



# A PLACE TO CALL HOME

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

## SUMMARY REPORT

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QUEEN'S  
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CHILDREN'S  
RIGHTS





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 6, 8, 9 & 11 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 is 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.

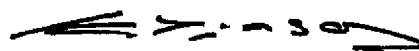
The report's authors have identified many of the challenges faced by children, young people and families but in many places they have highlighted excellent examples of support and care given often by NGOs.

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.

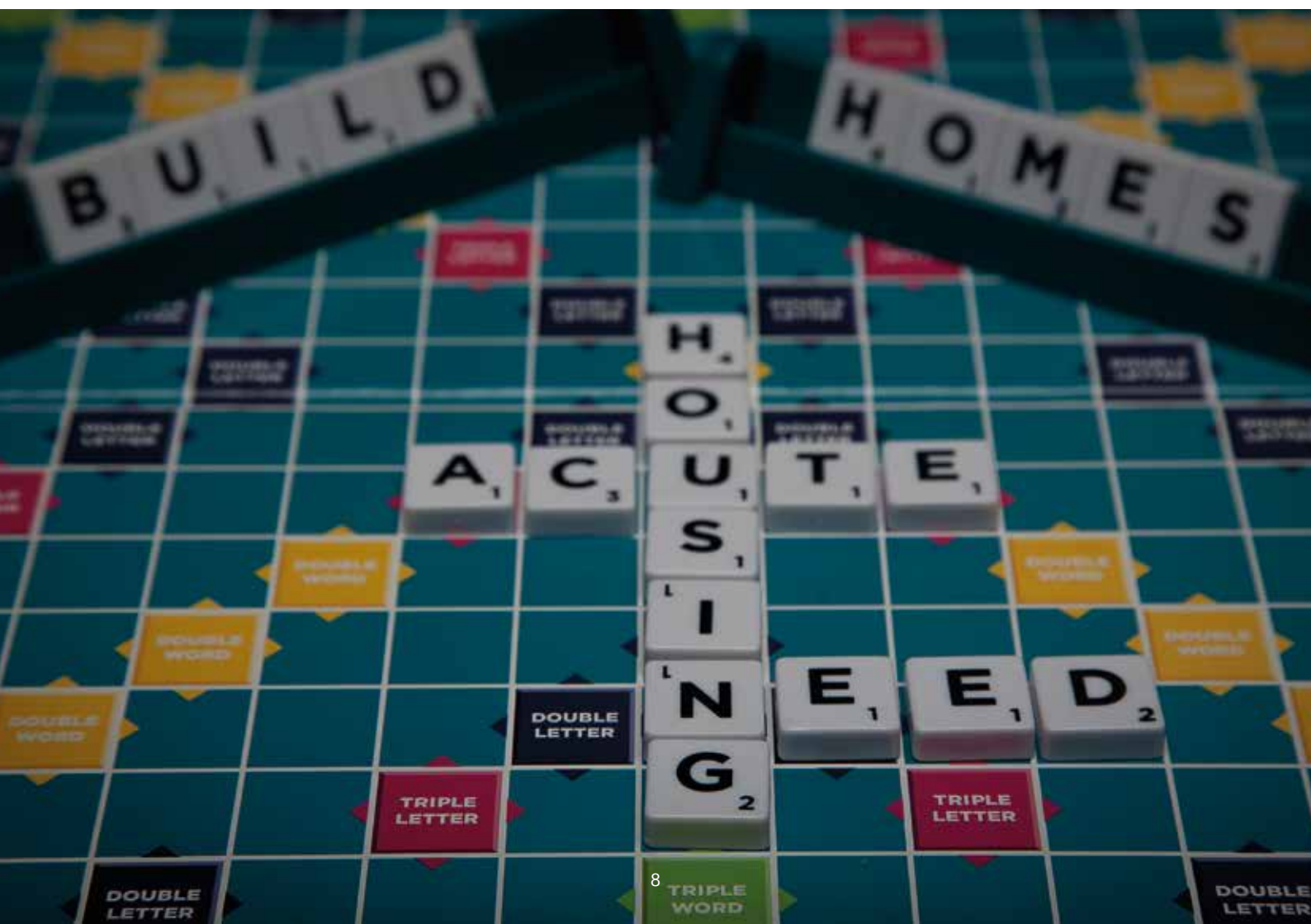
Thirty-two participants took part in in-depth interviews and included: fourteen parents of children aged 0-17; nine children aged 10-17 living in homeless or insecure contexts with a parent/guardian; and, nine young people aged 17-22 living independently from their parents/guardians, some of whom identified 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 contextualising 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.

