

Action Report  
June 2024

# our homes, our rights



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# INTRODUCTION

**Citizens UK** (CUK) is a national community organising group, who brings communities together to enact change. **UCL students** from the **Institute of Education** have been working in partnership with CUK in eight primary and secondary schools, and sixth form colleges across London, giving young people a space to voice their experiences of housing. In a series of workshops, UCL students have extended CUK's community organising agenda, to **listen, plan, and act** to create positive change.

This action report is the culmination of this collective effort and represents the voices and lived experiences of young people across London. It provides evidence for the devastating impacts of this widespread issue and the systemic failures to provide for these children, their families, and their communities.

Discussions with young people across London demonstrated the scale and prevalence of the housing crisis. Children reported anxieties about both the condition and stability of their home situation, with many living in temporary accommodations. Young people face daily exposure to mould, damp, vermin and bug infestations.

These health hazards have severe implications, manifesting as recurring illnesses and long-term health complications. Additionally, some students are faced with forced relocation away from their school and community, imposing long commutes and social isolation. Others described inadequate facilities, including a lack of space, severe overcrowding, and no internet access. These conditions are un conducive to young people's physical, social and educational development. This is shown as schools report frequent absences, with students being too tired or too ill to attend. Even when present, students are still not able to concentrate and engage in learning.

**Homes in disrepair.**

**Indefinite temporary housing.**

**No accountability from key stakeholders.**

**We are in the middle of a housing crisis.**

This report elucidates the destructive impacts of the housing crisis, and seeks to inform purposeful and meaningful policy changes. A large collection of testimonies, this provides evidence for the urgency of the housing crisis and serves as a powerful call to action to decision-makers.

## **WE CALL ON DECISION-MAKERS TO TAKE ACTION.**

### **OUR ASKS ARE:**

- 1** **Establish a statutory time limit for temporary accommodation**
- 2** **Increase access to affordable homes**
- 3** **Address urgent and immediate repairs**
- 4** **Increase regulation and accountability**

**Hear these voices.**

**Make change.**

*“The stress of dealing with the council affects the parents which affects their ability to be great parents... which affects the children’s mental wellbeing to be good at school.... a domino effect.... a cycle... a circle of breaking families.... it spreads....almost like a virus.... it starts with the parents it spreads to the children, spreads in our home and in our community”*

**A Parent Testimony from Surrey Square Primary School**



# EDMUND WALLER PRIMARY SCHOOL

Edmund Waller Primary School (EW) is a vibrant and nurturing school for children aged 3 to 11 located in Lewisham, a borough in southeast London with a culturally diverse population of over 300,000. EW serves as an intercultural community in Telegraph Hill, built on the keystone values of humanity, creativity and ambition, with a vision that children must have the best education to thrive.

Their curriculum has been carefully adapted in recent years to suit the ever-changing local needs, following three main drivers: London and beyond; social justice; and a sustainable future. An active participant in local community organising, EW is one of 11 Lewisham schools that signed an open letter to the new Mayor declaring a **borough-wide housing emergency** in February 2024. Several members of the School Council also marched to the Lewisham Council with other community members, demanding a change.

Our team of UCL undergraduate students worked with approximately 15 students on the EW School Council, ranging from Year 2 to Year 5.

We conducted a series of three workshops with a focus on introducing the concept of community organising, the mayoral election, and urgent housing issues in London.



Our findings reveal a compelling dynamic: despite being located in **Lewisham, a borough where 2000 homes do not meet the Decent Homes Standard**, the majority of EW's students come from wealthy backgrounds. According to their 2023 Equality Policy, Information, and Objectives report, only 11% of children receive Free School Meals compared

## Our Homes, Our Rights

to the national average of 24%, indicating that the school's population is generally wealthier than the national average for state-funded schools.

This highlights a significant issue: a prominent divide has been established between the wealthier majority of students and the poorer minority. By further exploring these challenges faced by this minority living in difficult housing conditions, this chapter of the report aims to draw attention to the urgent need to address and improve their circumstances.

