



West Midlands
Combined Authority

Families living in temporary accommodation

**West Midlands
Combined Authority
Homelessness
Taskforce**

Summary report

December 2021



Project details

Title	Families in temporary accommodation
Client	West Midlands Combined Authority Homelessness Taskforce
Project number	20142
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Summary report

M·E·L Research was commissioned by the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) Homelessness Taskforce to undertake a research project into families in temporary accommodation (TA) across the WMCA region. The Taskforce was established in 2017, with the aim to design out homelessness in all its forms. This report summarises the research, with a fuller version of the report also available.

While TA for families is an integral part of homelessness provision, it presents real challenges to both households using it and organisations providing it. All forms of TA affect the potential for a settled home and all that goes with that.

This action research project was commissioned to better understand the profile of families in TA, their journeys into TA, the impact on families in relationship to work, health, education and more, and on their broader longer-term opportunities, including what ‘protective factors’ affect a family’s resilience to the impact of TA.

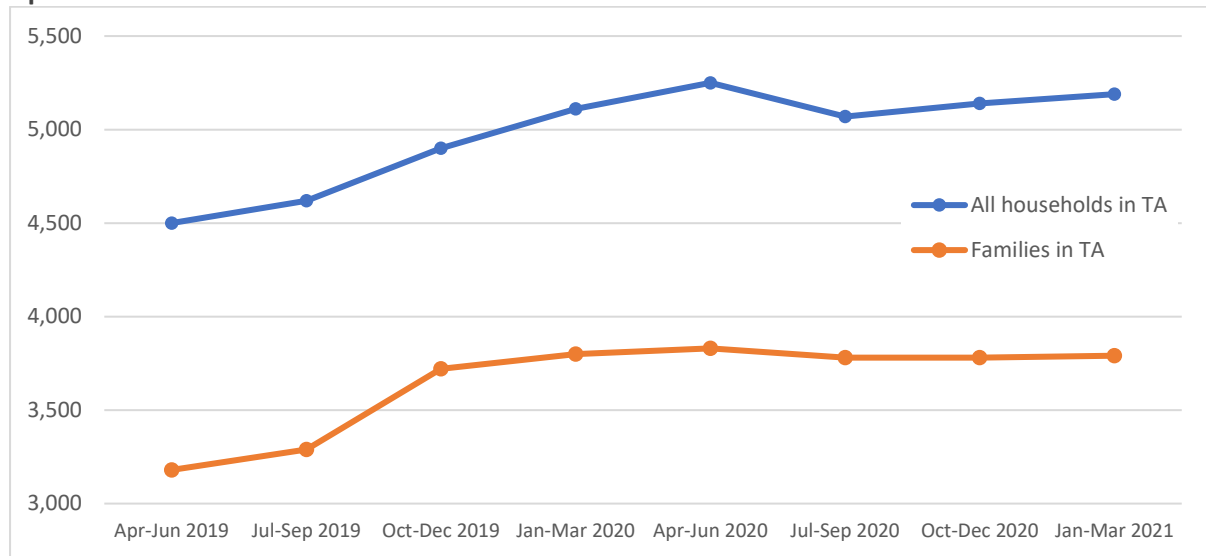
In order to address these research questions we: carried out a focused review of key literature; analysed national and regional level secondary data on TA; collected and analysed snapshot data from the seven constituent local authorities of the WMCA; interviewed the lead for TA in each of the WMCA constituent local authorities, hearing from 12 colleagues in total; interviewed 12 stakeholders more widely in the West Midlands; spoke to three wider agencies in the region, representing health and wellbeing, safeguarding and domestic abuse; engaged with 21 families, mostly currently living in TA; and researched and engaged with a wider group of ‘good practice’ providers.

For clarity when we are referring to the seven constituent authorities that make up the WMCA we will refer to it as the ‘WMCA area’. When we refer to the whole of the West Midlands we use the ‘wider West Midlands’ or ‘West Midlands region’.

