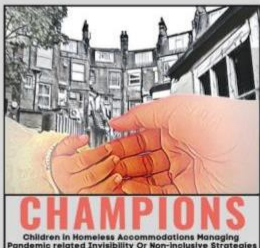




CHAMPIONS POLICY BRIEF



**CHAMPIONS PROJECT POLICY BRIEF
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE CHILDHOOD TRUST**

January 2023

**Developing a roadmap to give
children experiencing
homelessness a better future:
*Preventing the exacerbation of
the impacts of COVID-19 on an
already vulnerable population***

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PROJECT LEADS



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Children in Homeless Accommodations Managing Pandemic Invisibility Or Non-inclusive Strategies

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1. BACKGROUND

Children living in temporary accommodation (TA) experience health and educational inequalities, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and could further impact their future prospects if we don't act now. A generation of children in TA has been deeply affected by the pandemic with potential lifelong impacts. Urgent cross-sectoral action is needed to support this generation.

Furthermore, our research shows that children in TA were already behind their peers in terms of health and educational markers before COVID-19 due to systemic inequalities which still need to be tackled to prevent burdening further generations with homelessness and healthcare inequities.

The CHAMPIONS team, The Childhood Trust and Human Rights Watch have therefore worked together to produce evidence-based recommendations for policy-makers to ensure that children experiencing homelessness are given the best start in life. This generation of children should not be left behind as the nation moves on from the pandemic and onto battling the cost of living crisis, as the latter will only increase the number of children experiencing homelessness and the longevity of the issues they face.



The 2019 Children's Commissioner "Bleak houses" report showed that over half a million children in England were homeless or at risk of becoming homeless in 2019 (*Children's Commissioner, 2019*). There has been a 65% increase in the number of families living in TA in England over the last decade (*Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2021*). With the impact of the pandemic and the escalating cost of living crisis, this number will continue to increase.

The cost of living has been increasing across the UK since early 2021. According to the UK House of Commons, the annual rate of inflation reached 9.9% in August 2022, close to a 30-year high, affecting the affordability of goods and services for households (*House of Commons, 2022*).

Furthermore, child healthcare access was severely impacted by the pandemic (*Rosenthal et al., 2023*).

In addition, in 2021, Human Rights Watch and The Childhood Trust released the joint report, "I Want Us To Live Like Humans Again: Families in Temporary Accommodation in London, UK," (*Human Rights Watch & The Childhood Trust, 2021*) examining how families across London are being placed in poor-quality and uninhabitable accommodation, significantly violating their rights. The report called on local authorities and the government to act and urgently address this crisis.

2. KEY FINDINGS

The CHAMPIONS project, funded by the UKRI/ESRC, has been working with families with children under five in TA, and professionals from numerous sectors (health, education, housing, social care, and the third-sector) across England.

This policy brief builds upon similar calls to action. CHAMPIONS research reinforces and adds to existing recommended standards and frameworks, thus strengthening the evidence-base available amidst a worsening housing situation.

The team collected data and co-developed recommendations to inform best evidence-based practice for the safe and healthy development of children under five experiencing homelessness in England.



1. Prolonged **lockdowns, social isolation, poor environments, and lack of support** during the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing, and introduced new, **physical and mental health, developmental and behavioural issues** for children under 5.



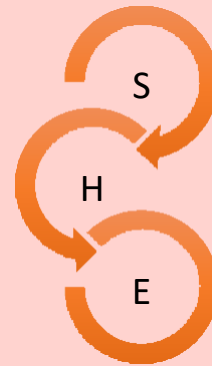
2. Service provision broke down during the pandemic for the **most vulnerable group (families with young children living in TA).**

3. Effective solutions depend on the **integration of child-centred services** (housing, health, education, social care, and the third-sector).

3. SHE FRAMEWORK

In consultation with families, the CHAMPIONS team developed the SHE Framework for a child's rights to be Safe, Healthy, and Educated (Lakhanpaul et al., 2022). This framework, applied to the ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), helps understand child health, wellbeing, and development along these three key rights within the immediate TA environment and available systems and resources.

*The intersection of the SHE Framework with the system levels shape our recommendations for a range of **stakeholders, including local authorities, central government, housing providers, health professionals, and the third-sector.***



Safe

The right to safe and suitable housing

Healthy

The right to access a healthy lifestyle, and essential health services

Educated

The right to accessible education, and the means and space to pursue one

4. OUR POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In July 2022, the CHAMPIONS team, The Childhood Trust, and Human Rights Watch collaborated to host a policy workshop to develop evidence-based recommendations.

