A PLACE TO CALL HOME

A rights based approach to understanding the lived experience of children and families facing homelessness or housing insecurity

MAIN REPORT

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This drawing by 'Jaydon' (10) represents his ideal home. He was interviewed alongside his mum ('Jennifer') for this report. At the time he had been living in single let accommodation with his mum and two older siblings for 18 months.

Cover image: This drawing by 'Jaydon's' older sister (15) represents her ideal home.

Images on pages 14, 25, 50, 68, 87, 98, 108, 111 & 115 courtesy of Westcourt Camera Club, Belfast.

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COMMISSIONER'S FOREWORD

Here it is – my final report as the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People. I have been proud of each and every one of the reviews that we have published since March 2015 and this one is no exception.

Many of us have, at some point, studied Maslow and his hierarchy of needs and it makes sense that, to achieve anything in life, we must secure the basics: physiological health and safety which means enough food, heat, shelter and security. A safe, warm and adequate home is not just a roof over our head, it is the foundation from which a child can enjoy their rights in every aspect of their lives – family life, mental and physical health, education, play and so much more. It for this reason that there is a plethora of international human rights instruments, including the UNCRC and domestic law, concerned with the right to family life and a home.

Housing and homelessness was not a priority for NICCY during my first years as Commissioner but when visiting schools particularly primary schools children talked about their concern for homeless people they could see in towns and cities across NI and in particular they were very worried about children in such a situation. So it was children who insisted that we interrogate this issue further and this report and the scoping study that preceded it demonstrates how right they were.

As I read the report I realise how much I take for granted my own front door, a place to sit down and spend time with my family and space for each of us to be on our own and the security of knowing that it will be there tomorrow, and the day after and into the future.

This report adds context to the official data which, although incomplete, give us an indication of the scale of the issue for children, families and young people who are homeless or living with housing insecurity. This report introduces you to some of the people behind the statistics. Their aspirations and hopes are the same as everyone else – a home of their own where they are safe and can heal from any trauma they may have experienced.

The report addresses three groups of people. Firstly families with children who, whilst they have a roof over their head, have had to wait for years for a home. The difference between a roof and a home is very evident.

Secondly, young people (18-21) who have a disability or have been looked after, who describe the difficulties they had getting settled, and the inability of services to meet their needs. As NI grapples with providing services for children with adverse childhood experiences I am not surprised but deeply saddened that young people facing challenges such as poor mental health, substance misuse and family breakdown find themselves homeless.

Finally, the report examines the experiences of families seeking asylum. It is important that we remember that their housing insecurity did not start when they arrived in NI. For most of them it began several years earlier when they left their country because it was not safe for them. They have been looking for a safe home for a very long time. It is distressing that the system does not sufficiently recognise the trauma of these families and insists that they continue to live in inappropriate accommodation. A roof over their heads is shelter, but not a home.

The report's authors have identified many of the challenges faced by children, young people and families but in many places they have highlighted excellent examples of support and care given often by NGOs.

The recommendations that I make are based on the evidence outlined in the report. I would like to thank Mary-Louise Corr, Lucy Holland and Alan McKinstry from QUB who undertook this work on NICCY's behalf. They were determined to ensure that people experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity had the opportunity to share their experiences and did not complete the work until they did. I am grateful to them for their commitment and to NICCY staff who worked with and supported them.

I am also very grateful to the dedicated people working to support children, young people and their families living in housing insecurity or homelessness. It is clear that you are doing what you can with insufficient resources to provide help, and that our requests to facilitate this research have added to your workload. However, we are grateful for your help to bring these important concerns to light.

But I reserve my deepest thanks to those parents and children who met with the researchers to talk about your experiences and the impact of housing insecurity and homelessness on your lives. You have helped to bring to light what life is like for children, young people and their families living in these situations, and the importance of having an adequate, safe, secure home.

The right to family life and an adequate standard of living is the basic minimum a child should expect from that state. This report shows that for too many NI still has a long way to go to achieve the basic minimum for its children.

Koulla Yiasouma
Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Homelessness and housing insecurity in Northern Ireland has been noted as a concern by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC, 2016a). The Committee has highlighted particular concerns regarding households with dependent children, many of whom are young children and infants living with family in temporary accommodation (TA). They have also noted concerns with regard to young people facing homelessness, as well as children seeking asylum. Due to a concern that children's and young people's right to a home, shelter or accommodation is not being effectively met in Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People commissioned a scoping paper to better understand the scale and impact of homelessness or housing insecurity affecting children and families in Northern Ireland (Corr & Holland, 2021). This study builds on the desk-based scoping study with an aim to increase understanding of the lived experiences of children, young people and families that face homelessness and housing insecurity, and the concomitant ramifications for their rights. This study adopts the broader definition of 'homelessness' that captures the diverse living experiences of those who live in temporary and insecure accommodation, and includes those who may not satisfy all four statutory tests in Northern Ireland.

Housing: rights, obligations and standards

A number of international human rights instruments make reference to housing within the purview of an 'adequate standard of living'; The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, Article 25); International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, Article 11); United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, Article 27). Such rights are indivisible and interconnected to all others in each convention respectively, making the right to an adequate standard of living (housing) also subject to non-discrimination – everyone is entitled to an adequate standard of living regardless of race, colour, sex, sexual orientation, religion, social background etc. The definition of 'adequacy' is also expanded upon (UN CESCR, 1991), laying out the scope of obligations that should be met by States parties, including safety; space; basic facilities; affordability; accessibility; legal security of tenure; availability of services. With regard to children and young people under 18, States are placed under additional obligation to ensure an adequate standard of living and the right to housing, such as the obligation to support parents in realising these rights, adopting holistic strategies to assist children experiencing homelessness that will promote their rights, and adequate provision for young care leavers. Similar obligations are placed on States regarding persons with disabilities, enshrining a right to housing that takes into consideration the additional needs and unique circumstances of an individual. Children and young people subject to immigration control are acknowledged by the UNCRC as in possession of the same rights as all other children, placing the obligation on States parties to ensure their right to housing.

Methodology

The aim of the study was to increase the understanding of the lived experiences of children, young people and families facing homelessness and housing insecurity exploring pathways through homeless and housing services, the suitability of accommodation and the impact of homelessness and housing insecurity in their lives. A key aim was to inform recommendations to government where it is failing to meet its obligations under the UNCRC.

Thirty-two participants took part in in-depth interviews and included: fourteen parents of children aged 0-17; nine children aged 10-17 living in homeless or insecure contexts with a parent/guardian; and, nine young people aged 17-22 living independently from their parents/guardians, some of whom identified as care-experienced or as having a disability. Participants in the sample reflected a range of housing and homeless experiences including: hidden homelessness; emergency accommodation (B&Bs & hostels); contingency and dispersal accommodation for asylum seekers; rough sleeping; temporary hostels; supported accommodation for young people; private rented; and, social housing. Data were analysed using a framework informed by rights instruments and standards as related to housing (e.g. ICESCR, UNCRC, CRPD), with data being coded according to the tenets of adequate housing and the details for particular groups extracted (e.g. young care leavers, children with disabilities, those subject to immigration control). This assisted in contexualising participants' experiences in the wider context of rights.

Experiences of homelessness and housing insecurity

"I think it was just the, again not knowing where I'm going to go next and constantly moving. Like I didn't know if I was going to have to wake up in the middle of the night to just move again, you know, it was scary like." (Claire, 18)

The experiences of children, families and young people in a range of living situations raises a number of concerns in relation to the adequacy of such accommodation, including privacy, space, legal security of tenure, habitability, location and affordability (UN CESCR, 1991). Housing pathways were characterised by constant movement between unstable forms of accommodation, indicating participants' lack of security of tenure for large periods of time. Young people were more likely to have navigated several different living situations, and both families and young people described periods of hidden homelessness, relying on family and friends. The instability created stress and anxiety, being constantly reminded of the fragility of their situations, aware of the conditions on their stay and the potential to be asked to leave at any moment. Many stayed in temporary accommodation for a number of years and young people often ended up returning to unstable family environments for lack of other options, continuing cycles of abuse and instability.

The inadequacy of several forms of living situations have been highlighted. Conditions across a range of temporary settings meant that participants lived in largely uninhabitable conditions – families in hostels and single lets enduring cold, damp and disrepair. Cramped conditions compromised children's right to privacy, their ability to study and play, as well as affecting families' ability to spend time with one another. Family routines were disrupted by placements in locations far from school and that raised safety concerns due to criminal activity and harassment. This was also a concern for young people who accessed temporary accommodation, exposed to violence, drug use and felt unsafe around adult residents.

Young people largely spoke positively about supported accommodation and accounts suggested it presented a chance to settle after periods of upheaval, with young people benefitting from their own space and access to other housing related services and supports. Shared spaces enabled them to form important peer networks and consistent access to support staff assisting them in maintaining stability. However, a number of young people described a lack of planning and consultation for housing transitions, when leaving care and from supported housing to independent living. They also noted they were not given access to information on accommodation possibilities or housing processes, despite their rights under Articles 12 and 13 UNCRC.

Experiences of exiting homelessness – continued insecurity

"I'm like is this a mockery? What is this? You know? Are you trying to play, to prey on our vulnerability or our desperation of needing a house?" (Natalie, mother)

Generally, transitions into social housing or private rented accommodation were viewed as positive experiences by young people and families, offering independence and a chance to 'settle'. However, accessing such accommodation could take several years, and navigating the process of entry into social housing and private rented accommodation was described as difficult, with many citing the support of staff from temporary accommodation and other organisations as crucial in doing this successfully. Accessing private rented accommodation was described as difficult by young people, who felt discriminated against due to their age. Both young people and families noted financial difficulties in raising deposits to access the private rented sector.

The location of accommodation continued to be a barrier to participants following transitions, however – some participants were allocated housing in areas that were unfamiliar and could not access forms of informal support. Location also had ramifications for children and young people's safety, a number of participants raising their concerns about exposure to harassment, violence, drug use/dealing. This has serious implications for children's right to protection from violence (Article 19, UNCRC). Properties allocated also did not meet their needs for space, and participants still described a lack of furnishings, disrepair and damp, as well as a struggle to heat their homes due to rising costs. The above highlights participants' continued experiences of insecurity and inadequacy in social housing and private rented sectors, and an absence of adequate supports post-transition, eviction and harassment caused a number of participants to return to temporary accommodation.

Non-housing supports

"… so much things going through my head at the same time, like how am I gonna do this, what am I gonna do with the stuff I don't need, what am I gonna do without the stuff that I don't have… It felt like it was a bit of a kick up the backside and out the door …I felt like they didn't really give me the right support that I needed moving onto my new house because that would have been my permanent home." (Luke, 20)

A number of key areas of support were found to be useful in coping with the challenges of living in temporary accommodation as well as facilitating and maintaining positive transitions in their housing pathways. Families and young people in supported housing spoke of additional supports that had been offered to them, such as assistance with life skills like budgeting and cooking. It was also highlighted that such assistance needed to continue during their transitions to independent accommodation in order to make the transition stable and permanent – those that had not benefitted from such supports often found new arrangements breaking down because they felt unprepared for the change and additional responsibility. Associated with this was positive, consistent and long relationships with support service staff who understood their individual circumstances – conversely, data indicates those who experienced multiple changes or disinterest from key/social workers struggled more with their housing journeys and outcomes. Informal supports from family and friends also emerged as crucial including practical support that was offered with the set up of new homes and the logistics of moving.

Many participants also spoke of needing access to more mental health services, in tandem with housing support, that were

suited to their needs. Largely, those who had been in receipt of such services felt they had benefitted from them. Similarly, support with addiction was cited as very valuable, with inadequate support in this area leading to further addiction issues and impacting on accessing permanent and suitable housing solutions. This ties in with the CRC's assertion for robust support for young people leaving care, ensuring that transitional support is made available across a spectrum of housing-related supports and the gradual withdrawal of support (UN CRC, 2016a). Many participants also struggled financially in meeting their basic needs, which was exacerbated by the economic climate and cost of living crisis. Data suggests that financial contributions from charitable and voluntary organisations, while small, contributed to filling the fiscal gap, aiding with necessities, energy bills, school expenses and travel costs.

Living in contingency and dispersal accommodation

"One room, big room, three beds inside, and small window, but it was like arrest because we couldn't go outside. [town] very far away from city centre, we couldn't, we hadn't money to…to go like by bus. We hadn't, because no cash." (Majeda, mother)

The State is obliged to provide 'appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance' to ensure asylum-seeking children are enabled to realise their rights under the UNCRC, as well as all other human rights instruments to which the State subscribes (Article 22, UNCRC). However, several issues were highlighted by asylum seekers, particularly those in contingency accommodation, which illustrated the impact of such accommodation on a range of their children's rights. The lack of space, the norm being families living in one room, was highlighted by parents and children. Participants cited it as an inappropriate environment for them and their children, affecting their ability to play and study, as well as to have privacy and the opportunity to create the desired family environment. Health issues like malnutrition have arisen due to the lack of adequate food provided to families, with many of them needing to access healthcare as a result. Such health issues were exacerbated by challenges in accessing healthcare. When participants voiced complaints about the inadequate conditions they were met with dismissal and intimidation.

Families' cultural lives were hindered by the restrictions on their space, time and access to culturally appropriate foods for religious celebrations, particularly Ramadan. Participants also stated that the limited funds provided alongside accommodation are not enough to provide for basic necessities. Some participants created their own peer support networks and accessed limited assistance for voluntary and charitable organisations to try to plug the gap in support. Families felt support for asylum-seeking children was lacking in school, which, combined with their families' inability to support them with their schooling in their accommodation, meant that their education was suffering. They also struggled in accessing education for their children, receiving no additional support of information as to enrol them in school. Participants' accounts of their experiences seriously bring into question the adequacy of hotels for housing families seeking asylum, with some having to endure such conditions for months or years, and the severe impact this provision has across the spectrum of children's rights.

Impacts of homelessness and housing insecurity

"I couldn't see my friends anymore." (Jaydon, son, 10)

"I kind of put myself out there sometimes to stay in places… I wasn't doing too well and I was into drugs…a lot of men's houses and stuff if you get what I'm saying…" (Ava, 20)

Participants' housing situations had an impact across different aspects of their lives. Relationships, both familial and peer, were affected. Young people asserted that it was often difficult to maintain friendships due to their constant upheaval of being moved to different accommodation, with friendships being transient. While some young people were willing, or even preferred, to cut ties with caregivers that contributed to their unstable living conditions, they lamented the loss of contact with other family members like siblings. Children felt limited by the location of their temporary accommodation to socialise with their friends, as well as the poor living conditions causing embarrassment and making it difficult to have friends over and maintain friendships outside school.

Children's temporary accommodation was also cited as inadequate with regard to space and privacy, as well as spending time together as a family. Accommodation often lacked basic facilities to study which affected children's schooling, as well as being located far away from school (Article 28, UNCRC). This calls the adequacy of temporary accommodation for housing families with children into question, where parents felt unable to provide them with an adequate standard of living due to the poor conditions. For young people, the instability related to their housing situations often resulted in a disengagement with formal education, which in turn affected their ability to gain employment in the longer term. Parents also felt it difficult to re-engage with employment after experiencing housing difficulties (raising implications for the State's obligations under Articles 18 and 27, UNCRC), hindered by location, their inability to leave children in unsafe accommodation and lack of childcare.

Mental and physical health were also impacted by their experiences of temporary accommodation and rough sleeping, demonstrating a tangible impact on children's right to health, and survival and development (Articles 6 & 24, UNCRC). The constant changes in location and accommodation, combined with the lack of certainty created great stress and anxiety for participants. They also cited exhaustion with having to constantly engage with housing services to little avail. The participants that had experienced rough sleeping also cited the negative short and long term impacts on their physical health as a result of having to sleep on the streets. Health was a major concern among those housed in hotels, with families becoming unwell due to the inadequate food being provided. Safety was also compromised as a result of housing insecurity – the context exposing children and young people to relationships with unsafe people that could lead them into further instability and harm, such as violence and addiction (Articles 19 & 34, UNCRC).

Hopes and messages for the future

When asked about future aspirations, participants responded with a number of goals. Desire to establish a home, live independently with a sense of belonging, often near local communities, support systems and services. Families with school-aged children highlighted that it was important that their future home was near their children's schools so that they could benefit from having access to friends locally. Young people expressed a need for planning and strategy when it came to future permanent accommodation, including taking into account current support needs like mental health and

addiction support. Young people and families, regardless of migration status, maintained hopes for stability through education and employment in tandem with sustainable housing solutions. Asylum-seeking families highlighted their unique circumstances, many desiring privacy and space for parents and children regardless of location, or improving dispersal accommodation by improving the food, providing facilities like a kitchen or play areas for children which would enable to them to exercise more autonomy.

A number of participants highlighted a need for further diversification of housing provision on offer that can meet a broad range of needs. Young people voiced a need for more supported accommodation that caters solely to young people facing homelessness and to be kept separate from adults. They also called for further supports in these settings focussing on housing-related issues like employability, life skills and mental health services, as well as the need for these supports to be transitional in the wake of moving to independent accommodation. Many young people asserted the need for genuine communication and collaboration between them and support services with regard to housing – to be treated with respect and their views and opinions taken seriously.

Conclusion

All participants in the study, regardless of living situation, spoke of the fragility of their living situation, including those in social housing and private rented accommodation. The analysis illustrated that the concerns expressed by the CRC in 2016 in relation to the placement of homeless families and children in temporary accommodation remain (CRC, 2016). Families and children reported spending a number of years in temporary forms of accommodation and described the impact of constant insecurity and uncertainty about their living situation.

The process of accessing social housing or private rented accommodation, for both young people and families, was prolonged and presented many barriers, including direct and indirect discrimination in relation to age, disability and nationality/community background. Accessing these potentially more stable forms of accommodation required support and advice from experienced professionals whilst many shared their frustrations with the points system which did not recognise particular needs within the family. Transitions into secure housing were more sustainable where participants were satisfied with the location in terms of access to local amenities, play opportunities, proximity to informal supports, familiarity and safety. They were also assisted by floating support in areas such as budgeting, financial support, provision of basic necessities and furnishings, and advocacy.

The impacts of homelessness and housing insecurity among participants was far greater than a lack of stable housing. Children, young people and parents reported the impact across a range of domains including family life, access to and experiences of education, physical and mental health. Homelessness also affected play and leisure opportunities, ability to maintain friendships and social networks and being able to practice their faith.

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights lays out seven essential tenets that comprise ‘adequate’ housing (UN CESCR, 1991). The analysis demonstrates that issues arise in relation to all seven essential tenets when considering the experiences of children, young people and families in Northern Ireland facing homelessness and housing insecurity across a range of accommodation types. As such, an individual’s “right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity” (UN CESCR, 1991:para 7) is significantly compromised.

RECOMMENDATIONS

NICCY's recommendations to Government in full.

Adequacy of housing provision

1. The DfC and NIHE must work to ensure that there is adequate provision of housing for children, young people and families, including accommodation tailored to the needs of young people.

2. The NIHE must ensure that all accommodation allocated to children, young people and families (including temporary accommodation and social housing) is maintained to an appropriate standard.

Rights compliant policy and planning

3. The DfC and NIHE must ensure that they have taken account of the rights of children and young people through the use of Child Rights Impact Assessments when developing housing policy and solutions. This should include proactive engagement with children and young people, and a thorough assessment against the ICESCR standards as set out in this report.

4. The DfC and NIHE should amend the housing selection scheme so that it better meets the needs of children with disabilities, including neurodisabilities, through allocation of additional points.

5. The NIHE should provide young people with information about their rights, as well as their range of options regarding housing and accommodation in an accessible format.

Initial responses to homelessness

6. Trusts should conduct children in need assessments in relation to all 16 and 17 year olds who present as homeless, as outlined in the Children (NI) Order 1995

7. Trusts must never house young people under the age of 18 in bed and breakfast accommodation.

8. The NIHE must ensure that temporary accommodation provided to families must be of an adequate standard to enable the realisation of children's rights, including their rights to family life, privacy, education, health, play, leisure and social engagement (e.g. friends and peers). Families must only be placed in temporary accommodation for the shortest time possible. This is also the case for asylum seeking families provided accommodation by the Home Office.

9. Gaps in data must be addressed to inform planning of supports and services, and to facilitate targeted awareness raising of services among at risk groups. This includes data on the scale and nature of hidden homelessness among young people and the number of young people with disabilities and families with a child with disabilities presenting/accepted as homeless.

Coordinated service provision

10. The NIHE must work with housing providers and Policing and Community Safety Partnerships in every council area to ensure that all tenants feel safe in the communities that they live. This should include young people in hostel or B&B accommodation.

11. Statutory agencies should cooperate with each other and with voluntary organisations to provide holistic services to meet the assessed needs of young people in supported and other temporary accommodation, particularly with regard to their mental health, substance misuse, as well as life skills.

12. HSCTs and NIHE must ensure transitional support, including mentoring, is available to young people accessing their first tenancy for as long as they need it.

13. HSCT leaving and after care services should continue to proactively engage with young people who have left care and disengaged from services until their 21st birthday.

14. Young people in supported accommodation should be supported to transition to independent housing over a period of time, in line with their support needs and only once their new accommodation has been secured.

Families and young people with no recourse to public funds

15. The NI Government must, without further delay, implement the recommendations of NICCY's 'A Hostile Environment' report:
    a. Undertake work to identify how many children in NI are living in families with no recourse to public funds and publish this data.
    b. Develop clear pathways across and between agencies like Home Office and Health and Social Care agencies to ensure that children and families are referred as appropriate and that the needs and best interests of children are assessed as a matter of urgency.
    c. Address the needs of each child, particularly ensuring that they have access to the highest standard of health care, effective education and an adequate standard of living, and all other protections afforded by the UNCRC.[1]

[1] https://www.niccy.org/news/number-of-children-affected-by-immigration-rules-and-at-risk-of-destitution-in-ni-unknown/

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to research

The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has voiced a number of concerns regarding growing housing instability in Northern Ireland. In its Concluding Observations (UN CRC, 2016a), the Committee noted the increase in the number of homeless households with dependent children, including the number of homeless families with infants staying in temporary accommodation. The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) has identified homelessness and housing insecurity as a priority area, particularly the use of temporary accommodation, such as shelters, hotels and/ or bed and breakfasts, for children and young people. Due to a concern that children's and young people's right to a home, shelter or accommodation is not being effectively met in Northern Ireland, NICCY commissioned a scoping paper to better understand the scale and impact of homelessness or housing insecurity affecting children and families in Northern Ireland.[2] This study builds on the desk-based scoping study with the overall aim to increase understanding of the lived experience of children, young people and families facing homelessness and housing insecurity and navigating the housing support system (see Section 3 for detailed account of methods).

1.2 Definitions of homelessness and housing insecurity

There is no single, universally accepted definition of homelessness. A narrow definition limits it to 'rooflessness' or 'rough sleeping' which describes those lacking shelter of any kind. However, broader definitions capture the diverse living experiences of families and individuals who move between temporary or insecure accommodation types and thus includes individuals in 'inadequate accommodation', those 'at risk' of homelessness, those living in emergency or temporary accommodation (e.g. hostel or bed and breakfast), individuals 'sofa-surfing'[3] , or those at risk of violence if they remain within the home (Mayock & Corr, 2013; Murphy, 2016). A useful conceptual classification of homelessness and housing exclusion was developed by the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) and the European Observatory on Homelessness – ETHOS. Although its utility to count homelessness at a certain timepoint has been questioned (Clarke, 2016), nevertheless it depicts the spectrum of housing difficulties which households may face, grouped into four distinct housing situations: rooflessness (e.g. living without shelter); houseless (e.g. temporary accommodation, transitional supported accommodation, reception centres, institutions); insecure (e.g. those in longer term homeless support, living temporarily with family/friends, squatting,[4]. More recently, the Institute of Global Homelessness developed *A Global Framework for Understanding Homelessness* based on a collaboration across six continents. It defines homelessness as 'lacking access to minimally adequate housing' and offers three categories of homelessness: people without accommodation (e.g. rough sleeping); people living in temporary or crisis accommodation (e.g. night shelters, hostels, refuges and camps); and, people living in severely inadequate and insecure accommodation (e.g. sofa-surfing, living under the threat of violence, hotels/B&Bs, overcrowded conditions)[5].

[2] https://www.niccy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NICCY-QUB-Homelesss-Scoping-Paper-April-2022.pdf

[3] Defined as 'where individuals stay with friends or members of their extended family on their floor or sofa as they have nowhere else to go' (Clarke, 2016).

[4] https://www.feantsa.org/download/ethos2484215748748239888.pdf

[5] http://ighomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/globalframeworkforundertanding.pdf

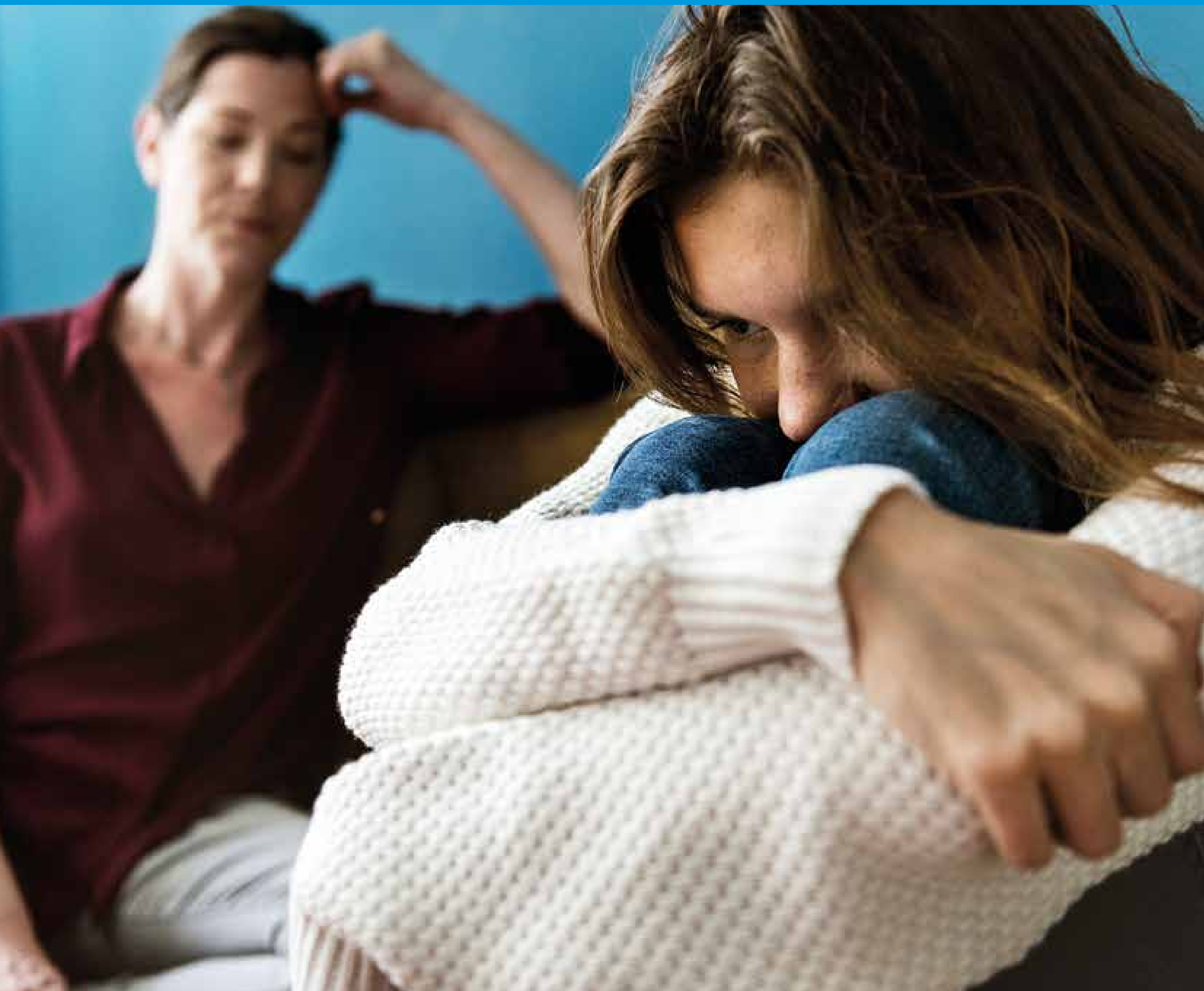
1.2.1 Statutory definition of homelessness in Northern Ireland (NI)

Statutorily homeless households in NI are defined in the Housing (NI) Order 1988 which places a statutory duty on the NIHE to provide interim and/or permanent accommodation for those 'accepted' as statutorily homeless or a 'Full Duty Applicant' (FDA). To be accepted as FDA, a household must meet four tests: homelessness; eligibility; priority need; and intentionality. To satisfy the homeless test, households will be: 'actual' homelessness, where they have no accommodation in the UK or elsewhere (e.g. street homelessness, sofa surfing, staying with friends); deemed homelessness, where it is unreasonable for a household to continue to occupy their accommodation (e.g. inadequate housing, family breakdown); or, threatened with homelessness where it is likely a household or individual will become homeless within 28 days. Therefore, the statutory definition of homelessness in NI recognises the broader spectrum of living arrangements. It is also recognised that households failing to meet all four statutory tests may still be homeless (NIHE, 2017).

1.2.2 Hidden homelessness

Hidden homelessness refers to situations where individuals or households are invisible to homeless and other systems of intervention and thus may be staying temporarily with family and/or friends, 'sofa-surfing', living in over-crowded conditions, squatting or rough sleeping (Busch-Geertsema, 2010; Clarke, 2016; Watts et al., 2015). Clarke (2016) notes that whilst data on statutory homelessness is well recorded in the UK, there is a lack of data on informal or hidden homelessness which relies on partial information and street counts. A number of jurisdictions have, nonetheless, noted a high prevalence rate of hidden homelessness among young people in particular, both prior to and after they make first contact with services (Mayock et al. 2014; Quilgars et al., 2008). An online survey conducted in 2014 of over 2,000 young people aged 16-25 in the UK found that rates of hidden homelessness among young people were higher than previously thought, with 35% of young people having 'sofa-surfed' in their life (20% in the last year) because they had nowhere else to go. The same survey also found that the likelihood of having sofa surfed was higher for young people who were ever in care or had a social worker or who had a disability (Clarke, 2016). Similarly, research in NI notes that for young people in care or leaving care the likelihood of entering hidden homelessness was 'especially pronounced' (Gray et al., 2022:55). Reasons for entering hidden homelessness have been found to relate to negative home environments or having been asked to leave by parents (Clarke, 2016; Mayock and Parker, 2021) but young people also move into hidden homelessness subsequent to a period of living independently (e.g. when a tenancy ends, they split from a partner or due to overcrowding) (Clarke, 2016), or to escape service environments where they felt consigned to a life of homelessness (Mayock and Parker, 2020).