## Needs vs. Wants



We first asked the children to draw their dream house. There were a variety of creative, dreamy drawings, including mansions with waterslides, vending machines, and music rooms. However, the stark truth is that **many people do not have access to the basic requirements for a quality home**, let alone live in these dream

houses. Discussing conditions such as **overcrowding and mould**, the children differentiated needs from wants.



Collaboratively, we created a mindmap, brainstorming what everyone needs in their home. Examples included; shelter, space, clean, and warmth. When cleanliness was brought up, Sarah\* quietly whispered, "The opposite of my home."

**“Clean, the opposite of my home”**

This quiet confession truly shines a light on the disparities within the EW and Lewisham community. It was an unexpected, poignant moment that made the issue deeply personal, emphasising the urgent need to

to address these basic living conditions for everyone.

Indeed, between April and December 2023, nearly half of all repairs in Lewisham were not completed on time. **Undoubtedly, this is a real, pressing problem, one that is happening right now.**

## Temporary Accommodation

While discussing temporary accommodation, Sarah immediately raised her hand and said:

“ **I know what temporary accommodation is because I live in temporary accommodation.**”

Sarah lives in very difficult conditions, inevitably impacting her **health, well-being,** and **education,** standing out amongst her more affluent classmates. She explained that she lives with five siblings in the same room. Despite being sick and vomiting the previous night, she had no personal space as her siblings had nowhere else in their home to go. Their home has mould on the ceiling and is infested with rats, but her mother doesn't have enough money to move them to a better place. They have been waiting for five years for a permanent home, but the council keeps giving homes to others.

**For a child to have such a strong understanding of the housing issues through lived experience is heartbreaking.**

The majority of children in England who are homeless and living in temporary accommodation are located in London. This is a serious and urgent housing crisis. **When will temporary accommodation be acknowledged as a temporary solution?**

**No child should be raised in temporary accommodation, let alone for 5 years.**

**No child should be sharing a cramped bedroom with their five siblings.**

**No child should live amongst rodent and mould infestation.**

Local authorities in London **must raise the standards of temporary accommodation** so no child is subjected to such poor conditions, ensuring that they are placed in temporary accommodation only for a specific and limited duration.

## Inequalities

Londoners' likelihood of living in a good quality home varies significantly based on their ethnicity, location, and economic background. The current state of the housing market has **created a clear divide in both access**

and **quality of housing across London**, a reality painfully reflected in the varied experiences of pupils.

After Sarah bravely shared her struggles with temporary accommodation, she was met with joking laughter from a classmate. She responded quickly with raw emotion:

“**This is not funny. I live in these housing conditions but YOU live in a house with a garden and a dog. Why are you laughing?**”

This incident precisely illustrates the urgent need for increased awareness and action on housing issues, especially among the middle- and upper- classes. **Ignorance is not an excuse**; everyone must educate themselves on the realities of the housing crisis and work together towards addressing these critical disparities.

### A Heart for Others

In a role-playing activity, students chose from five hypothetical housing scenarios, ranging from a mansion to temporary housing without WiFi, an unkempt home, and a home far from school, based on a random order. As expected, students assigned nicer

houses felt happy, while those in poorer conditions were disappointed. They discussed how their housing issues would impact their assigned characters, highlighting the multifaceted impact of housing inequalities on school life and emotional well-being, fostering empathy and understanding amongst the students.

This can be seen in the development of William\*. He played someone living in temporary accommodation. Upset by that, he sharply told his classmate, “In real life, my house is so much nicer than yours, it has three stories! Yours has only one.” However, after further discussion, he demonstrated more empathy towards his classmate and understanding of housing as a right, rather than a privilege, evident in his post-session reflection.

