



THE EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILIES FACING HOMELESSNESS

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CENTRE FOR
CHILDREN'S
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GLOSSARY

- ▶ **Temporary accommodation:** accommodation where people are placed while they are waiting for a permanent offer of housing.
- ▶ **Hostels:** self-contained units of accommodation such as grouped houses or flats. Some have communal areas and additional support for residents..
- ▶ **B&Bs:** Bed and Breakfast. A small lodging providing overnight accommodation and breakfast. Should only be used in exceptional circumstances and for a short period of time.
- ▶ **Temporary Private Single lets:** a private dwelling which is made available on a temporary basis to a homeless household while they are waiting for permanent rehousing. These dwellings are normally in the private rented sector.
- ▶ **Supported living:** accommodation where people can access services to help them live more independently (e.g life skills like cooking and budgeting), usually staffed 24/7.
- ▶ **Rough sleeping:** sleeping without adequate shelter, outside or in a place not designed for living.
- ▶ **Sofa-surfing:** staying temporarily with different friends or family when someone doesn't have their own place to stay.
- ▶ **Hidden homelessness:** people who are hidden from homelessness support services because they are dealing with the situation informally, like sofa surfing with family and friends.
- ▶ **Care experienced:** children and young people in care, on the edge of care or who have left care.
- ▶ **UNCRC:** United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, an international treaty that sets out children's rights.
- ▶ **ICESCR:** International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, an international treaty that set out the economic, social and cultural rights of all people.
- ▶ **Adequate housing:** a place to live that is safe, secure, in good condition and meets the needs of the people living there.
- ▶ **Paramilitaries:** Groups who unlawfully take justice/punishment/law into their own hands.
- ▶ **Social housing:** affordable housing provided for people by governments or housing associations.
- ▶ **Private rented accommodation:** accommodation available to rent from a private landlord.
- ▶ **Children's Rights:** Things children are entitled to and which parents, guardians and governments should ensure they have access to.



1. WHAT IS HOMELESSNESS?

Drawing above by a girl (15) who had been living in single let accommodation with her mum and two siblings for 18 months. This represents her ideal home.

Homelessness is more than just lacking shelter or sleeping on the streets. You can have accommodation and be homeless. It also includes:

- ▶ Living somewhere temporary (like **hostels**¹, **hotels** or **B&Bs**).
- ▶ Living in very poor conditions and being overcrowded.
- ▶ Living somewhere distant from services people need.
- ▶ Staying with family or friends (**'sofa-surfing'**) because there is nowhere else to go.
- ▶ Living somewhere insecure where there is no formal agreement like a contract.

Living in very poor or overcrowded conditions are all known as forms of **'hidden homelessness'** because people may be invisible to support services that could help them.

¹ Words in bold appear in the glossary with a definition.





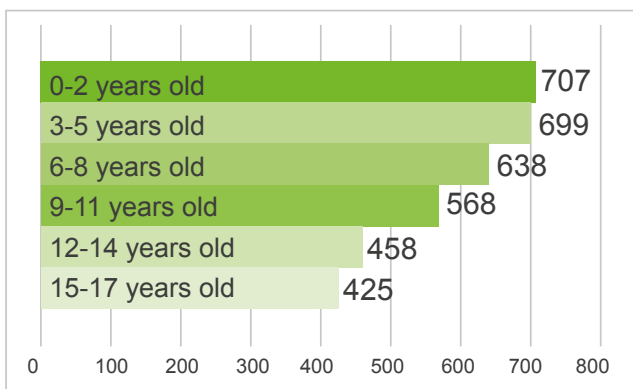
2. HOMELESSNESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

We will never know exactly how many children, young people or families are homeless in Northern Ireland (NI). That is because so much of homelessness is hidden, especially for young people and care-experienced young people.

When homeless, individuals and families can go to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) for help to access social housing. NIHE data tells us that nearly a third of homeless households have children aged under 18 living in them. In January – June 2022, households and families accepted as homeless in NI included 3,495 children. When waiting for NIHE to access housing, individuals and families can spend a long