This study adopted a broad definition of homelessness to capture the diverse living experiences of families and individuals who move between temporary or insecure accommodation. This includes: those living in emergency or temporary accommodation, hidden forms of homelessness such as sofa-surfing, those living in inadequate housing, those at risk of homelessness and those who may not satisfy all four statutory tests in Northern Ireland.



2. HOUSING: RIGHTS, OBLIGATIONS AND STANDARDS

2.1 Right to housing

The obligations of States by way of housing are demonstrated in several international human rights instruments. The right to housing is directly referenced within Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (1948), the right to “a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and of his family including... housing.” This is echoed in the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, Article 11), which states: “The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions.” Table 1 outlines the rights instruments and standards related to housing. All such rights apply without discrimination to all citizens in States that have ratified the Conventions in which they are contained.

Table 1: Human rights obligations and standards that relate to housing

Adequate standard of living	Article 25, Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 11, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
Home and family life	Article 8, The European Convention on Human Rights Article 8, Human Rights Act (1998)
Non-discrimination	Article 2, Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 2, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

2.1.1 Non-discrimination and the right to housing

The above obligations and standards are reinforced by the right to non-discrimination, the scope of which is universal across the spectrum of human rights standards. According to the UDHR human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, everyone is equally entitled to an adequate standard of living regardless of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Imperatively, this is not only a passive obligation to prohibit discrimination, but requires proactive measures in policy, provision and practice to ensure equal opportunity for the enjoyment of rights, including the right to housing. Such proactive measures include the legal obligation placed on public bodies to respect and protect the right to non-discrimination, down to the very decisions officials make on a day-to-day basis related to housing (Williams, 2017: 3).

2.1.2 Adequate housing

To aid the rigorous implementation of minimum standards, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) provides a comprehensive definition of “adequate housing”, determining that it should not be interpreted narrowly; it is not merely having a roof over one’s head but the “right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity” (UN CESCR, 1991:para 7). The committee expands, identifying the following essential tenets that comprise the scope and meaning of “adequate” housing, relaying State’s distinct obligations:

- **Adequacy:** privacy, adequate space, security, lighting and ventilation, basic infrastructure and location with regard to basic facilities (all at a reasonable cost).
- **Legal security of tenure:** measures that confer legal security upon people and households, and if they are lacking such measures that it should be done in consultation with them.
- **Availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure:** must contain facilities essential for health, security, comfort and nutrition. Sustainable access to natural and common resources, safe drinking water, energy for cooking, heating and lighting, sanitation and washing facilities, means of food storage, refuse disposal, site drainage and emergency services.
- **Affordability:** housing related costs must be commensurate with income levels. Housing subsidies for those unable to obtain affordable housing.
- **Habitability:** ensuring the physical safety of the occupants. Adequate space and protecting them from cold, damp, heat, rain, wind or other threats to health, structural hazards, and disease.
- **Accessibility:** disadvantaged groups must be accorded full and sustainable access to adequate housing resources.
- **Location:** access to employment options, healthcare, schools and childcare centres.
- **Cultural adequacy:** the way housing is constructed, materials used and policies supporting this construction must appropriately enable the expression of cultural identity (UN CESCR, 1991).

The CESCR have also noted the importance of consistency in adequacy. It states that obligations are ‘perhaps even more pertinent during times of economic contraction’, pointing out it would be inconsistent of States with obligations under the ICESCR (1966) if living and housing conditions were to decline because of policy and legislative decisions made during economic crisis (Williams, 2017:3).

2.1.3 State intervention in the home and family life

The European Convention on Human Rights (Article 8), incorporated nationally into the Human Rights Act (1998), provides for the right to respect for private and family life, including one’s home. Overly intrusive interventions, for example in the case of forced evictions, are deemed to be incompatible with the requirements of the ICESCR (UN CESCR, 1997). It is acknowledged that such practices may lead to rights violations, and that minorities and other vulnerable individuals are disproportionately affected. Indeed, they can only be justified in exceptional circumstances and, crucially, with regard to families with children, governments are obliged to explore all feasible alternatives and ensure the provision of adequate alternative accommodation if such an intervention must take place (UN CRC, 2017:para 51).

2.2 Children’s rights, obligations and standards: Families, children and young people

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) contains key principles and protections that situate children as right’s holders according to universal human rights standards, but also as individuals with vulnerabilities that are distinct from other individuals due to their age and evolving capacities. Several standards contained in the UNCRC are not contained in any other convention, which adds additional State obligations to families, children and young people experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity in the realisation of their rights. Table 2 outlines the UNCRC Articles which are of relevance to housing and/or specific groups of children of interest in this research.

Table 2: UNCRC Articles of relevance

Article 2	1. States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.
Article 3	1. In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.
Article 4	States Parties shall undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative, and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognized in the present Convention. With regard to economic, social and cultural rights, States Parties shall undertake such measures to the maximum extent of their available resources and, where needed, within the framework of international co-operation.
Article 6	1. States Parties recognize that every child has the inherent right to life. 2. States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child.
Article 12	1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
Article 16	1. No child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his or her honour and reputation.
Article 18	2. For the purpose of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present Convention, States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.
Article 22	1. States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure that a child who is seeking refugee status or who is considered a refugee in accordance with applicable international or domestic law and procedures shall, whether unaccompanied or accompanied by his or her parents or by any other person, receive appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance in the enjoyment of applicable rights set forth in the present Convention and in other international human rights or humanitarian instruments to which the said States are Parties.

Article 23	1. States Parties recognize that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community. 2. States Parties recognize the right of the disabled child to special care and shall encourage and ensure the extension, subject to available resources, to the eligible child and those responsible for his or her care, of assistance for which application is made and which is appropriate to the child's condition and to the circumstances of the parents or others caring for the child
Article 27	1. States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. 2. The parent(s) or others responsible for the child have the primary responsibility to secure, within their abilities and financial capacities, the conditions of living necessary for the child's development. 3. States Parties, in accordance with national conditions and within their means, shall take appropriate measures to assist parents and others responsible for the child to implement this right and shall in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing. (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989)

The CRC has voiced a number of concerns regarding growing housing instability in Northern Ireland. In its Concluding Observations (UN CRC, 2016a), the Committee noted the increase in the number of homeless households with dependent children, including the number of homeless families with infants staying in temporary accommodation. They have also highlighted the child poverty rate – especially noting the overrepresentation of people with disabilities (disabled children or children living with a disabled family member) and those belonging to ethnic minority groups. Such concerns are linked to recent social welfare reforms, such as the benefit cap and bedroom tax, and their concomitant impact on the best interests of children experiencing them, particularly vulnerable groups (UN CRC, 2016a).

The CRC have highlighted the nuanced and unique challenges that may be encountered by distinct groups of children, and elaborated on the corresponding obligations of States in ensuring their rights are realised regardless of their status, identity or socio-economic context. Naturally, due to the intersectional nature of many children's lives, a combination of the characteristics below may apply to an individual child, young person or family, depending on their unique circumstances.

2.2.1 Obligation to a minimum standard

All the above rights intersect with an additional obligation that impresses upon States a minimum standard in the treatment of children, and by virtue of association, their families (Williams, 2017:3; UN CRC, 2017:para. 34). For children facing homelessness and housing insecurity, the CRC highlights that they should enjoy at least a minimum essential standard of each social, economic and cultural right, and States have a core obligation to facilitate this minimum

standard. In terms of material assistance for children facing homelessness, the need for a safe place to live via State support to parents and caregivers, particularly in relation to subsidised, adequate housing is underlined (UN CRC, 2017).

In pursuit of a 'minimum standard' for children, the CRC adds further stipulations to the definition of 'adequacy' when constructing housing; conducting impact assessments on the human rights of prospective residents should be a prerequisite for development projects, as well as ensuring the conditions in state and civil society run facilities (shelters, hostels etc.) meet adequate standards (UN CRC, 2017:para. 45). Furthermore, it is noted that such minimum core obligations should not be compromised by any retrogressive measures, even in times of economic crisis (Williams, 2017:3); rights standards should act as a safety net for children, whatever the changing political or economic climate (UN CRC, 2017). While 'adequacy' of housing is stipulated by the CESCR, it is worth highlighting that the language of 'minimum standards' is only used by the CRC with concern to rights, emphasising that there must be an established 'minimum' that children should receive in recognition of their unique characteristics and vulnerabilities.

2.2.2 Children in families

In the realisation of children's right to housing, the CRC recognises rendering the corresponding assistance to parents as essential (Articles 18 and 27). It impresses upon the State an obligation to assist parents and guardians via material means and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing, depending on their economic situation. Families affected by poverty, therefore, should receive assistance from the State depending on their financial and socio-economic means to meet their children's rights under the Convention. Furthermore, such measures must respect the evolving capacities of the child, and living conditions must meet the necessary conditions for the child's 'optimal development' (UN CRC, 2017:para. 31). The CRC have recommended greater holistic investment in family support programmes that are proved to halt the intergenerational transmission of conditions that result in children becoming homeless; this includes interventions for parents and caregivers, including managing finances, gender equality, non-violent communication etc. (UN CRC, 2017:para. 48).

2.2.3 Assisting children affected by homelessness

The Committee notes that repressive policy approaches and laws to 'tackle homelessness' can, in reality, disproportionately affect and cause direct discrimination to children affected by homelessness; for example, the criminalisation of offences that may be an inherent part of the lives of homeless children and young people, such as begging, rough sleeping or breaches of curfew (UN CRC, 2017:para. 16). To comply with their obligations under the Convention, States are urged to adopt holistic and long-term strategies to assist children affected by homelessness in the realisation of their rights (UN CRC, 2017:para. 13).

Such assistance should reflect the spirit of the Convention – implementing personalised, specialist services and interventions that take each child's unique circumstances into account. The Committee highlights the importance that State provision respects children as active agents, rendering them direct material assistance in the form of services focussed on prevention, early intervention and street-based support that provide a continuum of support within a longer-term strategy. Services specified directly are access to healthcare, particularly the availability of prevention, rehabilitation and treatment services for substance abuse, as well as trauma therapy and mental health services. Non-formal education provision is

highlighted, with the stipulation that it is free and reaches those out of traditional schooling environments (UN CRC, 2017:para. 54). The Committee emphasises the availability of drop-in and community centres; night shelters; daycare centres; as well as residential care in group homes; foster care; and independent living or long-term care options as means to support children affected by homelessness (UN CRC, 2017:para. 44).

Simultaneously, the importance of State assistance to engage children with trustworthy and supportive adults is highlighted — such as reunification with family members, State or civil society social workers, psychologists, street workers or mentors. Such engagement should, again, aim to meet children affected by homelessness where they are; it must respect their autonomy and individual circumstances, and be implemented without coercion or requirement to renounce their street connections.

2.2.4 Young care leavers

In its Concluding Observations to the UK, the CRC (2016a) has voiced concerns about provision for young people whilst in, and when leaving, care, noting the impact of frequent changes in placement, the distance of placements from biological family and, in Northern Ireland particularly, the practice of children being placed in secure accommodation. It impresses upon the State the need for more robust support for young people leaving care, ensuring that as they transition into adulthood there are follow-up mechanisms and a gradual withdrawal of support and services, rather than the lack of preparation and abrupt termination of support that has been observed (UN CRC, 2016a). Young care leavers should be informed and consulted about their transition from an early stage, receiving support to access employment and appropriate housing (UN CRC, 2016a:para. 53; UN CRC, 2016b:para. 54). The CRC notes that adolescence can be a source of discrimination in itself, therefore such support should be in consideration of their evolving capacities, in combination with social protection mechanisms that protect their standards of living as rights holders (UN CRC, 2016b).

2.2.5 Persons with Disabilities

In 2017, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) expressed its concern for the universal lack of available, acceptable, affordable, accessible and adaptable services and facilities, including housing (UN CRPD, 2017). The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006) delineates the rights of persons with disabilities and the related obligations of States Parties in realising these rights. Article 28 UNCRPD enshrines the right to an adequate standard of living for persons with disabilities, consistent with the UNCRC (1989) and the ICESCR (1966), with added emphasis on the distinct contextual circumstances of persons with disabilities, including accessible public housing, social protection and poverty reduction programmes. Also, in accordance with other Conventions, Article 5 of the UNCRPD ensures persons with disabilities experience the full enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis. Article 9 (UNCRPD, 2006) develops this with a focus on the particular circumstances of persons with disabilities which make them distinct and entitled to further consideration. In order to ensure rights are accessed on an equal basis with non-disabled persons, so that persons with disabilities may live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States are obliged to pro-actively identify and eliminate obstacles and barriers to accessibility in the sphere of housing. This also includes the establishment of accessibility standards for housing (UN CRPD, 2017); facilitating access to appropriate and affordable services, devices and other assistance for disability related needs, which encompasses a broad

range of provisions tailored to individual circumstances. Furthermore, it includes subsidising service-related costs as, the Committee asserts, it is contrary to the Convention for persons with disabilities to pay for disability-related expenses by themselves (UN CRPD, 2017). This is dependent on means, and those living in poverty are entitled to assistance from the State in the form of disability-related expenses and financial assistance, respite care and public housing programmes. In this instance, so too should social housing providers offer housing that is accessible for persons with disabilities (see UN CRPD, 2014).

The CRC has repeatedly stressed the recognition of poverty as being both a cause and consequence of disability, and the right of children with disabilities to an adequate standard of living, including housing (UN CRC, 2006). Children with disabilities are recognised explicitly in the UNCRPD, Article 7 (2006) via the principles of non-discrimination (ensuring States take all necessary measures to ensure the full enjoyment by children with disabilities of all rights on an equal basis with other children, as in Article 2 UNCRC); best interests (a primary consideration in all actions concerning children with disabilities) and participation (the right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them, their views being given due weight, and to be provided with age and disability-appropriate assistance to access that right). Article 23 of the UNCRC (1989) similarly recognises children with disabilities, preserving their right to special care, social integration and development, as well as the obligation of States in ensuring the extension of assistance not only to children, but also those responsible for their care, dependent on the child's condition and the means and circumstances of their caregivers.

2.2.6 Families and children subject to immigration control

Migrant children are equally entitled to the rights and corresponding State obligations under the UNCRC (1989), including Article 27 pertaining to adequate living standards and housing. Furthermore, children seeking or in possession of refugee status, whether accompanied or unaccompanied, are directly acknowledged in Article 22 of the UNCRC (1989). The State is obliged to provide 'appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance' to ensure asylum-seeking and refugee children are enabled to realise their rights under the UNCRC, as well as all other human rights instruments to which the State subscribes (Article 22.1).

In spite of this, the Committee have expressed reservations about the treatment of children subject to immigration control. In General Comment No. 6 (2005) they noted routine discrimination and denial of access to housing for unaccompanied children. It has been noted that asylum seeking, refugee and migrant children and their families face challenges in accessing basic services, putting them at high risk of destitution (UN CRC, 2016a). A major contributing factor, it has been argued, is being subject to No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) - a prior investigation commissioned by NICCY found that children living in families who are subject to NRPF live in extreme poverty and can experience homelessness and destitution (O'Hara and Orr, 2021). Furthermore, the effects of NRPF affect certain groups disproportionately, such as single parent families, often mothers, whose children are receiving inadequate support and are prevented from benefiting from provisions such as social housing (O'Hara and Orr, 2021). Due to the immigration status of their carers, children are excluded from accessing homelessness assistance and benefits, and the resulting destitution has been argued to be a breach of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)

concerning torture, or inhuman or degrading treatment (Refugee & Asylum Forum, 2017 in O'Hara and Orr, 2021), as well as their rights as children under the UNCRC (e.g. Articles 2, 3, 6, 18, 22 and 27). The consequences of the NRPF policy conflict directly with the obligations of the State under international human rights standards. While such concerns were asserted by the CRC in their last Concluding Observations on the UK in 2016, the NRPF policy remains in place, and it is unclear whether any action has been taken to address them (O'Hara and Orr, 2021).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Aim and objectives

The overall aim of the study was to increase understanding of the lived experience of children and families facing homelessness and housing insecurity and navigating the housing support system. Specific objectives were to:

- Explore participants' pathways through homeless and housing services and supports and examine enablers and barriers to accessing support.
- Assess the suitability of accommodation for families, children and young people, taking account of diverse needs.
- Examine the impact of homelessness and housing insecurity on the lives of children and young people across a range of domains.
- Inform NICCY's recommendations to Government in relation to addressing gaps or where Government is failing to meet its obligations under the UNCRC.

3.2 Sampling and recruitment

Criteria for inclusion in the study was informed by the parameters of the project set out in the tender document as well as by reflections on recent data trends and sector views documented in the scoping review. The final criteria was agreed in consultation with NICCY staff. The criteria were individuals who have experienced homelessness or housing insecurity and who are:

i. Parents with children aged 0-17 living with them.
ii. Children and young people aged 10-17.
iii. Young people aged 18-22 who are also care-experienced or identify as having a disability.

Informed by scoping review, within these groups we also aimed, as far as possible, to include: young people and families in temporary accommodation; young females; parents of children at the lower age range (aged 0-5); asylum seekers and refugees; individuals with experiences of hidden homelessness; individuals previously in custody; families and young people with NRPF.

The study aimed to recruit up to 25 participants and adopted a purposive sampling approach whereby participants were recruited on the basis that they could speak to the study's aims. On receipt of ethical approval, a range of potential recruitment sites were identified, starting with services funded by the Supporting People Programme which identify young people and families as key client groups. Subsequently, an internet search was conducted to identify additional relevant services, both directly related to housing and services more generally supporting families and/or young people where they may come into contact with those experiencing homelessness/housing insecurity. Gatekeepers in each organisation/programme were responsible in identifying potential participants who satisfied the study's criteria. They were then asked to share a participant information sheet (which also included easy read versions as well as translated versions into Arabic and Farsi) and arrange a time for interviews to take place. Participants were offered the opportunity to have individual interviews or to be interviewed alongside a family member or friend. All participants were recruited via voluntary and community sector organisations or housing associations.

3.2.1 Sample profile

- Twenty interviews were conducted with a total of 32 participants.
- Nine young people (6 females and 3 males) aged 17-22 were interviewed individually who had experienced homelessness or housing insecurity independently of their families, eight of whom were care-experienced and three identified as having a disability related to either learning needs or mental health.
- Further interviews were conducted across thirteen families, where children aged between 4 months and 17 years lived in homeless or insecure contexts with their parents. Of these families, 14 parents (12 mothers and 2 fathers) took part in either single or joint interviews and 9 children (5 daughters and 4 sons, aged 10-17) were interviewed alongside a parent. Of these, four families were seeking asylum and one had attained refugee status.
- Three mothers spoke of children with a neurodisability and one child with autism took part in the study alongside her mother. The sample reflects a range of housing and homeless experiences including: hidden homelessness; emergency accommodation (B&Bs & hostels); rough sleeping; temporary hostels; supported living; private rented; and, social housing.

3.3 Interviews with children, parents and young people

In-depth interviews were conducted with individuals and families. Three versions of the interview schedule were developed: one for interviews with parents; one for interviews with children and young people; and one for interviews which combine parents and children as participants. International rights standards, as set out in ICESCR, UNCRC and UNCRPD and summarised in Section 2, informed the development of the interview schedules as did consideration of the legal and policy context in Northern Ireland of presenting as homeless. Interviews explored four key areas:

1) experiences of accommodation/housing (allowing participants to speak to issues around adequate housing and availability of suitable housing that meets their needs);
2) experiences of housing services and support (including experiences of presenting as homeless, navigating the housing support system, questions of eligibility, knowledge and experience of supports to access/maintain housing);
3) impact of homelessness on children's and families' lives across a range of domains (allowing participants to speak to rights implications, e.g. UNCRC/UNCRPD);
4) experiences of non-housing services and supports (incorporating a range of needs that individuals may present with when requiring housing support).

Interviews then concluded with reflections on hopes for the future and messages to decision makers. All interviews took place in person, and most were conducted at the premises of the recruiting organisation. Other interviews took place in an agreed safe area that the participant and researcher were comfortable in, such as a café and cultural spaces, and a small number took place in participants' homes at their request. Twelve participants (nine young people and two parents) completed an individual interview and twenty participants were interviewed alongside a friend or family member. Two young people chose to have a key worker attend the interview with them. Additionally, three young people offered drawings of their 'ideal home' which are presented in this report.

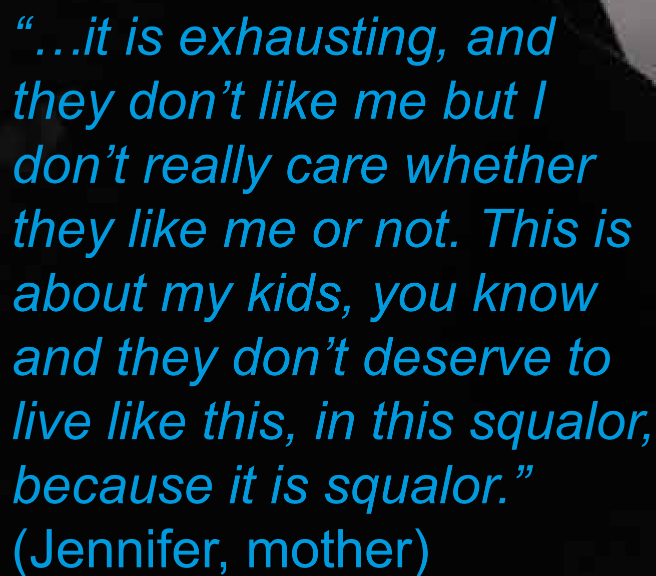
3.4 Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded with the permission of participants and an anonymised transcript of each recording was prepared. An analytic framework was informed by the rights instruments and standards as reviewed in Section 2. It applies a lens of intersecting rights instruments and standards as related to housing (for example the ICESCR, UNCRC and CRPD), including the additional interpretation and expansions provided by the various Committees (e.g CESCR, CRC, CRPD), which elaborate on the definitions and application of rights and standards. Initial coding related to adequate housing and data is coded for: adequacy; legal security of tenure; availability of services; materials, facilities and infrastructure, affordability; habitability; accessibility; location; cultural adequacy (ICESCR). Across this, details of more particular experiences and groups (e.g. children, those with disabilities, those subject to immigration control and young care leavers) are extracted and coded against additional relevant rights instruments (e.g. CRC, CRPD). This facilitates a greater depth of analysis, as well as situates the intersectionality and nuance of participants' experiences in relation to their rights. The analytical framework assists to contextualise participants' experiences within the wider context of rights. These standards were applied directly to the realities of children, young people and families' housing experiences to establish themes – similarities, patterns, intersections, disparities - among the distinct groups. The analysis enables a greater understanding of the extent to which participants' rights are being met, and the State is implementing its obligations, in the context of housing.

3.5 Ethical considerations

The study involved discussing potentially sensitive topics with individuals, including children, experiencing homelessness/ housing security and who may be considered vulnerable. Voluntary, informed consent was sought with every research participant. Details of the research were explained in detailed information sheets, with accessible information sheets for children and young people and translated information sheets in Farsi and Arabic. All participants were advised that participation was voluntary and that they had the right to refuse participation without any repercussion. Where children were aged under 16, parental/guardian consent was attained in addition to children's own consent. Participants were advised that interviews will remain confidential[6], unless they disclose information that the researcher has to report, relating to, for example, where a participant discloses that a child or young person are in danger or at risk of danger in some way. A protocol on the limitations to confidentiality was established and followed by all team members as was a safety protocol to protect participants' and researchers' safety. In recognition of the time spent by participants, a small supermarket voucher was offered as a thank you to participants.

[6] All names used in this report are pseudonyms.



"…it is exhausting, and they don't like me but I don't really care whether they like me or not. This is about my kids, you know and they don't deserve to live like this, in this squalor, because it is squalor." (Jennifer, mother)

4. EXPERIENCES OF HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING INSECURITY

The true extent of homelessness and housing insecurity among children, families and young people in NI is unknown given the hidden nature of much homelessness. As such, official data can only provide a partial picture.

A scoping paper preceding this research aimed to attain a profile of children and families affected by homelessness or housing insecurity.[7] Despite data limitations (e.g. gaps in relation to young adults aged 18-21 with a disability, and families and young people aged 16-17 subject to immigration control/NRPF), it is possible to identify some key trends in relation to children, families and young people in Northern Ireland.

There has been an overall decline in the number of families[8] presenting and being accepted as homeless in Northern Ireland, yet they consistently account for approximately one third of all households presenting and being accepted as homeless (1,862 families in January-June 2022, DfC/NIHE/NISRA, 2022, Table 2.2).

Other data breaking down households as accepted as homeless give further indication of the numbers of children and their parents experiencing homelessness. For example, the second largest category of priority need accepted as homeless is 'having dependent children', accounting for approximately a quarter of households accepted as homeless in Northern Ireland. Additionally, whilst there is indication of a slight decline in the total number of children in households accepted as homeless from 2018 to 2021, consistently there have been greater numbers of children at the lower end of the age range (aged 0-5) in households accepted as homeless.

Data on placements in temporary accommodation also suggest that concerns expressed by the CRC about the numbers of homeless families in Northern Ireland staying in temporary accommodation remain (UN CRC, 2016). Placements in temporary accommodation for families and young people aged 16-17 have increased, whilst there has been a steady increase in the number of children in temporary accommodation across all age categories, with the highest numbers among children aged 1-4.

Most recent figures available report that 3,913 children were in temporary accommodation in July 2022, including 1,142 children aged 1-4. The majority of placements in temporary accommodation involving children relate to placements in private single lets, followed by hostel accommodation (DfC/NIHE/NISRA, 2022).

Official data, whilst useful in providing an indication of overall trends, however, is partial and does not give insight into experiences of those individuals and families in a range of living situations. The following analysis assesses the experiences of children, families and young people across a spectrum of homelessness and housing insecurity, with particular attention given to the adequacy of such accommodation for children and families and the implications for their rights.

[7] NICCY & QUB Scoping Paper – April 2022. The paper drew on the biannual summary of homelessness statistics in Northern Ireland, the quarterly Northern Ireland Housing Bulletin and additional data on specific groups requested from the NIHE and HSCB which related most closely to the aims of the scoping paper and research. https://www.niccy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NICCY-QUB-Homelesss-Scoping-Paper-April-2022.pdf

[8] It is important to note that 'families' do not necessarily include children under 18 and may include units were there are children over 18 or adult siblings/other relatives living together.

4.1 Current living situations

At the time of interview, participants were living across a number of different living situations representing a spectrum of housing (in)security, from hidden homeless contexts and temporary hostels to permanent social housing. Across all living situations, as discussed further below, there were varying degrees of instability and inadequacy of accommodation, including for those in apparently more secure contexts.

Among the thirteen families represented in the study, nine were currently living in temporary accommodation with their children who were aged between 4 months and 17 years. Of these, four families were staying in hostel accommodation for families, one of whom had attained refugee status, and one family was living in a single let. Four families were seeking asylum: two were in dispersal accommodation, managed by an accommodation provider, awaiting their asylum claim; two other families were living in contingency accommodation in hotels. Finally, four families were living in more stable settings: three in social housing managed by the NIHE or a Housing Association and one in private rented accommodation.

Nine young people, aged 17-22, participated in the study. Of these, five were living in supported accommodation for young people and one was staying temporarily with friend. Three young people were in potentially more permanent or stable living situations, one of whom was in social housing, one living with a grandparent and one young person was in private rented accommodation.

Classifying families' and young people's living experiences into types, particularly in terms of temporary, permanent or secure, does not necessarily reflect the reality of living situations. For example, many of those in so-called 'temporary' living situations had been there for a number of years. One family had been living in a temporary hostel for families for three years, whilst an asylum-seeking family had been living in hotel contingency accommodation for a period of nine months. Young people living in supported accommodation typically had a contract of two years, after which they planned to access permanent accommodation. However those approaching, or who had already reached, the end of their contract cited uncertainty about next steps. Additionally, those living in contexts which could be considered more permanent or stable still spoke of ongoing insecurity, with some at the time of interview actively seeking to leave their current accommodation. Examining the extent of movement between living situations, rather than focusing on the point in time when interviews were conducted, gives further indication of instability and fragility of families' and young people's homeless and housing pathways.

4.2 Movement between living situations

The extent of movement between living situations varied across participants in the study. Parents and children who had experienced homelessness or housing insecurity as a family were more likely to have made fewer movements between living situations, moving directly into temporary accommodation on presenting to the NIHE as homeless when more stable arrangements broke down. A mother and her three daughters, for example, had been living in their family home. On the breakdown of a relationship, the mother could not take on the mortgage and after a short time at her parents' home, the family moved into a family hostel where they had been living for two years. A father, who was an asylum seeker, explained that he had his family had been moved into a hotel on arrival to Northern Ireland and remained there for nine months before being placed in dispersal accommodation the day before. Other families

noted greater movement between living situations. For example, one mother arrived in Northern Ireland as an asylum seeker in 2017 and had now attained refugee status. With her son, she moved between three forms of initial and dispersal accommodation over a period of three years. On attaining refugee status, she presented as homeless and in the following 2.5 years moved between two temporary family hostels and a period of hidden homelessness, staying with a friend. A mother and her son recounted their story of moving back to Northern Ireland from England, having to stay with her own mother while presenting homeless to NIHE. Following two different placements they had been living in social housing for 2.5 years but had been trying to leave for over one year.

Young people's stories were more commonly characterised by experiences of constant movement between a range of temporary living situations, such as 'sofa-surfing', B&Bs, hostels, sleeping rough and supported living, as well as returning to periods with a parent (temporarily and usually as a last resort) and potentially more secure or permanent contexts, such as social housing or private rented accommodation. Eight of the young people were care-experienced and care placements could precede or be interspersed with periods of homelessness. As such, some young people reported 10-12 housing transitions in their mid-to late teenage years. For those who were care-experienced, the point of leaving care was a particular juncture which triggered periods of instability.

