

'Do my kids have to live like this forever?'

The lives of homeless children and families in London

John Reacroft

December 2005



Barnardo's

LONDON, EAST and SOUTH EAST (England)

GIVING CHILDREN BACK THEIR FUTURE



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Foreword

The number of statutorily homeless households in England rose above 100,000 for the first time in 2004, compared with 41,000 in 1997. Unfortunately, this figure is the tip of the iceberg. Many families with children who live in unsuitable and insecure temporary accommodation are not included in the statistics. The problem is much worse in London, with 62% of all statutorily homeless households in England being in the capital.

While Barnardo's welcomed the publication of the Every Child Matters Green Paper, we are still seriously concerned about what is happening to children in homeless families. The five main outcomes for children envisaged by the legislation: be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being, can all be compromised by being homeless and living in temporary accommodation.

One hundred years ago, Thomas Barnardo died. He had spent his life caring for homeless children. Children no longer have to live on the streets, but far too many are still living in unacceptable conditions.

Within the pages that follow you will read about a family who were living in a flat so crowded and dirty that they were too scared to take their baby out of their room; a teenager who saw drug dealing outside his home on a daily basis; the practical difficulties of small children having to use a shared toilet in the middle of the night, and a mother who says if she would have known she would have to live in temporary accommodation for seven years, she would have stayed and put up with her violent husband. Added to the conditions of their temporary accommodation, these families did not know how long they would have to stay there, and were desperate to get some stability back to their lives.

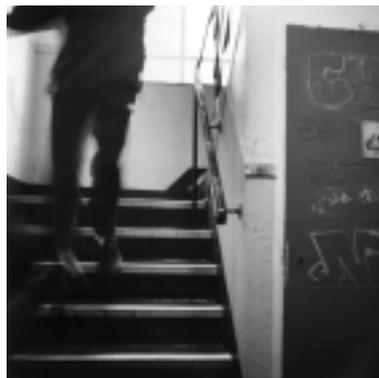
This document explains what needs to happen if the aspirations of Every Child Matters are to be met and families and children living in temporary accommodation are to be given the support they need.

Delroy Pomell
Director of Children's Services
Barnardo's – London, East and South East Region

Introduction

In this publication you will hear the voices of children and parents from ten homeless families living in London. We do not claim that these families represent all those who are homeless, but they are typical of more than 3,000 homeless families that we have met through our work in London.

These families do not live on the streets; they are entitled to a roof over their heads. But the temporary accommodations they live in are far from satisfactory. You will hear about the conditions, problems and sense of social exclusion experienced by ever increasing numbers of children and families. Despite living in one of the richest countries in the world, very large numbers of children in London do not have the opportunity to live in decent, secure and affordable accommodation.



Barnardo's and homeless families

Barnardo's vision is that the lives of all children and young people should be free from poverty, abuse and discrimination. Our purpose is to help the most vulnerable children and young people transform their lives and fulfil their potential. We help the UK's most vulnerable children have a better start in life, and therefore the chance of a better future. We have a wide range of childcare professionals working in services in local communities that help protect, nurture and provide opportunities to children, young people and their families.

Last year we worked directly with 100,000 children, young people and their families. In addition we helped a further 40,000 through our work with community groups and with other organisations. We run 370 projects across the UK working with children in their homes, their schools and in their communities.

LEaSE, London, East and South East (England), Region is the largest Barnardo's Region and includes the Greater London area. Barnardo's provides over 75 discrete services throughout the Region, of which the Families in Temporary Accommodation Project (FiTA) is one.

Barnardo's believes that all children should grow up in decent, secure and affordable housing. The temporary accommodations homeless families are placed in are never secure, rarely affordable and often of a poor standard. Since we started the FiTA Project in 1993 over 8,000 children and 3,400 families have been supported. We aim to improve the lives of children in homeless families by supporting them during one of the most traumatic experiences a family can face and by using our experience to influence changes at local and national levels.





This is a very difficult time for homeless families. The number of statutorily homeless households in England rose above 100,000 for the first time ever in 2004, compared with 41,000 in 1997.¹ There are now 100,970 homeless households in England. Of these, 72,810 (72%) are households including dependent children and/or a pregnant woman. The problem in London has been more severe than anywhere else with 62,640 statutorily homeless households living in the capital, compared with 24,060 in 1997. The proportion of England's officially homeless households in priority need who live in London has increased from 58% in

1997 to 62% in 2005. Additionally, many families with children who live in unsuitable and insecure temporary accommodation are not included in the statistics.

The supply of social housing has decreased significantly, both due to the sale of council accommodation since the 1980s and the reduction in the building of new social housing, which more than halved between 1995 and 2004. The number of social houses completed in the UK by registered social landlords and local authorities has fallen from 41,516 in 1995–96 to 18,577 in 2003–04.² By the end of 2004 there were 386,000 less units of social housing in England than there were in 1997.³

- 1 At end of Quarter 1 1997 there were 41,250 homeless households in priority need in temporary accommodation in England. At end of Quarter 4 2004 there were 101,030. See Statutory Homelessness: 2nd Quarter 2005, England. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 12.9.05. Government News Release 120830P and 'Homeless households in temporary accommodation by local authorities, by Government Office Region' Table 7. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister: www.odpm.gov.uk/pns//pnattach/20050189/10.xls for all the figures quoted in this paragraph.
- 2 See Table 201 Housebuilding: permanent dwellings started and completed, by tenure, United Kingdom. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister: http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_housing/documents/page/odpm_house_041461.hcsp
- 3 See Table 104 Dwelling Stock by tenure, England. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister: http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_housing/documents/page/odpm_house_041459.hcsp

Every child matters

Barnardo's welcomed the publication of Every Child Matters,⁴ but we still have serious concerns about the well-being of children in homeless families. A key factor contributing towards the tragic death of Victoria Climbié, which led to the Laming Inquiry and subsequently Every Child Matters, was that she lived in a number of temporary accommodations during which she moved across borough boundaries. Our experience is that this is not uncommon for families with children who apply as homeless to London local authorities. It is very difficult for agencies concerned with children's welfare to maintain contact with those who live such transitory lives.

The issue of family homelessness is not adequately addressed in Every Child Matters, where the government's welcome legislation to prevent homeless families with children being placed in bed and breakfast accommodation is the main policy highlighted. Unfortunately, there are many other families living in temporary accommodation similar to bed and breakfast who are not covered by this legislation and there are far larger numbers of families living in different forms of unsuitable temporary accommodation who do not benefit at all.

The conditions, transient nature and cost of temporary accommodation can all harm children. Their physical development, social development, emotional well-being, educational attainment and potential contributions to society may all suffer.

There are five main outcomes envisaged by Every Child Matters, which are based on what children said was important to them. Being homeless and living in temporary accommodation can compromise all of these. In our interviews, which represent a typical cross section of the homeless families we meet, at least three of the five outcomes were not met to a significant degree for every child. Four of the outcomes were not met for 30% of the children, and for 30% not one of the five was met. The outcomes 'Stay Safe' and 'Enjoy and Achieve' were not met at all. In this section, we address each of the five outcomes and identify the interviews which illustrate each point.



4 Every Child Matters, Chief Secretary to the Treasury, September 2003, Cm 5860.



Be healthy

The standard of some temporary accommodation, for example, shared toilets, little space, inadequate cooking facilities, damp, poor states of repair, infestations, noise and blatant criminal activity can make it very difficult to establish a healthy lifestyle. The stress on parents often leads to depression and reduces families' ability to promote healthy choices and minimise the effects of homelessness on their children's health.

Children's physical, mental and emotional health can all be adversely affected by homelessness.

See Interviews 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10.

Stay safe

It is difficult to keep children safe due to the physical conditions of some temporary accommodation. Families also find that dislocation from their normal support networks as they move from one temporary accommodation to another, often far from their home neighbourhoods, reduces the support they receive from family and friends.

Children's safety from accidents, bullying and discrimination; their security and stability; and their safety from crime, can all be adversely affected by homelessness.

See every interview.

Enjoy and achieve

Children can feel stigmatised and often feel a sense of shame about being homeless. Living in crowded, uncertain, and stressful surroundings greatly reduces children's enjoyment and achievement in life. They often spend time out of school and may be unable to make the best use of school when they attend.

Children's enjoyment of school participation; their personal and social development; and their recreational opportunities can all be adversely affected by homelessness.

See every interview.

Make a positive contribution

Children are very badly affected by the uncertainty of life in temporary accommodation. Their homes can change with little or no notice, which gives a feeling of powerlessness and knocks self-confidence, as well as the disruption it causes to schooling. Access to playgroups and childcare is often lost and children can be effectively excluded from mainstream society.

Children's power to engage in decision making; their community involvement; their self-confidence and ability to deal with life changes and challenges can all be adversely affected by homelessness.

See Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 6.

Achieve economic well-being

Temporary accommodation is very expensive and families who are forced to live in it find themselves in a poverty trap, where they cannot obtain employment which pays well enough for them to afford the rent. They may still get housing benefit when working, but there will be many additional costs, such as travel and childcare. The rent can also be higher than the level housing benefit will pay, so families have to find money from somewhere else, often from other benefits, towards the cost. There can be long, difficult and expensive journeys, if children try to access the schools they originally attended. Limited access to cooking facilities can lead to extra expenditure on food, which is often unhealthy fast food.

Children's education and their employment opportunities when they leave school, their right to live in decent homes and sustainable communities, their access to transport and the chances of them being able to live in households free of low income can all be adversely affected by homelessness.

See Interviews 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10.



The families

Ten families were interviewed. They were asked to speak about their lives in temporary accommodation, the effects on children and the impact of Barnardo's support. A counselling interview model was used to provide space for families to speak about their concerns in their own terms. The interviews were recorded and lightly edited from full transcripts before the selections below were made. Families' own words are used, with minimal commentary, to keep the flavour of their experiences. All the families use Barnardo's services in London. Nine families use the Families in Temporary Accommodation (FiTA) Project and one (Interview 8) the Akwaaba Project. The names of the members of all families interviewed have been changed.



