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Citation for published version:

Sen, R, Smeeton, J & Thoburn, J 2022, 'A safe place of one's own? Exploring practice and policy dilemmas in child welfare practice with families waiting for adequate and secure housing', *European Journal of Social Work* . <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2022.2083084>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/13691457.2022.2083084](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2022.2083084)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

European Journal of Social Work

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To cite this article: Robin Sen, Joe Smeeton & June Thoburn (2022): A safe place of one's own? Exploring practice and policy dilemmas in child welfare practice with families waiting for adequate and secure housing, European Journal of Social Work, DOI: [10.1080/13691457.2022.2083084](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2022.2083084)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2022.2083084>



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A safe place of one's own? Exploring practice and policy dilemmas in child welfare practice with families waiting for adequate and secure housing

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ABSTRACT

As in many European states, a shortage of housing in England has resulted in some families who are 'waiting for' adequate and secure housing in England while also having the 'weight of' their children being placed outside their care hanging over them. This paper reports on the development of a practice guidance document that included an online survey with 38 children's social services practitioners in England regarding their practice experiences of responding to family homelessness. Findings suggest the complexity of the issue of family homelessness and implicitly highlight its neglect within contemporary research and policy in the UK. Homeless families are caught between the constraints of housing shortages and the complexity of the needs underpinning their homelessness. Despite these constraints, social work practice has an important role to play in providing, or facilitating families' pathway to, housing advocacy and advice. Most importantly of all, social work practice can maximise families' access to statutory family support provision so that families can be helped to remain together wherever this is safely possible. Suggestions for practice, policy, and research development are outlined.



KEYWORDS

Family homelessness; housing; social work; family support; out-of-home care

Introduction

This special edition is about the experience of those 'waiting for' the welfare state to meet essential needs and the professional practices underpinning such waiting. This paper addresses the theme by exploring social work practice with families who are 'waiting for' adequate and secure housing in England while simultaneously having the 'weight of' their children being placed outside their care hanging over them. It draws on practice guidance developed for social workers in England to support improved working practices with families waiting for secure housing. The work was underpinned by three foci:

- What evidence is there on the needs and legal entitlements of homeless families in the UK?
- What are social workers' views and experience of practice with families who are homeless or in housing need in England?
- How can families who are homeless or in housing need be supported by children's social services?

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Supplemental data for this article can be accessed here <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2022.2083084>

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The guidance document includes an evidence review of published research on family homelessness, a review of statutory social workers' legal powers and duties related to family homelessness and findings from a survey of social workers regarding their practice experiences with homeless families. The impetus for developing the guidance was anecdotal reports from specialist charities that some families were being placed under pressure to agree that their children be placed in care due while waiting for appropriate housing, rather than being offered suitable temporary accommodation or financial support to find housing as a family. The authors became aware of these reports through their membership of the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) England Children and Families Group – BASW is the largest representative body of social workers in the UK. The authors took forward the development of the guidance on behalf of, and with feedback from, the group on its development. The group includes a number of child and family social work practitioners. The guidance is best understood as a knowledge exchange project with social workers on practice around family homelessness, based on an evidence review and a survey of social workers' experiences and views related to this practice.

The paper presents contextual information surrounding the families' wait for adequate housing in England, before presenting an abridged version of the evidence review from the guidance document as this paper's literature review section. It then provides an overview of the survey methodology, before presenting key relevant findings from the survey. The paper subsequently draws out some implications from the survey findings and wider evidence for improved social work practice, policy and research in this area, before concluding.

Terminology and scope

Consistent with UK legislation, the terminology of 'homeless' is used to indicate situations where a family is without secure accommodation, or at risk of losing secure accommodation, in the subsequent 56-day period. We sometimes additionally refer to families 'in housing need' to denote situations where families are experiencing housing precarity beyond this, including living in unsafe housing of various kinds, or insanitary conditions.

Housing and homelessness in the UK and Europe

Compared to most European states, the UK has a high proportion of owner-occupied housing, with volatile but generally sharply increasing property prices, and a relatively small private housing sector, where tenure is insecure compared to long-term rental security in several other European countries, most notably Germany (McCrone & Stephens, 2017). The UK is also unusual within western Europe in having, for decades after 1945, large parts of its social housing sector owned and managed directly by local government (McCrone & Stephens, 2017). The majority of such social housing is today owned and managed by non-governmental charitable housing associations, although local authorities still own and manage social housing stock (MCHLG, 2020). Local authorities in the UK also still retain responsibility for providing eligible homeless families with temporary and emergency accommodation, though this may be in purchased places in separately owned and managed refuge, hotel, hostel and bed and breakfast accommodation, as well as local authority owned housing stock.