I feel really sad  
that PEOPLE don't  
have good housing  
and I think  
every one  
should have  
a reasonable  
house

Another child, Steven\*, expressed feeling powerless and saddened by the experience of 'living' in the poorest conditions. The children actively

a empathised with others facing different housing conditions, internalising that these **housing disparities are more than abstract concepts; they impact real lives.**

## What the Children have to Say

That everyone has a clean, spacious house and have warmth. I was happy because it was big and clean.



When discussing accountability, a key aspect of community organising, a child expressed concern about whether Sadiq Khan would fulfil his promises on housing, and subsequently voiced his **disappointment** upon learning that sometimes **promises are not kept.** **Young members of the community are paying attention.** They, like everyone else, have a right to expect **honesty** and **transparency** from their political leaders.

The children also had earnest and creative suggestions to improve everyone's housing conditions, proposing actions such as

London-wide marches to raise awareness and bake sales to raise funds. When we asked a pupil, Lucy\*, how she could help the child she portrayed in the role-playing activity who lived in temporary accommodation, Lucy excitedly said,

***"She can come live with me!"***

When we questioned her receptivity to letting a stranger live with her, Lucy responded effortlessly,

***"Then we can be friends!"***

**These children may be young, but are wise beyond their years.** Despite a majority of them coming from privileged backgrounds, they are still aware of housing issues that are pervasive within their community. Their limited ability to enact long-lasting, legislative change does not deter them from being willing to give up whatever they can to help.

**You, the decision-makers, have the capability of making immediate and powerful change.** If the children want to do anything in their power to help others in need, why can't you do the same?

**Now, it's your turn.**

No one should have to question the safety of their home.

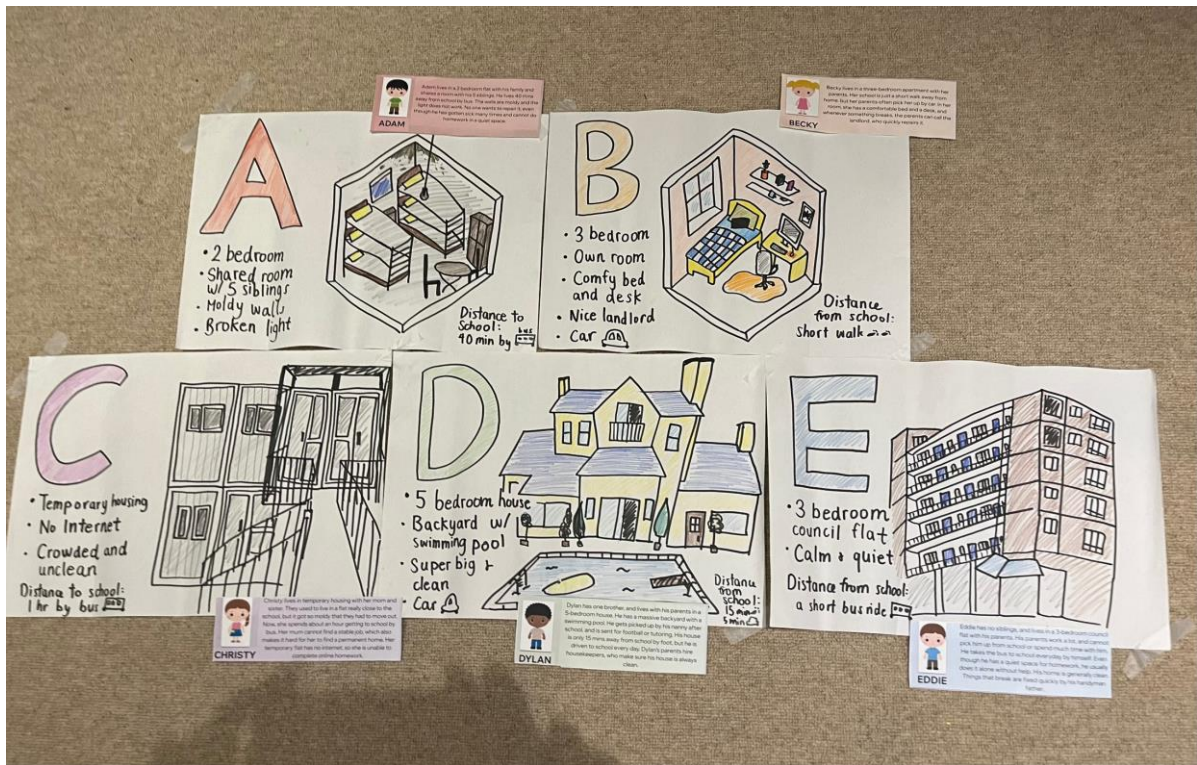
No one should be afraid of rat infestations or finding mould.