Interview One

“*It's something I wouldn't wish on any mother or parent to go through*”

Ann is now in permanent accommodation, but spent just over two years homeless with her three children, two girls, Lynne and Sheila who were 7 and 4 when they were last homeless and Carl who was 1.

Before being accepted as homeless, the family lived in a succession of temporary addresses, including several women's refuges, as a result of domestic violence. Ann previously lost a council flat, which was repossessed, and at first the local authority did not accept a homelessness duty towards her. After she consulted a solicitor, the decision was reversed.

They were first placed in temporary accommodation on the other side of London from their home borough. After that they were placed in a local authority hostel, which still created very serious problems for the family.

At first I was in B&B, all of us in one room. There was a toilet there, a little shower, a little kitchen attached on, bunk beds and a double bed. The elder two would go on the bunk beds and my son would be on the bed with me. I can't remember if you had a wardrobe... no I don't think you did.

One of my girls was at school. What I ended up having to do was to send her to stay with my mum. Because of the travelling distance (from north to south London) it would have been too much getting three of them up so early in the morning. They'd be half asleep.

I just had to keep ringing up (the local authority) and explaining to them 'It is too far.' And I said to myself, 'You know what, this is too much.' Eventually they did get me somewhere, but they said to me I'd have to wait until Wednesday because there was no cooker. I said to them 'To be quite honest anything has got to be better than being here because it's too far out.' So on the Tuesday I went down to Balham. One child had bronchitis and one had asthma, so I was travelling with two sick children. I got up early in the morning to go to the launderette. When I came back, all our stuff was in the dining room. Basically they hadn't given me a chance to take out my things. Then I called a cab, but that took a long time to come and cost over £20. I had to do it on my own. I didn't have any help at all.

I agreed to move straight away because I know Balham. The hostel was clean and fresh. You had cupboards, wardrobes, dining room, two bedrooms and a separate kitchen. But it wasn't very spacious. I never realised it would be like a little compartment.

Sharing the bathroom and toilet was the most difficult aspect of life in the hostel.

The problem with sharing the bathroom and toilet was when you are coming out to use it; you have to take everything out there with you.

My daughter Lynne used to go toilet through the night so she'd come out and go to the toilet and then she'd come back in again. She would either leave the door on the latch or, where it wasn't so breezy and if you opened the door it wouldn't slam, she'd leave it open and quickly run and go. What I had to try and do was cut down things like drink. I made them drink until a certain time and then make them go to the toilet and I had to explain to her that she couldn't go out in the middle of the night, because obviously I'm sleeping. Because I had a potty there I just said to her, use that. She doesn't want to use it really, she was, what, six going on seven. So she kind of feels 'Me, using a potty!' I had to explain to her 'I'd rather if I'm sleeping you get up and use the potty because if you go out and the door closes I cannot hear you.'

Getting the children washed used to be a nightmare. I had to take the two little ones, then I had to keep going back and making sure I had everything. I ended up telling the oldest 'you stay here and I will take the two smaller ones.' But one thing with her, she was very helpful. I'm not saying she never gave trouble, every child does but it was like she was my shadow. I have said to her, 'I may have a go, I may shout at you but I'm not actually shouting at you, I'm just angry...' I find that when I explain to her or when I talk to her she understands. And I used to always say to her 'I'm not angry with you but if we do it this way it will be easier for us to get around and for Mummy to get out the house so we can get to school on time.'

There used to be floods all the time. People knew the codes for the doors and used to come in and the place would get flooded. I remember one time the door closing but by the time I had got there it was too late to see who it was. It was a nightmare because I was thinking 'Oh God, what am I supposed to do, where am I going to go?' I'd just come in from school, I had to mop up the floor, it was terrible. The worst one that frightened me was when my daughter got up in the middle of the night and she wanted to go toilet. She came back, it was about 1.30 in the morning, and said 'Mum, Mum, Mum there's a flood outside!' I got up to see the whole hallway full of water. The first thing that came into my mind was, she could have gone out there, slipped, banged her head and gone unconscious, that is how dangerous it was getting. There was no one to call. I had to mop it all up. I had already spoken to the staff at the front and that's when they changed the code for the first time in two years.

I have had a guy come to my door asking if so and so lived there and I'm like 'I'm not really sure,' because basically you could walk in and find information on people very easily. If someone didn't want to be found (eg if they were escaping domestic violence) they would be found very easily.

Getting children to school was very complicated because Ann did not want to disrupt Lynne's schooling. The problems became worse when Sheila was given a part-time place at the same school.

I had to take Lynne to school and I had to come back. And it was a nightmare because I had to leave by a certain time and make sure I was on time, because it was a long hill to walk up to get to the bus stop. And then it was two buses. I used to have problems with the teacher because I was stressed. I would be flying from one place to the other; I would be in the school and then gone; you would see me then you wouldn't see me. I used to be stressed because I have to get all the children back home. Rush hour and all of that, you've got two children that are tired and another one who has just left school and she is tired. They used to be falling asleep.

I was told to take the oldest out of the school and put her in one next to the hostel. I said 'No', and people said to me 'I don't know how you do it' taking her to school so far every day. And I said 'do you know what, when you want something so bad, believe me you will sacrifice, you will go through all you have to go through.' I wouldn't like to go back there again. Because when you are stressed your children are stressed and when they are stressed and they are going to school, they can't settle.

I was actually going to the school six times a day, there and back because Lynne was full-time and Sheila was part-time, and for any mother that is too much to do. You don't even have time to think for yourself! It's like you are going round doing the same thing over and over again... after a while you can't think straight.

The worse thing was when winter came and I have to take the children to school. The youngest one was in his buggy. When we left the house it was dark and when we came back from school it was dark and then we were travelling with all the school children because there's a secondary school just down the road from where we are. Sometimes I had to put some Weetabix in a little plastic container and carry it with me to feed Carl. I just used to feed them on the bus.

He would eat, as long as I was carrying something warm for him to eat and that's what I used to do. But it was a strain, it was difficult and it is something that I wouldn't wish on any mother or parent to go through.

Yeah, I wanted to keep her at that school. And I know that would also go on my side (in getting accommodation in the preferred area). If she was already in the school, why am I going to take her out because that was the area that I wanted to move into?

Ann found life in the hostel very depressing and stressful, but appreciated the support she was offered by Barnardo's.

I stayed in that hostel just over two years. I think I was strong. Not a lot of people are. Living like that can drive you to depression. I was depressed and I think, my relief, to be honest was the day Jenny (Barnardo's Welfare Rights Worker) knocked on my door.

When she knocked on the door I was all over the place. Carl had Weetabix all over his face, I'm standing there, I think I had even my night clothes on. Toys were everywhere and I was just like 'Please do excuse the mess because I really wasn't expecting nobody at this time of the morning,' but then she just walked in and the way she walked in I was like 'OK'. When she sat down to speak to me she said, 'don't worry, seen it all before.' She really bought my spirits up, but then I broke down and was in tears.

She said to me, 'I didn't come here to make you feel bad,' but she handed me the leaflet and she said 'we do have drop in sessions' and she said 'feel free to come with the children, there's refreshments, there's things to do, there's time out, there's someone there to look after the children.' She said 'it may not be a lot of hours but within those hours there is something to bring back home, something to look forward to going to every week.' And I did start going and it was really good. Without that group I don't think that I would have had the strength. The group also gave a lot of strength to my children, they met other children there, I met other parents. It is someone to talk to when you've got problems, they may not be able to help in every direction but it's someone to listen to, someone to hear what you are saying and that's the most important thing because if someone is not hearing you, how are they going to know what you feel? They may not have been down that road themselves but they are hearing and they are understanding and the comfort goes a long way. To know that someone else has either gone through it or knows what it is like to go through it, guiding you step by step each way...

Jenny wrote letters that did go to the council. She came with me to the school and explained that we needed a full-time place for Sheila.

Finally, Ann was rehoused.

When I came down here to look at this place I said 'Hold on a minute, don't get too happy.' I told Jenny I didn't know which one it was but then I realised and we drove around and we saw the garden. It's literally dead opposite the schools. It was nice, it was a lovely feeling, I felt good that day, I felt really good. I just felt... you know when you just take in that deep breath and you think a whole weight has been lifted off your shoulders. It wasn't all my troubles over but it was a start.

When the children asked when they are going to move next it was nice to say 'we live here, we can move on.' When you can actually be somewhere where it's settled, your mind is settled.

Interview Two

“ I didn't want to talk about it ”

Ameera was first homeless when she was 6 years old with her older brothers, Muhammad and Hassan, now 14 and 20 years old, and her mother, Salma. They lived in a bed and breakfast hotel, before being housed in a temporary self-contained local authority flat, which was later made a secure tenancy. Ameera is now 13. Although the events she describes are half a lifetime away, her memories are vivid, as are the feelings she had about being homeless.

I was six years old when we were first homeless. We stayed in the hotel for six months. During that time, for the first couple of months, I didn't know Barnardo's and then my mum started telling me how you guys were trying to get us in a better situation. Then I got my first gift from Barnardo's, at Christmas when I was there. I was really happy. I showed off to my brothers because I got more.

It was lucky our school was near. It was round the corner from the hotel. I liked that school, it was nice. It had after school clubs and Christmas school dinners.

I liked it a lot when I went to Barnardo's because you had friends who were in the same situation so you didn't feel afraid to talk about how you felt and they would understand. In school sometimes it felt hard to say the reasons why you were here, the reasons why you were homeless. Firstly I didn't speak proper English. I spoke a little bit after a while, but at first you feel embarrassed to tell the story. When someone would start that, asking why you here, why you this, I would just change the subject. I didn't want to talk about it.

