



Empty Promises

Families' experiences of housing in Edinburgh



Shannon Thomson, Nicole Keatley and Sara Thomson
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Photos by Shannon Thomson

Signed, Sealed, Ignored

Brown letter slip through the door again
Stamped and sealed,
But hollow within promises
Filed in a cabinet sleep
While ceilings crack and still weep.

Appointments booked,
Then swept aside no call no knock
No reason why just silence humming down the line
Another day another lost out of time.

The boiler sighs its final breath
The mould creeps slow
A quiet theft
Of warmth,
Of health,
Of dignity all logged somewhere,
But not to see.

“Priority”, they claim
With charts and schemes,
But none of it matches lived-in dreams
Where leaking roofs and broken doors should matter
More than polished floors.

You wait to meet a faceless name
A housing officer meant to explain
Yet weeks turn to months,
And still no sign,
Just automated replies every time.

So here we stand in crumbling trust
In borrowed time,
In quiet disgust,
A system built to serve they say
But somehow always look away.

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About the Empty Promises project

Who we are

We are Nicole, Shannon and Sara, a group of young Mums with kids and problems of our own with housing in Edinburgh. This is one of the reasons we are dedicated to this research and to help people that cannot speak for themselves and their family.

Over the last 12 months, we have worked with the Poverty Alliance and Low Income Families Together (LIFT) on our Empty Promises Research Project – a peer-led research project on families' experiences of housing and impacts on health in North West Edinburgh. The research project was conducted with the Scottish Health Equity Research Unit (SHERU) at the University of Strathclyde, which is an independent research unit funded by the Health Foundation to provide insight, analysis, and scrutiny on the socio-economic factors driving health inequalities in Scotland.

We have named our research group The Empty Promises Project because it explores the gap between what is promised and what is actually delivered.

We have spoken to local people going through similar experiences, and we all have one thing in common and that is that social housing and temporary accommodation in Edinburgh is not meeting families' needs and families have been neglected. We are happy to answer anything we can to improve these problems and answer any questions to the best of our knowledge from the research and experiences of our own.

We would like to thank the research participants for taking part in the research, members of the LIFT team for their help with the research including Darcy and Dionne, Fiona McHardy from SHERU for her support and guidance, and Julia Newton from Shelter Scotland for meeting with us at the beginning of the project, providing feedback on the report and input on the research recommendations.

Why this research is needed

As a group of young mums, we feel obligated to take part in this research. We feel it is important to share our opinions and views and also to learn from other families about their difficult experiences of temporary and unsuitable accommodation and homelessness including their experiences of reporting and receiving housing repairs.

We are just a few, out of thousands of Edinburgh's social housing and Private Sector Leasing tenants, who feel like we are not getting listened to or given empty promises. While temporary and Private Sector Leasing accommodation (where the Council rents properties from private landlords and sublets them) provides an important form of housing for people who otherwise have nowhere to live, the condition of the accommodation and the speed and effectiveness of repairs can have a significant impact on tenants' health, wellbeing, safety and overall quality of life.

Research into families' experiences of housing can help identify common problems, barriers to accessing repairs and areas where housing services can be improved.

What we did

We conducted research with families with young children about their experiences of housing in North West Edinburgh. The project timeline below shows what we've achieved in the last 12 months. The research questions we set out to explore at the beginning of the project were:

- What does bad housing look like for families in Edinburgh?
- What changes can be made to improve housing?

Here is a summary of what we did:

- We made leaflets to explain who we are and what we are doing.
- We conducted two in-person workshops with 12 participants in total to explore their experiences of housing, the impacts on their family's health and what needs to change.
- We analysed data, and researched the transcripts of the workshops, highlighted key themes, repeated issues, and worries.
- We identified four key research findings.