Profile of families in TA

National statutory homelessness data shows the scale of families living in TA in the wider West Midlands region. The chart below shows a consistent number of about 3,700 families with children living in TA since the last quarter in 2019 and staying at that level up to the first quarter of 2021 (the latest published data available). In fact, this bucks the national trend, where the number of families living in TA has fallen slightly. In the West Midlands region, there were 1.6 families with children living in TA per 1,000 households in June 2020, which translates to about one household in every 640 in the West Midlands region.

Total number of households and families with children in TA in West Midlands region, quarterly Apr-Jun 2019 to Jan-Mar 2021



Source: Statutory homelessness: Detailed local authority-level tables

The local snapshot of data, for the seven constituent local authorities, as at 1 March 2021 counted a total of 3,518 families with dependent children living in TA across the WMCA area. Birmingham had the largest number, at 2,955, then Coventry at 281 and Solihull with 115. The lowest number – at just 6 families – was Dudley. Locally, in total, this snapshot captured 14,008 people living in TA, including 8,240 children, averaging 2.3 children per family.

When looking in more detail at the data from the local snapshot, over two-thirds (68%) of lead applicants were women, with single mothers making the majority (58%) of households in all seven constituent local authorities, up to 82% of families in Coventry. This is also backed up by existing research, showing lone mothers and women affected by domestic abuse as the most prevalent groups in TA.

The ethnicity of lead applicants in this local snapshot reveals another distinct group of families living in TA. The proportions of lead applicants with a Black/Black British African ethnicity in Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Coventry were higher than their representation in the wider local populations. Asylum seekers, refugees and those given leave to remain in the UK also appear in statistics and during interviews. Some spoke about the constituent local authorities that are working as dispersal areas, including Birmingham, Coventry, Sandwell and Wolverhampton. This is therefore one distinct group of families living in TA.

A third distinct group of families living in TA, with their own particular challenges, are those with a disabled family member. Again, this also came out in the literature, highlighting both physical disabilities and mental health problems. Several families we spoke to as part of this research

mentioned the disability of a parent or child. This includes several children with autism or other special educational needs.

Typical journeys into TA

Some of the characteristics above already suggest some of the routes into TA, including fleeing domestic abuse or being granted leave to remain in the UK for asylum seekers. For example, Peter and Faye (all names of family members have been changed to protect anonymity) were given leave to remain by the Home Office in January 2021. After four years in Home Office accommodation they were given 28 days to leave their accommodation, leading to their homelessness application and current TA placement.

Some of the evidence about domestic abuse is picked up in the local snapshot data. However, this may disguise a longer journey into TA. For example, women (and children) affected by domestic abuse may move in with relatives first and later be asked to leave, a point highlighted in stakeholder interviews. One stakeholder went further, believing that when you dig deeper into the stories of women with children in TA you will find a history of domestic abuse that is not always apparent when they first approach for help.

Domestic abuse was one of the top three reasons for homelessness in the local snapshot, followed by an end of an assured shorthold tenancy (even during the Covid pandemic and ban on evictions) and being asked to leave by family or friends. Together, these three reasons accounted for 62% of all families across the seven constituent local authorities where the reason for presenting as homeless was known.

The private rented sector (PRS) came up several times when speaking directly to families. This included comments about poor quality housing, sometimes with evictions soon after reporting problems to landlords. Louise said she had had three private sector tenancies that have been problematic due to the poor condition of the property and the failure of landlords to carry out repairs. Other families described affordability issues with private renting, sometimes leading to rent arrears building up. A few families had fallen into arrears after their employment had been affected by Covid. Rather than fall behind with rent, Gemma moved in with her mum when her private sector landlord increased the rent from £625 to £750 a month. The existing national and regional literature points to the lack of affordable housing as one of the structural causes of homelessness among families, coupled with poverty.

“I need to pay [private] rent from Universal Credit and its unaffordable.” Adana

Stakeholders agreed that debt was a key driver for families ending up in TA. There was reference by some to anti-social behaviour (ASB) as a cause of homelessness. This included some families who have been evicted from social housing and ended up in the private rented sector until being evicted by the private landlord. It is worth noting that it can be hard to find social housing with a history of ASB, something housing associations told us themselves.