4.2.1 Young people leaving care

Children and young people leaving care are recognised as being more vulnerable to homelessness, with recent strategies in Northern Ireland emphasising the importance of early intervention to prevent a young person leaving care becoming homeless, and of supporting them making a successful transition into independent living as adults (NI Executive 2020; DOH/DOE, 2021). *A Life Deserved: 'Caring' for Children and Young People in NI Strategy* (DOH/DOE, 2021) recognises a child's right to an adequate standard of living which requires access to the right support at the right time to enable young people to make a successful transition into adult life and access to somewhere safe and suitable to live.

For children leaving care, the *Regional Good Practice Guidance: Meeting the Accommodation and Support Needs of 16-21 year olds* (2014), agreed by the NIHE and Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs), applies. Where children are aged under 18, a duty may arise for the relevant HSCT, thus removing the child or young person from the duties of the housing legislation and bringing them under the provisions of the Children (NI) Order 1995 (as amended) (Housing Rights, 2020). Article 21 of the Children Order states that a HSCT shall provide accommodation for any child in need within its area who appears to require accommodation. A number of agreed procedures are outlined in the Regional Good Practice Guidance. Where a 'relevant'[9] or 'eligible'[10] 16-17 year old presents in an emergency to either the NIHE or the HSC Trust, it will be established with 16 Plus if previous accommodation is available and if they can return. If they cannot return, 16 Plus and NIHE secure suitable alternative accommodation. In the case of young adults aged 18-21 presenting as an emergency, if they are a 'former relevant child'[11] or a 'qualifying young person'[12] it will be established with 16 Plus if previous accommodation is available and if the young person can return. If they cannot return, 16 Plus and NIHE work together to secure suitable alternative accommodation and establish whether the young person is owed a duty under the Housing (NI) Order 1988 (Housing Rights, 2020).

[9] A child aged 16 or 17 who has left care and before leaving care was an 'eligible' child
[10] A child who has been looked after for a prescribed period after a prescribed age, and is aged 16 or 17
[11] A former relevant child is a young person aged 18-21 who has been a relevant child in the past
[12] A qualifying young person is a young person under 21 who, after reaching the age of 16 but while still a child, but is no longer, looked after.

Data accessed for the scoping paper from NIHE and Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) give some indication of the insecure nature of some young people's living situations on leaving care.[13] In relation to young people aged 18-21 who are care-experienced, there was an overall increase in both presentations and acceptances as homeless between the financial years 2018/19 to 2020/21, with 86 care-experienced young people aged 18-21 having presented as homeless in 2020-21 and 74 young people having been accepted as homeless in the same year. Over a fifth of 991 former relevant young people, aged 18-21+, were living across less stable accommodation types in March 2021 (jointly commissioned supported accommodation projects; staying with relatives/friends; hostel/B&B/Foyer; supported board and lodgings; and, prison). This represents a small decrease in the proportion of former relevant young people in more insecure situations compared to March 2018. Data for 42 qualifying young people at the same time point showed that 12 qualifying young people were living across the same categories of less stable living arrangements, an overall decrease since March 2018.

Young people in the study described varied experiences of care and the leaving care process. Some were uncertain about the exact processes that led to their current, or previous, living situations, highlighting the difficulties they experienced navigating housing support systems. Their accounts do provide, however, important insight into the significant challenges in their transition to independent living as adults and prolonged periods of insecurity, which, for some, began while still in care. Three young people, for example, recounted multiple care placements, which contributed to a sense of constant movement which then persisted into experiences of homelessness and housing insecurity.

"Because you're walking round with black bags like and people's just staring at you like terrible thing to do moving around home to home rather than just settled in one place and be there for good." (Abi, 20)

Reasons for leaving care, and the support experienced at this juncture, varied across young people's accounts. Some young people spoke of their desire for increasing independence and as they approached age 17 or 18, they wanted to have their own place. At the same time, this could precipitate some anxiety, especially if there had been a lack of planning. For some, although they spoke of family conflict, breakdown in relationships, and/or violence as reasons for moving into care, when they returned to these contexts to live with parents temporarily as they sought alternative living situations, exposing them to a range of potential harms. Ella had been in foster care for 11 years and, as she approached 18, she described how she struggled with her foster parents' rules and being located away from her friends.

"I just didn't agree with the rules anymore, you know, I was 18 and I was wanting to go out and do my own thing and it was just a disagreement like… I feel like I was just at the point where I was just ready to do my own thing. I think they realised that as well but like there's no bad blood… We were very far out of [Town], so I found it really difficult to come in and see my friends. They were very old fashioned, very strict about going out and about what I wore and what I was doing and my boyfriend and everything. And I just wasn't agreeing with it." (Ella, 19)

[13] Data was extracted from the NIHE live database on 25th March 2022 relating to the number of young people aged 18-21 who are care-experienced and who presented or were accepted as homeless. HSCB provided data representing a point in time in March of each year (2018-2021) on the living arrangements of former relevant young people and qualifying young people.

She noted, however, that limited planning had taken place because *"there was never any even notion of me leaving foster care."* It was assumed by professionals she would move into student accommodation and return to her foster parents outside of term time. With no alternative plan in place, she returned to her mother's home who *"was really heavily drinking at the time… and trying to get violent"* so she ultimately *"just had to leave"* moving into hidden homeless contexts, staying temporarily with her boyfriend's family in *"crammed"* conditions. Eventually she was put under pressure to contribute financially or leave and accessed private rented accommodation which she was also hoping to leave at the time of interview. Claire spoke of multiple care placements in children's care homes and secure care. Her story tells of the anxiety associated with constant movement and *"back and forth"* between care, parents and eventually emergency accommodation and rough sleeping.

Claire, 18
Claire was first placed in care at the age of 11 or 12. From that point, she described several placements in a children's care home and in secure care. Between each placement, she returned to live with either one of her parents or other family members or friends. She was never quite sure where she would return to after each placement, nor did she know if or when she would be placed again into care. The constant *"not knowing"* caused Claire a lot of anxiety which precipitated *"mental health issues"*, Claire also describing drug use and an overdose during a particularly *"rough time"* in residential care. The *"worst time"*, however, was when she had to return to her mother's home in between care placements.

"Going back with my mum [was the worst time]… That was a very difficult phase in my life. Mostly just because of like abuse and stuff. So that was quite difficult, to leave care where I was actually doing okay a majority of the time. And then having to go back into that, to go back into the care system. You know, it was very back and forth and very difficult."

Claire left her final care placement four months before her 18th birthday. She recounted that *"Nobody actually did help me plan anything"* and as a result she had to return to her mother's house where she said the *"normal patterns"* recommenced and she had to leave. This precipitated a period of *"constantly moving about"* between rough sleeping, sofa-surfing and accessing B&Bs, a time which she described as *"very unpredictable."* She tried to stay in a hostel, but it was too *"scary"*, rough sleeping presenting as the *"safer"* option. The *"not knowing"* of where she would stay next and having to *"move all [her] stuff every other day"* was difficult.

"I think it was just the, again not knowing where I'm going to go next and constantly moving. Like I didn't know if I was going to have to wake up in the middle of the night to just move again, you know, it was scary like."

Most of the young people who were care-experienced entered into supported living for young people either on leaving their last care placement or a number of transitions later in their housing pathways. Some also accessed independent living contexts through social housing or the private sector. For most of them such transitions – either into supported or independent contexts – were presented as positive. However, their accounts also demonstrated continued instability and risk where often these placements broke down, particularly where young people noted a lack of support or guidance, and thus were part of a cycle of movement between inadequate or unsustainable living arrangements.

4.3 'Hidden homelessness' and rough sleeping

Periods of 'hidden homelessness' and rough sleeping, in most cases, occurred at early transitions in families' and young people's homeless pathways and at a time when they were not engaged with, or aware of, housing supports and services. Needing to escape difficult living situations or having nowhere else to turn, they sought the assistance of friends and family or had to resort to sleeping on the street. These experiences were typically interspersed with placement in emergency accommodation such as B&Bs and hostels (explored further in Section 4.4).

Three young people, two young women and one young man, recounted periods of sleeping rough. All of them referenced family confrontation and violence as a reason for ending up on the streets, one young woman having to leave home as a result of *"abuse"* whilst another had *"nowhere to go"* following an argument with her family when she had been sent home by supported living accommodation during Covid lockdown. Similarly, another young man described, at aged 16, having to leave his mother's home due to ongoing confrontations and as a result spent time on the streets.

*"She used to throw us out and all and we used to just go away for a couple of hours and then come back but at that time I thought it was serious and all, she hit me and all… and I didn't know what to grab because I was getting ****** out, I only grabbed a jacket. I just like to keep walking and walking until I got tired and then I was walking and walking into the town and I was outside [shop] that … has the wee enclosed bit and I just lay down there and put the jacket round me and stuff."*
(Luke, 20)

Described as *"one of the hardest times"* of his life, the young man continued to highlight the lack of support, formal or informal, available to him at this juncture: *"No, nobody helped me in terms of accommodation or sofa surfing or opening the door for me or anything."* The mental toll of living in such conditions was evident as he would *"break down and cry… feeling like I was a waster and nobody wanted me and stuff."* As a means to *"survive"*, he viewed *"stealing off people… robbing cars… drink and drugs as the only way forward."*

Six young people and seven families described periods of 'hidden homelessness' whereby individuals or households are invisible to intervention and rely on informal forms of support. This typically includes staying temporarily with friends or family members, moving between peers and family in a period of 'sofa-surfing' and living in over-crowded conditions (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016: 1). For some participants this lasted for a number of months whilst others described periods as short as a week until they were able to access other accommodation. Indeed, experiences of hidden homelessness could act as a pathway, or 'gateway' (Sanders et al., 2019), into more visible forms of homelessness or to an individual or family making contact with housing and homeless services. Regardless of length, staying temporarily with family, friends or merely *"acquaintances"* were periods of insecurity when participants were unsure how long they could draw on others' support and/or worried about being a burden on others.

Some young people described periods of hidden homelessness which occurred on leaving institutions (e.g. care or psychiatric hospital) where they assessed they had nowhere to go and unwillingly returned to a parent's or other family member's, home where they were subject to abuse, violence and other forms of stress. Julia, for example, felt that she had no choice on discharge from a psychiatric hospital but to stay at her mother's house despite *"a very bad relationship."* This caused her a significant amount of stress and triggered a "*very big breakdown":*

"So even though I had the security of I was in my ma's I had no like idea… would I be staying here long-term? What would my treatment be here down in [town], … I had no specialised treatment, which I was meant to have. So I was in a very big bundle of I didn't know where I was going or what was happening." (Julia, 19)

Thinking that her only alternative was being placed in foster care, she moved to her mother's where she remained in her room and described situations with the potential to trigger violent interactions.

"So it was very rough, and the relationship between me and my ma was basically just non-existent. It was very rough, I was very aggressive, she was very aggressive, we were just getting on each other's nerves, and we were both worried that it would get to a point where it would end up getting physical unfortunately." (Julia, 19)

Although she assessed she had not been *"properly homeless"*, the situation was evidently unsustainable and she described herself being "close" to having to draw on forms of emergency or temporary accommodation before being placed in supported living accommodation. Other young people were unable to return to family members in such contexts and embarked upon more frequent sofa-surfing between various acquaintances. Ava, for example, described three periods of hidden homelessness which were interspersed with constant movement between residential care, emergency accommodation, supported living and social housing. Her first experience of hidden homelessness occurred at the age of 17 on leaving her mother's house and she was *"just living about friends"* before being placed in residential care. She recounted two further periods of hidden homelessness just before her 18th birthday, where she moved between more *"acquaintances"* sought out at parties, rather than friends, which posed risk to her safety (see Section 8.8). Liam also had to leave his mother's home and described the uncertainty that he faced as he moved between neighbours and friends.

"I didn't like, sort of any time I was staying somewhere I didn't know where I was going to stay like in like two days' time, so I always had to like get somewhere else sorted every day. I had to get somewhere else sorted to go." (Liam, 17)

Liam further illustrates the 'hidden' nature of this situation where his social worker was unaware of his insecurity.

"My like social worker like she was kind of hard to get in contact with like at that time, which was annoying... I don't really know what she thought, but I probably think she just assumed that I was just going and staying in family members' for a few days, then I was going to go back to my mum's. Like I think that's what she thought. But I wasn't for going back to my mum's, I didn't want to." (Liam, 17)

Luke's experiences of hidden homelessness occurred on losing social housing. His story demonstrates the uncertainty that surrounds hidden homeless contexts where length of stay is dependent on good relationships and behaviour. On eviction, Luke entered a period of staying with family members interspersed with rough sleeping and B&B accommodation. Initially spending two days at his father's house and then at his mother's, who *"threw me out."* He then moved in with a friend with whom he had been living with for a number of weeks at the time of interview. Clearly worried about the stability of his situation, he was conscious of not wanting to be a burden on his friend and tried to contribute to the household in some way, in the hope of prolonging the arrangement until he was *"rehoused."*

"I'm helping her out cleaning the house, feeding the cat and doing things around the house and stuff and it's working out up there…Hopefully when I start working I'll be able to start putting money into the house and all and start doing stuff and all that there… Once I get paid I buy a big case of cat food… I top her gas up, I top her electric up and I get tobacco for us… I don't want it to look like I'm freelancing, no way. I do my best to try and show her that I'm not … using her or using her house." (Luke, 20)

Whilst highlighting the positive *"influence"* of his friend to help him *"keep… away from the drink and the drugs"*, the arrangement was also dependent on his behaviour *"no ***ing about, no drinking and all that there."* As a result, he was aware of the fragility of his living situation.

"It makes me even more anxious and worried. I don't know. Say we have a disagreement, I'm very forward, if I don't agree I will put it forward and I don't want her that she takes it bad in any way or something … I just don't want us to fall out and then that will be me stuck in a hole." (Luke, 20)

Families who recounted periods of hidden homelessness described losing more stable housing situations following, for example, family/relationship breakdown, eviction from private rented tenancy or having been issued a threat (which they linked to *"paramilitary"* activity) to move out of their social housing. At these junctures, some spent short periods staying with family/friends, while others endured inhabitable conditions before being able to access formal housing support. Two mothers described tensions when they moved into their parents' homes on a temporary basis when they lost their prior accommodation. One mother and three daughters, for example, had to leave their home after a relationship breakdown where they could not take on the mortgage. Moving to her parents' home for six months, whilst *"thankful"* for somewhere to go, the family struggled with inadequate space, the property now *"too small"* for increased inhabitants. The stress of this exacerbated personality *"clashes"* particularly when it came to questions of raising the children. Subsequently presenting as homeless, the family had been living in a temporary hostel for families for two years at the time of interview. In a similar situation, another mother described moving back to Northern Ireland and having to stay temporarily with her mother until she could access housing, a situation that only lasted a couple of weeks after a *"massive argument."* She described her anxiety and hesitation to present as homeless as she feared she would be perceived as unable to provide for children

"So I went out and I packed a case. I had a case, you [son] had a case. … And went down to the Housing Executive and pretty much says 'I have nowhere to go'. I was a wee bit scared to tell you the truth, as a parent, because I was scared in case someone would take my children away because I couldn't provide somewhere for them to live, you know? I really was. I was quite literally willing to tell the kids to drop and cases and run." (Anna, mother)

Another family described the impact of eviction from private rented accommodation and the challenges of accessing suitable accommodation via the NIHE so that the children could still attend school. Continuing threatening behaviour from the landlord, however, prompted them to move to a friend's house while they awaited placement in hostel accommodation. The son, who was 14 at the time, described the unease he felt staying at his mum's friend's house.

"I always found it weird to wake up in someone else's house and then get ready to go to school and then go home, and then go out and then go back to that." (Dominic, 17, son)

Other families did not have the support of families or friends to rely on, or they chose not to. Alternatively, they endured inhabitable conditions, living in a state of disrepair, before being able to access housing support. One family, for example, was issued a notice of repossession but had to remain in the house for three months prior to being placed in single let accommodation. During that time, they had *"no heat and no water… carrying boiling pots of water up the stairs [to] wash the kids."* (Jennifer, mother)

4.4. Temporary accommodation: B&Bs, hostels and single lets

The placement of children, young people and families in temporary accommodation was highlighted as a key concern by the CRC in 2016 (UN CRC, 2016). Indeed, the use of temporary accommodation and the length that households are placed in temporary accommodation has become a key focus of a number of recent strategies in Northern Ireland. The *Chronic Homelessness Action Plan*, for example, emphasises the importance of rapid responses and ensuring stay in temporary accommodation is as short as possible through the provision of a range of housing options and more permanent solutions (NIHE, 2020a). *The Homelessness Strategy 2022-27* reinforces a housing-led approach whereby households are to be supported to exit homelessness through the supply of suitable temporary accommodation from which households can transition into settled housing (NIHE, 2022a). Alongside the Homelessness Strategy, the Strategic Action Plan for Temporary Accommodation – *Homeless to Home* – aims to reduce the time spent in TA before households move to a settled home (NIHE, 2022). A key objective is to minimise the need for temporary accommodation in the first place through targeting prevention initiatives. It recognises the current homelessness response as crisis led and notes the need for 'a systemic and cultural shift towards homelessness prevention and rapid rehousing' (NIHE, 2022:15). Within this, the usage of hotel/B&B are noted as needing to be minimal, with no children being placed in a hotel/B&B (NIHE, 2022:18). *A Life Deserved*, focussing on looked after children, also notes that the placement of young people in hostels, B&Bs or hotels should be rarely used and for the shortest period of time (DOH/DOE, 2021).

Participants in the study spoke of staying in B&Bs, hostels and single let accommodation. Of the young people in the study, four (one male and three females) had previously stayed in B&B or emergency hostel accommodation. Typically, their experiences in these forms of emergency accommodation were short-term, sometimes limited to one or two nights, and were explained by wanting to escape from or avoid difficult living situations they could not face at particular junctures. Whilst short-term, when considered alongside periods of sofa-surfing, rough sleeping and care placements, they formed part of a constant movement for young people between multiple forms of unstable living situations in their mid-to-late teenage years.

Young people who stayed in B&B accommodation described it as an alternative to rough sleeping or as offering them some respite during a period of rough sleeping. Luke, for example, wanted to escape the *"hostile environment"* at home and was supported by his social worker to access a B&B for just one night. He described feeling uncomfortable and staying in the bedroom all day. One young woman described a period of four months before her 18th birthday of *"constantly moving about"* between B&B's and rough sleeping, a time which she described as *"very unpredictable."* Whilst staying in B&B accommodation provided this young person with some respite from the street, the *"not knowing"* of where she would stay next was unsettling. This young woman tried

to avoid hostel accommodation, assessing that sleeping on the streets was a *"safer"* option. Accessing a hostel on one occasion, she witnessed another individual injecting and returned to sleeping rough after *"half a day."* Two young women spoke of longer periods spent in hostel accommodation in their teenage years. As well as raising issues related to safety (see Section 8.8) they noted the inadequate condition of the hostel.

"I couldn't wash my clothes, it was dirty, like really dirty, everywhere. The mattresses and all were like something you'd lie on in a prison cell." (Ava, 20)

Four families were living in temporary hostel accommodation for families at the time of interview. One family was in single let accommodation and a second family had stayed in two single lets before moving into social housing. Children in these families were aged between 1 and 17 at the time of interview. Only one parent viewed her position in a hostel for families in a positive light, having lived there for one year with her one-year-old son, and was *"happy"* to stay there until she could access suitable social housing. Having left her mother's home due to overcrowding, she was pleased with the space she and her child had at the hostel, particularly having moved from a one-bedroom to a two-bedroom space. A key benefit for her was the social supports available to both her and her son (see Section 6.1).

Other families, however, depicted more negative experiences of temporary accommodation, particularly related to the length of time they had remained in a hostel or single let. The other three families in family hostels had been there for 1, 2 and 3 years respectively. One family had been in single let accommodation for 18 months at the time of interview, whilst another family had spent 2.5 years in a single let prior to accessing social housing. A key issue for these families was the length of their stay which, to them, did not feel 'temporary'.

"Well I thought, initially the girl had said to me, because they had started making changes here, 'oh you'll only be here six months, you'll only be here six months', and we're still sitting here two years later… I just turned forty and I'm going why am I still literally sitting here homeless with my kids? I didn't think I would be here at that stage, at this stage in life…." (Fiona, mother)

Added to the long time spent in temporary accommodation, families were also aware of the fragility of their situation with one mother recounting how she received *"subtle threats"* to remind her that she could be asked to leave at any time.

"… it's temporary and you are reminded every day. You're told 'oh they could ask you to leave. They could say you've stayed so long, it's a temporary accommodation, and then you'll be forced to private rent'. I've been threatened like that. They are subtle threats, but they are threats like that… but somebody somewhere should be able to move these cases along." (Natalie, mother).

A move into temporary accommodation often involved families moving location which could contribute to a sense of upheaval, being far away from important sources of support such as families, friends, school and place of worship (discussed further in Section 6). A number of parents and their children raised their concerns about unfamiliar neighbourhoods and described times when they felt unsafe. One mother, for example, explained that she was *"afraid"* that her son would be *"affected"* by the *"gangs"* in the area (Fatima, mother). Another family described how they had to move across the city to access a family hostel, something that was particularly unsettling for one daughter who has autism. Coming into this *"different world"*

one of the daughters described that *“a lot happens near here”* in reference to rioting at a nearby interface area. Her mother had to reassure her that *“the gates are locked at eleven o’clock every night… You know, there’s somebody [staff] down the stairs.”* (Fiona, mother) Similarly, a mother and her son described the stress of moving to a different part of the city which was unfamiliar to them, with the young man describing the unease he felt after his mother’s car was damaged, something that he assessed would never have happened in his former neighbourhood.

“shortly after we moved in the passenger window got smashed in… by someone with a hammer. It was just, it was shortly after we moved here. … like I have never like heard anything like that happening again near our area but, you know, it was definitely something new considering nothing of the sort happened where we used to live.”
(Dominic, 17, son)

His mother noted that this was a racist attack and others, too, reported feeling very unwelcome in their new community, to a point that they described being harassed. One family who had moved into single let accommodation described how they felt ostracised in their new neighbourhood.

“These people here have made sure nobody comes near us, and I don’t know why. We haven’t done anything... We haven’t done anything to anybody … So I think we’re ostracised because it’s [single let accommodation]. They just don’t, they just don’t want people in here I don’t think.”
(Jennifer, mother)

Space was also highlighted as an issue for two of the families currently in family hostels and a family living in a single let accommodation. They described brothers and sisters having to share a bedroom and rooms which were too small for sharing, particularly when schoolwork had to be done. Alternatively, parents noted that children had to stay in their room for reasons of either space or wanting to feel safe as they were disturbed by *“banging doors”* and people *“on the stairs all the time… you can’t really get to sleep”* (Thea, 15, daughter). Much of this meant that the idea of privacy for parents or children was impossible to fathom and that they suffered disruption to their sleep. Two daughters, aged 11 and 15, one of whom has autism, explained how they felt about the cramped conditions in their family hostel flat where they lived with their mother and 6-year-old brother.

Thea: *“My room’s too small so it doesn’t really feel like a room… Because everything’s just piled onto the floor everywhere.”*
Mairead: *“And then like sometimes when I’m getting changed I have to get [brother] out of the room, and sometimes he doesn’t go out of the room and it really annoys me… So I need my own room... Well it’s like tiny and then I have to share a room with [younger brother], and I have a lot of stuff so like my room’s a bit messy.”* (Thea, 15, daughter; Mairead, 11, daughter)

Others noted the lack of communal space for families within the hostels, particularly for teenagers and parents, and felt that due to the impact of social isolation from their friends and family a place *“where you can go just and chat with people from other flats”* (Natalie, mother) would help.

On arrival to temporary accommodation, a number of families described contexts which were uninhabitable due to broken toilets or washing facilities, dirty furnishings and broken appliances. As a result, many struggled to create a homely atmosphere with limited resources available to make improvements independently. One family described in detail the inadequacy of the flat when they first moved into in a family hostel.

Natalie: *"… it was not up to the standards, the toilet needed fixing, needed painting, the walls were nasty and I had to buy paint and paint it. Me and my son painted it, and I had to share a bed with my daughter … Oh the beds, we had to throw them out as well, because they were minging. They were nasty. I said 'I'm not sleeping on this and I will put them out the door'. … And the mattresses too… I mean I've never even seen, even your mop wouldn't be that soiled and I'm like 'and you expect humans to live like this?' You know?"*

Dominic: *"Like it was sticky in some places too, like to touch. Like the top of the cupboards was just sticky for some reason."*

Natalie: "*Stinking, yeah. Oh and for smell, do you remember? … But the most important thing is we had a place to sleep. We didn't have money as well that we could go and buy these clothes, like beds and mattresses for ourselves… So I slept on the floor for a few days, like maybe two or three weeks, before they brought me a bed, and I probably, they thought, this woman is proud or she is full of herself. But I was only, that is no way, no human should be allowed to live like that."* (Natalie, mother; Dominic, 17, son)

This experience was not a one-off and other parents described *"dirty"* mattresses, duvets and pillows with families sleeping on the floor until replacements could be bought or donated. Two children were keen to point out that they did not have a comfortable sofa to sit on and instead had to sit on chairs that were *"mostly wood"* and *"hurt your back."* Others described broken appliances which required repair or replacement and whilst fixed, the interim periods were a source of financial stress where families had to, for example, pay for clothes dryers at local shopping centres and pay for takeaways whilst cookers and ovens could be replaced. Indeed, those staying in family hostels described hostel staff who responded to their concerns and organised repairs and maintenance quite quickly. Those in single let accommodation, were "exhausted" making repeated calls to housing management companies to see to long-term issues in their home. One family described a series of concerns that needed to be addressed: a door had fallen down and hurt a child due to rotten wood in the door frame; the lock on the front door had to be fixed on three occasions, once left unlockable overnight which caused anxiety for a family who had experienced domestic violence; a *"mouse infestation"* in the kitchen; a repeatedly broken cooker; and, being left without water over a weekend. The mother described how the constant requests for help and repair could take their toll.

"… it is exhausting, and they don't like me but I don't really care whether they like me or not. This is about my kids, you know and they don't deserve to live like this, in this squalor, because it is squalor. I don't care what anybody says." (Jennifer, mother)

A key source of stress for all families in hostels and single lets was the cost of keeping their homes warm and all struggled in this regard, particularly due to the rising heating costs and fearing further increases in the coming winter. One mother noted the difficulty in being placed in an oil-heated single let accommodation pointing out difficulties in affording the required minimum oil purchase.

"They don't think, these people in temporary accommodation don't have money. Why put them in oil, where you can't top-up five pound or ten pound? You know, you have to have a minimum or even a drum used to be twenty, thirty pound…" (Anna, mother)

A number of parents raised particular concerns in relation to their children's bedrooms, described as *"very cold, damp."* One mother living in single let accommodation with three children described how she was "worried sick" about her children coming into

winter due to a lack of insulation and draughty windows and doors. She recounted how they currently eat their meals in bed *“under the covers… because it was that cold”* and continued to describe the mould that has appeared.

Jennifer: *”Absolutely freezing cold. You can’t get warm… It’s just, it’s horrible. [daughter’s] room it feels like you’re outside, I think because it’s on the end, you know? Because there’s obviously no insulation or anything like that. It’s always damp. I’ve got a cupboard in the room we sleep in… and I put all the clothes we weren’t wearing and my curtains and things like that in there, and…*
Jaydon: “*It goes mouldy, and it’s disgusting.”*
Jennifer: “*It’s all gone mouldy.”* (Jennifer, mother; Jaydon, 10, son)

4.5 Supported living for young people

Homelessness strategies have also prioritised the provision of housing-led options and aim to secure sustainable, appropriate accommodation, provide appropriate support solutions and support ‘customers’ exiting homelessness into settled accommodation (NIHE, 2017, 2021). The current range of housing solutions for young people in Northern Ireland, however, is recognised as inadequate (NIHE, 2022a). The Housing Supply Strategy recognises a need for increased housing supply and affordable options, as well as more diverse housing types and alternative models of housing to meet the needs of different groups, including children in care and those with disabilities (DfC, 2021). *A Life Deserved: ‘Caring’ for Children and Young People in NI Strategy* further recognises a need to review and expand the continuum of housing options available to young people as well as the delivery of housing support services and care provision in the home environment (DOH/DOE, 2021:50).

Five of the young people in the study, all of whom were care-experienced, had lived in accommodation specifically targeted at young homeless people and four were still in the accommodation at the time of interview. These accommodation types were managed by community and voluntary sector organisations and young people were typically offered a two-year contract. Most settings were staffed 24/7 by housing and support workers and included an element of shared spaces with other young residents. Those living in the accommodation at the time of interview had been there between one week and two years and one had previously been in supported accommodation on two other occasions. Another young man, currently living with a friend at time of interview, had previously been in supported accommodation for two years.

All of the young people spoke of benefitting from the support of professionals in providing them with information about their options and/or to give them the practical help to make the move into supported accommodation. Often the first barrier to accessing such accommodation was that young people were unaware that it existed. On discharge from psychiatric hospital, Julia was faced with limited options as she didn’t feel ready to be discharged nor did she want to return to her mother’s home where she and her mother had a *“very bad relationship.”* She described the planning meetings with professionals where she felt her *“only choice”* was to return to her mother’s.

"I was with FIS at the time, so if I got to my social worker or my family intervention worker, and they obviously asked, you know, 'do you believe you're ready to go back to your ma's or would you like to go somewhere else?' At the time … I didn't even know the idea of supported accommodation existed… So I really thought it was either I'm going to my ma's or I'm going to foster care. So I was like 'I'm going back to my ma's', because I didn't really want to end up in foster care. I've heard the horror stories … I had no clue supported accommodation existed." (Julia, 19)

Having only found out about the supported accommodation after returning to her mother's home, the same young woman emphasised the importance of informing young people about their options.

"… the only reason I found out was through my FIS worker after I got discharged. I wish, like if people are in a very tense household I wish people were given a second option of like 'this is supported accommodation, this is what it is. We can try to get you in here if you want'. It is limited, I know, with spaces… but I wish it was more accessible to people… I wish it was more out there and people knew more about it, because it's almost like a secret." (Julia, 19)

Similarly, Claire indicated a lack of information on the housing possibilities open to her at important junctures, including when she left her final placement in a children's care home. From that point, she was living between her mother's, hostels, rough sleeping and B&Bs. Although she explained the process of applying to supported accommodation was a blur at the time of significant stress, she remembered that it was only when she was accessing B&B accommodation that her social worker began to discuss an application to supported accommodation. Whilst she described her eventual move as *"sudden"*, others described a more prolonged process.