*“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)

## 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 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.

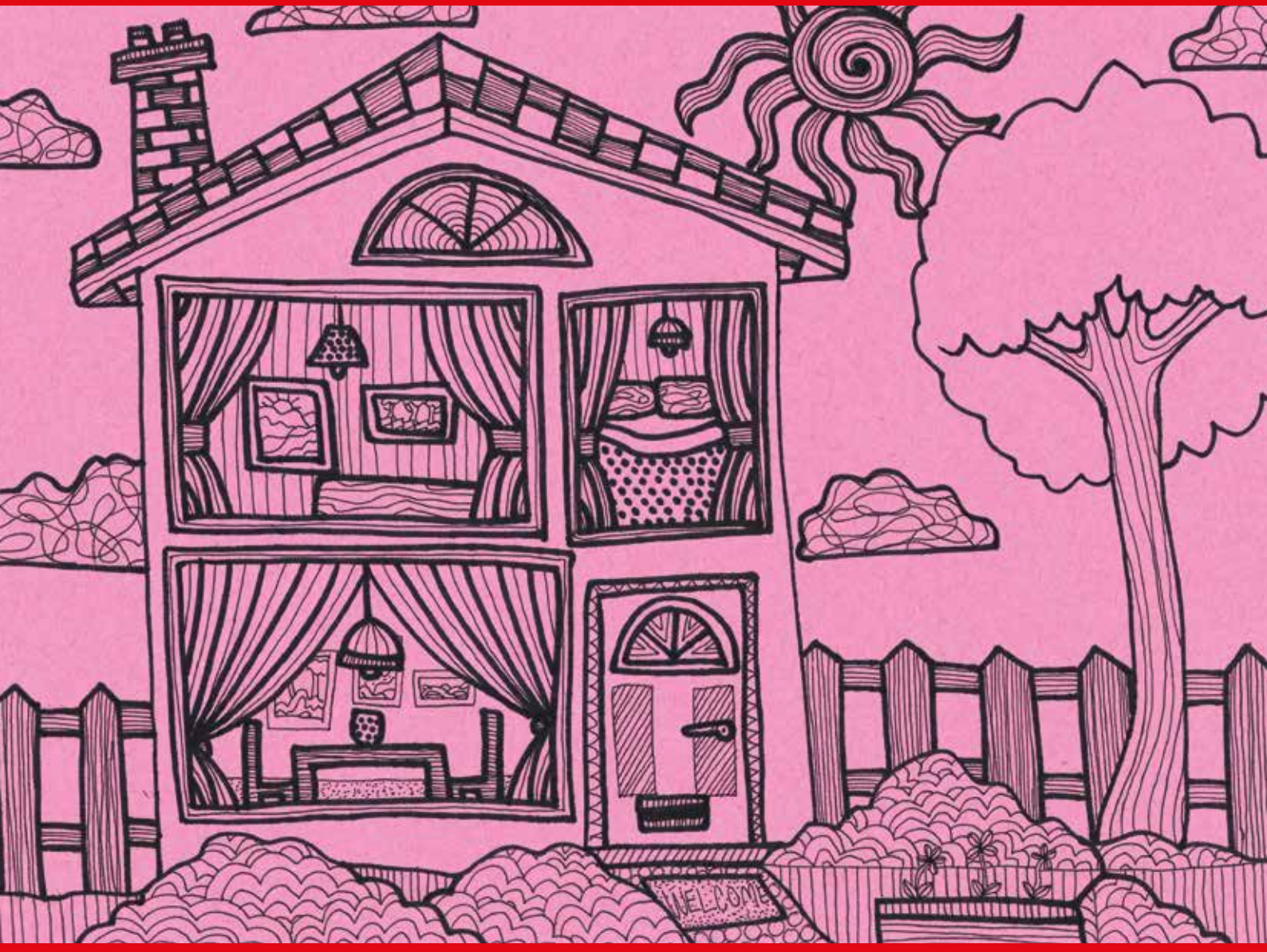
## Conclusion

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.



