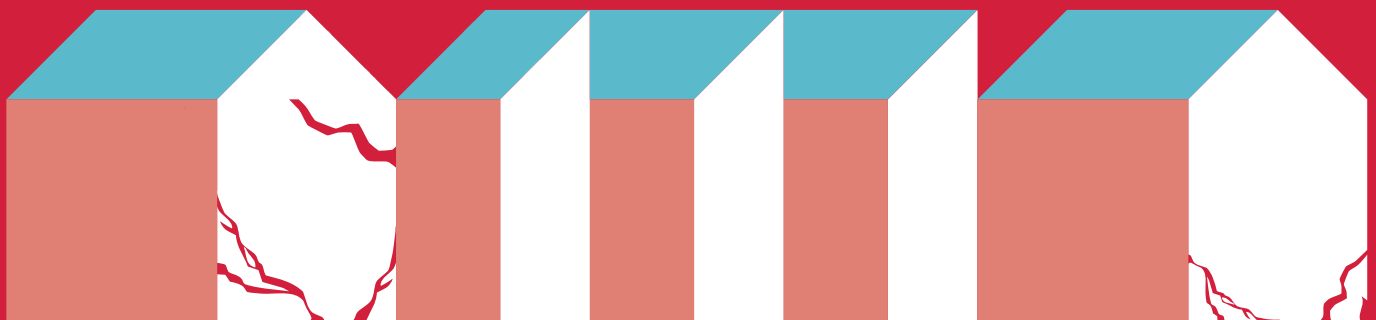


# Lifelines

**A history of temporary accommodation  
in England: 1834 – 2011**

**Authored by: Dr Jessica Field**



## About the author

**Dr Jessica Field is a social historian and writer. Shaped by her family's own fight against mass eviction, she researches housing insecurity, tenant activism, and homelessness. Her first book is *Eviction: A Social History of Rent* (Verso, 2025).**

## Foreword

Jessica Field's thorough examination of how temporary accommodation has developed, through legislation and resistance, over nearly 200 years, gives us a foundation for understanding why we are where we are today. In doing so, she has produced an invaluable resource for everyone who wants to see TA provision improved.

Reading it, I was particularly struck by the continuities over time and geographies, not just in the underlying ideologies, but in a very literal sense; the ticket that gave access to the Bermondsey Workhouse in 1839 is almost identical to the ticket that gave access to the Camberwell Reception Centre nearly 140 years later; the families sharing beds in cramped conditions; the removal of children from their families; relocation to poorer areas.

And yet so much has changed. Jessica Field does a masterly job of unpicking this contradiction of continuity and change, of good intentions and bad outcomes. It is powerfully described how the binary between those who deserve state assistance and those who don't has endured, even though who constitutes the 'undeserving' has changed over time. A single mother at the beginning of the 20th century was considered to break norms of morality; 100 years later she would have been top of the list of those who deserved help.

Today, there is a growing recognition that everyone deserves a safe and secure home, regardless of circumstances or background. To get there, the report leaves us with a clear steer as to where we can begin to make meaningful change for the 21st century.

I hope you find it as interesting as I have.

**Simon Gale**

CEO, Justlife

## Foreword

### Siobhain McDonagh MP

Jessica Field's report lays bare that the inadequate provision of temporary accommodation is nothing new. Through comprehensive and rigorous research she shows how we have continued a cycle of costly but inadequate provision of temporary accommodation, over a period of nearly 200 years. While significant reforms have made some positive changes, there remains a consistent 'deservingness ideology' at the heart of temporary accommodation provision.

The notion of the deserving and undeserving persists today. While we as a society have accepted our duty to provide those threatened with homelessness a temporary place to stay, we have also accepted that temporary accommodation can be unsafe and unhealthy for those that live in it. Standards in temporary accommodation are almost entirely unregulated, and certainly not regulated to the same level as other forms of housing.

The report also reveals a consistent pattern of fragmentation, with temporary accommodation always existing separately from other forms of welfare support, without proper oversight and without a coherent framework for how to deliver the best outcomes for those who rely on it. Still today, government action on temporary accommodation is reactive. Rather than lay out a long-term vision for how temporary accommodation should operate, ad-hoc solutions are used to firefight. This comes at a great moral and financial cost – we spend a lot of money on bad outcomes for people in need.

I am encouraged, however, by the report's hopeful conclusion. The fact that the UK has a legal duty to house people threatened with street homelessness should be a source of pride, particularly as we were pioneers in establishing this duty. But we must act to ensure temporary accommodation is fit for purpose. We can do that, as Field argues, by breaking silos between services, removing exemptions from housing standards, and abandoning the idea that there are those who do and those who don't deserve a decent standard of living.

#### Siobhain McDonagh, MP

Chair of the APPG for Households  
in Temporary Accommodation

# Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>15</b>
1.1. Terms and types	16
1.2. Scope and aims	18
1.3. Methodology and sources	20
1.4. Enumerating Temporary Accommodation	22
1.5. Structure of the report	24
<b>2. Historical Foundations</b>	<b>27</b>
2.1. Temporary Accommodation in law and policy 1834–2011	27
2.2. Organising the history	30
2.2.1. 1834 to 1944: Punishment as policy	30
2.2.2. 1944–1977: Reluctant welfare	32
2.2.3. 1977 to 1996: Hierarchy of rights	37
2.2.4. 1997–2011: Divergent investment	39
<b>3. The Deservingness Filter</b>	<b>45</b>
3.1. Categories of (un)deserving	46
3.1.1. Single person	46
3.1.2. “Problem families”	50
3.1.3. Migration and racialised disadvantage	54
3.2. Intersecting exclusions	59
<b>4. Administration of Exclusion</b>	<b>61</b>
4.1. Procedural fragmentation	62
4.1.1. Fragmentation through delegation	62
4.1.2. Fragmentation through discretion	64
4.2. Administrative exclusion	68
4.2.1. Exclusion via relocation	68
4.2.2. Exclusion via outsourcing	72
4.3. An architecture of unaccountability	77
<b>5. Mutual Aid and Resistance</b>	<b>79</b>
5.1. Squatting solidarity	80
5.2. Direct action: protesting conditions	84
5.2.1. King Hill, Kent, 1965–6	84
5.2.2. Palmer Street, Birmingham, 1980–1983	86
5.2.3. Olympus Hostel, Westminster, 1984	88
5.2.4. Landmark, Liverpool, 2000–2004	90
5.3. Journalism and Cathy Come Home	92
5.4. Against Exclusion	95
<b>6. Moment of Progress?</b>	
<b>The 1944 Temporary Housing Programme</b>	<b>97</b>
6.1. The ‘hen huts’	98
6.2. Comfort for a family	100
<b>7. Conclusion</b>	<b>102</b>
7.1. Lessons from history	103
7.2. From lifelines to a safety net for all	105
<b>8. Acknowledgements</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>9. References</b>	<b>110</b>

# Executive Summary

**Temporary accommodation is an essential safety net – a lifeline long established in law in England. Yet conditions are frequently poor, stays protracted and people can be placed far away from their communities. Detrimental impacts are unevenly distributed among marginalised populations, and costs of this provision are putting local authorities under strain. It is frequently described as a crisis, a term that suggests departure from a norm of adequate provision.**

**This report reveals how practices that appear to be contemporary policy failures represent historical continuities over a 177 year period. Through independent archival research, this study tracks changes to TA provision over time and brings individual stories to light; exposing failures that have persisted, over and above cyclical housing pressures, policy changes and resource constraints. Rooted in a 19th century ideology of deservingness, exclusions have been reproduced across radically different legislative contexts, affecting different groups over time.**

**The study further shows how a lack of statutory coordination has created unmanageable fragmentation, allowing discriminatory harms to go undetected and obscuring good as well as bad practice. Concluding that substantial reform is needed to break the cycle of these deep-rooted historic patterns, the report finally offers three lessons for systemic reform.**

## Research scope

This report examines the history of temporary accommodation (TA) in England from, 1834 to 2011, centring the distinct ideological, administrative and legal conditions that have shaped this essential welfare provision. The timeline starts with the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, which reorganised the workhouses into a unified system underpinned by an ideology of deservingness, which was to become structurally entrenched. Analysis ends with the 2011 Localism Act: the act's empowerment of councils to discharge their homelessness duty into the private rental sector without tenants' consent signalled an intensification of market-reliance in TA governance. That shift, and the impacts of subsequent welfare retrenchment, fall outside the study's historical scope.

Research involved original archival work and primary source analysis – drawing on the Museum of Homelessness' Housing Justice collection, the British Library, digitised newspaper and magazine collections, and the Mass Observation Archive – supplemented by secondary historical analysis, Hansard, and case law. The historical analysis is framed as a critical research resource aimed at practitioners and researchers; recommendations are aimed at policymakers and political decision-makers.

## Deservingness: an architecture of exclusion

Rooted in moral concerns over habitual vagrancy, Victorian policymakers redesigned the workhouse system to sort, manage, and exclude social groups deemed “undeserving” of costly parish relief. Families were separated upon entry and those perceived as work-capable were frequently subjected to hard labour and degrading living conditions. Irish paupers were disproportionately removed from English workhouses and sent to their birth parishes in Ireland. Deservingness was predicated on citizens conforming to wage-earning and family self-sufficiency ideals, and – as Poor Law relief was tied to local parishes – organised around geographically bounded notions of belonging. These norms have retained potency in the management of TA as a homelessness response ever since, albeit with changing consequences.

Key progressive and hard-won reforms have contributed to shifting the discursive and legislative environment away from overtly moralising attributions of individual and racialised culpability for homelessness. The 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act statutorily defined homelessness, guaranteed settled housing to those owed a duty, and shifted responsibility for homelessness duties onto housing rather than welfare departments. This was widely praised legislation which prioritised housing solutions to homelessness over previous welfare-driven frameworks. New Labour's political and resource investment in homelessness prevention from 1997 similarly signalled a concern with structural routes into homelessness above individual, pathological explanations.

Nonetheless, the post-war emphasis on single person pathology retains some force in the present-day requirement for a single person to prove vulnerability under “priority need” criteria in order to qualify for TA or a permanent housing duty. Family separation and the removal of children into care – routinised throughout the 1950s to 1970s – still occurs today. And the systematic over-representation of racialised minority and migrant households in out-of-area placements and/or the worst-quality stock is documented from post-war Caribbean migrant dispersals, to out-of-area placements of Irish and Bangladeshi families in the 1980s, through to National Asylum Support Service (NASS) asylum seeker dispersal from 1999. The persistence of these exclusionary trends speaks to the deservingness framework's power to naturalise structural injustice.

## Fragmentation and exemptions: a tangled net

Inequalities have been perpetuated by a fragmented system. Delegation to local authorities – operative under the 1834 New Poor Law’s union-based system, then for families under the 1948 National Assistance Act – created hundreds of decision-making sites with minimal oversight and diverse internal processes. The discretionary authority retained by individual frontline staff further distributed gatekeeping power without effective monitoring. The combined effect has been the maintenance of a system in which poor conditions can be seen as context-specific, or normalised as institutionally unremarkable. Conversely, model practices can be missed or unable to affect systemic change; fragmentation has undermined genuinely effective local authority work.

From the 1980s, growth in TA outsourcing, and the increased reliance on out-of-area placements, deepened fragmentation. Accountability diffused across contractual chains regulated through self-reporting, conditions became harder to monitor, and the populations bearing the cost followed a traceable pattern – single parent families, racialised minority and migrant households, and single people excluded from statutory pathways altogether.

Part of the accountability gap can be ascribed to the exemption of TA from minimum standards applied to other housing. TA access, conditions, and tenant rights have too often been weighed against local authority budgets and the management of housing scarcity. Where standards or powers have existed – such as through the ability of local authority environmental health officers to inspect TA properties – they have required proactive local authority action in a context where they might lack relevant information or resources.

## The power and limits of mutual aid and resistance

Individuals and households living in TA have long drawn attention to harms, articulated demands, and achieved change. Family squatting campaigns secured TA leases and improved condemned properties in the 1960s. Protests in Kent in 1965–6 ended one welfare hostel’s family separation and eviction practices. Mary Cecil’s 1962 *New Statesman* article about Newington Lodge and the BBC drama *Cathy Come Home* (1966) helped shift the political narrative around housing insecurity and propel homelessness campaign work. Direct action against Birmingham Council’s slum-landlord management resulted in the demolition of condemned TA in 1983. A protest occupation of Camden Town Hall challenged deadly conditions in a Westminster hotel in 1984. Strikes by people seeking asylum secured relocation from substandard NASS accommodation in Liverpool in 2001. These cases evidence that change is possible. Yet, impacts were largely localised, required political will, and placed significant burdens on individuals and households experiencing homelessness.

The 1944 Temporary Housing Programme (THP) provides an example of what political will can achieve on a larger scale: an emergency housing scheme of 156,623 prefabricated bungalows designed for homeless families – with comfort and privacy as guiding principles. Yet, the reach of the THP was ideologically limited to the families of returning servicemen in the context of post-war reconstruction, and the programme was never replicated. Insufficient move-on housing also meant the bungalows stayed up far longer than they were designed to last.

## Lessons from history: building a safety net for all

Breaking the power of the deservingness ideology while retaining the essential, longstanding responsibility to provide a TA safety net to homeless families, requires confronting how deservingness is operationalised and normalised through structural fragmentation. Historical analysis reveals where the deservingness framework has proven most durable and highlights three areas where action is most urgent.

### 1. Make discriminatory harms visible:

Categories of exclusion have persisted across reforms. Addressing housing scarcity and affordability is necessary but insufficient; the exclusionary architecture has adapted to different resource and reform contexts while maintaining uneven conditions. Breaking this pattern requires making its effects visible. The historical absence of systematic equality monitoring of TA allocation and conditions has allowed discriminatory outcomes to be naturalised.

### 2. End fragmentation with statutory coordination and monitoring:

Delegation, discretion, out of area placements, and outsourcing have systematically obscured the visibility and comparability of TA experiences and outcomes. They have shielded poor practices from scrutiny and prevented learning from good practice. Ending fragmentation requires breaking silos through well-resourced and politically prioritised coordination. Monitoring and accountability should not be diluted through outsourcing or out-of-area arrangements.

### 3. End exemptions and develop a new enforceable framework:

TA has persistently operated outside minimum standards applied to other housing. Ending this requires ending TA exemptions through the establishment and enforcement of baseline minimum standards, with accountability at every level: a coherent, enforceable, legislative framework for TA.

# 1. Introduction

**Temporary accommodation (TA) refers to temporary housing for people who are homeless.<sup>1</sup> It is an essential safety net: recent data reveals 134,210 households living in TA in England – including 176,130 children.<sup>2</sup> For these people TA can be a lifeline and yet conditions are often poor and stays protracted. Nearly 14,000 households are living in bed and breakfast hotels (B&Bs) – accommodation that often lacks cooking and laundry facilities, private bathrooms, and play space for children. Reports of damp, mould and overcrowding are ubiquitous. The deaths of 104 children have had TA as a contributing factor between 2019 and 2025.<sup>3</sup>**

Beneath the headline figures are unevenly distributed experiences. Families can wait several years in TA before being rehoused<sup>4</sup> – a delay disproportionately impacting single parent families who represent 35 per cent of the total share of households in TA (compared with 16 per cent of families).<sup>5</sup> Black and other minoritised households spend longer than White families in TA, are less likely to gain access to social housing, and are over-represented in out-of-area placements.<sup>6</sup> Migrant households accepted as statutorily homeless are also less likely than non-migrant households to be rehoused in social housing.<sup>7</sup> Government statutory homeless statistics do not include 91,141 asylum seekers, temporarily accommodated across England by the Home Office.<sup>8</sup>

The current TA situation is often referred to as a crisis. It certainly is unacceptable; high homelessness numbers, prolonged stays in TA, and poor experiences disproportionately borne by minoritised households represent a damning indictment of the country's failure to provide genuinely affordable and quality housing in sufficient supply, with equitable access. They also represent a systemic failure to provide decent, local emergency accommodation in the interim – an essential safety net for a vulnerable population.

However, the term “crisis” suggests departure from a norm of adequate provision, a turning point for the worse. This report reveals how practices that appear to be contemporary TA policy failures represent historical continuities – similar squalid conditions and poor treatment adapting to new contexts. Understanding how these practices have emerged, and what processes have contributed to their character and persistence, reveal why piecemeal reforms may continue to reproduce poor conditions even when they appear substantive. As this report will show, a system overhaul is necessary. TA is an essential lifeline that must be protected as a universal right, and reformed so that it can truly deliver the safe and healthy safety net for all households who find themselves in a critical moment of need.

This introductory section defines key terms and outlines the scope and aims of the report. It addresses the vast array of terms that encompass ‘temporary accommodation’ and the types of actors historically involved in provision. It then outlines the scope and aims of the research, including its limits. The methodology and overview of sources is followed by a brief analysis of TA in numbers, and the section closes with signposts for the remainder of the report.

## 1.1. Terms and types

The terminology around TA is diverse and has changed with time. ‘Temporary accommodation’ became a more commonly used term from the 1970s, yet the provision of emergency accommodation has existed as a distinct response to destitution-related homelessness for centuries. The first nationally-operated form of emergency shelter was the Poor Law union workhouse system, codified in the early 19th century under poverty laws. Since then, policies and laws governing the provision of TA have included housing legislation, welfare frameworks, local government reform, and immigration rules and laws. Within these diverse and fragmented frameworks, administrative terms used for TA have included, among other things: ‘emergency’, ‘temporary’, or ‘short stay’ for duration; ‘housing’, ‘shelter’, or ‘accommodation’ for dwelling; as well as references to specific types, like Reception Centres and refuges.

Providers of TA have been similarly varied. Local government bodies have been dominant providers or contractors of TA over the past nearly two centuries, underpinned by law. Other actors – such as charities, churches, or private companies – have provided TA services in response to varied moral, religious, or profit-making incentives.

### “Homeless” – what’s in a word?

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “homeless” was used interchangeably with “houseless” or “roofless” – referring to a lack of a physical structure that a person could live in. From the 1960s, voluntary organisations advocated for its inclusion of people with a physical roof over their head, but where the dwelling conditions were poor quality, insecure, or overcrowded. However, a statutory definition of “homelessness” wasn’t provided until the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act – core principles of which remain in force today. Under this act, a person was deemed homeless if they had no accommodation whatsoever or accommodation they could not reasonably be expected to occupy.

A household found to be “statutorily homeless” was entitled to have settled accommodation secured for them provided they met three conditions: they were homeless or imminently homeless, were in “priority need”, and had not been judged “intentionally homeless”. The applicant had to have a local connection, though where an applicant lacked that, the receiving authority could refer them to one where they did. The 1996 Housing Act added the further threshold of “eligibility” as a precondition, which formally excluded certain groups from the duty on immigration grounds. While asylum applications were being determined, where permanent housing was unavailable or where households failed these conditions, applicants could be placed in TA.

The temporary status of TA means that it is provided as emergency housing in response to homelessness, but that it also constitutes a state of homelessness itself.

Over the past two centuries, ‘temporary accommodation’ in the broadest sense of the term has come in many material forms: purpose-built dwellings like workhouses and hostels; adapted dwellings like ex-army camps, short-life houses and homes for the aged; leased or licensed dwellings like hard-to-let council blocks, private rent flats, and hotels of all shapes and sizes.<sup>9</sup> This varied list hints at some of the problems that were to become characteristic of many types TA over the period: lack of privacy; lack of amenities; damp, cold, poorly lit; and even unfit for habitation or presenting a risk to life.

The existence of a longstanding legal foundation for TA, coupled with variable – frequently poor – conditions poses an important question: why has the state long-acknowledged a duty to shelter people who experience homelessness (a positive welfare duty) while also providing or regulating TA in ways that have routinely produced poor conditions and marginalised people it purports to help? While many households have certainly had satisfactory TA-related support, with short placements in decent self-contained TA, many others have been placed in condemned, infested, damp or mouldy properties. Or in hotel rooms with no cooking facilities and shared sleeping arrangements. Or they have been placed in TA far away from their support networks, and for extended periods of time.

Local authority resource constraints and a dearth of affordable move-on housing provide a partial answer: decent, self-contained TA can only be allocated as widely as a council has stock available. However, funding and policy around the number, type and minimum standards of council housing and interim TA are not passive circumstances, they are political and policy choices. What factors have shaped this tension between the positive welfare duty that underpins TA, and the negative conditions experienced by so many? The report argues that the answer lies the structural and political choices that have shaped what TA is required to be – and for whom – across nearly two centuries.

## 1.2. Scope and aims

**This report offers a historical perspective on TA in England between 1834 and 2011. It examines the changing legal and policy landscape around TA, alongside its shifting physical forms and conditions.**

As Section Two, Historical Foundations, will chart: 1834 marks the start as, with the inauguration of the Poor Law workhouse system, Britain saw its first national structure of accommodation for the homeless and destitute. The timeline ends in 2011 with two developments: first, the Localism Act's empowerment of councils to discharge their homelessness duty into the private rented sector without tenants' consent; second, the government's full privatisation of asylum seeker accommodation under COMPASS (implemented in 2012). Together, these changes marked the consolidation of a market-reliant TA system – and the start of the present phase. That year also saw the foundation of Justlife, marking a symbolic moment to draw the report's timeline to a close.

### The study has three aims:

- i To explore the history of TA as distinct from rough sleeping interventions at one end of the homelessness response spectrum, and settled housing on the other. These are all fluid parts of the same discussion, and a housing insecure person might experience each at various points within their lifetime. Yet, TA has distinct ideological, administrative, and temporal characteristics – including gender and race dimensions – that expose certain state welfare dynamics which a broader homelessness or housing policy analysis can miss.
- ii Temporary accommodation also produces distinct lived experiences. People living in TA have some form of housing, but its organisation creates distinctive social conditions. The second objective therefore is to qualitatively examine these conditions and the impacts of changing rights and dwelling types.
- iii Through spotlighting the legal, ideological, and administrative characteristics and distinctive social conditions of TA, this report aims to provide homelessness sector organisations with a historical understanding of how present-day inadequacies have been constructed – revealing which aspects of current provision reflect entrenched ideological frameworks above and beyond resource constraints, and therefore where purposeful redesign should focus.