It felt more comfortable at Barnardo's, to be around people that you know have the same life. When you went to school they would be like 'Oh look I bought a new bike today, I bought this.' And you would feel left out, but Barnardo's helped us a lot.

But afterwards you get used to it and you just don't mind and you are like, 'this is my story and at least I succeeded.'

All I know about how we became homeless is that mum said that she was having some arguments with dad and they don't know if they are going to get back together again. Sometimes we went to my aunties and sometimes we went to other places. My mum decided it was enough and so she brought us here. Well from what I understood because I was still little, she took us here and I felt as if we reached the light at the end of the tunnel when I got to England. I saw a computer for the first time when I come to England. I think she decided it would be a better life for us.

I remember the Barnardo's helpers that were there at the start. The leader of the group was Bridgette (Project Worker) and there was Garry (Welfare Rights Worker) and I remember another helper which was Pat (Project Worker). I liked Pat a lot. She used to do face painting and work with me a lot and other children and Bridgette was very, very, very kind. You can't put it into words how she helped you. But not just getting you this, getting you that but mentally she would help you. She would lift your spirits somehow. It was the way she talked to you. She didn't look down at you; she gave that moral support that you needed. She came at the right time. And Garry, he helped us a lot as well. They were all a good laugh.

The family experienced a very serious health issue while they were living in the hotel and Ameera's mother, Salma, was experiencing severe stress.

During the time we were in the hotel it was hard because my mum had two heart attacks. And one of them I remember clearly because I stayed up all night. I was scared I wasn't going to see her again.

She got stressed. She built up the stress, thinking when are we going to get out of here, when are we gonna stop being homeless? It stressed her more than it stressed us. The main thing that worried me was if I was gonna see mum tomorrow. If I didn't just get a telegram or something saying that... you know... come and see your mum and this... but luckily she is still here with me today.

I remember when she came back from the hospital. My older brother looked up at the window and said 'Look, there's mum.' We all ran up the stairs and went to the hotel and it was like 'are you OK, are you OK?' and she goes 'Yeah.'

I was six going on seven. I worried a lot but me and my brothers were very united. We talked and my older brother (who was 13 at the time) was very responsible and caring. He would make us feel better; he would make us laugh and joke. He would sometimes even cook for my mum; he would go 'Sit down take a rest.' He would tell us not to go and muck about and stress our mum and he would play with us and let our mum rest. I'd go and join them in their room and we would muck about.

I reckon she was just worried about us. Thinking how we felt and she was stressed, every day she would be more stressed. Usually we would all stay in one room and I would see her worried. She would have all papers in front of her and she'd be looking and then after a while she would put them away and we would joke about. She spent a lot of time in the garden. I think she was just trying to get rid of the stress and think about something else for once.

For Ameera herself, life in the hotel had some compensations.

In the hotel everyone was friendly. We were lucky, we had two bedrooms and that was one for my two brothers and one for me and my mum and they both had toilets inside them which was good so we didn't have to go outside to have a bath or anything which I liked. At breakfast we had cards to go get a drink and then you can have cereals. And then you can have a croissant with jam and butter. And there was a machine where you could also put your card in and you could get a drink.

Everyone was friendly. Everyone there knew each other and they would sit together at lunch. When my mum had the heart attacks and went to hospital, other families would cook and would offer us help and would say 'would you like to come and sit with us' and stuff. That was nice.

Although Ameera didn't mention this, social services also offered support to the children at this time, however it was clearly not a situation three children could be left in for more than a short time. Fortunately, Ameera's mother made a good recovery.

When the family was offered self-contained temporary accommodation (a top floor flat), there were more problems to overcome. Fortunately, sympathetic neighbours offered support.

All our friends in the hotel started going before us. So it started getting lonely in the hotel. But then we got a house. And now I am pretty proud of our house seeing as I saw it when it was pretty bare, when we came in that day. It was raining and it was at night. A couple of friends from the hotel helped us move in.

The thing is, they said, 'here's your house, you have got a temporary house' and we didn't know it was going to be permanent. They told that to my mum at night. My mum came and checked the house while we were at Mosque. When we came back my mum said 'they showed me a house, it's got three bedrooms, I just checked the sizes, they are good.' They said 'you've got a week to move in' or something like that.

We all got happy when she showed us the house. The happiest thing to me was when I saw my own room. My own little room, yeah, I got happy.

That night we brought a piece of carpet to sleep on, but the neighbour helped us. He goes, 'No, don't do that because I've got a spare bed.' He gave it to us; we've still got the cushion for the bed, the mattress. But he gave us some covers and stuff like that for furniture. On the first day he gave us the bed so we could actually sleep on it.

There was nothing. The cupboards were here, but we didn't have a washing machine or a cooker. We started off with a cooker and pretty much built our way up. The neighbours helped. They used to give us food and stuff occasionally.

I liked it when we moved in because my mum seemed more happy. She used to go 'look there's a swimming pool there and it's free in the holidays, we could go there.' She used to take us to the library. Every time we tried to skip off homework she used to go 'No, I know you get homework everyday come on.' And she tried to help us and everything.

One or two years ago we asked our mum 'How come you said it was temporary?' And she said 'Yeah they kind of told us that we are permanent.' We were like 'mum, can we have this, can we have that?' So we saved up a lot for things.

Ameera now has a very confident, positive and ambitious outlook on life.

Well I went up two levels at school this year. I got a governors' award since year seven and year eight. In year four, five and six I got special awards at the end of the year. I got a hundred percent. I've always liked to study. When I had sats in year six, I had a club every day, it was either maths, science or English and my brother used to say 'are you Matilda or something!?' (From the film Matilda).

Whatever happens in my life, I don't think I'll ever let myself forget Barnardo's. Because they were the ones who helped me be where I am today. For one of those reasons, I am aiming high in life. They show you, you don't just give up in life, whatever happens you keep on going. I want to do loads of languages at GCSE. I'm doing French and German and want to do Spanish.

I think I will go to university because I want to do business IT. I want my own business.

I'm not trying to be big headed but ours was a success story. From a homeless person to where... now when I look at my house I am not one bit ashamed of my past because I am seeing this as we built on it. And we haven't lost our culture, or religion, or tradition, or anything. I'm proud, actually. I'm proud of my life and proud of my family.

Interview Three

“ *In the house, she can't play* ”

Abraham (A) and Elizabeth (E) live with their daughter Rochelle, who is almost two years old. The family are not officially classed as homeless. They live in one room in an ex-council four bedroom flat. There are five households in the accommodation, one in each bedroom and one in the living room, which is the family's room. There have been nine adults and four children living in the flat, although they are all being given notice to quit after environmental health became concerned about both the overcrowding and the state of the property. There is a tiny kitchen, bathroom and separate toilet, all of which are shared by all the occupants. The landlord is a church minister. Abraham pays £85 a week for their room. He works and, including tax credits, the family has a gross income of £230 a week.

(A) We have been living here close to three years now. My partner was pregnant; Rochelle is going to be two in October.

(E) There is only one kitchen. Sometimes you have to wait until others finish. And for other people to clean the toilet or the bathroom. Sometimes they don't do it so you have to end up having an argument with them.

(A) We have a terrible landlord. He just barges in on people at any time and he increases the rent at random at any time he likes. If you are not satisfied with the services he tells you to get out.

The environmental agency came down here because the structure of the house was so bad. Someone came to spray the place because of roaches and mice. They sent a letter to Southwark Council saying that they did the spraying. Along the line they found out this place was unkempt and the environmental agency came in. They looked at the place and gave the landlord some orders to clear the place and specifications. They removed the door and put in a fire door and so many other things he's just been gradually doing. During that process they found out how many people were actually living here. So they told him the number of people living here is more than the number of people who are supposed to live in the flat. So they ask him that he doesn't have more than five to six people living in this house.

(E) All these people were there when I gave birth to the child.

(A) She has to be bathed inside the room. We can't bath her outside because the place is not well kept. She never left the room actually, when she was still a little baby. I think she was indoors for about a year without coming out, except when her mother had to

go for an appointment. The place was so crowded and dirty everywhere, so we had to keep this place clean and lock her inside. Very, very, very difficult.

I got to know about Barnardo's through the health visitor, which would be about a year and a half ago.

When the landlord decided to evict the family, Barnardo's ensured that this was done properly so that the local authority would have to re-house the family as homeless, which would not necessarily have been the case if they simply left when the landlord asked them to.

Barnardo's helped a lot. Garry (Welfare Rights Worker) was phoning them up and at the end of the day it was because of that man that we were able to get the paper that they were taking us to court. Otherwise we would have been quitted out of this place without anything.

We were able to join this (Barnardo's) playgroup for this child. Sometimes she goes there, to go and play and meet other kids so it's a very large difference. So she gets different toys and enough space because in the house she can't play. We also go and visit places like London Zoo. And I really enjoyed it. It was my first day in a zoo. I took a day off from work that day. I never had the opportunity to go to a zoo. It was nice and also it was free. We had a nice time that very day. And the kids they enjoyed it as well. It was nice, it was nice.

You know, Rochelle took a long time to walk. Even to sit up, she took quite a long time to sit up. I was thinking maybe there is something wrong with her.

The family will never be able to afford to pay a market rent in the private sector for the accommodation they require.

I work in a factory for sausages. I get about £230 a week, including tax credits, which is enough for me to be able to pay for a flat weekly because I don't think a flat should cost me more than £85 like I am paying here.

Actually I rented a private flat before in New Cross. That was when Elizabeth was pregnant. Before she was pregnant, we were both working and paying for the flat but as soon as she got pregnant she couldn't work anymore so I had to take care of it. So we had to move to something that would suit my own pay packet every week. Which is here. We used to pay about £590 a month, excluding water, electricity, and telephone bill. It was just a bedsit.

Because the family, with Barnardo's support, have notified the environmental health about the conditions in the flat, the problems with the landlord got worse and he tried to get them out of the accommodation. However, he did not want to use a proper legal process to do this.

