If we work together we can change this place

The experience of families living in England's Lane hostel and recommendations for change

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About Us

We aim to improve the life outcomes for children, young people and families and make north Camden a great place to grow up. We use a community-led approach to place-based, systems change, to achieve this goal.

We start with communities. We capture their lived experience and amplify their voices by providing a platform for them to be heard. We use a strengths based approach and identify the skills, knowledge and assets belonging to communities that should be harnessed when seeking sustainable solutions. Communities prioritise the changes they would like to see. We build capacity and invest in communities to lead on these changes.

We convene communities and cross sector professionals to deepen their understanding of people’s lived experience, learn about the system conditions, co-design solutions and make recommendations for change. We broker the support of the wider system to make these solutions a reality, and unlock the physical and resource assets in Camden. We provide a platform for collaboration. We also provide challenge where system barriers perpetuate, or prevent positive change.

The Winch was established in 1973 and has since become an established and well-respected local charity serving our community. At The Winch, we use a cradle-to-career pipeline. This means that the services offered run from 0-25 years old, beginning with activities for toddlers and parents and finishing with employability and enterprise programmes for 18-25 year olds. We deliver activities at offices, in local schools, through other organisations and in the community. We also run Belsize Library and host the North Camden Zone. We reach over 1,200 children, young people and families every year, many of whom are suffering setbacks due to social and economic deprivation.
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Executive Summary

North Camden Zone heard about the lived experience of Camden’s hidden homeless families living in temporary accommodation in England’s Lane Hostel. We wanted to understand the reality of their day-to-day lives and their longer term journey navigating the housing system. These are voices that are seldom heard but whose experience and insights could support the development of joint solutions to improve lives.

In Camden there are 707 dependent children currently housed in temporary accommodation. Families are placed by Camden Council, and the accommodation is intended as a stopgap until families are able to be housed in the private rented sector or accrue enough points to bid for council housing. The largest accommodation is England’s Lane Hostel, with 136 dependent children living there (as of March 2018).

The families living in England’s Lane have a wealth of untapped skills, experience and knowledge. They are educated, they work, they come from diverse cultures and backgrounds, they know how to survive through adversity, care for their children and support one other. All of the families would like to leave the hostel and move into their own home. Some would like to do further education or gain employment to build a better life.

We heard from families that have been residing in England’s Lane Hostel for ten years or more, making their stay far from temporary. Whilst waiting for a new home, these parents and their children eat and sleep in a cramped single room together, originally intended for a single student nurse. The lack of decent cooking facilities, communal space, resident voice and lack of launderette are their key concerns.

Despite their many strengths and resilience, many of the families living in the Hostel had faced very challenging circumstances and setbacks, and continue to experience difficulties. Some have fled domestic violence. Others have no recourse to public funds due to their immigration status. Many of them work, yet are still in debt. Homeless families in temporary accommodation have become part of the new ‘precariat’, who don’t always have control over their own lives and don’t know when they will leave temporary accommodation. This has taken its toll on residents’ mental health. The living conditions and lack of facilities in the hostel have exacerbated their financial hardship and reduced their opportunities to lead a healthy life. Temporary accommodation may have been originally designed and intended as part of a compassionate solution, but the families we spoke to felt that, as a result of how it was operating, the Hostel risked becoming an integral part of the problem.

We also learnt that the system responded to families as individual, atomised cases. The housing system has not been structured to take account of the collective potential of families within the settings or the communities where they live. It does not build on the relationships residents have with each other or could have. It doesn’t acknowledge their strengths, assets, capacities and desires to make things better. It does not account for their essential, shared humanity.

We learnt about the limitations of housing policy. The legal status of residents living in temporary accommodation sits outside the normal protection around overcrowding standards or the suitability of accommodation. The housing allocation points scheme makes
accumulating enough points to get social housing whilst living in temporary accommodation out of reach. The legislation, policy and procedures have been designed on the assumption that temporary means short-term. This is clearly at odds with the lived reality of the current housing crisis, in which families are housed in temporary accommodation for years.