To meet these objectives, the report examines the ideological frameworks shaping TA as a homelessness response and their translation into administrative practices, material conditions, and lived experiences. It examines wider developments relevant to TA that homelessness law and policy studies rarely bring together in one analysis, including: unsupported TA, such as squats and temporary prefabricated bungalows; how attitudes to immigration and its regulation have shaped TA policy; and the resistance of TA users against poor conditions.

This approach is distinct from political process analyses. There is an already rich body of literature exploring how homelessness legislation has evolved or emerged from ministerial priorities, voluntary sector pressure, and/or bureaucratic negotiation over the years.<sup>10</sup> Rather, the aim of this report is to explore how ideological assumptions have shaped – and continue to shape – TA provision on the ground, even as specific policies and material conditions evolve. Funding for TA is also not a central focus of the analysis, although underfunding – and poor value for money – are consistent background themes across all periods.

\* Examples and case studies are primarily drawn from England, though legislation and national statistical data include Wales until devolution of powers in 1999.

### 1.3. Methodology and sources

Research for this report was conducted over nine months across 2025–2026. It was desk-based and combined a structured literature review and selective deeper reading with targeted primary source analysis of archival materials, legislation, case law, parliamentary debates, and contemporaneous press coverage.<sup>11</sup> Analysis employed a four-period framework examining ideological continuities beneath broad legislative shifts. The report’s organisation is thematic rather than chronological – focusing on social groupings in homelessness policy, material conditions, and administrative structures.

The study primarily focuses on the evolution of state-mandated TA (i.e. TA required in some way by law), as it is interested in exploring tensions between state welfare duties and quality of provision. Charity or voluntary sector TA feature, as they shaped, and were shaped by, state welfare and homelessness discourses and funding. However, analysis is selective rather than systematic. Similarly, private contractor providers of TA will be explored at particularly relevant moments, but the topic remains an area in urgent need of further study. Case studies and examples are primarily located in urban centres or large towns, reflecting an urban bias.

Visible across the timeline is self-organised TA (also referred to as self-placed or unsupported TA).<sup>12</sup> Many people experiencing homelessness who have been refused a homelessness duty or other state support have fallen back on temporary solutions other than rough sleeping, such as self-funded hotels, private lodgings or sofa surfing. Others have chosen not to approach state or voluntary services for help in the first place, fearing rejection, discrimination, or that the provision will be worse than they could otherwise organise themselves. Unsupported TA is largely “hidden” and therefore challenging to define and historically analyse. It is not counted in official homelessness or TA statistics<sup>13</sup> and has been deliberately excluded from many government policy considerations.<sup>14</sup> This report seeks to fill some of that gap by sourcing studies of squats, self-organised private lodging houses, bedsits and Houses of Multiple Occupation. But this subject remains an ongoing and significant knowledge gap.



Two young children in their overcrowded bedroom in Manchester, 1971. Credit: Nick Hedges.

This photo was part of a ‘slum housing’ series that Hedges took across the 1960s and 1970s, in collaboration with Shelter and the Birmingham Housing Trust. They stand as a record of the housing crisis of the period and the ‘never ending cycle of poverty, insecurity and frequently ill health’ faced by many households. See more at [nickhedgesphotography.co.uk](http://nickhedgesphotography.co.uk).

The research sought to uncover lived experience testimony and accounts of protest and resistance as evidence of what the TA “system” has produced over nearly two hundred years. However, administrative fragmentation and longstanding weak data collection norms have rendered so many TA users biographically invisible. The combination of this structural invisibility and project time constraints has necessitated a triangulation of lived experiences – identification of similar patterns and attitudes across time – rather than the development of detailed TA typologies or deep case studies. Triangulation contributes to the creation of a composite, wider picture of the social conditions of TA in different periods, and it is an important step towards humanising TA experiences over time. However, many sources drawn on to spotlight the voices of TA users are mediated. They include news reports, third sector research, campaign and advocacy materials, government surveys, and contemporaneous ethnographies and sociological studies – each with specific aims, objectives and audiences that have shaped case study selection, the tone and details recorded. There is much more to be done to capture firsthand narratives – including life histories<sup>15</sup> and oral histories of lived TA experiences.<sup>16</sup>

## 1.4. Enumerating Temporary Accommodation

Before turning to the qualitative history, there is the question of statistics and their reliability. How many people experiencing homelessness have actually been accommodated in TA over the period? Accurately representing the scale of TA and its users in England and Wales across this timeline presents a challenge as available numbers are misleading. Local authority record keeping about households in TA was not required until after the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act; both before and after then, data has been inconsistent, incomplete, and incomparable across boundaries due to different definitions of homelessness and TA, in/exclusion criteria and counting methodologies. Unsupported TA has never been systematically counted. There are also no reliable statistics of single homeless people in TA across the period because they fell outside of statutory provision and so again, were infrequently or inadequately counted. Moreover, any existing 'snapshot' data can be misleading because it only captures information from a single moment and can miss crucial context and dynamics that shift between snapshots. Similarly, headline figures can skew the uneven – often racialised and gendered – distribution of TA allocation and support services among different populations.

Nonetheless, numbers can help illustrate trends. To give a broad foundation: high numbers of poor people entered the 19th century workhouses. Local Government Board returns for 1870–1880 put figures at a 200,000 peak in January 1880.<sup>17</sup> In the aftermath of the Second World War, over 750,000 houses alone were rendered uninhabitable through bomb damage. There were no nationwide surveys of how many were de facto homeless, nor of those supported by councils in TA in these early post-war years. Government surveys conducted in the mid-1960s reflected around 2,500 households in local authority TA<sup>18</sup> (separate to around 10,000 single people in Reception Centres, lodging houses, and nightly paid hostels).<sup>19</sup> Official numbers of households in TA steadily grew across the remainder of the century. Statistics shared in Parliament for 1974 include 6,866 households in TA across England, as well as a further 1,555 in B&Bs in London alone.<sup>20</sup> By 1985, records indicate 15,920 households in TA across England.<sup>21</sup> A large spike then occurred in the early 1990s – 63,070 households in TA in 1992.<sup>22</sup> Figures declined and then peaked again, this time at just over 100,000 in 2004, before falling to just under 50,000 by 2011, the end of this report's timeline.<sup>23</sup>

This partial numerical sketch (with data widely accepted to be undercounts throughout) highlights the persistence of a need for TA, and a gradual growth – with sharp spike points – from the 1960s. More than that, this overview highlights the problem of weak data, inconsistent methodologies, and the systematic exclusion of core groups, like single people, from official TA counts. National-level policy change cannot have been informed by substantial evidence simply because robust, comparable and granular data was never collected across the timeline – a theme that reappears throughout the report.

## 1.5. Structure of the report

The remainder of the study is structured as follows:

### Section Two: Historical Foundations

Presents the legislative and policy foundations regulating TA from 1834 to 2011. It maps the key statutory developments via a timeline and establishes a four-part analytical periodisation. To give a sense of the evolution of material conditions, each period outlined here also contains archetypal TA descriptions of conditions and occupant experiences.

### Section Three: The Deservingness Filter

Traces the evolution of the deservingness framework – an architecture of exclusion that has shaped TA access and conditions across two centuries. It examines three broad groups around whom exclusionary mechanisms developed: the single person, “problem families”, and racialised minorities and migrants. This section reveals how and why TA became a distinct site for applying deservingness judgments, shaping not only who was permitted access to temporary accommodation – and potential social housing thereafter – but what conditions they encountered along the way.

### Section Four: Administration of Exclusion

Examines how the deservingness ideology has been operationalised over time. It traces the implications of four interconnected mechanisms: the delegation of responsibility to local authorities; discretionary powers held by frontline officers; the geographic relocation of homeless households via removals, out-of-area placements or dispersal; and service outsourcing to private contractors. It reveals that, together, these mechanisms have fragmented accountability, translated to decisions which have disproportionately harmed marginalised groups, and severed people experiencing homelessness from their support networks.

### Section Five: Mutual Aid and Resistance

Recentres the collective action of households living in TA against exclusion and poor conditions. Through exploring solidarity practices, squatting campaigns, direct action protests and the power of news media, these case studies foreground the political agency of households experiencing homelessness, and the concrete changes they won. It also interrogates why localised victories have not translated into systemic reform, examining how the architecture of exclusion has structurally prevented resident-led pressure turning into durable change.

### Section Six: Moment of Progress?

Explores one of the few historical moments of decent TA provision: the 1944 Temporary Housing Programme. It argues that the self-contained, prefabricated THP bungalows demonstrated what decent TA can look like when political will is present – private, comfortable, community-orientated – while also exposing the limits of a provision allocated on the basis of deservingness, and implemented without sufficient move-on planning.

The Conclusion draws together analysis to argue that TA’s persistent failures in access and conditions have been produced by an architecture of exclusion that traces its roots back to Victorian ideas of deservingness, rather than inevitable resource constraints. From this, it presents three lessons for systemic reform, addressing the adaptability of exclusionary categories, administrative fragmentation, and the absence of enforceable standards.

**Note on terminology:** This report includes limited quotations from historical sources containing language now recognised as outdated or offensive. These quotations appear only where necessary to evidence historical attitudes and practices. Workhouses are referred to throughout as temporary accommodation for consistency, though the term was not applied to them contemporaneously and carries connotations that postdate the period.

## 2. Historical Foundations

### 2.1. Temporary Accommodation in law and policy, 1834–2011

Since at least the early 1600s under the Old Poor Law, local parishes have provided some form of emergency shelter (workhouses or poorhouses) for the homeless destitute, alongside other assistance like rates relief, food and clothes. By the 19th century, this system was straining against increasing demand, escalating costs, and hardening social judgments around the causes of poverty. In 1824, begging was criminalised under the Vagrancy Act (still in force today, though due to be repealed imminently). Then, in 1834, the Poor Law Amendment Act was passed, which created a new system of relief for destitution, including homelessness.

This “New Poor Law” sought to replace outdoor relief and standardise an indoor workhouse regime, explicitly designed to deter people from seeking assistance. Hundreds of purpose-built workhouses were erected across the country. It was the only shelter a homeless person was entitled to if they wanted state assistance. As such, the New Poor Law created the first unifying framework for emergency shelter, systematising provision. Since then, some form of TA has been legally required, although not for all.

The timeline on the following page presents a chronology of key moments when TA regulation evolved, beginning with the workhouse system in 1834. It is not a comprehensive history of homelessness-related legislation. For this, Jamie Harding’s book *Post-War Homelessness Policy in the UK* (Palgrave, 2020) provides a recent, valuable reference text. Rather, the timeline highlights key legal changes that have shaped or reflected something crucial in the history of TA, including local government regulation and immigration acts, alongside homelessness and housing-related acts. While each law represented a notable shift in the TA ecosystem, reforms did not necessarily result in breaks in attitude, policy or practice – patterns are visible. The study consequently deploys a four-part periodisation designed to organise continuity and change.

Alongside analysis of law and policy developments, this section features descriptions of common TA accommodation types in each period, revealing how legislative and administrative frameworks translated into material conditions. Descriptions in this section are overwhelmingly negative. This is largely an outcome of available evidence: narratives of poor conditions and mistreatment have tended to populate news stories, advocacy reports and academic studies, whereas qualitative accounts of decent TA and satisfactory rehousing outcomes are sparse. But it also represents a choice. The accounts that follow foreground negative conditions in order to expose and explore the gaps between the welfare safety net the TA system purported to offer – particularly since 1948 – and what the material conditions could look like in practice.

1834

### Poor Law Amendment Act

Unified the workhouse system as the state response to destitution. Under this law, parishes were organised into larger unions, and each union was instructed to build a workhouse and establish "indoor relief" with strict discipline, basic communal living conditions, and restricted diets.

1948

### National Assistance Act

Abolished the Poor Law system and created a new duty for local authorities to provide temporary accommodation to homeless people in urgent, unforeseen need. Section 17 established the duty of the National Assistance Board to provide Reception Centres for people with an 'unsettled' way of living. Section 21 "Part III" directed local authorities to provide TA for the unexpectedly homeless – a provision that was interpreted to relate to families.

1972

### Local Government Act

Reorganised local authorities into larger units. Within it, the government downgraded local authority responsibilities for homeless households from 'duty' to 'power'. Local authorities were no longer liable to provide TA, they were just empowered to do so.

1996

### Housing Act

Consolidated previous laws. Introduced a two-year time limit on re-housing duty, after which a homeless household's situation had to be reassessed. Created conditions of ineligibility for access to housing assistance, excluding most asylum seekers.

1996

### Asylum & Immigration Act

Restricted asylum seekers' access to welfare benefits and local authority housing, specifically affecting those applying for asylum from within the UK ("in-country applicants") or those appealing a negative decision.

2011

### Localism Act

Gave local authorities power to discharge their rehousing duty to homeless households by offering a tenancy in the private rented sector regardless of tenant preferences. The only requirement was a minimum 12-month assured shorthold tenancy.

1944

### Housing (Temporary Accommodation) Act

Funded the construction of 156,623 temporary prefabricated bungalows as an emergency response to war-related homelessness.

1977

### Housing (Homeless Persons Act)

Created the first statutory definition of homelessness and established a duty on local authorities to secure settled – primarily council – accommodation for applicants who satisfied conditions:

- (1) homeless or threatened with homelessness within 28 days;
- (2) in "priority need" (families with dependent children, pregnant women, those vulnerable due to age/disability/disaster, or other special reasons); and
- (3) not "intentionally homeless".

The "local connection" test then determined which authority was responsible. Households unable to meet these conditions could receive advice and assistance.

1999

### Immigration & Asylum Act

Formalised a separate welfare and TA system for people seeking asylum. Created the National Asylum Support Service.

2002

### Homelessness Act

Extended "priority need" categories to include 16-17-year-olds, care leavers aged 18-20, prison leavers, veterans, and people fleeing domestic violence. Required local authorities to develop homelessness strategies and emphasised prevention. Removed the two-year limit, reinstating the right of statutorily homeless households to settled housing.

2002

### Nationality, Immigration & Asylum Act

Introduced accommodation centres and tightened support access. Housing and financial support could be refused if a person seeking asylum did not make a claim as soon as was 'reasonably practicable'.

## 2.2. Organising the history

### 2.2.1. 1834 to 1944: Punishment as policy

The 1834 New Poor Law created the first regulated emergency shelter “TA” system, unifying workhouses that had been operated ad hoc for centuries. Union workhouses were deliberately designed to be worse than the material conditions faced by the poorest labourer on the outside (a principle known as ‘less eligibility’). Local connection also affected a person’s access to assistance. Under 17<sup>th</sup> century settlement laws (predating the New Poor Law), workhouse inmates could be removed from the workhouse they entered and relocated back to their parish of birth – the parish judged most responsible for their welfare.

This system aimed to deter poor people from seeking public assistance – particularly the “undeserving” physically able poor deemed capable of working. The deserving/undeserving binary was fundamental to workhouse design: the sick, elderly and infirm “deserved” (meagre) assistance to survive – though this, too, often included admission to the workhouse or comparable institutions like infirmaries. Those perceived as able to work were subject to harsher deterrent conditions within the same system, regardless of how they came to be destitute or homeless.



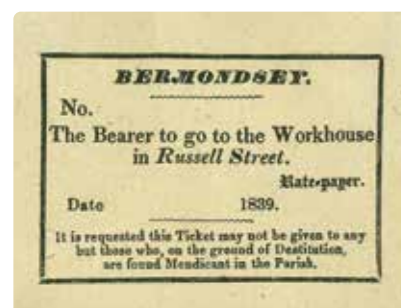
Bruce House - a model common lodging house - on Kemble Street, Camden, c.1906.



Dormitory cubicle, Bruce House, c.1906.



Dining room of Bruce House, c.1906.



Bermondsey workhouse admission ticket, 1839. Credit: Southwark Archives.

### Workhouses

Workhouses were purpose-built institutions designed to segregate and discipline residents and enable surveillance. Stories of wilful cruelty and institutionalised neglect in workhouses pepper newspaper articles, court records, and political discussions across the second half of the 19th century. In a typical case, a Poor Law Inspector described how, in a St Pancras workhouse in 1856, men were forced to sleep virtually naked together on plank beds, 25 mothers and 30 infants were crammed into a single offensive-smelling nursery, and in the children’s dormitory, eight children shared one bed, causing skin diseases to spread.<sup>1</sup>

Indignity was a management feature. Upon entry, ‘inmates’, as they were referred to, had to communally wash, undergo invasive physical inspection, and wear workhouse-issued rags if their clothes were infested. Families were separated, and children of single mothers were removed from their care.<sup>2</sup> Workhouse dormitories were often crammed with berths in doubled-up rows. Journalist Henry Mayhew described the beds as looking like ‘a series of coffins arranged in long catacombs’ in 1850.<sup>3</sup>

Workhouses operated turn out and curfew times. Work-capable inmates were also required to undertake hard labour in exchange for bed and board. John Montford, an inmate of St Pancras, testified in court in 1848 that: ‘[W]e have no supper allowed, and in the morning we have to break a bushel of stones or pick a pound of oakum, before we get any breakfast’. These tasks might take two hours to a whole day, but ‘if we do not do one or the other we get nothing [to eat]’.<sup>4</sup>

Two factors motivated this punitive turn in relief: first, concern over the rising local rates (essentially tax) costs of relieving increasing poverty. The early 19th century saw a significant economic downturn with an agricultural slump and rapid urbanisation creating huge need. Second, the period saw hardening social and moral judgements around poor people’s deservingness to receive assistance. New Poor Law architects were particularly concerned about rising numbers of poor labourers requesting parish relief towards the costs of obtaining a “house-room” to rent<sup>5</sup> Work was insecure and low paid, rent was high. Yet, reliance on parish relief was judged to be a result of idleness and ill-discipline. Workhouses, officials believed, would function as an effective deterrent from dependence on the state.

Numbers in workhouses declined in the early 20th century. Reforms – including the Old Age Pensions Act 1908 and the National Insurance Act 1911 – provided financial safety nets that prevented destitution among many more people. Around this time, attitudes were also shifting away from punitive deterrence towards institutionalised care through infirmaries. Workhouses were renamed Public Assistance Institutions in 1930 – though they were still large communal institutions and would have remained the last resort for destitute people without housing.

Common Lodging Houses similarly offered communal accommodation in institutional facilities – and were utilised by many single men experiencing homelessness well into the late 20th century. Three were established by London County Council between 1893 and 1906 under the Housing of the Working Classes Act 1890, including Bruce House (pictured). These ‘model’ lodging houses charged a nightly fee, so were targeted at the working poor. It was not until the mid-20th century that there was any major change in law relevant to the state provision of emergency shelter for those without means.

## 2.2.2. 1944–1977: Reluctant welfare

The Second World War created a huge housing need in Britain; bomb destruction, the endurance of slums, and growing families meant that 750,000 new houses were urgently required, and hundreds of thousands annually after that. Just before the end of the war, the coalition government passed the 1944 Housing (Temporary Accommodation) Act, funding the construction of 156,623 temporary prefabricated bungalows to temporarily house the homeless.<sup>6</sup> The significance of this act will be explored in Section Six, but relevant here is that it offered an unprecedented type of purpose-built TA: prefabs were self-contained with fitted kitchens, comfortable furnishings and small gardens. Nonetheless, the legislation did not shape the TA environment outside of its specific provisions.

In 1945, the new Labour government then inaugurated a “welfare state” which included the nationalisation of the health service, the implementation of an extensive social security programme, and mass council housebuilding. To access settled council housing, citizens had to put their name on their local council’s waiting list and stock would be allocated accordingly – not strictly on need, but open to all who met local residency requirements.

Within this so-called welfare state, the primary legal framework designed to address homelessness and regulate provision of TA was the 1948 National Assistance Act (NAA). This abolished the Poor Law and mandated that local authorities had a duty to temporarily accommodate the unexpectedly homeless. Under Section 17 of the act, single people facing an urgent need for shelter were to be supported in Reception Centres overseen by a central body, the National Assistance Board (until 1966, and the Supplementary Benefits Commission after that).

### Reception Centres

Reception Centres were set up much in the same way as the workhouses, not least because many were physically that prior to the war. Camberwell in Peckham was one of the largest and began life as a ‘grim’-looking workhouse in the 1870s.<sup>7</sup> Reported to have sheltered 1,100 homeless men at its post-war peak,<sup>8</sup> it usually accommodated around 600 in the “barrack-like” dormitories.<sup>9</sup>

Admissions processes were fractious. Former resident Eddie Brindley describes the process in Camberwell in the late 1970s: ‘Last night sat for three hours [in the waiting room] before the porters called us in. Quite a few drunks, same old faces, singing, swearing, bottles breaking, glass all over the place. One goes flying through the window and I duck as it flies over my head. Five or six porters come rushing in, they grab the drunk and push him out the gate’.<sup>10</sup>

If admitted, residents had their clothes inspected for lice and were required to wash in typically freezing or boiling water. Eddie described feeling ‘shunned and miserable’ when forced to wear the rough overalls allocated when personal clothing was found to have lice.<sup>11</sup> Like pre-war workhouses, these facilities offered mass communal sleeping with no privacy, typically filthy conditions, meagre food rations, turn-out and curfew times, and expectations of behavioural discipline.

Distinct from workhouses, Reception Centres offered additional rehabilitation support and facilities that presented men with an ‘unsettled way of life’ the chance for character reform, social work interventions and limited employment opportunities. However, they were generally inadequate at meeting residents’ needs, particularly mental health problems and addiction.<sup>12</sup>

The Victorian model Common Lodging Houses also continued to operate across this period. Though they charged a nightly fee, they developed similar rehabilitative and social work functions targeted at single men experiencing homelessness.

Homeless families were not admitted to Reception Centres; they were to be provided different – “Part III” – emergency accommodation under Section 21 of the 1948 National Assistance Act. Though the provision did not explicitly refer to ‘families’, such an interpretation was near-universal. The act also did not specify material type of TA. The government perceived peacetime need to be small – primarily occurring in extreme cases like fires and floods, or unanticipated evictions they imagined to be rare.

Widespread slum housing, a surge in eviction-related homelessness, and insufficient council housing supply created an unexpectedly large homelessness need, particularly from the early 1960s – one that far outstripped public housing supply. Unable to permanently house people in council housing in large enough numbers, local authorities cobbled together TA from often dilapidated stock like ageing council properties and slum clearance sites.

