

# More Britons than ever forced into homelessness due to rent increases

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In the run up to the New Year, the cross-party Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of MPs called homelessness a “national crisis.” They revealed that more than 9,000 people were rough sleepers and 78,000 families were living in temporary accommodation in England alone.

Homelessness is hitting families that previously would not have been affected.

In his report, “Still No Place Like Home,” Michael King—the local government and social care ombudsman—notes that in 2016-17 one in three complaints received about homelessness services delivered by English authorities came from outside London. A majority were from people who found themselves in a situation where they have been “forced to call on their local council’s help by the increasing unaffordability of private tenancies.”

King said, “Our cases show many preconceived ideas about the people affected by homelessness simply no longer ring true. The increasing cost of private rents has meant we have seen a shift towards more people in professions such as nursing, and their families, becoming affected.”

Many families are finding themselves on the brink of homelessness due to being priced out of the housing market. One-third of cases involved councils in South-East England, often in affluent areas with high housing costs, such as Berkshire, Sussex and Kent.

“People are coming to us not because they have a ‘life crisis’ or a drug and alcohol problem, but because they are losing what they thought was a stable private-sector tenancy, being evicted and then being priced out of the [rental] market,” King said.

In April 2004, the government introduced legislation to limit the use of bed and breakfast (B&B) accommodation for homeless families—*The*

*Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order 2003*. The law states that bed and breakfast accommodation is not suitable for families or pregnant women unless no other accommodation is available and, even then, must *only* be provided for a maximum of six weeks.

During 2016-17, 450 complaints were issued to the Ombudsman concerning temporary accommodation and homelessness. Of the cases investigated, a staggering 70 percent found that councils were at fault.

*There’s Still No Place Like Home* references the 2013 report, *No Place Like Home*, on the inappropriate use by councils of bed and breakfasts (B&Bs) to house families. Four years later, the same problems have worsened and there has been no coordinated response nationally in implementing recommendations—put forward by the ombudsman—to avoid people being shoved into B&Bs “for months on end.”

The horror stories featured in this year’s report reveal a situation comparable with Victorian slum housing. Living conditions for many are such that many councils—following a complaint to the ombudsman—spend thousands of pounds paying compensation to residents due to the poor state of the accommodation they provided.

One family with two young children lost their home when they were evicted from their private tenancy and were placed in a B&B. They all lived in one room together and had to share washing and cooking facilities with other tenants. The shower didn’t work, and cockroaches were found in their bedroom. The owner did not address these problems and they spent significantly longer than is legal in the accommodation. The council paid the £1,750 in compensation.

Other stories show the impact of welfare cuts on the most vulnerable. A single mother with a

disability—requiring the use of crutches—and her four children were forced into B&B after they became homeless due to her welfare benefits changing.

The council placed her in an unsuitable property with steps separating key facilities. To worsen the situation, “the rooms were two floors apart so Susie [the mother] would either be separated from one or more of her children, or they had to share crowded conditions.” The accommodation was found to be uninhabitable due to its appalling condition. Despite this, they lived in this situation for two years and four months.

Council delays causing additional stress on the poorest are detailed in the case of Rebecca, a mother of three children, including a baby with Type 1 diabetes. They were housed in a B&B without access to cooking facilities. The council made Rebecca wait until bailiffs came to evict her before rehousing the family in temporary accommodation. She was moved on numerous occasions between different types of housing, each one unsuitable. Her baby son was hospitalized due to infections. The report concluded, “The council had plenty of opportunity to secure suitable accommodation for Rebecca and her family before she became homeless, but failed to do so.”

In another case, the council paid out £2,325 for the injustice caused to a family who had to live in a single room with one kitchen shared with five other families. The kitchen had only one working hob and was filthy, and bed bugs were found along with stained bedding.

Under the Conservative government’s austerity programme, councils are under immense pressure due to the slashing of budgets. This is set to worsen, with councils facing a £5.8 billion overall funding shortfall by 2020.

The reduction and removal of vitally needed services—carried out mainly by the Labour Party-led councils in urban areas—has resulted in many thousands of job losses, leading to mistakes being made to the detriment of many families.

The most graphic example of the indifference of the authorities to the fate of those thrust into homelessness is that of the Grenfell fire survivors. Out of 208 households that needed homes following the tragedy, 118 are still in hotels and bed and breakfasts(B&Bs) or living with friends, including 29 families with children. The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council has acted unlawfully by having families spend more

than six weeks in B&B accommodation. When the figure is adjusted to include residents forced to leave blocks adjacent to Grenfell Tower, it is estimated that a staggering 857 people, including 303 children, spent Christmas in temporary accommodation.

The PAC’s figures are damning, but they are an underestimation of the true number of homeless people in one of the richest countries on the planet.

The BBC reported in December on the phenomenon of the hidden homeless. Usually young people, who are dubbed “sofa surfers,” find themselves sleeping in friends’ houses as a stop-gap before they eventually get their own accommodation. However, some youth interviewed had been doing this for over six years. This group are usually not included in official statistics, but UK-wide research commissioned by the BBC found that out of 1,000 questioned, “41% of young people had stayed with friends for at least one night and 9% did so for over a month.”



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