The landlord became very cross when the environmental health came in. He kept bringing people inside the house. He brought one man and told him to tell us he has bought the flat. The man would just use the key and come in at any time. We don't know him, but because he has a key, obviously the landlord must have given him the key. So we had no right to challenge him or anything.

After about a week he's been coming, he knocked on my door and he says 'Excuse me', I went out and said 'What can I do for you?' He said he was sorry to disturb me but has my landlord not told me anything? I said 'My landlord? I've not seen my landlord and he has not told me anything.' He said 'Well, he should have told you that I am the new owner of the house.' I said 'what, new landlord or new caretaker or what are you? That was on the Saturday. On the Monday of the next week, the landlord came with the man and a pregnant woman. The landlord said this is the man he has sold the house to and that the terms and conditions in which we were living here would be changed. I said you are the person I still know as my landlord. If you had sold this house you would had told me officially and quit me out before you sell off the house to somebody else.

At the end of the day this resulted in an argument. Then the other man ran away with the woman while we are arguing. The landlord came back after some days and said I didn't let him sell the house!

The landlord stopped collecting rent. This could be a serious problem for the family because if they get evicted for not paying the rent they will be regarded as intentionally homeless and the local authority will not have a housing duty towards them, which it would if they are evicted simply because the landlord requires vacant possession of the property.

After that the landlord stopped collecting rent from me because he wanted to use that as a reason to go to court. He put on the court paper that I haven't paid rent. I say 'alright, no problem, I will pay you.' During that same period he put gas and electricity on a meter, but he didn't put the rent down. Everything was inclusive before.

The way he evicts people you know... like ladies he has living here... There was a lady living here before; it got to the stage the lady owed him about three or four or five months, because he was trying to sleep with that woman. The next thing the woman did was to move out of the house because he said he was going to call the police on her because she was illegal.

When he knew I was a British citizen, he couldn't really do anything about me. Most of the tenants, except one other, living here were illegal immigrants. The rest were cowering down, 'Yes sir, ok sir,' 'Yes, Daddy.' Sometimes someone will come for just two months and then do something and have to leave quick.

Providing the family are legally evicted from the accommodation through no fault of their own, they will be able to apply as homeless to the local authority. However, this will only be the beginning of an uncertain period of time in temporary accommodation, before they can obtain secure social housing.

Interview Four

“*I got really tired going from one place to another*”

Pauline (P), together with her children, Tina (T), 15, Alice (A), 10 and David, 2, escaped domestic violence for the second time seven months ago. Since then, they have had five addresses, two B&Bs, two hostels and their current temporary flat. The flat is owned by the local authority, but managed by a housing association as temporary accommodation. The rent is £216.60 a week. Pauline cannot afford to work.

There are serious problems with the neighbours and loud music starts during the interview.

(P) Leaving my husband was an absolute nightmare because I knew what it was like out there as a homeless person; I'd been homeless when I was 17. I left him because of domestic violence. I left him the year before but the council refused to help me then and I ended up renting privately. Then the bathroom collapsed and I couldn't live in the house that I had rented, so I had to move back. There was nowhere else for me and the kids to go. The little one ended up in hospital so I moved back with my husband and it all went bad again. I left my husband again this year and this time they helped. He's fine as long as we don't live together.

I was in two minds whether to leave my husband, but in the end because of the mental and physical violence I had to. Sometimes I was hit, but it was more mental. And a couple of times he lashed out on Tina. And my view is, 'you don't do that, you are a man, you can hit harder than a woman so you don't do that.' She was thirteen or fourteen then.

I used to get a lot of verbal abuse, you know 'You are fat, you're useless, you're this, you're that,' and then eventually you believe it all. And then there was a couple of times my skin was burnt. I've got a split knee cap after he got hold of me and twisted me, pulled me round and then my boot got stuck so my legs gone but my foot's still there, so my whole leg turned round. I can't do a lot of stairs now. My leg swells up, it gets water on my knee, and there's nothing they can do.

I left home at 17. I was single then, and I had to live in with druggies, drunks and everything else. I didn't want to put the children through that but in the end I had no choice. I had to get out. Tina had to see a psychotherapist and no one was happy. I thought when I came out it was for the best and sometimes I think 'yeah, it's a lot better,' but sometimes I think 'well they had stability' before. It's a hard fight in your head. But you think, 'ok yeah, it'll get better.'

We spent about two or three days in the first B&B. We had to keep going back to the homeless persons unit every day so you sleep there, you pack up all your stuff the next morning, go all the way back down there, they give you another letter to go all the way back again for another night. The B&B was a crack house. There were ten other rooms and in the next room to us, a boy and a girl were arguing and she was being slapped and punched.

(T) And condoms outside the window.

(P) Alice looked out the window and she said, 'Look at that', what did she say it was? 'A lemon!' There was a condom sitting outside the window. Really nice, lovely!

I can't do a lot of stairs because of my knee. Eventually, they sent us to a hostel with the room right on the top floor. They sent us there in the night, but when we got there I ended up basically staying on the stairs because I couldn't get up there.

There were no sheets on the bed and there was no cot for the baby. At about two in the morning we were walking up and down Herne Hill because the baby wouldn't sleep, obviously because we didn't have a bed or anything. Then we got put in another hostel that wasn't too bad, but you had to go upstairs to the cooker and everything. You have to carry all your food upstairs and then you have to carry all the plates back down the stairs, eat in your room and carry it all back up to wash up.

I didn't know I was pregnant then. So it was like running backwards and forwards, carrying all the stuff, feed the kids and then obviously having a baby you have to sort everything out so it was just money upon money so I was borrowing money left right and centre. Then I lost the baby in the toilet here. I had a miscarriage. I was four and a half months pregnant. Now it's horrible to go to the toilet. I can't have the door shut.

They said it could have been because of the stress, you've been running around, you've been carrying, you haven't been resting, you haven't really been washing properly. All that sort of stuff, it all combines, but I had a high white blood cell count which means I could have caught an infection from somewhere that I'd been in. I'd lost him; I didn't want to know why. That was the end of it.

It's one thing after another, it just hits you and you have to get up and go through it again. What with the miscarriage and everything it's the kids that keep you going. Without the kids I could quite easily sit in bed and not do a thing, turn to drink. But I think 'No I've got three kids I've got to look after them, I've got to get them out of this place and get them into a decent place and have the life we have missed out for the last years with all the shouting and arguing and everything else.' So, it's a lot better now than when I was 17, that was what scared me, taking the girls to places like that. It's not too bad, apart from the neighbours but you don't know what might happen.

Pauline had problems dealing with the council.

I had the worst case worker going. I said 'I want to come and see you', and he said 'No, you don't need to see me.' It was unbelievable. I found out a few weeks later that he had left. No one told me. Then I found out that my case wasn't 'live,' so no one was looking at it. Garry (Barnardo's Welfare Rights Worker) rang up and found out that I wasn't live. They didn't tell me that when I rang up. It's a good job he did ring up.

The children's education was disrupted.

(T) Last year with all the moving around it affected my school work as well. Because I was in year ten and I missed loads of school with going backwards and forwards and having to help my mum carry stuff, it was too much. Because my mum had explained to them what was going on, they were actually understanding and they were trying to help me as much as they can. But last year I missed so much time I have a lot of catching up to do still now. It affected my school work, because all the grades I should've been getting at year 10 I was falling behind because I haven't been in. So this year I've got to put a lot of work in, to get up to the grade I should be.

I got really tired going from one place to another and it really got to me because it was a bit upsetting as well, the fact of, they can't just place you somewhere and say 'Right, you can have that house because it's suitable.' They should be able to give houses where you've got kids; it's not fair on them being lugged from pillar to post.

(P) Tina is a lot better than Alice, she gets ratty, I mean, she sleeps in my bed.

(A) I have to be in your bedroom because I am scared of the spiders.

(P) I think it has affected them but they don't really say too much. I went through a bad stage with Tina anyway and she's calmed down a hell of a lot since then.

Pauline also had letters from the educational welfare about Alice's attendance.

There was a letter as a threat but then they didn't come round. The hard thing now is I'm running round trying to find her a secondary school because she starts secondary school next September. I didn't know where we're going to be. There's none round here I want to send her to. The one I want to send her to is in Bermondsey but if I use this address she would never get in.

I actually love that school. That's where I'd like her to go but she probably won't get in there. But then again in six months time I could be living in Bermondsey...

The two year old has been severely affected by moving around. Pauline says:

When we were moving around a lot he used to scream. We would go into one place and it used to take me ages to settle him into that place and then we would move again and it would be the same thing for him. Even when we first moved in here it really unsettled him; now he is not too bad. But he does like other company and he doesn't get much chance. I mean he has got the girls but he doesn't get much chance to play with other children so when he plays with this little boy (at the Barnardo's group) he loves it and it's a bigger space for him. I mean, I've got a garden but it is full of glass and rubble so he can't really go out there.

I don't know if I will be moving into another temporary, or if I am going to a permanent. If it's temporary then I will have to do it all over again with him. I've done it this time and he has settled, we've been here a little while now, he's fine. Next one, it'll be the same; it'll take him a month or so to settle in, just like one thing after another.

Pauline describes coming to Barnardo's FiTA Project the first time.

I walked into Barnardo's the first time and thought 'OK, if anyone can give me advice on what's going on and anything else then I am going to grab it.' The two year old loves it. For a couple of hours he is playing with toys, but I just sit down. It's peaceful, I'm not running around.

You know when you get something like this for Families in Temporary then you think 'OK someone is going to be able to tell me little bits and pieces that this man at the council who is being paid to tell me isn't bothering to tell me.' So that's why I went to Barnardo's.