### Short-Life Housing

Condemned, “short-life” or “patched” housing emerged as a common type of family TA in the mid-to-late 20th century, as slum clearance programmes created large numbers of unoccupied housing awaiting demolition. These condemned properties were often in severe disrepair. Glenforth and Marlton Streets in Greenwich hit headlines in the late 1970s and were described by a local councillor as ‘the worst in the Borough’.<sup>13</sup> The houses – owned first by a private slum landlord, and then bought by the council – were overcrowded and damp with rotten floorboards and window frames, dangerous wiring, leaky roofs and infestations.<sup>14</sup> Some homeless families had lived there for years, many of whom had been evicted for rent arrears by the same council that placed them there.

Similarly, a block of flats in Palmer Street, Birmingham, was condemned in 1958 and again in 1978. It had bare walls, leaking sewage, and severe damp and mould – occupants routinely suffered respiratory illnesses. Yet, the council continued to use it to place homeless families well into the 1980s. Resident Helen Sale recalled her reaction when she was placed there: ‘Oh I was ashamed when I saw them at first. I nearly died. In fact, I cried’.<sup>15</sup> (See 5.2.2., for Palmer Street residents’ fight back).

Slum clearances significantly reduced from the 1970s but by this point, post-war tower blocks had become hard-to-let by councils, partly due to the residualisation of council housing stock (an academic term explaining how council stock was increasingly reserved for the very poorest and consequently stigmatised and neglected). These systems-built tower blocks were typically unsuitable for children and family life as they lacked play spaces, green spaces, or functioning amenities like lifts. Many were also unsafe to occupy due to flaws in their systems-build construction (which led to the partial collapse of Ronan Point in London in 1968) and were scheduled for refurbishment or demolition.<sup>16</sup> Despite such concerns, they were regularly used for homeless family TA.

Other families were placed in communal properties like welfare hostels or halfway houses. Welfare hostels routinely denied access to male members of the family over 16 years old, separating families (see 5.2.1. for a case study of separation in Kent). Many authorities simply took children into care and offered no support to the parents. The BBC film *Cathy Come Home* (1966) dramatised the cruel conditions and family separation faced by many households experiencing homelessness at this time. Watched by 12 million people, it came to define homelessness and TA for generations (see 5.3.).

### Residential Care Homes For Children

Across the 1940s–1970s, thousands of children were taken from their families and placed in residential children’s homes every year. For example, 3,958 children were taken into care in England and Wales from 1962–1963 alone, simply because of their families’ homelessness.<sup>17</sup> A further 1,149 were placed in care due to ‘unsatisfactory home conditions’, which would have included overcrowding and dilapidation. Together, these figures equated to around 10 per cent of all children taken into care that year.

Care home types and conditions varied significantly – from large single sex hostels to smaller shared houses or fostering arrangements. Institutional facilities were characterised by remote locations, impersonal care, shared and limited amenities.<sup>18</sup> Recent inquiries have uncovered widespread sexual, physical, and emotional abuse of children in care across the period.<sup>19</sup>

In 1972, the Local Government Act reorganised local authorities into larger units. For reasons unknown, the act also downgraded local authority responsibility to provide TA to homeless families to a ‘power’ (discretionary) rather than a ‘duty’ (mandatory) – a change buried deep within provisions.<sup>20</sup> A 1974 Department of Environment circular then sought to urge (not mandate) local authorities to transfer responsibility for accommodating the homeless from welfare services to housing departments.<sup>21</sup>

The confusion the act and circular created is part of what fuelled the passing of the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act, which reinstated local authority duties to assist homeless households, and placed responsibility squarely with housing departments. The confusion also epitomised the reluctant welfare character of the period: the government acknowledged the need for TA as part of the welfare state, yet deregulated duties, repurposed workhouses, continued family separation, implemented rehabilitation agendas, and were never clear about where accountability lay. What came next was a clearer legislative turn towards recognising housing rights – at least for some groups.

## 2.2.3 1977 to 1996: Hierarchy of rights

The 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act codified local authority duties to permanently house certain homeless groups. This was world-leading legislation, as it defined homelessness more broadly than peer countries and was the first statutory definition.<sup>22</sup> The act, followed by later consolidations, also entitled homeless people to be housed in settled accommodation if they met certain criteria: currently or imminently homeless, unintentionally homeless, and in priority need (families with dependent children, pregnant women, disaster victims, or otherwise vulnerable people). Where an applicant lacked a local connection with the authority they approached, that authority could refer them to one where they did.

It was the first legislation to place an enforceable duty on local authorities to permanently house certain categories of homeless people. If households were denied the duty, they could challenge it through the courts. While there were significant barriers to households launching legal action – including cost and expertise – and judgements were typically limited to individual cases, the existence of judicial redress represented a powerful accountability mechanism.

Numerous legal cases followed the act over subsequent decades, and a handful affected wider structural change – though subsequent expansions of homelessness duties were not always strictly a result of judicial intervention. In *R v Hillingdon LBC, ex p. Puhlhofer* [1986], the court ruled lawful a council's classification of a B&B room as accommodation sufficient to discharge its homelessness duty – a decision so widely condemned that it prompted the government to amend the 1986 Housing and Planning Act to require that accommodation be 'reasonable to continue to occupy'.<sup>23</sup>

Despite significant inclusions, the 1977 act recreated hierarchies established under the 1948 National Assistance Act (NAA). Homeless single people (including couples without children) were entitled to advice and assistance but were excluded from the settled housing provision – and interim TA – unless they could demonstrate vulnerability; a criteria that rooted entitlement in individual circumstances rather than housing need.

The 1977 act was followed by Conservative government policies designed to reduce the state's footprint in all types of housing: selling off council housing stock under the 1980 Right to Buy policy; restricting the building of new council houses; and reorganising and reducing benefit payments, including housing assistance. The failure of the private rented market to fill the huge shortfall in public housing provision resulted in a significant rise in all types of homelessness. The 1977 act provisions meant that increasing numbers of households were owed a statutory homelessness duty, but there were fewer council properties to rehouse them in. Faced with no permanent housing options, local authorities increasingly contracted out TA services to bed and breakfasts (B&B), hotels, and private sector lease properties – especially in and around London.<sup>24</sup>

CAMBERWELL RECEPTION CENTRE

**Casual Admission**

20 JAN 78  
Date..... CP No.....  
Name.....

ADMIT TO

Block N	Floor 4	Bed No. 23
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This ticket must be shown at supper and breakfast times and given up on discharge

Please read the rules overleaf

Supper	Breakfast
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Form RC 21A  
(2002) 250588/173511 4/73 165m NCS 922

**RULES OF THE CENTRE**

AS A CONDITION OF ADMISSION,  
EVERY PERSON

- must carry out any reasonable order given by an officer.
- must occupy only the sleeping accommodation allotted to him, and must attend for meals at the time and place required.
- must be prepared to assist in the work of the centre by performing a task of work, if required to do so.

Camberwell Reception Centre admission ticket, 1978.  
Credit: London Museum.

## Bed & Breakfasts

Local authorities contracted private B&Bs directly or used accommodation agencies, which were not required to register or pass any quality standards threshold.<sup>25</sup> Health and safety inspections were infrequent, allowing squalid conditions to proliferate. Environmental health officers visited 17 B&Bs accommodating homeless people in Birmingham in 1988 and found 'substandard and dangerous accommodation is the norm rather than the exception'.<sup>26</sup> Two properties were closed immediately after inspections as their fire risk was judged too great.

Families continued to be subject to separation in B&Bs, as some local authorities refused entry to fathers.<sup>27</sup> Conditions were consistently unsafe. Overcrowding was endemic, with families confined to single beds, let alone single rooms.<sup>28</sup> Severe pest infestations were common.<sup>29</sup> Security concerns compounded these conditions. Harry reported to children's charity Barnardo's the situation he and his son faced in one B&B TA in 1995:

*I've been robbed [here], ... there are loads of drug addicts here, all sorts. One time we had to tell Barnardo's that three girls had been abused in this hotel. With people like that around, I never let my son out of the room. The kids living here are so bored they ...[set] the fire alarms off six or seven times a night. One day there'll be a real fire and no one will take any notice.<sup>30</sup>*

The spatial constraints had psychological impacts. Harry observed his son had become progressively more destructive due to lack of play space and missing his old bedroom.

Minoritised populations were overrepresented in B&B TA across this period.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, from the late 1980s, councils began using the "intentionally homeless" provision of the 1977 Act (consolidated under the 1985 Act) to assess the housing status of migrants and Commonwealth citizens in their country of origin – no matter how long they had lived in the UK. In 1988, Tower Hamlets evicted ten Bangladeshi households – sixty-six people – after courts ruled in another case that leaving an available residence in Bangladesh entitled a local authority to conclude the household made themselves "intentionally homeless".<sup>32</sup>

Racialised exclusion was then formalised under the 1993 Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act, which denied TA to asylum seekers if they had access to any accommodation, however temporary or unsuitable. It challenged the 1977 act's principle that anyone experiencing housing hardship could approach a local authority for housing assistance (outcome notwithstanding). Legal changes in the next period formalised this differentiated treatment, sending citizens and asylum seekers on completely different pathways.

## 2.2.4 1996–2011: Divergent investment

In response to rising visible homelessness and public anxieties about homeless people "queue jumping" for social housing, the Conservative government passed the 1996 Housing Act, which placed a two-year limit on the provision of TA for statutorily homeless households (until 2002, when the limit was abolished). Under this limit, a local authority had to reassess the household's eligibility for a homelessness duty every two years. It then had the 'power' (and therefore the choice) to provide TA for longer, but could only do so from its own stock for two out of a three-year period.<sup>33</sup> As such, this act fundamentally weakened the 1977 act's promise of permanent housing. For a time, families looked like they would be stuck in TA permanently. The New Labour government (1997–2010) then reversed this specific restriction but codified a forked system: significant investment in homelessness prevention for citizens running alongside intensified exclusion for destitute asylum seekers.

For citizens: New Labour established the Social Exclusion Unit immediately after taking office in 1997 and made tackling homelessness one of its top priorities. This was institutionally significant in that it was located in the Cabinet Office, had Prime Ministerial patronage and was well funded – meaning that it was able to work cross-departmentally with authority and cut through some silos.<sup>34</sup> Labour established the Rough Sleepers Unit in 1999 along similar lines, driving through major policy and conditions changes – including the Homelessness Action Programme (1999–2002), which provided £134 million to 113 towns and cities across Great Britain and achieved its two-thirds reduction in rough sleeping targets early.<sup>35</sup> The 2005 Hostels Capital Investment Programme also upgraded some facilities, addressing some longstanding concerns over conditions.

The government's 2002 Homelessness Act extended "priority need" status to additional vulnerable groups (16–17-year-olds, care leavers aged 18–20, prisoner leavers, veterans, and people fleeing domestic violence). Labour also introduced targets to halve the number of households in TA between 2004 and 2010.<sup>36</sup> A six-week cap was placed on B&B stays – a policy that saw a 44 per cent reduction in family B&B placements between June 2002 and June 2003.<sup>37</sup> Though the limit was not always successfully applied and numbers in other forms of TA continued to grow. Moreover, conditions in alternative forms of accommodation – such as self-contained TA leased from private landlords or councils – continued to be variable. Fitzpatrick and Pleace's study on the statutory homelessness system found an overall TA household satisfaction rate of 5.8 out of 10 for self-contained TA, compared with 5.5 for hostels and B&Bs in 2005 – a marginal improvement.<sup>38</sup>

## Self-Contained Accommodation

Private Sector Leases (PSLs) and equivalent council-leased properties were self-contained flats and houses used as TA. Their privacy meant they were viewed favourably against shared accommodation, and residents reported fewer conditions-related health concerns than in B&Bs.<sup>39</sup> However, the high turnover of homeless families, lack of maintenance, and accountability gaps caused familiar problems for many homeless households.

In 1993, Sharon Smith, Neil Richardson and her two children lived in a Hastings PSL riddled with slug, ant and flea infestations.<sup>40</sup> Her children (aged six and four) slept downstairs as their bedrooms were too damp. 'The council should not let people live like this, it's meant to be only temporary but it's like living in hell', Sharon told a local reporter.<sup>41</sup> A decade later, a 2004 Shelter survey found that 35 per cent of households in self-contained TA reported damp and mouldy conditions and a quarter found cooking facilities inadequate and unhygienic.<sup>42</sup>

Placements also rarely accounted for health needs or disabilities. In 2004 Shelter documented Sabah's case: he, his wife, and three children were placed by their council in a higher-floor flat of a dilapidated building with unreliable lifts, despite having serious mobility, heart, and respiratory conditions. Sabah explained that no nearby parking meant: 'You cannot take a child to school, you cannot go shopping, you can't go'.<sup>43</sup>

Homelessness prevention was a key part of the Labour government's agenda, with local authorities working with households to prevent evictions and family break up. Pawson highlights that, with a 50 per cent drop in homelessness acceptances between 2003-2006 at precisely the moment housing affordability was worsening, 'the scale of the post-2003 reduction in official homelessness numbers can only be described as remarkable'.<sup>44</sup> However, performance indicators also incentivised local authority gatekeeping to housing assistance in high housing pressure areas – pushing some eligible households toward potentially unsuitable private rentals or unsupported TA rather than accepting statutory duties.<sup>45</sup>

Certain groups continued to be viewed as needing special rehabilitative attention in this period: "entrenched" single homeless men and "chaotic" families deemed unresponsive to social inclusion policies.<sup>46</sup> The 2006 Respect initiative, for instance, focused on anti-social behaviour, a component of which included police enforcement against rough sleeping.

For homeless non-citizens, investment took an entirely different path, shaped by an array of different housing and immigration laws. In a structural rupture that changed the gateway criteria for homelessness duties, the 1996 Housing Act added an "eligibility" precondition to the homelessness duty – typically excluding people subject to migration control and people whose habitual residence was judged not to be in the UK.<sup>47</sup> That same year, under the Asylum and Immigration Act, the Conservative government also removed certain asylum seekers' entitlement to income support, extending 1993 restrictions.

Unable to afford rent and denied access to public housing, large numbers of asylum seekers and refugees ended up on the streets, causing a domestic humanitarian crisis.<sup>48</sup> After legal challenges, asylum seeker entitlement to housing assistance was briefly reinstated, until the Labour government then implemented a punitive parallel system through the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act. This act created the National Asylum Support Service (NASS), which managed asylum seeker housing.

Labour's 2002 Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act then removed asylum seeker entitlements to NASS support if they were deemed not to have made an asylum application as soon as was 'reasonably practicable' upon arriving in the UK. Though not fully rolled out, Part 2 of this act introduced provisions for large-scale accommodation centres with on-site education and health facilities, designed to isolate asylum seekers from local communities.<sup>49</sup>

## National Asylum Support Service (NASS)

NASS managed asylum seeker accommodation between 1999 and 2006, when the system transitioned to the New Asylum Model (with similar features). NASS contracted accommodation providers through complicated sub-contracting arrangements. Landlords were a mix of private entities and local authorities. Until full privatisation in 2012, local authorities retained a level of control over contracts, which were run by local authority consortia. However, accountabilities were weak in practice.

Private landlords who offered only a few properties could become sub-contractors 'without any checks being made locally about their past record or suitability'.<sup>50</sup> In a 2001 Shelter study, Environmental Health Inspectors recorded asylum accommodation as 'some of the worst private rented housing conditions they had seen for many years'.<sup>51</sup> Of the 154 dwellings they inspected, almost 17 per cent were unfit for human habitation, with inadequate kitchen facilities, dampness, and poor heating and ventilation.<sup>52</sup> NASS also systematised dispersal – the deliberate placement of asylum seekers at some distance from their place of application and social networks.

That year, Afghan refugee Fatima described to a journalist what it was like to live in such a place. She and her six children shared two small bedrooms separated by three floors in a hotel in London: 'Life is awful here... The bathroom has cockroaches and I don't want to use it. Especially when you see the shower curtain. It is shared by so many people. I try to wait six or seven days before I have a shower'.<sup>53</sup> She reported her children suffered from skin conditions, anxiety, panic attacks, and were unable to study because of space constraints.<sup>54</sup>

Beyond substandard conditions, the government implemented two additional deterrent measures: voucher welfare (worth 70 per cent of Income Support rates)<sup>55</sup> and dispersal policies that deliberately moved asylum seekers to areas with poor housing and limited support infrastructure on a "no choice" basis.<sup>56</sup> It was an explicit and distinct TA-based deterrence system.

Marking the end of this report's timeline, the 2011 Localism Act, brought in by the 2010-elected Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, enabled local authorities to discharge their homelessness duty to the private rented sector without requiring tenants' consent. It essentially signalled a retreat from the expectation that homelessness duties would be met through social housing, and further marketised homelessness support. Conservative government decisions that year (implemented in 2012) to fully privatise the asylum seeker support system through COMPASS contracts similarly cemented marketisation. COMPASS (standing for Commercial Operating Managers Procuring Asylum Support) also finalised the separation of asylum seeker accommodation from mainstream homelessness provision and further distanced public accountability for conditions and the treatment of asylum seekers.

The four periods outlined – framed loosely around the 1834 Poor Law, 1948 National Assistance Act, 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act, and the 1996 legal changes through the Housing Act and the Asylum and Immigration Act – mark significant shifts in the state's regulation of TA for people experiencing homelessness. TA evolved from being an explicit disciplining tool (1834), to a flawed welfare safety net (1948), to a statutory entitlement within a solidifying hierarchy of rights (1977), to a bifurcated system with racialised investment and management (1996). Each evolution reflected and shaped clear swings in political and public attitudes around homelessness, TA, and welfare entitlements.<sup>57</sup> Yet, such moments must be taken as pivot points rather than absolute transformations.

Across the near 200-year timeline, TA has been maintained in some form as a homelessness safety-net protected in law. This is a positive welfare duty and remains a cornerstone of welfare and housing policy. However, core features of TA persisted in England: selective, rather than universal, access; squalid conditions; and the treatment of homeless people as moveable units rather than people rooted in place and within communities. These features were products of resource constraints but also often operated to deter people from seeking assistance in the first place. And they did not function uniformly – they were shaped by an ideology of deservingness that influenced which groups faced which conditions within the system, which received minimal assistance, and which were excluded from it altogether.

Section Three looks at this ideological framework, examining three social categories that preoccupied social policy and shaped homelessness policy and TA practice across this timeline: the single person experiencing homelessness, the "problem family" (denoted as such due to perceived failure to conform to nuclear, domestic, and behavioural standards), and racialised minorities and migrants – a dynamic category in which racialisation was shaped by shifting policies and popular racism over the timeline.

## 3. The Deservingness Filter

Section two outlined how TA policy has embodied a contradiction: the state has long-accepted a responsibility to provide emergency shelter for people experiencing homelessness and passed world-leading legislation to protect that entitlement. However, throughout, it has also practised exclusion, deterrence, and overseen degrading TA conditions despite reforms. Pressure to reduce local authority cost burdens have been one factor driving the exclusionary and degrading character of TA.<sup>1</sup> The logic being that deterrence can reduce demand and therefore cost (flawed in the face of inadequate housing supply).

Decisions over entitlements, and the distribution and management of resources, – i.e. who to exclude and how to deter or conversely, include and protect – do not sit in a social vacuum. While the *'who'* has changed over time, the ideology that demands distinction between the “deserving” and “undeserving”, has remained.

Many scholars have previously highlighted the insidious persistence of the deservingness ideology in welfare, housing and homelessness law and policy in general, as well as in popular opinion.<sup>2</sup> As this section will show, notions of deservingness have deeply influenced TA policy design, too. It should not be taken as a rigid, or the only, explanation of exclusionary or degrading TA experiences. Rather, “deservingness” should be understood as a persistent discourse that has helped normalise resource scarcity and exclusion based on identity or behavioural characteristics of the person experiencing homelessness – in ways that have proven adaptable around reform.

To organise analysis, the section explores three key “undeserving” population categories around which TA has been legislated and organised: single people, “problem families”, and racialised minorities and migrants. Other groups – including youths, people with disabilities, prison leavers, and LGBTQ+ individuals – also experienced profound TA exclusion and/or marginalisation across this period.<sup>3</sup> However, the report focuses narrowly on these listed three, as they generated distinct exclusionary processes that shaped access across the system. Examining such continuities reveals how the exclusionary architecture of TA adapted to changing political contexts while preserving core functions.

## 3.1. Categories of (un)deserving

### 3.1.1. Single person

The enduring Victorian assumption about single people experiencing destitution, and without disabilities, was that they were individually responsible and capable of securing work and housing – but chose not to. Poor people were believed to exploit, in the words of Poor Law architects, ‘the plea of impending starvation’ to justify requests for assistance.<sup>4</sup> Such attitudes underscored a persistent Victorian anxiety about labour discipline and were fuelled by prominent social theorists like Thomas Malthus and Herbert Spencer.<sup>5</sup>

#### Social theorists on poverty

British Economist **Thomas Malthus**, author of *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, is best known for his controversial theory on population growth: that when population growth outpaced food production, disease and famine were ‘natural’ checks on overpopulation. He believed the poor were responsible for their own poverty and that parish relief, including rent assistance, encouraged early marriage, large families, and inevitable destitution – so it needed to be abolished. Evolutionary biologists were heavily influenced by Malthus’s work, including Charles Darwin and **Herbert Spencer**. Spencer took criticism of parish relief to the extreme, arguing in 1851 that: ‘the poverty of the incapable, the distresses that come upon the imprudent, the starvation of the idle. . . are the decrees of a large, far-seeing benevolence’.<sup>6</sup> In other words, only unmitigated poverty could induce people to better themselves.

These views reflected the moral value that Victorian society placed on the economic independence of households and, within that unit, the male breadwinner.<sup>7</sup> Single people experiencing homelessness violated these norms because they existed outside economic and family structures that ordered society. Terms used to describe single (typically male) claimants for workhouse relief – like “tramp”, “vagabond” and “vagrant” – emphasised homelessness and itinerancy as lifestyle choices rather than consequence of wider economic conditions – choices that needed disciplining.