Moreover, in London, as in many parts of the UK, there are fundamental structural problems in the housing sector outside of the control of local authorities There is a real lack of social housing, a lack of affordable and suitable accommodation, in addition to prohibitively high rental costs. We know that systems can evolved which unintentionally perpetuate negative conditions for those working in the system as well as those they intend to serve. We noted that this appeared to be true of the housing system operating around England’s Lane Hostel.

We asked residents what would good temporary accommodation look and feel like. What would their vision for temporary accommodation be?

The residents have a vision for the hostel as a place where families can begin to rebuild their lives, that feels like a home where there is warmth, trust, support, nurture and safety. It should be a place where homeless families are given the best chance to succeed in life and where children can grow up and thrive.

In order for the resident’s vision of England’s Lane to be realised, we need to create the conditions where change can occur. Inside the Hostel there needs to be a mechanism, role and culture shift to hear and listen to the voice of residents, support their individual and collective needs, broker the support of external organisations and nurture resident-led action and mutual aid.

More widely, to improve the experience of families entering, living in and leaving temporary accommodation there needs to be a whole system approach, with residents at the centre, to inform strategy, service design and cross-sector collaboration with an express goal to improve the lives of families living in temporary accommodation.
Recommendations for Homeless Families Living in England’s Lane Hostel

Professionals from across the sectors alongside residents should:

1. Make England’s Lane Hostel feel like home. Make it a place full of opportunities, where residents feel heard, can rebuild their lives, be empowered, support one another and develop their own solutions and activities.

2. Seek creative solutions with residents to offset the hardship experienced by families living in temporary accommodation.

3. Convene a Camden Temporary Accommodation Action Group, a cross-sector collaboration with residents, to build a common understanding of the problems and collectively identify and develop solutions.

Residents should be supported to:

4. Set-up of an England’s Lane Residents Association and include the voice of children and young people.

5. Develop their ideas and solutions using an asset based approach to make the hostel a great place to live and grow up.

6. Induct new families into the hostel and local area, connecting them with GPs, schools, advice and support services, local activities and other residents, using a buddy system and induction pack.

7. Have their voices and experiences as central to any review of homelessness or housing services and strategy developed by London Borough of Camden.

London Borough of Camden hostel staff and housing officers could be supported to:

8. Be solution focused, harness the strengths of residents, brokering their needs and ideas in partnership with external organisations.

9. Allocate more access time to communal spaces inside and outside the hostel for parents and their children.

10. Provide families living in temporary accommodation with a seamless holistic service including giving regular updates to those entering or waiting to leave temporary accommodation about their rights, their status and realistic options.

11. Arrange translation services for families where English is not the first language, with the onus on services to identify when this is needed.
What we did

Residents Consultation

We spoke to 27 individuals that live in England’s Lane Hostel, 21 adults and 6 children and young people. We conducted 1-2-1 interviews and group workshops where we heard the issues that they faced. We mapped the assets, strengths and knowledge of residents. We asked them about their future aspirations for themselves as individuals and their vision for the hostel. The majority of families we spoke to were Somali or Eastern European. Many of the parents spoke English as a second language.

England’s Lane Hostel Hack
Residents, professionals and community members co-designing solutions

The North Camden Zone organised the England’s Lane Hack to convene residents, professionals from the voluntary sector, Camden Council, the NHS and Camden community members. Thirty-three people came together to deepen their understanding of the lived experience of residents’ day-to-day lives and their longer term journey navigating the housing system.