The principles of UK housing law have been noted to be progressive in that all UK citizen families with dependent children waiting for housing are classed as in 'priority need', with an entitlement to be housed by a local authority (Gaubatz, 2001). The application of this law is though conditional in practice. Firstly, local authorities can refuse to provide long-term accommodation to anyone who they assess as having become 'intentionally homeless': this, oftentimes controversially applied, designation is applied to those deemed to be responsible, by action or inaction, for the loss of suitable

living accommodation. Secondly, there is a severe shortage of long-term social housing (Bogue, 2019). This is reflected by the statistic that, in 2020, 128,200 children in England were in families living in temporary accommodation while waiting on a long-term secure home, an increase of 75% since 2010 (Helm & Savage, 2020). Notably, social housing in England is of better overall standard than privately rented and owner-occupied property (Cross et al., 2021). The profile of those living in social housing in England also differs in important ways: half of households in social housing have one or more persons in the household with a long-term illness or disability, and there are also higher proportions of lone parents and low income households (Bogue, 2019).

The UK is far from unique within Europe in its shortage of social housing. Haran and Ó Siochrú (2017) note evidence from 2016 that over 40,000 households in Ireland had been waiting for social housing for over four years, while Hearne and Murphy's (2018) research with homeless parents in Dublin-based emergency accommodation also found homeless families' housing precarity to be rooted in a fundamental shortage of social housing provision in Ireland. More broadly, many more Europeans are now waiting for secure housing. Common factors underpinning this are: housing scarcity leading to a lack of affordability; the shrinkage of social housing provision; and an increased need for housing, particularly following the Covid crisis (Housing Europe, 2021).

Children's social services support in England

Under statutory family support provisions in England (s.17, Children Act 1989), local authorities have a duty to provide social work support to children classed as 'in need' who are living with their families, which may include providing housing for a family where a child's health or development may be impaired without it (we will refer to s.17 as 'statutory family support' hereon in). However, s.17 statutory family support provisions are a general duty in English law and case law indicates local authorities are not obliged in any particular case to provide a family with accommodation to allow a dependent child to continue living with their parents (House of Lords, 2003.) Local authorities have a more specific duty (s.20, the Children Act 1989) to place a child in out-of-home care where a parent is unwilling or unable to provide appropriate accommodation for them. This is sometimes referred to as 'voluntary accommodation' as it cannot be provided against the express wishes of a parent. As in other European states, a range of court-mandated measures to place children in out-of-home care are also available in England. These however require a local authority to evidence that there are child welfare concerns which have, or may lead to, the significant harm of a child, to the satisfaction of a family court judge. Placing a child in out-of-home care could be a temporary supportive measure for families who are waiting for adequate housing and who are in crisis, allowing them space to address immediate issues so the family can be reunited. It could also be used inappropriately by local authority children's social services to separate families who could have remained together with the provision of adequate s.17 statutory family support. Such practice would be contrary to one of the overarching principles of the Children Act 1989 – that support should be provided to help keep families together wherever possible – as well as commonly accepted social work values.

Over the last decade questions have been raised about the rising numbers, and proportions, of children in the English care system during a period of unprecedented austerity cuts to social assistance, particularly family support and youth work services, since 2010 (Sen & Webb, 2019). Challenges in balancing the 'support' and 'protection' remits within children's social services are long-established throughout European child welfare systems, with increasing numbers of children in out-of-home care in numerous European states in the 2010s (Burns et al., 2017). In England, these challenges became more acute under austerity as more families waited for adequate state support to meet their basic needs. The UN observed that the UK's austerity-driven cuts to welfare benefits were notable by their range, severity and arbitrariness (Alston, 2019). Some of the curtailment of welfare support has directly fed into housing insecurity, including reductions in the housing benefit support available (Bogue, 2019) and a new welfare benefit, Universal Credit, the introduction

of which has increased some families' indebtedness, including rent arrears, and thereby their housing precarity (Cheetham et al., 2019).