Such attitudes were rearticulated through the post-war “welfare state”. Section 17(1) of the 1948 National Assistance Act, created a duty to provide reception centres or resettlement units for single persons ‘without a settled way of living’, insinuating that instability was partly a life choice.<sup>8</sup> Though the language was intended to be softer than terms like “tramp”,<sup>9</sup> it still outlined a category of person that required character reform – or ‘opportunities of rehabilitation toward a settled life’, to quote Secretary of State for Health and responsible for housing Aneurin “Nye” Bevan.<sup>10</sup>

Under Section 51 of the 1948 act, people who persistently failed to maintain themselves (and their families) – and therefore caused the state to provide assistance – could face imprisonment.<sup>11</sup> Three men were jailed under this in 1950, including one whose crime was forcing the state to pay for the care of the wife and child he had abandoned by moving into a hostel.<sup>12</sup> Similar to the 1834 New Poor Law, the underlying moral imperative of homelessness assistance was to encourage individuals to work rather than claim welfare, and to fund any family dependents to prevent the state from having to do so. It deflected from structural causes of homelessness by locating the solution in individual behavioural change.

Despite a 1966 government survey of single homeless people identifying some structural contributors to homelessness – for example, that 24.5 per cent could not find accommodation and 52.6 per cent lacked money – government policies emphasised personal deficiency.<sup>13</sup> Malthusian concerns about relief-as-incentive remained influential. A 1958 Manchester Welfare Services Committee Report argued it could be seen that ‘the existence of [Reception] Centres stimulates a demand which would largely disappear in their absence’.<sup>14</sup>

Also around this time, academic research explained single homelessness in terms of poor mental and physical health.<sup>15</sup> Pathological explanations were partly influenced by changes in mental health law that saw mentally unwell patients come into contact with the state via homelessness pathways. In 1959 the Mental Health Act, and later circulars, recommended mental health patients be discharged from hospitals and provided for in the community. However, as the government failed to provide sufficient community care facilities, patients often found themselves homeless.<sup>16</sup>

In some ways this view of individual vulnerability was welfarist and challenged the Victorian notion of single people playing the relief system to their advantage. However, the lean towards pathological explanations reinforced the post-1948 idea that the single homeless needed some form of specialist rehabilitation rather than structural reforms that provided affordable housing options and more secure employment.

The subsequent 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act again did not generate housing duties for single people experiencing homelessness unless they qualified under vulnerability provisions – which in turn were subject to broad local discretion. Its duties towards the single homeless were largely limited to advice and assistance. This created a policy feedback loop whereby a person's only access to permanent housing through homelessness frameworks was through reinforcing the perception that single homeless need was individual and a result of specific vulnerability. A 1980 survey of London hostel users highlighted a policy fixation on 'individual problems and pathologies rather than on the failure of the housing market'.<sup>17</sup>

Reception Centres remained the primary state-provided shelter accessible for single homeless men at this time, despite contemporaneous studies highlighting user preferences for self-contained accommodation or rooms with a key and more privacy.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, a 1981 government survey, *Single and Homeless*, 'dispelled the popular image of the single homeless as drunken dossers, identifying the major causes of homelessness amongst that group as being the lack of adequate housing and people moving between institutions, charities, hostels and sleeping rough'.<sup>19</sup> And yet, policy continued to exclude or manage single homelessness through a welfare or medical lens via large institutions, rather than with appropriate housing provision or self-contained TA.

Reiterating judgements around self-responsibility and reinforcing its influence, Conservative Prime Minister John Major stated on a few occasions in the early 1990s that people slept on the streets out of choice.<sup>20</sup> Policy followed suit; to reduce peaking rough sleeping numbers (and a media storm), the Conservative government's 1990 Rough Sleeper Initiative increased hostel capacity rather than addressing causes or increasing settled housing options. Hostels were used uncritically as a sticking plaster.

Then, while the Labour government post-1997 focused on reducing single homelessness through prevention, it did so in part through emphasising individual self-reliance and work – individualised solutions where people were expected to take self-responsibility – rather than by meaningfully increasing access to appropriate and affordable housing.<sup>21</sup> Certainly, public housing provision for single people or 'two-adult' households has been small for more than seven decades.

In a notable progressive move challenging the individual blame framework, the Rough Sleepers Unit – created in 1999 – identified institutional pathways into rough sleeping (including exit from care, prison and the armed forces) as structural drivers requiring cross-departmental intervention.<sup>22</sup>

The 2005 Hostels Capital Improvement Programme enabled some hostels to provide occupants with their own room (though there is a lack of 'robust evidence' on the programme).<sup>23</sup> These reforms represented a long-overdue expansion of coordinated homelessness prevention and limited change to the physical make-up of some hostels. Nonetheless, once services were created, people sleeping rough were expected to access them – with police involvement if deemed necessary. Begging was made a recordable offence and police would "wet down" rough sleeping areas in some authorities.<sup>24</sup>

This carrot and stick approach accords with Welshman's explanation of the New Labour approach to welfare reform more generally: the welfare system was supposed to be active rather than passive, combine opportunity and responsibility, and be based around paid work.<sup>25</sup> The single person without disabilities could fall the fastest through the net if viewed as not living up to those social values – particularly in the absence of a statutory duty for those who were non-priority.

## Where are the women?

Throughout the timeline, policy approaches to single homelessness overwhelmingly focused on men; women were routinely overlooked or made invisible. Assumed not to need employment-orientated rehabilitation for the best part of the 19th and 20th centuries (their "place" being assumed as wives and carers within the private sphere of the house), women experiencing homelessness were routinely under-provided for within the system.<sup>26</sup>

Reception Centres and other institutional TA did not explicitly exclude women entrants. However, their workhouse institutional character, large male population, and small-scale provision for women dissuaded many from applying – reinforcing the policy assumption that need was small.<sup>27</sup> Single-sex hostel options were also few. A 1987 Institute of Housing report highlighted: 'statutory hostel provision for men exceed[ed] that for women by a ratio of 9:1'.<sup>28</sup>

So, where did single homeless women go? Underprovided-for in mainstream TA provision, excluded in law, and structurally disadvantaged in the labour market, many likely stayed in unsuitable or violent relationships or turned to unsupported accommodation – though historical data on women in "hidden" homeless situations is sparse.<sup>29</sup>

### 3.1.2. “Problem families”

The family unit (particularly the heteronormative nuclear family setup) has long been viewed as responsible for its own prosperity – with each member having a different function and moral role to fulfil. The “problem family” emerged over time (explicitly in the 20th century) as a rubric to classify family units not meeting social and moral ideals.

In the early 19th century workhouse system, families were essentially a problem by dint of their needing relief – accessing the workhouse itself represented failure to meet expectations of household self-sufficiency. Though it was not an administrative category or organising principle at this time as such, single mothers posed a particular ideological burden on the workhouse regime; unmarried women transgressed Victorian morality codes, and their illegitimate children represented undue burdens on public funds, with no father to pay for their care. Single mothers were often set apart from other groups in the workhouse – both as a method of deterrence and to ‘save’ innocent children from the corrupting influences of their ‘vagrant’ ways, especially girls.<sup>30</sup> Their apparent immorality was viewed as intractable and contagious.



Three women and a child in a hostel for single mothers and pregnant women in Liverpool, 1969. Credit: Nick Hedges.

The post-war welfare architecture was then organised around the breadwinning male head of household and promoted the value of a nuclear family. Married women were excluded from the 1948 national insurance system, losing credit they might have built up as single working women prior to marriage.<sup>31</sup> Unemployed married women were entirely uninsured independently. State authorities were therefore not prepared for welfare claims outside of the male breadwinner-nuclear-family set up.<sup>32</sup>

When welfare departments were then overwhelmed with family-based applications for homelessness support in the decades after the Second World War, many leant on behavioural frameworks to sort access to, and quality of, TA and permanent council housing. Placements rested on local authority judgments about culpability in an applicant household’s circumstances, because the 1948 act stated that TA should be provided in cases of ‘unforeseen’ homelessness. Evictions from rent arrears were frequently judged to be foreseeable – a product of household mismanagement rather than the consequences of unemployment, low wages, or a withholding-rent response to landlord harassment or poor conditions. There were also fears in government that prioritising rent arrears-evicted households might result in collusion between landlord and tenant to jump the municipal housing queue.<sup>33</sup> Families in rent arrears were then regularly shunted to the bottom of the rehousing list or to the worst quality TA, like large welfare homes.

Authorities also examined the ‘overall disorder’ of the family’s domestic situation to help determine eligibility for assistance.<sup>34</sup> They were helped along by reformers and social policy theorists, such as the influential Eugenics Society (formed in 1907), which explained the “problem family” as a result of genetic deficiency.<sup>35</sup> While ‘reliance on welfare’ was seen as a degenerative trait in its own right (alongside alcoholism, habitual criminality, and neurological conditions),<sup>36</sup> women’s domestic standards also formed part of the assessment. A 1974 Department of Health and Social Security report stated on council house allocation:

*[U]nmarried mothers, cohabitees, “dirty” families and transients tended to be grouped together [by councils] as “undesirable”. Moral rectitude, social conformity, clean living and a “clean” rent book on occasion seemed to be essential qualifications for eligibility – at least for new houses.<sup>37</sup>*

“Decent families” risked turning into problem families if they stayed in TA too long – with the characteristics of homelessness and squalor being projected onto the household itself.<sup>38</sup>

After the 1977 act’s guarantee of settled housing for households owed a homelessness duty, the “problem family” risked becoming the homeless family in public opinion – virtually regardless of breadwinner status or household competence. In this hierarchy-of-housing-entitlements period, political and public discourse became increasingly concerned about homelessness becoming a shortcut to permanent council housing. Propelled by reactionary headlines, a view hardened that some families experiencing homelessness were deliberately displacing others with greater moral claims on the council house waiting list (those who had worked, paid rent consistently, avoided homelessness through responsible behaviour, and so on).

Domestic violence occupied a contested space between (un)deserving categories at this time. Households with dependent children were, under the 1977 act, given priority need status because of the presence of children. However, for many decades, domestic violence survivors without children tended to be judged as single women in a context of relationship breakdown – many were explicitly or indirectly encouraged to return to their partners when approaching local authorities for housing or financial assistance.<sup>39</sup> While the 1977 act allowed domestic violence survivors to qualify for priority need by proving vulnerability under ‘other special reasons’, the burden of proof was high – reflecting the rigidity of the expectation of marital dependence for women.

In the 1990s, single mothers once again became the problem family target for direct media and political attacks – specifically pregnant teenage girls apparently “jumping the housing queue” by getting pregnant to gain a council house (a media-driven story validated by leading politicians).<sup>40</sup> The longstanding attitude towards homeless youths was that they were the responsibility of parents rather than the state,<sup>41</sup> pregnant teenagers were an affront to family ideals on multiple fronts.

### Social theorists on welfare dependency

One of the most influential social policy thinkers around unmarried motherhood and welfare dependency in the late 20th century was **Charles Murray**, an American social policy theorist and author of  *Losing Ground*  (1984). Murray argued that welfare states encouraged dependency because poor people would rationally choose benefits over work. He also believed the welfare system encouraged co-habiting and births outside of marriage – an egregious phenomenon in his view, because he deemed married parenthood as the only ‘civilising agent of young boys’, and because it advantaged single unmarried mothers over married ones. ‘[T]he welfare of society’, he wrote, ‘requires that women actively avoid getting pregnant if they have no husband’.<sup>42</sup> His work filtered through to the British political context. The Conservative Government under Prime Minister John Major, for instance, developed a Back to Basics reform agenda focused on reinforcing “traditional” nuclear family values and reducing dependency culture.<sup>43</sup>

By the early 2000s, challenges experienced by homeless individuals and families were framed as a problem of ‘social exclusion’ – the Labour government’s flagship social policy programme. The government’s social exclusion framework acknowledged structural drivers of family poverty and homelessness – low wages, worklessness, inadequate housing – and introduced genuinely structural interventions, including the national minimum wage, tax credits, and Sure Start.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, internal tensions were present from the outset.

The target of the government’s social exclusion interventions included families whose “chaotic” parenting, troubled lives, and anti-social behaviour could be, in the words of Prime Minister Tony Blair, ‘passed down generations’.<sup>45</sup> Home Secretary David Blunkett similarly suggested disruptive behaviour in three-year-olds might be warning signs of teenage anti-social behaviour and therefore should be monitored.<sup>46</sup> There is no clear evidence that intervention programmes translated into a distinct TA provision for such families whose homelessness brought them into contact with the state. Though, a specialist tier of ‘intensive family support units’ did have residential components and were targeted at ‘anti-social’ families at risk of eviction.<sup>47</sup> The point here is that social intervention operated in parallel with homelessness assistance, feeding a discursive environment around which household competency was under scrutiny.

In a marker of (slow) progress, in 2002, domestic violence became an explicit ground for a vulnerability assessment. Yet, it was not until 2021 that automatic entitlement was introduced under the Domestic Abuse Act. Before then, the burden of proving ‘vulnerability’ – particularly for households without children – created significant space for discretionary judgement around the truth of the survivor’s testimony. The ideological outcome across the timeline was again to reinforce women’s dependence on men rather than the welfare state, and to buttress the nuclear family social ideal.<sup>48</sup> Though beyond this report’s timeline focus, it is notable, too, that the 2021 recognition of a survivor’s need and entitlement to housing assistance came through safeguarding legislation rather than housing law – repeating a pattern of legal fragmentation documented in detail in Section Four.

Ultimately, the New Labour period brought more funding, more policy infrastructure, and an acknowledgement of structural causes of family homelessness, but it did not dismantle the exclusionary deservingness architecture that underpinned welfare access more broadly. The “problem” family frame was not discarded under social exclusion; it was absorbed into it, retaining the essential logic that certain families were disordered in ways requiring intervention and rehabilitation to enable them to get back on their feet. The frame then remerged explicitly in 2011 under the coalition government’s Troubled Families programme – an agenda focused on the behavioural reform of families that fell within its remit.

### 3.1.3. Migration and racialised disadvantage

Racialised notions of belonging and citizenship are key to understanding migrant and minoritised experiences of TA. “Belonging” here refers to the assumption that welfare provision should be restricted to those judged to fit within a racially or culturally defined national community – a judgement that, depending on period, operated alongside, or in tension with, formal mechanisms of citizenship or legal residency status.

Across the 19th and early 20th century, the largest racialised minority population seeking emergency shelter were Irish immigrants.<sup>49</sup> During the Great Famine in Ireland in the late 1840s, hundreds of thousands of Irish paupers arrived in Britain fleeing destitution. Attitudes towards Irish people at this time were often derogatory; they were associated with drunkenness, disease, casual violence and stereotyped as an uncivilised underclass. Such stereotypes were racialised – formulated in the context of British colonial hierarchies and anti-Catholic sentiment – and were fuelled by the attribution of poverty among Irish migrants to their culture or race.<sup>50</sup> When these attitudes interacted with pressures on Poor Law resources,<sup>51</sup> the Irish ‘quickly found themselves in a system intent on shovelling them out as quickly as possible’ through removals – forced relocation back to a presumed home parish in Ireland.<sup>52</sup>

Post-Second World War, Britain saw an increase in migration from the Commonwealth (particularly West Africa, the Caribbean and Pakistan). The scale and visibility of the migration flows of people of colour prompted state concern and efforts to manage social integration. First, to maintain a desired minority/majority ratio between racialised migrants and local White populations, the government sought to proactively disperse new Commonwealth entrants via the labour exchange to industrial towns across the country. The plan, according to the Ministry of Labour’s north-west of England office was to ensure these new migrant workers would ‘live as very small minorities’ in White communities so as not to tip an imagined ideal social balance.<sup>53</sup> Hilliard described how the dispersal policy ultimately did not work, with migrant workers often segregated in poor quality housing in economically depressed areas and excluded from jobs.<sup>54</sup>

Alongside segregation, racialised migrant groups were increasingly subject to racist suspicion and accusations of abusing and/or overwhelming the welfare system and public institutions like schools. Despite holding Commonwealth citizenship and full entitlements to the same welfare benefits as British-born citizens, these migrants – particularly from the Caribbean and South Asia – were routinely othered as non-citizen outsiders. They were accused of travelling to Britain specifically to claim ‘generous’ benefits, including rent assistance, unemployment assistance, and access to council housing.<sup>55</sup> Suspicion built on a sense of injustice that migrants might be able to access benefits under a system constructed around the contributory principle of “paying in”.<sup>56</sup>

#### Social policy and the contributory principle

The government’s 1942 *Social Insurance and Allied Services* report – known as the Beveridge Report after author William Beveridge – provided the blueprint for what became known as the “welfare state”. Under the provocative and ambitious promise to tackle the five “giant evils” of Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness, the report set out a detailed plan for the government to implement a comprehensive system of ‘social insurance and allied services’. The system was based on a principle: ‘The State should offer security for service and contribution’.<sup>57</sup> In other words, social welfare was a contract between the state and citizens – the “British race” as Beveridge occasionally termed it<sup>58</sup> – where households had to “pay in” by working in order to receive benefits.

Beveridge’s blueprint was broadly implemented by the 1945 Labour government. The system created a structural architecture through which racialised minorities and migrants could be denied entitlement on the basis of or assumption that their migrant status, racialised outsider identity, or low-income precluded contribution.

This discretionary space for administrative exclusion operated in a political context shaped by growing racial nationalism across the 1950s. Figures such as Cyril Osborne and Norman Pannell, Conservative Party MPs, sought to draw regular attention to the racial threat that migrants posed to the White population of Britain.<sup>59</sup>

Frequent complaints about high numbers of racialised migrants claiming cash assistance were made to local National Assistance Board (NAB) offices (responsible for administering welfare payments like rents as well as running Reception Centres). Evidencing the political power of these attitudes, in 1952, Prime Minister Winston Churchill requested the NAB to investigate. The NAB responded that just 1.5 per cent of 37,000 national assistance recipients were minority ethnic as of January 1950.<sup>60</sup>

Regional news media frequently reported on migrant attitudes to local employment and their domestic competence. One news story from Hampshire in 1956 noted of migrant worker men: their ‘landladies have said they are well behaved’.<sup>61</sup> This “good migrant” narrative was the flipside of the advantage-taking one – still rooted in concerns around assimilation and claims on the state.



Mother living with her two toddlers in a single room, North London, 1972. Credit: Nick Hedges.

“Good migrant” behaviour however did not readily result in access to good housing. Racist exclusion from private rents pushed migrant households, particularly poorer ones, into ‘twilight’ or slum housing – typically overcrowded and run down HMOs where landlord exploitation of tenants was rife. It was a form of “hidden” homelessness. While such poor housing conditions classed as inadequate in contemporaneous housing legislation, it was ultimately down to local authorities as to whether they triggered an intervention. Rex and Moore documented a case in Birmingham in 1967 where authorities declined a slum redevelopment partly because ‘600 immigrant families would have had to be rehoused’.<sup>62</sup> Councils also routinely placed homeless migrant families in both TA and permanent council housing in deprived twilight zones. The clustering of migrants in rundown areas then exacerbated racist judgements around their self-responsibility, as the cause of poor living conditions was frequently attributed to the resident migrants’ own culture or race.<sup>63</sup>

Racist tropes about migrants also fed into attribution of blame for violence exacted against them. Newspapers covered two high-profile incidents in low-rate nightly-paid hostels in Liverpool (Colsea House hostel) and London (Carrington House) in the late 1940s.<sup>64</sup> Both cases involved groups of White men surrounding and attacking the lodging with the migrant residents barricading and defending themselves from the inside. Yet, news reports – and in the case of Carrington, the police and London County Council itself – framed the violence as fights (suggesting intent on both sides) and concluded that Black migrant residents shared culpability through their ‘insolent attitude’ and apparent inability to keep their heads down.<sup>65</sup>

By the 1970s, Black youth homelessness dominated headlines and was constructed through overlapping ideological frameworks as: family pathology (Black families unable to provide proper care for their children), cultural deficiency (outsider youths requiring “rehabilitation” into British norms), and a social threat (potential criminals rather than vulnerable minors). Encapsulating this, Guy Barnett, Labour MP for Greenwich, stated in the House of Commons in 1972:

*[I]n London and, no doubt, in other major cities some hundreds of black youngsters are roaming the streets, sleeping rough, very often at odds with their own families, usually unemployed and ... feeling at odds with society. This minority in our population is a potential danger both to itself and to society as a whole.*<sup>66</sup>

This construction positioned Black youth as fundamentally in conflict with mainstream society – requiring assimilation and cultural correction. That disciplinary intent was not lost on Black youths themselves. As James Watson of the Clapham Community Town project described in 1973, ‘the young immigrant has got it into his head that such places [as Salvation Army hostels] smack of the established order’ and so he avoids them entirely – leaning on friends, renting in overcrowded lets, or snatching sleep on public transport.<sup>67</sup>

## Countering exclusion: The Dashiki Project

In 1971, journalist Vince Hines set up the Dashiki Project in Notting Hill by accommodating Black youths experiencing homelessness in his own flat. As demand grew, the Dashiki Project took a short-life housing trust property in Notting Hill.<sup>68</sup> The Dashiki programme offered the homeless youths advice on jobs, education and the law, as well as discussions and education around Black political consciousness.

When the Dashiki Project acquired a permanent property in March 1973, the organisation ensured it was ‘beautifully decorated’ – even though funds were tight.<sup>69</sup> Education Officer Mike Philips explained that the place was carpeted to a relatively high standard deliberately: ‘Kids who have had nowhere to go except places with broken lino have this assumption that everything white is smart and good and everything black is second rate’.<sup>70</sup>

From the 1980s, a revival of homelessness-related relocations of racialised homeless families reflected deeper ideological assumptions that their connection to their local area did not sufficiently matter. In 1985, Tower Hamlets was forced to end the ‘disastrous’ placement of large homeless families – overwhelmingly Bangladeshi – in overcrowded, poor-quality B&Bs in Southend. Though the Commission for Racial Equality later concluded ‘the pattern of allocation could be explained by factors other than race’, it also highlighted that the practice ‘had a particularly damaging effect upon homeless Bangladeshi families’.<sup>71</sup>

Then, from October to November 1987, Camden Council implemented a programme of repatriating Irish residents experiencing homelessness “back” to Ireland largely irrespective of how long they had lived in the UK – replicating 19th century Poor Law removal practices. Justified as an urgent move to address a ‘chronic lack of resources’, the Labour-led local authority then mulled extending the scheme to Bangladeshi households accommodated in B&Bs in its constituency – yet denied such policies were racist.<sup>72</sup>

The legal justification for the action is covered in more detail in 4.2.1. Relevant here are the ideological implications. When questioned by journalists about how many people this policy affected, Camden council admitted that it was keeping ‘no special record’ of the numbers being repatriated – despite the policy’s purpose being to reduce a measurable cost burden.

