**Extreme poverty, housing insecurity and forced displacement**

Our submission addresses the ways in which austerity measures related to housing are being enacted by local government, considering the case study of Newham, East London. Please find an annexed report ‘Homelessness, Health and Housing’ which provides significantly more detail and evidence.

In summary, the findings reflect extreme poverty, deprivation and destitution amongst a relatively hidden population in London, many of whom are facing forcible removal from the city. Key findings include:

* The forced removal (or threat of forced removal) of individuals and families in extreme poverty from London to locations hundreds of miles away (known as ‘out-of-borough placements’)
* A seemingly systemic attempt to remove vulnerable people from the borough
* A disproportionate impact on disabled people and women with children
* Serious physical and mental health issues arising from, or being exacerbated as a result of, insecure housing and forced displacement
* An intensely destabilising effect on affect people’s mental health
* Extremely poor living conditions, with further negative impacts on the mental and physical health and well-being
* Access to both education and employment undermined through such housing conditions, insecurity and/or displacement

A combination of factors and measures have led to the current situation in which vulnerable populations in the capital not only face homelessness, but also forced removal from the city, with seriously deleterious impacts on their access to social and economic rights, as well as their health and well-being. These include extensive reductions in income support and particularly, housing support. This has included the ‘bedroom tax’ (spare room subsidy), a reduction in the amount of rent eligible for housing benefit, cuts to Local Housing Allowances, and an overall ‘benefit cap’, with age increasingly being used as a mode of rationing benefit support. This has been combined with stagnant wage levels, dramatic increases in both house prices and rent and the removal of social housing stock and a block on building new social housing. In 2011, the Localism Act freed councils from providing social housing, as they are now able to discharge their homelessness duty in the private rented sector through the offer of a private sector tenancy (usually with a 12 month lease). If refused by prospective tenants (for example, because the offer is poor quality or too far from employment, schooling or support networks), the homelessness duty is discharged as residents are then considered ‘intentionally homeless’.

Following the findings, we recommended:

* Ending the practice of out of borough placements in light of detrimental social, economic and health impacts on affected individuals
* An equalities impact assessment due to disproportionate effect on women
* Home seekers to be advised to bring advocates to housing meetings
* All meetings between council housing representatives and residents to be audio recorded
* Consider people facing eviction automatically as at higher risk of mental health problems, with attendant referrals for services
* Full and immediate counselling offered to those approaching the council for help with housing and homelessness

None of these recommendations have been taken up by Newham Council or other boroughs and housing insecurity and displacement continues apace.

We now outline the specific ways in which the findings in the annexed report address key questions posed by the Rapporteur.

**B. AUSTERITY**

**Have austerity measures implemented by the government taken adequate account of the impact on vulnerable groups and reflected efforts to minimize negative effects for those groups and individuals?**

No. On the contrary, our research demonstrates that vulnerable groups (disabled people, people with mental health needs, single mothers with children and children) have been disproportionately affect by the impact of austerity measures in the areas of housing and broader welfare entitlements.

**Have the human rights of individuals experiencing poverty been affected by austerity measures?**

Yes. Our research demonstrates that the following human rights have been negatively affected:

* ***The right to be free from discrimination***

The disproportionate impact outlined here clearly discriminates against women, carers and disabled people: primarily those not currently able to participate in the labour market.

* ***The right to social security and economic, social and cultural rights***

Respondents were clearly denied the right to social security in the form of appropriate housing, which had negative impacts on their economic rights (access to employment), as well as to social rights in the form of supportive networks. A majority of respondents (54.1%, n=26) had been offered, or told to look for, housing in other London boroughs and over a third (36.2%, n=17) told to look further afield, outside the city. Such insecurity created a manifold crisis for respondents (outlined in more detail below).

* ***The right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work***

Housing insecurity and displacement directly impacted on participants access to employment. For 1/3 of currently unemployed people, the loss - or threatened loss - of housing prompted unemployment. Eviction or threat of eviction was the most highly cited reason for ending employment. Stress over housing insecurity had resulted in withdrawal from the labour market in some cases. Some people were told to end their employment in order to be considered for housing, for others, relocation to new accommodation in places geographically distant from respondents’ existing places of employment. Some had explicitly been told by housing officers to give up their jobs in order to accept housing outside the city.

* ***The right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family. In particular, this right points towards the special care and assistance that should be provided to Mothers and children, who should enjoy the same social protection.***

The poor standard of living experienced by residents, as a result of the measures leading to housing insecurity, had a serious and dramatic impact on health and well-being. A significant proportion of respondents had a disability (22%) or health condition (48%) which affected their housing needs. Mental health problems constituted the most common issue amongst respondents. Insecurity, displacement and housing conditions had an extremely destablising effect on people’s mental health, as 89% mentioned worsening mental health as a result of their housing situation, including suicidal thoughts and self-harm.

Displacement also undermined access to services and primary care, including doctors and rehabilitation services (for example, drug counselling). Housing conditions further exacerbated physical health problems due to overcrowding, inappropriate and inaccessible accommodation, damp and dangerous conditions for children. This research demonstrates that statutory bodies, rather than responding in order to improve health through housing, are creating and exacerbating health problems through both insecure housing and also displacement within or from London. This lays the basis for health problems to worsen in the absence of appropriate care, creating more serious needs and vulnerabilities in the near and more distant future. Multiple respondents recounted that mental health issues were not taken into account and were largely dismissed by housing officers.

* ***The right to education.***

The placement of children in inappropriate and overcrowded housing undermined their ability to play and do homework. Most seriously, the displacement of children disrupted their access to their schooling, across age groups as they found it difficult and tiring to travel long distances to school or were forced to withdraw from existing educational institutions.

**(13) What alternatives to austerity might have been considered by governments in the last decade?  Could any such alternatives have had a more positive impact on poverty (and inequality) levels in the United Kingdom?**

The key alternative in the area of housing would be the building and provision of social housing. This would not only provide security for individuals in relation to accommodation, but also to basic human rights including access to employment, social networks and healthcare – which are disrupted through insecurity. The current situation of intense insecurity creates additional costs to social services and specifically for health provision and in some cases, the emergency services. Currently, housing benefit is paid from the state to private landlords, representing a direct transfer of revenue and funds away from the public purse into the private sector with the obvious impact of further decimating public finances.

In addition to avoiding additional costs, building social housing would lead to job creation and increase inputs into public finances, through rental payments and more disposable income circulating in the economy. Cost neutral alternatives also include: reforms to the private rented sector, including rent caps in high rent areas, minimal tenancies of 5+ years and enforcement of acceptable housing conditions; the creation of policies to support the establishment of cooperative housing and the use of public lands for community land trusts.

1. **GENERAL**

**(7) Which individuals and organizations should the Special Rapporteur meet with during his country visit to the United Kingdom?**

We would recommend visiting Focus E15. Contact: focuse15london@gmail.com

We can also put you in direct contact with them.

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We would welcome the inclusion of the report provided here and the annexed report, including the images, on the website of the Special Rapporteur.