**‘I want us to live like humans again’: Families in Temporary Accommodation, London UK**

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Patricia Leatham moved back into the council house where she grew up when her mother became ill in 2017, to look after her as a full-time caregiver. When her mother died in 2019, Patricia and her then 14-year-old son, “Clarence,” were evicted into homelessness as her name was not on her mother’s tenancy contract. She applied for support from London’s Waltham Forest Council, which placed her in temporary accommodation where they lived for just under two years.

First, Patricia and Clarence were placed for eight weeks in a single room of a shared house where fourteen people used one kitchen and one bathroom. Waltham Forest Council then moved them to a one-bedroom apartment at the top of a tower block (high-rise building). Clarence slept in the bed, and his mother slept on a chair in the living room during the 18 months they lived there. It was cold in the winter because the heating facilities did not work when they moved in. Clarence described holes around the window in the bedroom: “We were really high up in the tower block, [so] the cold wind used to blow in, I remember being really cold every night.”

Under English law, local councils (elected government bodies which manage local areas) are obliged to provide people like Patricia and her son, who are threatened with homelessness or have recently become homeless, with temporary accommodation. Families have little control, and if they reject the offer, the council can say that it has “discharged its duty” and no longer needs to help the family. As of October 2021, 42,290 households with children were living in temporary accommodation in London, which is 70 percent of all families in temporary accommodation in the UK.

A combination of cuts to local government funding, a restructuring of the welfare system, and a lack of permanent social or genuinely affordable housing, has driven this increase. Government funding to local authorities has faced consistent reductions, as shown by a 37 percent decrease in real terms in the past decade. However, in response to the growing homelessness crisis, local authorities in London have had to increase their spending on short-term fixes that do not address the root of the problem, with expenditure on temporary accommodation more than doubling, increasing by 108 percent in real terms, between 2010/11 and 2019/20.

As a part of austerity-driven cuts to benefits, the government decreased the amount of housing benefits privately renting tenants can receive by reforming a calculation method known as Local Housing Allowance. In 2011, the government altered the amount from covering 50 percent of local rents to 30 percent of local rents. Meanwhile, the cost of private renting rose. The number of families living in temporary accommodation in England has increased by 65 percent since April 2011, when Local Housing Allowance rates were first changed.

The government then enacted further changes to Local Housing Allowance rates, including freezing the rates between 2016 and 2020. This means that while the cost of private renting has increased, Local Housing Allowance rates have not, making private rented housing even less affordable for people on low incomes. In April 2021, the government froze the rate once again, after a one-year respite, amounting to a further cut to people’s housing benefits. No date has been specified for the freeze to be lifted. In real terms, a conscious series of governmental policy decisions have left people who depend on Local Housing Allowance to pay their rent significantly worse off in 2021 than they were in 2011.

One other major contributing factor to the overall problem is the lack of social housing. Levels of social housing have declined steadily since the 1980s. One of the key policies that has diminished levels of social housing is the “right to buy” scheme implemented by the Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher’s leadership in 1980. The scheme enabled social housing tenants to buy their homes for a reduced price. Local authorities were then restricted from using sales proceeds to construct new housing. Within five years, half a million social homes were sold in England.

Families across London who are unable to find, or remain in, permanent housing are instead being placed in uninhabitable accommodation, often for years at a time, as local councils face significant pressure from high demand and low housing stock.This report documents habitability problems, including toxic mold, cold temperatures, and a lack of adequate space in temporary accommodation. The situation is worsened by the fact these placements are often far from “temporary,” with some families living there for several years.

Human Rights Watch interviewed several families who highlighted that lack of adequate space is a major problem in their homes. “Amaka N.,” a pregnant mother of three boys, ages 4, 7, and 9, lived for six months in a temporary accommodation studio flat in Lambeth from February 2020. The room was so small that the four of them had to share one double bed. She said it made daily activities very difficult, and without space for a table, they ate all their meals on the floor. She said the situation deteriorated when the pandemic started. “It was very, very hard for me in that small flat … When Covid started I saw hell. All we could do was stay at home all day with absolutely no space.”

Human Rights Watch also interviewed families who highlighted dampness and lack of ventilation in their temporary accommodation, which can lead to the growth of toxic mold. Mulki Ibrahim, her husband, and their three children, ages 1, 6, and 7, all live in a one-bedroom flat in Wandsworth, which the council owns. She said mold was a problem in every room, including above the bed where her oldest children sleep. She said the mold gets worse in winter as it is too cold to open the windows for ventilation. They have lived there for six years, and she says she and her 6- and 7-year-olds suffer chest pains and respiratory problems each year. “Thankfully my youngest hasn’t had a chest infection yet, but I think he will start to get them soon.”

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