A subsequent letter to *The Guardian* from CHAR (the Campaign for the Homeless and Rootless) highlighted that at least nine Irish families had been deported in the four or five weeks since the policy began.<sup>73</sup> The policy choice not to keep count reveals how racialised exclusion was systematically invisibilised – and suggests that Camden Council had at least some institutional awareness that the practice was discriminatory.

Migration controls grew to be effective tools of racialised exclusion from housing assistance. Macewen documents a number of court cases across the 1980s where local authorities successfully refused a homelessness duty to Commonwealth migrants on the grounds that the applicants left accommodation in their home countries (Ghana, Uganda and Pakistan) to travel to Britain – actions which the courts agreed constituted ‘intentional’ homelessness.<sup>74</sup> The Ugandan case, heard in 1983, was a refugee fleeing recognised fear of persecution. Yet, the court upheld they should have secured Home Office refugee status before applying for assistance in Brent. In contrast, in a case in Hillingdon, the courts determined an ‘English national’ leaving their accommodation in Australia because of an expired visa should not be considered intentionally homeless. As Macewen notes, ‘English national’ was not a legally recognised status, yet the court seemingly took English origin into account when determining intentionality in this case.<sup>75</sup>

In 1988, Tower Hamlets evicted at least ten Bangladeshi families from B&Bs – at least one of whom reportedly lived and worked in the UK for 25 years – on the grounds the households made themselves “intentionally homeless” because they already had available residences in Bangladesh.<sup>76</sup> This move was supported by subsequent court rulings and represented a creeping determination of homelessness assistance on the basis of racialised notions of belonging.

Then, in the 1990s, the government formalised the welfare exclusion of asylum seekers entirely – marking them out as a distinct racialised minority group whose homelessness required separate governance. Various orders and acts (see timeline, 2.1.: 1993, 1996, 1999), stripped asylum seekers of rights to assistance or TA under the mainstream system. Around this time the media resurrected the 1950s moral panic around migrants coming to Britain to take advantage of its “generous” welfare system – this time in the form of the “bogus” asylum seekers trying to get a free house.<sup>77</sup> Webber points out the interaction between ‘hysterical’ newspaper headlines and political (re)action created an intractable contradiction: asylum seekers were banned from working as a means to deter applications, but that induced a destitution that made them reliant on welfare and housing assistance – effectively turning them into the dependent ‘scroungers’ so despised in the public eye.<sup>78</sup>

## 3.2. Intersecting exclusions

Examining TA practices that have emerged around three social groups when they have experienced homelessness – the single person, the “problem family”, and racialised minorities and migrants – reveals how deservingness has operated as a persistent yet adaptive framework across two centuries of welfare and TA provision. Critically, these social categories were neither separate from each other nor fixed. They have overlapped and intersected in ways that has compounded exclusion and stigma. For example: young White single mothers were stigmatised as both “problem families” and youths expected to remain with parents. Survivors of domestic violence could be viewed with suspicion if they were single women, or a priority if they had dependent children. Young Black men were often simultaneously viewed through the lens of single male homelessness, youth delinquency, and racial threat. Other marginalised categories of homeless people not examined directly in this report – youths, prison leavers, veterans, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ households – faced their own distinct exclusions, interacting with the single/family/racialised deservingness frameworks at different moments. Households could face multiple, reinforcing barriers to accessing support if they had their deservingness questioned on several grounds at once.

This (un)deserving framework shaped homelessness policy and welfare provision more broadly, not just TA specifically. The ideology necessitated and justified similar exclusions from all forms of state assistance: national insurance, benefit entitlements, council house waiting lists, permanent rehousing duties, and everything in between. However, TA occupied a particular position within that system as an experimentation area for deservingness judgments. The politics of housing resource scarcity and the emergency nature of homelessness created space and justification – a sense of an imperative, even – for authorities to sort households through explicit and implicit tests. In doing so, however, it then reproduced the very social categories it purported to organise – with profound exclusionary implications.

Asylum seeker dispersal is the culmination of that experimentation: deservingness working alongside politically charged resource constraints to justify and formalise the transformation of TA discretion into legislative exclusion. That legal foundation has enabled the state to deliberately cut people keeping asylum from their networks and regulate aspects of their lives in ways that would not be acceptable to citizens, and yet has been broadly naturalised in discourse.<sup>79</sup>

## 4. Administration of Exclusion

**Section Three examined key ideological frameworks that help explain patterns of exclusion from homelessness assistance, as well as the types of TA certain populations have been routinely allocated. This section examines how exclusion and poor conditions have operated in practice through fragmented administrative mechanisms.**

First, it explores the implications of the delegation of TA provision from the centre to local authorities and, within that, the split of responsibilities between local housing and welfare departments. It then critically examines the significant discretionary powers given to local welfare and housing officers to determine duties and conditions. While the localised dynamics affecting homelessness can justify local delegation above centralisation, and discretion above rigid rules, this section highlights how such structures have created accountability gaps that need to be addressed.

Two of those accountability gaps have operated through the relocation of homeless households via out-of-area placements and dispersals, and the outsourcing of TA to private contractors. These policies have distanced households in TA from the authorities responsible for their welfare assistance and weakened their channels of redress through diffusion of responsibility. Such gaps have fuelled peaks in TA overcrowding, poor conditions, or otherwise inappropriate accommodation.

Together delegation, discretion, relocation and outsourcing have transformed ideological exclusions into material outcomes via systems that have frequently operated beyond meaningful scrutiny. The history documented in this section suggests that reform that does not address structural fragmentation will, as it has before, produce new administrative forms around similar exclusionary functions.

## 4.1. Procedural fragmentation

### 4.1.1. Fragmentation through delegation

State responsibility towards its homeless populations has long been devolved to local bodies. The 1834 New Poor Law created a national workhouse system administered through around 600 Poor Law Unions, each operating with considerable autonomy in interpreting or applying relief obligations. Crowson suggests that the New Poor Law could 'be considered as a series of poor laws that operated at a regional level, and even union by union'.<sup>1</sup>

The 1948 National Assistance Act sought to repeal the Poor Law and bring some uniformity to welfare – but did so by splitting responsibilities. The National Assistance Board (NAB), a central unit, commissioned Reception Centres for “unsettled” single people, running them through local bodies. Local authorities were responsible for “Part III” TA for families, creating hundreds of determining regimes.

The 1948 NAA did not specify which local government department should take responsibility for homelessness and TA – an ambiguity that led most local authorities to designate responsibility to welfare rather than housing departments for the next three decades. This weighting reinforced a “welfare first” approach to homelessness, treating it as a social problem before a housing one. It also meant accountability was often divided between both; families found themselves pushed from pillar to post.<sup>2</sup>

Functional splits were particularly acute when mapped onto two-tier administration outside the major county boroughs. Glastonbury observed in 1971 that a family entering TA could become ‘a county responsibility’ that the district could effectively forget.<sup>3</sup> Even once a county council assumed responsibility, a homeless family could experience an administrative circus. Various jurisdictions relevant to that household – e.g. county welfare department, employment offices, Supplementary Benefits Commission, a second-tier local authority, or the police – all had different geographic boundaries. Homeless households might have to deal with several in order to manage their stay in TA and get back on their feet. For instance, one family Glastonbury interviewed who were ‘living on a caravan site, found themselves dealing with the Supplementary Benefits office in one town, the Employment Exchange in a second, and the Housing Authority in a third, while the school their children went to and their postal address, were in a fourth’.<sup>4</sup>

Crowson argues bringing homelessness under the single responsibility of local housing departments, rather than welfare, was a key Whitehall motivation for passing the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act.<sup>5</sup> This reform did not completely resolve tension between departments however, as homelessness cases often presented, or were interpreted as, having a primary welfare component. Harding notes that subsequent welfare legislation, like the 1989 Children Act, outlined a responsibility for social services (rather than housing departments) to provide accommodation for homeless children aged up to 17 – creating further confusion about responsibility.<sup>6</sup>

This post-1977 system did establish regular data collection by local authorities, though such data revealed little about operational differences between different local authorities, household composition, or length of stay in TA. For England and Wales, quarterly data returns stated “decisions taken”, though did not count all applications with a homelessness component.<sup>7</sup> Reporting on TA conditions was not required.

The limitations of statutory data collection were partially offset by prolific voluntary sector research and campaigning throughout the period. Organisations, including Shelter, Crisis and the umbrella CHAR (representing 65 member groups by 1974) publicised crucial evidence on homelessness conditions that statutory returns did not capture.<sup>8</sup> Crowson documents how such evidence directly shaped the debate leading up to the 1977 act, and how civil servants found their influence ‘largely useful’.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, statutory gaps needed to be filled by statutory monitoring.

Such weak reporting has also obscured positive housing outcomes for households experiencing homelessness. A study by Cloke *et al* in 2000 revealed many local housing officers actively mitigated the exclusionary effects of the 1996 Housing Act by tweaking their housing waiting list allocations so homeless households could get rehousing priority anyway – skipping TA altogether.<sup>10</sup> As a reminder, the 1996 act essentially sought to remove the priority need pathway to permanent housing via placing homeless households “back” on the general housing waiting list – typically at the bottom. By tweaking allocations to prioritise homeless families, the local authority officers were unilaterally determining priority. Yet, bureaucratically, those households were never counted as homeless nor their pathways to rehousing recorded in a way that could place an upwards pressure on procedures. Under such a fragmented system, relevant data and potential positive model practices remain buried. Similar implications can be seen in discretionary help by individual officers.

## 4.1.2. Fragmentation through discretion

Discretion has been a key mechanism determining individual outcomes in TA since the workhouses. Fowler noted that ‘for every enlightened union with imaginative [Poor Law workhouse] guardians and dedicated staff, there were perhaps half-a-dozen places where the guardians were more concerned with keeping the rates low and the staff unresponsive to the conditions of those in their charge’.<sup>11</sup>



Father and son in a homeless hostel in Southwark, 1971. Credit: Nick Hedges.

In the early post-war years, newspapers are peppered with stories of local authority officers and government officials criticising any “queue jumping” of the housing waiting lists by households homeless through eviction. Discretion frequently operated as gatekeeping – ensuring such households were not accommodated with any precedence in the queue, and often in the worst quality conditions (if at all). Elsewhere, TA was used as part of the state’s discretionary surveillance.

Sir Geoffrey Hutchinson Q.C., Chairman of the National Assistance Board (NAB), visited Walsall in 1955 and while there, addressed ‘local rumours’ swirling about migrant workers defrauding the assistance system through multiple applications at different NAB offices. Hutchinson reassured locals that the NAB implemented checks and balances: ‘One of the Board’s methods of checking was to send them to reception centres

– in Walsall’s case the Salvation Army Hostel – and issue them with vouchers to obtain food and lodgings’.<sup>12</sup> Vouchers were redeemable in specific locations, enabling monitoring and limiting spending on goods – restrictions explicitly placed on migrants.

In the 1960s, Hill documented racialised, gendered, and class-based discretion in his analysis of NAB assessment of rent allowances: poor immigrant households and single women, for instance, were routinely set higher access hurdles and lower assistance rates than other social groups.<sup>13</sup> Hill attributed this to officer value judgements around deservingness. Similarly, Greve et al noted in 1971 a wide variation in homelessness assessments between boroughs: ‘the “wasters”, “workshy”, “irresponsible”, or “anti-social” to one borough are the “socially deprived”, “inadequate”, “low income”, “educationally subnormal” of another’.<sup>14</sup>

The 1977 act’s introduction of ‘intentionally homeless’ tests opened the geographical horizons of discretion out to the whole world. Housing officers could look at a homeless migrant’s origin country and determine whether the applicant had ‘intentionally’ abandoned a home overseas to access public housing in England.

### Racialised exclusion as spectacle

In 1978, a widower and his four children arrived from Kenya to Heathrow and applied for homelessness assistance from Hillingdon Council. Hillingdon quickly determined the family were ‘intentionally homeless’ after leaving their rented home in Kenya and arriving without funds. Rather than conveying the family to TA, Terry Dicks, the Housing Chairman of Hillingdon Council, put the family in a taxi and left them on the pavement outside the Foreign Office as a spectacle.<sup>15</sup>

It worked – the case made headlines and provoked heated debates in parliament around the entitlements of Commonwealth migrants to housing assistance. According to Nick Raynsford, Director of the Shelter Housing Aid Centre at the time, the father had a British passport, an entry certificate for Britain and had been denied a work permit in Kenya.<sup>16</sup> Yet, Dicks was unrepentant and told journalists he would maintain the tough line to immigrant families.<sup>17</sup>

However, in a racialised double standard, Hillingdon gave ‘priority need’ status (therefore a permanent housing duty) to a White Rhodesian family, the father of which they knew to have voluntarily left his teaching job and home in Rhodesia to bring his family to England.<sup>18</sup> They were not deposited on the Foreign Office doorstep.

Vulnerability assessments under the 1977 Act’s priority need criteria proved equally subject to discretionary variation. In a 1988 survey, Single Homelessness in London (SHIL) found huge variations in the chance of a single homeless person being found vulnerable in different London boroughs. From the 24 boroughs who returned data, numbers accepted as vulnerable ranged from none to 485 individuals,<sup>19</sup> an unlikely imbalance of vulnerable constituents. Different types of staff were responsible for the assessments within each borough too, with the majority giving the Homeless Persons Unit and housing officers prime responsibility, and six delegating it to medical officers.<sup>20</sup>

Weak oversight mechanisms are persistent. A 1989 government report of practice in nine local authorities noted an absence of control or monitoring for most officer-level decisions.<sup>21</sup> A parliamentary report from 1994 documented that ‘local connection’ referrals were governed by a voluntary joint Local Authority Agreement – meaning that it was self-regulated rather than statutorily monitored.<sup>22</sup> And a study by Tomlins in 1999 reveals that, even when equality policies had been established, and training given to prevent the discriminatory effects of discretion, biased judgments around an applicant’s living standards or preferred rehousing area were routinely applied – disproportionately impacting racialised minorities.<sup>23</sup>

Explanations for discretion tend to combine a mix of resource pressures, organisational priorities and personal judgment. One social policy study from 1999, for example, found local authority officers routinely discouraging single people from applying for homelessness assistance – partly to manage an applicant’s expectations in relation to priority status, but also to reduce their own workload.<sup>24</sup> A local authority ethnography in 2000 similarly detailed the frontline effects of top-down pressure to cut expenditure and highlighted how that pressure filtered through discretionary powers to produce racialised outcomes. The study documented the duty refusal of a woman fleeing domestic violence in Ireland, as she was racialised as coming from the Irish traveller community. The credibility of the threat she faced from her former partner was a key judgement point in the assessment, and the housing team leader determined on hearsay that the risk was not sufficient and she could return to Ireland. ‘We’ll send her back, you just watch me’, the Team Leader commented.<sup>25</sup>

Alden’s 2015 study recorded half of her twenty-seven local authority housing advice service interviewees describing themselves as ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ decision makers in homelessness assessments, with one respondent explaining:

*I think people just come to the job with slightly different approaches, so people feel that they are gatekeepers and they are there to stop people from going through temporary accommodation no matter what it takes, and those are the hardliners as I call them, and then I think there are people who see themselves as more there to help people.<sup>26</sup>*

The latter type of decision-maker – the ones keen to help – are visible in Cloke *et al*’s study of local authority officers who mitigated the exclusionary effects of the 1996 Housing Act by tweaking waiting list allocations to prioritise homeless families anyway.<sup>27</sup> Harding also documents numerous cases of local authorities pulling against limitations imposed by the 1996 act.<sup>28</sup>

The difficulty of distinguishing ill-intent from good-faith operations within a flawed system is part of the structural problem. Where a deservingness moral framework appears natural (or at least professionally unremarkable), where resource pressure is intense, and where monitoring or accountability mechanisms are weak, it becomes practically challenging to identify and evidence genuine abuses of power.

Nonetheless, local authorities have not operated without any accountability – particularly since 1977. The introduction of legally enforceable rights through the 1977 act was internationally significant as it meant that homelessness exclusions or poor treatment could be – and certainly were – challenged through the courts. As Lowe notes, complex case law then developed which has been tested from many angles – resulting in notable enlargements of homelessness protections, as well as retractions in statutory definitions.<sup>29</sup> As an example of enlargement, the Supreme Court determined in *Yemshaw v London Borough of Hounslow* [2011] that local authority consideration of domestic violence should include non-physical violence (such as emotional abuse and financial coercion) not just physical when determining a homelessness duty.

However, individual households’ powers of redress were (and remain) limited by the cost, time, and expertise barriers – each of these affected by structural disadvantages coded in wider housing, employment, and legal systems. Judicial challenges by households in TA could also result in a restriction of statutory definitions. In *R v Brent LBC, ex p. Awua* [1996], Brent Council determined that Ms Awua had made her household “intentionally homeless” as she had turned down an offer of council accommodation in another council, Tower Hamlets – housing that she considered unsuitable for herself and two children. After various rulings and appeals, the case made its way to the House of Lords, who found in favour of Brent Council. Lord Hoffmann agreed with Brent that Awua had ceased to occupy the TA because she refused the Tower Hamlets offer. Wilson writes that, with this decision, the courts effectively ‘removed the requirement that unintentionally homeless people should be provided with something other than temporary accommodation’.<sup>30</sup>

Structurally relevant here is that court-based accountability requires significant resource, time, and emotional investment from a household experiencing homelessness – a population group least equipped to shoulder such burdens. It also primarily offers individual remedies to exclusion rather than structural reform, and it can narrow entitlements as much as expand them.

Out-of-area placements and dispersals have developed within similar accountability gaps.

## 4.2. Administrative exclusion

### 4.2.1. Exclusion via relocation

Relocation is not a technical term in the context of temporary accommodation. Rather, it captures several different population movement practices directed or enabled by policy: removals, pushbacks, out-of-area placements, and dispersal. Removals date back to 16th century Old Poor Law settlement laws, which located people's 'homes' typically in their place of birth – the parish viewed to have more responsibility for the cost burden of their welfare. Paupers who entered workhouses outside of their birth parish could be removed back there.<sup>31</sup>

While updates to settlement laws – including the 1846 Poor Removal Act – prevented removal of a poor person from their workhouse if they had been resident in the parish for a few years, these protections ended up being theoretical for many Irish paupers who were systematically removed at rates far higher than any proportional representation of their population.<sup>32</sup> In the year ending March 1853, 9,072 removal papers were signed by English magistrates – 53 per cent of them for Irish paupers. In Lancashire – a county with one of the highest Irish migrant populations in England – 91 per cent of their removals applied to Irish inhabitants.<sup>33</sup> While removals operated on the legal justification that Irish pauper 'home' settlements were their birth parishes in Ireland, it was a one-way system. Irish union authorities were not permitted to remove English paupers in their parishes back to England in return.<sup>34</sup>

Relocation of homeless households outside of their residential area was a feature of post-war policy, too. In early 1949, the Ministry of Health issued a circular requesting London authorities to identify large houses in their boroughs suitable for adaptation into halfway houses. According to news coverage of the circular, the Ministry financed the adaptation of such properties and retained a claim on 75 per cent of placements from a London-wide pool, enabling high-pressure areas to distribute households out of their own boroughs.<sup>35</sup> The remaining 25 per cent of the allocation could be local placements. Willesden was one of the first enthusiastic adopters, requisitioning two more properties to make six halfway houses in the borough by the end of 1949.

Relocation also took the form of facilitated pushbacks: the payment of travel tickets to other areas rather than a formal transfer of responsibility to another local authority. Noble documents the refusal of single mothers and their infants from accessing mother-and-baby units in welfare hostels in London across the 1950s–1960s if the applicants were thought to be from elsewhere.<sup>36</sup> The single mother was referred to the National Assistance Board for a railway voucher if they did not have the money to return to their 'home' area immediately. In a clear echo of Poor Law practices, Noble writes, the Welfare Department 'feared that without the backing of male wage-earners, they [the women and children] would become permanent charges of the welfare homes'.<sup>37</sup>

Facilitated pushbacks were not unique to mother-and-baby units. Shelter's 1972 *Grief Report* featured numerous cases of households refused TA and 'offered instead a travel warrant to any place where the family had friends and relatives who might conceivably accommodate them'.<sup>38</sup> Pushback could create a ping pong effect, with each authority denying responsibility. One homeless family with three young children, for example, who approached Derby Social Services in 1973, were turned down and given a ticket to Basingstoke. Refused there, the family tried two more towns and finally ended up back in Derby, where an intervention from Shelter helped them secure accommodation.<sup>39</sup> In his 1971 study of local authorities in the southwest of England and Wales, Glastonbury observed that 'if the distance was too far for anything but a deliberate sending, the details of cost were scrupulously worked out between authorities'.<sup>40</sup>

From the 1980s – as statutory homelessness rose dramatically, as local authority housing supply was decimated through Right to Buy, and as TA costs became unsustainable in some London boroughs – councils began directly placing households in accommodation in cheaper boroughs. A Greater London Council study in 1986 recorded that 17 out of 33 London boroughs were using TA placements outside of their area. The study's authors note a paradoxical situation had arisen whereby 'some boroughs such as Camden, who are placing homeless households in six other boroughs, are themselves being required to provide temporary accommodation from several other boroughs'.<sup>41</sup>

In many cases, the host borough was not aware that another borough was temporarily accommodating homeless people in their locality, creating deadly accountability gaps. In 1984, a fire ripped through the Olympus Hostel, a TA contractor in Westminster, killing Shamin Karim (also named as Mrs Abdul Karim) and her two young children Shalasha and Nezamul. The family were from Camden and the investigation exposed that Westminster did not know Camden Council was placing homeless families in that accommodation.<sup>42</sup> Neither Westminster, Camden, nor the Greater London Council had taken responsibility for fire safety checks at the Olympus, allowing the landlord to create a death trap.