Who took part in the research

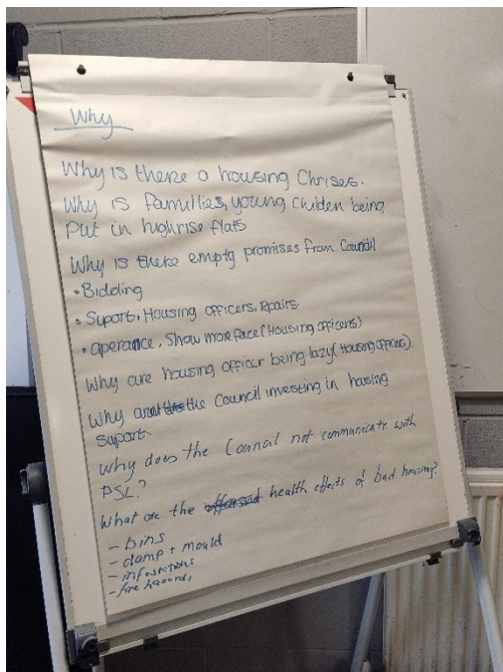
We wanted to speak to parents with young children living in social housing (council or housing association housing), temporary accommodation and Private Sector Leasing housing in Edinburgh. We shared a recruitment leaflet to recruit participants who had experienced housing issues (e.g. damp and mould, bad health due to housing and repairs issues).

Whilst most of the participants fitted these criteria, there were three participants who attended the workshops who had other experiences of housing including mid-market rent, private rent or owning their own home.

The participant living in private rented accommodation lived in a block of flats owned and managed by Edinburgh City Council and their experiences of the management of the block of houses and communal spaces are included in this report. The family living in a mid-market rent property had been on the waiting list for housing and took a mid-market rent property because there was no social housing available.

Nine participants were living in council or housing association housing. Several participants also had previous experience of temporary housing and private sector leasing (PSL) housing. Participants also shared housing experiences of their friends, family and neighbours in the discussions .

*Images 1 and 2: Research aims brainstorming activity;
participant recruitment leaflet*



Nine of the 12 research participants filled out a questionnaire which asked them about social and demographic characteristics.

- Gender: 9 (female)
- Age: (18-24 (1), 25-34 (2), 35-44 (3), 45-54 (3))
- Household: Seven participants had children under the age of 16 living with them and one participant provided care for their grandchildren sometimes. One participant did not have children and lived with their parent and younger siblings (aged under 12). All seven parents had younger children under the age of five, and a couple of parents had older children too.
- Ethnicity: Eight participants were white and one participant recorded their

ethnicity as 'other ethnic group'.

- Scottish Government Priority Family Groups (groups at greater risk of poverty): lone parent family (3), minority ethnic family (1), larger family (3), family with a disabled adult or child (3).

In this report, we use participants' real words, but we have changed all participant names and some participant details to protect their identities

