

Supporting homeless families

As health visitors, we know how desperately unsuitable some accommodation can be for the health, wellbeing and development of babies and young children, says Crystal Oldman

For the last 17 years, the QNI has managed a network of practitioners whose work involves supporting people who are homeless or living in insecure housing. Many of these practitioners are health visitors who work to support families living in temporary accommodation.

As health visitors, we know how desperately unsuitable some accommodation can be for the health, wellbeing and development of babies and young children. Some accommodation is plainly very high risk and raises immediate red flags in relation to safeguarding.

There is also a higher risk of sudden and unexpected death of babies who



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live in temporary accommodation. And yet, homeless families continue to be placed in situations which generate these levels of risk.

The health visitors on the QNI Network last year contributed to the evidence presented to the All Party Parliamentary Group for Ending Homelessness (APPGEH) on the impact of families living in temporary accommodation. An impressive group of expert health visitors offered the research evidence and personal experiences of supporting families with babies and young children, and the impact that living conditions have on their health and development.

The outcome of the meeting with the APPGEH is that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC, 2024) has updated Chapter 17, sections 7.12 and 7.13, 'Cots in temporary accommodation' of the the *Homelessness Code of Guidance*, to make it clear that temporary accommodation should not be considered suitable for a family with children under 2 years of age, if there is not enough space for a cot. It also states that local authorities should help families to secure a cot where one is needed. The Lullaby Trust and Shared Health Foundation have

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guidance on safe sleeping for families with babies and young children in temporary accommodation, *Safer sleep advice for emergency situations* (Lullaby Trust and Shared Health Foundation, 2024).

The dangers of living in high-risk, temporary accommodation have also been highlighted to the public in a film produced by Amnesty International. It features the actress Olivia Colman and the trailer can be seen online here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bu-N8uv4jn8>. It is deeply distressing and features

a shocking death of a baby, showing the impact of the appalling state of some temporary accommodation on the health of our most vulnerable young citizens.

The film calls for an end to all unsuitable temporary accommodation and is a very powerful way of communicating these hidden issues to the general public.

As health visitors, we understand why families live in temporary accommodation. Fleeing family breakdown and domestic violence are common reasons, and mean that

the children may already have had suffered a level of trauma that has had an impact on their emotional, mental and physical development. Ensuring that they can be accommodated in a suitable, secure environment is the least we can do to support them as a civilised society.

Health visitors have a central role in supporting parents, babies and young children in these situations. There can be no greater illustration of the way in which the principles of health visiting are delivered, and the impact of their work measured. **JHV**

Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2024) Homelessness code of guidance for local authorities. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/homelessness-code-of-guidance-for-local-authorities/chapter-17-suitability-of-accommodation> (accessed 4 March 2024)

Lullaby Trust, Shared Health Foundation (2024) Safer sleep advice for emergency situations. <https://www.lullabytrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Safer-sleep-for-emergency-situations.pdf> (accessed 4 March 2024)

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