### Salman Rushdie on The Olympus fire

*When [the fire] started, no alarm rang. It had been switched off. The fire extinguishers were empty. The fire exits were blocked. It was night time but the stairs were in darkness because there were no bulbs in the lighting sockets. And in the single, cramped top floor room, where the cooker was next to the bed, Mrs. Abdul Karim, a Bangladeshi woman, and her 5 year old son and 3 year old daughter died of suffocation.<sup>43</sup>*

*The Guardian, 3 December 1984.*

Rushdie pointed out at the time the racialised context of this neglect – that ‘Black and Asian families are far more likely than white ones to be placed in such “temporary” places’, hidden from view and accountability.<sup>44</sup> A Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) study found, just a few years later, that Tower Hamlets was disproportionately placing Bangladeshi households in B&Bs in Southend-on-Sea – a policy which cut them off from their communities, resulted in job losses, and caused negative emotional and educational impacts on children.<sup>45</sup>

Relocation of households experiencing homelessness also extended overseas in the post-war period. Section Three documented how Camden, in 1987, repatriated at least nine Irish households experiencing homelessness after the council determined the families had access to suitable accommodation in Ireland.<sup>46</sup> *The Guardian* noted at the time that Camden was believed to be the first council attempting to repatriate Irish households under the 1986 Housing and Planning Act. This act updated previous legislation by allowing authorities to discharge their homelessness duty though ‘giving him such advice and assistance as will secure that he obtains suitable accommodation from some other person’.<sup>47</sup> Camden were therefore discharging their duty through assisting Irish applicant households to obtain accommodation they ostensibly had links to in Ireland – regardless of their time spent living in England.

Such action was seemingly based on a novel interpretation of the law that was not applicable to English-born applicants; it effectively extended the search for a local connection beyond English borders. While councils had previously found households “intentionally homeless” under the 1977/1985 acts by looking at their housing options overseas, the Camden case appears to be one of the first instances post-war where a council physically relocated households to another country as part of its homelessness response.<sup>48</sup> It is unclear whether Camden or any other council implemented further repatriations after the news story broke and attracted significant criticism.

In contrast, out-of-area (OOA) placements within the country have become routine. A 1994 House of Commons research paper noted that it was ‘not unusual’ for local authorities to resort to OOA placements – especially London boroughs.<sup>49</sup> Financial concerns were paramount; it was seen as an acceptable ‘value for money’ option (rather than evidence of policy failure) when other ‘cost-effective’ opportunities had been exhausted in the area. By 2003, one in six London households were being placed outside of their borough.<sup>50</sup> It was less cost-effective for the households concerned, however, who lost access to support networks, health care, childcare, education and jobs. Moreover, impacts continued to be unevenly distributed.

Echoing 1988 CRE findings of Tower Hamlets, a 2005 government report noted concern that OOA was likely having a disproportionate – though unquantified – effect on minoritised households.<sup>51</sup> And the pattern continues today – in 2025, lafrati et al found that 90 per cent of local authorities with 100 or more OOA placements disproportionately placed Black and minoritised households OOA.<sup>52</sup> The authors argue this pattern ‘reflects the way in which such households are overrepresented in poverty and low-income jobs’<sup>53</sup> – a structural explanation that stops short of intent. However, the mechanisms do not need to be intentional to create predictable harms. OOA placements build on, and exacerbate, more than a century of racialised, gendered, and classed housing scarcity and employment opportunity.

Dispersal marks the most recent iteration of relocation. Local authorities began dispersing asylum seekers in the mid-1990s. Darling describes the emergence of a market in which asylum seeker receiving local authorities in London and the Southeast would source accommodation elsewhere in cheaper areas of the country (such as the Midlands or the north of England), negotiate with social landlords, physically relocate asylum seekers to the new location, and provide them with the bare minimum of resources.<sup>54</sup>

Dispersal was formalised in law with the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act and the inauguration of NASS (see 2.2.3.). Under this new asylum management framework, asylum seekers had (and still have) no choice over location and are deliberately placed at some distance from their home area, separated from family networks, and placed in substandard accommodation with minimal oversight as part of the national deterrence function.<sup>55</sup> Darling notes that, while these measures were undertaken to process and reduce a significant spike in applications – from 11,640 in 1989 to 71,158 in 1999 – dispersal ‘had a profound effect of the wellbeing of those in the asylum system’.<sup>56</sup> These are forced population movements and restrictions on liberty that would be unacceptable to citizens today; yet, dispersal has clear precedent in the ad hoc and reactive ways that many local authorities have experimented with homeless relocations and exported TA. And exporting has often been managed through outsourcing.

## 4.2.2. Exclusion via outsourcing

Taken broadly, outsourcing in TA refers to the contracting of external actors to provide homelessness accommodation, management or support services. Non-state actors in this arena have been historically diverse: private firms, charities, faith-based organisations, voluntary-sector organisations, consortiums, and much in between. There is a substantial historiography exploring the homelessness work of charities, faith organisations, and voluntary agencies and their relationships to the state through granting, partnerships, and contracts.<sup>57</sup> While they have played a vital role in accommodating people experiencing homelessness – particularly those excluded from statutory TA pathways – this section focuses primarily on for-profit, directly contracted provision. It is a dimension of outsourcing much more recent in scrutiny and not yet historicised in depth – and it is where the impacts are most visibly concentrated on already-disadvantaged populations.

Outsourcing care for people experiencing destitution occurred as early as the 19th century, with the workhouses ‘farming’ out homeless pauper children to private boarding institutions that were subsidised to provide basic board and lodging along with meagre education.

### ‘Farming’ pauper children

One of the most notorious cases of Victorian private boarding institutions was Mr Drouet’s establishment for pauper infants in Tooting, the unsanitary and cruel conditions of which contributed to the death of over 150 children in one cholera outbreak in 1849.<sup>58</sup>

The owner, Bartholomew Peter Drouet, was indicted for the death of one of the children, James Andrews, and witnesses were called to court to testify to conditions in this institution. One of those was James’ brother, eight-year-old Joseph Andrews:

I did not have enough to eat, nor did my brother ... sometimes we had rotten potatoes and meat for dinner – when we had potatoes we were not allowed bread, and when we had bread we were not allowed potatoes – the potatoes were not good; some of them were black – when they were bad we used to chuck them away – we put them on the table, and they would take them away and put them in the hog-stye.<sup>59</sup>

Drouet made two shillings per week per child in the difference between subsidy and expenditure on care.<sup>60</sup> With 1,372 children “farmed” in his institution (the contemporaneous term for the practice), the arrangement rendered significant private profit. And without apparent accountability: in April 1849, the court acquitted him of murder, determining there was no proof James would have recovered from cholera had it not been for conditions at Mr Drouet’s establishment.

In the post-war decades, evidence around councils renting or leasing properties from private property owners is sparse. When need for TA outstripped their supply, councils often opted to purchase vacant houses, including condemned properties earmarked for clearance. Purchase was a reasonable option for London councils pre-1961 as land was valued based on its use.<sup>61</sup> The Land Compensation Act 1961 shifted valuation to market-based – enabling landowners to charge much more on the basis that properties had development *potential*. Compulsory purchase for TA subsequently declined.

During this time there was a strong private market for private lodging houses, which could accommodate households excluded from local authority assistance. The government’s 1965–1966 Single Homeless People study surveyed over 7,100 men about their reasons for staying in a commercial lodging house; while some were there out of preference, the majority – nearly 60 per cent – stated reasons describing some form of homelessness, such as family breakdown, eviction, or inability to find other accommodation.<sup>62</sup> These properties were often cramped and overcrowded, with grim shared facilities and single ‘rooms’ constructed using flimsy partitions to maximise rentable space.

Private lodging houses were not strictly outsourced TA provisions, as occupants' stays were – where benefit entitlements permitted – paid through the National Assistance Board assistance allowances (i.e. individual social security payments) rather than by local authority contracts with the provider. Occupancies were mixed; individuals not experiencing homelessness would rent rooms there too. Nonetheless, private lodgings and other types of single-bed or single-room, per-night accommodation offered an easy-access per-night model that would develop into a significant outsourcing market for local authorities.

The first major growth period for systematic private outsourcing in the report's timeline was from the early 1970s when local authorities began turning to private B&Bs/hotels to fulfil their TA needs. Shelter's 1972 *Grief Report* observed that whilst hotel and B&B accommodation was not yet a nationally common solution for sheltering homeless families (catering instead for the single homeless), all but five London boroughs regularly resorted to it.<sup>63</sup> Households in B&B accommodation then increased dramatically across the country, rising from 1,330 in 1980 to 12,150 in 1991.<sup>64</sup> And costs spiralled accordingly: in Greater London alone, spending on B&B placements rose from £4.3 million in 1981–82 to £12.5 million in 1984–85.<sup>65</sup> A 1996 parliamentary public accounts committee noted that at £15,000 per family per year, they represented poor value for money for taxpayers.<sup>66</sup> B&Bs were costly for accommodated families, too. Lack of kitchen facilities would see daily costs mount up through having to pay for takeaways or eating out.<sup>67</sup>

Yet, despite this type of accommodation – and similar hotels, hostels, and houses of multiple occupation (HMO) – accommodating increasing numbers of statutorily homeless households, standards travelled in the opposite direction. Infestations, overcrowding, security concerns, and curfew restrictions were common complaints (see 2.2.3.). Macewen writes that racialised households were particularly vulnerable to landlord harassment and refusal from the accommodation.<sup>68</sup>

Many B&Bs failed to meet even basic health and fire safety standards – resulting in preventable deaths, including of the Karim family in Westminster's Olympus Hostel in 1984. Just a few years before that, a coroner ruling on an HMO fire that killed eight residents in 1981 failed to find evidence of negligence, despite fire investigators uncovering combustible partition walls, unprotected staircases, and dangerously high electrical loading.<sup>69</sup>

While it is unclear whether the property accommodated statutorily homeless individuals, the coronial outcome revealed a concern with weighing homelessness-related costs against building safety. Ewen writes that the coroner declined to add safety recommendations to the verdict, 'claiming that the need to reconcile cheap accommodation for homeless people with "expensive" fire precautions was an "insoluble problem"'.<sup>70</sup>

Regulations for B&Bs and similar privately-owned multi-occupation properties in this decade were labyrinthine, weakened by fragmentation across departments, and poorly enforced. One MP commented in a 1984 parliamentary debate that 'there is clear evidence of the failure of the bewildering array of housing and public health Acts and circulars to make any significant impact on conditions' in multi-occupation housing.<sup>71</sup> Ewen explains part of the regulatory failure as a laissez faire attitude in government: 'Landlords and building owners were expected to take responsibility for their own properties with the responsible local authority stepping in to enforce the law as a last resort, which in every case followed avoidable disasters'.<sup>72</sup> It was essentially a system of self-regulation that placed the burden of reporting conditions on TA occupants and weighed safety concerns against private profit and the public purse.

Even in properties of decent standard, the confined layout and shared facilities were repeatedly documented as utterly unsuitable for family wellbeing – especially the healthy development of children. Yet, stays were frequently protracted – particularly for larger families for whom there was insufficient move-on accommodation. A Greater London Council report on TA revealed that at the end of August 1985, 60 families in B&Bs in Camden had been living there for over eight months.<sup>73</sup>

The growth of this costly and unsuitable market was driven by government housing policy. Right to Buy and restrictions on councils' capital borrowing across the 1980s had collapsed council housing supply. B&B supply could expand immediately to meet demand and was supported by government subsidy, whereas purpose-built TA, social housebuilding and even private lease procurement required infrastructure, funds, and longer lead times. It was a reactive temporary sticking plaster that councils struggled to remove.

B&B placement numbers decreased after the 1991 high, partly offset by the local authority turn to private lease options. However, many families were increasingly self-placing in the same hotel establishments, faced with nowhere else to go if discouraged or refused assistance by local authorities.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, B&B rooms were turning from unsupported temporary accommodation to de facto permanent for some households. Asylum seekers who self-placed in B&Bs were often refused a homelessness duty because they had already secured some form of housing.<sup>75</sup> Carter highlighted in the 1990s that 'unscrupulous hoteliers' took advantage of confusion. She found one case (and heard rumours of many more) of a hotelier sending buses to Heathrow airport to pick up asylum seekers, transporting them directly to their hotel.<sup>76</sup>

### Rogue landlords and shadow TA: Supported Exempt Accommodation

Several investigations over the past decade have revealed another iteration of rogue landlords taking advantage of outsourced housing: the Supported Exempt Accommodation (SEA) scandal.

Supported accommodation refers to housing with a care, support or supervision function. SEA is supported housing exempt from Housing Benefit regulations that limit rent to defined local levels.<sup>77</sup> SEA rules were first introduced in 1996 and were designed to enable providers to fund their higher costs through an enhanced benefit rate. It is not statutory TA; SEA is used to accommodate people with specific needs to live independently. However, for single people experiencing homelessness with relevant support requirements, the SEA need existed in part because that population lacked provision within statutory homelessness legislation. While many providers have sought to operate within the spirit of the law and offer decent conditions and services, a significant minority have not – particularly after 2014 when reforms meant that SEA could become a guaranteed rental income stream.

The requirement that the provider had to be a council, housing association, charity, or voluntary organisation has been met on paper. However, many have flouted this through complex leasing agreements, inflated management and service charges, and the provision of substandard support and accommodation in order to maximise profits.<sup>78</sup> Unscrupulous profit-seeking providers have abused exempt provisions by charging exorbitant rent rates to the Department for Work and Pensions. The significant profit margins, alongside weak legal guardrails, have encouraged providers to expand into supported housing areas they lack the expertise or experience for – for example, accommodating survivors of domestic violence. Tenants across the expanding array of SEA properties have faced exploitation, abuse, harassment, evictions, and been driven out of their neighbourhoods. The scarcity of data on this form of accommodation also means that the full scale of the problem is not known.<sup>79</sup>

From the early 1990s, local authorities in London began turning away from B&Bs to private landlords via private sector leasing (PSL).<sup>80</sup> This move was partly cost driven. Shelter figures in 1990 revealed that the annual costs of hosting a statutorily homeless family were £15,440 for a B&B, £10,452 for a PSL, and £8,200 for a newly built council house.<sup>81</sup> Ongoing capital borrowing restrictions and an ideological commitment to reduce council housing stock prevented public investment in the latter. A series of government reviews, commissioned studies and voluntary sector pressure also influenced the debate, with publications highlighting appalling conditions in language and terms that were repeated in newspaper reports, government debates and made ongoing B&B use politically challenging.<sup>82</sup>

Under PSL arrangements, local authorities leased private properties at guaranteed market rates, with specialist brokerage companies emerging to facilitate deals between councils and landlords.<sup>83</sup> In 1986, approximately one-fifth of London boroughs were leasing privately; this increased to four-fifths by 1992.<sup>84</sup> The 1996 Housing Act explicitly aimed for the (newly limited) TA duty to be primarily managed with private sector arrangements.<sup>85</sup>

PSL was generally viewed as of a better standard than B&B hotels;<sup>86</sup> its self-contained nature meant that families had private kitchens and bathrooms and freedom to come and go without curfew. However, concerns still lingered around poor conditions. The English House Condition Survey from 1991 established that one in five private rented properties were unfit for human habitation, with many more containing substantial maintenance issues – and PSL TA was drawn directly from that stock.<sup>87</sup> Two decades later, Fitzpatrick and Pleace noted in 2012 that ‘quality of life was consistently reported as better in self-contained provision than in other forms of temporary accommodation’, but they also found that ‘satisfaction with the accommodation itself was often no better’<sup>88</sup> – suggesting material conditions were suboptimal or location inappropriate. The conditions issue here was a regulatory one. As with B&Bs, the PSL regime depended on local authority initiative and landlord self-reporting.

For destitute asylum seekers, after the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, accommodation outsourcing was systematised and contracted to providers on a principle of deterrence. The centralised NASS contracted accommodation with private landlords and a few social housing providers, or worked through consortia of local authorities, social landlords and private landlords. Until full privatisation in 2012, local authorities retained some level of control. Nonetheless, there was ‘little redress’ for asylum seekers if they faced any problems, as the main method of regulation was private landlord self-assessment.<sup>89</sup> Landlords rarely self-reported appalling conditions, discriminatory treatment, or harassment. These structural flaws only worsened after the 2012 privatisation of contracts under the COMPASS regime.

Darling documents how the persistent lack of a forum for asylum seeker consultation, opaque complaints procedures and the routinised ignoring of asylum seeker complaints, has come to act as a form of slow violence: ‘disconnecting asylum seekers and advocates from possibilities for change’.<sup>90</sup>

## 4.3. An architecture of unaccountability

Exclusion and poor quality TA has operated through four connected mechanisms: delegation, discretion, relocation and outsourcing. Delegation created hundreds of independent sites of decision-making with limited oversight and fragmented internal processes. Discretion has distributed gatekeeping power across these sites without effective monitoring – compounding the geographical lottery a homeless household might face when seeking emergency accommodation. The combined effect has been the maintenance of a system in which poor conditions can be ascribed as case-specific or normalised as institutionally unremarkable, and positive outcomes can be missed or unable to affect systemic change.

Relocation and outsourcing have also evolved to be relatively unremarkable TA management practices; enduring responses to housing or cost pressures. However, they are not neutral in their effects and the piecemeal regulations that have chased their advancement have compounded the fragmentation of accountability.

Relocation has consistently served to displace both the cost and visibility of homelessness away from the authority responsible for it, and concentrate some of the worst material consequences on those already structurally marginalised within the housing system. The examples highlighted here – of Victorian Irish paupers, post-war single mothers, Irish and Bangladeshi households, and asylum seekers – suggest a recurring pattern: when pressure on homelessness resources was at its most acute, the burden of relocation disproportionately fell on those whose claim to a locality was already contested on grounds of origin, race, or family makeup. These removals, pushbacks, out-of-area placements, and dispersals cannot be read as neutral responses to resource constraints. They were predictable outputs of a system that has frequently approached scarcity by exporting the cost.

Commercial outsourcing also deepened distancing. From Drouet’s private institutes for children, to the B&B boom, to PSL – each iteration has resulted in certain improvements in conditions and treatment. Yet, each has also extracted private profit from public subsidy, diffused accountability through contracts, and rendered conditions hidden enough to insulate the state from accountability. The populations bearing the cost of this fragmented system similarly follow a traceable pattern – racialised households, people seeking asylum, and single people excluded from statutory pathways altogether – again suggesting a structural rather than incidental pattern of harm.

## 5. Mutual Aid and Resistance

**Against a backdrop of exclusion, people living in temporary accommodation and their activist allies have long resisted conditions and fought for better access, fairer treatment, and improved quality. However, such experiences have been systematically under-documented – both as a result of weak local authority reporting requirements since the Second World War, but also because of the structural privileging of institutional voices in archives more generally. Examining struggle around TA conditions helps reveal what issues were at stake for the people and groups directly impacted by homelessness policy, how deservingness was (re)produced through exclusions and conditions, and why such punitive treatment has persisted across different TA types, in different places in England, and across the timeline.**

Building on the partial testimonies of struggle woven throughout the report, this section centres specific moments of resistance within or about TA. It opens with a case study of post-war homeless community making through squatting – initially condemned by the state but soon partially formalised as TA provision. The second part explores direct action through protest and narrates cases of how people experiencing homelessness – and their legal and activist allies – used powerful, innovative or simply desperate methods to highlight appalling treatment and demand change. Finally, the section examines the roles and impact of journalism and drama through *Cathy Come Home* (1966) – rooting analysis in one woman's first-hand account of staying in a Part III welfare hostel with her three children in 1962.

The evidence shaping these accounts has been mediated through the editorial lines of newspapers and journalists, through hagiographical accounts of activist organisations, and through secondary oral histories that required some level of (self-)selection for interview. Moreover, many of the campaign cases overviewed here were subject to internal contestation as well as friction with authorities in ways that surviving records might not reflect. Nonetheless, these cases stand as evidence in their own right of a TA system that was frequently contested and challenged, and they pose important questions around the humanity of a system that places the onus on the homeless household to challenge exclusion and conditions.

## 5.1. Squatting solidarity

Squatting refers to the occupation of uninhabited buildings owned by someone else. Squatting emerged ‘on an unprecedented scale’ after the end of the Second World War and was an explicit reaction to housing shortage.<sup>1</sup> Returning soldiers and poorly housed families occupied empty city flats, ex-military camps, and even vacant holiday homes on the south coast. In Brighton, for example, Vasudevan writes about a veteran group called the ‘Vigilantes’ who took over three empty houses and installed the families of ex-servicemen.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, squatters occupied old army camps. The squatters’ prior accommodation was often slum housing. As one 25-year-old woman shared in a Mass Observation study:

*Well, I’d been living in one room and one child I’d had, had died – and even then the council didn’t do anything about it ... The ceiling was falling down, it was shocking, I don’t really know how I stuck it ... but here [in the Bushey Park squat] it’s wonderful.<sup>3</sup>*

Many army huts were handed over to their occupants, turning TA into longer-term housing. Though, as Vasudevan explains, ‘over time they [the ex-military camps] were incorporated into the wider public housing system and used by social services to house homeless families well into the 1950s’.<sup>4</sup>

### The Great Sunday Squat

One of the highest-profile post-war squats occurred on 8 September 1946. Organised by members of the Communist Party and dubbed the ‘Great Sunday Squat’ by the press, several hundred families moved into a luxury Kensington block of flats, the Duchess of Bedford House.<sup>5</sup> These families were escaping squalor – overcrowded rooms with damp, collapsing ceilings, and infestations.<sup>6</sup> Duchess of Bedford House flats, by contrast, had multiple bedrooms, bathrooms, heating, plumbed water, and modern kitchens.<sup>7</sup>

Squatter families came from all over London. Their occupation was assisted by the Women’s Voluntary Service, and even police officers.<sup>8</sup> An inspector reportedly arranged a hot drinks van for the incoming squatters.<sup>9</sup> The public were also largely sympathetic. One man reflected in a Mass Observation diary at the time:

*I think the Communists were right, whatever their “ulterior” if any, motives may have been to draw attention to the shocking housing conditions that many of the flat squatters have had to put up with. Rat-bites! Just think of it. It seems to me scandalous that a Labour Govt couldn’t have done better for their own people in this last year.<sup>10</sup>*

Within the squats, homeless families and neighbours provided mutual aid, too. *The Telegraph* reported that as soon as neighbours heard squatting families did not have food or utensils, they ‘arranged cooking parties and provided refreshments’.<sup>11</sup>

Public sympathy emphasised solidarity and dignity in homelessness, but it was historically contingent. Many squatters at this time were ex-servicemen and families – heroes who “deserved” quality housing (and were promised as much by the government). The government was less forgiving and responded with eviction notices and criminal prosecution. Minister for Health, Nye Bevan, evoked the ‘queue jumping’ criticism, stating: ‘the squatters have in many cases jumped the claims of persons higher on the local authorities’ lists of applicants for houses’.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, at this point the government worked with many of the squatters to get them into local authority TA and then rehoused.<sup>13</sup>

In later decades, squatters found it harder to gain public and political sympathy, as squatting groups were increasingly associated with counterculture and/or were made up of single young people and non-“traditional” families. However, some squatter support groups cut through, like the family squatting movement. Founder Jim Radford explained that over the late 1960s he and other community organisers coordinated several squats that transferred families living in ‘absolutely appalling conditions... worse than any slum you could imagine’ to short-life council properties.<sup>14</sup> ‘[W]e fixed them up, we put new locks on the doors and we got the water, gas and electricity on’.<sup>15</sup>

Councils would send bailiffs and police to forcibly evict the families, which sometimes turned into aggressive siege-like situations. Then, in 1969, Lewisham Council agreed to do things differently. Radford and his team placed a family in house – ‘a very good photogenic family with a cast iron case’, he explained in an oral history interview (acknowledging the importance of visual appearance as well as circumstances for evoking sympathy).<sup>16</sup> When the police came to evict, Radford proposed to the council to keep the family in place. In return, the South East London Squatters (as the organisation was initially known), would guarantee the family would leave when the council needed to pull the house down. It worked and was the first legally agreed squat in England – heralding a distinct type of state-regulated TA.

