

# Child homelessness in England reaches a record high

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The National Housing Federation (NHF) has sent an open letter to Conservative Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, and leader of the Liberal Democrats Ed Davey, with proposals to end the crisis of homelessness in the UK.

The “#PlanForHousing—Our open letter to the next Prime Minister” details the sharp rise in child homelessness last year in England and the “grave” consequences if government policy does not change direction.

Child homelessness rose last year by 15 percent to 145,800. The number of households in temporary accommodation—whether hotels, hostels, or even converted shipping containers—by the end of 2023 was 112,600, up 12 percent in a year. Rough sleeping rose by 27 percent to 3,898 on a given night.

The letter states, “An entire generation of children risk having their futures snatched away if the next Prime Minister does not act to end the housing crisis.

“Millions of children across the country do not have anywhere safe and decent to call home. These children are living without space to study, play or even have a good night’s sleep; while their parents struggle to afford essentials like food and clothes.”

The NHF describes itself as “the voice of England’s housing associations”, which provide social housing alongside local authorities, offering cheaper rents than the private market.

The letter notes that children from black and Asian minority families as particularly affected, many living in damp, unsanitary conditions.

Not only is there a crisis in the number of affordable homes available, whether social or to purchase, but many homes owned by private landlords are unfit for human habitation.

In December 2020, two-year-old toddler Awaab Ishak died from a respiratory condition attributable to mould

growing in the flat he shared with his parents in Rochdale.

*ITV News* reported that 55 children have died since 2019, with living in temporary accommodation registered as a “contributory factor” in their passing. (Figures collated by the National Child Mortality Database). Forty-two of the children were under one year old, their preventable deaths due to one or more factors—multiple occupancy, inability to regulate room temperature, damp, or no room for sterilizing feeding equipment. The majority lived outside London.

In March, the *Observer* reported that some children spend their entire childhood without a permanent home. In 50 local authorities a total of 14,000 household have been in temporary accommodation for longer than five years, some as long as 20 years.

Social workers report children exhibiting developmental delay, with some learning to crawl and walk on beds. The lack of stability has a detrimental effect on mental health.

Based on new analysis by the NHF, the letter warns that on the current trajectory, by 2030 in England:

- 160,000 or seven children in every school will be living in families which are homeless.
- In every school 85 children will be living in overcrowded conditions.
- 4.8 million families will be unable to afford to pay their rent or mortgage.

The Conservative government’s 2019 manifesto made a commitment to build 300,000 homes a year by 2025, though Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, then stated that this target—addressed to local authority planning committees—was advisory.

Labour Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves said a Labour government would make the targets mandatory. But even if the target was achieved, high house prices coupled with rising interest rates mean mortgages are out of reach for many families and young people.

Private landlords charge extortionate rents and are loath to let their properties to the unemployed, as housing benefit does not necessarily cover full rent. Plus they demand a hefty deposit in advance.

Re-elected Labour Mayor Andy Burnham boasts a target of 10,000 new council homes in Greater Manchester by 2028, if the Right to Buy council houses introduced by Margaret Thatcher and maintained under successive Labour and Tory governments is suspended. But Burnham is a loyal leading figure of a political party which makes no commitment to ending Right to Buy, and venerates Thatcher.

The Housing Act 1980 gave five million tenants in England and Wales the right to buy their council home. This was part of the Thatcher government's (1970-1990) roll back of the welfare state, which the Labour governments of Blair and Brown (1997-2010) continued, enthusiastically embracing privatization.

Homelessness charity Crisis found that in 2023, 25,749 social homes were either sold or demolished in England, while just 9,500 social homes were built. The *Big Issue* newspaper reported that 90,000 new social homes are needed each year (as deemed by Parliament's Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee) to resolve the desperate housing shortage. This measure is proposed by the NHF letter.

The likelihood of cash-strapped local authorities stepping in to resolve the housing crisis with a programme of council house building is zero. According to the Local Government Association, councils in England face a funding gap that will reach £4 billion in two years. Half of councils anticipate bankruptcy within five years. Over the last 13 years, central government funding to local authorities has been slashed by 40 percent.

The housing crisis is just one aspect of the decline in social conditions for the working class. Department for Work and Pensions statistics released in March showing 4.3 million children are living in relative poverty after housing costs for 2023/24, an increase of 100,000 from last year. Relative poverty is living in a household where the income is 60 percent or below the average income.

Children living in absolute poverty rose to 3.6 million from 3.3 million last year. Absolute poverty is when basic needs of life, including food, shelter, education, healthcare, safe drinking water are unmet. 826,000 children live in households which resorted to foodbanks last year.

Among the NFT letter's 33 signatories are the CEOs of leading charities such as the YMCA, St Mungo's, The

Trussell Trust, St Martin's-in-the-Fields, Shelter, Child Poverty Action group, NSPCC, Centrepoint, Barnardo's and Glastonbury festival organiser Sir Michael Eavis.

Other signatories are leaders of education unions including Pepe Di'lasio, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, and Paul Whiteman, general secretary of the NAHT school leaders' union.

Appealing to the leaders of the main political parties which defend the capitalist system that caused the housing crisis in the first place is a fantasy. Sunak, Starmer and Davey couldn't care less what happens to poor children. Neither will the references the NHF makes to the electorate's housing concerns garnered in a YouGov poll sway them. Facilitated by the education unions, they allowed children to be exposed to repeated COVID infections, each time increasing the danger of Long COVID—and there are still no mitigations in schools!

All three support the sending of weapons to Israel, which rain down on the Palestinians in Gaza. Among the slaughtered are over 12,000 children. In grave danger are 600,000 children who are refugees in Rafah, as the Israel Defence Forces prepares to raze the city to the ground.

To pay for battlefronts in the Middle East and Ukraine and plans for war against China, society's wealth is being drained away from housing, health and education to defence spending, which is increasing by at least another £75 billion to 2.5 percent of GDP. Labour is 100 percent on board with this. The most Labour's Shadow Secretary of State for Housing and Levelling Up Angela Rayner could muster was, "Labour will robustly hold developers to account to deliver affordable housing."

There are over a million privately owned empty houses, which must be expropriated along with the wealth of the super-rich, and the nationalization without compensation of private development companies.

A mass building programme of high-quality social homes in which children can thrive must be a priority. The answer lies not with the reform of capitalism but its overthrow, not appeals to the leaders of capitalist parties but the mobilization of the working class as part of the struggle for socialism.



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