Elena, for example, explained that she would not have returned home temporarily to her mother's following a foster placement if she had known she would be on a waiting list for a considerable period: *"I thought it was going to be quick, and I didn't know it was going to be ten months"* (Elena, 18). Julia also faced an element of delay in accessing supported accommodation as her mental health diagnosis and treatment appeared to present as a barrier.

"… the main issue with me was when I first came in here I was on a lot of medication, and [supported accommodation] was worried that if I was to come in here I would be, basically I might use the medication and I would do something to myself or start selling it to other people. So it was a very, I was, it was very, I was almost not came in here due to the amount of medication I was on. So it was, it went through a series of like meetings and managers and all that, but afterwards I was allowed in." (Julia, 19)

Prior to being placed in supported accommodation on a two year contract, a number of young people recounted periods on assessment during which their suitability for supported living was considered. During these times they spoke of feeling isolated, described less than *"homely"* flats and the need for more support at this juncture. Ava, for example, first stayed in supported accommodation on an assessment placement for three weeks at the age of 16. She had previously been with her mother, followed by a period of sofa-surfing, and described the move as *"a hit up the face… at such a young age"* where she struggled with the independence and *"influencing"* of older young people in the accommodation. Being on a temporary placement, she continued to feel insecure about her future which potentially contributed to her views on staff attitudes and her coping mechanisms in the setting.

"I know also from being younger, when I was in here at sixteen, if you don't want help and you think the staff are against you you're not going to have a good experience… Well so when I was sixteen I was like very like drink, like party, and I guess the people, other people in here at the time weren't too good themselves. So we all kind of just came together, and I did feel as if the staff were against me at that point in time. But I don't know if that was because I was on stuff or what really. … Yeah, it was more like I would sneak people in and stuff here, and like I knew I was only going to be here for three weeks or so, or I think it's two weeks, the assessment flat, so I knew that I wasn't going to be here for very long. And then it's the not knowing where you're going next." (Ava, 20)

She felt at that point she needed more support to prove herself suitable for a longer term flat.

"And in assessment I feel like they could work more with you, because when you're in assessment they don't really, well not that they don't care about you as much, they don't really get to know you as much, even in that space of three weeks." (Ava, 20)

Ultimately assessed as not ready for a supported living flat, she was angry to be subsequently placed in a children's care home with younger children, returning to the same supported accommodation on two further occasions. On her second admission she continued to face difficulties in relation to the accommodation setting's rules (see further below) but her third experience, where she was currently living at the time of interview, was more positive where she was more open to the support being offered to her. This highlights the importance of second and third chances to young people as they move through transitions in their lives.

On securing a place in supported accommodation, young people required some practical support on the initial move Julia, for example, appreciated the support from Sixteen Plus where she was provided with *"microwaves, kettles, cutlery, plates"* whilst the Family Intervention Service helped her with some *"basic necessities."* Luke described the assistance he received from various supports to set up home.

"… I moved into [supported living] and I loved it at the start, [staff name], my housing worker, I actually still speak to her now, I call her my second mum because she basically is my second mum because she always looked after me… The social workers, the Trusts give you a setting up home allowance, and my old social worker, she brung me out and I got all the stuff I needed, everything I wanted and stuff, the staff, you used to get all your stuff and leave it all into the living room and then the staff from downstairs came up and helped you." (Luke, 20)

Indeed, even among the small group of young people the extent to which they were prepared for independent living differed. Julia described that her mother had *"trained"* her *"for the world"* and she was in a position where she knew how to cook and clean on moving into her flat. Others, however, noted how they struggled with the move towards independence. Some, therefore, needed to take the move gradually and not let the sense of what was happening overwhelm them.

"There's still bits and bobs that I still need to get. Like I was saying yesterday to my friend like Rome was not built in a day and thank god it wasn't because I'd actually die." (Elena, 18)

The initial move did cause Elena some anxiety, who was in a different form of supported accommodation to other young people whereby she was living in a self-contained flat with a personalised support package but with no communal area. Whilst she had been *"counting the days"* for her *"own flat*" she also described her anxiety on arrival, *"panicking"* when her door wouldn't lock and uneasy about the attention from her new neighbours.

"At the start, I'm not going to lie, I didn't [feel safe]. Because when I like, it was my first night in there, like they started flashing blue lights in my window, and I was like 'what is going on?' And I thought it was the police, but it was all them outside my front door… My next door neighbours… So they were sitting doing that there like outside the door with like a light. … I could just hear them like out the back kind of like laughing and all, and I was like what is going on? And I had to close my windows and all. But then like I haven't had any hassle since." (Elena, 18).

Although daunting, the move represented the potential for a more settled period in young people's lives as they described the positives of independence and have a place to call their own.

"I'm just grateful for anything to be very honest. Just somewhere that I can actually settle down and call my own, decorate it my own, you know, be my own person." (Claire, 18)

The move into their own space was in stark contrast to their previous living conditions and they described the space afforded to them within individual flats including a bedroom, bathroom, kitchen and living space. For some this was their first experience of privacy, *"no sharing or nothing like that"* (Luke, 20), where they had the key to lock their door and could come and go as they please. Julia explains how this was an improvement on leaving psychiatric care.

"Well obviously I was up in the hospital before, I was there for six months, and you were given no privacy. You had your own bedroom and bathroom and you weren't allowed to lock your door. So going from there to, with being in a place where I'm able to lock my door and just be by myself in my own wee house… my own space, was very nice." (Julia, 19)

Young people also reported positively about location when they were placed in an area which was familiar to them, which added to their sense of safety, and where they had easy access by foot or public transport to all amenities. In general, most young people felt safe in their accommodation, citing the ability to lock their flats and control who came in as key.

"Yeah I genuinely feel safe. This is why I'm in supported living, because when I lived in my house I had people coming to my door and it wasn't very nice, but this is why I'm here, because no one can just walk in." (Ava, 20)

Similar to families in temporary hostels, however, young people did raise a number of issues in terms of the maintenance of the property, the need for repairs and the costs associated with electric and/or gas. One young woman explained that unmet maintenance issues was not the *"fault"* of the supported accommodation provider themselves, but rather the housing company who managed the property.

"… well it's no fault of [supported living] themselves, it's [housing company]. That's the people who own this building. Maintenance issues are very hard to get fixed here… Autumn time last year, my bathroom light broke, and I have no windows in my bathroom. So I couldn't change it because it was one of them lights up there you can't really get into it… : You needed someone to go in. So I put it in in November, it took to the March to get it fixed. So no fault of them, they were reporting it constantly. But it took them forever, so I was using torches and all in the

bathroom. So no fault of the service itself. It's the people who own the building." (Julia, 19)

The same young woman also reported a leakage in a communal area which took two months to be fixed and that another young person living adjacent was currently without heat. Another young woman noted that whilst very minor things could be dealt with quickly, some issues like mould on carpets were ongoing without having been fixed.

"… although there is like been a few problems that we've been going on and on about and we can't seem to push it any further. Like the carpets, like mould's going in them and stuff. Like wee things like, but the weeer things, like they, like there's some stuff they can do it themselves and stuff, so it's been good that way." (Ava, 20)

Young people spoke of the difficulty of managing increasing electricity and gas bills and were apprehensive about keeping their flat warm.

"Yeah, especially gas. I barely turn on my heating now, and am technically freezing the majority of the time because I can't really afford it, you know?... It's kinda scary actually." (Claire, 18)

Those struggling to provide electricity and heat spoke of the benefit of the shared spaces in their accommodation. Shared spaces usually entailed a place where they could cook at no cost to their own electricity card and somewhere heated where they could keep warm. In times which are increasingly challenging financially, this space was important. Communal spaces also had the benefit of providing a sense of community among young people within the supported living context. Whilst there was a potentially wide age range from, for example, sixteen to twenty-five, young people reported making friends and likened them to *"just annoying brother and sisters"*, sometimes coming together to eat a meal, forming *"close"* friendships and helping young residents by providing advice. It was noted that communal spaces were important for those *"struggling"* with their mental health and young people sometimes chose to sleep where staff could *"keep an eye on them."*

However, two young women recounted how the shared space in their accommodation had recently been closed during the day to allow staff to hold meetings and only opened up in the evening for young residents. One described this as a *"crappy rule"* as she, and others, were *"relying"* on the communal area to cook at a time they could not afford an electricity top up. One young person clearly noted her expectation that this was a space for residents and not staff.

"So when I've been in here in the past the lounge has been always open, which people who need extra support it's great for. You go down and you just, like it's communal, there's people about, most of the time … And this is supported living and that's an area for us, and they've changed that, which I'm really not happy about either….You know, that's for the people living here….I don't think there's a big enough excuse for that, because that's our communal living area." (Ava, 20)

At the same time, however, young people recounted a number of areas of support where staff in supported accommodation provided essential help to young people who were struggling or who needed advice to help sustain their tenancies (see Section 6.1 for further discussion).

Staff were also responsible for implementing a number of rules and regulations, some of which young people felt were unfair or did not sit well with their growing independence as they reached the age of 18. Curfews and the expectation to stay in the accommodation setting most nights were raised by a number of participants as potential issues, particularly if young people recognised differential treatment. For example, one young woman

noted that residents aged over 18 usually had no curfew, but those under 18 or known to have substance or behavioural issues were likely to have a curfew, raising issues across the peer group. Staying out late past curfews or not answering calls could trigger notifications to the police, bringing young people to their attention. One young woman describes the tension here between independence and ensuring safety.

"I know some of the younger residents are very against that. Now obviously for safety reasons it needs to be in there, especially with them being in supported accommodation and within the service. They need to know where they are and be on site most nights. So the young people maybe struggle with it but it's there for their own safety." (Julia, 19)

Staying away at friends' or partners' homes raised questions about whether they in fact needed the placement and triggered reports to the NIHE. On her second placement in supported accommodation, Ava was assessed as *"spending too much time kind of out"* staying at her boyfriend's home and struggled with the restrictions on having friends to stay.

"The only thing that got me with being in here was you're restricted. Like it is supported living, but even where visitors are concerned I found that very hard. So only like if you're having someone stay they can stay three nights and they have to get ID checked and there's a lot, and it just doesn't feel. Like even still at age eighteen you feel like you're getting nowhere. … the rules and stuff is a bit too much sometimes." (Ava, 20)

As a result, she left after a short period, retuning to supported accommodation at a later juncture. Others struggled with the group setting and what they described as the potential influences of other residents on their own behaviour. This raises questions on the suitability of such accommodation for some young people, particularly those with more complex needs. One young man, for example, noted the extensive socialising during his time in supported living which, he described, started at weekends but quickly moved into the weekdays *"and that's when things went wrong."* At this point, he reports young people not going to work or training and instead hanging out with their friends where drug use escalated and young people's lives were at risk.

*"being around people my age, just a year or two older getting into ****, we were all drinking, taking drugs, partying like **** and people wrecking each other's flats and stealing off people. [supported living] just turned into a full **** show at one point. It wasn't even the amount of drugs, it was the amount of tablets getting brung in. Like ambulances and police getting called every week. It was wild. The longer I was in [supported living] the worse it was getting. The drug use and the amount of drugs that was found in [supported living], it was wild… What was it, it's like the times the police have come into [supported living] so many times, aye they were coming, that there and overdoses, there was so many overdoses in that place and that was not a ****ing good sight to see …Oh it was so scary."* (Luke, 20)

On entry to supported accommodation on a two-year contract, young people spoke of a housing plan that typically involved moving into independent accommodation at the end of the two years. However, they were aware of the challenges of accessing accommodation and sustaining positive transitions once their contracts had expired. There was a sense, therefore, of the continued fragility of young people's housing situations while in supported accommodation, not least because it was another form of temporary accommodation. Julia, was at the end of her two-year contract and Luke had already completed his two-year period and had moved into social housing at that point. Both their stories indicate the continued instability at this

particular juncture. Julia, for example, spoke about reaching a point where she needed to negotiate an extension, which was only possible up to three months, as she struggled to access secure independent housing via social housing or the private rented sector. Luke, whilst able to access social housing, recounted what he felt was an accelerated transition into independent living for which he was not prepared and which ultimately broke down. This juncture, whilst having felt settled for the period previously, represents another potentially unstable point in their housing pathways; the difficulties in making transitions into independent living are discussed further in Section 5.

4.6 Summary and rights implications

This Section has examined the experiences of children, families and young people of a range of living situations and the analysis raises a number of implications in relation to the adequacy of such accommodation, particularly in relation to privacy, space, legal security of tenure, habitability, location and affordability (UN CESCR, 1991). As such, the analysis illustrates the failings of the State in fulfilling its obligations under Articles 18(2) and 27 of the UNCRC and Article 11 of the ICESCR.

The constant movement, for some participants, between the most unstable forms of accommodation indicated the level of fragility in their experiences, and the lack of any security of tenure for large periods of their housing pathways. Young people in the study, many of whom were care-experienced, were more likely to have navigated several different living situations, most notably in their late teenage years, in between care placements and on leaving their final care placement. Families and young people described the uncertainty that surrounded their experiences of hidden homelessness where they relied on the support of families, friends or acquaintances. Conscious of being a burden and aware of conditions attached to their stay, they were reminded of the fragility of their position and the possibility of being asked to move on at any moment. Whilst overall presentations of families and young people aged 16-17 as homeless have declined in Northern Ireland, their placement in temporary accommodation has increased in recent years. Participants' experiences demonstrated that current polices which highlight the importance of rapid responses to homelessness and to ensure that stays in temporary accommodation are as short as possible do not materialise as a reality as many stayed in these settings for a number of years. Whilst placement in supported accommodation offered the potential of a settled period in young people's housing pathways, nonetheless approaching the end of a two year contract they spoke of the uncertainty and instability of the transitions that followed. For all in forms of temporary accommodation, the insecurity of their position was further emphasised with threats that they could be asked to leave.

This section has also highlighted the inadequacy of several forms of living situations. Families had to endure cramped conditions when they relied on friends or family to provide accommodation or where allocation of temporary housing did not meet the needs of the family. Cramped conditions could compromise a child's right to privacy (Article 16, UNCRC) whilst the needs of children with neurodisabilities going unrecognised in the allocation of accommodation raised questions for their rights under Article 23, UNCRC and Article 28, UNCRPD. Conditions across a range of temporary settings meant that participants lived in uninhabitable conditions with accommodation in a constant state of disrepair and families and young people having to endure cold, damp and mould throughout their homes, exacerbated by an

inability to heat their homes with rising costs. Being placed in an unknown or unsuitable location caused significant disruption to children's and family's daily routines and raised safety concerns (see Section 8.8). Safety was also a concern for young people who accessed B&B and emergency hostel accommodation, their experiences highlighting the unsuitability of such settings for children and young people who were exposed to injecting drug use for the first time and felt unsafe alongside older residents (Article 19, UNCRC; Article 33, UNCRC).

A number of young people had lived in supported accommodation on a two year contract. For most this was a positive transition and offered a chance to 'settle' after a period of significant upheaval. Accounts demonstrated the increased adequacy of this form of accommodation as young people spoke of the benefits of their own space, privacy and convenient locations to a range of amenities and supports. Shared spaces helped form important peer networks and mitigate some of the costs associated with managing their individual flats. They also spoke of the importance of professional support in these settings which assisted in setting up home and maintaining the ongoing stability of their placement (see Section 6). However, there were some concerns in relation to the application of curfews and rules and exposure to peer's substance use could become a problem for young people themselves (Article 33, UNCRC).

Children have the right to be heard in all matters affecting them (Article 12, UNCRC) and children in care have the right to participate in all proceedings related to their care and make their views known (Article 9, UNCRC). To enable them to express their views Article 13 UNCRC states their right to receive and impart information and Article 17 states their right to access information and material from a range of sources to promote his/her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health. That is, State parties have an obligation to encourage media to provide relevant and accessible information to children.

The majority of the young people in the study who were interviewed independently were care leavers and a number described a lack of planning when leaving care, feeling unprepared for the transition that followed. They noted that they did not have access to information to the range of accommodation possibilities, particularly in relation to the potential of supported accommodation, and described an assumption by professionals that they could return to live with a parent. As a result, a number were put at risk of abuse and violence which precipitated their (re)entry into homeless contexts.

5. EXPERIENCES OF EXITING HOMELESSNESS – CONTINUED INSECURITY?

Social housing is allocated in line with the Housing Selection Scheme, a points-based scheme where the level of points awarded determine the applicant's position on the waiting list. Applicants are awarded points across four broad areas:

- Intimidation (e.g. as a result of a terrorist, racial or sectarian attack or an attack motivated by an individual's disability or sexual orientation and the applicant cannot reasonably be expected to live in their home).
- Insecurity of tenure (e.g. where they have been awarded Full Duty Applicant Status or a range of other factors have led to insecure tenure such as relationship breakdown, leaving care, eviction, release from institutions, etc.).
- Housing conditions (including sharing, overcrowding, lack of amenities and disrepair).
- Health/Social Well Being Assessment (including functionality related to physical mobility, support/care needs and complex needs).

Following applicants facing intimidation (200 points), the next highest allocation of points (70 points) is to applicants with Full Duty Applicant status, resulting in the majority of tenancies being allocated to homeless applicants (NIAO, 2017).

In relation to children in families, additional points are allocated under housing conditions on the basis of an applicant with dependent children or an applicant aged 16-18 where sharing or overcrowding is relevant.

The total number of applicants on the housing waiting list on 31st March 2022 was 44,426 (increased from 36,198 in 2017-18), with 31,407 of these in 'housing stress', meaning they have 30 or more points. The *Housing Supply Strategy* (DfC, 2021) recognizes that waiting lists and housing stress continue to rise and that the current housing stock does not reflect the changing needs of the population. It also acknowledges shortcomings of the housing allocation system, where the awarding of some points (e.g. intimidation) mean that some individuals get priority over those on the waiting list for longer periods (DfC, 2021).

Nearly all of the participants in the study (apart from those with asylum seeker status) had applied to the NIHE for accommodation, a number of whom who had been placed in temporary accommodation as per the interim duty to accommodate. Many, therefore, were on the waiting list for social housing whilst others either chose to, or felt they had no option but to, access private rented housing. The sections below examine their experiences of attempts to access stable housing, navigate the housing supports system and maintain positive transitions in their housing pathways.

5.1 Accessing housing

A number of participants had exited homeless contexts to access social housing and/or private rented accommodation. Some of these participants were still in the accommodation at the time of interview, whereas others' exits from homelessness had been temporary and individuals/families had returned to temporary accommodation. Three families and one young person were living in social housing accommodation at the time of interview. Additionally, two young people, now in temporary accommodation, and one family, now in private rented accommodation, had previously been living in social housing. Two participants, one young woman aged 19 and a mother of an 11-year-old son, were living in private rented accommodation at the time of interview. Additionally, two mothers, both of whom lived with two children had previously lived in private rented accommodation; one was now in social housing and the other in a temporary hostel for families.

Moves into social housing or private rented accommodation were generally represented as positive transitions by participants. One young person who had been living in social housing for two years, and no intention of leaving, emphasised the freedom she associated with her living situation.

"A load of space. No one tortures you, no one tortures you to tell you what to do, you can do your own thing in my own house, no rules whatsoever." (Abi, 20)

Ella had been in private rented accommodation, by herself, for one year. Having left foster care and entered into a period of hidden homelessness, she similarly described the positive impact of moving into what she considered a more settled living situation.

"Oh I felt like I was on top of the world, I was so happy because I finally felt like I could just settle somewhere again after so long like because I really didn't enjoy having to jump from house to house and be in somebody else's bedroom… Yeah, I've just felt a lot happier. I may not have had everything that I used to have and all the luxuries but like I was just happy that I had my own wee space like." (Ella, 19)

However, participants did raise a number of issues including the prolonged process of accessing secure accommodation; barriers to accessing accommodation; the often overwhelming nature of being offered accommodation and the subsequent move; the adequacy of accommodation; and, the potential instability that they still faced despite the transition into more secure settings.

The majority of participants (apart from those seeking asylum) spoke of their experiences of presenting to the NIHE as homeless and waiting to be allocated housing. Some participants benefited greatly from the support that was available to them via some of the temporary accommodation they were housed in, such as supported accommodation for young people, as well as from floating support and social workers. For example, some spoke of drawing on assistance to fill out initial forms to present as homeless and having support during first meetings with housing officers. Additionally, advice and support in the accumulation of additional points was crucial for some, describing key workers who were willing to act as a mediator between individuals and their housing officer or offer advice on their position. Most spoke of the prolonged time spent on the social housing list, ranging from months to a number of years, and of the impact of the indefinite wait.

"And I've only got a hundred and ten points. So I'm going to be waiting for quite some time. I am planning to reapply this October, since I applied in October last year, to see if I can up my points a wee bit more, see if there's anything I can do, because obviously I don't want to be here over three years like." (Julia, 19)

Indeed, some young people recounted that they were advised by housing officers of the prolonged wait for social housing and to *"stay put and make it home"* (Claire, 18) in their current accommodation. The stress of the long wait was such that participants felt resentment or anger to those who appeared to have been placed in accommodation a lot sooner. Some participants, particularly some children interviewed alongside their parents, found it difficult to understand how others they knew in family hostels were placed before them in housing.

Mairead: *Yeah, and there's people coming in, staying here for a week and getting a big house.*
Fiona: *And then getting houses. How they do it I don't know, but they just need to, they need to get some sort of order going. It's just not fair. I've done all that I can to try and get the points. It's just not fair.* (Fiona, mother; Mairead, 11, daughter)

Others described being allocated social housing *"pretty quick"*, including two young women who were pregnant at the time of application and living in overcrowded contexts. One young woman recounted that *"all my neighbours didn't like me because I got the house at 18.5 like a young age and it's all old people around me"* (Abi, 20), which was further indication of the resentment felt to those being allocated housing.

On presenting to the NIHE as homeless, participants described having to navigate a system where the focus was largely on the accumulation of points or an assessment of priority need and how they could move up the list. On being placed on the waiting list, there was a sense of needing more follow up or access to information. Some participants were unsure of the details of their application in terms of whether they had been assessed as having a priority need, what their current points allocation was and their place on the waiting list. For some, this meant regular calls to the NIHE for an update on their status. Others noted it would be simpler if there was an online system to access their most up to date status.

"… you hear people saying 'you have to torture them, you have to torture them'. I'm not that type of person. I'm not going to be on the phone, hanging on the phone all day every day, 'Can I get a house? Can I get a house? Can I get a house?' There should be a better way for people to be able to do that, you know, to be able to go on and see, right this is how many points I have, this is where I am on the list, this is how many people's in front of me or how many people are looking this type of house and that type of house. Because there's nothing, you just don't have a clue." (Fiona, mother)

A number of participants expressed their frustration at certain conditions or circumstances not being recognised through the allocation of points. One young woman, for example, felt that her mental health diagnosis, for which she was on medication and had been in psychiatric care for a number of months, should have qualified her for extra points.

"… it was mainly because I'm coping so well here and I'm not, though I have like quite chronic pains or quite bad mental health I'm not suffering so bad that I can't do things normally. So that's why I'm not so high on the list." (Julia, 19)

One mother expressed her frustration at her daughter's diagnosis of autism not being sufficiently recognised. Having been on the waiting list for 2.5 years, she noted that she had to fight for points for her daughter's diagnosis of autism – *"because apparently she's not physically disabled enough to get complex needs points"* (Fiona, mother). Additionally, the need for her daughter to have her own room did not seem to have been considered in their application as two children aged under 18 of the same sex are considered capable of sharing a room, regardless of other needs.

Other participants felt that experiences of harassment and being threatened were not recognised in the allocation of points. One mother was intimidated out of her home before accessing single let accommodation. Whilst the police had advised the relevant housing officer, in her view this was not recognised in points allocation. Another mother, currently living in a family hostel, described a reluctance to allocate her points for a racial attack, despite the Housing Selection Scheme Rules clearly noting racially motivated attacks as qualifying for intimidation points.

"they've also been very reluctant to award me points for stuff that happened to me, like when I was attacked, when my car was broken into, you know?... Because it was a racist attack…. I mean it was only my car and an Indian woman's car that were broken into, you know?... So they were trying to tell

us we can't stay here no more…. I believe the police recorded my incidents as racist to be honest… But they still won't give me the points." (Natalie, mother)

Natalie also felt that the points system disadvantaged families not originally from Northern Ireland. She noted, for example, that those who could stay with family nearby temporarily had the opportunity to able to accumulate points related to sharing. She also considered that those who identified with one of the two dominant communities in Northern Ireland could accumulate more points by placing themselves in the 'other' community for a period and claiming sectarian intimidation, highlighting the potential to play the system which she described as *"drama."* She suggests, therefore, that the system could therefore indirectly discriminate against those who don't identify with either community in Northern Ireland or against those who had moved to Northern Ireland from another jurisdiction and are without any social supports.

"Like I said they put a points system where if you're sharing with people you could get forty points, if you do this, you get intimidated out of the area and you get more points for that. As much as it's a good thing, but I feel it also rewards criminals, and people also manipulate the system. And they should also have another criteria that they can use where they can consider these people who go through the net, you know, like they just slip through the net. Just because people, not everybody's dramatic and not everybody can create and manipulate a situation to get themselves a house. There are people who just want to just explain the situation as it is and should not be punished by the system. Because right now I feel we are being punished… Like for example the people who are Protestant, they go and rent a house in like a stronghold Catholic area, take a six months tenancy knowing very well they're going to be put out and that's going to shoot them up on the points system. I mean what's the point of that kind of drama?" (Natalie, mother)

There was some exasperation also in the contact with some housing officers in the NIHE and the fact that individuals may be passed through a number of members of staff. Natalie, for example, noted her anger when it was suggested that she made herself *"intentionally homelessness"* which was later apologised for. Others noted that housing officers weren't forthcoming with the type of advice they needed in terms of, for example, good locations to choose for safety or indeed in order to potentially speed up their allocation.

"… the Housing Executive they passed me onto seven different people, seven different people did nothing. Nothing at all. I have been down to the offices, I've asked for advice, what areas should I choose? They don't give you any help with that. I've been given ten or more housing officers and they change every time you phone up…Yeah, so no they pass the buck all the time. They don't want to speak to you, they don't want to help you, they don't issue you with the points that you deserve, or that you should be given. No. They're useless, useless." (Jennifer, mother)

Participants living in private rented accommodation had either given up hope of being allocated social housing due to the length of time they had been waiting or they had been unsatisfied with their housing allocation, thus entering the private rented sector. Access to private rented accommodation, however, also came with its challenges, particularly for younger participants in the study. Participants noted that they required support, typically provided by local voluntary and community sector organisations, to find suitable properties in locations they were happy with as well as to support them through negotiations with landlords and understand terms of tenancy

agreements. Ella explained that it took nearly six months to find suitable accommodation, citing her age as a particular barrier.

"Yeah, the problem was that I wasn't old enough. Like I was looking at flats in [City] as well because I was studying in [City] at the time and it was all ah, you need to be 24, you need to be older. So a lot of places were denying me because of my age as well… Just because of my age." (Ella, 19)

Another young person echoed challenges for young people to access private rented accommodation. Julia was living in temporary supported accommodation at the time of interview and explained that given the lack of progress with her NIHE application, she had started to explore the possibility of private rented accommodation, also noting the importance of supported accommodation staff in assisting with the filling of forms and providing advice. Having applied for *"countless"* private rented opportunities with no success, she identified barriers related to relocation, cost and employment status.

"… it's absolutely impossible to find housing in this town… It's a very big struggle. Like housing here in this town, is very, it's very rare. And since it's so rare people can charge whatever they want because people will pay it….So it is very difficult to find a one or two bedroom place that is not miles out of town, because obviously I need to be in close proximity to my mother. So I recently viewed a place, it wasn't too far, but I was declined due to me not working… That is a very big, a big play of factors is, one I'm nineteen, two I have no references, and three I don't work. So that is a very big play factor in private renting, is they don't really want people who don't have those three, who aren't, you know, mid-twenties, have references, and are working… Which to me makes no sense because if you go through my benefits you will get paid no matter what." (Julia, 19)

She also highlighted a number of biases and assumptions held in relation to young people and their lifestyles meaning that landlords may be less likely to rent accommodation to those in their late teenage years.

"Well if you think nineteen-year-old you're probably thinking college student or you're thinking maybe, if they're not in college you're thinking like work or rambunctious a bit. Because obviously when you're my age, early twenties, you want to party, you want to experience things, you want to maybe experiment with different, you know, the drugs or alcohol or god knows what, you know? … So obviously if your landlord sees that they'll probably think, they're going to go into my house and wreck it. And obviously that's a big issue… It's obviously a biased factor, but unfortunately it's just the way it is. It's the same thing with the people on benefits. They see a lot of, especially young people on benefits, they'll see them and go 'oh you're just lazy. You want to sit around and just do substances and party and do nothing, and you're going to end up wrecking my house'. And so that's a big main issue with the landlords now." (Julia, 19)

A number of parents highlighted the financial barriers to accessing private rented accommodation. One parent explained that a grandparent had to act as a guarantor as she moved from social housing into private rented accommodation. Others who were exploring routes out of temporary accommodation, such as family hostels or single let accommodation, noted that they struggled to pay a deposit or that Housing Benefit was insufficient for private rented accommodation when compared to social housing. One mother expressed her frustration at the limited financial support for private rented accommodation compared to the financial contributions for single let accommodation.

"So I asked about private rental. So the cheapest private rental you can get now in [city area] is between seven and eight hundred pounds....They pay £700 for this [single let]… But if I want to go and privately rent somewhere I'm only entitled to £480 housing benefit … And I've told this to the Housing Executive as well, you know? '… I can't go and privately rent somewhere, because I don't have a deposit and I don't have the money to sustain the rent, even though you're prepared to pay seven hundred pounds a month for this'." (Jennifer, mother)

5.2 Housing allocation: debating suitability and adequacy

Location was a key consideration for both those offered social housing and those seeking private rented accommodation. Parents, for example, highlighted the importance of access to local amenities and play opportunities for their children, including parks, community centres and sports grounds. Both young people and parents thought that living near informal supports was a positive including family or *"a friend down the road"* (Ella, 19). Familiarity with an area was an added advantage as participants reported feeling safe and were keen to bring their children up in their home neighbourhood.

"I was born and reared in [neighbourhood], moved out of it, had my kids and moved back. I wouldn't bring my kids up anywhere else." (Ruby, mother).