By the terms of this deal, only Lewisham council housing waiting list families were eligible, and they would occupy the property under a license agreement, so would not have ordinary renter rights to protect against eviction. Their housing waiting list status was frozen, so they would be assessed for permanent council housing on the basis of their pre-squatting situation. The agreement went on to be replicated across London and other cities across the country.<sup>17</sup> A government circular shortly followed, recommending the model to all councils.<sup>18</sup>

Such licensing agreements created a new category of state-regulated temporary occupation that appeared to legitimise squatting. Many individuals and groups continued to “claim” TA in this way – including Women’s Aid groups (see box, next page). Nonetheless, the practice also preserved core exclusionary mechanisms shaped by the state. Councils restricted access to families on housing waiting lists, excluding single people. Even for eligible families, licensing agreements created no obligation for the council to rehouse them – so they could be evicted without safety net if demolition happened before they reached the top of the waiting list. The agreements also reinforced the postcode lottery, as it was adopted in some local authorities but absent in others, replicating the administrative fragmentation that characterised all TA provision. Where squatting had temporarily circumvented deservingness judgments – in that anyone desperate enough could occupy a property – licensing then reintroduced levels of gatekeeping. Nonetheless, looking at licensed squatting as TA reveals some aspects of what was materially valued and fought for: self-contained property, autonomy over personal space, build quality, and mutual aid or shared struggle.



Women’s Aid community kitchen in Richmond, London, c.1975. Credit: Homer Sykes.

## Women’s refuges and Squatting

The Women’s Aid movement emerged in the early 1970s to provide shelter for women and their children fleeing domestic violence.<sup>19</sup> In 1971, Chiswick Women’s Aid opened the world’s first refuge for women and children – a grassroots effort to fill a gap.<sup>20</sup> The property was a ‘small, somewhat derelict house’ with ‘two rooms upstairs and two down... [and is] occupied by 20 or 30 women per night along with their children’.<sup>21</sup> Chiswick expanded their refuges, and other women’s organisations followed suit – often by squatting short-life council properties before coming to an agreement with the council (or being moved elsewhere).

Routon documents the tedious labour squatters undertook to make these squatted refuges liveable, citing one woman’s experience of setting up the Brent Women’s Centre (a predominantly Black mothers’ working-class refuge): ‘It was in a terrible condition. We set to work ... clearing the house and also painting. We spent hours there weekends, until we had about three rooms going’.<sup>22</sup> Maintenance required frequent time-consuming fundraising drives and properties often remained poor quality and overcrowded.

Women’s squats were not characterised by a universal solidarity, either. Like the women’s movement, refuge squats were full of tensions relating to race, class, gender and sexuality and contested debates around inclusion.<sup>23</sup> ‘Throughout the years’, Routon writes, ‘some members were evicted; some left out of protest; others simply moved on’.<sup>24</sup>

## 5.2. Direct action: protesting conditions

Throughout the period, many homeless households and communities had to resort to direct action to force a material change in their TA conditions. Some protests responded to immediate crises, demanding the state prevent further harm. Others emerged from prolonged exposure to degrading conditions, where institutional indifference forced residents to make their suffering visible. The following cases demonstrate how collective resistance has successfully forced concessions from authorities, but they also reveal the exhausting duration of struggle required – and the differential sympathy extended to different groups of people experiencing homelessness.



Child protester with a billboard highlighting the eviction of homeless families from King Hill Hostel, Kent, c.1966. Credit: London Museum.

### 5.2.1. King Hill, Kent, 1965–1966

King Hill hostel, run by Kent County Council, prohibited husbands and children above 16-years-old from sleeping overnight, and had done so since the early 1950s. The hostel also operated a three-month maximum stay, evicting families even if they had nowhere to go, and taking children into care. Eviction was straightforward because welfare hostels and other TA were excluded from Rent Act protections. Across 1965–1966, over two dozen husbands defied the ban and stayed overnight, provoking arrests. Resident women and children also refused to leave the hostel after the three months stay limit, resulting in court summonses.

#### “The worry of all this”

Two King Hill women, Jean Gibbons and Sally Blackman, stated their case in an open letter in the local press in 1966:

*For most of us the present is, separation of our children and ourselves from our husbands; the future is, separation from our children until someday we find somewhere to live... We wonder if you can understand the problem that faces the men; on the one hand their duty to be law-abiding citizens; on the other hand, their love for their wives and their children. We wonder if you can imagine the effect the worry of all this has on us; the effect that lack of security has on the children.*<sup>25</sup>

The women’s political framing of the contradiction – the law versus the moral integrity of the family – highlights how the state was willing to undermine its own ideological moral preference for a family unit in order to deter and punish “problem families” experiencing homelessness.

The husbands and families of King Hill were supported by the Friends of King Hill, a campaign group formed to help the families. Together, they organised pickets, distributed campaign literature, ‘invaded the House of Commons’ (as supporter Jim Radford termed it), camped outside the Minister of Health’s house, and dominated headlines for twelve months.<sup>26</sup> In the end, intense pressure led Kent County Council to reverse its policy, allowing families to stay together and scrapping the three-month limit. According to *Solidarity* magazine, the council even redecorated some areas of the hostel and upgraded kitchen facilities.<sup>27</sup> Radford later reflected that ‘publicity was our most potent weapon’.<sup>28</sup>

The message certainly spread. Shelter’s *Grief Report* highlighted that by the early 1970s, other councils were taking note of ‘all that trouble at King Hill hostel’.<sup>29</sup> However, the protest did not end TA family separation practices nationally, and the fight exacted prolonged stress and a heavy toll on the campaigners who were separated from their families and forced to repeatedly go through the courts and press to make their case.

## 5.2.2. Palmer Street, Birmingham, 1980–1983

As detailed earlier (2.2.3.), Birmingham Council managed an ex-army barracks block that had been converted into TA and placed families in there from the 1940s to the 1980s. Built in 1903 as military accommodation, the Palmer Street blocks were repurposed as TA and continued to house homeless families until 1983 – despite it being condemned as unfit for habitation in 1958 and 1978. *The Guardian* described the property in 1978 as ‘bleak in the extreme, with bare brick walls, concrete floors ... leaking drains, sewage pipes, and roofs; defective woodwork and brickwork and being generally unsanitary’.<sup>30</sup> Respiratory illnesses were common, especially among children.

Council attitudes towards tenants could be deeply patronising. Councillor Edwina Currie, Chair of the Housing Committee (later Conservative MP and Junior Health Minister), described the blocks in a 1983 television news interview as a ‘rehabilitation unit’, for families who could not be ‘trusted with an ordinary tenancy in an ordinary block’.<sup>31</sup> In other words, families who had been evicted for rent arrears or antisocial behaviour complaints – often by the council itself. The deservingness frame was explicit. Families were trapped in there, sometimes for years with, according to a psychologist’s report, ‘little or no opportunity to live a happy and useful life’.<sup>32</sup>

By the early 1980s, residents had organised an Action Group. They held weekly meetings to communicate and coordinate strategy and hosted open days inviting councillors and environmental health officers to witness conditions firsthand, forcing officials to confront the reality their policies created. The group marched on Birmingham’s Council House, making their struggle politically visible. They cultivated media attention through newspaper articles, radio phone-ins, and a Central TV feature. External support proved crucial. Shelter, Birmingham Action on Homelessness, and Small Heath Community Law Centre provided advocacy infrastructure and legal expertise that amplified residents’ voices. These alliances show how community organisations sustained resistance when official channels failed.

### “We will not be bought off”

Palmer Street resident-campaigner Linda Ball was resolute about what needed to happen to this block. When asked by *The Guardian* in 1982 if she would take an offer of a transfer to other TA she responded:

*[W]e are all united in a determination to see these things come down. Until they are demolished, we will stay here. We will not be bought off by any offers of alternatives because we don’t want other people suffering in the way we have been forced to live.*<sup>33</sup>

The campaign succeeded in securing demolition. When the bulldozers finally moved in in September 1983, Ball watched the buildings fall and said to a TV news journalist present: ‘I’ve been waiting three and a half years for this... we just kept on and carried on, and even when we thought we were losing we carried on’.<sup>34</sup> Her testimony captures both the exhausting duration of struggle as well as a determination that contributed to victory.

However, the residents did not receive all they were due. The High Court ruled in March 1983 that Palmer Street tenants were owed compensation by the council for the conditions they were forced to live in, but by 1989 they had still not received a penny.<sup>35</sup> It is unclear whether they ever received a payout. (Around this time, several residents also sought to raise a libel case against Edwina Currie for her derogatory descriptions of resident families but could not raise funds for the legal representation).<sup>36</sup>

The Palmer Street case shines a spotlight on both the persistence of the TA-as-punishment policy into the 1980s, as well as a lack of local authority accountability for inhumane living conditions. The residents’ resistance exposed this logic publicly, forcing demolition, but only after sustained pressure made continued use politically untenable. Their victory demonstrated that collective action and visibility could challenge entrenched institutional indifference, though it was an isolated result – Birmingham council continued to place households in substandard and dangerous accommodation across the late 1980s.

### 5.2.3. Olympus Hostel, Westminster, 1984

The deaths of Shamin Akhtar Karim and her two young children – aged five and three – in the Olympus Hostel fire in Westminster on 20 November 1984 provoked fear from other residents temporarily housed in the B&B. As detailed earlier (4.2.1.), homeless families were placed there by Camden council, without the knowledge of either Westminster or the Greater London Council, and dangerous conditions had been allowed to proliferate.

After the Karim family deaths, other residents felt it was untenable to live there any longer. At least twenty households descended on Camden Town Hall and proceeded to occupy it for three weeks, representing around 80 households – primarily people from racialised minority backgrounds but also White households.<sup>37</sup> Two heavily pregnant women from the protesting contingent camped on the Town Hall floor for over a week, deeming it preferable to their death-trap rooms. This group shared litanies of horrors with a few visiting journalists. One resident recounted that her young baby had died from infections caused by sewage leaks in their room.<sup>38</sup>

#### The bare minimum

Geraldine Bisett lived in a single room in the Olympus with her four-year-old son, which they accessed via a narrow spiral staircase with a broken banister. Despite living there for over four months at the time of the fire, she explained to a *Fitzrovia Neighbourhood News* reporter that she had never seen anyone from any council visit the place: 'They just ring up once a week to check that I'm still here'.<sup>39</sup> After sharing her story to the journalist, she asked in fear: 'They can't throw us out for talking to you can they?'

The protesting families received support and advice from Camden Black Workers Group, Bengali Workers Action Group, and the Camden Committee for Community Relations, with prominent housing activist Nick Beacock later joining the campaign. Yet, the occupying families struggled to secure media coverage, particularly in the national press.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Salman Rushdie documented Camden councillors' dismissive remarks, accusing the homeless families of trying to jump up the housing waiting list with the occupation.<sup>41</sup>

The direct action did force eventual concessions. When *Guardian* journalist John Cunningham visited the occupation on 21st December 1984, he noted that all families were due to be rehoused by the council within the week, and Camden Council had committed to cease placements with the landlord (it is unclear whether these promises were fulfilled).<sup>42</sup> A few months later, a jury verdict found inadequate fire precautions and means of escape contributed to the Karim family deaths.<sup>43</sup> The landlord admitted the house was a fire trap while denying moral responsibility; private outsourcing carried no meaningful accountability.

Campaigners sought to highlight that the safety problems were not isolated. According to government figures, more than 600 people had been killed in HMO fires between 1978 – 1982 alone; residents living in this type of accommodation were ten times more likely to die or be seriously injured than households living in self-contained flats.<sup>44</sup> It is unclear how many of these HMOs were being used as TA, supported or unsupported. Regardless, there were no meaningful structural changes in the end anyway. As Ewen writes: '[L]ocal authorities were awarded discretionary powers to establish registration schemes in their area, but few took advantage of these. ... Despite calls to establish means of escape in the event of a fire as a condition of fitness, this was not originally included'.<sup>45</sup> Olympus Hostel families seemed to win their immediate struggle through direct action, but the framework of exclusion and deterrence remained intact.



A man seeking asylum, sat in the Landmark tower block in Liverpool, 2001. Credit: Howard Davies.

As an internationally published photojournalist, Howard Davies has documented conflicts around the world. This picture is from his series 'Exiled Worlds'. See more at <https://eye-camera.com/>

### 5.2.4. Landmark, Liverpool, 2000–2004

The final case study of direct action centres on TA provided for people seeking asylum by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). In Liverpool in 2000, private company Landmark Liverpool Ltd won a NASS contract to run two blocks in Everton, housing between 600–700 people seeking asylum: Inn on the Park and The Landmark. Liverpool Council reportedly sold these towers in the first place as they were unfit for their council tenants.<sup>46</sup> Conditions did not improve when Landmark Liverpool Ltd moved asylum seekers in.

Kurdish resident Ahmed told the BBC in August 2001: 'We live four or five to one small flat and there is no heating'.<sup>47</sup> A community nurse who visited patients in the block described conditions as 'appalling, substandard, inadequate' and contributing to mental health issues.<sup>48</sup> She also described the staff as intimidating and 'obstructive'. Liverpool Riverside MP Louise Ellman raised conditions in parliament repeatedly across the years, highlighting 'deplorable' living conditions and describing the building management as deliberately intimidating residents.<sup>49</sup>

Numerous complaints were made to NASS and the government, but it was not until ten asylum seekers went on hunger strike in June 2001 that the government acted. Housing Minister Jeff Rooker agreed to meet with the residents and investigate the issue, so the protestors paused their strike. All occupants were then moved out of the blocks while the government investigated conditions and management. In November 2002, the government concluded that conditions in Landmark Liverpool Ltd's properties were unacceptable: insect infestations, widespread damp, and poor electrical installations.<sup>50</sup> They ended placements immediately and finally terminated Landmark Liverpool Ltd's contract in March 2004.

Despite this victory, the outcome did not challenge any systemic flaws in the NASS system (core aspects of which are still in place today).<sup>51</sup> When asylum seeker residents were initially moved out of the block, NASS sought to have them placed in alternative Landmark Liverpool Ltd properties – ignoring previous complaints about landlord harassment. Following objections, they were placed in adequate local housing but then forced to relocate, just two weeks later, to new homes elsewhere in the northwest – outside of Liverpool and far away from where they had been creating social networks for themselves, and enrolling in education and health services.

#### "I am being treated like a prisoner"

One of Landmark's residents, Iranian Behrouz Keshavarznejad, told the *Liverpool Echo* in June 2002:

*I just cannot believe what is happening. I had really started to feel safe in Liverpool and was making friends. I am now very frightened about where I may be forced to live. I have never been anywhere outside of Liverpool, apart from London once. I will be in a strange place where I will not know anyone. I feel as if I am being treated like a prisoner. ... The conditions in the [Landmark] tower blocks were terrible. After moving to Picton Road I started to feel happy and now it is all being taken away. We were given two days' notice [of the move-on].<sup>52</sup>*

Thus, the victory at Landmark came at significant cost to those who fought for it – hunger strikes secured government intervention, only to result in further dispersal.

By separating asylum seeker support from mainstream housing and homelessness frameworks in 1999, the government ensured that challenges to their TA conditions would be judged within immigration law rather than welfare frameworks – a boundary that Landmark residents, despite their hunger strike, could not cross.

## 5.3. Journalism and *Cathy Come Home*

For nearly two centuries, journalists have played an important role in exposing the conditions faced by destitute and homeless households resident in temporary accommodation. Henry Mayhew’s ‘Labour and the Poor’ series for the *Morning Chronicle* from 1849, for instance, placed the spotlight on workhouse conditions, featuring interviews with ‘inmates’ that sought to humanise their pathways into destitution – job loss, marriage breakdown, illnesses. Descriptions were vivid and detailed, though often filtered through a middle-class reporting lens. Many other social commentators followed suit across the late Victorian era, sometimes going “undercover” and pretending to be homeless themselves to observe and report on conditions.<sup>53</sup>

This tradition of investigative exposure continued intermittently into the twentieth century, but it was the 1960s that produced the most sustained and, arguably, politically consequential media scrutiny of temporary accommodation. Several factors drove this attention,<sup>54</sup> one of which was the broader role newspapers played in documenting the failure of the state’s welfare and housing safety nets.<sup>55</sup> Journalists were increasingly asking whether the welfare state was even working. Crystallising the concern about homelessness, Harford Thomas posited in *The Guardian* in 1967: ‘local authorities are not organised to deal with the kind of family that finds itself with no home and no one to turn to’.<sup>56</sup>

Mary Cecil was the head of one of those families – and her testimony contributed to a growing national conversation that would peak around *Cathy Come Home* (1966). In January 1962, Mary wrote a *New Statesman* piece recounting in unsparing detail her experience entering Newington Lodge, a large “Part III” welfare hostel in Southwark, London.<sup>57</sup>

### Mary Cecil on Newington Lodge: “a sadness no one could ever forget”

Mary Cecil and her three children – one, a young baby – became homeless after her husband abandoned the family and she had to leave their council home. They temporarily lodged in a flat with an elderly couple, the man of which sexually abused her children. She reported him to the police and fled to London with her family, where they stayed temporarily with friends – but that, too, proved unsustainable. She ended up at the door of Newington Lodge. In her account of life there, Mary described the “deafening” noise, the flimsy cubicles they were appointed to sleep in, the grey food, threadbare furniture – “the pillows might have been filled with sand” – rationed cutlery (never replaced if stolen), and the harsh regime that dictated every turn in their day. Her children sobbed with overwhelm; they had no safe space:

*There was neither playroom nor playground for the swarms of children, and it was not safe to put a baby outside in its pram in case its eyes were attacked by an older child. The small common room at the end of the corridor was therefore crammed with seedy prams and push-chairs, as well as women and children. This room was as desolate as everywhere else ... like a communal cell, a painting by Hogarth. A group of young women vied with each other narrating their gruesome histories.*

Newington Lodge administrators weighed up Mary’s journey to the hostel and determined she lay at fault. They categorised her as an “irresponsible” and “bad” mother, unfit to have charge of her children – her culpability apparently evident in every flight from previous accommodation. Their only offer was to take her children into care.

Mary and her three children were only able to leave Newington Lodge after another family – “modern Samaritans” she called them – made room in their private home.

Around the same time, journalist and playwright Jeremy Sandford also began reporting conditions at Newington Lodge and other welfare hostels for *The Observer* and other outlets after his neighbour was evicted and ended up in one – Durham Buildings in Battersea. He, too, documented overcrowding, squalor, the spread of disease, and general sense of shame that came with living in one. Sasson writes that Cecil and Sandford together ‘placed the difficulties homeless families were facing into accepted discourse’ – humanising family homelessness experiences and provoking widespread concern about hostel conditions.<sup>58</sup> Sandford then turned the experiences he encountered into a television play, partnering with director Ken Loach to produce *Cathy Come Home*.

Aired on the BBC in November 1966 and watched by twelve million people, *Cathy Come Home* depicted a young White family move through almost every level of housing precarity and housing condition – private rent flat, overcrowded family home, lodging, damp council property, caravan, derelict slum, and finally welfare hostels that refused entry to the father. The film ends with Cathy’s children being forcibly removed from her on a railway station platform and taken into care. Closing titles explain that the story was a composite of true events and that 4,000 children are taken into care every year because their parents are homeless.

The programme received nationwide coverage and provoked reams of interviews with families sharing their own “Cathy” story. People wrote to their MPs demanding political action, it was raised in political debates for many subsequent decades, and helped propel the campaign work of *Shelter*, which launched just a few weeks after the programme was aired. In the aftermath of the public response to the film, politicians and activists came together and formed *Crisis*.<sup>59</sup> Fitzpatrick and Pawson describe *Cathy Come Home* as having had a ‘profound and long-lasting’ impact on the British social psyche and ‘[e]ven all these years later, it remains a key reference point for UK professionals working in the field’.<sup>60</sup>

Yet, as Sasson writes, the impact of the discourse was also limited. It helped focus attention on the difficulties many households faced trying to secure housing, but it was largely a White-centred discourse and ‘ignored the particularly vulnerable situation of Commonwealth migrants’.<sup>61</sup> It was also more than ten years before homelessness saw a statutory definition in law under the 1977 act. Moreover, the separation of families and the placement of children from homeless families in care continues today.<sup>62</sup>



Scene from the 1966 film *Cathy Come Home*, directed by Ken Loach. Credit: Alamy

## 5.4. Against exclusion

The continuous recurrence of similar struggles across the timeframe reveals that the architecture of exclusion has proven adaptable but ultimately resistant to reform. First, the cases collectively demonstrate that resistance was necessary because the system had no meaningful internal accountability mechanism. Residents were left to make their conditions politically visible – through occupation, protest or news coverage – because administrative channels either did not exist or were unresponsive. The burden of proof was always on the household experiencing homelessness.

Second, the differential sympathy evident across these cases evidences the endurance of the deservingness framework institutionally and in wider discourse: ex-servicemen squatters received help and public sympathy, later squatters had to fit family norms (and those featured in campaigns had to be “photogenic”); King Hill and Newington families were categorised as “problem families”, until they articulated respectable family values or couched themselves as victims; Palmer Street family experiences of utterly unfit accommodation were weighted against council explanations of culpability; Olympus families struggled for national press because they were predominantly racialised minorities; Landmark asylum seekers had to place their lives on the line to catalyse political engagement. The deservingness framework functioned differently depending on attitudes towards race, family structure and circumstance. And while each case achieved partial victories, the structural framework producing those conditions remained unreformed.