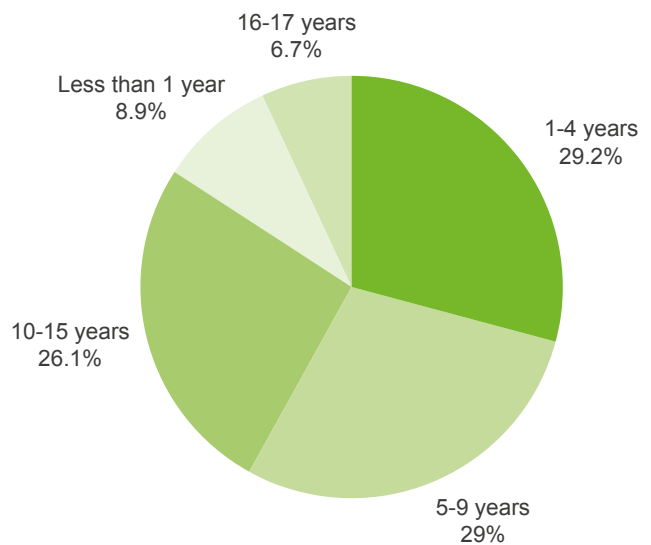
time on a waiting list before they get a home, it could be months or even years. While they are waiting, they are placed in **temporary accommodation** which can be **hostels, hotels, B&Bs** or a **single let** which they can use for a short time. Some people have said that temporary accommodation is not suitable for children because of the poor conditions. Despite this, the number of placements in temporary accommodation for families and young people aged 16-17 has increased in recent years. In July 2022, 3,913 children aged under 18 were living in temporary accommodation in NI, an increase from 2,433 in January 2019 (this includes children living with their families and young people aged 16-17 living independently).

Figure 1: Children from households Accepted as Statutorily Homeless (by age)



Source: DfC/NIHE/NISRA (2022) Northern Ireland Homelessness Bulletin January-June 2022. Belfast: DfC

Figure 2: Children in temporary accommodation by age (as of July 16th 2022)



Source: DfC/NIHE/NISRA (2022) Northern Ireland Homelessness Bulletin January-June 2022. Belfast: DfC



3. CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO HOUSING

3.1 What are rights?

All children have rights. These consider what is essential for children and young people, what they should have or be able to do.

Everyone under 18 years old has these rights.

Rights in the **UNCRC** relate to education, family life, health, protection from harm and the right to give opinions on decisions affecting your life. If you are homeless, you are still entitled to your rights.

3.2 What is the UNCRC?

Children's rights are found in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (**UNCRC**), an international treaty that sets them all out in writing. Children should be able to **access all their rights** in the **UNCRC** equally, no matter your age, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion or if you have a disability.

3.3 Article 27 UNCRC

Article 27 of the UNCRC says that every child should have an **adequate standard of living** – this includes having a place to live (housing). Article 27 says:

- ▶ Parents or others responsible for children have the **main responsibility** to ensure children have an adequate standard of living.
- ▶ The State should **provide assistance** to parents or guardians who aren't able to do this, such as financial support and access to necessities like food, clothes and housing.

3.4 International Covenant on Economic, Cultural and Social rights (ICESCR)

The **ICESCR** is another convention that speaks about **housing as a human right**. It tells us that all people – children and adults – have the right to **adequate housing**. This means:

- ▶ Just **'having a roof over your head' is not enough**.
- ▶ People should have a place to live that is **safe, secure, in good condition** and meets their needs.
- ▶ People should have **enough space, privacy and basic facilities** in their homes.
- ▶ Housing should be **affordable** for people depending on your income.
- ▶ People should have **easy access to services** they need like healthcare and school.





4. EXPERIENCES OF HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING INSECURITY

We spoke to 32 individuals who experienced homelessness and housing insecurity in NI. This included 14 parents and 18 children and young people aged 10-22. Some of these young people were living away from their families and had previously been in care. Other children and young people were living in homeless accommodation with parents.

The people we spoke to were living in a range of accommodation types including:

- ▶ **Family hostels**
- ▶ **Hotels**
- ▶ **B&Bs**
- ▶ **Supported accommodation for young people**
- ▶ **Temporary private single lets**
- ▶ **Social housing**
- ▶ **Private rented accommodation**

Even though some of these arrangements were meant to be temporary until they got permanent housing, some told us they'd been in this type of accommodation for three years. Often young people had no information on where they could go to get help, which meant they were more likely to have spent time sleeping rough on the streets or to have stayed temporarily with friends or family. Often, they had to leave the homes of friends and family because it was too overcrowded, their family or friends could not provide for their needs, or they were at risk of violence.

Many people moved about a lot between the different types of temporary accommodation listed above. This made them feel very unsettled and worried about when they would have to move on next and where that would be. Alongside instances when accommodation was in an unfamiliar or unsafe location, a lot of the accommodation was also inadequate or unsuitable for their needs: too small; cold, damp and mouldy; broken toilets; dirty mattresses and bedclothes. Younger children told us they weren't happy and parents said they needed help to provide for their children.