Literature review

Only one UK study was found in the period since 2000 which had an explicit focus on homeless families and families in housing need, and who also clearly had ongoing children's social services support. This was a study of an intensive family support service (Hill et al., 2002) to which families were referred because of housing issues – principally eviction, or threatened eviction, arising from anti-social behaviour or rent arrears. Anderson et al. (2006) undertook a study of a comparable family support service, but this time based within a local authority housing department in England and the extent of families' ongoing contact with children's social services is less clear in this study. Hill et al. (2002) outline that a range of other issues were evident in most families' lives beyond housing difficulties, including domestic violence, concerns about child care or child behaviour, substance misuse and criminal activity. Amongst these families were those where children's placement outside their parents' care was a serious possibility, and sometimes had already occurred (Hill et al., 2002). A more recent study of homeless families in Ireland (Haran & Ó Siochrú, 2017) also found that the majority of families at high risk of homelessness were engaged in anti-social behaviour or criminal activity and/or had wider family difficulties, including relationship breakdown, addiction, finance management difficulties and debt. Child and family social workers were likely to be involved with the families as a result. The study of Anderson et al. (2006), as well as other wider UK literature on family homelessness, broadly consistently suggests the following issues commonly accompany family homelessness in the UK: domestic violence, relationship breakdown, neighbourhood harassment and poor housing conditions (Bimpson et al., 2020; Riley et al., 2003; Tischler, 2008; Vostanis, 2002).

Taken together, this evidence suggests families' homelessness is unlikely to be the sole issue for these families. Rather it is likely to be a manifestation of a wider set of family difficulties. Most homeless families who become known to social workers will therefore require a range of support beyond provision of accommodation alone. This can include support to improve family relationships, parenting, child behavioural issues, child development, child and parental physical health, children's educational progress and child and parental emotional well-being and mental health (Anderson et al., 2006; Haran & Ó Siochrú, 2017; Hill et al., 2002; Karim et al., 2006; Riley et al., 2003; Tischler, 2008; Vostanis et al., 2001). This is an important consideration in a UK context: Gaubatz (2001) argues that the historical operation of UK housing policy has sometimes led to a siloing of service provision, with family homelessness seen solely as a housing issue, and the family's wider social needs viewed as separate to their need for safe and secure accommodation.

Different challenges are evident for another set of homeless families in the UK – those subject to 'no recourse to public funds' conditions. These conditions impose strict restrictions on the social rights to public assistance of migrants subject to immigration controls, including their right to state housing. Children's social services are not classed as a public fund and therefore many families who are subject to no recourse to public funds are nonetheless still eligible for s.17 statutory family support assistance. Some other families, such as asylum-seeking families whose claims for asylum have been turned down, are not – however these families should still legally be provided with statutory family support where the denial of it would breach Article 3 (degrading treatment) and Article 8 (right to a family life) of the European Convention of Human Rights (Project 17, 2021). The needs of families subject to no recourse to public funds are complex in the sense of the precariousness of their entitlements to social assistance. However, in distinction to the needs of other homeless families described above, these families' contact with children's social services is likely to primarily be a function of destitution and homelessness arising from their immigration status, rather than stemming from wider family issues (Dickson et al., 2020; Farmer, 2017).

The detail of which families subject to no recourse to public funds are eligible for statutory family support from children's social services is legally complex and there is evidence that social workers are

illegally denying such families social work support to which they are entitled through unlawful gate-keeping, knowingly or otherwise (Dickson et al., 2020; Farmer, 2017). Farmer's work (2017) documents how some destitute and homeless asylum-seeking parents were on the one hand denied support, and on the other threatened with their children's placement in out-of-home care, when seeking housing support from children's social services. It is notable that the tenor of some of these findings resonates with wider European evidence. Samzelius' study (2020) focused on 17 migrant lone mothers who were homeless in the Stockholm area. These mothers reported that when they approached social services for support 'they were often told that it was their 'individual responsibility' to organise a place to live for themselves and their children' (2020, p. 235), and were directed away from Swedish public welfare systems.

Notwithstanding the reasons that families are waiting for secure housing, there is clear evidence that the wait for it compounds families' difficulties. Child and parental mental health is likely to deteriorate especially since temporary housing accommodation is often insanitary, overcrowded or in premises where some fellow tenants may pose risks to children (Pennington & Garvie, 2016; Smith, 2005). Evidence from Samzelius' Swedish study (2020) offers some analogous findings in that lone homeless migrant mothers reported that, while the wait for stable housing was their principal problem, their homelessness affected all other areas of their family life. Bimpson et al. (2020) study describes how the operation of housing policy in England structurally disadvantages some mothers waiting for re-housing in temporary homeless accommodation, whose children were not in their care at that time. As a result, they were classed as single adults, rather than as families with dependent children, and no longer counted as 'in priority need' for re-housing. In turn, the lack of settled housing contributed to undermining the mothers' wishes to resume care of their children.