Location, however presented as an issue for a number of participants. Younger participants, for example, were more likely to accept the first offer of housing *"straight away"* (Abi, 19) but could subsequently face some challenges. Some, for example, spoke about feeling unsafe in an unfamiliar area, particularly where they experienced threats of eviction which they linked to *"paramilitary"* groups and expressed frustration at the lack of information available before taking up housing allocation. Ava, for example, noted that those on the housing list should have information and advice made available in relation to the potential threat that they could face in certain areas. Many young people, they suggested, would be unaware of the potential threat of certain areas and contacting a local crisis intervention project to provide advice could put individuals at risk.

"And another thing is, you know, finding out what is the paramilitary things like everywhere, and they were never good at telling me about that. Like what's the involvement like around that area. Because I had no clue… they don't give you enough information, because they really can't I suppose. Like that's the way they give, that's the impression, like they can't really. And the thing is you have to ring [crisis intervention project] and find out just if you're allowed in there or not. But then by them doing that you're bringing up your name to the paramilitaries… So that's just dangerous." (Ava, 20)

Indeed Ava, and others, noted that the NIHE are *"bound to know"* when an *"area is dodgy"* and as it would be *"known"* when people had been evicted previously from certain accommodation. Luke echoed such views, having been the fourth individual *"put out"* of his social housing and assessing that the accommodation was *"one of the easiest to get put out of."* Such experiences raised questions for young people as to why they and others were placed in accommodation with a history of eviction.

The occasion of being offered accommodation, therefore, could present as a dilemma for those on the housing waiting list and could be an additional source of stress, particularly for parents who spoke of needing to balance the need for a secure home with the possibility of threats to safety. One mother recounted that she felt encouraged by her housing officer

to take *"an unsuitable house"* which she felt exploited her *"desperation."* Having been offered a house in a *"stronghold Protestant area"* even though her children attended *"an Irish school"* and she feared them being identified in their school uniform.

"I'm like is this a mockery? What is this? You know? Are you trying to play, to prey on our vulnerability or our desperation of needing a house? … But then I'm thinking if I take it they're still going to put me out. So it took me about three, four days to go and, to actually make a final decision… And I thought, what are my chances of me living here peacefully, you know? Am I coming here to get myself more mental health problems or, you know, intimidated and put out again? So I might as well just stay in that hostel where I am, you know?... I couldn't sleep for days. I relived the trauma that I had before I left the other house, you know? … I wasn't going to make my children safe or keep them safe. That's my work as a parent." (Natalie, mother)

Other offers of social housing were viewed as unsuitable as the property did not meet the family's needs, particularly in relation to space. As previously noted, some families struggled to have neurodisabilities recognised in their housing application through the allocation of points. Additionally, the offer of accommodation may not suit their children's needs. One mother, for example, explained her frustration with the allocation of a one-bedroom flat when her son who had autism would require more space.

"… my wee boy he has autism so he couldn't go in a flat... But I got no extra points or nothing… they kept offering me one-bedroom flats, in wee estates, and I wouldn't, you know, my son wouldn't be able to cope in like a one-bedroom flat. And just, I don't know, they kept on offering me places that weren't good, so I just went private landlord… Had no choice, because the housing place wasn't helping at all." (Brooke, mother)

This mother, as a result, accessed private rented accommodation where she had more space, including "a big garden." On receipt of social housing or attaining private rented accommodation, the transition could be overwhelming, particularly for young people who moved from supported accommodation contexts. As a result, a number of participants spoke of the various supports which assisted their transition, or supports that were missing (see Section 6). A number, particularly young people, struggled with the move and ultimately their arrangements broke down. The allocation of social housing or the move into private rented accommodation did not mark the end, therefore, of participants' experiences of housing insecurity, as the following section examines.

5.3 Inadequacy and continued instability

On moving into new homes, participants' accounts demonstrated that they continued to face inadequacies in relation to their accommodation, either in social housing or private rented accommodation. Some of the initial difficulties related to the provision of furnishings and appliances as well as the general state of the accommodation. One mother, described a range of inadequacies on moving into social housing, including a lack of flooring, limited available appliances and a lack of furnishings, including beds.

Anna: *We didn't have a chair, we didn't have a microwave, didn't have flooring, I didn't have tables, I didn't have a fridge freezer, I didn't have a bed. …the only flooring that was put down was that bit of lino in the kitchen and there was a bit like safety flooring in the bathroom. This is where me and [older son] slept for*
Patrick: *A week or two.*
Anna: Until the charity ones helped us (Anna, mother; Patrick, 14, son)

On initial move but also as tenancies progressed, participants spoke of a range of repairs that needed to be addressed. They also expressed their frustration, however, with delays or refusal in relation to repair requests. One mother living in social housing, for example, detailed the inadequate attention to the repairs required in her home.

"They don't do nothing for you, nothing at all. I've a live wire in my boiler and they said they was going to come out and fix it, and they've nailed the door shut, and I have two autistic kids in the house. …They had my stair carpet put down yesterday and the floorboards are ruined, they won't replace them. Been waiting on a new front door for two years, still haven't got it. They're cowboys, complete cowboys." (Ruby, mother)

Those with experience of living in private rented accommodation described similar challenges in interactions with landlords when repairs were required. One family explained how they were left without heat for three nights over winter due to a broken boiler. Another family described a long list of repair issues and a reluctant landlord. After ten years in the private rented sector, on eviction they decided to seek social housing and were living in a hostel.

Natalie: *The cooker wasn't working, the fridge wasn't working, some sockets weren't working, you know? The repair, the roof had caved in.*
Dominic: *And the toilet was, was the toilet not working too?*
Natalie: *… yeah the toilet as well wasn't flushing, and every time we'd tell her to come and fix she didn't want to do it. So it was, I was thinking now why should I go to another private landlord who might treat me the same? I might as well look for social housing… it ended up being too expensive because we had to buy carry-outs and maybe visit a friend. When they'd make dinner, we'd go home after we've eaten, you know? That's no way to live.* (Natalie, mother; Dominic, 17, son)

Landlords' attitudes to tenants who request such assistance underlines the precarity of their living situations as they faced threats or eviction or felt no option but to leave. One young woman in private rented accommodation, who was now seeking new accommodation, recounted that it would take ages for repairs to be finally addressed and if she were to push, she was simply told: *"well, if you don't like it then leave"* (Ella, 19).

A key concern for a number of participants in relation to the state of the property was the presence of damp and mould in both social housing and private rented accommodation, reflecting some of the inadequacies they had faced in temporary accommodation. Some spoke of dampness, rotten wood and mould throughout the house, *"but the bathroom had mould in it, the front bedroom and the living room had mould"*, (Brooke, mother). This caused worry for participants in terms of their health, but also increased exasperation with unsatisfactory responses to complaints. Maya was living in social housing at the time of interview and described the frustrating reply to her damp complaint.

"I phoned them up… and I said to them 'I've got my damp in my house, out my back hall. There's no radiator at my back hall and the whole walls are black'. And they came out and turned around and said to me 'it's not damp, it's condensation. You don't leave your window open'. I says 'my window's, that back window's open every day all night long', I said, 'I never close that'… They were like 'well I don't know why it's like that. Go and get bleach or something and clean it'." (Maya, mother)

Ella also raised concerns in relation to mould in her private rented accommodation, noting the issue with having to pay full rent in the context of such inadequacy.

"I don't think it should be £400 a month because I don't think the condition of my flat's great. There is lots of mould in my flat… There's a pile of things that my landlord is stalling on to fix or very lazily fixing them… I've tried cleaning the mould but it just grows back, and I've told [Landlord] about it and all they've said you can do is clean it. And there's very bad mould in the bathroom and in the bedroom there's very bad mould as well and I'm just worried about coming up to the winter time." (Ella, 19)

As Ella notes, concerns in relation to damp and mould were heightened in colder seasons and a number of participants, similar to those in temporary settings, were struggling to heat their homes due to increasing heating and gas costs. She described the assistance she received from a floating support team to help her plan for the week ahead in terms of budgeting and helping her out with electric cards. Some noted they put *"very little heating on"* (Anna, mother), prioritising times when children were in the home. Children were told to put on more clothes if they were cold, and difficulties were faced with drying clothes when trying to save on the cost of tumble dryers.

"It is difficult getting clothes dry, but to tell you the truth I'm an expert at it now, with all these temporary accommodations I've been in, and maybe not having lines or not being able to put washing out or having a tumble drier… I put everything over the top of the doors, and I put those chairs up on the table and put things over the chairs. I can get everything dry, I can get two washes dry so I can." (Anna, mother)

The concerns in relation to the rising gas and electric prices were exacerbated by the perception that homes were not well insulated or guarded against draughts. One young person noted the difficulty in keeping her house warm.

"Awful. So bad. Like the windows and all when I first moved in, where the handles are right here there was a big gap, like you can put your fingers through and your fingers were outside and it was letting all the heat out and even when I got the windows fixed it was still not keeping the heat in." (Abi, 18)

Another mother described similar issues in a house that was *"constantly freezing."* At the same time, she was generally happy where she was living in private rented accommodation, having eventually accessed a home with sufficient space to meet her son's needs related to his autism. She was reluctant, therefore, to complain for fear of losing her tenancy, again highlighting the continued insecurity of families in these types of accommodation.

"My house would be cold quite a bit, because the doors, the back door's quite old and it's like there's spaces round the whole door. The bathroom, it's constantly freezing, because it's like, it's not connected to the house, it's sitting out. But the space and all is okay. He has a big back garden and stuff, so, but I would feel like a burden if I rang up to them uns and said it was cold. Like I'd think they would throw me out or something if I complained… I don't ring them for anything at all." (Brooke, mother)

A further concern for participants was in relation to the safety of the area they were living in. All participants who raised concerns in relation to this were living in social housing, perhaps indicative of the level of choice participants had in selecting the location of their accommodation whether they were in private rented or social housing. Participants spoke of the extent of police presence that was evident as well as the levels of crime and disturbance including exposure to drug use and drug dealing, violence and nuisance

behaviour by neighbours. One mother, for example, described having to leave her first allocation of social housing due to levels of violence in a community *"full of druggies"* (Ruby, mother). Another mother expressed her concerns about the level of exposure to drug use within her flat complex, noting the role of *"paramilitary"* groups.

"… it's all UVF [whispers] they're dealing drugs, the kids are seeing it, and they're smelling it, morning, noon, night, and through the night as well… Not only was the cannabis found, fentanyl was found out this corridor last year, about this time last year, and about a year and a half previous to that syringes were found. The place is stinking, it's a drug den." (Anna, mother)

Other concerns about safety were related to threats or potential violence targeted directly at participants. One mother who had been in social housing for 2.5 years spoke of trying to seek alternative accommodation for the past year. She described *"quite a lot"* of concerns for her family's safety due to *"ongoing problems with neighbours"*, including threats at the door, racial harassment and an attempted break-in. Her son, aged 14, described how the actions of a particular neighbour made him feel unsafe.

"Because of my neighbours. He's went out the front and wielding a bat before, like a baseball bat… He punched someone through a car window as well. He's intimidating… I was going down to a neighbour … and he stood at the end of the hall and just stared at me which is intimidating and scary, because it was kind of late at night." (Patrick, son)

Another mother expressed similar concerns and described a number of occasions where she was the subject of threat and intimidation. Following complaints she made to the police about her neighbours' partying and harassment, she was *"threatened … with paramilitaries four times"* (Maya, mother) yet received no intimidation points. She subsequently left her social housing to return to her mother's home temporarily to keep her child safe.

"Because I had my wee boy there, like in case something did happen, you know, he was constantly partying and all, and then I would've went in hassling him, and then whoever was in his house would've come out really aggressive." (Maya, mother)

At the time of interview, the same mother was in her second allocation of social housing but similar issues remain with her current neighbours and again she feels sufficiently threatened that she needs to move out of her home. She and two other mothers who were interviewed together agreed that *"paramilitary"* influence in the area meant that they couldn't complain. Their accounts echoed those of other parents who had taken their concerns to the community police, local MPs, social services and their housing officers. Responses on the whole were considered unsatisfactory where parents felt experiences of intimidation had not been recognised through the allocation of points or advice to leave accommodation put them at risk as being assessed as intentionally homeless.

Whilst participants may have intended to stay in social housing or private rented accommodation indefinitely, the fragility of positive transitions was evident where families and young people felt the pressure and tension of living under threat, being exposed to violence and enduring inadequate conditions. Apparently secure living situations, therefore, still carried a level of instability. Indeed, for a number of young people and families, a move into social housing or private rented accommodation was experienced as a temporary exit from homelessness, where they returned to forms of temporary accommodation on breakdown of their

housing. Three mothers, for example, had experienced the breakdown of social housing, where they left due to the accounts of harassment and violence noted above. One entered into a period of hidden homelessness before returning to social housing, whilst two others entered an unsettled period of moving between private rented settings and eventual return to social housing. Additionally, two young people who were allocated social housing in late teenage years struggled with the transition which they described as overwhelming. As a result, both returned to a cycle of emergency accommodation and hidden homelessness at particular junctures. They both recounted similar experiences which underlines the need for continued support in the transition to independent housing (see Section 6). Their stories highlighted struggles to maintain their housing alongside the pressures and challenges associated with the influence of peers, 'risky' behaviour patterns and the impact of mental health issues. Ava's story below illustrates the fragility of positive housing transitions for young people, having lost social housing on two occasions. The following section then explores some of the support needs required to assist households in maintaining positive transitions in their housing pathways.

Ava, 20

Ava's story was one of constant movement between a range of living situations from when she first left her mother's home at age 16. Since that point she had moved between children's care homes, emergency hostel accommodation, three different placements in supported accommodation and sofa surfing. In between these various forms of temporary accommodation, she had been allocated social housing on two separate occasions. The first time Ava moved into social housing she was pregnant and having *"a good few points"* she was allocated housing after a few months. She accepted the first house she was offered despite warnings about the area.

"… it was absolutely lovely. I wish I could've stayed there. People were telling me about the area, not the Housing Executive, but they knew, they knew how many people had been put out … only now I know that. … my boyfriend's mum at the time … she was telling me 'yeah it's a dodgy area like' and stuff, but it was a lovely house and I'd seen, the people in there like that I met that were around at the time seemed lovely, and I was like 'yeah I'm going to take it'."

She spent her start up fund on getting the house ready over a number of weeks but started to receive threat messages just six days after moving in. She wasn't exactly sure if this was due to her entering into a new relationship with a man who *"wasn't really liked"* in the area or because she was an outsider and *"the fact that they wanted that house for one of their own people."* Either way, given the risk posed to her child, social services advised the child was removed to her mother's house and Ava *"was placed in like a domestic violence hostel"* before her mother allowed her back home.

Subsequently going *"through a hard time"* and *"partying a lot"* her child was placed with the father and Ava entered another period of temporary living situations. Benefitting from *"loads of intimidation points"*, she was allocated social housing a second time. The house had a number of inadequacies but financial support to improve it *"all went on drugs and drinks."* She described struggling with her mental health and noted that she had *"no support"* with delays in accessing addiction support and the community mental health team. She described the influence of acquaintances who *"were coming to my door and using me and like filling me with drugs"* and the house became *"a complete party house."*

Anticipating that she would lose her house, she decided to terminate the tenancy after just 2 months before *"someone else did it."* The stress of trying to manage the house and deal with the disruption others brought to her door clearly took its toll: *"because like I'd tried to kill myself at that stage because I thought I was going to lose the house if I didn't terminate it."*

Following this Ava attended hospital and wished she had *"been put in like a mental health ward or something, because I just wasn't ok."* On discharge she noted she *"had nowhere to go… no one would take me … it was really hard."* After a short time at another hostel she entered her third supported accommodation placement where she was at the time of interview: *"they've really helped me letting me come back in here for the third time."* Having accessed support for addiction and mental health, she is now thinking about future housing but she wants *"to be able to plan what it's going to look like"* to ensure that it is more sustainable.

"I need people to really work with me and figure out a good area, because I'm sick of moving around and I want to find somewhere where I can just make home when I'm ready to make it home… Not mess it up… I think a flat as well next time, just for my, I feel more safe… when I had a house there was a garden and there was a front and back garden... I didn't like that, it freaked me out… So I just want a wee cosy small thing for me and my daughter."

5.4 Summary and rights implications

Transitions into social housing or private rented accommodation were generally thought of as positive experiences in participants' housing pathways, both by families and young people living independently. Participants in these contexts described a more settled and 'free' context where they had more autonomy over their living situation. Barriers did present, however, in accessing secure accommodation and many waited several years before making successful transitions. Support from staff in temporary accommodation settings, for both parents and young people, was crucial for many to help navigate the processes and form-filling associated with entry to both social housing and private rented accommodation.

In relation to accessing social housing, issues were highlighted in relation to the allocation of points through the Housing Selection Scheme. Participants felt that certain needs such as mental health diagnoses or children's neurodisabilities went unacknowledged by the system, whilst others argued that racial harassment was not sufficiently recognised and individuals born in Northern Ireland were at an advantage in relation to points allocated for intimidation and sharing. This raises questions as to the potential for indirect discrimination in the allocation of points (Article 2, UNCRC; Article 2, ICESCR).

Accessing private rented accommodation also presented challenges, particularly for young people who felt discriminated against because of their age as their applications were automatically overlooked. Parents also faced financial barriers where they could not raise a deposit and/or financial assistance did not prove sufficient to leave temporary accommodation to access the private rented sector. This raises questions in relation to the State's obligation to assist parents via material means with regard to housing (Article 27, UNCRC).

Whilst transitions into social housing or the private rented sector were positive in a number of respects, accounts demonstrated that participants were still subject to a number of inadequacies related to their accommodation. Location, for example, proved unsuitable for some where allocation of social housing was made in unfamiliar areas where families and young people could not access important forms of informal support. Location also had implications for children's safety, as a number of parents and young people raised their concerns in relation to exposure to drug use/dealing, violence, harassment and intimidation, compromising a child's right to protection from violence (Article 19, UNCRC) and from the illicit use of narcotic drugs (Article 33, UNCRC). Others noted that properties allocated did not meet their needs, particularly in relation to space. Whilst housing was not necessarily uninhabitable to the degree of some temporary forms of accommodation, nevertheless participants still described lack of furnishings, frustration with the need for constant repairs and living with damp in the home. Similar to those in temporary accommodation, families and young people struggled to keep their homes warm with rising costs and financial assistance was insufficient to meet these costs.

Participants' experiences of social housing and private rented accommodation highlighted continued instability in their housing pathways and raised questions in relation to their security of tenure. Indeed, a number returned to temporary forms of accommodation following eviction or harassment or because they struggled with the transition due to the absence of necessary supports.

6. NON-HOUSING SUPPORTS

A key objective of recent homelessness strategies has been to provide tailored support solutions for households to enable them to maintain their accommodation long term. The Supporting People Programme, introduced in 2003, has focused on enabling households to live as independently as possible in the community (NIHE, 2022b) and funds 86 delivery partners that provide over 850 housing support services for to up to 19,000 service users across Northern Ireland. It aims to: achieve a better quality of life for vulnerable people to live more independently and maintain their tenancies; provide housing support services to prevent problems which can lead to homelessness; and help smooth the transition to independent living for those leaving an institutionalised environment. It is focussed on four thematic areas - working with people who are experiencing homelessness, young people, older people and people with a disability including mental health and learning disabilities (NIHE, 2022b). The most recent Homelessness Strategy highlights that whilst there has been progress in the greater use of support services, the finite nature of the Supporting People budget and the increasing complexity of need among clients present as significant challenges in delivering supports (NIHE, 2022a).

This section focuses on participants' views on supports and services they have engaged with. Participants outlined how services have assisted them to cope with the challenges posed by living in temporary accommodation, and helped facilitate positive housing transitions. For a number, this includes the reliance on informal supports to fill the gaps in services in the community.

6.1 Supports in temporary accommodation

Several young people living in supported temporary accommodation spoke favourably of the additional support open to them from staff. This support extended far beyond access to housing, but ultimately helped them to maintain access to this provision by providing stability, particularly for those young people without familial support. A number spoke of being able to go to staff with any *"personal problems"* whilst others described assistance with the costs of living, particularly when they first moved into the accommodation.

*"And say I spent all my Universal Credit on whatever she would be like yip, I'll top your gas and electric up. I didn't do it every single time, don't get me wrong, it showed me you're a young man now, you need to ***ing provide for yourself and stuff and they showed me tough love but like [supported living] Jesus, the first few weeks was great."* (Luke, 20)

Support provided emphasised a number of skills to support young people's independence and with a view to their future housing transitions (see further below). For instance, Claire disclosed that in the absence of a *"stable figure"* in her life, entering supported accommodation helped to prepare her for life in independent housing through discussions around budgeting that she did not have growing up.

"it's kind of just shown me what I'm expecting whenever I'm moving out of here, you know, into the outer world type thing. What to expect whenever it comes in terms of like money and stuff. Growing up I never really had that, you know, stable figure of like being able to be taught things." (Claire, 18)

Others spoke positively of the assistance with filling in forms (related, for example, to PIPS, Universal Credit, Housing Benefit), providing food and cooking equipment, and supporting residents with substance use issues.

Families living in temporary hostels also spoke positively of the additional assistance provided by staff in the accommodation settings, particularly where this responded to their individual needs. Whilst not so much directed towards planning for the future, as was the case with young people in supported living, additional support provided to families helped them to manage the day-to-day realities of living in hostel accommodation. One family, for example, explained wide-ranging support, extending to emotional support in times of grief.

"They give us support according to the needs that we have. So, I believe there are people who probably have, need more support than we do. But I know when I moved in here, the first week, my mum back home passed away and I was referred to for grief counselling, you know, stuff like that." (Natalie, mother)

Another crucial element of familial support within a hostel setting was practical help with essential needs that financial circumstances made it difficult for families to resolve on their own.

"Last week we had run out of toilet paper, and I didn't have money to buy toilet paper and I went to them, and I said, 'may I have some toilet paper?' she gave it to me. And she was like 'Do you have gas? Do you have electric? If you are short just let me know and I'll do something'" (Natalie, mother)

The responsive nature of these supports is crucial given the varied difficulties experienced by those families facing homelessness and housing insecurity. Indeed, the same family noted how a particular staff member *"always reached out"* to them and provided books and packages for the children.

These support structures help to alleviate some of the persistent struggles faced by families in hostel accommodation, addressing issues that could exacerbate housing problems.

6.1.1 Informal supports in temporary settings

A number of respondents spoke of the impact of moving into temporary accommodation where this took them away from their local communities and, as a result, sources of informal supports such as family members and friends. Liam, for example, explained how he found it difficult to see his friends after being forced to move to another area to access supported accommodation: *"if I was in my mum's I could just go out and then whenever like I would just like be with my mates more."* Other residents in temporary accommodation with shared elements could become importance sources of support, therefore, to help cope with the challenges of surviving in temporary accommodation. Supported accommodation where young people lived in private, individual flats, but which also had communal areas such as kitchens and living rooms, appeared to create the right environment for peer support networks to emerge. Julia, for example, described the connectedness among young people in the accommodation setting she had been in for two years and the strategies of support they used.

"If someone's going off a bit too hard or you think they're about to go and do something that's a little bit too extreme a lot of us will try to stop them, and 'okay, come on now, cop on. There's no point doing that'. There is a lot of, what's the word I'm looking for, like bonding here… it's like a big family as I said. So, there is kind of companionship almost" (Julia, 19)

Even though Julia preferred the privacy of her individual flat, she still appreciated the ways in which young people chose to assist one another and learn from each other's experience.

"… what I love to see is the older people will help the younger people. So if they're like, I don't know, there was a girl I was chatting to and she was looking to try to go on Universal Credit and she knew I was on it so she asked me what the process would be, and the same with the Housing Executive. So that's definitely a great dynamic, with the older people, the older residents helping the younger residents" (Julia, 19)

In another supported accommodation setting, two young women told of the friendship they had developed with one another and the support they offered each other to address their substance use and establish routine. Claire said:

*"She and I have now created this routine where we would like go out and get [café] and stuff, and like this morning we went out for breakfast. And she really encourages me, you know? I got her off drugs… I got her away from drugs and drink, and yeah now she treats me out for breakfast every morning and she's like 'get you're a** up out of bed. You're not being depressed today. We're going to go and get ****ing breakfast bro, and go for a [café] as well'. So yeah she's a good person."* (Claire, 18)

The importance of these informal support structures is also evident in the impact removing them has upon young people and families, with such peer support sometimes becoming disrupted for those in other housing provisions.

Those in family hostels, for example, more typically described keeping to their individual flats with no contact with others living in the hostel. Such hostels did not typically have shared or communal spaces, or if they did, participants described cold rooms with some toys for children where no one went. Natalie described her desire for some connection with other residents in their hostel.

"We should by the way, where you can go just and chat with people from other flats. Because some people here have domestic situations they're fleeing away from, some people were, we need to be able to interact, you know?" (Natalie, mother)

In contrast, Caroline, mother of an infant living in a family hostel, benefited from the support of other mothers through the use of a shared space for young children operated by an early years' service. She described the importance of this support network which aided with childcare but also offered much needed emotional support.

"I've found it really, really good. Like I'm happy here and I wouldn't like to go to another hostel, because in here's just amazing. Because you can go down to the park to play and you can just meet all the other mummies in here, and they're so like lovely and you just get along with everybody. So it's just really good for like your head… And there is a kind of a support then between the mums, you know, to help each other out … if we were feeling down and all we would like talk to each other and just have a laugh and just feel better and all." (Caroline, mother)

6.2 Supporting housing transitions

The need for these support networks to continue when transitioning to independent accommodation, such as social housing or the private rented sector, was crucial for some participants but not always forthcoming. Those in receipt of such support spoke favourably of having their needs addressed through this difficult period. Abi discussed how budgeting and cooking concerns were addressed through the floating support her supported accommodation continued to provide her as she moved into social housing.

"They come back and helped me budget and helped me do more stuff. Like [support worker]… she taught me how to make homemade food you know, two weeks ago and that's what I like, someone to come help me cook… that's why I like [their] support because they help you with everything." (Abi, 20)

Although these supports are not directly linked to access to housing provision, they provide stability that is essential to maintaining stable housing solutions during transitional periods.

Some participants also spoke of the value of the provision of basic necessities to help set up their home. A group of three mothers discussed the provision of home starter packs, which had not been made available when they first made transitions to independent living, but which they suggested would have made a significant different to their experience. Other participants spoke of relying upon charitable help during transitional periods to provide essential furniture, including beds, mattresses, and tables for children to do schoolwork. Anna described sleeping on the floor with her son in the first nights of moving into social housing until a local church provided them with beds, whilst she had to make use of local food banks to feed her children. Others drew on the supports of family and friends in the absence of other assistance. Ella, for example, received support from her former foster parents to furnish her new home when she moved into private rented accommodation:

"they give me a sofa, they give me forks and knives and plates and cups and everything and they brought a big moving van and helped me move down" (Ella, 19).

Other support required related to feelings of loneliness or isolation which can accompany transitions into independent living, particularly in the case of individuals moving from shared settings. Abi, for example, indicated that she still required the support and company of a friend after moving to social housing.

"Cos I need someone to stay over with me at night time just so I don't feel as lonely though but I can always get my friend to stay over so there's a spare bedroom to stay there and keep me company. I have their bedroom and they have their room." (Abi, 20)

The importance of supporting housing transitions is perhaps best illustrated in the accounts of those who did not feel they benefited from sufficient sources of support and as a result were unable to maintain more secure housing. Luke, for example, felt that the move from supported accommodation into social housing was *"too quick."* Having accepted the first offer of social housing, when he was aged 19, he felt that this triggered the move from supported accommodation too quickly and he assessed he needed more time to prepare for the transition.

"… so much things going through my head at the same time, like how am I gonna do this, what am I gonna do with the stuff I don't need, what am I gonna do without the stuff that I don't have… "It felt like it was a bit of a kick up the backside and out the door …I felt like they didn't really give me the right support that I needed moving onto my new house because that would have been my permanent home." (Luke, 20)

He previously *"loved"* living in supported accommodation and had spoken positively of the support provided and feeling comfortable in speaking with staff should a problem arise. Knowing that he *"wasn't gonna have that support"*, however, was *"really hard."* Alongside the stress of moving, this young man also struggled with mental health issues which had been *"severely up and down"* as well as issues with alcohol and drug as a means of coping with the anxiety that he faced. On the event of moving, he recounted that *"drink and drugs took their toll."* The support he required, therefore, went beyond practical support to do with housing. Floating support did continue in some vein, as he received phone calls from his supported accommodation, having moved during Covid restrictions. He, however, required physical contact and *"wanted somebody to be able to come over once a week to check up on me"* (Luke, 20). After a number of months, he was evicted for unreasonable behaviour and drug use and was staying temporarily with a friend at the time of interview.

6.3 What do positive support systems look like?

Several respondents to the study, both parents and young people, discussed the key things that make support networks worthwhile and helpful. A recurring theme here was talk of relationship building and consistency on behalf of the support service. This consistency involved both the need for regular visits, and long-term access to one key worker. Anna, who had experienced multiple transitions between temporary accommodation before accepting a social housing flat despite reservations about its size and compatibility with their needs, outlined the importance of having an outside voice they could contact in times of need, and who could empathise with their circumstances when advocating for positive housing outcomes.

"It was just great to have another adult that was focused on the same thing as me and could see the mountain of evidence that I've got. And the fact that I'm going in circles. I'm doing what everyone's telling me to do but I'm not getting anywhere." (Anna, mother)

There were also repeated references to consistency being crucial in engaging additional support structures. Whilst Ella spoke in positive terms of a social worker, she has had for 2-3 years, *"I'm very thankful to have her because not many other people get that opportunity",* other respondents shared adverse experiences with this service. Anna said that the prolonged wait to access children's social care and a perceived lack of understanding of the family's situation made her feel that continuing to access this service was not worthwhile. This resulted in a lack of support in a housing crisis involving a racist attack on the home and racial abuse towards the children living there. Additionally, both Julia and Ava experienced multiple changes in keyworker support in accessing social care that left them frustrated. This was combined with continued frustrations with reduced contact from new social workers. Julia describes her new social worker as having *"basically no contact with me",* whilst Ava voiced concerns with the failure to build a relationship with a social worker because they are *"trying to get on with them, and then all of a sudden you have a new one."*

The failure to develop these support networks through long-term work risks leaving the causes of homelessness and housing insecurity unaddressed. On this point, Claire states that access to additional support services could have been provided by *"a good social worker, someone allocated to me to… fight for what was my rights, you know?"* The potential for advocacy that Claire refers to was discussed favourably by Fatima. She spoke of prolonged work with a family trauma support worker that helped her to provide context around her family's experience of domestic violence in discussions with both children's social care and her son's school.