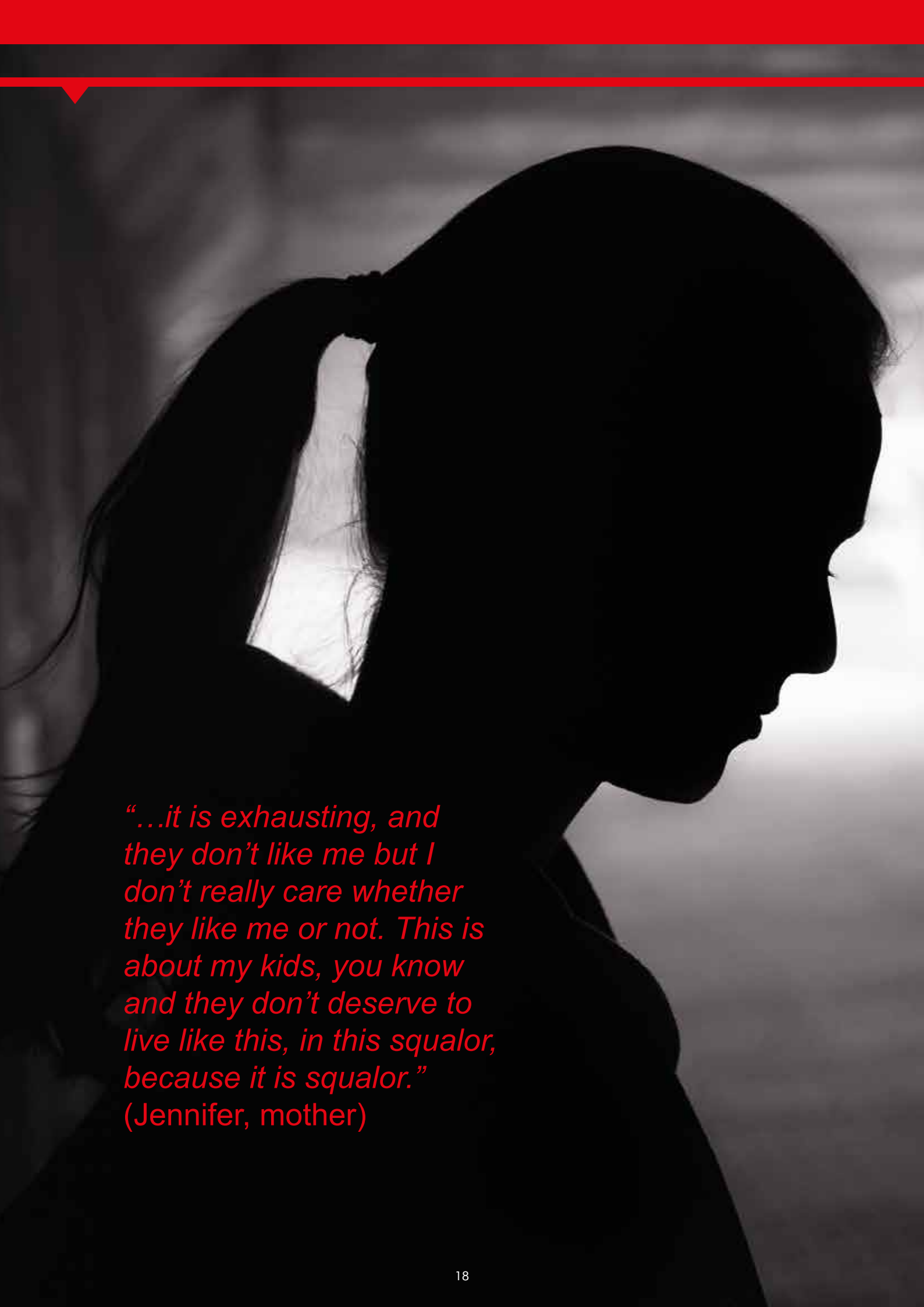
### **Coordinated service provision**

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.<sup>1</sup>

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



*“...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)*





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