There is evidence that homeless families with wider underlying difficulties can successfully achieve resettlement/tenancy stabilisation through problem-focussed coping strategies and multi-agency support (Anderson et al., 2006; Haran & Ó Siochrú, 2017; Hill et al., 2002; Tischler, 2008; Tischler and Vostanis, 2007). However, there is some past evidence that a significant proportion of re-housed families became homeless again within a year (Vostanis, 2002). This finding emphasises the need for ongoing post-rehousing support, particularly as difficulties in parental mental and emotional well-being tend to endure after re-housing, even if they lessen (Karim et al., 2006; Vostanis et al., 2001). Notably, parents waiting for long-term housing will sometimes compromise on what re-housing they will accept to escape homelessness, but this increases difficulties in settling in a new tenancy, making repeat homelessness more likely (Tischler, 2008).

In summary, there is a gap in contemporary research regarding families who are waiting for secure housing while also in receipt of children's social services in the UK. The evidence there suggests two discrete categories of families waiting for secure housing with whom children's social services are likely to be in contact. The first are families in pre-existing contact with children's social services, for whom family homelessness is a manifestation of wider underlying family issues and other social needs. Here, advocacy with housing providers to obtain secure and suitable housing, support around tenancy management, as well as work to address the family's underlying social needs is required. The second are families subject to no recourse to public funds who tend to approach children's social services as they are destitute, homeless and barred from accessing many other forms of public social assistance, including state housing. For both sets of families, long periods waiting in temporary housing leads to further difficulties developing, particularly mental health difficulties for both children and parents. Effective support needs to be multi-agency wide and wholistically consider a family's underpinning social needs, as well as their direct need for secure accommodation.

Methodology for the social worker survey

The survey was online and anonymously completed, comprising 16 obligatory closed questions and 9 optional open text questions (see *supplementary data*). It was circulated by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), along with a link to a draft electronic version of the practice guidance at

that point. The survey questions asked about respondents' views and practice experience of family homelessness. 38 responses were received. The questionnaire contained an information and consent section at the start, by which respondents indicated their agreement to the use of the data in their responses. A draft version of the questionnaire was piloted with two practising child and family social workers. Some small changes to wording and an additional question was added following feedback from the piloting. The data were collated in a spreadsheet by BASW and forwarded to the lead author who had received ethical approval from the University of Dundee, application number E2019-102, to analyse the data and publish findings from them. Drawing on Hahn (2008), the data were uploaded to Excel, cleaned and analysed to provide descriptive statistics for closed questions and to identify themes from the open questions, initially by listing open text data in categories linked to the question and then developing themes by reading the open text data and searching for particular word strings.

Limitations

The questionnaire data is from a small, self-selecting, sample of social workers amongst BASW's membership. We do not know how they differ from the wider population of children's social service practitioners in England and they should not be seen as representative of the broader population. Open survey questions have some limitations as qualitative data but are a convenient way of gaining additional insight into respondents' perspectives. Online surveys have advantages in ease of distribution and data capture, which has had particular relevance during the Covid pandemic: accordingly, online surveys have been used within a number of other recent studies of social workers' views and experiences, including those exploring complex ethical issues (e.g Alston et al., 2021; Banks et al., 2020). The data in this study are also, to our knowledge, some of the first UK data regarding social workers' experiences of working with families waiting for adequate housing and offer insights into social workers' attitudes and practice experiences in this important, but neglected, area.

Survey findings

The majority of respondents were in direct practice roles (hereafter 'social workers'), five were in practice leadership roles, seven in management roles and there were two student social workers. Six were in 'other' roles which included a Child Protection Conference Chair and a practitioner in an 'early help' (non-statutory family support) role. The vast majority worked in local authority children's social services (see Table 1).

Respondents were asked whether or not, based on their direct practice experience, family homelessness was a 'major factor' or a 'contributory factor' in children's entry into care. The modal answer in each case was 'sometimes' but less emphatically for homelessness as a 'major factor' (42%) rather than as a 'contributory factor' (58%). Only one respondent (R8, A Team Leader/Practice Consultant) had never experienced family homelessness as a major factor in children's entry in care, and it had

Table 1. Respondents: setting and job roles.