“She’s so helpful, and when this happened, with the dad, the social worker went with her and because I was with this lady since I arrived and she knows everything and I told her everything that I faced with my son, and my worries and how, yeah? That helped me.” (Fatima, mother)

This example highlights how vital consistent support can be in providing additional help that ultimately benefits positive housing outcomes. The trauma support received, and the advocacy provided alongside it, was bolstered by the long-term understanding developed between the participant and support service. This ultimately led to a more consistent housing solution for the family that was informed by addressing the nuanced risks associated with the domestic violence experienced by the mother and her son.

6.4 Financial assistance

Continued financial strain was a factor for a range of participants in the study and highlights that basic needs are not always adequately met. For participants like Ava this is combined with a lack of budgeting skills that they feel they and some of their fellow tenants in supported accommodation could make use of. *“I think a lot of people need it, in here could do with the same thing as well.”* Across a number of families and young people the inability to afford basic needs was a prominent theme throughout the study. Claire highlights these concerns, stating:

*“Toiletries, daily things like pads, tampons, whatever, underwear especially, you know, because we all have to use the same laundry room, so sometimes things get mixed up, and it’s a wee bit ****** in that term. But yeah we just, a lot of us do struggle with paying for certain things. But, I don’t know, it’s quite difficult to say. But I do struggle buying food quite a lot.”* (Claire, 18)

These struggles are combined with rising costs in the current economic climate that leave those facing homelessness and housing insecurity on a constrained budget. Participants spoke of these rising costs as a particular area of concern for them. FAM4-5 suggested that *“everything goes up, but the money never goes up.”* This was expanded upon by FAM8-9 who says there is *“literally nothing left, nothing”,* after paying for food, electricity, and heating bills. These basic housing provisions like heating and electricity are a theme for several participants, with Natalie stating that Universal Credit payments represent a *“drop in the ocean”* in meeting the perceived rising costs of providing for children in their current circumstances. This forces some in these circumstances to make money in other ways, because they *“didn’t have enough to survive”* (Ava, 20) after Universal Credit payments.

For children, these economic constraints also impact upon educational needs. One family, (Natalie, mother), recalled that during the first year of the pandemic funding was not provided for a laptop for schoolwork. Meanwhile, Anna discussed the costs of school uniform as a major area of financial pressure.

“The hoody, the tracksuit bottoms, one of the PE tops, one of the shorts. There’s another PE top and another pair of shorts, and then two different pairs of socks as well.”
(Anna, mother)

In this economic vacuum some participants spoke positively of additional support networks filling these financial gaps. Young people like Ella rely upon local organisations to help them out with travel costs, providing additional aid during tougher periods of financial pressure. Meanwhile Julia said that the same organisation was able to provide her with funding for electricity and oil in their home, with this help also extending to travel costs and help in attaining grants for necessities like furniture that provide stability in transitional housing situations.

6.5 Healthcare needs and access

Participants generally gave positive feedback on their access to physical healthcare support, including dentistry and opticians. Proximity was a key factor in this positive experience, with participants all saying they could have their healthcare needs addressed nearby. One young person, however, described the difficulties of accessing healthcare while sleeping rough and as a result an STI went untreated during that time. Access to mental health care, however, presented with challenges. Claire suggested that mental health support and support with housing provisions should be provided simultaneously, saying that *"if you are going through like housing and stuff you do need to get mental health support as well."* However, this appears undermined by insufficient access to mental health support and the lack of a more bespoke approach from mental health services. Julia for instance discussed the difficulties of accessing the mental health care that she needs, saying she has been waiting two years for this service, *"I'm meant to having psychotherapy, that's my designated therapy, but it's incredibly rare within Northern Ireland. I think there's about four or five people who do it."* Additionally, Jennifer suggested that the inflexibility of mental health services resulted in unnecessarily long wait times for their child to receive mental health support.

"My telephone was broken and they refused to do it on one telephone, and they said no. 'So we'll have to make you another appointment'. I said 'well we've got the laptop here', it was working at the time, we had the laptop here, 'we can do it on the laptop. We can Zoom if you want', I said 'I could Zoom and you could talk to [sister] on', 'no. We're going to have to make another', so we had to wait another twelve weeks." (Jennifer, mother)

Expecting homeless families to have access to two electronic devices has the potential to restrict access to the mental health support they require and represents a lack of understanding around the financially restricted situation many homeless and housing insecure families find themselves in.

6.5.1 Addiction support

Concerns around support for addiction issues also represent a challenge for those facing homelessness and housing insecurity. A small number of participants recounted experiences of substance use and addiction issues as being directly linked to their unstable housing situation. Amongst these participants, themes apparent in how a supportive relationship with key services are developed again appear. Their experiences illustrated that inadequate support led to further issues with addiction which had a direct impact on access to appropriate housing solutions. Claire suggests in using threats of admitting her to hospital, addiction services previously attended had merely attempted to *"scare me out of addiction and stuff like that… instead of like genuinely helping me. I never got genuine help."* As a result, she went *"cold turkey"* without the appropriate support. Timing was also a key issue for addiction support. Luke, for example, spoke of the need of earlier intervention in relation to his own substance use.

"I didn't know I would have been sitting in this position now when I was sitting in school, I was thinking I'm gonna be working away and having my own car and a house and all but drink and drugs just like, I went sidewards and just went completely off track. I would have benefitted a lot from the [substance use] Project and stuff if I knew of them back then. Prescription tablets just ruined my life" (Luke, 20).

However, when support of this nature was forthcoming, participants like Ava suggested that, although more frequent support would be welcomed, her bi-weekly sessions with addiction support services were helping her to maintain stability in her temporary accommodation. In describing her recent

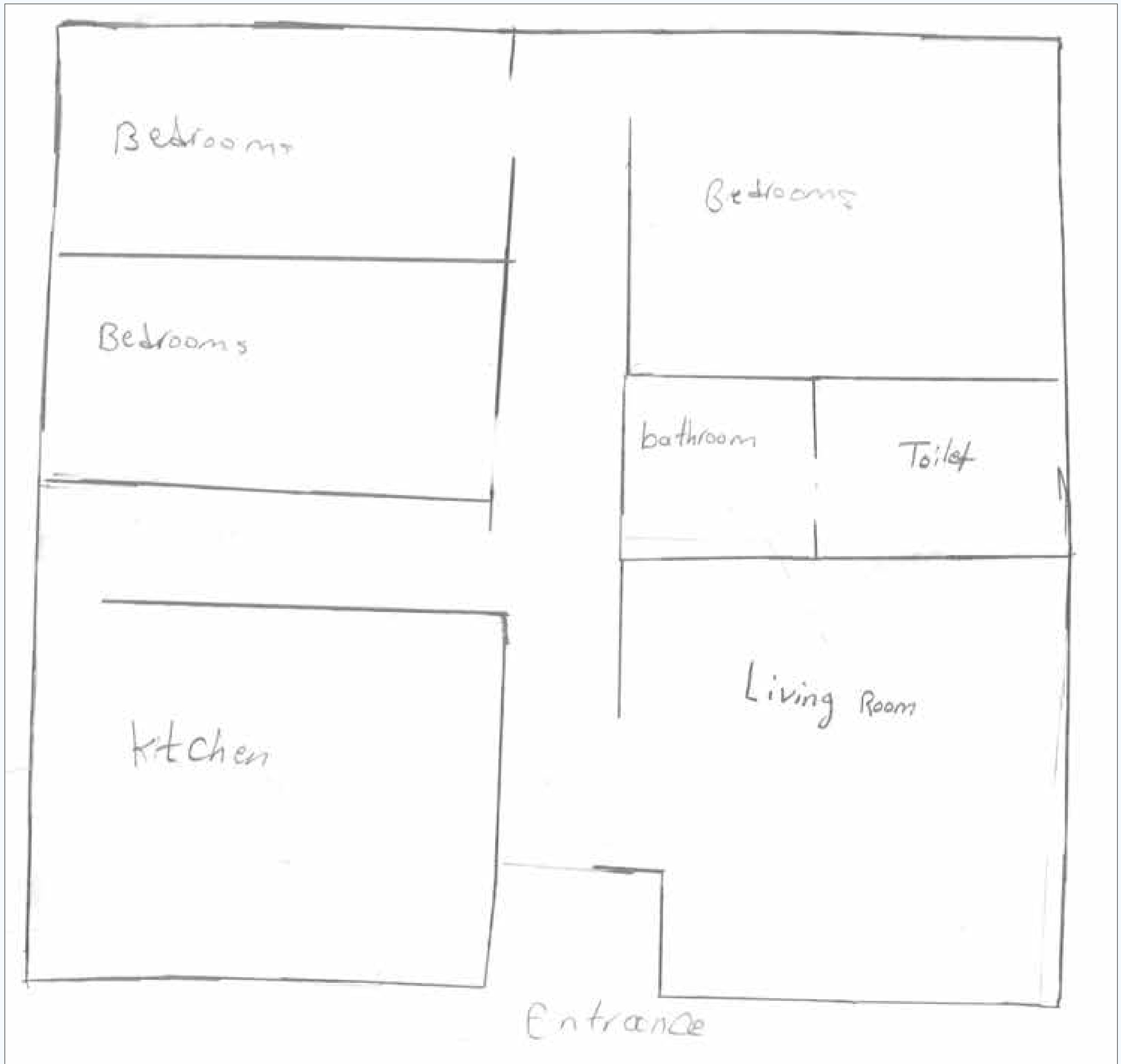
positive experiences with addiction support services, she said *"that's something like that no one else done that for me, not even social, and I wanted to prove something to them, you know, like 'do drug tests. I want yous to see', you know?"* Although combined with a clear determination on behalf of the participant to stop using drugs and alcohol as coping mechanisms, this highlights the difference that appropriate support can make for young people facing a multitude of difficulties alongside their housing needs.

6.6 Summary and rights implications

Participants in the study benefitted from supports which assisted them in coping with the challenges of living in temporary accommodation as well as facilitating and maintaining positive transitions in their housing pathways. Young people spoke highly of assistance within supported accommodation which helped them to maintain their current tenancy, but also aimed to prepare them for future transitions towards independent living. Such transitions could be overwhelming for young people and having support to avail of in terms of skills for independent living was crucial. When such support was not available or appeared to stop suddenly, this posed a threat to the sustainability of young people's transitions. This was the case for a number of the care leavers in the study. The CRC has highlighted the need for robust support for young people leaving care, ensuring that the withdrawal of support and services is gradual (UN CRC, 2016a). States are also urged to adopt holistic and long-term strategies to assist children affected by homelessness in the realisation of their rights (UN CRC, 2017:para. 13). Services specified directly are access to healthcare, particularly the availability of prevention, rehabilitation and treatment services for substance abuse, as well as trauma therapy and mental health services (UN CRC, 2017). Several young people in the study spoke of mental health issues which had existed during their teenage years but experienced delay in accessing appropriate support. Additionally, a small number of young people who reported substance use issues highlighted the inadequate support when these issues first emerged in teenage years, but when support was forthcoming in latter years their experiences had been positive.

The State's obligation to assist parents/guardians in their child-rearing responsibilities and to assist parents/guardians via material means and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing is affirmed in Articles 18 and 27, UNCRC. A number of parents spoke of the value of support which assisted them in the set up of their home through the provision of basic necessities, although in a number of cases this was through the support of charitable organisations or the supports of family and friends in the absence of any state-funded assistance. A number of families and young people spoke of the inadequacy of Universal Credit payments in the context of rising living costs and thus reported an inability to afford basic needs in the home (e.g. food and toiletries) as well as to meet costs related to travel and education.

Informal supports emerged as crucial for participants who spoke of the practical support that family members and friends offered in the set up of new homes with the provision of furnishings and helping with the practicalities of the move. Others spoke of the importance of emotional support offered by peer networks – either existing or newly formed in accommodation settings – to help cope with the challenges they faced and to share learning from experiences. This underscores the importance of consideration of location when placing families and young people in temporary and more permanent forms of accommodation, as isolation from such supports can add to the instability of their experiences.



7. LIVING IN CONTINGENCY AND DISPERSAL ACCOMMODATION

Image above: Drawing by ‘Sharmin’ (14) representing their ideal home. ‘Sharmin’ lives in temporary accommodation in a terraced house with her mum and sister. They have been seeking asylum and spent eight months living in hotels beforehand.

Image on previous page: A floor plan for Sharmin’s ideal home. She has included bedrooms for her two sisters, who she hopes will join her when her family are granted asylum.

The number of asylum seekers arriving in NI has increased, with 904 asylum seekers in receipt of asylum support on 31st December 2018 compared to 1437 on 31st December 2021. Up to June 2021, they were primarily accommodated in Dispersal Accommodation within Belfast but more recently the use of contingency accommodation has increased where newly arrived asylum seekers are placed across a number of hotels on first arrival. (Law Centre NI, 2022). The Law Centre NI estimates that there were almost 1,200 asylum seekers living in contingency accommodation in March 2022, including 130 school-aged children (Law Centre NI, 2022).

Four families seeking asylum were represented in the study by five parents and four children. Additionally, one mother who had attained refugee status almost two years prior to the interview took part and she had been an asylum seeker in Northern Ireland for approximately three years. Four families had lived in hotel contingency accommodation and two had lived in dispersal accommodation for asylum seekers. The accounts below explore their experiences of living in such accommodation, with a particular focus on the inadequacies and the stresses this adds to family life. Additional impacts of such accommodation across a range of areas in children's lives is considered in Section 8.

7.1 Contingency accommodation

Two families were still living in hotels at the time of interview. The first of these – a mother, father and four children aged between 2 and 12 – had been in the same hotel for 9 months. The second – a mother, father and infant child – had been in a hotel for 2 months, with the father having stayed in a hotel for singles for the 3 months prior to the interview. Two other families seeking asylum who had recently been placed in dispersal accommodation had previously stayed in hotels. The first of these – a father, mother and two children aged 12 and 8 – had lived in a hotel for 7 months and had just moved to housing the day before the interview. The second family – a mother and two children aged 10 and 14 – had lived across two hotels and a guest house described as *"a very bad situation we suffered for 10 months"* (Majeda, mother). They had been in housing for one month prior to interview.

Participants identified differences across hotels – both those who had stayed in multiple settings and those who had friends in other hotels/guest houses. Indeed, one of the issues raised by a father was that there was insufficient oversight of the hotels to ensure consistency in provision and that they were fulfilling their contracts: *"You must put one law to all hotels… You must not depends on the hotel, he got his own rules… because he is benefit, he want money, he want money"* (Faiz, father). Despite differences across the settings, all participants raised similar issues which highlighted the inadequacy of hotels for families, particularly when resident for a number of months.

A key issue was the size and condition of bedrooms within hotel or guest house accommodation which increased the stresses of family life. Most of the families had been allocated only one room and requests for any extra space had been refused. Only one family, with four children, had been allocated two rooms yet they were not connecting rooms. Children were therefore separated from their parents and their mother raised her concerns.

Translator (for Ruhena): *"Little safe, but she is not happy because the room not close each other, so about, there is about seven rooms between her room and the children's room, so always she has to feel safe because, thinking about the children, sometimes they open the door, there is people outside…"*
(Ruhena, mother)

The location of rooms within the hotel posed an issue for one family with a baby. Having been placed within earshot of a *"noisy bar"*, the baby was being kept awake late into the night. Families living within one room struggled with the lack of privacy and sleep deprivation, and children found it difficult to focus on homework under the stress of all the family in one room (see Section 8). Some participants likened their situation to being under arrest or *"like a jail… because this room is very, very small. Two metres by two metres for three people"* (Abid, father). Conditions within the room were described as inadequate by some who noted that windows could not be opened for fresh air, drains were blocked in the bathroom and the bedroom door could not be locked (and a request to have it fixed refused) so that the door could be opened *"suddenly"* by others.

Communal areas in hotels did not seem to offer families much respite from their crowded rooms. Space and opportunities for children to play in hotels was very limited. With large numbers of children in the hotels, parents talked about issues between children due to the stresses of overcrowded conditions and lack of play. Hotels within the city centre were described as having very limited outdoor space, usually taken up with chairs/tables and occupied by parents and so there was no opportunity for outdoor play for the children. Children's needs were clearly not at the forefront of any planning to accommodate families. This is further illustrated by a father's account of the closing of toilets in communal areas, such as the restaurant, thus requiring residents to return to their rooms for bathroom purposes. He described the stress of this with young children, particularly when the elevator had also been closed down.

"But for [hotel] it has another act against us. They just close the elevator, close it, they close three bathroom for general in the front, in the first floor, they close it just for the staff. So if any children has to pee when he is in the restaurant or in the hall if he got to pee or something he is child, we must run with the children to the room… Up the stairs to second floor or one floor without elevator. So I see some accident happen. There is some child on the stairs, he make it on himself, because they don't want any children just to enter this bathroom... It's not humanity… Why are they doing this?... They are kids, kids, yeah." (Faiz, father)

The location of the hotel also added stresses to some families. One family recounted that they had been placed in a hotel in a town outside of Belfast with few services or amenities in the surrounding area. Transport options were limited due to the cost of travel, considering the limited £8 per week payment for asylum seekers and they described the restriction to movement they experienced.

Majeda: One room, big room, three beds inside, and small window, but it was like arrest because we couldn't go outside. [town] very far away from city centre, we couldn't, we hadn't money to…to go like by bus. We hadn't, because no cash.
Sharmin: It was just so quiet, so quiet.
(Majeda, mother; Sharmin, 10. daughter)

The location of some hotels also meant that parents struggled to find their children a school place easily accessible from their accommodation. They recounted that children could go a number of months without accessing a school, and when they did it was most likely not within walking distance. This added extra pressure to life in the hotels as children who were not at school were then present in the hotels most of the day.

Participants also struggled with typical aspects of daily family life that hotels are unable to cater for. Access to laundry services, for example, was limited. Whilst laundry may be collected once per week,

this did not suit the frequency of washing required for families with young children. One participant noted that often items of laundry would go missing or would be *"destroyed"* which was a significant problem given their limited access to funds: *"we haven't much money to buy another"* (Majeda, mother). Whilst there were machines available for families' use, two machines was noted as insufficient for the number of families in the hotels and there was no space in their rooms to dry their clothes. But the main aspect of daily family life that concerned parents was the inability to cook for the family and the standards of the food within the hotels. A lack of variety meant that *"every day the food the same"* (Sharmin, 10, daughter), with breakfast and lunch usually standard and portion sizes small.

"it's always the lunch not good, it's always, you know, for six month, our breakfast is one boiled egg and two toast, that's it... No choice, no no choice. They give a jam, jam, small, and butter, small, and one kind of cereal for the children, one kind of cereal, the cheapest one, the cheapest one. So the kids always come to breakfast, one egg, two toast, that's it. When we come at lunch you will see, for a long time there is one soup, soup, just bigger like this, one soup. The next day for the lunch a sandwich for cheese." (Faiz, father)

Others noted that the food presented was not suitable for children, including too many spices, despite requests to cater for children's tastes and diets. Parents were also concerned with limited access to healthy foods, one father noting that each individual was rationed to just one piece of fruit a day.

"When you go to a hotel, hotel is not giving any food, food is not enough, not good. Everything, fruits is not for one each person, he will take only one fruit in a day, for all children, all adults. He will take one apple or one banana, that's it all day." (Faiz, father)

There were also limits to the way in which food was served. This was restricted to certain hours of the day – usually one hour in the middle of the day for lunch and one-hour early evening for dinner, with no food available outside of these times: *"If families were not available at these times, then they do not receive that meal at all: If we were busy or outside we have no lunch"* (Majeda, mother). Additionally, if children were sick and unable to come to communal areas, families were not allowed to bring meals to the bedrooms and they missed out: *"if my daughters were sick they couldn't eat because they couldn't go to the kitchen because they're sick… For example suddenly health, problem health, they are sick, they have period problems or, we couldn't eat inside the room, without food"* (Majeda, mother)

Due to the standard of the food, participants were worried that families were starving and raised health concerns that many children, and also parents, were becoming *"sick"* (see Section 8). Participants had made a number of complaints in relation to the above but these were described as being received aggressively by hotel staff or management. Via a translator, one father explained how they were required to move hotel after trying to raise complaints in relation to the food.

Translator (for Abid): *"… he had a problem there because the food, the meal, it wasn't nice, and then when he started just get pictures on his mobile, and then one of the receptions they make trouble with him and then they call the police, and they threw him out. They said 'you're not allowed to take picture', but it was, there was, they were aggressive with him as well. And then after that they told him 'you are not allowed to stay in this hotel' and moved to (current hotel)."* (Abid, father)

7.2 Dispersal accommodation

Two of the families seeking asylum were currently living in dispersal accommodation. One family had been resident in the house for just over a month, after ten months between three hotels, and another family had just moved the day before interview after seven months in a hotel. Those who moved into a house after staying in hotels viewed this as a positive transition. Additionally, one family now with refugee status spent nearly three years between two flats whilst seeking asylum. Unlike the other families, they did not stay in hotel contingency accommodation, having first arrived in Northern Ireland in 2017. In contrast to the views expressed above which likened hotel accommodation to incarceration, Majeda described the freedom she associated with moving into a house with her two daughters.

"This is a place, this is house we have two bedrooms and a big salon and it's a good life now. We have neighbours, we have friends, we can cook the food which my daughters like, and any time we can go outside without regime and controlling, and we can live free, as a free yes." (Majeda, mother)

One father described the *"change"* which a move to a house represented, despite only being there for one day. Having a fully furnished house, with adequate space and three rooms, all necessary appliances and, importantly for him, the ability to cook for his family, was in stark contrast to the seven months spent in a hotel. Although those who had previously been in hotels were happy to move, the move itself was described as last minute. One family had been given a month's notice that they would have accommodation but not given a *"specific time to move."* When the time came, they were given one hour to leave the hotel and, it seems, with little support.

Majeda: And suddenly, when we prepare ourselves… and I worked hard, hard, hard, hard, my daughters were at school, and alone I collect our things, our stuff, and I was waiting five hours, five hours to take us by bus. When we moved, after five hours waiting, our stuff was ready. We moved to this house. What happened? They said no toilet in the house. You have to … Go back to your hotel…. we stayed in the hotel [for two days] without stuff, without bedroom or without toothbrush, without books, without my medication, without…

Sharmin: Anything. (Majeda, mother; Sharmin, 10, daughter)

Their experience was in contrast to the family who arrived in Northern Ireland in 2017, who spoke of removal support organised by the housing management company as they moved between two types of accommodation. On attaining refugee status after three years, the family presented to the NIHE as homeless and had been living in a family hostel at the time of interview for almost two years. There, the mother described more restrictions on privacy and movement than when they were seeking asylum status, having to notify staff if they were to leave the accommodation for even one night. This illustrates the continued fragility of asylum seekers' housing transitions as they attain refugee status and begin to navigate housing systems and supports. Their experiences of housing systems, therefore, must be understood along a continuum of instability which takes account of their previous asylum-seeking status and the impact of long-term insecurity on families and children's lives.

7.3 Support gaps

Some participants described the ways in which asylum seekers in Belfast had tried to provide the support needed to survive in contingency accommodation. For example, they spoke of creating their own peer networks to fill gaps in services. One mother discussed her work with a housing rights group who she now volunteers with, providing arts classes for children. Meanwhile, another mother is involved in a Muslim women's organisation that helps her and other asylum seekers to maintain connections with their culture despite difficult housing situations. This was particularly relevant during Ramadan. She stated that *"we tried to make an atmosphere, especially for people who were accommodated in hotels, asylum seekers, and they were struggling in food."* (Fatima, mother)

Additionally, families in hotel settings spoke of the difficulties of surviving on eight pounds per week per person. Given the poor nourishment provided by hotels, families tended to spend their £8 allowance on further food.

"We spend it all, because we are starving in [hotel]. The food is not good. We buy a bread and yoghurt and we buy a cheese. So we always make it in the room." (Faiz, father).

The allowance, however, still does not sufficiently feed a family and the same father described having to seek further assistance, explaining that his family made regular trips to a local church that provides treats for the children and extra food they can eat without needing to cook.

"They give us candies always for kids or like food. But if we depend on the eight pounds, never enough, you know?… They give us something, stuff like cans or something… or vegetables or something simple. They ask always, they are very kind and very generous." (Faiz, father)

Access to healthcare support was a particular area of concern for participants seeking asylum and a gap that could not be filled through informal networks. The issue of access to a healthcare card was raised by two families, without which they cannot attend an optician or dentist. For one parent, this meant that their child could not receive treatment for an eye condition that requires assessment every six months: *"They said 'you don't have healthcare, so you're not allowed that. You have to pay for it.'"*

The same issues with access to a healthcare card impacted another family, with the mother unable to see a dentist despite months of tooth pain. Both families discussed a lack of support on this issue, one noting that, despite the multiple challenges her family face, this is currently their biggest area of need.

7.4 Summary and rights implications

Migrant children are equally entitled to the rights and corresponding State obligations under the UNCRC (1989), including Article 27 pertaining to adequate living standards and housing. Furthermore, children seeking or in possession of refugee status, whether accompanied or unaccompanied, are directly acknowledged in Article 22 of the UNCRC (1989). The State is obliged to provide 'appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance' to ensure asylum-seeking children are enabled to realise their rights under the UNCRC, as well as all other human rights instruments to which the State subscribes (Article 22.1).

Whilst a small number of families seeking asylum are represented in the study, their experiences speak to the significant inadequacies of contingency accommodation for children and families. Space allocated to families is insufficient for the long periods they are currently required to stay in hotel accommodation and this significantly compromises any ability for children or

parents to maintain privacy. In communal hotel areas children's needs are not factored in. Challenges to accessing school means that children are spending long days in hotels; hotels feel overcrowded and insufficient space is dedicated to the children's needs. Children's food requirements or preferences are not catered for and there is no opportunity for parents to cater for their needs independently. Indeed, whilst Article 18(2) (UNCRC) reiterates the State's obligation to provide appropriate assistance to families in assuming their child-rearing responsibilities, asylum seeking parents expressed their frustration at not being able to meet their children's needs or carry out usual tasks such as cook for the family and do the laundry as needed. Those in dispersal accommodation in the community offered different accounts that spoke of the space and freedom available for them to care for their families in safety.

In the absence of formal supports, asylum seekers in the study spoke of the need to fill gaps in services by developing their own network of peers and supports, going a small way to meet gaps in children's education and to offer support to peers to enjoy religious and cultural expression. Charitable assistance proved crucial to mitigate the destitution experienced when surviving on small weekly payments, used mainly to provide further food for the family. A key source of stress for families seeking asylum were challenges in accessing healthcare both for children and parents, a concern exacerbated by the health impacts of living in contingency accommodation.

8. IMPACTS OF HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING INSECURITY

Drawing (above): Reflections by members of the NICCY Youth Panel on Claire's story and the impacts of homelessness.

"I'm just grateful for anything to be very honest. Just somewhere that I can actually settle down and call my own, decorate it my own, you know, be my own person".
(Claire, 18)

This section examines the impacts of homelessness and housing insecurity on the lives of children, young people and parents. It draws on accounts of those who have navigated housing systems and supports in Northern Ireland, as well as accounts from families who have arrived in Ireland seeking asylum. The analysis demonstrates that homelessness and housing insecurity is not just about the right of children and their families to adequate housing, but that it has wide-ranging impacts across a number of domains in children and young people's lives.

8.1 Family life and relationships

Many interviewees spoke of the impact of homelessness and housing insecurity on their family lives and relationships. Loss of contact with family and the breakdown of relationships was common, particularly in young people's accounts. Some young people described fraught relationships in the family home, often due to mental health issues and addiction, causing them to leave home or be placed into care. However, they often ended up back with parents because of long waiting times for housing services or a lack of other options: *"thought it was only going to be a few weeks"* (Caroline, young mother). Young people described that going back into the family home often caused a further breakdown in relations, consolidating a cycle of to-and-fro characterised by initial calm, but ultimately ending in further tension and breakdown, *"it was nice at first but..."* (Claire, 18). One family described a similar experience after moving in with grandparents as a result of their housing situation – a clash of routines, lack of space and disagreements ultimately resulted a breakdown of relationships (Fiona, mother). During periods of hidden homelessness and instability, young people and families had to return to the *"family home"*, causing further relationship breakdown.

As a consequence, several interviewees maintained a distance with parents and former caregivers, with some electing to cut contact completely as a result of their experiences. In contrast, young people who were able to find housing arrangements that supported their *"specific needs"* - some moving into kinship care, supported living or private rented accommodation - noted an improvement in relationships. Previously fractured connections were able to be rebuilt through distance and appropriate, stable accommodation where they could have a break from tension and disagreements: *"it was just too much hassle, and I just needed like my own space and my own like, just to stay, do you know what I mean?"* (Caroline, young mother). One young person in private rented accommodation described her mum helping her move into and decorate her new flat (Ella, 19). Another young person recounted a growing relationship with his dad due to living in kinship care with his grandparents: *"I never used to talk to my dad, and then because of staying at my granny's I talk to him a bit more now...I can stay at my dad's sometimes if I want"* (Liam, 17)

In addition to parental relationships, young people cited the loss of contact with siblings as something that affected them. Young people's younger siblings may have remained in the family home while they left, sofa surfing or relocating to temporary accommodation. Their ability to stay in contact, therefore, was restricted, particularly where they ended up staying far away from siblings with limited access to transport options. Location and ease of access made a big difference to maintaining relationships with siblings, and moving between different types of accommodation and locations could be the deciding factor as to whether they were able to maintain contact with siblings.

“Where I’m living at the minute they can’t see me cos they don’t drive, like my two younger brothers, they don’t drive at all...and they really wanted to see me.” (Abi, 20)

Having experienced several moves, Abi was able to maintain relationships with her siblings when they were living’ *“right round the corner.”* The physical distance when she moved to accept an offer of social housing impacted their ability to meet up and spend time as a family.

Parents and children highlighted the nature of accommodation and its proximity to essential services as affecting their ability to have a normal family life. A family in temporary accommodation discussed the disruption to routines and bedtimes caused by restrictive rules around leaving children unattended in the hostel.