Research method

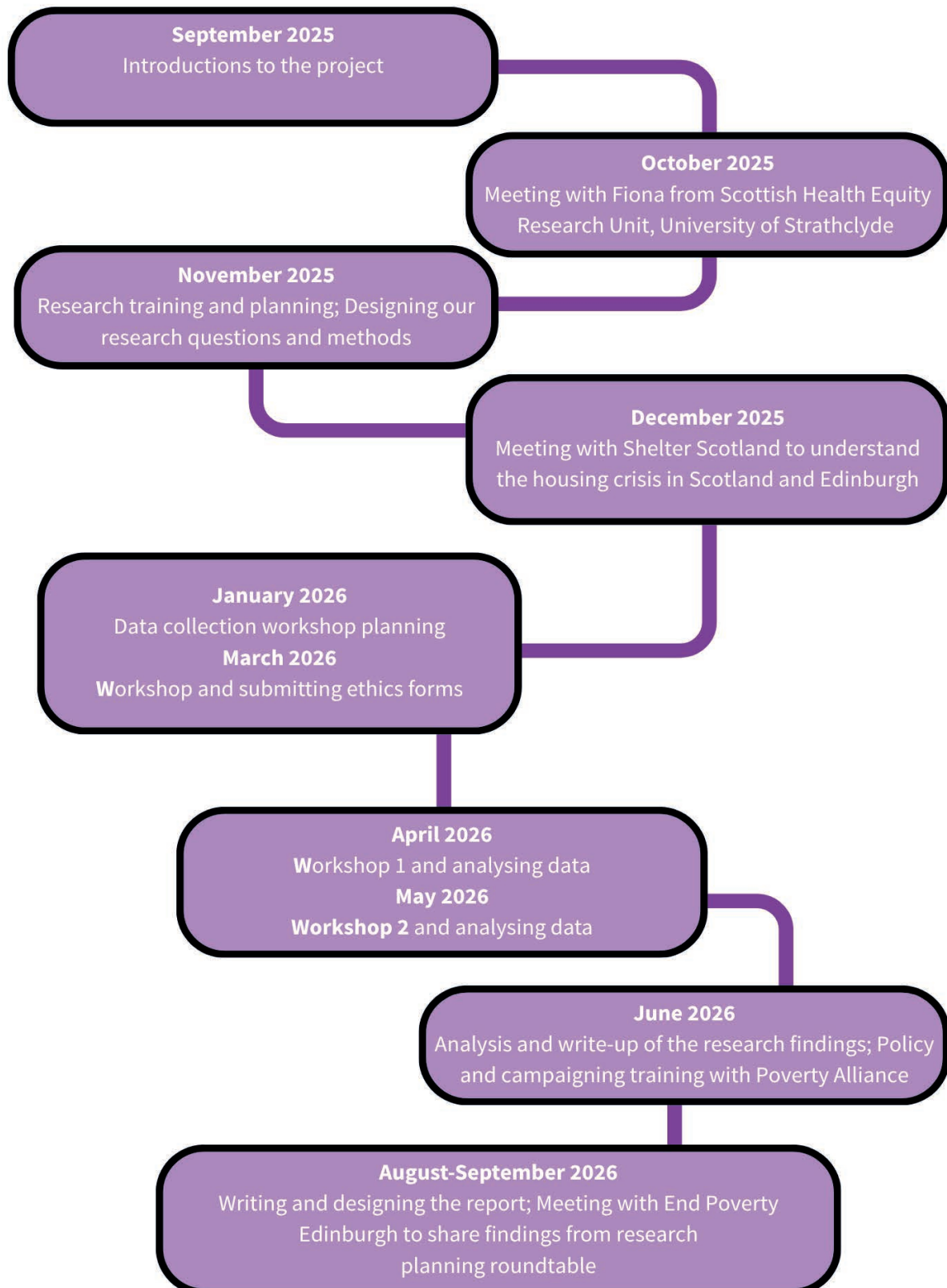
The workshops were both conducted in person at the LIFT Millenium Muirhouse Community Centre. Both workshops lasted 1.5 hours and were recorded. We chose to do workshops so that we could include space for discussion and for activities that would ensure that everyone had the chance to share their views.

After introductions and sharing a research information sheet and consent form, we began by using templates of housing layout so that participants could record their experiences of housing issues in their homes. We shared a print-out of a template we had filled in earlier to give participants an idea of things they could include.

We also did an activity using traffic lights to find out what participants were most happy with and least happy with on five topics: Housing officers, Temporary Accommodation, Private Sector Leasing, Repairs, Council Housing. We split the participants into two smaller groups and gave them laminated cards to put up on flipcharts under the traffic light colours. We also let participants know that they didn't need to put a card up on the flipchart if they didn't have experience of any of the issues.

We also facilitated discussions and asked a range of questions to explore people's experiences. Some examples of questions were: What are the challenges faced by families? What is the impact of bad housing on family's health? What changes could the council make to improve things for families?

Timeline of the research project



Key findings

We identified four findings from our Empty Promises research project on families' experiences of social and temporary housing in Northwest Edinburgh. These include:

- There is a lack of suitable housing for families;
- Families shared experiences of poor support from social housing providers;
- The current repairs system is leading to temporary fixes rather than permanent solutions; and
- Families' housing situations are negatively impacting parents' and children's mental and physical health.

