



'It's like family to me': the school feeding its poorest families

Surrey Square primary in London provides meals - and even clothes - for pupils' families most in need

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Jessica Elgot

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When Damilola Fowoshele's nine-year-old son Michael started acting unusually at school, teachers at Surrey Square primary school called in his mother to speak about his behaviour. It was then that Fowoshele finally told them what was going on.

She and her two children had been sleeping on a bare church floor every night for nine months, and she was barred from working or seeking any help from authorities because her immigration status gave her no recourse to public funds.

"I didn't want to tell the school at first, it took a long time," Fowoshele said, sitting with her daughter Rebecca in the welfare office at the south London primary. "Now this school is like a family to me."

She is not alone in feeling that way. There are at least 40 children at the school whose parents either cannot work while their immigration status is in doubt or have limited leave to work but

no access to welfare including housing or child benefit.

Where the state falls short, the school has stepped in. Whole families appear early for breakfast; at lunch the kitchens cook extra for parents who cannot afford to feed themselves. Teachers write lengthy letters of support for immigration cases. In extreme circumstances, the school even provides clothes, cooking equipment, cots and mattresses for families like the Fowosheles.



Staff prepare breakfast at Surrey Square primary school in south London. Photograph: Alicia Canter for the Guardian

“They had no bedding, no mattress,” said Fiona Carrick-Davies, the school’s family and community coordinator. “His trainers were two sizes too small, he didn’t have any socks and he wasn’t eating. And you suddenly think: oh right, that’s why you can’t concentrate in class. We got them mattresses, duvets, trainers and socks, so he could actually walk properly.”

The school sits in the shadow of the Aylesbury estate, once the largest public housing estate in Europe and the site of Tony Blair’s first speech as prime minister. In recent years, as many of the buildings have been knocked down and replaced, it has been on the frontline of the battles over gentrification and affordable housing in the capital.

Children have arrived at school having slept on night buses, in churches or mosques or in police stations; many are living with their entire families in hostels or in one bedroom, or moving between the living room floors of patient family friends.

Carrick-Davies admits being torn as to how to respond when children arrive at school having spent the night sleeping on a bus. “These are children, and normally a child becoming homeless would spark a formal process,” she said.

However, the normal routes do not apply when a family has no recourse to public funds. Southwark council has a dedicated team to provide some limited support to families at risk of destitution, where failure to do so would breach human rights, but the need in the borough is huge.



Fiona Carrick-Davies, Surrey Square primary's family and community coordinator. Photograph: Alicia Canter for the Guardian

Southwark's Labour MP, Neil Coyle, said it was "madness" that councils had to step in to provide emergency support because parents were barred from working.

"People are told to stop working, to stop contributing to our economy," he said. "The families with children, many of them British children, are told they cannot provide for their kids. It breeds a generation who will see that the state is requiring their family to live in penury, absolute destitution."

The school's co-head Nicola Noble says: "We treat people here without judgment, and we see time and time again them being judged the minute they walk in the room and that changes as soon as we are there. That is so wrong."

Fola (not her real name), the mother of two children at the school, was evicted from her home in mid-December last year. She spent her last £25 on a room in a hotel, and when the council said it still had no available help, she had no choice but to sleep at a police station.

"The officers bought my kids crisps and drinks," she said. "They called social services, but they said they can't help me, they could only take my kids. I said to them: 'I haven't committed any offence, why would you take my kids?'"



A tower on the Aylesbury estate in south London. Photograph: Linda Nyland for the Guardian

Liz Robinson, the other co-head at Surrey Square, said it had been a deliberate decision to do more to help, backed by the school's governors. "We do still have a boundary and we know where that is," she said.

Though Surrey Square is rated by Ofsted as outstanding, Robinson said nothing the school did to help homeless families was counted towards that rating. "There is zero incentive for a

school to engage in any of this work we are talking about,” she said.

Oluwakemi Okewoye, 47, was living in one of the Aylesbury blocks set to be demolished, and with no official status she and her 11-year-old son Gbolahan were about to become homeless. “My stuff had to be in the school for almost three months,” she said.

Eventually, Okewoye was given a temporary room in Tottenham, north London, and Carrick-Davies and Noble moved all her belongings across London in a taxi.

Now the family are in a hostel in Forest Hill, where Okewoye and her son share a bed. “I can’t work, I’m on my own just waiting,” she said. “It’s very, very difficult but now I thank God we at least have somewhere to lay our heads.”

When children at the school who were born in the UK reach the age of 10, they can begin the long and expensive route of applying for British citizenship. Eighteen children have secured citizenship in the last three years and another nine are currently applying. The cost is £973 per child - highly prohibitive when parents may have no income.



Daniel Adebese, nine, who travels for three hours a day to get to school. Photograph: Alicia Canter for the Guardian

Nine-year-old Daniel Adebese is one of those in the process of applying for citizenship of the only country he has ever known. His mother and father were so determined he should stay at Surrey Square, the family travel in from their temporary home in Essex. “It takes me three hours travelling every day. We have to take a taxi or walk to the bus stop which is a long way,” Daniel said.

His fellow year 5 pupil Anjolaolwua Somefun has also travelled for miles to school while moving between temporary homes, and Carrick-Davies helped the family move all their belongings in her camper van.

“I’ve just moved to a place where there is only one room, me, my mum and my brother and sister,” she said. “I don’t like it, it’s a cramped space.” She hopes she can one day study to be an engineer and build cars, after she has become a citizen.

Many of the families are now on their way out of destitution. Fowoshele, who was sleeping in the church, now has leave to remain in the UK and is entitled to housing support.

She and her two children are in one room in temporary accommodation in Crystal Palace, but she says she is exceptionally grateful. “I started volunteering with the Salvation Army when Fi said I should do something for myself,” she said. “I thank God for my son, for Fi, for Nicola. Where I am today is by the grace of God and what I prayed for, I’ve got it.”

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