A range of government representatives, civil society organisations and NGOs including housing charities, human rights organisations, faith groups, think-tanks, local authorities, academia, and mothers with children currently living, or with experience of living, in TA, contributed to the workshop discussion.

We combined the discussions from the day with the project's wider findings and produced the following recommendations focused on ensuring the needs of children to be Safe, Healthy and Educated:

1.

What? Implement a mandatory child-centred minimum standards framework for TA which is clear and usable, with accountability and monitoring in place.

Why? Current TA environments fail to meet basic standards to keep children Safe, Healthy, and Educated. Thus, standards should include:

- The provision of necessities (e.g. kitchen appliances, sanitation and laundry provisions, safe spaces to play and learn)
- The control of environmental health risks (e.g. vermin, mould, pollution)
- The monitoring of the maximum length of time children are allowed to stay in unsuitable accommodation
- The minimisation of instances of displacement/moves to reduce impact on peer and support relationships, and education

2.

What? Introduce community service navigation advisors to aid and direct families to helpful information and support.

Why? Many families are unaware of the benefits they are entitled to, and of the assistance that is available to them, such as food and baby banks, moving services, and legal advice.

3.

What? Develop materials to support families with navigating local services.

Why? Families in TA are frequently moved to new neighbourhoods or areas of the country with little support to assist with identifying local services (food banks, nurseries, children's centres, legal support, housing officers, local authority contact, citizen's advice). These materials should be accessible and available in both digital and physical formats.

When a family is first placed in TA, and every time a family is moved, they should be given this information as guidance.

4.

What? Collaborate and share relevant information across sectors using secure data-sharing methods in order to create notification systems that enable service providers to alert relevant sectors when a new family is rehoused, this allowing for quick access to health, education, and social services.

Why? System continuity between locations will prevent re-traumatising families through repeated history recounting. Data collection from families in TA should be mandatory and conducted in a uniform manner.

5.

What? Change the narrative and stigma around families experiencing homelessness.

Why? Families have reported experiencing stigmatisation from the individuals who are supposed to support and aid them. All staff working with children in this situation should be trained on how to work with families, and how to sensitively deal with their problems, focusing not only on the parents but on the children too.

6.

What? Local areas should ensure the adequate provision of doctors, health visitors, and midwives for the timely assessment and support of children in line with the Healthy Child Programme.

Why? Nationally, there has been a reduction in targeted specialist health visitor and midwifery support. COVID-19 has had a detrimental effect on children's health and wellbeing and urgent intervention is needed to overcome the negative effects of the pandemic in the long-term.



Figure 1: Mind map created by artist Raquel from MoreThanMinutes during a workshop with professionals from local authorities, central government, housing providers, health providers, and the third-sector.

Our recommendations are relevant to the following policies:

- ❖ Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities (*Department of Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, 2018*)
- ❖ TA Standards Framework (*Human Rights Watch and The Childhood Trust, 2022*)
- ❖ Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) (*Scottish Government, 2014*)
- ❖ Convention on the Rights of the Child (Articles 3 & 27) (*UN OHCHR, 1990*)
- ❖ Health and Care Act 2022 (*Department of Health and Social Care, 2022*)
- ❖ Data Supporting Families Programme (DLUHC), mandatory data collection on TA in Scotland (*Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities/Department for Education, 2016*)

Many people have already moved on from the pandemic and hope to leave it all behind. However, there is a danger that in attempting to do this during an economic crisis, it is the most vulnerable that will remain invisible. Families in TA are still trapped in the aftermath of the pandemic and this is having lasting consequences on their child's health, development, and educational outcomes. To ensure that the negative impacts of the pandemic on the children experiencing homelessness are not exacerbated further, we need to act now.

To read the full report by Human Rights Watch and The Childhood Trust, please visit: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/01/17/i-want-us-live-humans-%20%20again/families-temporary->

For more information on the CHAMPIONS project, and to see a full team member list, please visit:

<https://www.championsproject.co.uk/>

If you would like to get in contact with us, please contact project Principal Investigator Professor Monica Lakhapaul m.lakhanpaul@ucl.ac.uk

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