Lack of suitable housing for families

In Edinburgh, there were 31,694 applicants on Edinburgh Council's housing waiting list and 6,198 households living in temporary accommodation in June 2026.¹ The number of children in temporary accommodation is higher in Edinburgh than any other local authority in Scotland: in March 2026, 3,820 children were living in temporary accommodation.²

The lack of suitable social housing for families in Edinburgh means that many families often end up in unsuitable housing and in temporary accommodation including PSL for long periods of time. We heard from a participant who had moved into a mid-market rental property as there was no social housing available in the area. We also heard that there is not enough accommodation for families who have experienced domestic abuse in Edinburgh. Participants were also frustrated with the suspension of the housing allocations process in Edinburgh.

"There was none [no social housing] in this area at all, and they were all miles away, and they just weren't any good to us at all... We couldn't get anywhere else, so that's why we have mid-market."

"So, in general, there's not enough council houses in general. Have closed the EdIndex. It's just a joke..."

¹ Edinburgh City Council (2026) Integrated Impact Assessment – Summary Report (online). Available at: [housing-emergency-action-plan-biannual-update-august-2026](#)

² Scottish Government (2026) Homelessness in Scotland Data Tables 2025/26 (online). Available at: [Supporting documents - Homelessness in Scotland: 2025-26 - gov.scot](#)

Poor support from social housing and private sector leasing

Evidence from our research shows that tenants in and around Edinburgh feel like they have been neglected and have little to no support from social housing providers. In regard to their personal experiences, it has come up multiple times that these tenants feel the lack of trust and lack of empathy and are not necessarily happy with delayed/unhelpful responses. In some situations, families are being left in unsafe and uninhabitable living conditions from damaged properties, failed repairs, mould and damp and overcrowding.

"So then when he went to the council, they were saying there's nothing. And then two days later, his pal, so his pal went the day before and his pals just been offered a flat and he's like I'm still sitting here. But they genuinely went one day after each other. It's if your face fits. Honestly."

In our research we conducted two workshops which helped us understand the severity of the issues across social housing, temporary accommodation and PSL in and around Edinburgh. Quotes such as "if your face fits" and "it's not what you know but who you know" have come up quite a lot. These tenants range from young to middle aged parents that have young dependents in their care, and this is how they feel when they need to approach the social housing teams with the issues regarding their council property.

Participants described feeling left in the dark when it comes to making their housing provider aware of issues. Based on the research findings and our own experiences, tenants are starting to feel like they are getting neglected as they do not feel like they are getting listened to or are given what they feel like 'empty promises'.

"They don't ever tell you when your housing officer is going to change as well, like I've been left in the loop so many times and I went in last week and a guy looked at me in the face and said would never believe that I'm your housing officer."

"He [housing officer] says he's going to do a regular stair inspection. What does that mean? There's no such thing. Takes weeks and weeks and weeks."

We have been told by a number of participants that some of them don't even know who their housing officer is. In some situations when a tenant phones to speak to a housing officer their advice is different to what they have been told by a previous housing officer so they do not know what advice to follow.

We heard from council housing tenants, that they are frustrated as they do not know who to go to in regard to any issues with their council housing.

Another issue discussed in one workshop was a lack of support for parents with experiences of domestic violence. Participants said that families had been told that the nearest housing for families was in the Borders and that if families fleeing domestic violence were staying with friends and family, they would not be considered homeless and be “sent away”.

“So, I was told that I would have to go homeless before they would be able to help. Then I would be sent to like a temporary accommodation, but it would not be in Edinburgh because there’s none.”

Experiences of private sector leasing housing

A couple of participants had negative experiences of PSL in Edinburgh, where the Council rents properties from private landlords and sublets them. Being in PSL housing means that families can’t decorate and participants also shared examples of poor communication from PSL including spot visits. The high cost of rent for PSL properties was also criticised. Here we shared an anonymised case study of the experience of a PSL tenant.