“But then again say I have one or two that wants to come down [to the garden] technically I’m not allowed to leave one in the flat. That’s the same with the garden. If [son] wanted to go out to the garden I would have, the rules are that I would have to go with him, but again I can’t leave these uns in the flat. [older daughter] was used to, because she loves her own space, so I was able, like when we had our house I was able to leave her in the house, she knew how to get out, if anything happened she knew how to get out, and I would be quite happy go and leave her for half an hour if I had to go anywhere with these uns and come back again... like the nights that she has training [younger daughter] I have to bring her with me [older daughter]. She has to come and sit in the car. She’s not allowed to stay here.” (Fiona, mother)

Children under 18 were not allowed to be left unattended within the hostel, nor were children permitted to stay there alone without an adult present for any period of time, something that would have been the norm in their family home given the older daughter was 14. With children spanning in age range, and therefore different interests and needs, this rigidity was difficult for the family. In particular, the eldest daughter, who was on the autistic spectrum, found the disruption exhausting and difficult to cope with. The restriction of autonomy and self-determined family living caused by these rules, in combination with a lack of affordable and available childcare options, often forced the family to *“travel as a unit”,* with the mother, son (6) and two sisters (11 and 14) having to stay out to facilitate each others’ schedules and routines which left the children exhausted.

A number of families described the impact their living conditions had on family life. The inability to prepare food and eat together was mentioned as especially disruptive to spending quality time together as a family. The mother of three children living in a single let described the impact their living conditions had on them as a family.

“we’re very disjointed now because I think eating together’s really important, I really do think eating together is really important...we would have always ate at the table no matter what...show the lady how the table wobbles, you couldn’t eat at that table” (Jennifer, mother)

They cited a lack of space and facilities as the main causes of this disruption – there was only one small table that was too small, broken and had nowhere to sit around it, resulting in the children often taking meals upstairs in their mum’s bed due the lack of space and the cold. The table was also the only place to sit and study for school.

“I cleared that, honestly if you’d have seen that table before you came, it was, because last week [son] had a project for drama, he had to make a puppet theatre, so we had all of that and [daughter] art stuff. It was just piled high. You know, you can’t sit and eat at the table because we need it for them to do their homework on.” (Jennifer, mother)

Another family in a hostel had similar issues due to the lack of space and appropriate furniture for the whole family to sit together.

“Like we used to have dinner every night on the kitchen table in our old house, and then up there because the kitchen’s too small, don’t get me wrong there’s a table, a kitchen table, and there’s chairs, but there’s not enough room. [older daughter] sits in her bedroom. I would take mine into my bedroom, and the two of them [younger children] would sit at the table.” (Fiona, mother)

The physical impossibility of eating together, for families to spend time together as they would before becoming homeless, were cited having a large impact on their day-to-day lives.

Family life was also disrupted, perhaps more acutely, for families seeking asylum housed in hotels. Many lived in one room, with little space or opportunity for privacy for both adults and children, which put pressure on relationships.

“Stress, very stress, for the children, for us like adults. So I just separate my room with a sheet, a blanket, I just always will do that, because the children must sleep and I and the mother sleep beside in our bedroom, just separated by a blanket or something. It’s very difficult, very stressful. You see, when you see the room, you stay in room for seven month, it’s not good, very not good” (Faiz, father).

For families seeking asylum,, privacy was often only achieved by individuals having to use the room on rotation, with the children being sent downstairs to play. In addition, one interviewee described the hotel’s common areas.

“Just we complain, there is no oxygen, no breath here. They say to us ‘it’s designed. This is the design of it’. We are dying. No, no breath” (Faiz, father).

Families highlighted a feeling of claustrophobia and lack of space as having a severe impact on being able to create a family life and space for their children, as well as the toll the stress took on their relationships. Indeed, one family described the feeling of freedom after having been moved from initial hotel accommodation into dispersal housing in the community, where there were fewer restrictions on their autonomy with regard to space, time and the ability to cook and foster social connections.

8.2 Friends and social networks

Participants also expressed difficulty in maintaining friendships and social lives as a result of homelessness and housing insecurity. Several young people brought up the constant moving and upheaval as a factor in making and maintaining friendships and that living between so many settings meant that relationships were generally transient.

“So obviously because I’ve moved about over the years I haven’t been able to build stable relationships with anyone, so I don’t have a friend, you know, some people are like ‘oh I’ve been friends with her for two years’. I don’t have that, I literally don’t. I always end up losing them” (Elena, 18)

“Everyone just comes and goes” (Claire, 18)

Location of new placements required a greater effort on young people’s part to maintain relationships. One young person in kinship care with his grandparents, after a period of hidden homelessness, described the difficulties of meeting of his friends.

“See because I’m in my granny’s now like I can’t just come out whenever. I have to be like ‘yo are you coming out today at this time? Meet me at this time’. And if I go out I can’t like, I have to stay out. I can’t go out and then back out again. It’s just, it’s just so, I don’t know, it’s just so much more annoying.” (Liam, 17).

His friendships were based in his local community, and upon leaving he moved outside the local area where all his friends were located making accessing friends more difficult. This was often in combination with fewer and affordable transport options which contributed to the social isolation young people felt; interviewees often had an awareness that support services might try to relocate them somewhere remote and voiced their concerns, knowing the impact this would have on their relationships and ability to access their support networks: *"they were going to try to send me to [town] where I had no service and I couldn't contact anyone, and I would've just offed myself"* (Elena, 18). Many participants were desirous of greater contact with friends that could not be afforded them due to their housing situation.

Families spoke of similar experiences, with the distance of accommodation to school and social activities preventing them from interacting with friends. Children expressed distress at the location of their accommodation in relation to where their friends lived. A girl living in a family hostel with her mother and siblings emphasised her loneliness, stating *"because all my friends live beside my school, and I couldn't go out to play with them"* (Mairead, 11, daughter). Another young boy noted that moving away from his local area and into a single let (social housing?) meant *"I couldn't see my friends anymore"* (Jaydon, 10, son), the distance preventing him from visiting friends; in contrast there were *"no children here to play with"* in the area they had been allocated, the family feeling ostracised from the community due to their status as homeless. Parents felt the impact of their situation on their own friendships and social connections too, demonstrating the geographical isolation of the whole family. One mother described the impact of moving away from her church community on both her and her son when they accessed hostel accommodation.

"the support that I had from my friends and my community I don't have it when I'm here, we don't have it. Like he's (son) saying he knew every weekend he would go to his church and be playing games and have practice drama, meet his friends. He no longer has to do that. So we are more isolated here...we're cut off socially from society" (Fiona, mother)

This was exacerbated in places like hostels and hotels by greater security and more rigid regulations. Families resident in such accommodation noted the rules and regulations were not conducive to a self-determined social life, with obligatory sign in and curfews for guests, as well as CCTV surveillance. A mother and son living in a hostel had restrictions around over-night guests, including children's sleepovers: *"once a week for one night and I have to give them their ID"* (Fatima, mother). This made inviting her son's friends over next to impossible, meaning he missed out on spending time with them - something he could otherwise do in a more *"normal"* housing context. Families worried that inviting friends to a place with such rules were off-putting, embarrassing and limiting, preferring to forgo asking people altogether.

In addition, the poor state of accommodation and the lack of upkeep by responsible authorities, was a source of embarrassment for children and young people and made it impossible to invite friends over, *"We couldn't invite friends with their family and their kids because there is weeds and plants, and here it was so dirty"* (Fatima, mother). The same mother, who lived in a hostel with her 10-year-old son, shared that he doesn't like to tell his friends where he lives, *"he doesn't like when I say hostel, we live in a hostel, we live in a hostel"* (Fatima, mother). Similarly, one mother described her teenaged son and daughter's experience, both refusing to tell friends where they live or have friends over to their single let for fear of the social repercussions due to the poor living conditions.

“She’s [daughter] too embarrassed to bring anybody here basically. She doesn’t want to bring her friends home, and [son] certainly wouldn’t bring his friends here...he won’t even tell his friends at school where he lives” (Jennifer, mother)

Several families, it should be noted, mentioned COVID-19 as an amplifying factor in the social isolation they felt due to their housing situation. Their already limited avenues were narrowed further by the onset of lockdown and the closing of schools and services.

8.3 Play and leisure

According to children and families, opportunities for play and leisure activities were limited by the suitability of their accommodation. This may vary between accommodation settings, one mother living in a hostel with a very young child expressed her satisfaction at the provision available to her child for play, with access to local green space and a centre downstairs that provided activities for babies and toddlers to play together. Families with school-aged children, however, seemed to struggle more with having appropriate facilities and outdoor or communal spaces for their children to play. For example, a mother living with two daughters in temporary accommodation noted that it was harder to *“do the things they like outside school [art]”* due to a lack of space, as well as the communal area, which offered more space, being too cold. Another noted the lack of outdoor space for her 10-year-old son, and the desire for green space so he might have somewhere to *“release energy”* (Fatima, mother). Again, families noted that having friends visit was near impossible, especially for activities like sleepovers due to the lack of space and the noise of other residents that would occur until late at night.

Families seeking asylum spoke of the struggle for children to find somewhere to play in hotels. A combination of the lack of space (including no outdoor space), or of small designated areas for children to play, limited provision of toys and recreational activities and obstructive rules around parental presence made it difficult for children to have the time and space to play.

“‘Your child not allowed to play with himself here, with, play with the other children’. ‘Why?’ ‘No, your child not, your child must not sit in the vestibule your child must stay… the children always go downstairs, go to play, go to, just to breathe. We must, the parents must, one of them, enter with them, because the reception they said not allowed children So it’s very difficult, very difficult’” (Faiz, father)

The expense of recreational activities was also mentioned by young people and families. With many in financial difficulty connected to their housing situations, there was simply not the option for some to partake in activities without making financial adjustments. This ranged from going to the cinema with friends (Ella, 19), to activities that often come at greater expense, like trips and holidays (Jennifer, mother; Jaydon, 10, son)

8.4 Religion and culture

The location and proximity of accommodation to places of worship emerged as having an impact on families. One family had been moved away from their preferred church and into temporary accommodation, it was too far away to attend due to a lack of funds for transportation.

"I miss my church family... But now I don't have that support. It's one of the supports I can't access now. And as much as you know you would find somebody at the end of the phone it's not the same as when you sit down and take a cuppa, and it costs so much, especially now with the petrol, too much. So you're thinking, hmm let me just stay here, oh let's watch Church on Facebook or on YouTube or, you know? But it's still not the same...you need that human interaction" (Natalie, mother)

This had a significant impact on both the mother's and son's social life as well as their ability to practice their religion, the two things being intertwined to a large extent. Similarly, a mother with refugee status explained how the hostel accommodation where she and her son lived limited their freedom to celebrate their culture, to invite friends and cook food *"I dream to make barbecue, to make a party. I have a lot of friends. In our culture we have to invite friends. It's affecting me, I'm not expressing my culture. I want to invite, to do our food"* (Fatima, mother)

Families seeking asylum living in hotels also faced barriers to practicing religion. Fasting during Ramadan was made challenging due to hotel food provision, one parent commented *"after one day all the day fasting I couldn't find good food for my daughters to eat because the food was, they couldn't eat it, and they are fasting. What I can feed my daughters?"* (Majeda, mother). The food provided by hotels was not adequate in either quality or amount for families to break their fast. While one hotel made arrangements to cater to celebrating Ramadan, families experienced obstruction from hotel practices, for example, kitchen opening hours were not commensurate with the timings of fasting; when the time came to eat the kitchen was closed and there was no food available.

8.5 Education

Homelessness and housing insecurity had a significant impact on children and young people's education. An overall disruption to attendance and school dropout was common among participants, especially among young people. Many interviewees found it difficult to focus in school while they were experiencing instability and lack of support outside the school environment, this included periods back in a volatile family home environment between accommodation placements, leaving care, worry about their next placement and worry for their family. This resulted in a drop in attendance, and for some, dropping out altogether because the demand was too great to focus on school and other life events simultaneously. For example, one young person spoke about her experience leaving foster care which resulted in a brief, tumultuous experience back in the family home, and a longer period of sofa surfing with her boyfriend's family in an overcrowded residence: *"I barely went into the school last year. It was ridiculous. Honestly. I just didn't go in but at the same time I was too busy focusing on other things... I just didn't feel like I was in a very good place, like last year. And with mummy and everything I was worrying about her as well"* (Ella, 19).

8.5.1 Accessing education

Young people and families alike spoke of difficulties accessing school and education settings as a result of having to move away from their community to access accommodation. The journey time for many was between 40-90 minutes walking, which meant early wake-up times and difficulty concentrating, one 14-year-old boy commented he was *"just more tired going into school. Even if I had slept the night before I was still tired going in, and cold a lot of the time from rain, like sitting in damp clothes and a lot of the day"* (Patrick, 14, son). A lack of affordable transport options also meant that there was no choice but to walk long distances in bad weather that would affect him for the rest of the day. One family had no choice but to drive to school, despite the expense, because of a lack of other options and being refused bus passes by the Education Authority, *"leave here at seven, to take two buses to get him to school, to get back. We wouldn't have been home until about half past five, six o'clock. That's too much for a ten-year-old"* (Jennifer, mother). When the car broke down with no money to fix it, this resulted in her son missing out on days at school; before being moved to their assigned accommodation he was able to walk to school with his friends which he preferred to *"long and boring"* journeys down the motorway.

The situation was similar for asylum-seeking families living in hotels, who had fewer funds for transportation, and was compounded by the difficulty of being able to access schools in the first place. Participants discussed the difficulties they faced in securing a place in school for their children. Again, support was not forthcoming in this area, and one family said, *"this is one problem that asylum seeker, we do it by ourself. We go to schools and ask them if there is any place for our children, because, you know, Education Authority it's not speed enough"* (Fatima, mother)

Some children seeking asylum went several months with no education, despite already having missed substantial amounts, due to a lack of availability of school places and little support being given to families as to how to apply to schools in order to secure their children a place. After securing a place, families spoke of difficulties for their children attending school without key worker support, with both children acknowledging difficulties in how learning was communicated to them. The mother spoke on these challenges, pointing out that she felt a teaching assistant was required for her daughter, but she does not know how to access this.

"She doesn't speak English very well, and understanding, in school. So she missed school's year, so she needs support, help. For example, one teacher to explain the maths or anything else. Yeah, outside the lessons. But supposed, it supposed to have one teacher to help, assistant for example, but there aren't." (Majeda, mother)

8.5.2 Space to study

An issue that many interviewees highlighted was in the inadequacy of their accommodation to facilitate education out of school hours, this was especially the case for those living in temporary accommodation such as hotels and hostels, as well as single lets. The lack of adequate space and furniture meant children and young people had to find other means of getting their work done, *"before the charity ones gave us the table I was doing it on the floor"* (Patrick, 14, son), often in the cold conditions because they were unable to heat their homes. Cramped conditions were tough on those with younger siblings, with whom they often had to share space, making it difficult to concentrate on studying (Anna, mother, Patrick, 14, son). A number of families mentioned the noise from neighbours and other residents as distracting, preventing their children from studying. An asylum-seeking parent in hotel accommodation noted *"he doesn't feel like at home because sometimes*

they have homework, they have to study, they do some, you can't hear with the noise here" (Ruhena, mother). Some children were forced to stay in school longer or to do homework in class because of their home environment (Fiona, mother, Thea, 15, daughter; Mairead, 11, daughter).

For several participants, the impact on studying was exacerbated by the onset of the Covid pandemic, which cut them off from school resources – many relied on school as a space to complete work with reliable WI-FI, sufficient space and an environment more conductive to studying. One young person (17 at the time of interview) spoke about his difficulty accessing education in the pandemic. Having not received a device on which to attend classes and complete his work until 2021, he spent several months working on a laptop his mother described as *"breaking, falling apart"*:

"Yeah, it, nah like it didn't, it didn't come to me [laptop], like during the pandemic we were in the old house, but like I didn't get one, I didn't get like one from the school until 2021...like early, like during the time we were all locked down again in 2021 we had the, I didn't get a laptop until then" (Dominic, 17, son)

8.6 Employment

Employment was another area which participants noted was affected by their experiences of homelessness and housing insecurity. Both young people and parents faced barriers to getting into employment that were associated with their housing situations. Parents mentioned difficulties getting back into employment after time spent off due to their housing situations. One parent was desirous to go back into employment, but felt that the nature of their accommodation made it unsafe to leave her children alone in the couple of hours between the end of the school day and the work day (Anna, mother). Another commented that the lack of adequate space and the inconvenient location of the accommodation meant she wouldn't be able to complete the training necessary to go back into employment after time away:

"If we had somewhere to live I could go back to work. But because I have to take my children to school and we live in somewhere we don't want to live, you know, I can't go back to work under these, you know, nobody can go, nobody can go to work when they haven't got a home'.... why aren't they doing something about people, you know, that want and can, you know, the NHS are crying out for nurses, I'm thirty years trained, I've been out for six months but what they're saying is I would need to do three months for my return to practice, which is fine, I don't mind doing that...but I can't do that while I'm living here... I mean they haven't got anywhere to study. Where am I going to study? I've got to study, work, get the children to school, get them home, get them fed in a kitchen the size of a broom cupboard" (Jennifer, mother)

Similarly, both parents and young people perceived that taking up employment would impact their receipt of benefits and rent payments. The interrelationship between taking up employment and the impact it would have on benefits and paying rent; one young person spoke about her supported living accommodation:

"We all get housing benefit, so the government will basically pay for us to live here, because it's a supported charity technically. But if we're making enough money from like a job, like full-time, flat out, you know, and we're racking up the money, then they would expect us to pay it. Yeah... It's not fair...It definitely does give me a little bit of discouragement [looking for work], you know, and kind of, I don't know, because I'm barely

surviving as it is, you know? I don't want to go into a full-time job and be expected to pay like two hundred and ninety pound for somewhere where I'm supposed to be living for free in the first place, you know? So yeah I would say it definitely does hold you back a little"
(Claire, 18)

A number of participants similarly thought that gaining full time employment would remove their financial safety net and were thus discouraged from applying for jobs as they thought it would place them in greater hardship. One mother living in hostel accommodation claimed she would be no better off with full- time employment:

"At the moment because I'm working part-time I'm not earning much, so yeah housing are paying [the rent]… I can't apply, because if I applied I have to pay here one, every week three hundred... So one thousand two hundred per month.... That's what we're saying about the system. They don't encourage people to work. Yes, they follow people to work, but at the same time they're not helping" (Fatima, mother)

She felt that if she were to take up full time employment the majority of the income would have to be put towards rent, without any benefit to the family and most of the mothers' hours spent working. This points to a need for young people and parents to receive guidance on navigating the benefits systems alongside taking up work opportunities. One young person demonstrated how homelessness directly affected her employability, the discrimination she suffered due to her status as homeless resulting in her being fired from her job with no support or notice period:

*"I got fired because I was homeless [laughs]. It's not really a laughing matter but, I don't know, I think it was around the times that I was about to go into [yp support org] but yeah around that time I was basically waitressing for a place down the road, and, I don't know, someone said that I smelt … because I hadn't showered in like a week or two because I was homeless, you know? All I had was my uniform and the clothes on my back...And that was it. And yeah, they didn't like offer me any help or anything, even though I did tell them that I was homeless, you know? They kind of just like blankly stared at me and just kind of told me to get the f*** out of the shop. So I said okay, and then I got fired, so yeah it was pretty crap."* (Claire, 18)

8.7. Health

8.7.1 Mental health

All participants noted the impact of homelessness and housing insecurity on their mental health, which varied according to circumstance: *"I was a full emotional wreck, I used to lock myself in my room and not come out, I used to lock myself in the flat"* (Luke, 20). Young people's experiences were often characterised by uncertainty as to where they may be staying next, both short and long term.

"Not knowing where you are going - It's definitely scary not knowing where you're going to go. I think that's definitely where a lot of mental health issues come in, you know, whenever you're growing up and you're not sure what the next thing is, you know? It does terrify younger people I would say.....because, now I could deal with it, you know, if I were my age now back then I would've been able to deal with it, but not back then, no, not as a kid." (Claire, 18)

Such circumstances caused feelings of worry, anxiety and depression. One young person commented that even when on the housing waiting list, the feeling of waiting got them down, made them feel fed up and isolated; despite being in receipt of some level of support young people were often not informed about when or where they might be moving, hearing nothing for long periods of time and

then having to deal with last-minute, abrupt transitions that left them feeling overwhelmed. The feeling of 'limbo' and uncertainty was particularly acute for those sofa surfing, knowing that there was no chance to settle or obtain any permanence.

"I feel like it was really affecting my mental health because I felt like I was sofa surfing, I felt like there wasn't a place where I was staying because I was always moving my stuff" (Ella, 19)

This was also compounded by the anxiety of knowing that they were staying at the generosity of others, the thought that a disagreement may result in them losing the roof over their head was a constant source of stress and worry. Furthermore, limbo and uncertainty left young people unable to plan for the future, *"it's difficult to plan your life not knowing where you are going to be, you don't know you're going to get a house you want and when"* (Liam, 20). In contrast, one young person described how much her mental health improved upon being able to settle into a place of her own that was suited to her needs.

"I was on top of the world, I was so happy because I finally felt like I could just settle somewhere again after so long like because I really didn't enjoy having to jump from house to house and be in somebody else's bedroom…I've just felt a lot happier. I may not have had everything that I used to have and all the luxuries but like I was just happy that I had my own wee space like." (Ella, 19)

Young people also described the transitions out of care as being hard on their mental health. Where there may have been greater structure and a more family-oriented atmosphere, there was not sufficient support in place to fill the gap upon leaving: *"I was really missing my foster family, you know, I'd been with them for 11 years and all of a sudden I wasn't. So I was really sad about that, I still missed them loads"* (Ella, 19).

This was also accompanied by greater personal responsibility when moving into more independent situations, which some young people felt ill equipped to deal with emotionally (Luke, 20).

Families' experiences were also marked by mental ill health as a result of their housing situations. Families seeking asylum spoke of how the conditions in hotels were a major source of stress and concern: *"That's why in your mental it will be difficult for you, because all the time just thinking about your interview, your children, the life what you're living here, so to make you stress more than normal"* (Abid, father). The toll that the poor living conditions had taken on the health of their children, the lack of engagement by healthcare professionals, and the additional stress of waiting for status decisions combined to create extremely stressful conditions for families.

With concern to eviction, one family's experiences illustrated the impact such processes had on the children's mental wellbeing.

"We got the eviction notice at four o'clock on Wednesday the sixteenth of March telling us we had to be out by Friday the eighteenth of March. Now can you imagine the stress?... Saint Patrick's Day. It was four o'clock when I got it, so I phoned the Housing Executive, like literally as soon as I opened the letter I phoned the Housing Executive and I said 'what do I do?' Did anybody want to talk to me? No, they wanted to go home because it was Saint Patrick's Day and they wanted to be on their holibobs. So they told me to phone first thing on Friday morning, which I did, and seven people spoke to me, seven people. And I said …what do I do? Me and my daughter were emptying this place out, because we didn't know if they were going to come in with bailiffs. We didn't know what to expect. We had no idea. It caused, she started taking, she'd been so good and she started taking

her panic attacks and everything. I had to get her readmitted… to [children's mental health service], you know? And she'd been doing really well, and that just completely tipped her over the edge again." (Jennifer, mother)

While her daughter had been responding to mental health intervention, the family having escaped a situation of domestic abuse, the stress and upheaval of eviction directly triggered a regression and a need for further mental health intervention. After such trauma the family valued safety and stability, both of which were undermined by the eviction, with the mother noting, *"when you've been in a controlling relationship and then you come and you think you're going to be away from that and you're going to be safe, it felt like you were back in it, you know?"* (Jennifer, mother).

8.7.2 Physical health

The impacts of homelessness on young people's physical health was noted by some participants, such as weight loss, poor hygiene and fatigue. One young person described the short-and-long-term effects of sleeping on the street.

"Whenever I was homeless like there was times where I couldn't feel my body and it was like physically numb for days on end, you know? Because like there was no heat or circulation getting into my body, because of the weather. And yeah I would definitely say I became more like fatigued after that. You know, I wasn't getting up... yeah I would definitely say my physical health became like an all-time low after that.... I have higher blood pressure now, due to paranoia and all that stuff, and just because of me living out on the streets" (Claire, 18)

This in turn affected self-esteem, and as young people gained more housing stability, there was a growing desire to improve their physical health and feel *"more like themselves"* after periods of poor health brought on by malnourishment and addiction (Luke, 20).

Families' greatest concern with regard to physical health stemmed from the poor conditions that were ubiquitous across the spectrum of temporary accommodation. For example, one mother in a single let described the mould in her daughter's room: *"her entire wall was green"* (Jennifer, mother). When she became sick with COVID she became increasingly concerned for her daughter's health, which deteriorated due to the poor living conditions. One mother in hostel accommodation noted a lack of proper washing facilities for her and her 10 year-old son, an ongoing issue with the shower meant that they had to use the tap to wash, and her son had developed eczema due to the cold and unhygienic conditions (Fatima, mother).

All of the asylum-seeking families interviewed expressed considerable concern about how the living conditions were affecting the health of their children; *"the children are sick"* (Faiz, father). Interviewees attested that the hotel food provided was insubstantial, of poor quality, and ill-suited to young children, so much so that their children were refusing to eat and were beginning to feel the physical effects of malnourishment.

"My daughters had an anaemia because they couldn't feed very well, so they weren't stand and walk. [daughter] she was sleeping all the time, she can't, she couldn't stay, she 'oh mum I feel dizzy', like this, and she felt in a depression. She could, when we walking in the street she can't walk until five minutes. Her legs were painful" (Majeda, mother)

Upon raising this, first with a GP and then directly with the hotel, one family was told *"we cannot do anything to you... and [housing management company for asylum seekers] employ, she told me 'force your daughter to eat'. I told her 'can you force a child to eat?"* (Faiz, father). Another father spoke of how his request for *"special baby milk"* that had been prescribed by the doctor for his infant was denied (Abid, father).

Others families attested that when complaints were raised to the hotel about the food upon the advice of medical professionals, parents were met with intimidation. This was despite being presented with medical proof that a pregnant mother's dietary needs weren't being met, which was exacerbating her diabetes, putting her and her unborn child at risk.

"And then they ask her what's the type of food they are eating and blah blah blah, and then when he complain about the food in the hotel, just write report the hospital, write the report and they send maybe for the immigrant, and then they ask him here 'why you said there is not good food? Why you complain about that?" (Abid, father)

8.8 Safety

8.8.1 Unsafe situations and relationships

Several young people noted the impact of unstable and unsafe relationships developed as a result of their precarious housing circumstances. One young person in supported accommodation commented on how associating with peers in similar circumstances could exacerbate issues related to addiction and antisocial behaviour.

"Just the temptation of being on it with my so-called friends, at that time. It was better than waking up and going and having to do a day's work and all that carry on. Most people were like that. Ah I'm not going to work or I'm not going to tech or training the day, I'm just gonna sit here and get on it." (Luke, 20)

A young person made similar assertions about her time in a children's care home, the increased contact with other young people in situations of precarity led to *"a lot of dangerous situations, like prostituting and selling myself to older men and stuff like that, and stealing a lot of things"* (Claire, 18). Similar experiences occurred in stints at the family home, when some young people may have had to return temporarily due to a lack of other options, exposing them to the potential for violence. For example, one young person detailed how he got caught up in drinking and anti-social behaviour with his father, leaving him feeling afraid and unsafe when they began receiving threats from the neighbours: .

"when I was living with my da he's an alcoholic... we just sat there getting pissed and pissed. It ended up the boys and all were wanting to come down and shoot us and all and we were causing some amount of trouble... It got to the point where the sofa and all was stuck down the bottom of the stairs because we didn't know who was coming for us, we didn't know if the door was gonna get put up the hall and all and we were scared to go out." (Luke, 20)

Several experienced violence directly from parents when having to return to the family home, further putting their safety at risk.

"Like [mum] was really heavily drinking at the time so she was drunk all the time and she just didn't remember anything and she was causing rows and trying to get violent." (Ella, 19)

Indeed, as a result of such situations some young people took deliberate steps to distance themselves from particular relationships that they felt had impacted them negatively, including friends and parents (addiction, contact with police, violence etc). Other young people described how sofa-surfing increased their risk to safety in contexts outside of their family, including experiences of sexual exploitation. Ava, for example, explained how a period of hidden homelessness just before her 18th birthday put her at significant risk of sexual exploitation as she sought out somewhere to stay by attending parties and relying on offers from friends or, at times, older men.

"I kind of put myself out there sometimes to stay in places… I wasn't doing too well and I was into drugs…a lot of men's houses and stuff if you get what I'm saying… So that would involve maybe like getting with someone, because I was partying a lot, or just going to parties, like literally I had so much contacts, like people who would party every night. Or people who just wanted someone to drink with… I would drink with them. And I got into some bad situations like… I always kind of have been taken advantage of by men." (Ava, 20)

8.8.2 Accommodation settings and staff

Young people and families felt concerned for their safety within their temporary accommodation settings. Several young people expressed a preference for being separated from older residents due to feeling unsafe around them, and having heard reports of inappropriate behaviour and sexual assault, one young woman noted an experience: *"it was an older man older than me (35), I was only like 18 at the time and he would have pressured me for money all the time saying give me this, give me that.'"* (Abi, 20). Another young person noted her hesitancy at going into emergency accommodation due to fear, preferring to sleep on the street than risk a hostel or going back to the family home, *"There was times where I did it, you know, to get away from scarier things, because I felt safer, you know? Mostly whenever it came to like hostels or going back with parents, you know?"* (Claire, 18). Ava further described how a man was able to climb through her window in a hostel at one point and, having previously been threatened out of her social housing, she *"didn't really feel safe."*

Furthermore, asylum seeking families experienced threat and intimidation from hotel staff, especially if they made complaints about their living conditions, such as the poor quality food.

"The biggest threat from the staff of the hotel. They, if they hate you or something they always make [inaudible], they always not hesitate about oppress on you... they always call, the [housing management company for asylum seekers] told them 'this guy has complained on you, so take revenge on him." (Faiz, father)

8.9 Summary and rights implications

The impacts of living in homeless and insecure contexts are wide-ranging in the lives of children, young people and families, going beyond considerations of adequacy of various living situations. The impacts span across a number of domains in children's and young people's lives and raise several concerns in relation to their, and their family's, rights.

