

A Call to Action:
To safeguard homeless families during the Covid-19 pandemic
and in its aftermath

"Many children already do not reach development potential, or struggle to grow and develop because of multilevel barriers, including those resulting from poverty or homelessness. COVID-19 has added a whole new layer of risk." ¹

Recommendations made by Shared Health Foundation in our [2019 Gold Standard Proposal](#) remain relevant. However, the social and economic impacts of Covid-19 on homeless families have led to further, urgent recommendations. This short briefing acts as an addendum to our Gold Standard Proposal, outlining the most urgent calls and reasoning behind them.

There is an absence of discussion and detail on a national level about the impact of Covid-19 on families who are homeless. We are gravely concerned about this 'hidden homeless' population, for whom the pandemic has made invisible.

Observations:

- Children who were already barely visible to the state support system are no longer receiving visits from community services and are not in school to access early help support systems. Health Visitors have described finding it challenging to 'satisfactorily' check in on patients² with one team not providing face to face visits to their cohort for over two months.
- Parents who found it difficult to meet their family's nutrition needs before the pandemic, are now facing months with no access to food beyond humanitarian dry food packages, which have limited nutritional benefit. Local Authorities are themselves referring families to Greater Together Manchester's charitable food scheme.
- Staff within B&Bs already ill-equipped to deal with health and safety concerns are facing an increased demand on their pastoral support without the health, hygiene or safeguarding training to respond adequately. Zero B&Bs have access to safe communal spaces and staff questioned had no knowledge of how to make safeguarding referrals. There has been a dramatic fall (> 50% reduction) in the number of children's safeguarding referrals during the pandemic.³

We are concerned numerous homeless families across Greater Manchester are receiving no outside support to safeguard their health and welfare.

This is leading to a health and developmental crisis amongst Greater Manchester's homeless family population. Families who struggled to keep GP appointments prior to Covid-19 are now not even accessing the health system, leading to the exacerbation of existing conditions and new problems going unchecked.

Identified conditions vary from bedwetting and anxiety to poor dental care and limited medication access. In addition to health concerns, children visited have been spending their lockdown without structure, play items, stimulation, adequate indoor or outdoor space and no facilities to have hot food cooked.

Rather than simply highlight problems, we want to contribute to possible solutions to these issues.

Positively, during the Covid-19 pandemic there has been a considerable decrease in the number of families housed in emergency B&Bs. Councils have been able to move more families into dispersed accommodation, while referrals into the system have temporarily halted due to a moratorium on evictions. This respite is expected to be brief. Increases in evictions and thus homelessness will be compounded by the lasting impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Consequently, this call is being made now, while there is capacity in the system to make change.

Solution-Driven Recommendations:

Shared Health's four calls to action and offers of support to Local Authorities, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership are:

- 1. Children staying in B&Bs and hotels to be given the same health and education rights as children in corporate parenthood.**
 - Each child should have a lead worker assigned to them to ensure their rights and needs from are being met.
 - GM Local Authorities to officially inform parents and schools with children in temporary accommodation, no matter their age, of their right to attend school during the pandemic.
 - Schools must register homeless children arriving in new areas for a September start.
 - Every child currently in B&Bs and those new to the system to have an Initial Health Assessment by a paediatrician.
 - Shared Health's 'Focused Care' workers have the capacity to act as advocates, to register families with GPs and liaise with schools, ensuring children in temporary accommodation are not falling between gaps in services or policy.

- 2. Priority access to NHS services to be given to children staying in B&Bs and hotels when mental and physical health provisions resume.**
 - A Greater Manchester commitment for GP practices, mental health services, tertiary paediatric appointments and referrals to community paediatrics, dental practices and community midwifery services to give priority face-to-face access to children living in B&Bs and hotels.
 - Shared Health have a mental health 'roving' pilot which can be operational by the Autumn to aid capacity.

- 3. For the mixing of single people who are homeless and families in B&Bs and hotels to cease.**
 - There are significant safeguarding concerns being witnessed, including: grooming risk, sexual exploitation, physical and psychological abuse.
 - As numbers of families in emergency accommodation are at their lowest, now is the easiest time to implement this change, without delay.
 - Shared Health have done extensive research on B&Bs which currently meet our 'Gold Standards' and we believe are most 'family-ready'.

- 4. Increase safeguarding in place in B&Bs and hotels.**
 - Clear and obligatory safeguarding pathways for reporting to be established within Local Authorities and communicated to B&B hotel staff and residents.
 - Safeguarding and mental health training available for staff in B&Bs and hotels.
 - Shared Health is able to support the offer of the above training.

1. Rosenthal DM, Ucci M, Heys M, Hayward A, Lakhnpaul M. Impacts of COVID-19 on vulnerable children in temporary accommodation in the UK. *Lancet Public Health*. 2020;5(5):e241-e242. doi:10.1016/S2468-2667(20)30080-3
2. Dorney-Smith S, Williams J, Gladstone C. Health visiting with homeless families during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Journal of Health Visiting*. 2020; 8(5), 190-193. Doi:10.12968/johv.2020.8.5.190
3. Thomas R. Fears over vulnerable children after 50pc drop in referrals. *Health Service Journal*. 2020. <https://www.hsj.co.uk/coronavirus/fears-over-vulnerable-children-after-50pc-drop-in-referrals/7027490.article>.