Interview Five

“As asylum seekers we found everything difficult”

Nelson and his mother, Sandra, were asylum seekers from Ecuador. When they first came to the UK five years ago they were refused leave to remain in the UK, despite asking for time to retrieve lost documents which could prove their case. They appealed and were finally given leave to remain in the UK this year. During the time they spent in temporary accommodation as asylum seekers, in common with all asylum seekers, they didn't appear in the statistics as homeless.

I was 15 years old when I was first in temporary accommodation with my mother, I am 20 now and this is still temporary accommodation.

The first accommodation we got was in Crystal Palace. It was in a hotel, just one room with an en-suite bathroom. And it was very small. It was just my mother and I. There was just one cooking facility for the whole hotel. It was a big house and had three floors and three rooms on each floor. We were living on the second floor and there were three families there, so there would be about nine families altogether.

I'm not sure how long we lived there. We spent an entire summer, before we were moved to Brixton.

Nelson was very highly motivated to do well at school, but didn't speak much English when he arrived.

I remember I was looking for a place to study the language and I remember writing to International House, where I met this teacher and she taught me English for one month and after that I found a place at a referral unit. It was a unit for children who were expelled from other schools. And also for overseas students and other asylum seekers who were looking for a place.

The teachers were the best teachers I have ever had in my life. I mean, imagine how good you have to be as a teacher to control those youngsters. We got some homework, but not very much, it was very easy. I finished a summer term at the referral unit and then I started my secondary school education at the Battersea, at a regular school.

The family were moved to a self-contained temporary flat, but had difficulties due to drug dealing in the immediate vicinity.

Then we moved to Brixton and... well, I suppose it was ok. There was only one bedroom but we transformed the living room into a bedroom. We lived there for five years.

The place was very reasonable to be in but the area was not very appealing. We had drug dealers in front of our house, and the noise was unbearable. My room was in front of a corridor and the corridor led straight to the front door downstairs, so if they are smoking cannabis, all the smoke will come straight into my room. There was a Caribbean restaurant on the ground floor and they used to sell drugs all day in our doorway. It would carry on until they got tired, sometimes I am.

They came everyday, very punctual and just sat there the whole day. The whole time there was trouble outside the front door. Sometimes they were arrested. But they came back to our front door a few days later. They used our door because of the Jamaican restaurant, so it was very convenient.

Someone was killed there. I have no idea why. We just saw a person under a blanket. He had been shot. It was terrible. There was a big investigation. The road was closed and some police came and were investigating the area, searching for clues for a few days. It was quite interesting to see. The drug dealers just probably went somewhere else until they could come back.

I was never tempted by drugs. No, no, no. I really hated that from the beginning. Even having people smoking around you really got into my nerves.

I used to go to the local library in Brixton to study to get away from the noise outside the flat. But sometimes it was too cold, especially during winter. I just didn't want to go out so I just stayed indoors and just got used to the noise basically. Sometimes it was hard to concentrate.

Nelson was eventually offered a place at a good university to study chemistry, but as an asylum seeker had to pay the full overseas fees. He was also not eligible for student loans or support and not allowed to work.

It was very, very difficult. If you wanted to become a builder or something like that then you might get help but if you want to do a scientific degree you don't have any help whatsoever. I found in the newspaper an article about a guy who was helping asylum seekers to get into higher education. I called him but he told me that he can only help me if I wanted to do a not very academic degree in a not very good university. It was for asylum seekers but it didn't help me.

So, my mother and I had to do everything by ourselves. I had to pay £12,000 a year. Well, we have some friends who gave us money and also a very nice guy in a bank so he helped us, and also I got a hardship grant from the university.

Now it's the third year and we have been given leave to remain, so I have been classified as a home student now. I don't think I have to find anything this year. I have also applied for a student loan.

If I say everything made it very hard for me, I think maybe I am just making excuses. I passed all my courses, but not with as high a grade as I wanted. But, I don't know, I have to see this year how it goes.

It was very strange how we moved away from Brixton. Five years ago in the hotel a man knocked on the door and he said that we have a new accommodation. Just like that. He came every so often just to see how the place was and then after five years, this same man he came to our house and he said he has found a place for us.

We used to complain every week, to everybody, to the landlord, to social services... but... when the man came to visit us we used to complain and all the time it was the same story. We complain to him and complain to the landlord and then they complain to their workers and etc, etc. and the complaint was carried on to other people and nobody ever paid any attention.

The present accommodation is much better, but the cost is too high. As the family now have leave to remain in the UK they are classed as homeless and the local authority has a housing duty towards them. However, they will now be at the end of the homelessness queue, despite already spending five years in temporary accommodation.

In this area now, it's very peaceful, you don't hear anything. It was quite relieving coming to live here. It costs £270 a week. We were thinking this might be a bit too expensive for us if we started working full-time. We want to find a place in an area like this but not so expensive.

As asylum seekers we found everything difficult. When we came here, we lost all our luggage and didn't have any papers, so we were refused asylum. They couldn't wait a few weeks until we could get our things. Then we had to appeal. Now we just want to carry on with our lives. Live a stable life.

Interview Six

“*I feel like I'm being punished*”

Stephanie lives in a three bedroom privately rented temporary accommodation in a borough bordering on her home borough. She has lived in the accommodation for two years. The rent is £320 a week. Stephanie lives with her second husband and three children, Peter aged 17 and girls Katherine and Chelsea, aged 11 and 14, from her first marriage. Stephanie and the children have been homeless for seven years after she left her first husband following domestic violence. At that time she had a fourth child still living at home who has now moved away. Stephanie commented that if she has to wait much longer all her children will have left home! Stephanie described what she did when she decided to leave her violent partner:

I just got the car, I filled it up as much as I could, which is only so much because when you got four kids in it you can't carry much else. I did try to keep them at the same school but he wouldn't leave me alone. I took the kids to school every day and I had to get my mum to come with me. In the end I had to take them out of school and put them in another school near where my mum lived.

I stayed with my mum a year and they said they couldn't house me unless I left mum's. So I left mum's and took one child because they wanted me to go out of London but the doctor wouldn't allow it. I went into bed and breakfast with Chelsea.

Then Peter came to stay in the B&B but I still left Katherine at my mum's because she was a bit scared and didn't like it. They don't like too much change, children. Especially being in a house with a lot of people they don't know. You shut your door and they don't realize they have to stay in that room.

The toilet was on the end of the bath so if anyone was in the bath you couldn't go to toilet. I had to get a bucket in the bedroom because I was too scared to leave of a night to go to the toilet in case anybody else was out there. I don't know how many were sharing. They said there was one upstairs but they all kept coming downstairs and really late of a night. My room was just behind the showers so you could hear everything.

I'm not too sure how long I was in the B&B. My ex-husband came and found me and they had to move me. All of a sudden they came up with a temporary house. That was in 2000.

They said it was only for two years. Then I found out that it belonged to the council, but they charged for it as a temporary... they could have let me stay. They could have given it as a permanent with all the trouble I've had. Then I had to move from that house to here.

Stephanie has been told by the housing department that she cannot work while she is living in her current temporary accommodation as the rent has to be paid by housing benefit. However, she is expected by the Benefits Agency to be looking for work.

The rent's paid by the benefit. It goes up every year, I think it's £320 (per week) but it might be more now. They told me when I took it that I couldn't go to work. The housing officer said 'this house we are giving you is only for people on benefits.' So I've been here nearly two years. So in other words... I got one person telling me about getting a job and I got them telling me I can't because of the house. See it's not given to anyone who is working because of the rate of rent. I had to go through to the benefits once, a while back because you have to have an assessment. I told them I weren't very well and about how much the house was. They said 'Oh well we'll leave it for now.' But then I had to go and look for a job because my circumstances did change but because of, I wasn't very well they put me back on to the income support to do with disability. My husband's looking for a job but he's worried about the rent. We're waiting to get a permanent.

And sometimes I think the property's not worth it. I mean, when I moved in the boiler wasn't working. The front door's not got a Chubb on it; it's only got a normal lock. And we had to mend the back gate ourselves because the back gate's falling down.

It's got three bedrooms but the small one is very, very, very small. My daughter can't move in it very well. But the big one, the main bedroom is very, very big. It's got a separate toilet.

Stephanie has to bid under a choice based lettings scheme for property in her home borough, not the one she is temporarily housed in. She wants to stay where she is because the children are the most settled they have been since becoming homeless and are doing well in local schools.

I'm bidding and I'm saying 'No, no'. They say you can choose what area you want, but the area you want is not on the list. There was one on the list last week but it was a double and two singles. Well I've got three kids not two. I had four in the beginning. They're not big enough. I think it should be if your kids are actually going to school in that area now, then I think you should have priority.

When people come in to the (Barnardo's) group and say 'I've been housed' I don't mean to be mean but I feel really, really down and jealous. I think 'When's it my turn?' What year? I don't think it's going to be this year.

It's going to be a house that I'm bidding for and I'm gonna be really heartbroken if there's two or even one in front of me, if it's something I like in an area I like I'm gonna get down hearted, I'm gonna get suicidal. Which, for someone in my position, they

should have a bit of consideration. They knew I wasn't well. I went to a psychiatrist in Harley Street, but they still didn't put me down as a medical priority.

I have been bidding for property for two or three years. I got to 6th place once and I got one once that said that I was number three. They said 'You can come and look at it,' in case numbers one and two turn it down. I don't even remember bidding for it. When I looked at it, it was right where girls use to bully my daughter and it scared me.

In my own mind I think they keep me out here deliberately. How do we know they're telling the truth? We've got to trust them. But I don't... and it hurts because I've been on there seven years and I've had people come along say to me 'Oh I've got a house' and do you know how bad that makes me feel after they've been on the housing a year?

Stephanie feels very strongly about how she has been treated by the system.

I feel like I'm still in the violence. I feel like I'm still being punished. I feel like I'm being punished for leaving the domestic violence. I feel like the council is punishing me now. I'm being punished by the government. For leaving. Now I know why a lot of women stay and get on with it and let it happen. Every Christmas I cry because another year has passed and I'm still not housed.