As a group we sought to tackle these challenges and together we co-designed solutions. We used a series of fast-paced exercises using Liberating Structures as our underpinning methodology to generate innovative ideas, and flesh out the best ones into solutions. The Hack ended with teams pitching five solutions and pledges of support.
Participants on the day signed up to be on the England’s Lane Panel, with a mixture of residents, community members and professionals putting themselves forward. The purpose of the group is to take forward and implement the ideas generated at the Hack. The group also put together the recommendations generated in the report.
North Camden Early Years Network is run in partnership by North Camden Zone and Camden Integrated Early Years Service. The network listed the factors that cause and perpetuate families to be homeless in Camden.
The Skills and Assets of Residents Living in England's Lane Hostel

- Speakers of many different languages
- Diversity of cultures and faiths
- Cooking meals on a budget
- Taking care of a household
- Experienced at parenting and childcare
- Trained nurses and paid carers
- Organising and creating a budget
- Communication and social media skills
- Being hospitable and making people feel welcome
- Befriending and caring for people
- Connecting people to organisations and support
- Talking and listening to people
Where would you like to be in 5 years time?

All of the residents we spoke to wanted to have left England’s Lane Hostel and be living elsewhere. This collates the other answers given.

- Permanent home in Camden
- Have a big house
- Be in my own house
- Go back to my home country in Somalia, Sweden

- Finish my education
- Train to be a carer
- Convert my degree to UK
- Finish childcare qualification

- Get a good job
- Be a nurse
- Be a cleaner
- Be a paid carer or paid for childcare
- Work in customer service in the future

- Get my family together
- More children
- More opportunities for my children
- Better life for my children

- More independent
- Independent of the system
- Better circumstances and opportunities
Context and Background

Camden predominately uses two types of temporary accommodation to house homeless households. Family hostels such as England’s Lane, and Annex accommodation. In Camden there is a severe shortage of affordable housing, with families in temporary accommodation often have to wait long periods for council properties.

There are approximately 1000 council homes that become vacant per year and around 6000 people on waiting list. The need for social housing hugely outstrips demand. There is also a lack of affordable and available housing in Camden in the private rented sector. Camden is having to offer families accommodation in the private rented sector out of borough if they require accommodation with 2 or 3 bedrooms. Some families are accepting 1 bedroom flats to stay in Camden.

England’s Lane Hostel is temporary accommodation for families leased by the London Borough of Camden since 2004 with 155 rooms. The hostel is situated in a very affluent area surrounded by multi-million pound properties, high end shops and cafes. There are approximately 100 families living there today. Many families live in a single room or “studio” with a small bathroom, which was originally designed for single student nurses. The lease is due to end in 2024 and all families will need to be rehoused at that time.

England’s Lane Hostel has a small playroom which the residents are allowed to use. The hostel has a larger room called the Zillion Suite which is used by external organisations including the Anna Freud playgroup, CARIS Families homework club and the health visiting team. Families are not allowed to use this room on their own and external bookings by other organisations are not usually received. There used to be a laundry room housing 6 washing machines and dryers, that has been closed for around 5 years.

The Lived Experience of Families Living in England’s Lane

- Families like living in Camden, the location of the hostel and the proximity to local services and amenities
- There is a strong sense of community between the residents living within the hostel, where people support each other informally with childcare and emotional support

“I have a few good friends and sometimes if I need help I ask and sometimes they are able to help and they can look after my son and the other way around and that’s a good thing because we as single mother understand other single parents. It’s also good because people are also exchanging experiences and we can learn from each other and I think if we work together we can change this place for a better place.”

- Families like the existing services that are at the hostel but would like more services based within the hostel.
• There is a lack of access to the larger communal space for residents, for things like holding birthday parties for their children, exercise and spaces to meet together as parents or young people

• Families suffer from a lack of private living space with children, young people and their parents co-habiting in one room where they cook, eat, sleep, do homework, and play in one room surrounded by their worldly possessions.

“...I need to leave the place now, my daughter needs her own room, we sleep in the same bed now, I can’t change my clothes, my family can’t visit… I would like a 2 bedrooms or 3 bedrooms’ place. It would change our life”

• People have complained about maintenance issues with the rooms such as mould on the windows, condensation, cockroaches and flies in the room and temperatures are often too high

• Parents and children worry about the effects living in temporary accommodation will have on them, particularly how it might impact on their education and future.