Time in TA

The snapshot also included data on the total time families were in the current TA placement. This shows some variation across the authorities, least in Sandwell (36-42 days or 5–6 weeks) and highest in Birmingham (498–504 days or 1.4 years).

Total time in current placement

Local authority	Median days
Birmingham	498-504
Coventry*	106-112
Solihull	127-133
Wolverhampton	78-84
Walsall	71-77
Sandwell	36-42
Dudley	Unknown
Total	414-420

* Coventry included 6 households that were about to enter TA that week.

The experience of the families we spoke to also mirrored this. Some had very short placements, for which they were grateful. In contrast, others had lived in TA for some time, often in several placements. Fleur, for example, spent six months in one placement, another six months a one-bedroom property and was about to move again to another TA placement while she looks for a private sector property.

“I want to be settled so I do not have to move again.” Kim

Stakeholders told us that larger families and those with a disabled household member tended to remain in TA for longest. We heard of the 100-plus families in TA in Birmingham who need a 5+ bedroom property and these properties being “few and far between”. Although there were not so many families with disabilities, they do also stay in TA for longer than others. Often waiting considerable periods of time for suitable properties, such as for wheelchair users or close enough to special schools. Stakeholders told us that adaptations are only possible in permanent, not temporary housing, and more likely in social housing than in the private sector which limits the choice of move on accommodation for these households.

Different types of TA

Looking at the type of accommodation provided, local authority stock accounts for the largest share (including managed by ALMOs), almost half across all seven constituent authorities. Only Coventry, which transferred its housing stock several years ago, has a different most common type of TA: PRS leased accounting for 47%. It is worth noting that just 13% of families in this snapshot were living in B&B accommodation at the time of the snapshot.

Type of TA

	Total
Local authority	49%
PRS leased	29%
B&B	13%
Hostel	5%
Nightly rate self-contained	3%
Housing association	2%

From stakeholders and families themselves, we heard positive and negative elements about every type of TA, summarised below.

Comparison of family, stakeholder and existing literature views on different type of TA

Type	Positive	Negative
B&B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited use for families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not self-contained Small, usually just a room or two, so overcrowded Wide mix of people, so potential safeguarding concern
Hostel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Security measures like CCTV and entry fobs Better safeguarding support Lack of isolation Can share food and costs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Negative connotations: scary, risky and unsafe Run-down blocks in areas with existing problems Can be small, so overcrowded
Refuge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Few rules, e.g. no curfew, no ban on alcohol 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited supply
Hotel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did not feature much in interviews Accessibility for disabled family members can be better 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cramped conditions No cooking facilities No visitors allowed Sometimes no staff onboard, so not secure Can be costly
Family units	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 24/7 security in some Support workers coming in with space for sessions Space for children to do homework Can cook there 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Concentration of problems Restrictive house rules, e.g. no visitors In some, gardens only open when staff present Restrictions with communal laundry, especially during pandemic Smaller units can lack privacy Some lack wifi, so harder for children to do homework
Dispersed TA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preferred option for stakeholders Blend into local neighbourhoods, thus eliminating stigma Better property conditions Often more appropriate locations Potential to flip into longer-term secure tenancies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (None mentioned)

Impact of living in TA

“It is pretty scary when you have children to be homeless.” Sonia

A large part of this research has been to record the impact of living in TA for families with children. The existing literature notes the potential toll on the mental health of family members of living in

temporary accommodation and this was echoed by many of the families we spoke to. Several families spoke about pre-existing conditions such as anxiety and depression and how these were exacerbated by their time in TA. For example, restrictions on the use of gardens in family units and no privacy for parents or children affected the mental wellbeing of the whole family. For Emily, her depression and anxiety have “rocketed” while living in TA. Families affected by domestic abuse, and in some cases refugees, often have a legacy of trauma which can be triggered or made worse by poor and unsettled living conditions.