Q If someone had said to you while you were with your first husband, 'OK you want to leave him, but if you leave him you will still be in temporary accommodation in seven years' time and you still won't know where you are going to go.' Would you have stayed?

A I would have stayed. I would have put up with it. But in the end I don't know what would have happened to me. I'd probably be dead anyway because I probably would have done it to myself or he would have done it. I'd have probably ended up living in a mental hospital or something. Sometimes I think that's the way it's going to go. That the kids will be living with mum and I'll be living somewhere else away from the children.

The children have been badly affected by the moves and uncertainty.

When I first left my husband, I think the children thought I'd left them, a couple of times. That's what they are scared of now... they are very close, very clingy, if they could sleep with me now they will. When I was in the first temporary house they were always coming in and getting in the bed, 'Can we sleep with you?'

And they've seen me in violence. They know how ill I can get. I came out of the violence very, very ill and skinny, like a skeleton.

I think it started from being pushed and shoved and moved. Because they don't know where they are going. They're like that now. If I could I would stay in this borough,

because of their schooling. They get on so well at school now. Chelsea doesn't want to go back to Newham at all.

Stephanie describes the effect meeting Barnardo's staff had on her.

I met Barnardo's in the market after I had been homeless for about two years. A lady was coming around saying 'Do you live in temporary accommodation, do you need some help?' I jumped at it. And I've been there ever since. Didn't think I'd be there that long. When you come from domestic violence and you're left just to hang there you feel that sometimes, you need someone to talk to and help you with what you've got to do. You don't know the council or what their policies are. They have all these policies but some of them have clause 99 and clause thingie, who knows the clauses?

That's why I got more ill. I got so frustrated because it scared me. I can't deal with the housing. When I go there I get very nervous. I start panicking before I get in there. I start shouting. I raise my voice and I panic or I might just sit there and cry. And they wonder what's going on, you know. So I have to make sure I've got someone with me when I go in there. I sort myself out, go in quick and get out.

I feel like Barnardo's are part of my family now. I feel very welcome. I feel a lot of love there, you know. When you don't feel good everybody welcomes you. That's why I like going. When you get down, you've got someone. I feel that, I feel that I'm part of the family now, a bigger family because you've always been there, for such a long while now. Actually I always say that if I didn't have Barnardo's then I think I wouldn't be here.

Interview Seven

“*When I was evicted, I became a non-person*”

Samantha and her three children, Dean aged 15 and twin girls, Amy and Emily aged 18 months live in a temporary one bedroom flat, together with the family's remaining furniture from their last settled accommodation, which was a three bedroom flat. The temporary flat is being used to house homeless families until it is demolished in a redevelopment.

The flat is very cramped, with nowhere for the girls to play. Samantha sleeps with the two girls in the bedroom. Dean sleeps on a couch in the living room. I interview Samantha in the bedroom.

Samantha has been found intentionally homeless by the local authority for non-payment of rent. Only households who are unintentionally homeless are entitled to be rehoused under housing legislation and the family have now been told that they must leave their temporary accommodation. This also means that the family no longer appear in the statistics as homeless.

I was evicted from my flat after I had lived there for eight years. There was a dispute over repairs. In 1998 there was a flood and the ceiling collapsed. I stayed with my mum for 10 months. The repairs were not properly done and I was flooded again. I remember hearing the dripping sound, then I found water running down the live electricity wiring and into my daughter's stereo. There was arbitration, but they only agreed to pay for the stereo.

Around 1999, things started going to pieces. I was studying full-time and working part-time, but I got very depressed over my housing situation. I have fought depression for most of my life. I ended up leaving the job and dropping out of college. That same year, my aunt died. That was an awful year.

Around this time I stopped paying the rent. I felt that they had robbed me all those years when I was paying for accommodation I couldn't safely live in. By 2002 I was really in debt.

I completely lost heart. Around 2003 I started to pay rent again, but by then it was too late. I was declared intentionally homeless. When you've seen it laid out in black and white, that you are intentionally homeless, you feel very judged. I could have appealed, but I was so depressed, I didn't do anything and then it was too late.

When I was evicted, I became a non-person. No one helps you. You get passed around from person to person. My housing officer told me 'I didn't want this case!' Imagine how that made me feel.

I was put in here with my son, but was broken into almost straight away. I was seven months pregnant with the twins. They offered me a hostel in Queens Road, but I couldn't face living there and sharing toilets so I stayed here. I was told I would be here for three months.

Where we live now is terrible. Flats are broken into all the time. I have never seen so many drug addicts as there are here. There are always needles lying around and the lift, when it works, stinks like a toilet.

When the girls were born, it got much worse. As soon as they began walking, I couldn't keep them safe. They keep running into danger, falling off the bed and knocking into things. Thankfully, they have had nothing worse than a few bruises as a result. I have to be extra vigilant all the time.

I always take them out all day. From early in the morning, right through to the evening. We just sleep here. It's not as bad in the summer, but in the winter, I have to take them to my sisters. I have had two winters in here with the girls, I can't take another one. The idea of another winter in here...

My son is also so depressed about living here. His school work has gone right down and this is a really important time for him to do well.

The only good thing that has happened to me is meeting Barnardo's. They put a leaflet through the door and I saw it said families in temporary accommodation. I might not have gone there, but someone came round and knocked on the door to follow up. The fact that they followed up made me go. The playgroup is a godsend and the welfare rights...

At first I felt ashamed and embarrassed to be living like this, but getting the chance to talk about it helped me put things into perspective. At first I felt like nobody, a non-person, but you can begin to pull yourself up with the right support.

I am a woman who will speak up and after I met Barnardo's I spoke to the newspapers, BBC2 and the radio. I felt good about doing that.

These kinds of living conditions have got to stop for all people. Yes, I was found intentionally homeless, but do my kids have to live like this forever? It's not right.

Because the family have no right to social housing, Samantha could ask Social Services for support. However, some local authorities have only been offering to accommodate the children and not the parents, and even when they house the whole family it is often only in the worst temporary accommodation, so Samantha decided to look for private rented accommodation. However, the rent will be at a higher level than she will be able to afford unless it can be paid by housing benefit. Although Samantha is highly intelligent and could do a wide variety of work, it is likely to be several years before there is any chance of the family being economically self-sufficient.

Because I have been declared intentionally homeless, I have to look for private accommodation. I have found somewhere and I should be out of here in a couple of weeks. It's £950 a month, but I hope housing benefit will pay most of the rent. It's a three bedroom flat and the lease is for three years. As long as I pay the rent, when the lease runs out I can apply to the council again as homeless.

The first thing I am going to do when I get somewhere decent to live is to have my family round for a meal. That's the kind of person I am. I want to be able to have my family round.

Interview Eight

“ *It's just so much stress on me alone* ”

Sarah and her children, Leon aged 4 and Lisa aged 2 live in a temporary council flat in the same London borough they are homeless in following the flooding of her previous accommodation. There has been a long standing dispute with the local authority over this. They have been homeless for just under five months, but previously lived in a barely habitable flat for a year. The entryphone in the temporary accommodation doesn't work, so I have to phone a mobile number when I get there in order to get in.

The block is run down and is being used to house homeless households pending decisions on their cases. Sarah's flat has no carpet and not much furniture. A settee was too big to get through the door and had to be thrown away apart from the cushions, which are now on the floor and are the only soft seating in the flat.

The family has just been warned that they may be found intentionally homeless and evicted from their temporary accommodation.

Sarah describes living in a flooded flat for a year, with the final month also without electricity.

I was flooded out from my previous place for a year. Every time the plumbers got there, they made the plumbing worse. Then they found the leak and sorted it out, but they still had to come in and suck the water out. The council came in and switched off the electricity because it was dangerous. They turned off the electric in January and I didn't move out until 28th February. So a month with no electricity. All this time I was in that environment with my kids and the water was stinking.

The children have asthma; if the weather changes or they are in a damp place then it just comes on. All that time we were sleeping in the wet flat it was really bad. That's why Yasmin (Children's Services Manager Barnardo's Akwaaba Centre) tried to get help for me because of my son. One day he went to school and the teacher said he is too chesty to go to school. I said 'Well he's going back into the house and it's wet'. And it was just stressful. He was sick all the time.

I don't even know what to think about it... I don't. Before I start talking about it to them, to Akwaaba, it's just; when I go in there they can see the stress. Sometimes I go in there and I am crying, or I scream and shout. My little son he couldn't do nothing basically because, you know, I scream. Then they see that and they ask if everything is alright and then I tell them about the flooding.

Half the flat is damaged, the lady upstairs told me it's not only me; it's the same reason why they moved out the woman that was living there before. So it's always going to be flooded. And that was my kids' bedroom. And my kids they have asthma as well. It was a nightmare going to the doctors a lot of the time. Somewhere with flood and damage the asthma will be worse. It was just constant damp. The stairs everywhere flooded.

I had to light the flat with candles; that can be dangerous. Where the water come down in from the bedroom into the kitchen all the floorboard is lifted up.

Sarah has many problems dealing with the local authority.

Every time I go there they were irritated more. I videoed the damage and showed it to them and they mislaid the video. They can't find it because they don't want no evidence against them really. You know, I was doing everything.

The inspector told me to go homeless. I went to the homeless place and they gave me this straight away which wasn't bad but I had to register the property with LEB. They told me they need a reference number from the council before they will come and put on the electric. The council housing officer gave me a hard time; she said it's nothing to do with them.

Also at the moment they want me to pay two rents, for both places. I can't pay full rent of £70 and £70. That's £140; I don't get that much a week. I applied for a loan from the DHS (the Benefits Agency) to carpet this place but they say they can't help me because it's a temporary accommodation. It's working out hard for my little son; it took him a long time to settle. It took a month until I got the gas in here as well. It was so hard going to the café every day, spending, eating out every day with two kids.

