

An introduction to the case studies



The following case studies are the real stories of 11 people experiencing homelessness in Camden. They were collected via hour-long interviews led by Camden's homelessness co-production team, who all have lived experience of homelessness and are trained as peer researchers.

The co-producers have played a major role in shaping [Camden's Homelessness System Programme](#) since its inception in 2022, ensuring that the voice of lived experience is factored into all decision making, as well as conducting work to deepen our understanding of Camden's homeless population, as well as designing and piloting new interventions such as the Personal Passport. Single Homelessness Project's co-production Lead Bex Oldham teamed up with Camden's design research team to provide training and support to the co-producers throughout this work.

A case study 'story sheet' was used by the co-producers to capture stories from those currently experiencing homelessness. The questions on the story sheet were developed together by the Design Researcher team and the co-producers. All participants had the chance to confirm they were happy with what was captured on the sheets. The blank 'story sheet' is included as appendix to this document. A final session was conducted with the co-producers to draw out the key themes which we have ensured were integrated into the strategy itself.

Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym (fake name) to be used with their case study. The names you see alongside their stories have for the most part been selected by those who shared them; where people couldn't decide, the team has chosen pseudonyms for them.

Zoe

I live with my twelve year old daughter in a hostel in Camden. My experience of homelessness is very difficult, the negative consequences of which my daughter and I are still experiencing; all this has affected our mental and physical health.

I wrote emails to the council that we had been left without housing. On the day when this happened, my daughter and I spent many hours in the council building. First, the staff called my relatives to make sure that I could not stay with them, then asked me to think about who else could help me. Only at 10 o'clock in the evening, I received an email with the address of a hotel where we could spend the night.

It was very dark, raining, we walked along unfamiliar streets, meeting drunk and aggressive people. I tried to calm my daughter down for several hours, she still remembers it and cries. She was very traumatized.

I've been in this hostel for just over a year. I live in one room and share facilities with other women and their children who live there. We have one kitchen and one toilet.

Before this hostel, we stayed in many different hotels and different areas. We were moved every 2-3 days to different areas of London, very far from the school where my daughter studied.

My daughter began to get sick and miss school. There was a case when my daughter had a high temperature, she was sick, so I asked them to leave us in the same hotel. But the cancellation staff refused us, saying that there were no rooms in the hotel. The hotel staff confirmed rooms were available, and that we could stay if we paid. The cancellation staff in this either lied or did not want to understand the situation.

One day my daughter was at the after school club and we got back to the Premier Inn hotel (where we were staying) and I got told "the council don't pay for you, you can't stay here anymore." To be honest I don't remember what happened. I think we were there in the hotel lobby until 11pm at night waiting for emergency accommodation. I felt pressured when I was told that I had to make a decision quickly, and they did not provide me with an interpreter.

It has been a very difficult journey for me and my daughter. My daughter has had some therapy through school.

Now I'm being told I can't live in Camden. I must move to an area where I can afford to pay the rent.

Zoe's story



Zoe continued

I have letters to pay service charges for the other hotels I was in. I don't know...I get the letters and I put them in my bag, because I have too many problems. I think maybe it can wait. At least now I know how to pay the services charges in the hostel.

Camden council ask me, "why don't you work?" But how can I find a job when I don't know where I'll be. Everyday is stress. I go to college but sometimes I can't go. People ask me how I am, but I cry.

I volunteer at a food bank. The manager of this foodbank helped me to get support from the Early Help team. The Early Help worker has supported my daughter in school and she visits us at home. When you have somebody to speak to, you know you are not alone.

We have very good support in the hostel. They have a room for children to play in. They do trips, like to the seaside, theatre and Kew Gardens. It's amazing.

I thank the director of the primary school where my daughter studied, and the main manager of the food bank, who helps us a lot with everything, from letters and communication with the council staff to help with clothes and food.