Case study of a tenant’s experiences of Private Sector Leasing

The lack of trust and communication was at a zero! Always doing tenancy inspections, making demands and repairs but never actually repairing anything. PSL is a homeless scheme, but what they fail to tell you is the council will get your tenancy, sign your lease for the tenancy but refuse to help with repairs etc., so when it comes to keeping to expectations and demands to keep up with your tenancy agreement, your either left to pay and fix the repair yourself, which they then proceed to disagree with, or to face long waits and incomplete jobs, to then face an invoice for repairs when your tenancy does eventually end! PSL charges a £260 management fee to fix any repairs that are needed within the tenancy as a PSL tenant but yet fail to do so.

Lack of communication starts with how many times the housing officers change, you don’t know who to ask for or who’s going to turn up for these tenancy inspections. Again the council also failed to mention that your homeless officer within the council is not able to help you with anything to do with your PSL tenancy, leaving you in a position to “hope for the best!”

One of our participants expressed how the damp and black mould situations left them with pneumonia, and fungal mushrooms growing in the house caused bacterial infections leading to the family falling ill and with one member of the family having to go to hospital. They did fight to be moved into temporary accommodation operated by the Council which after a few weeks they did get a move however in this time the participant said they had to close down the kitchen and stop any use of it to prevent further illness and infections. Inspectors and Officers from PSL then refused to check the issues properly and then made further reports to other health teams, without checking the problem first.

Since then, the comparison between the relationship between tenant and PSL and tenant and council temporary accommodation is a massive jump. The Council have fixed any issues that have risen with the temporary accommodation, and they've stuck to some sort of communication.

A repairs system that leads to temporary fixes

In our research we have heard a lot of complaints about the repairs and mould and damp issues in social housing, temporary accommodation and in PSL. Participants shared that they are getting frustrated with the lack of effort that comes when they report these issues. They feel that they are not getting listened to and having to deal with repairs themselves that the social housing should be doing as it is their duty of care.

Edinburgh City Council policy for an urgent repair is that they aim to be out within a day. For non-urgent repairs, the Council states that vulnerable tenants or tenants with young kids should have an appointment within two weeks, but that tenants could be waiting longer due to the "high demand".³ Some of our participants had said that when a repair has been reported it was as an emergency or urgent repair but have found themselves back reporting the same issue days later because no one had turned up.

"But I think it's just the fact of trying to get a repair. Sometimes it could be, you know, recently I've had a problem with the toilet. When you flush your toilet, it just comes back up. No matter how many times the plumbers have been out...still can't get to the bottom of it."

"You wait ages to get anything done, that's if they even come out at all. They ask if you've got anybody vulnerable that lives in the house or blah blah blah. You tell them aye, right, we'll be out in four hours. Two days later, you're still waiting. That's some four hours!"

³ Council house repairs – The City of Edinburgh Council

"So, it's dampness issues. Most rooms...The (window) doesn't latch so obviously the heating escapes. The seal doesn't fit so she loses heat through that...And two windows don't unlock. Open your window for dampness, but we can't even actually physically open their windows... There's damp treatment they can get every six months, but they're still in the same situation."

If the social housing teams were to listen to the majority of their tenants when they come forward with the repair issues and get them done and completed properly with care and dedication, they would not be in the position they are in today. Our participants have come forward to tell us that they are constantly getting unwell/stressed due to the lack of support they receive when it comes to speaking up about these issues.

In some cases, tenants are frightened in case someone gets into their homes with their windows being broken/boarded up, stair/close door locks getting broken easily and not getting repaired, always worried in case hot water/heating boiler breaks down and left with no heat or hot water for days or even weeks sometimes. Especially in the winter with young kids and elderly people living in these council properties, we should not have to buy storage/fan heaters that could run up the electricity bill and which in a cost-of-living crisis isn't ideal. If the council cannot do these repairs quickly, they should not give us empty promises of providing these storage/fan heaters and covering costs to run them.

Impacts on physical and mental health

A key finding from the research is that the tenants being left in their situations (for example damp and mould, feeling unsafe, and a lack of support) are experiencing massive impacts on physical health and also mental health.