Accessing nursery provision for her children now takes Sarah several hours a day as the temporary accommodation is a long way from the family's previous address.

Getting to the nursery on the bus with two kids every day is just terrible. The nursery is in Deptford. Before I lived across the road. Most of the time now my son is always late. I get two kids up in the morning and take them both to the nursery. I come back here with Lisa for two hours then back to Deptford. And it is still a nightmare but at least Leon is settling down. He loves the nursery that little one. He is very good, very bright little boy but very hyperactive as well. Everyone knows him in Akwaaba.

When I drop off Leon at 9am, sometimes 10, I come back here with my daughter, which is about 11am. Have to go back for 1pm with Lisa. Then at 4pm I have to go and get them. I can pick them both up at the same time. All together I spend over three hours a day taking children to nursery. Before, it was just across the road and would take ten minutes.

Sarah's problems have become very serious and complicated because she has not been able to convince the local authority that she is unable to move back to her previous address.

My housing officer came here last week to give me a letter to say that the council phoned up the homeless people to give me notice from here because I am not homeless. They say my place is ready, but when I went round there, there's no electricity. So I ask for a review because they are going to take me to court about that. They are going to put me in the street basically with my kids. I don't know what is going to happen. They want me on the streets with my kids but I'm not going. I am saying 'No!'

They say I'm not homeless because according to them the place in Deptford is ready, it's all been sorted out according to them, but at the same time it ain't been started on, it's got rotten floors, still damp, blackness, it's got squatters in there, the windows are broken because you got people going in and out there all day long, and it's apparently ready. It's been broken into through the back and everyone, all the local kids are in there, puffing the drugs in there and there's empty cans of beer in there. And they say it's ready!

I want to live there but I can't because the place is not fixed. They need to do the kids' bedroom, the whole ceiling and the walls, plus the bathroom, kitchen and the hall stairs. It's rotten, everything is.

I couldn't settle in this (temporary) flat, I had no money but I had to feed my kids. I think I am doing my best but... It's just so much stress on me alone.

Interview Nine

“*They don't care how we are living*”

Maria lives in a temporary, two bedroom flat with her husband Paul and two children, David and Michael, aged 2 and 11. The rent is £330 per week.

I used to live in private property and it was very bad. The flat was very damp. All that time we didn't have central heating and we were living there three years. That's when I found Barnardo's. Jenny (Welfare Rights Worker) guided me about that damp. The landlord didn't want to do anything to repair that flat and Jenny gave me the name of the solicitor and then the landlord said he is going to repair but he can't do it with us inside the flat so we have to come out and we were living in one room waiting for that flat to be repaired. It was supposed to be for two months, but it took more than five months because I remember that I was already pregnant and I was living in one room and I was very anxious and I was stressed. Then I went to the homeless.

First we were in Bed and Breakfast; it was a one bedroom flat really. I was pregnant. We were there just for one week. Then they moved us to a two bedroom flat in Streatham. Then they have to move us again because the ceiling from the bathroom collapsed onto my leg. We could see that it's not safe and since we moved there they said they are going to repair it. They didn't do anything until the collapse of the ceiling. I was taking a shower and I heard a strange noise and I thought 'Oh the ceiling is going to fall!' So I run. When I reached the door I couldn't take all my body outside so my leg it was trapped by the ceiling. We didn't call the ambulance, I just went to the surgery the next day and he gives me some cream. It was a year ago and I still have a black mark.

It was a month before we were moved. I remember I was looking at the ceiling and afraid that the other half is going to come down. We had to still use the bathroom; the toilet is there as well. I had to stay there and do everything quickly (when using the bathroom).

So I was very, very angry with the landlord. I went there and I said 'When are you going to move me? I am there with my children and my husband and it is very dangerous to leave like that.' At that moment they give me the letter and said you are going to move right now. On the same day!

They are getting £330 a week for this flat, quite a good amount! But they don't care how we are living. When we moved in we didn't have any sofa, we didn't have any beds, the floor was very dirty and I said 'I'm not going to move there, I'm going to stay with Lambeth' and the manager from the agency said 'No, no Madam I am going to do

everything, I am going to put a carpet there, I am going...' But we have to move like that, no carpet, all the dirty things; we haven't got a fridge or a sofa. The little one shares a bed with us because the other room is very, very small.

Every morning the music plays. Before it was an old lady lived there and it was all quiet and then one lady moved in there with a boyfriend I think and all the time they were shouting, fighting, because their door was slamming all the time, they broke a beaker. They were playing the music very loud whilst my son was sleeping and we said, 'you have to turn down the music because my son is sleeping and he is going to wake up.' And they say 'Sorry, sorry, yeah, we are going to turn down the music.' But they didn't and we were too tired to talk about it. Now it is the music everyday.

Maria did not receive a letter from the council offering her a permanent accommodation and has been told that her case is now closed and she is being evicted in 28 days.

We were on holiday and we reported that, we said that we are going to be on holiday since the 8th August. I sent a letter to my case worker and her colleague, recorded delivery. I have the record. I called as well before I leave for holiday and he said 'Yes, it is already on the computer that you are going on holiday.' So they knew we were not here and they still sent an offer. That's why I am saying it is on purpose.

I didn't get a letter at all because when I came back I check all my mail and it wasn't here. My family were checking as well, inside the flat all the time I was out and there wasn't any letter from the council. No, I don't know what is going to happen because Jenny wrote a letter for us and we are waiting for a response because they said we have to leave this temporary accommodation in 28 days.

Actually my biggest one, Michael, is always saying to me, when are we going to move to our proper house? Because we have told him this is just temporary and he doesn't like it, you know, moving around all the time, he says 'No, I am with my friends.' He still goes to the same school, but it takes an hour to get there. I have to take him.

He will be changing to secondary school next year, so we have to apply right now but we are lost because what happens if we move maybe next month all the secondary schools that we have applied are this side? So... I don't know.

I want to have my own house. I want to move. Because you know, we can't live like that, you are anxious waiting for the letter and the letter doesn't come. You have to still wait and because if you are living in temporary accommodation you stand by and don't do anything because mostly you can't... because if you have your own home you have to do little by little but it's your own and you can buy new things.

Following Barnardo's representations, Maria's eviction was cancelled and she should receive another offer of accommodation.

Interview Ten

“*They should make sure that the people inside will be secure*”

Aleksander (A) and his wife, Liaise, his son Eric (E) aged 8, daughter Flutura aged 3, and new born baby girl Lena have been in temporary accommodation for a year. They currently live in a local authority flat which is being used as temporary accommodation until the estate can be demolished and redeveloped. The family were originally from Kosovo and have leave to remain in the UK.

Previously, the family have lived in both a B&B and a hostel. Although they preferred the hostel, the B&B was better run.

(A) They kept me for two days in a hotel. After the hotel they sent me to a hostel. It was not good. But you know they didn't have any other place at that point. They put us where they can. When I go I find it was not cleaned, it was without beds. We went in and decided that as long as you were inside it was ok; and after that they sent me to this place where I am now.

I have to take beds from outside and put them inside. I couldn't even find the person who was looking after the hostel. When I found someone it was eight in the night time. I turned around and I say 'hey man, there is no bed or nothing in here.' He said 'let me give a call.' He was saying to me 'We will take two beds from one other place.'

It was messed up from the start. We buy some stuff ourselves. The people who working in that temporary accommodation, they spend a lot but it doesn't mean they try make you happy and keep things clean.

It was the council people who ran it. We had one room really and there was a bathroom for everyone. I don't know how many shared. There was a toilet in the corridor. It was shared.

The toilet it was disgusting. You can share everything but not the toilet... the thing is the children. The people who are in charge of the hostels, they don't do the real work that has to be done. For example cleaning them or something like that. You have to clean everywhere by yourself, corridors and everything.

The hotel was clean and you have service. In the hostel you didn't have any service, maybe it was just that one. The hostel was better because you are living in a more open room, it was a bigger room. In a hotel you also have one room but it is not a big room. You could cook in the hostel. In the hotel you couldn't cook at all, just have breakfast.

In the hotel you have people (the staff) day, morning and evening. In the hostel there was a man in the morning. Once a week I saw him. That hostel where I was, was more bad than any hotel. The hotel was small but you have a service.

When I need to find someone for the washing machine in the hostel, you had to go and look for him. In that place the service was very low. No let's say no service. Because that man just came one time and then ran away. There were two people in charge but I didn't see the other one at all.

My children are small; they are very sensitive about clean toilets and stuff. Everything I washed it, I cleaned the floor, maybe every time. I never saw anybody else cleaning. I clean it every time because of the children because they can get very easily infections.

A year ago... I meet with Garry (Barnardo's Welfare Right Worker). Garry was very personable. I know in myself I have so much respect of him. He is a very hard worker and I went in a place when I went to East London, you know when you go in to make interviews. Everything I was checking with Garry and always he done the best he can.

This is my view. I know you, I know Garry, I know Lorna and Dani (Barnardo's Project Workers). I thank all of you, you are such a great help. If they can help they do, if they can't they do the best they can, they do very hard work.

The family cannot afford any leisure pursuits, but were able to attend a trip organised by Barnardo's.

Barnardo's is doing great for the kids. You know when we go with Dani to the cinema, to the Imax, you were very happy.

(E) Yes, I liked that film. I was scared because it went to your eyes (the film was in 3D). You can try and grab them but I couldn't. I wanted to go there before but we couldn't because it was too expensive. Because the popcorn was expensive and everything. It was expensive in there. I don't know where to get all that money.

Aleksander is not sure what the future holds. Eric has his own opinions about the lack of housing.

(A) I don't know what's going to happen with my housing. I refused one that was too small and they agreed. There are five people now in here. They will give me one final offer.

(E) At school they say council houses is less. Because there are millions of houses in the United Kingdom for sale, but no council. I think they should be about 100,000, not 193,000 (£) or over because that's too much.