For those families seeking asylum, the hotel accommodation they were placed in was also deemed inadequate, with issues with privacy, lack of basic facilities like washing machines, and no outdoor space for their children to play.

Some young people and families had moved into stable accommodation like social housing or private rented accommodation. But they still faced problems: homes needed lots of repairs; difficulties with landlords; lived under threat of eviction from neighbours or paramilitaries; being exposed to violence; and not having enough support. This meant that some people left or lost their housing, some of them through feeling they had no other choice, and returned to homelessness again.

Claire's story is an example of a young person who had lived in different types of accommodation, including care, finding the constant movement scary.

Claire had a number of placements in different children's care homes. From age 11 she spent roughly six years in children's care homes, moving every six months due to inconsistent placements. In between these, she stayed with one of her parents, other family members or friends, she was never quite sure where she was going to stay. When describing this time she said, *"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"*. Although she is overcoming this now, Claire suffered with substance use alongside her mental health issues, she said she *"overdosed and had a really rough time with my mental health afterwards, and I got new diagnoses of mental illnesses I didn't even know were a thing"*. Claire left the children's care home for the final time four months before her 18th birthday. No one had helped her plan leaving the children's care home or asked her where she wanted to go: *"the social workers didn't really care for what I thought or how I felt about it"*.



As she didn't know what to do, she went back to her mum's, but then had to leave because of the abuse she experienced there. This started 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 was "terrified" after seeing "someone injecting something" – rough sleeping was the "safer" option. But 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."

Claire's story raises questions in relation to the availability of support at an earlier stage for young people in her situation, particularly around mental health and substance use issues that were made worse by her time spent in and out of children's care homes. Claire may have benefitted from having professional support that outlined her options, whilst having someone to listen to her concerns and advocate on her behalf based on her needs. Young people in Claire's situation feel that there is a lack of information on what to do when you become homeless, and feel that this information should be provided much earlier to ensure that they are kept safe.

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



5. IMPACTS OF HOMELESSNESS

Young people and families spoke about the different ways homelessness had affected their lives. Many young people had lost contact with parents, they also spoke about missing their siblings and how hard it was to stay in contact (Article 9, the right to family life). Leaving and coming back to the family home because they had no other choice made some relationships worse. Families talked about how their accommodation impacted on them having a 'normal' family life because of a lack of space to spend time together or study, the poor living conditions that affected their health, and living in locations that isolated them from services, school and friends.

Young people found it difficult to make and keep friends because of how much they moved around. Children were cut off from friends because they lived far away or because they couldn't invite friends over. Many children also didn't have places to play or spend leisure time where they were living (Article 31, the right to leisure and play). Some families did not have the money to pay for activities. Some families felt it was difficult to practice their religion and culture, especially asylum-seeking families in hotels (Article 30 the right to culture, language and religion).

Children and young people's education was affected by homelessness; many had dropped out or spent a long time out of education because of insecure housing (Article 28, the right to education). Parents seeking asylum found it difficult to find a school place for their children. Many children and young people lived far away from school and couldn't study at home because of their living conditions. Getting and keeping jobs was more difficult because of homelessness.

Homelessness also affected mental and physical health, the constant worry, moving around and 'not knowing' caused anxiety and stress (Article 24, the right to health). Rough sleeping and inadequate food made children and young people ill. Safety was also an issue, homelessness forcing young people into situations with unsafe people that exposed them to drugs, sex work and violence. Young people in shared accommodation with adults felt unsafe and experienced harassment (Article 19, the right to protection from violence).



"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."
(Majeda, mother)

"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)

"... there was times where I couldn't feel my body and it was like physically numb for days on end, you know? Because there was like no heat or circulation getting into my body because of the weather ... 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)

"I got fired because I was homeless ... 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? ... they didn't like offer me any help or anything."
(Claire, 18)



6. SUPPORTING CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE, AND FAMILIES WHEN THEY ARE HOMELESS

Many children, young people, and families encountered several other issues that they needed help with. Young people felt that they needed someone who could be there for them in challenging times and that they could build a relationship with. This included things like:

- ▶ Help managing their finances. Young people did not have to worry about money when with their parents, but were suddenly left to fend for themselves and budget their lives.
- ▶ Support with their mental health and substance use. Young people felt that support for these issues arrived too late, or was difficult to access. Some said that if they had received help sooner, their situations would not have gotten so bad.
- ▶ Help with paying bills and filling out forms. Young people we spoke to had not paid bills before, and felt that they needed help with this from an experienced professional they could trust. They also found some forms related to housing, education, and things like Universal Credit difficult to complete alone.