No one should endure housing conditions that profoundly impact their quality of life.

Above all, everyone deserves to live in a safe, clean and permanent home of their own.

Children are our future. The future they envision—a future of equality, support, and community—is one that we have the power to build. Why not start now?

\* All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the children.



*"The stress of dealing with the council affects the parents which affects their ability to be great parents... which affects the children's mental wellbeing to be good at school... a domino effect... a cycle... a circle of breaking families... it spreads... almost like a virus... it starts with the parents it spreads to the children, spreads in our home and in our community"*

Parent from Surrey Square Primary

*"Some students described having to live with relatives from their extended family instead of with their parents, contributing to fragmented family relationships. Children are having to choose between their parents and a safe home."*

Excerpt from St. Mary's Lewisham Primary School

*"One staff member recounted how a student was relocated by local authorities over an hour's commute from school. Unable to afford the travel expenses, he would not have been able to attend school without their financial assistance."*

Excerpt from St Gabriel's College

*"All my siblings and I live in a very small space and we all have to squeeze ourselves in"*

Student from St. John's Angell Town Primary School



*"We can't adjust to living like this, there are electricity and water problems, and there are rats"*

Student from Newman Catholic College

*'How come some people have huge houses with big chandeliers when others don't even have a home?'*

Student from Grinling Gibbons Primary School

*"However, the stark truth is that many people do not have access to the basic requirements for a quality home, let alone live in their dream houses."*

Excerpt from Edmund Waller Primary School

*"Let's not turn a blind eye,  
Let's not look away,  
For a house is more than walls and a roof,  
Its dignity, security, a foundation, a truth"*

An extract of a poem written by Trinity Lewisham Students



# ASKS

“This is the impact of your negligence.”

Parent from SSQ

## 1. Let Temporary Housing to be Temporary

*A statutory time limit on temporary accommodation*

The lack of a statutory time limit on temporary housing is framed by the government as a way of ensuring vulnerable groups, such as asylum seekers, have a safe place to live in while their case is addressed by the authorities. However, due to London’s shortage of rented homes and social housing, people can spend years in temporary accommodation. While these accommodations are intended to act as places of refuge, many fail to meet basic safety standards, with problems such as mould, overcrowding, and inadequate sanitary facilities. Living in these conditions for indefinite periods of time has a detrimental impact on the physical and mental health of residents, inducing feelings of insecurity, isolation, and loss of dignity. It also greatly disrupts the education of children, who are robbed of the ability to learn and develop in a healthy, safe environment.

### WE NEED YOU TO:

- **Make temporary housing a temporary solution:** Create a statutory time limit for temporary housing.
- **Provide more support:** Invest in affordable social housing so families can overcome housing instability. Those living in temporary accommodation must be able to find permanent places to call home.
- **Improve living conditions in temporary accommodation**

“

I know what temporary accommodation is because I live in temporary accommodation. We have been waiting years for our own home ”

Student testimony from Edmund Waller

## 2. Make More Affordable Homes

*A genuine target for building social housing and supporting civil society landowners to build community-led affordable homes*

*In 2023, London house prices were 11.95 times average earnings.<sup>3</sup> The gap between average earnings and house prices highlights how unaffordable London living has become. A lack of investment in affordable homes, compounded by skyrocketing property prices, indicates a systemic failure that has become central to the city's housing crisis. London's high rents have led to 49% of children in privately rented homes living in poverty<sup>4</sup>.*