These struggles also reveal demands relevant to policy and practice today. In their own ways, each campaign fought for: quality accommodation, characterised by privacy, safety, and decent furnishings; connection to a community, whether that was proximity to an existing one or a new community forged in a supportive environment; respect in treatment, including being welcomed, valued, needs met, and preferences heard; visibility in housing policy and discourse; and institutional accountability when things go wrong. These “asks” were distinct from a settled housing outcome; they spoke specifically to the period the homeless household was temporarily accommodated by the state.

The following section provides a case study example of a temporary housing programme valued by its users and demonstrably decent in quality: the 1944 Temporary Housing Programme (THP). The THP does not offer a clear-cut solution to ending the architecture of exclusion and fragmented management of TA. Rather, it demonstrates that the demands articulated through decades of resistance – for quality, autonomy, community, and dignity in temporary provision – have historical precedent in a government programme.

## 6. Moment of Progress? The 1944 Temporary Housing Programme

**In this penultimate section, the report returns to the end of the Second World War to explore a programme that in many ways marked a high point in temporary accommodation: the 1944 Temporary Housing Programme (THP), which saw the government finance the construction of 156,623 temporary prefabricated bungalows for homeless households.<sup>1</sup> The THP was virtually exceptional, then and since, in the level of centralised investment and coordination to produce decent quality TA, which raises the question: what made it possible?**

Partly, the THP was designed to address several urgent post-war reconstruction challenges. The temporary prefabs were made from a range of non-traditional housing materials, like aluminium and steel, using innovative methods that enabled mass production and construction on-site with minimal skilled labour. As such, the THP mitigated material and labour shortages in the building industry and helped sustain manufacturing while war munitions production declined. It was a by-product of non-housing priorities and consistent with the pattern identified in this report that TA provision has so often been shaped by external non-homelessness drivers. That said, the THP also captured the imagination of many leading political figures. Prime Minister Winston Churchill was a personal fan of the programme, hoping to construct half a million in total.<sup>2</sup>

Reasons beyond the bungalows' impermanent materials necessitated the "temporary" marker. Under the 1944 Housing (Temporary Accommodation) Act, the THP was centrally funded and represented an unusual form of direct government public housing provision.<sup>3</sup> With a 10 to 15 year material lifespan, the prefabs were never intended to be long-term settled housing for occupants. While centralisation enabled the government to standardise and coordinate methods of construction and distribution – vital to the effectiveness of the programme's rollout – they ultimately did not want to signal they were supplanting local authorities' long-standing role in providing public housing.<sup>4</sup> In that sense, the THP also fits into the tradition of reinforcing fragmentation rather than challenging it.

Separately, and crucially, the THP also stands out as receiving markedly positive feedback from prefab occupants – a stark contrast to conditions documented in Section Five. As will be illustrated below, the prefabs were self-contained, well-equipped, and even came with gardens. Such amenities cannot be explained by reconstruction and political pressures alone – not when considering that other households experiencing homelessness in the period were placed in halfway houses and slum-clearance properties. This section argues that explanations lay partially in the persistence of the deservingness filter.

## 6.1. The 'hen huts'

In the design phases of the 1944 THP, various prototypes emerged. The first, the Portal Bungalow, was made in a car factory and people joked it should have had windscreen wipers on the windows.<sup>5</sup> The standard design was one floor with two bedrooms; the compact nature of it 'was seen as an emergency measure only whilst sufficient standard three-bedroom products were built'.<sup>6</sup> While generally considered externally unattractive, the bungalows' internal features were generous. They included fittings that poorer renters had never experienced.



Uni-Seco prefabricated houses in Brixton, 1945. Credit: Historic England Archive P/H00049/005.

### "Happiest years of our lives"

One woman recalled being allocated her 'hen hut', as she termed it:

*[M]y husband, two-year-old son and myself lived in a condemned house. A housing officer came round and offered us number 22. ... We saw a square box with grubby-looking walls. I said "I'm not going to live there". However, going through the gate, down two steps, into a small garden, we entered a different world.<sup>7</sup>*

The time in that temporary house were the 'happiest years of our lives', she reflected. Similarly, at Lewisham's Excalibur estate, where 187 prefab bungalows survived into the 2010s, Eddie O'Mahony – a long-term resident who occupied his 'temporary' bungalow between 1946 and 2015 – recalled facilities as 'magic'. As he described:

*There was a toilet, an inside toilet!... to see a bathroom inside... and a hot towel rail; I had never heard of that! You just had to put the switch on and you had hot water, constant hot water.<sup>8</sup>*

Vale cites several reasons for the enduring popularity of this post war temporary accommodation among residents. First, they came with a private front door and garden space – features consistently valued in housing surveys throughout modern British history.<sup>9</sup> That meant they were private, and occupants were able to personalise them – even though they were known to be short-term. Second, the bungalows 'were used to provide homes in the widest sense of the word, through the creation of communities'.<sup>10</sup> Mass temporary prefab developments like the Shrublands Estate in Great Yarmouth were laid out like the public housing estates of the 1920s, with road and footpath access, garden competitions, and a club house for tenants.<sup>11</sup>

Materially, they were never meant to last long term, but insufficient 'move-on' council housing supply and the bungalows' relatively hardy construction meant they lasted far longer than their lifespan (with thousands reportedly still remaining today).<sup>12</sup> Unsurprisingly then, when long-settled prefab communities eventually received news of impending demolition, protests were common: 'They are convenient and I would hate to move away from the area', Rose Muggeridge told a journalist in 1971 after finding her Bristol prefab estate was slated for demolition.<sup>13</sup> Neighbour Margaret Harris shared that she would 'hate to live in a flat again. We like the prefab, which allows us our privacy'.<sup>14</sup> A 2002 campaign by a community in Worcestershire saved 30 prefab homes from demolition. Residents threatened to chain themselves to their plumbing, and Redditch council agreed the properties could be saved with minimal repairs.<sup>15</sup> By this point, their "temporary" prefabs were long-settled homes.

## 6.2. Comfort for a family

The THP's legacy of cherished homes reveals the state's capacity to provide decent TA when political will determines it a priority and investment follows. While Vale argues labour and industrial policy drove the programme,<sup>16</sup> economic rationale alone cannot explain why these homes included fitted kitchens and cupboards, indoor bathrooms, and were allotted to only one family per unit. Other people experiencing homelessness at the time were crammed into halfway houses or communal facilities like large welfare hostels.

In part, the difference was the intended occupants. Though the exclusion of single people was not written into homelessness-related law at this point – with the THP predating the 1948 National Assistance Act by four years – THP prefabs were explicitly reserved for families. During the 1944 Housing (Temporary Accommodation) Bill readings, Thomas Johnston MP explained: 'The Government have produced their proposals for a pressed steel bungalow with a limited superficial area suitable for a family consisting of a man, wife and two young children'.<sup>17</sup> These were not allocation recommendations – discretion remained with local authorities – rather, they were design specifications. No equivalent housing was commissioned for single people. Local authorities followed suit, drawing up lists to exclude 'full tenants of houses not condemned, nationals of other countries on travel permits, and persons living alone'.<sup>18</sup>

For those shaping the programme, the ideal type of family was narrower still. Gay writes that Churchill used the THP as a 'political solution to the problem of returning servicemen who married during the war and had nowhere to live'.<sup>19</sup> One of the largest prefab contractors, Taylor Woodrow Ltd, stated in a company meeting in 1945 that the THP was part of a wider move to 'keep faith with the men and women returning from the Forces'.<sup>20</sup> Many councils allocated priority unambiguously along those lines. Shardlow Rural District Council, for instance, used a points system with 'ex-prisoners of war claiming 15 points, servicemen 10, and children five'.<sup>21</sup> While ex-serviceman-headed households were not the only ones afforded priority (with bombed-out and overcrowded households also securing allocations), they occupied a clearly privileged position in the THP hierarchy.



A young girl in the kitchen of a Uni-Seco prefabricated home in Brixton, c.1945. Credit: [Historic England Archive. P/H00049/007](https://www.historicengland.org.uk/record/P/H00049/007).

That is not to say assessment of household competence and deservingness stopped at the door. Some councils then explicitly used THP bungalows as a sorting function for municipal housing allocation. In Meriden, Solihull, the council 'agreed that tenants put into the temporary bungalows on the Station Road site and found to be satisfactory might, in due course at the discretion of the sub-committee, be moved to permanent houses'.<sup>22</sup> The bungalows here were used as a surveillance function to monitor deservingness beyond the moment of allocation.

In the end, the material outcome of the programme fell short of ambition. Rather than the aspired half a million homes, just 156,623 temporary bungalows were erected. The programme was costly at £215 million – £65 million over budget.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the unintended transformation of these 'temporary' prefabs into long-term homes resulted in predictable maintenance problems: condensation, damp, corrosion, draughts, high heating bills. There was also no sustainable plan for 'move on' permanent housing so eviction and community break-up were written into the future of these homes, eventually.<sup>24</sup>

That the temporary prefabs in 1944 remain the only large-scale TA programme designed with resident comfort as a primary concern is not incidental – it reflects a specific constellation of political will, financial investment and attitudes towards the people the state was willing to invest in. Those attitudes were narrowly drawn, centring on the nuclear family of the returning serviceman – exclusionary framings that remained durable long after the prefabs themselves had been demolished. Nonetheless, the THP demonstrates that the state was capable of pre-planning and investing in decent quality TA – the prefabs set a standard their occupants valued. The question is why that standard proved so difficult to sustain.

## 7. Conclusion

**Temporary accommodation is an essential homelessness safety net with legislative roots stretching back centuries. The persistent lack of genuinely affordable housing coupled with the population-level predictability of life shocks – such as job loss or relationship breakdown – mean TA provision will continue to be required for a long time yet. While the imperative is to focus on homelessness prevention and social house-building, there is an equally pressing imperative to make sure whoever needs TA gets it, and that whatever TA exists is short, safe, and healthy – standards TA has frequently failed to meet for nearly two centuries, despite noteworthy reforms.**



Six children – Donna, Katrina, Kirsti (standing), Emma, Mark and Jason – eating in their council-run homeless hostel room in Blackpool, 1992. Credit: Craig Easton.

The family had to seek temporary accommodation in 1990 after a series of events – relocation, redundancy, and the national economic downturn – which meant they could no longer afford rent. Easton returned to the family across 2016–2020. His photo-documentary series, *Thatcher's Children*, has been published as a book by GOST in 2023 and is available at [craigeaston.com](http://craigeaston.com).

### 7.1. Lessons from history

Two dynamics have sustained this pattern. First, access to, and conditions of, TA have been implicitly determined by an enduring (un)deservingness ideology: a social and moral framework that sorts people experiencing homelessness into those whose circumstances warrant assistance, and those whose perceived failings – or racialised “outsider” identity – justify exclusion or poor conditions. Ideas of deservingness solidified in the 19th century as concerns grew about increasing numbers of impoverished people turning to their parishes for assistance. The union workhouse system – essentially the first state-mandated TA – was then explicitly designed to be cruel in order to deter people from claiming relief. Deservingness ideas informed who was admitted and what conditions they faced – and the ideology has endured ever since.

Second, TA has never been a coherent system in its own right. The workhouse system was abolished in 1948 and the National Assistance Act articulated “temporary accommodation” as a homelessness safety net in law. Yet since then, TA has been defined in terms of what housing has failed to deliver and managed through fragmented regulations and reactive spending. Fragmentation has enabled exclusion and poor conditions to flourish, in historically contingent ways.

In the post-war period of public house-building, and a shrinking and insecure private rented sector, households in TA were seen to challenge municipal “wait your turn” housing allocation principles. Demand exceeded supply, stays lengthened, and Victorian deterrence ideologies resurfaced to police housing access. In periods of public housing contraction – particularly post-1980 Right to Buy – TA intensified as a rationing tool, with the deservingness framework influencing who gained access and who was refused, relocated, or placed in the worst available stock. The 1977 statutory definition of homelessness came into force just a few years before public housing supply was decimated – creating a bottleneck that reinvigorated Victorian notions of deservingness and culpability for homelessness. In times of homelessness prevention from the late 1990s, TA became a performance indicator to manage – a facet of reducing social exclusion. For many citizens, TA conditions demonstrably improved and homelessness numbers decreased, though structural inequities and some attitudes towards individual pathology remained intact. For certain non-citizens, Victorian deterrence and harsh conditions were unambiguous: asylum seekers were separated entirely from mainstream assistance and dispersed into poor quality housing stock.

## 7.2. From lifelines to a safety net for all

The deservingness framework has endured through its explanatory power – it instinctively makes sense according to the values of the time – without requiring the structural accountability that might challenge assumptions. When demand for housing overwhelms supply in ways that become publicly visible – through rough sleeping, overcrowded B&Bs, or spikes in asylum seeker applications for example – the deservingness framework explains the problem as driven by “too many” undeserving people making claims on the state. The structural conditions that produce certain groups’ over-representation in homelessness statistics – racialised and gendered housing disadvantage, insecure employment, inadequate public housing supply – are then recast as individual or cultural pathologies: idleness, family breakdown, racialised belonging. Over-representation of certain groups in TA – unemployed single men, single parents, minoritised households – can then subtly appear as explanation rather than structural discrimination. Exclusionary or squalid TA conditions in such a context become both the inevitable outcome of scarcity *and* an appropriate response to tackle dependence.

This logic has materialised repeatedly since the apparent abolition of the workhouse system: in the family separation practices at King Hill hostel in the 1960s; in single homeless men made to feel ‘shunned and miserable’ in Reception Centres in the 1970s; in the ‘leaking drains, sewage pipes, and roofs’, forced upon families who could ‘not be trusted with an ordinary tenancy’, in Birmingham’s Palmer Street block in the 1980s; in empty fire extinguishers and blocked fire escapes that resulted in the deaths of a Bangladeshi mother and her two children in Westminster’s Olympus hostel in 1984; in asylum seekers left on the streets in 1996 and then ‘treated like prisoners’ in Liverpool’s Landmark tower block in 2001.

In apparent contrast, the 1944 Temporary Housing Programme provided over 156,000 war-homeless families with self-contained prefab bungalows that created communities. Yet, it was the exception that proved the rule: quality TA, provided for a more “deserving” population – returning servicemen and their families or waiting list households in slum housing, not “undeserving” households challenging social and moral codes (though even families in these temporary homes ended up staying far longer than the buildings’ material lifespan allowed for – consigning occupants to poor conditions and eventual eviction).

How, then, to break the power of the deservingness framework and move towards a TA system that is capable of providing a safety net for all who need it – not just a lifeline for the chosen few? How to move towards temporary accommodation that does not merely exist as a basic physical shelter, but is genuinely a short, safe and healthy base from which people can recover? Historical analysis presented in this report reveals where the exclusionary deservingness framework has proven most durable, how fragmentation and poor standards have perpetuated a state of ongoing crisis – unevenly shared by different populations and authorities – and identifies the mechanisms that have sustained it across legislative reforms and policy shifts:

### 1. The exclusionary architecture adapts

This report has revealed that the deservingness ideology has reproduced exclusionary and degrading outcomes across radically different legislative contexts. The 1977 act’s unprecedented introduction of a statutory homelessness definition did not dismantle deservingness – the ‘priority need’ condition turned it into an administrative assessment process. The New Labour government’s prioritisation of homelessness prevention from the late 1990s did not dismantle it, homelessness numbers fell, but judgments around personal responsibility for social exclusion retained some force. The 1999 NASS system for accommodating destitute asylum seekers did not create racialised exclusions, it channelled historically persistent exclusionary practises into legislation targeted at a minority group. The deservingness framework cannot be seen, therefore, as incidental; it underpins the system. Addressing the symptoms of the TA crisis – poor material conditions and high costs – will not change the uneven effects the architecture has on marginalised groups. Breaking this pattern requires, as a minimum, that its effects are made visible. The historical absence of systematic equality monitoring of TA allocation decisions has allowed discriminatory outcomes to be naturalised or discursively unremarkable.

### H-CLIC data: offering a fuller picture?

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (implemented 2018) introduced a new data recording system known as H-CLIC (Homelessness Case Level Information Collection). It was designed to collect detailed information on individuals – rather than just household data – as they progress through the various homelessness duty stages. An Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) study in 2022 found the system has enhanced the potential of statutory homelessness statistics to answer policy questions. For example: insights around the increased risk of rough sleeping among prison leavers has led to policy efforts to help them find accommodation before release.<sup>1</sup>

The full effectiveness of the H-CLIC system is yet to be determined – local authorities struggled with implementation for the first few years, and many still report missing data. Early evaluations indicate ongoing structural weaknesses. According to the OSR in 2022: some local authorities ‘may not be recording their data on a consistent basis, or not asking certain sensitive questions, such as on gender identity and sexuality’.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, a lack of “full picture” information about household moves between TA and the quality of TA were flagged as ongoing concerns in recent oral evidence to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee’s inquiry into housing conditions.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, there is no equivalent of the H-CLIC system for asylum seeker accommodation. A 2024 investigation for OpenDemocracy, revealed that the Home Office had no centralised data on the performances of its three main contracted providers and therefore no robust evidence on conditions faced by, and the treatment of, asylum seekers.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Fragmentation obscures poor conditions

Section Four revealed how administrative fragmentation has systematically shielded poor conditions and exclusionary practices from accountability, particularly since 1948. Devolution of TA powers to local authorities, coupled with broad officer-level discretionary powers, inadequate data reporting, and accountability gaps created through underregulated privatisation, have enabled the exclusion framework to operate frequently unchecked.

Ending fragmentation requires breaking silos. New Labour's successes in homelessness prevention provide some lessons here: the location of the well-resourced Social Exclusion and Rough Sleepers Units within the Cabinet and with cross-departmental authority enabled unprecedented coordination. But any meaningful attempt to address fragmentation would need to extend beyond homelessness prevention to encompass TA conditions, placement decisions, and outcomes – with reporting requirements that cannot be diluted through outsourcing or out-of-area arrangements. Coordination without accountability for conditions and equality impacts will, as before, produce measurable improvements in some areas while leaving structural fragmentation and poor conditions intact.

### The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017: structural reform or tinkering?

There has been substantial reform post-2011. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (in force April 2018) created duties to prevent and relieve homelessness regardless of priority need. It extended the definition of 'threatened with homelessness' from 28 to 56 days, triggering a prevention duty at an earlier stage; requires local authorities to provide homelessness services to all households needing it, including single households; and requires authorities to develop personalised plans to address prevention and relief needs. Shelter called such reforms 'one of the biggest changes to the rights of homeless people in England for 15 years'.<sup>5</sup> And by 2020, the government reported the Act has been 'effective in enabling more people who need it to receive help'.<sup>6</sup>

However, academic findings suggest exclusionary patterns persist. The new duty to relieve homelessness stops short of abolishing priority need entirely; duties to accommodate after the end of the relief duty are still only owed to those who meet priority need criteria.<sup>7</sup> It has not dismantled structural inequities, either. Iafrati *et al* found in 2025 that Black and minoritised groups continue to be over-represented in OOA, and government data relating to ethnicity appears to be inaccurate.<sup>8</sup> For homeless asylum seekers sitting outside of the HRA, the outlook has worsened with the full privatisation of accommodation management in 2012 and outsourcing-related accountability gaps.

## 3. Exemptions from standards sustains exclusion and squalor

This report has evidenced how local authorities and contracted providers have frequently operated TA outside of housing quality and safety norms, thereby escaping accountability for discrimination and harm. Self-reporting mechanisms have proven insufficient and accountability through the courts requires a household to surmount significant structural obstacles to take a case through the system. Historical evidence suggests ending this pattern requires ending TA exemptions – tacit and explicit – from existing housing standards and the establishment and enforcement of baseline minimum standards, with accountability at every level.<sup>9</sup> In other words, a coherent, enforceable, legislative framework for TA.

Such recommendations are not new. In 1985, Professor John Greve recommended to the Greater London Council the need for local authorities to: undertake a comprehensive review of TA in general; explore the feasibility of enforcing minimum quality standards; and establish a London-wide system of monitoring conditions, restrictions, and regimes.<sup>10</sup> A decade later, a Southbank University study – commissioned by major homelessness organisations – explicitly reiterated these recommendations as they remained unfulfilled.<sup>11</sup> Comprehensive baseline standards – and meaningful enforcement – is still lacking today, leaving people experiencing homelessness to fight for access and better conditions one household at a time; and TA providers with little incentive to improve.

This report has also revealed that households experiencing homelessness have, for decades, articulated the kinds of TA they value. The 1944 Temporary Housing Programme documented in Section Six produced quality, self-contained properties that fostered community and contextually decent, explicitly temporary, homes that bridged a gap during a post-war housing emergency. Residents particularly valued their privacy and the quality of their internal fittings. These post-war prefabs were not perfect and contained structural flaws linked to their construction materials and fabrication process (and there are important sustainability concerns around the provision of purpose-built, disposable TA units – ones that proponents of prefabricated TA must engage with today).<sup>12</sup>

The THP prefabs stand as an instructive example of TA designed with user comfort, privacy and community as guiding principles – not least because such standards were frequently articulated as demands in later decades when other types of TA provision fell far short of decent. Post-war squatters across London, protesting families in Kent, Birmingham and Camden, hunger-striking asylum seekers in Liverpool each called for variations of the same things: quality TA characterised by privacy, safety, and decent furnishings; family togetherness and connection to community or social networks; respectful treatment; visibility in discourse; and landlord accountability. That those demands went largely unmet is central to this report's findings.

The fact that many THP prefab bungalows housed families far longer than their 15-year material lifespan was not evidence of their success – it was a consequence of insufficient move-on housing provision. Well-regulated and better-quality TA will not resolve structural problems that render housing unaffordable, expose tenants to easy evictions, and trap people in unsafe relationships or inaccessible spaces. Investment in social housing and private rented sector reform is needed to ensure people have long-stay housing solutions elsewhere.

But until we reach that point, TA remains an essential welfare provision. Ensuring decent conditions in temporary accommodation is not aspirational for those who need it. These are minimum conditions that the state has often acknowledged, repeatedly failed to provide, and which this report shows to be structurally challenging to achieve without substantial reform.

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## Conclusion

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