“Stuck in a place where we do not know anyone...I’m of Caribbean heritage and I just can’t get the foods I usually eat and hair products here.” Bella

A sense of “living in limbo”, as one lead for TA told us, caused unease for families. Families can be living in unsettled housing, not able to put down roots, with no permanent address. Existing literature also raised the challenge of the length of stay in TA and the uncertainty of it. Some families we spoke to felt considerably worse by moving quickly at the beginning, “shifting around the [TA] system”. It was a tough time for some, including if they had belongings in storage but could not access them.

Matters were worse for many families during Covid restrictions. Some of these relate to limits on use of facilities or having visitors. Wider research found there can be a lack of space and internet access affecting schoolwork for children while being home schooled. For the families we spoke to, being cooped up in overcrowded living conditions also had an impact on family wellbeing. Also, there is a lack of dignity for parents sharing a room with their children, seen in the literature and through conversations with families themselves.

“Where I used to live had a few friends that I rely on, but they do not drive. They used to just pop round”. Emily

Often families have had to move out of their local area to access TA which can take them away from friends and support networks, for both parents and children. As a result of Covid-19, not seeing family and friends and therefore feeling isolated has impacted the public at large but these feelings may be even starker for those in cramped TA conditions. If people were seen visiting, this could lead to threats of losing the TA by breaking the rules, some families told us.

There were other impacts on children, including around schooling. We heard examples from families and stakeholders of families being moved to TA far away from their children’s schools. In an extreme example, one parent spent six hours a day travelling to school and back, in other examples families had to wake up at four or five in the morning to get ready for school. The impact on attendance and performance at school was also raised by the literature on families living in TA. On a positive side, we

did hear of some children who did do well at school, despite living in TA, sometimes a pleasant distraction from life in temporary housing.

There were said to be particular challenges for families with a disabled household member. These included some difficulties in the accommodation itself, especially if the initial placement was not fully accessible. Some children with disabilities attend special schools which can be far away from the TA and potentially even harder to get to for these children. Disability also makes it harder to find suitable longer-term housing, therefore consigning families to live in TA for longer. These challenges can make mental health problems worse, as they did for Emily, who is disabled and is living with her two children in a two-bedroom ground floor, tower block TA flat. The situation was affecting her pre-existing depression and anxiety. The need for an occupational therapy assessment has also been holding up her move to more permanent housing. While existing research suggested health deteriorates while living in TA, we heard of this for mental health more than physical health from the families we spoke to.

The evidence suggests that poverty is a significant issue for families living in TA, often being a big part of the reason for being homeless in the first place; unsurprisingly this continued to impact families whilst they were in TA. Variously this meant having to address debt and previous arrears, missing out on food and essentials and lacking furniture to move out of TA, therefore delaying move-on. There was support provided for some of this, however, from both local authorities and support agencies. This included help with money management or support around finances, in particular to help families to sustain tenancies when moving onto longer-term housing. For some, this is about “income maximisation”, ensuring families are claiming all the welfare benefits they are entitled to. Some of this stretched to securing discretionary housing payments (DHPs) or a prevention loan to pay off arrears, as well as payment plans to pay off debt.

“The temporary accommodation has allowed me to continue at university, submit assignments and pass which I could not do in the other property.” Moya

Although much of the experience of living in TA has been described negatively, we also heard positive things about TA. Alex said he has no complaints about his TA, for example. “The flat is quite bright ... It is a nice house. The furniture is not at its best, but I have no complaints. The area is wonderful. It has green spaces and a park which is great for the kids. School is five minutes’ walk. We are hoping to not have to change schools”. A few families praised how quickly either TA or permanent housing was found for them. For Moya, the TA location was fine and near to school. “We do not have a garden, but the area is green and a bit better.” Gemma found the condition of her TA in a good standard, better than she had feared. Likewise, Kim was very happy with the support and liked the TA. “I feel very safe.

It is close to the shops and chemist and there is buzzer system to get in the building so anybody can't just walk in the block".