Type of setting	Number	Job role	Number
Local authority children's social services	34	Main Grade Social Worker	16
Other	3	Other	6
Voluntary sector	1	Locality manager/other middle manager	4
		Team leader/practice consultant	4
		Senior Manager	3
		Newly qualified social worker	2
		Student social worker	2
		Principal social worker	1
Total	38		38

Table 2. Is family homelessness a major factor or a contributory factor to children's entry into state care?.

	Major factor	Contributory factor
Much of the time	5%	13%
Sometimes	42%	58%
Rarely	39%	16%
Very rarely	11%	13%
Never	3%	0%

been a contributory factor for every respondent. This is suggestive of family homelessness as a notable issue in children's entry into care for the study respondents, but not the pre-eminent one (see Table 2).

The most commonly experienced reasons for family homelessness were structural (lack of social housing), policy/legal (being deemed to be 'intentionally homeless', no recourse to public funds) alongside family related reasons (domestic violence and poor tenancy management by parents). The only reasons for family homelessness which a minority of respondents had experienced were a child's behaviour problems, and community harassment (see Table 3). The responses are consistent with prior evidence (Anderson et al., 2006; Hill et al., 2002) that there are often complex interplays of structural, policy/legal and family-related reasons that result in family homelessness coming to the attention of child and family social workers, rather than any single overriding factor.

There was unanimous 'agreement' or 'strong agreement' to the statement that it 'should be clear agency policy that local authorities must fully explore all alternative options to children being placed in state care when homelessness or acute housing problems are one of the major factors in the family's difficulties.' This comment was illustrative of a number of open text responses:

Homelessness should never be the sole reason for a child to come into the care of the local authority. (R 23, Locality Manager)

There was also unanimous agreement that social workers 'should seek to do all they legally can to support families subject to no recourse to public funds to avoid children being placed in care where a safe alternative exists'. Despite this agreement, a few of the open question responses illustrated how some respondents felt children's social services were constrained from providing these by the wider legal and policy landscape. The following response was articulated by a senior manager:

Ethically it is wrong to remove children due to NRPF [no recourse to public funds]. However, the home office system is often the cause for delay in families receiving a timely assessment. Housing depts should be made to have a legal duty to provide accommodation to families and this should not be solely down to children's [social services]. (R 3)

There was majority agreement with a statement that it was part of a child and family social worker's role to support families in their application for temporary accommodation (66% agreement). Comments left by respondents who both agreed and disagreed with the statement converged in that neither saw this as a core child and family social work role, but it was nonetheless one that some social workers reported undertaking due to the lack of alternative support mechanisms for homeless families they had worked with:

This does happen however this is not because I feel that it is the role of the SW but because there is no other service that would support with this, therefore [it] becomes part of the role which is not really the expertise of the SW. (R 19, Social Worker)

Similarly, there was minority disagreement with a statement that child and family social workers should make use of statutory family support measures (s.17, Children Act 1989) to assist homeless families (76% agreement). In one open text response, a student social worker who disagreed with the statement erroneously stated that s.17 statutory family support funds could only be used 'for providing accommodation to kids. The family accommodation issues can't be addressed' (R 30). The error may have reflected the respondent's student status, but it is also consistent with evidence

Table 3. Reasons for family homelessness.

	Yes %	No %
1. The lack of appropriate social housing available	82	18
2. Domestic violence	82	18
3. Deemed 'intentionally homeless'	79	21
4. The impact of No Recourse to Public Funds	76	24
5. Poor tenancy management by the parents	76	24
6. The lack of support in finding alternative accommodation which exists	74	26
7. Parental alcohol or substance misuse	74	26
8. Parental mental health difficulties	74	26
9. Problems accessing adequate welfare benefits	66	34
10. Anti-social behaviour by the family	63	37
11. Private landlord ending tenancy (not due to family behaviour)	55	45
12. Child behavioural problems including youth offending	47	53
13. Community harassment of the family	39	61

that social workers are sometimes incorrectly gatekeeping families' eligibility to statutory family support (Dickson et al., 2020; Farmer, 2017). Other respondents' who disagreed suggested that, while sympathetic to the use of statutory family support funds to address family homelessness, there were organisational barriers which would prevent them doing so, commonly a lack of managerial agreement and children's social services' budgetary shortages.