I understand that so many people are in the same situation. But sometimes you write an email to the council and you don't receive anything back. When you receive an email saying, 'there are many people in the same situation, we can't help you...' - on the one hand I understand this. But sometimes it feels like nobody hears me.

Decision-makers should try to understand and pay attention to individual needs. There should be better communication – respond to emails. Sometimes I have no idea what is happening. I'm waiting for my money (benefits) but I don't know. Maybe the council needs more people. My suggestion is to have the opportunity to meet once a month with the council staff who are handling your case.

There should be money for homes and housing. Prioritize peace and people.

Zoe's story



Maya

My family (my husband, daughter and I) are currently staying at a Camden hostel. My husband has been off work due to injuries and is awaiting surgery, while I work 30 hours a week to balance work and childcare. Our daughter attends a Camden primary school.

We have been homeless since the first COVID lockdown, and during that time, we moved between various hotels until we were placed in temporary accommodation in another borough. Unfortunately, the conditions there were very poor, with persistent roof leaks in every room, including above our bed, leading to recurring colds and chest infections. We eventually had to return to hotels before being moved to our current accommodation at the hostel in Camden.

During our time in hotels, we didn't have access to laundry facilities or hot meals, so we had to rely on takeaways for lunch and dinner, as only breakfast was provided. We also spent a significant amount on travel to work and school, and the frequent moves only added to our expenses, which further increased our debts.

Adding to the challenge, our rent fluctuates monthly because my husband's irregular work hours affect his wages. Each month, we have to update the benefits team, but it's been difficult to reach them—calls are often cut off, or we receive conflicting information. This frustrating cycle has even led to eviction threats a few times.

The most helpful support we received was when Camden served us with the notice to quit and referred us to Early Years Support and Mary Ward Legal Centre. The Mary Ward Legal Centre has been extremely helpful in assisting us with rent issues and liaising with Housing Benefits, despite also facing the same communication challenges we did.

Having a Tenancy Officer onsite at the hostel was also very beneficial, as they helped us keep track of changes in our benefits and provided advice when needed. Unfortunately, that officer has since left, and their absence has made things more difficult.

One major issue has been the frequent turnover of housing officers. There were times when we didn't even know who our housing officer was, or when the Homeless Team called, we weren't aware that they were supposed to be our point of contact. I only recently learned who our current housing officer is following our last eviction notice. It's also a problem that housing benefit reassessments take over four weeks, putting us in arrears and perpetuating this difficult cycle.

Maya's story



Maya continued

Our daughter has been our strength throughout this experience. Despite our challenging living conditions and lack of basic comforts like a proper bed or privacy, she's thriving at school, which motivates us to keep going.

One thing that would make a significant difference for us and others in similar situations is better communication from Camden Council. Consistency and accurate information are crucial. Too often, we're given conflicting advice, and no one seems to be on the same page unless they're copied into the same email chain. This lack of reliable communication gives false hope and leaves us feeling frustrated. Timely responses and clear, accurate information would make all the difference. I strongly believe that this lack of proper communication and support contributed to us falling into rent arrears since becoming homeless. There's been no consistent point of contact for us to seek help or receive reliable information from.

We are grateful for the help we've received, but it would be reassuring to be treated as individuals rather than just numbers in the system. Proper staff training is essential, especially in the Housing Benefits team, as there seems to be a lack of understanding and consistency across the board. Housing officers often disappear or change without notice,

which makes an already difficult situation even more stressful. Thankfully, our current housing officer has been responsive and more communicative.

We hope that decision-makers will prioritise consistency in communication and staffing to improve the experience for those going through homelessness. A more reliable system and better-trained staff would prevent unnecessary stress and confusion for families like ours.

Maya's story



Grace

At the moment I am in between homes. I will have a permanent address soon.

My story involves alcohol addiction and mental health difficulties. I've been diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder, anxiety and depression over the last few years. I also have several physical health problems which impact on me in an ongoing way. They are all autoimmune disorders.