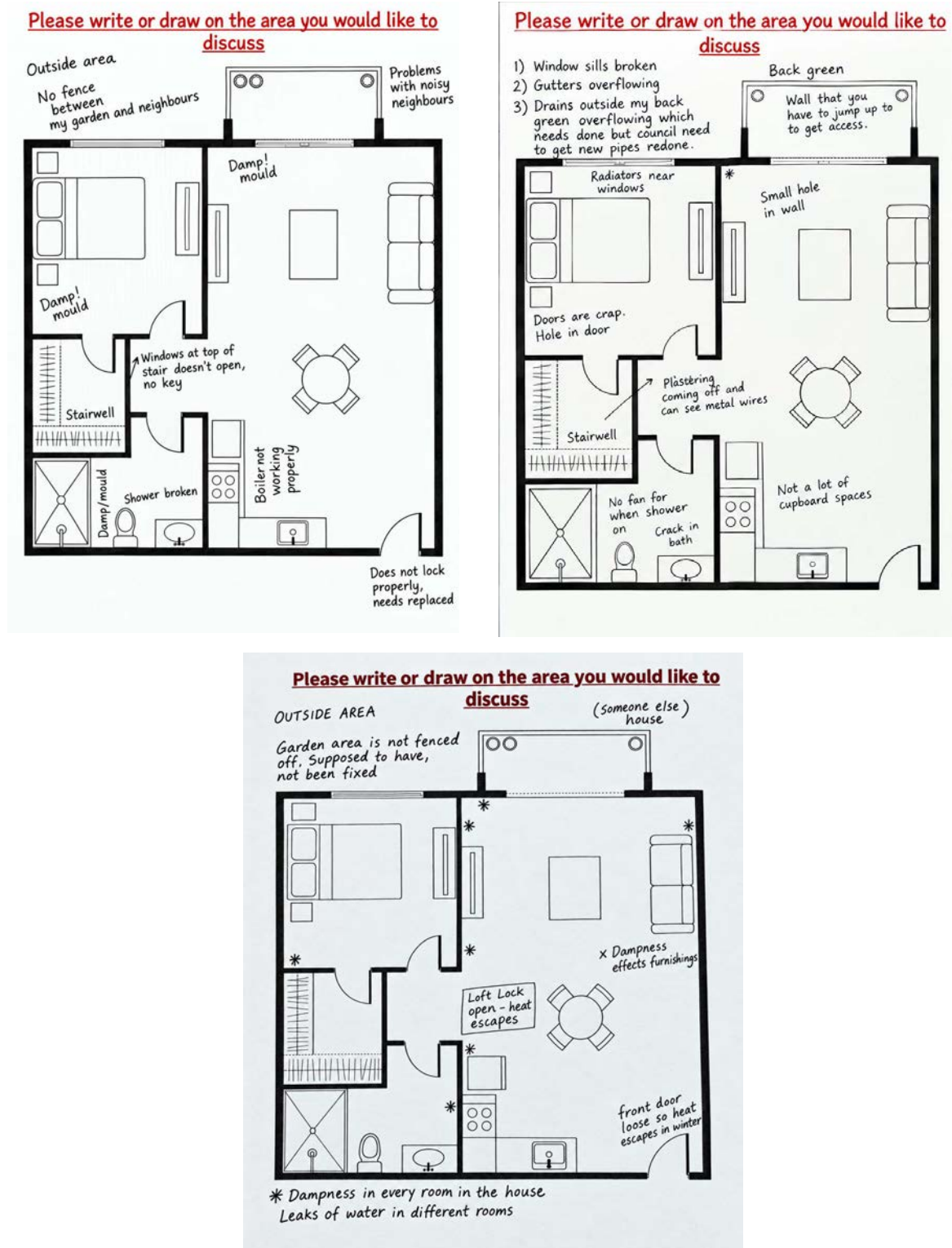
Impacts on the health and safety of children were also shared in this research. In one workshop, a parent living in a private rented flat in a council owned and factored building, shared the frustration and stress she had experienced as a consequence of rubbish being dumped and left in the garden and issues with the plumbing of the council flat above leading to sewage coming into her flat.