Families' longer-term housing needs

"I just want that stability for my children – where they belong, where their safe place is. It is gone on so long and I'm just a bit worn out with it all now." Gemma

Families told us about their longer-term plans for housing, some quite hopefully. Like many stakeholders said, there was a lot of aspiration among families of getting a three-bedroom social rented house with a garden and close to school. For some of the families we spoke to, this was happening. Not all families, however, were happy with the limited housing options available to them, sometimes with choices being made on their behalf, especially if they lacked online access to bid for themselves. Other families thought the options were inappropriate. For example, Fleur felt she had reasonable grounds for not accepting the properties offered as she did not feel safe in one location because it was a known area that her violent ex-partner frequented. The lack of affordable housing was hampering this, many stakeholders said. The lack of social housing stock came up repeatedly in interviews.

Several families were considering the private rented sector, including some who had lived in such housing before. A concern for these, though, was its affordability. Several local authorities were offering support with private renting, for example support and advice to access a deposit and rent in advance.

Good practice

We collected a range of good practice examples across this research which we note in greater detail in the main report.

Support was being provided to families in TA, sometimes before reaching TA, during and sometimes after moving on. Some of this was being done by in-house teams at local authorities, other times by generic or specialist agencies. Stakeholders felt that good case management of families helped to keep individual families in mind and therefore minimise their time in TA. One homelessness lead spoke about having an exit plan right from the beginning of TA. Families themselves were grateful for help and praised the support received. This included from housing officers, support workers, social workers and a social prescriber from a GP.

For families in TA that was social housing, we heard of a few examples of flipping dispersed TA property into secure tenancies, effectively leaving the family in situ but changing their security of tenure. Splitting larger families across two adjoining units is another option or bringing empty properties back into use can deliver extra units. Some stakeholders felt that local authority allocation policies needed to be changed. Examples include allowing people priority awards while they remained at home, as happened in Leeds, so putting out the message that there is no benefit to your banding of moving into TA, it is not a “stepping stone” to local authority housing.

We have already highlighted examples of authorities helping with the private rented sector, and this type of support is another example of good practice. As well as rent deposit schemes, some local authorities were finding private rented properties or contacting landlords on behalf of families.

Existing literature notes the importance of better ‘upstream’ work to prevent homelessness. This includes help with rapid rehousing, collaborating with other homeless services and creating support packages with mental health and drug and alcohol services. The key aim of the Homelessness Reduction Act is to ensure that homelessness can be prevented as much as possible through local authorities intervening as early as possible. However, our focus was mostly on families already living in TA, so we heard less about extensive preventative work. We did speak to two families who had been prevented from moving into TA. For Louise and Rob, the local authority successfully negotiated with the landlord to prevent eviction whilst they sought suitable permanent accommodation for the family to move into. For Lisa, the local authority paid off her rent arrears caused by delays in Universal Credit during the covid restrictions.

Recommendations

Some of the challenges noted in the report are structural and therefore require structural responses and some may be more amenable to changes in local practice. There is a role for the WMCA Homelessness Taskforce as a lobbying body seeking to influence investment and policy decisions nationally, regionally and locally.

At a structural level, building more affordable homes, including larger family houses, is going to be essential in helping many families to both avoid TA in the first place and if they have to use TA to move on quickly.

Some of the measures needed to address poverty are also structural, such as boosting education and employment chances, whereas supporting family members into employment or helping families to maximise their income and manage their limited money can be more regionally and locally focused.

More upstream prevention to avoid homelessness in the first place is challenging. Yet there are examples of this working including negotiating with private landlords, paying off rent arrears and engagement with wider services and agencies. Promoting and lobbying for effective upstream prevention, both universal and targeted is going to be critical in reducing the use of TA.

The condition of properties in TA and rules imposed can be improved, although families prefer and fair better in dispersed units. Investing in these will improve the lives of families who do end up in TA.

Promoting the best support possible for families in TA and working to move people on quickly will help to minimise the negative impacts of TA and may in fact mean that for some TA is a positive step in their journey.