Open text comments were positive about joint-working with local authority housing departments around accepted child protection issues, and more positive than not regarding the allocation of housing where a family met the criteria to be classed as in priority need. Greater difficulties were though noted, when a family did not. One social worker contrasted these responses:

Our council housing service are usually willing to bend rules to help families to not be homeless. The help is far worse (highly inadequate) in relation to moving families who are at risk due to domestic abuse or CCE [Child Criminal Exploitation], doing repairs for families who have breached their tenancy in some way (even where not doing that is impacting on the children's health but it's the parents' fault), and parents being made homeless after their children have been removed by social care. All those areas are very common concerns and are a big problem. (R 14)

Another social worker raised similar concerns about families being deemed to be 'intentionally homeless' after refusing an offer of re-housing they believed be unsuitable for legitimate reasons:

Families can be found intentionally homeless for refusing properties in areas where they fear experiencing harassment, including racial harassment/hate crimes. This needs to be challenged and addressed as a cause of homelessness. (R5).

Separate concerns were raised about the poor quality of temporary accommodation offered to those families fleeing domestic violence and its role in increasing family stress, as also highlighted in the study of Bimpson et al. (2020):

Often I see mothers (and fathers) who have fled DV being placed in inadequate temporary accommodation, with isolation and lack of facilities adding to the stress & trauma they have already experienced. This can contribute to the inadequate parenting for the child. Housing can be impossible to work with in addressing these issues. (R2, Social Worker)

Though an explicit connection to children's potential entry into care is not made in the social worker's statement above, it is implied. Two other social worker respondents did make this connection explicitly, one stating that a lack of preventative work with families to address housing issues could lead to a situation where the family 'have no choice but to voluntarily accommodate their children.' (R 18).

Discussion

In this small survey sample of children's social services practitioners' views and experiences, the wait for adequate housing was a notable factor in children's entry into care, but more often a contributory

than a primary factor. Survey respondents unanimously agreed that children's social services should explore all alternatives to placing a child in care where family homelessness was a substantive issue – suggesting an acceptance that families who were waiting for adequate welfare state support should not be penalised for that wait through family separation, so long as there were no pressing concerns about children's well-being.

The survey's finding that the wait for secure housing is a notable issue for families who are in contact with children's social services is consistent with the UK and international literature there is which carries some information on both family homelessness and contact with children's social services (Farmer, 2017; Haran & Ó Siochrú, 2017; Hill et al., 2002; Samzelius, 2020). This finding emphasises, however, that gaps in welfare state support in respect of housing for families require further exploration (Cross et al., 2021), with there being a notable gap in larger scale studies which identify the extent to which, as well as how, family homelessness and housing need are issues for families in contact with children's social services in the UK.

One potential explanation for the identified gap in welfare state support in the UK is that family homelessness has, since 1977, been the responsibility of local authority housing departments. These are organisationally separate from local authority social services departments. This may have led to an unhelpful separation between housing provision and social services for families where homelessness is one aspect of multiple support needs (Gaubatz, 2001). This separation is currently reinforced in the UK Government's annual publications on referrals to children's social services, and children's entry into out-of-home care in England: these do not include any data on whether homelessness or housing has been a factor for families (e.g. see, DfE, 2021a, 2021b). Indeed, social workers are only able to record one primary reason for a child coming into care in England from a pre-set list, and neither family homelessness or housing need are on that list. Adding homelessness and housing need to the pre-set list, and allowing social workers to record multiple factors underlying a child's entry to care, would be a simple initial change which would allow the capture of some initial, if basic, quantitative national-level data on the issue's prevalence when children enter out-of-home care or come into contact with children's social services more broadly. Social workers and children's social services management can also contribute to better data capture regarding family homelessness beyond this. The former by ensuring that family homelessness and housing need are clearly noted in case recording, the latter by collating these needs across contacts with families accessing children's social services, and then using these to feed into discussions with partner agencies and national government about meeting local housing needs and local housing planning.