**“ The rising cost of living in London has forced many of our families to move out of the city or into temporary accommodation.”**

Testimony from a teacher at St. John's Angell Town

### WE NEED YOU TO:

- **Increase Funding for Social Housing:** The London government needs to boost funding for social housing projects. This includes direct financial subsidies and low-interest loans to ensure the feasibility and sustainability of these projects.
- **Implement Rent Controls and Protections:** Introduce and strengthen rent control measures to ensure rent levels of newly built affordable housing are within the reach of low income families and not just for the wealthy. Establish long-term rent protection mechanisms to prevent rapid rent increases.

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3. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-03-25/london-homes-still-cost-12-times-earnings-despite-fall-in-prices?embedded-checkout=true>

4 . <https://www.london.gov.uk/mayors-longstanding-call-rent-controls-more-urgent-ever-private-rents-london-forecast-surpass-ps2700>

### 3. Immediate and Urgent Repairs

*Government to support and incentivise local authorities to complete immediate and urgent repairs to council homes causing poor health*

Housing conditions and the need for timely repairs severely impact many residents in London. Many families are forced to live in unsafe and unhealthy environments due to delayed or neglected repairs, particularly in low-income communities. The housing and repairs crisis in London has reached alarming levels. Issues such as damp, mould, structural damage, and inadequate heating are prevalent, affecting the health and well-being of individuals across London. The English Housing Survey 2021 found that 17% of homes in London suffer from damp problems. Structural issues pose additional safety risks, with many homes requiring urgent repairs to prevent accidents and ensure stability. Despite the urgency of these situations, 1 in 5 tenants in London have had to wait longer than a month for necessary repairs to be carried out, as found in a survey conducted by Citizens Advice.

#### WE NEED YOU TO:

- **Establish a Housing Repairs Fund:** Create a dedicated fund to support urgent and necessary housing repairs in low-income communities.
- **Implement Tenant Protection Laws:** Strengthen laws to ensure landlords fulfil their repair obligations promptly and adequately.
- **Promote Community-Led Projects:** Encourage and fund community-led housing improvement initiatives to address local needs effectively.

“One student described having black mould above his bed. He explained that this meant he was forced to share a bed with his mother, whilst they tried to find a solution, which took months to materialise.”

Excerpt from St. Mary's Lewisham Primary

“ The system is designed for you to give up and not pursue anything”

Parent testimony from Surrey Square School

## 4. Improve Regulation

*Higher standards and increased accountability including a complaints mechanism, for decent homes in the private rental sector*

The private rental sector is a crucial part of the housing market, accommodating a significant portion of the city's population. However, many tenants face inconsistent and poor living conditions due to a fragmented regulatory framework and landlords not being held accountable for the standard of their properties. These inconsistencies are further compounded by a complaint mechanism that varies across boroughs, making it hard for tenants to navigate and reach conducive solutions.

As a result, problems escalate to become severe health and safety risks. The rapid growth of London's population and increasing reliance on private landlords highlights the pressing need for improved regulations. The absence of a city-wide regulatory framework allows unscrupulous landlords to exploit tenants, often without consequences. When tenants report issues, they risk receiving an eviction notice from their landlord, putting them at an even greater disadvantage. This results in a dual market: one that is functional and fair, and another plagued by neglect and exploitation.

### WE NEED YOU TO:

- **Enforce Higher Standards:** Develop and enforce a unified standard for all rental properties in London which includes stringent health, safety, and maintenance requirements that landlords must meet.
- **Increase Accountability:** Establish a system where landlords are held accountable for non-compliance, with clear penalties and enforcement actions.
- **Establish a Centralised Complaints Mechanism:** Implement a comprehensive and accessible complaints system for tenants. This system should allow tenants to report issues directly, streamline the process of resolving disputes, and ensure that grievances are addressed promptly and effectively.



ACCOUNTABILITY

AFFORDABILITY

REGULATION

STABILITY