• The living conditions and uncertainty and strain of their housing situation exacerbate poor mental health making people feel isolated, disconnected and stressed.

“...I am struggling every day; I am hoping we are moving to a better place. Even if we are moving I don’t want this to happen to other parents or other families”

• The rooms have poor cooking facilities and lack of storage making it difficult to eat healthily and economically
“We only have a small hob provided and that is how we are meant to cook for our children and carry on living a healthy life in these conditions, which is impossible. They do not allow us to have an oven which makes it difficult to eat.”

- The lack of laundry facilities within the hostel and space in their room means that families are spending on average £25 per week and a lot of time on washing and drying clothes in a local laundrette, which is unfriendly and does not allow buggies inside.

“\textit{It is very difficult when you have children and you live in one small room, the smell, there is no place to put their dirty clothes, you have to spend a lot of money when you have a big family. Parents can be spending 6 hours a week doing their laundry.}”

- Several residents described feeling frightened and disorientated on arrival at the hostel, often having left behind their friends, families and networks of support.

- Residents have had a mixed experience of the hostel staff. Some of the receptionists are very responsive and yet others have been dismissive of their requests or their needs, so residents have felt unheard.

“I would like if they would repair when something is broken, and if they would be friendly, everyone welcome, (the staff) understand that when we live in a small room and something is broken, it’s very hard to live there”

- There is currently no form of residents group at the hostel or mechanism for residents to be heard in the way the hostel is run
The Lived Experience of Families Navigating the Housing System in Camden

- England’s Lane Hostel is far from temporary for some residents with residents that have been living in England’s Lane for 10 years.
  
  “I’ve been waiting for 6 years, in the future I would like to know how long it will take, my child is asking when are we moving and I say I don’t know. We are just waiting.”

- Many described an information deficit, where they had no clue about what was going on and when they would leave. A few parents said that they had not seen a Camden housing person for years.

- In the course of our research we noticed that the residents that had been living in England’s Lane for 5 years or more did not speak English as their first language.

- Some families have moved out of England’s Lane but had to take moving into another borough into private rented accommodation. This has meant children and young people commuting up to 3 hours a day to and from their Camden school or their jobs. Some have returned to England’s Lane.

- Some parents are working in full-time jobs but despite this are in debt and have gone into rent arrears which means they are ineligible to move into private rented accommodation.

  “I am a nurse in my country and managed to find a job that is far away from here and it is one year since I started as a full time role. It feels like a battle that is never ending… My income is lower than my expenses. There is always outstanding arrears. I cannot keep up with the payments. That is the reason that they cannot let me out of here because of arrears here… I do have plans I am going to university soon to convert my degree and contribute to the community like I have always planned.”

- A new Housing Allocation Points Scheme was introduced in January 2016 which, for one family that had been living in England’s Lane for 6 years, meant their status changed overnight from having enough points to bid for social housing to nowhere near enough.

- Residents informed us that some housing officers have lacked empathy causing residents distress and have not communicated in a way that enabled residents to understand what they needed to do.

  When you call Camden everyone they make me very sad. If I call them they tell me I think you are not going to move for 10 or 20 years, your life will be like this. This made me very sad and have mental issues and when I spoke to someone from Camden I didn’t sleep for nearly 3 or 4 days because they don’t know how to talk to people. When your life is difficult you don’t need them to make you sad, you need someone to ask you what’s wrong?”
This letter is from a 15-year-old resident who has been living in England’s Lane for 10 years, since he was 5 years old.