The survey data did not indicate that children were being placed in care only due to homelessness or housing need in respondents' own practice – but it should be again emphasised these data are based on a small-scale survey of social workers' experiences and should therefore not be taken as settled evidence that this is not happening. At the same time, respondents did illustrate pathways by which families' unmet housing needs could, indirectly, lead to children being placed in out-of-home care. These were on the one hand situations where the housing department did not view families as being in priority need for re-housing, or where the temporary accommodation offered was inadequate. Respondents identified that there were considerable difficulties in securing family housing moves when Child Criminal Exploitation (see Firmin, 2019) and Child Sexual Exploitation were issues; and, also when families were living in damaged properties, where the family was deemed culpable for the damage. Equally, families being refused alternative offers of re-housing after refusing an initial housing offer due to their fears of racism or other harassment, and families fleeing domestic violence being placed in inadequate temporary accommodation that increased family stress (see also Bimpson et al., 2020; Davidge et al., 2020), were raised as service shortcomings. These responses suggested that the failure to provide better housing support in such circumstances increased family stress and parenting difficulties, in turn increasing the chance that children might subsequently enter out-of-home care.

Within welfare contexts of social housing shortages, and the insecure tenure of private sector housing tenancies in England, there are inevitable limits to the housing security that can be

offered to some families with housing need, as Hearne and Murphy's (2018) study of homeless families in Ireland also identified. These welfare contexts mean that those providing welfare services became more focused on gatekeeping which families are provided appropriate secure housing, and which are not. One consequence of this gatekeeping is that some families may be inappropriately, and sometimes illegally, deterred from pursuing claims for s.17 statutory family support from children's social services connected to their housing needs (Dickson et al., 2020). The comment of one respondent in the current survey, as well as the study of Samzelius (2020) in Sweden, illustrate that a shortage of suitable housing can also result in housing providers expecting homeless families to accept any offer of re-housing, regardless of its suitability.

Housing supply shortages should, by the same token, not obscure the practical measures that welfare agencies can undertake to mitigate the worst impacts of family homelessness. Haran and Ó Siochrú's (2017) study in Ireland, outlines a range of advice and advocacy needs that homeless families have which welfare agencies can help provide: up to date information on housing rights and entitlements, advice in searching for properties and navigating the private rental sector if needs be, support to navigate state systems, financial assistance to afford rents, and co-ordinated services to address the underlying social needs underpinning homelessness. In the context of UK legislation, local authority housing departments should be the primary providers of such advice and support, but social workers also require knowledge of such matters in order that they can assist homeless families, in collaboration with housing providers. The studies of Hill et al. (2002) and Tischler (2008) illustrate the difference that targeted support services can make to helping families to re-settle successfully. Though child and family social workers' workloads are a perennial issue, the social work role should include helping homeless families access such advice and support – either directly, or by facilitating families' access to housing providers, non-statutory family support organisations and specialist housing charities.

Given the issues identified in the current survey regarding when s.17 statutory family support could be used, or when it would be managerially approved, it is also suggested that internal team discussions on helping families with housing needs access s.17 statutory family support would be of value. Specialist charities also offer training that social workers could access on families' legal housing entitlements. Such training is particularly likely to be needed in respect of families subject to no recourse to public funds given the legal complexities outlined. Finally, it is worth us re-emphasising the normative assertion that social workers should always seek to maximise the statutory family support that can be given to families who are homeless or in housing need under s.17, in order that as many of families as possible are facilitated to remain safely together.

Conclusion

This paper has reported that families' wait for adequate and secure housing is an important but complex issue according to the practice experiences of a small sample of children's social services practitioners in England. The survey data, alongside wider evidence, suggest that a number of families in contact with children's social services are waiting for the welfare state to provide them with adequate housing, yet the current neglect of this issue within contemporary social work research and policy in the UK mean that what we currently know about the issue is limited. It is though clear that families who are either homeless, or otherwise in housing need, are caught within the shadow of two overriding constraints: on the one hand a structural shortage of quality secure housing; on the other, the fact their needs are complex, either due to their underlying social needs, or strict limitations to their social assistance entitlements as families with no recourse to public funds. Despite these twin constraints, social workers have an important role to play. They can support families with housing needs by providing, or facilitating a pathway to, housing advocacy, advice and support. And, most importantly of all, they can maximise families' access to s.17 statutory family support so that families can be supported to stay together wherever this is safely possible.

Geolocation information

This research is focused on England, United Kingdom.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to BASW and Project 17 for assistance with production of the overall guidance. Prof. Malcolm Hill provided helpful feedback on an earlier version of the manuscript.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The survey questions used are made available. Participants were not asked to give consent for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data themselves are not available.

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