Alongside this, young people in temporary accommodation spoke about informal support from friends within their accommodation who helped them when they felt lonely. They also needed help to move home when they were given access to a permanent home.

“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 but then again, drink and drugs took the toll on it.”

(Luke, 20)

Parents also spoke about needing support, saying that they need help to make sure their children have everything they need. Some of the help they needed was **financial**, such as supplying heating and electricity for their homes and to provide food and hygiene essentials for the family. They also said they needed **help to buy furniture**, with some families forced to sleep on the floor when they first arrived at their new home. Parents also talked about **needing someone to support them** and to give advice on how to access the right home. Whilst some families spoke of the relief of having someone to speak to, others said they wished they had someone like this to help them.

The people we spoke to said that getting help with these things supported them to stay in their current home and allowed them to feel hopeful about their situation in the future. When young people and families received the right support, they spoke of how their situation and outlook for the future improved. This included young people who spoke about help provided to them whilst staying in supported living, who felt that they had been prepared by professionals to leave this accommodation and live independently. They spoke of receiving help with cooking, paying bills, managing their finances and accessing support for their mental health and substance use. Families shared this experience. When appropriate support was received, they felt less financial pressure to provide for their families, they also received help with mental health issues and advocacy to improve their housing situation.

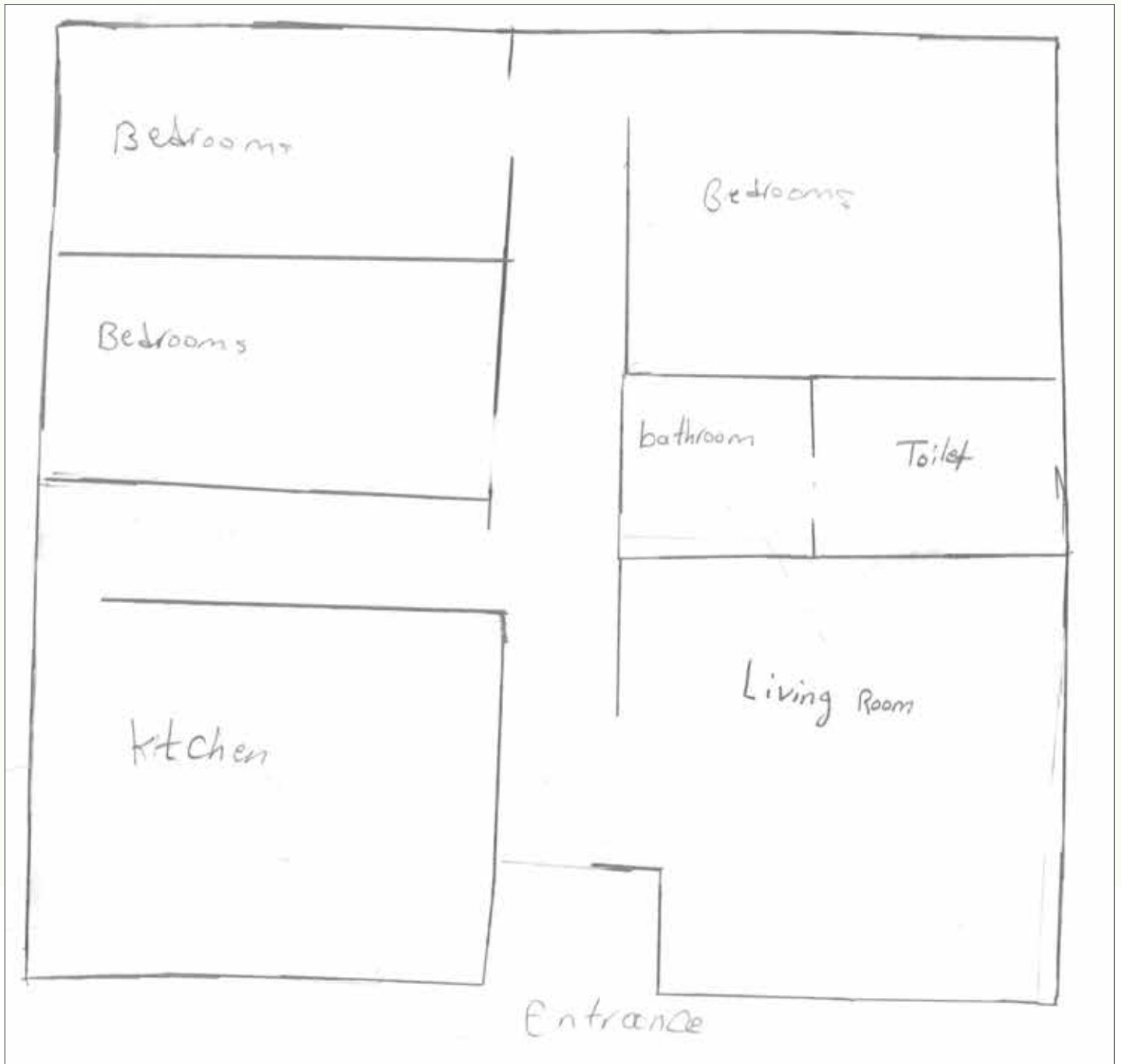
"They come back and helped me budget and helped me do more stuff. Like [support worker] ... she taught me how to make homemade food you know, two weeks ago and that's what I like, someone to come help me cook ... that's why I like [their] support because they help you with everything."