(A) He watches TV a lot and learns it from TV. Everything he gets from the news from the TV. It goes up into his head.

(E) I knew that by myself. Yeah, I can see loads from here. (The family live near some major Central London private housing developments).

The temporary flat is not secure and has been broken into. All the family's possessions were taken, even the cutlery.

I was just upset the first time. I went in the area housing office and asked them to give me any help and I think that they didn't give it to me to be honest. Even my housing officer... nobody. One thing is in here the people who are dealing the housing they should have to make sure that when they put them somewhere, that the people inside will be secure.

The thieves are very clever. I don't know if it was easy or hard for them but when I found my flat open... I don't know what can I say? You know, when you have seen someone has taken your stuff that's the point when... So (long pause)... You can ask me if I need to say something, I don't know... what can I say...?

Our main concerns

We welcome initiatives that the government has taken, particularly the reduction in the numbers of families with children being placed in B&B accommodation. However, based on the experiences of the homeless families using our services, we currently have seven main areas of concern about the direction of policy on family homelessness, which will have to be addressed if the Every Child Matters outcomes are to be met for the homeless children we meet. These are outlined below together with our recommendations, which follow in the next section.

1. Our overriding concern is that homelessness has been steadily growing to unprecedented levels and has been matched by a reduction in the provision of social housing. We are concerned that the current target to provide 30,000 new social homes a year will be insufficient to provide the accommodation that is required, particularly as it would take over twelve years simply to get back to the number of social homes in 1997 at this rate. The overall ODPM target for reducing the numbers of homeless households in priority need in temporary accommodation by 50% by 2010⁵ is also a much too modest target, particularly given that this will still leave more statutorily homeless households than the present administration inherited in 1997. Yet there are homes. The Empty Homes Agency estimates that there are 870,000 empty homes in the UK, plus empty commercial property which could convert into 420,000 homes.⁶
2. There are many more families with children who are housed in temporary accommodation than appear in the government's official homelessness statistics. The Mayor of London's *State of London's Children Report* identifies a serious problem of hidden homelessness in the Capital.⁷ Families who find their own temporary accommodation, or who are placed there by social services, or by asylum and refugee agencies do not appear in the official statistics. Our FiTA Project targets families with the greatest need and in the worst temporary accommodation. Out of the 1,213 homeless families (with 2,431 children) who have received services for this reason since 2001, around 650 (54%) did not appear in the official statistics, 541 because they were asylum seekers and over a hundred who were excluded for other reasons.
3. The government's very welcome action to prevent families with children being placed in bed and breakfast accommodation, except briefly in an emergency, only applies to statutorily homeless families and not, for example, to the families placed in B&B by social services departments or asylum and refugee agencies. There is also a lot of other accommodation similar in nature to B&B, but not classed as such unless it is both owned and managed in the private sector.

5 Homes for All, ODPM Five Year Plan, January 2005. ODPM News Release 2005/007 24.1.05.

6 See www.emptyhomes.com.

7 Mayor of London – *The State of London's Children Report*, December 2004.

4. We are very concerned about the costs of temporary accommodation. The chronic lack of affordable social housing has led to a growth in investment by private individuals in property which is rented to local authorities as temporary accommodation for homeless households. As a result of this, increasing numbers of children and families are being housed in insecure and unsustainably expensive housing, some of which is also of very poor quality. We regularly meet families who have been housed temporarily in ex-council accommodation, which has been leased back by the owners to local authorities, but at rents in excess of £300 per week. Inflated rents are being subsidised by public funds, but with no long term gain except for the private individuals who have invested in the 'buy to let' market which homelessness has opened up.

Nevertheless we meet many families who accept expensive private sector rented accommodation as an option when the only other choice is living in the worst temporary accommodation.

We also meet many families who have been temporarily housed in local authority or housing association property at much higher rents than tenants would pay. We think that many of these arrangements could be converted into secure, affordable social tenancies.

Some housing associations are now buying property, which is let to homeless households, with a view to converting temporary arrangements into permanent ones. We think these schemes are preferable to private investment because they offer the possibility of secure tenancies and affordable social rents. The disadvantage is that the rent can only reduce to an affordable level after more than ten or fifteen years due to the costs of servicing debt. Local authorities' capacity to finance such schemes themselves is limited, as any borrowing by them appears in the overall public sector borrowing figure (which is not the case with housing associations).

Parents who work for minimum wages will only earn around £200 per week in a full-time job. They will be entitled to tax credits and some benefits, but can still end up in a benefits trap where they are no better off, or worse off, if they work. Schemes such as 'Working Futures' can prevent this for some families by subsidising rents directly, rather than through housing benefit. This does not address the root problem that there is not enough affordable housing and may actually help push rents higher.

It will be very difficult for the government to reach its poverty eradication targets unless it tackles the issue of high rents and the benefits poverty trap. This is particularly an issue in London where rents are very high.

5. There have been indications that the government will change the statutory definition of one or both of 'homelessness' and 'temporary accommodation.' After the statutory homeless figures went over 100,000 in December 2004 *The Guardian* reported the responses of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Housing Minister:

'This is not a *Cathy Come Home* situation,' Mr Prescott told listeners to the BBC's *Today* radio programme, referring to the 1966 Ken Loach-directed documentary drama. He added: 'Now homelessness is not about people living on the street, basically what it means is they don't have a settled arrangement.'

The next day, Lord Rooker, the minister responsible for homelessness, confirmed that the government was looking to redefine homelessness to avoid the confusion between those in temporary accommodation and those sleeping rough. 'The vast majority of these households are in self-contained dwellings, they are not roofless or sleeping in shop doorways,' he said.⁸

We are very concerned that this could have the effect of reducing the numbers of officially homeless households, but without providing secure accommodation for families with children. This will be greatly to the detriment of homeless families in London.

6. There is a proposal for a London wide 'choice based lettings' scheme, which on the face of it would be to the benefit of homeless families. However, the current localised schemes are not leading to improved choice for any families we have met, although we have met families who have used all the main existing schemes in London. Families find that they never get the properties they choose, which leads to a sense of despair and hopelessness far worse than was experienced when they were simply given one offer of permanent accommodation.⁹ We are also meeting many families who are being placed in accommodation far from their home boroughs.
7. Our last concern is that the provision of floating support for homeless families, which we believe is both cheaper and more effective in encouraging independence than accommodating families in homeless hostels and also has a track record of empowering homeless families generally to take more control over their lives, receives very little statutory funding. For the past eight years, the entire cost of providing the services of the FiTA project have been met by Barnardo's voluntary fundraising. There should be more of a partnership between voluntary agencies such as Barnardo's and statutory bodies to facilitate the provision of these services. Relatively inexpensive support at the right time can make a very big difference for a homeless family and significantly improve the outcomes for children, which Every Child Matters aspires to.

8 Matt Weaver, *The Guardian*, 17.12.04.

9 See Barnardo's LEaSE Region response to the Draft London Housing Strategy 2005 – 2016, which over 50 homeless families contributed to. You can download this from:
<http://services.barnardos.org.uk/fita/whatwedo.jsp>

Recommendations – What we would like to see happen

We recognise that there are many competing demands for public money, but think that the provision of social housing for homeless children and families should receive a higher priority for the resources that are available. The decline in the availability of social housing for those who need it should be reversed. We recognise that some families will need temporary accommodation if they become homeless. However, it is unacceptable that very large numbers of families are spending such long periods of time in temporary accommodation. It is also unacceptable that so much temporary accommodation is unaffordable and often of poor quality, as well as being insecure. Children and families need decent, secure and affordable housing, if the aspirations of Every Child Matters are to be met. Although we would like to see all the points below implemented, any one of these could improve the lives of homeless children and families.

1. The long term use of temporary accommodation for homeless families should end and a limit be placed on the amount of time a homeless family can be housed in temporary accommodation.
2. In recognition of the enormous scale of the problem of family homelessness in the capital, there should be additional specific action to tackle the problem and implement these recommendations in London.
3. The current 50% target for reducing statutory homelessness is not acceptable. A target which aims to eradicate long term homelessness for families with children should be set.
4. No families with children should be housed in B&B accommodation, whether or not they are statutorily homeless. We accept that B&B may have to be used in an emergency, but this should only be very short term.
5. No families with children should be housed in accommodation which is similar in nature to B&B, but which is currently excluded from the definition of B&B because it is not owned and managed in the private sector. We accept that this accommodation may have to be used in an emergency, but this should only be very short term.
6. Minimum standards of decency for all forms of temporary accommodation should be effectively enforced.

7. Public money spent renting private sector accommodation should be invested in social housing, which would be of long term benefit to the wider community, not just the private investors. It is difficult to see how private sector rented accommodation can be economically sustainable as a long term solution for family homelessness.
8. Local authority and housing association property which is being used as temporary accommodation should be converted into secure, affordable social tenancies.
9. Housing associations which have bought properties to house homeless families, but have to let these at high rents to service their borrowing should receive debt relief to enable them to charge affordable rents.
10. Instead of subsidising high rents through housing benefit, or back to work schemes, which only addresses a symptom of the homelessness problem, the root problem, which is the lack of affordable housing, should be directly addressed.
11. Local authorities should be given more powers to borrow money to invest in social housing.
12. More schemes to enable tenants of social housing to buy in the private sector and incentives to encourage tenants who live in social housing, which is larger than they need, to move should be developed; and those that already exist should be extended.
13. Empty residential property should be brought back into use and suitable empty commercial property converted into homes.
14. The definitions of 'homelessness' and 'temporary accommodation' in current legislation should not be changed. Families with children who are homeless and in priority need should continue to be defined as 'homeless' and their accommodation defined as 'temporary' until they are accommodated in a decent, secure and affordable property.
15. Choice based lettings arrangements must provide some real choice of accommodation for homeless families, who should not face involuntary moves long distances from their home boroughs.
16. Statutory funding should be provided for some of the floating support charities such as Barnardo's provide to homeless families.