To whom it may concern,

My name is [Redacted] and I am 15 years old and I am currently living in [Redacted] in En gland’s Lane. Residence hostel with my 12 year old brother [Redacted] and my mother [Redacted]. We have just passed the 10 year mark of living here and, to be honest, it has been difficult for us. We understand that we need to stay here for a little while before moving into a permanent home but waiting for 10 years is absolutely ridiculous! I and my brother have been fantasising of a home where we have enough space to play like how other people our age do and more importantly a place where we have space to focus on our academic work but the reality we face could not be as worse as it is now.

For years now we have only been able to fit one small table into our tiny box of a home which we use to eat and try to work on. Being in my final year of secondary school, education means I need to spend endless hours after school revising at home and struggling to put multiple exercise and text books on this table is not something I should be having to deal with for this now and especially in this important time in my life. I can’t always depend on libraries! My brother is even being affected by this as he is ever so often unable to do his homework as a result of the lack of space we have available when I am trying to do work. For this to be going on for multiple years is...
We heard that many residents felt Camden Housing service is not always efficient, and they believe this has affected them being able to secure properties.

“Yesterday my housing officer called to say I have found a one-bedroom flat in Camden. The landlord will give you the address. You will have to go. Then the landlord contacted me and said they could not show me the room because Camden had not sent me the details. I had been waiting outside the property for 30 minutes before I found this out. I rang housing but they have not called me back and I was waiting for all of yesterday.”
Resident's Vision For Englands Lane Hostel

We want Englands Lane Hostel to be our home. A place for opportunities, to place to be empowered and a place to rebuild our families.

We want spaces in the hostel to:
- Exercise
- Cook and store healthy food
- House a launderette
- Provide an outside garden for the children
- Pray
- Have children’s parties
- Have an open communal space that we control
- Have a children's creche

We want hostel and council staff that will:
- Smile
- Listen to our needs
- Be understanding and empathetic
- Be on our side
- Say yes
- Be efficient and follow up agreed actions
- Create opportunities for us
- Give us accurate information and advice on housing and benefits

We want the hostel to be open to:
- Other external services and organisations
- Families and friends coming over

We want to be trusted and given responsibility within the hostel in:
- Paid roles for residents
- Volunteering opportunities
Conclusion

The intention of this report was to amplify the lived experience of families living in temporary accommodation in England’s Lane and how the strengths, assets and potential of the residents could be harnessed to support positive change. This report is not presented as a comprehensive exploration of all residents experiences of temporary accommodation based on quantitative research methods and does not include interviews with professionals about their roles or mapping of the housing system, which are important. It does, however, provide a window onto some of the challenges faced by families, who themselves are living in temporary accommodation, They have some inspiring and wholly achievable recommendations for change.

The Hack allowed us to convene cross sector partners and deepen their understanding of the issues raised alongside residents. We developed solutions that could be achieved within the hostel to harness the collective potential, strengths and assets of residents to participate in making England’s Lane hostel a home.

Some of the ideas generated by Hack participants included:

1. Wash and Care – a co-operative launderette run by residents
2. Developing an England’s Lane Residents Association
3. Creating a Buddy scheme for current residents to support new residents
4. Participatory budgeting where residents alongside hostel staff decide where the hostel budget is spent and
5. A pass where residents living in temporary accommodation have free travel, cheaper access to leisure facilities and other benefits to offset some of the disadvantages of living in temporary accommodation.

The Hack Ideas are available as a separate document from www.northcamdenzone.org

We would encourage London Borough of Camden and its partners to prioritise this as a strategically important issue and work to build a whole systems view of temporary housing for families in Camden. We’d ask that they and other system actors come together learn about the system, diagnose the system issues, identify areas for intervention and generate ideas for change.

We hope that this report will provide some useful insights and ideas on how to create mechanisms for community-led systems focussed action. England’s Lane Hostel as a shared residence, located within the wider Camden and London ecosystem contains huge potential for positive change. If trust is built, positive relationships are nurtured, connections are made between residents and staff and organisations outside the hostel, and solutions are collectively sought then the necessary conditions will be created where people share responsibility for achieving the vision of England’s Lane becoming a home.
020 7586 8731

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