(Abi, 20)

"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)

"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)



7. HOPES FOR THE FUTURE:



Image above: '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.

Despite the difficulties they faced, the people we spoke to had big hopes for their future. Many respondents said they hoped to establish a permanent home. Although some did not mind where the location of this home could be, others said that they wanted to live somewhere nearby their community and support structures, like schools, employment, healthcare, and family. The idea of having a permanent home was important for respondents who had spent a lot of time living in temporary accommodation, and they said this would provide them with somewhere to settle down.

Alongside these hopes for future housing solutions, both adults and young people said that they wanted to either get into education or get a job that would provide them with additional stability. Young people also said they wanted to have more of a voice in their housing situation, as well as knowing more about what to do when facing housing insecurity.

Asylum seekers we spoke to share these hopes, but for some families their main goal is to reunite with children who have not yet made the journey to NI. Those staying in hotel accommodation said they hope to regain privacy by settling in their future home, and to be able to give their children a place where they can play.



“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)

“I want it to be near my school and like near my friends’ house so I can go and play.”
(Mairead, daughter, 11)

*“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 p*** out of people because they are younger.”*

(Ella, 19)



8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Time for change

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young people (NICCY) has commissioned this research to identify problems facing children, young people and their families who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Using this information, we have developed a series of recommendations for government. We will engage with government departments and organisations to press for change in the following areas:

- 1. Make sure there is enough good quality housing, tailored to the needs of children, young people and their families. This needs to be maintained to an appropriate standard.**
- 2. Consider the rights and needs of children and young people, including those with disabilities, when developing policy or plans on housing. Make sure that they know about their rights and options when making decisions on where to live.**
- 3. When a young person or family becomes homeless, make sure that they are provided with accommodation that meets their rights and needs. Young people under 18 should never be housed in bed and breakfast accommodation.**
- 4. Organisations should work together to make sure that families and young people living independently feel safe in their homes, and that they have the support they need, including mental health services and life skills support.**
- 5. Government must act without delay to make the changes NICCY called for in our 2021 report 'A Hostile Environment' report which focused on the problems experienced by families and young people with 'no recourse to public funds' because of their immigration status.**

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/>



9. SEEKING HELP AND ADVICE

Below are contact details of support available to children and young people facing homelessness/housing insecurity and related issues.

Housing

MACS Supporting Children and Young People

028 9264 6329
<https://www.macsni.org/>

Extern

028 9084 0555
<https://www.extern.org/>

Housing Advice NI

028 9024 5640
<https://www.housingadviceni.org/>

Action for Children

028 9046 0500
<https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/>

Mental health and well-being

Lifeline

0808 808 800
<https://www.lifelinehelpline.info/>

NSPCC - Childline

0800 1111
<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/our-services/childline/>

Barnardo's

028 9067 2366
<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/>

Samaritans

116 123 (free from mobiles)
<https://www.samaritans.org/>

Mind Your Head

www.mindingyourhead.info

Drugs and alcohol

DAISY Project

Start 360, 2 Castle Street, Derry
028 7137 1162
<https://start360.org/how-can-we-help-you/daisy-east>

Steps to Cope (young people with family members in addiction)

0800 2545 123
<https://www.ascert.biz/project/steps-to-cope-2/>





For further information:

Email: info@niccy.org

Phone: 028 9031 1616

Please contact the communications team at NICCY if you require alternative formats of this material.



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