In the realisation of children's right to housing, the CRC recognises rendering the corresponding assistance to parents as essential (Articles 18 and 27). The responsibilities of the family more generally are recognised in the Preamble where the UNCRC states that:

'… the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community. Recognizing that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding' (UNCRC, 1989).

Family life was severely impacted by the experiences of homelessness and housing insecurity recounted by participants. The need to return to a family member's home – a young person returning to a parent or parents with children availing of grandparent support – often provoked tense, and sometimes violent, interactions. On the other hand, where young

people, for example, were able to maintain tenancies independently, the potential to restore family relationships was stronger as long as they were not placed in remote locations which could jeopardise sibling contact and relationships. Families staying in temporary accommodation perhaps recounted the most severe impacts on family life with the impact of living in overcrowded contexts with shared rooms compromising children's right to privacy (Article 16, UNCRC), most notably experienced by families seeking asylum who had been placed in hotels. Families also suffered disruption to their usual routines and their autonomy in relation to family life was restricted. A number spoke of limited quality time where space did not allow families to come together in the home, most notably at meal times.

A key issue for children was the impact that living in temporary accommodation had on their social lives and ability to see their friends. Being placed in a location far from their local community and/or school restricted opportunities for socialising within their peer network whilst hostel rules or the embarrassment of the state of temporary accommodation rendered friends visiting them at home impossible. A small number of participants also spoke of the impact of having to move location on their ability to practice their religion which was largely intertwined with their social life, whilst families in hotels faced challenges in adhering to fasting for Ramadan due to meal restrictions (Articles 14 and 30, UNCRC). Opportunities for play and leisure (Article 31, UNCRC) were limited within temporary accommodation in particular due to lack of space and facilities; this was particularly acute for families in hotel accommodation. For all, restrictions on play and leisure opportunities was exacerbated by the financial challenges in accessing other forms of leisure.

The right to education was proclaimed by Article 26 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR). It is also protected by Article 13(1) ICESCR which requires States Parties to ensure that primary education is 'compulsory and available free to all' and for secondary education to be made 'generally available and accessible to all' but not compulsory. A child's right to education is further reiterated in Article 28 of the UNCRC. The CESCR has identified 'availability' and 'accessibility' as core aspects of the right to education. It states that educational institutions and programmes should be accessible to everyone, especially the most vulnerable groups, without discrimination on any of the prohibited grounds. Children faced challenges in accessing education as a result of having to move away from their community to access accommodation with the lengthening of travel times and, as a result, increasing costs. Children in asylum-seeking families sometimes went several months without accessing education due to lack of available school spaces or difficulties in travelling to those schools that could take them. The inadequacy of accommodation, particularly in relation to space and provision of furniture also raised concerns of children's ability to engage in study, some having to remain in school to avail of study space.

Parents spoke of perceived barriers to (re)entering into employment that were associated with their housing situations, raising, again, implications for the State's obligations under Articles 18 and 27, UNCRC. Returning to employment was hindered by location, the duration of time away from work, the challenges of retraining within the confines of inadequate accommodation and a reluctance to leave children alone in temporary accommodation. There were also concerns in relation to the impact of taking up employment on benefits payments and requirements to pay rent, issues which both young people and parents required guidance on to facilitate a return to employment.

Article 12 ICESCR recognises the ‘right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health’ with a child’s right to health reiterated in Article 24, UNCRC. The analysis demonstrated that living in homeless and insecure contexts can severely impact upon both physical and mental health. Physically, participants had experienced weight loss, anaemia, fatigue and struggled to maintain good hygiene practices in certain contexts. Conditions of some housing also raised concerns in relation to living in damp and mouldy conditions. The impact on mental health was also evident, in particular associated with the stress of temporary living situations, not knowing where they would move to next, the pressure of making the ‘right’ decision for families, stress of (potential) eviction and the challenges of transitioning out of care. The effects of this were compounded, for young people in particular, by a lack of provision of mental health services in the community and at a sufficiently early juncture in their lives.

All children have the right to protection from ‘all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse’ (Article 19(1), UNCRC). The UNCRC also explicitly notes States Parties’ obligation to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse (Article 34). The definition of ‘violence’ is broad and is not dependent on frequency, severity of harm or intent to harm (UN, 2011). It includes, among other things, physical, psychological or emotional neglect; neglect of children’s physical or mental health; physical and mental violence (including exposure to domestic violence), sexual abuse and exploitation, self-harm, violence through information and communications technologies and institutional and system violations of child rights (including a failure to identify, prevent and react to violence against children) (UN, 2011). The negative impact of violence has implications for other rights including the child’s right to life, survival and development (Article 6) and children’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development (Article 27(1)). The analysis demonstrates that children’s and young people’s safety was threatened in a number of ways. Whilst children may have left homes where they experienced violence and abuse, not all were protected from violence as they entered care contexts, some noting exposure to danger and prostitution whilst in children care homes. A need to return to a parent’s home at specific junctures also increased their risk of physical and emotional harm, some reporting the negative impact of tense interactions, including violence. Efforts to escape such contexts increased risks to safety for some, young women in particular reporting sexual exploitation as they attempted to navigate periods with no housing. Participants also attempted to manage their safety by avoiding certain accommodation types whilst others, particularly asylum speakers, spoke of threats and intimidation experienced from accommodation staff.

9. HOPES AND MESSAGES FOR THE FUTURE

9.1 Future housing

The following section explores the future hopes and aspirations of children, young people and families facing homelessness and housing insecurity. It demonstrates that the hopes of those who have navigated the housing support system are similar to those of families who have arrived in Northern Ireland seeking asylum. The priority is a secure and sustainable housing solution that will facilitate positive transitions in other areas of their lives, such as education and employment. Additionally, some families seeking asylum hoped for reunification with their children who have not yet travelled to Northern Ireland.

When asked about their future aspirations, respondents raised a number of goals. Primarily, they expressed the desire to establish a home, live independently and with a sense of belonging. The location of the home was important to some respondents, who spoke of a desire to be nearby their community and essential support mechanisms, including education, employment, healthcare and family. Liam, for example, spoke of the desire to have a flat closer to his friends and education provider where, *"I'd just be a lot happier… I wouldn't have all the stress and all of like living with my mum."* The desire to overcome housing difficulties and arrive in a property where they could put down roots was pronounced amongst participants, with Claire saying this was key to her future planning, whilst Natalie spoke of a sense of feeling unsettled in temporary accommodation.

"I hope they could give us a house soon so we can settle down, because as long as we're here, even if we stay for ten years, you will still know you're in temporary accommodation" (Natalie, mother).

Similarly, Julia suggested that she was not too concerned with their future home's location, instead focusing on leaving supported accommodation to feel a sense of progress, *"as long as I'm out and I like the place and it's close enough to, like into town or near to my mother, I'm okay sure."* (Julia, 19)

However, participants with school-aged children said it was important that their future property is nearby their children's schools and peer network. In speaking about her two daughters, one mother said that she wanted to see her children being able to play with their friends and be able to walk to school, a sentiment reflected by her daughter, *"I want it to be near my school and like near my friends' house so I can go and play"* (Thea, 15, daughter). This sentiment was echoed by another family who are currently seeking asylum. They pinpointed the need for an area close to their children's schools as essential. The need for capacity for play was also apparent in discussions with Caroline, who said that, alongside being nearby her GP, with access to shopping, she wanted a garden *"for the child to just run about and play"* (Caroline, mother). The need for open space was also discussed by one mother who described her aspirations to grow herbs and plants, *"just a wee, even something small, you know? Somewhere I can sit out in the sun"* (Anna, mother).

Ava expressed concerns that her future accommodation needs must be met through planning alongside the support service she currently avails of.

"I want me and [supported accommodation] to be able to plan what it's going to look like, so when I get the final okay, 'yes, you know, your daughter can move in with you', obviously then I'm going to start planning to move out. You know, what work's going to look like, because I want to keep working. It's really good for my head. And then working out a routine with her and her dad. But housing-wise, yeah just I need people to really work with me and figure out a good area, because I'm sick of moving around and I want to find somewhere where I can just make home when I'm ready to make it home." (Ava, 20)

There is an apparent need for strategy when planning future accommodation, with this participant explicitly recognising the desire to no longer live in unstable circumstances.

9.2 Meeting housing aspirations

In order for these future housing aspirations to appear tangible, a number of respondents highlighted the need for increased and diverse housing provision that can meet a broad range of needs in their advice to decision makers. Two young people (Liam and Jaydon) pointed towards wasteland in their local areas where they felt that housing could and should be built. Whilst Ella pointed out that there should be *"a lot more private rentals"*, others like Julia highlighted the need for well-rounded supported living arrangements that can cater to needs and allow people to progress.

"Obviously with the hostels and then the supported accommodation, that they're able to go in there, start from there, and then work their way up through different services to get back into a home, I think that would be a lot better." (Julia, 19)

John supported these calls but added advice to decision makers that more supported accommodation should be provided that solely caters to young people facing homelessness. They expressed the desire to be kept separate from adults who, although in a similar position, have a different set of needs. Alongside these calls for increased supported accommodation, young people advised that there is as a lack of additional support when in some of these settings. Luke, for instance, said that such accommodation should provide more information on which agencies to contact about issues such as mental health and employability skills, stating, *"it's not just about giving them a place to stay, it's all that around them."* Luke felt that this support should also be transitional and that steps should be put in place to help young people cope with living independently after their time in supported accommodation, raising concerns around a lack of information around sexual health for those facing homelessness and housing insecurity. Julia reflected this advice, positing that greater support with substance abuse and mental health issues was at the heart of the problem for those facing homelessness. She outlined the impact of these issues by stating, *"obviously when you are so low that you don't care, you don't care if you're on the street. You don't care if you're alive almost."* Luke suggested that these needs could be met earlier, saying that addiction support, *"should be going into schools and saying who they are and what they do etc. Not just for younger people but older people too, like sixth form and upper sixth."* This presents an opportunity to challenge these issues sooner for young people, reducing the risk of homelessness and housing insecurity as a result.

9.3 Hopes for stability through education and employment

Another hope for the future shared by several participants was the desire to attain stability through education and employment. Multiple young people who participated in the study said that further education was a crucial element of their future aspirations. Three respondents (Elena, Patrick, Ella) all spoke of aspiring to attend university, whilst Liam noted that going to college was important for him moving forward, *"to get into the flat, go to the tech and do the electrician course, and just be an electrician and live out of my flat, and just try and work my way up."* (Liam, 17)

This speaks to the aspirations that young people have maintained throughout the adversity their housing situation has brought them, and by supporting these future aspirations it may be possible to sustain permanent housing solutions. This was also displayed in one family where the older child had maintained exemplary grades throughout time spent in temporary accommodation and maintained hopes of working in animation.

Employment was also discussed by John, who suggested aspirations of working in ICT, and Abi, who is currently also studying in college having gone back to education after time away whilst facing housing difficulties. One mother also discussed how her current housing situation has prevented her from working as a nurse and expressed hopes of returning to work. However, she spoke of a potential barrier to this in the form of the cost of privately renting, which would significantly impact on her ability to cope with the cost of living referring to this as *"a Catch-22 situation."*

9.4 Taking young people's views seriously

Alongside aspiring to obtain secure employment and access to education, young people in the study advised that they should be listened to and respected. Liam reflected upon how being under eighteen was a major barrier in accessing housing, despite feeling that many facing homelessness are in this position: "*There's no difference between an eighteen-year-old to like really need somewhere to stay and a seventeen-year-old to really need somewhere to stay."* Ella had a similar opinion when reflecting upon her own experience, feeling that she was discriminated against due to her young age.

"I wasn't taken seriously because I was too young to have a flat and they wouldn't give me the flat, when I was trying to apply for different flats and stuff. So, I feel like a lot of people shouldn't really take the piss out of people because they're younger." (Ella, 19)

Ella also advised that additional advocacy services should be put in place for young people facing these difficult circumstances, suggesting that she felt her voice was not heard. This was reflected by Julia who spoke about a lack of information on how to prevent homelessness and housing insecurity. She stated, *"it was never told to you how you could either prevent yourself from going homeless if you were in a dire situation or if you ended up in that situation what services, what you could do to get out of it."* This reflects a need for young people to, not only be given a voice when decisions are made about their housing situation, but also to be better informed about what services are in place to help them in circumstances that may lead to homelessness.

9.5 Future aspirations of asylum seekers

The families seeking asylum interviewed largely had the same goals and aspirations as other participants facing homelessness and housing insecurity, with one mother positing her desire to retrain as a child psychologist once granted asylum. However, prominent amongst two families was the desire to reunite with their children. One mother and her two daughters expressed the longing they feel to be reunited with their siblings who are still in the Middle East and who they have been detached from since coming to Northern Ireland. This was also the case for two parents who discussed their desire to be reunited with their four daughters in the Middle East.

"To be honest he didn't think about the space at the moment. Just he likes to bring his children… Because all children are small children. The oldest one is ten years old, so he miss them a lot, you know?... Just he wants to see them, that's it. He doesn't care about the place, big place, small house, you know?" (Abid, father via translator)

In addition, the need to regain privacy was also a recurrent theme amongst asylum seekers living in hotel accommodation, with one mother stating, "*just, she needs a house as quickly as she can, make a home, it's her privacy and cooking for the children. They will get a normal life"* (Ruhena, mother). This speaks to the unique situation asylum seeking

families currently find themselves in within hotel accommodation. However, it is important to note that their ambitions are ultimately the same as many other participants in this study. Faiz sums this up in stating,

“All the families came here for their children. We escape from our country not afraid ourselves, we’re afraid about our children… You see that. So, we hope they be good in school and move on and go to university and make their life better. We hope so.” (Faiz, father).

9.6 Meeting the needs of asylum seekers

Calls for increased housing provisions were also supported by those seeking asylum. Two parents felt that the decision-making process for asylum seekers could be faster and advised that greater steps need to be taken to reunite families. Stating that this was their main piece of advice, they made it clear that seeing their children again was the most important thing for them. In addition to this, asylum seekers said that improving the food for those living in hotels was of paramount importance. One mother suggested that this could be offset by providing small kitchen areas for those who have lived in a hotel for a long period of time, whilst her children pointed out that they just want a place where they can play.

A father seeking asylum advised that more accountability on behalf of the housing company running hotel accommodation is required, feeling that barriers put in place by this company meant that they were unable to voice concerns. Alongside this, there were calls for increased advocacy for asylum seekers and better support mechanisms to help them with everyday issues, such as the recurring theme of poor and uneven access to healthcare cards and children’s access to education.

10. CONCLUSION

Whilst the true extent and nature of homelessness and housing insecurity in NI is unknown given the hidden context of much homelessness and gaps in data, available data highlights the significance of the issue for children, young people and families in Northern Ireland, particularly in relation to the increasing numbers placed in forms of temporary accommodation. The analysis in the preceding sections has provided insight into the experiences of children, young people and families living in a range of accommodation types or living situations, from rough sleeping and sofa surfing, to various forms of temporary accommodation as well as entry into potentially more stable forms of housing such as private rented accommodation and social housing. Some groups, however, are not represented, including children and young people with a physical disability, young people on release from detention and unaccompanied young people seeking asylum.

Participants' accounts and experiences differed. Whilst some had spent considerable time in some accommodation types, others, particularly care experienced young people, recounted constant movement between the most unstable living situations, including periods of hidden homelessness and rough sleeping. A small number recounted successfully accessing social housing after a relatively short period of time but, more commonly, participants spoke of long periods on NIHE waiting lists for suitable accommodation that met their, or their children's, needs. Common to all accounts, however, even amongst those who had exited homelessness, was a sense of insecurity and fragility regarding their position.

Provision of temporary accommodation is necessary as an interim measure before the NIHE can offer a permanent housing solution to families and young people. Recent strategies recognise the need for 'rapid rehousing' to ensure that placement in temporary accommodation is as short as possible (NIHE, 2020a; 2021). The analysis illustrates, however, that the concerns expressed by the CRC in relation to the placement of homeless families and children in temporary accommodation remain (UN CRC, 2016). Families and children reported spending a number of years in temporary forms of accommodation and described the impact of constant insecurity and uncertainty about their living situation. Placement in temporary accommodation also involved substantial upheaval as they were often required to move away from formal and informal services and supports.

Despite a policy context that recognises the vulnerability of young people leaving care to homelessness and the importance of educating young people to equip them with life skills to prevent homelessness (NIHE, 2022a), a number of young people described limited access to information about their accommodation options when transitioning from care. This resulted in living situations which exposed them to risk, either having returned to the family home unwillingly or relying on strategies of survival that threatened their safety. Most care-experienced young people had accessed forms of supported living for young people and reported their satisfaction with an increased sense of independence and safety. They highlighted the value of assistance in accessing accommodation, as well as practical and emotional support when moving into supported accommodation and during the period of their contract. However, breakdown in such arrangements, uncertainty as they approached the end of a two-year contract, or the perceived accelerated nature of the transition into independent accommodation, were notable sources of stress for young people.

The process of accessing social housing or private rented accommodation, for both young people and families, was prolonged and presented many barriers, including direct and indirect discrimination in relation to age, disability and nationality/community background. Accessing potentially more stable forms of accommodation required support and advice from experienced professionals, whilst many shared their frustrations with the points system which did not recognise particular needs within the family. Transitions into secure housing were more sustainable when participants were satisfied with the location in terms of access to local amenities, play opportunities, proximity to informal supports, familiarity and safety.

The need to assist individuals and families in the maintenance of tenancies has been recognised with the funding of the Supporting People Programme in recent years. A number of participants spoke of the benefits of floating supports in enhancing their stability and the sustainability of their positive housing transitions including the development of budgeting skills, financial support, provision of basic necessities and furnishings, and advocacy. Notable gaps related to access to mental health services and earlier intervention for those with addiction issues.

Human rights are interdependent; where a right is breached this impacts on the individual's enjoyment of other rights. The impact of homelessness and housing insecurity among participants was far broader than a lack of stable housing. Children, young people and parents reported impacts across a range of domains including family life, access to and experiences of education, physical and mental health, play and leisure opportunities, ability to maintain friendships and social networks or practice their faith. Parents also spoke of their inability to meet their children's needs and rights, not only in relation to housing but also nutrition and clothing. Families seeking asylum echoed a number of these impacts and further identified specific impacts of living long term in hotel accommodation, which was detrimental to family life and the health of their children. A lack of adequate housing has a profound impact on children's right to life survival and development (Article 6) and their ability to enjoy a range of rights.

10.1 (In)Adequate housing

The ICESCR outlines 'the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions' (Article 11). CESCR further expands, with essential tenets that comprise 'adequate' housing. These are considered below in the context of this study's findings, with recognition of the evolution of the meaning of these concepts in the 30 years since their adoption (Oren & Alterman, 2022).

- *Legal security of tenure* can include a variety of forms of tenure (e.g. public or private rental accommodation, owner-occupation and emergency housing) but all households should have a degree of security guaranteeing legal protection against forced eviction, harassment and other threats. The degree to which participants in the study enjoyed this security is questionable. Those in social housing and private rented accommodation, for example, spoke of the harassment and threats from "paramilitary" groups, neighbours and landlords which, on assessment of the risks to their safety, left some with no choice but to leave their home. Other threats were more subtle where those in temporary accommodation lived under the permanent threat that they could be asked to leave at any time. Across the sample, the fragility of living situations was evident regardless of accommodation types, as many spoke of the uncertainty of how long they would, or could, stay in a certain accommodation and where to, and when, they would have to move next.

- *Availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure* relates to those facilities essential for health, security, comfort and nutrition. On one level, these conditions were met in most living situations except, most apparently, in cases of rough sleeping where the ability to maintain good hygiene was compromised. Standards are not met where participants reported the lack of essential furnishings in the home, insufficient insulation to keep homes warm and no access to cooking or sanitation and washing facilities while waiting for repair requests to be addressed. Families living in hotels were perhaps most affected in this regard, with limited access to laundry facilities, no access to kitchen or cooking facilities, no means of food storage and their families suffering significantly in relation to nutrition.

- *Affordability* means that housing related costs must be commensurate with income levels and that those unable to attain affordable housing receive housing subsidies. It also suggests that standards of housing are attainable at a price or a rent which does not impose an unreasonable burden on household incomes (Oren and Alterman, 2022). Furthermore, costs associated with housing should not compromise the household's ability to meet other basic needs. Most families and young people were in receipt of financial assistance for housing and housing related costs. Those in private rented accommodation, and those seeking private rented accommodation, however, spoke of the financial challenges as housing subsidies did not appear to cover rising rental costs. Across all forms of accommodation households were struggling with other costs, particularly in the context of a cost of living crisis, with many unable to heat their homes, and to meet the household's basic needs in terms of food and toiletries.

- *Habitability* relates to the physical safety of the occupants and providing them with adequate space and protecting them from cold, damp and other potentially harmful conditions to inhabitants' health. Concerns regarding habitability existed across the range of accommodation types, including both temporary forms of accommodation and more secure tenures. Space was restricted in most forms of temporary accommodation, the effects most acutely experienced by siblings who shared rooms or whole families sharing one hotel room. Many also spoke of accommodation which was in a constant state of disrepair, insufficiently protected from damp and mould and permanently cold, exacerbated by the inability to meet the rising costs of heating homes.

- *Accessibility* means that the special housing needs of particular groups such as, for example, children, individuals with physical disabilities, and those with mental health diagnoses are taken into account. The study could not speak to the needs of some groups, such as those with physical disabilities, but did raise some concerns in relation to children with neurodisabilities and mental health diagnoses. Their particular needs were not recognised in the awarding of housing points nor in the allocation of housing which would require, for example, consideration of extra space and the inability of some children to share bedrooms with a sibling.

- *Location* of housing must take into account, access to employment options, health-care services, schools, childcare centres and other social facilities. Suitability of location varied across participants but their views were in line with standards of adequacy in that a good location put them close to schools, opportunities for (free) play and leisure, and healthcare, as well as close to family and friends for support. Problems arise when participants had little choice in their allocation of temporary housing or felt pressured to accept the first offer of social housing. Moving away from home neighbourhoods separated participants from important informal supports in friends and family, schools and employment. Asylum seekers in hotels spoke of hotels being in unsatisfactory locations with limited play opportunities and long distances to the nearest available schools. Location also raised other implications in relation to participants' safety, particularly where they were placed in unfamiliar areas. Concerns related to levels of crime and disturbance, exposure to drug use/dealing, police presence, 'paramilitary' threats as well as racial intimidation. Participants suggested that being placed in familiar locations would have negated much of these safety concerns.

- *Cultural adequacy* pays attention to how housing can enable the expression of cultural identity. The CESCR focuses on the way housing is constructed, materials used and policies supporting construction. The data in this study illustrated how forms of housing limited freedom for cultural expression where, for example, accommodation did not allow the coming together of friends and family to celebrate significant events in the cultural calendar.

The CESCR emphasise that "adequate housing" is not merely having a roof over one's head but the "right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity" (UN CESCR, 1991:para 7) and thus attention to all essential tenets of adequate housing are crucial. Boyle and Flegg (2022) summarise the nature of the State's obligation to realise the right to adequate housing as threefold: to respect, protect and fulfil the right. The duty to respect requires the state to refrain from taking any action that results in reducing the right; the duty to protect requires the state to prevent others from interfering with enjoyment of the right (this includes private third parties such as private landlords); and, the duty to fulfil requires the State to 'facilitate, promote and provide the right to housing by taking the necessary steps to ensure the right can be enjoyed by all to the maximum of its available resources' (Boyle and Flegg, 2022: 4).

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

NICCY's recommendations to Government in full.

Adequacy of housing provision

1. The DfC and NIHE must work to ensure that there is adequate provision of housing for children, young people and families, including accommodation tailored to the needs of young people.

2. The NIHE must ensure that all accommodation allocated to children, young people and families (including temporary accommodation and social housing) is maintained to an appropriate standard.

Rights compliant policy and planning

3. The DfC and NIHE must ensure that they have taken account of the rights of children and young people through the use of Child Rights Impact Assessments when developing housing policy and solutions. This should include proactive engagement with children and young people, and a thorough assessment against the ICESCR standards as set out in this report.

4. The DfC and NIHE should amend the housing selection scheme so that it better meets the needs of children with disabilities, including neurodisabilities, through allocation of additional points.

5. The NIHE should provide young people with information about their rights, as well as their range of options regarding housing and accommodation in an accessible format.

Initial responses to homelessness

6. Trusts should conduct children in need assessments in relation to all 16 and 17 year olds who present as homeless, as outlined in the Children (NI) Order 1995

7. Trusts must never house young people under the age of 18 in bed and breakfast accommodation.

8. The NIHE must ensure that temporary accommodation provided to families must be of an adequate standard to enable the realisation of children's rights, including their rights to family life, privacy, education, health, play, leisure and social engagement (e.g. friends and peers). Families must only be placed in temporary accommodation for the shortest time possible. This is also the case for asylum seeking families provided accommodation by the Home Office.

9. Gaps in data must be addressed to inform planning of supports and services, and to facilitate targeted awareness raising of services among at risk groups. This includes data on the scale and nature of hidden homelessness among young people and the number of young people with disabilities and families with a child with disabilities presenting/accepted as homeless.

Coordinated service provision

10. The NIHE must work with housing providers and Policing and Community Safety Partnerships in every council area to ensure that all tenants feel safe in the communities that they live. This should include young people in hostel or B&B accommodation.

11. Statutory agencies should cooperate with each other and with voluntary organisations to provide holistic services to meet the assessed needs of young people in supported and other temporary accommodation, particularly with regard to their mental health, substance misuse, as well as life skills.

12. HSCTs and NIHE must ensure transitional support, including mentoring, is available to young people accessing their first tenancy for as long as they need it.

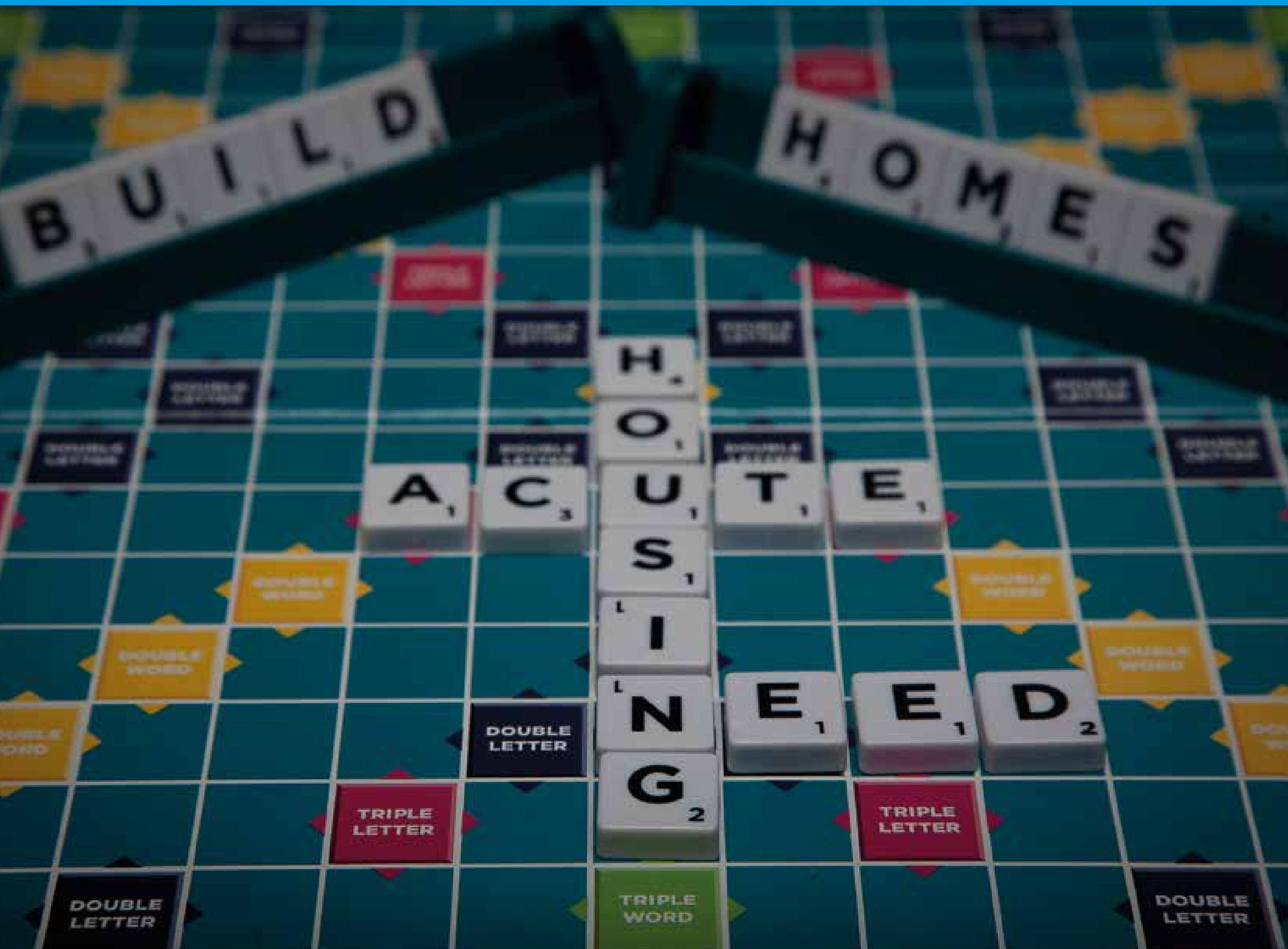
13. HSCT leaving and after care services should continue to proactively engage with young people who have left care and disengaged from services until their 21st birthday.

14. Young people in supported accommodation should be supported to transition to independent housing over a period of time, in line with their support needs and only once their new accommodation has been secured.

Families and young people with no recourse to public funds

15. The NI Government must, without further delay, implement the recommendations of NICCY's 'A Hostile Environment' report:
    a. Undertake work to identify how many children in NI are living in families with no recourse to public funds and publish this data.
    b. Develop clear pathways across and between agencies like Home Office and Health and Social Care agencies to ensure that children and families are referred as appropriate and that the needs and best interests of children are assessed as a matter of urgency.
    c. Address the needs of each child, particularly ensuring that they have access to the highest standard of health care, effective education and an adequate standard of living, and all other protections afforded by the UNCRC.[14]

[14] https://www.niccy.org/news/number-of-children-affected-by-immigration-rules-and-at-risk-of-destitution-in-ni-unknown/



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