"That's the worst experience for me, the council, the council. So they are, whenever they [her children] are in the toilet, they are vomiting. I didn't go to the toilet..."

In the workshop, participants were asked to annotate a housing blueprint of the inside and outside of a home thinking about what makes their home unsafe and not habitable for their family.

The images below show issues inside three homes including damp and mould and things inside the home not working properly and issues outside of their home including problems with noisy neighbours and overflowing drains.

Images 3-5: Participants' housing blueprints



Experiences of poverty and fear of running out of income resulted in participants' emotional energy being deflated. For families living together, fear of increasing isolation was common, as money for leisure was reduced or unavailable. For parents who provide care to dependants, they said they put supporting the emotional wellbeing of others first and reduced resources lead to difficult choices which further increased stress levels. They also feel that the lack of acknowledgement during their experiences of crisis has been increasing and parents are feeling like they have to provide for their own tenancies due to not receiving the help they are entitled to.

Lack of security in common stairwells has been a major issue for most of the participants, for example, stair doors that have security and buzzers but don't work and fear that anyone can come into the stair as well as anything can happen to their own home, being in the area that they live along with the anti-social behaviour.

The impact that most of the families we have spoken to that is most common is the lack of trust or empathy. The findings of our research show that families feel neglected as a tenant and as a citizen. We know that this can lead to panic and fear and not reaching out and families feeling like they have to fix or endure their problems in their homes themselves, to then sometimes receive bad feedback for not letting the council in to fix it. The unknown of the response they may receive from their council/housing or landlord means that many families will be unsure of what lays ahead for them. Participants reported that they suffered from insomnia, panic attacks, anti-social abuse, depression and even loss of their children and felt intimidated through the social work system.

Recommendations

In the workshops, participants shared a range of changes they wanted to see to make things better for families. Participants wanted to see more suitable housing for families and thought that there should be a way for families to be able to stay in a PSL property or temporary accommodation after a certain period.

"And then I feel like if you've been there (in a PSL property) for a certain amount of time, there should be a way where they can then just be a council property."

Participants also discussed priority lists for housing and wanted to see better support for people with mental health problems and families experiencing domestic violence.

"Taking people's certain situations into consideration, like mental health and

people that have been susceptible to like domestic violence or sexual crimes. Like they shouldn't have to, you know, be on the same sort of list..."

A participant also shared how she wanted families to be listened to and for housing professionals to be understanding and respond to tenants.

"I think the Council should be listening to us a bit more about like, repairs, and stuff like that. Be able to have somebody like, who you can, not even your housing officer, but somebody you could just like, somebody's whose understanding, somebody you could just pop in any kind of way..."

After the workshops, we identified recommendations for Edinburgh City Council and social housing providers, based on our own experiences and what we have heard. These include:

- Hiring enough staff so that every person in social housing, PSL and temporary accommodation can easily contact their housing officer. 
- Committing to informing tenants if their housing officer changes. 
- Ensuring tenants receive compassionate support from housing officers and inspectors. 
- Conducting a review of PSL properties involving tenants to determine if PSL is fulfilling Edinburgh Council's duties to provide safe temporary accommodation, and to create a plan to hold PSL accountable for their communication and the swift repair of properties. We also want to see the removal of charges for repairs of PSL properties. 
- Making improvements to communal housing spaces to ensure their safety for families e.g. regular cleaning of communal areas, regular maintenance of gardens, more bins and collections, locks on doors to gardens and pest control inspections for all housing tenants in social housing once a year. 
- Reviewing and implementing improved repairs processes to get to the root of problems and provide permanent solutions to repairs issues instead of temporary fixes. 
- Better support for families experiencing domestic abuse and mental health problems. 

Image 6: Challenge Poverty Week board at LIFT sharing the research





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