I used to work in the NHS as a Psychotherapist. When Covid came along, slowly but surely my mental health struggled and my addiction eventually became totally out of control. Once I quit my job following a psychiatric breakdown, I sought help from charities in Camden. CGL and SHP have become my lifeline, as has finally having a place to call my home. A place that I can finally feel safe.

They [CGL and SHP] have supported me with the cold, lonely isolation I experienced before them. My physical and mental health has improved as a result of various creative and support groups which helped me establish a purpose as a peer mentor and a co-producer, which I continue to thrive in and find my path.

Nowadays I feel secure in my recovery from substance misuse and my interests in shaping the thinking about homelessness and recovery services as I'm doing in my co-production role at SHP. I've found a place where my lived experience has true value. This also helps to keep me on the straight and narrow.

The crucial part of anyone's recovery is social inclusion. Lived experience and the utilization of this should systematically inform the practice and running of sheltered accommodation.

Grace's story



Jack

I've experienced homelessness since 1999. I was put into a psychiatric unit, and then a hostel.

My main challenges are my disability and drinking. My disability is due to my mental health and my inability to cope with it, so I jumped off a building. I experienced a lot of abuse as a child, from my mum, and while at boarding school. I was supported by children's services when I was 5 in another London borough.

I locked myself away as I'm fed up drinking and want to go to rehab, but I'm scared. I've been to 3 different rehabs already which didn't work. I realised my mental health got more noticeable without my coping method.

I've received no help for my mental health, simply because I'm too embarrassed to talk about it. I've had psychiatrists which were no good- mostly because I never told them everything.

I would really like the help I need. But I do not know what or where to start.

I keep going through self-medicating; tablets and alcohol. It's also my wanting to survive, my resilience. I want to improve myself, but I can only do that with help I can trust from people who actually care. I have the will to change, but I need the help as well. I just want to know who I am.

Decision-makers need to provide mental health support that addresses trauma and understands trauma. There needs to be more understanding of homelessness and substance misuse and how trauma causes it. We need person-centered therapy and other support for people to open up and get the truth out.

Jack's story



Gary

I am homeless and have been on and off for 40 years. I grew up in a family where my father was extremely violent. I. They should treat homeless people with (just) mental health issues the same as those with drug and alcohol issues.

I find if you're being treated for drug and alcohol issues that will be dealt with, but mental health is another story or even dismissed. I felt there was a certain kind of prejudice.

I have many traumas. After losing his job my father was constantly at home, thus I got more regular beatings. Punched, kicked, thrown out of the house. For quite a few years this was the case.

I have lived in hostels and had some support, but not lasting support. I was assessed and treated for PTSD, but never diagnosed. I had a good therapist who left, so that finished. Continued support would have been great.

When I came back to Camden, mental health support wasn't collaborative and didn't work. I had to get referred to lots of different places, then I gave up.

I'm quite ... sort of, in my head. I take myself out of the situation, and say to myself 'I will try to transcend it'. I'll be determined to try harder.

Decision-makers should fund things like day centres, and places with showers.

Don't blame people for not engaging. Look at why. What's happening? Is it something to do with staff? The values of those staff?

Gary's story



The Homeless Rambler

I have been homeless for a year, on and off, sleeping rough. It always depends on who is delivering the service you get. Do they have compassion? Do they have empathy? It matters.

I'm waiting to maybe get something, maybe a hostel. I also need to get a job. Once I get a job, things might change.

The system could be good, but why create all these barriers? You can't even ask someone on the street, 'where's this?' 'Where's that?' Finding what's available, it's just chance!

And then when you get to the place you need help, they say, 'we don't help with that any more'. I was in North London sleeping rough, and a member of the public called Street Link. They told me they would come back to find me but they didn't come.

Then a member of the public paid for my Travel Lodge for one night. It was only one night, but the fact that for one night I could sleep normally made such a difference.

Another homeless person told me about Routes off the Street Hub. But they said to me you need a verification. They refer you here, then they refer you there... Simple things. It might seem like nothing to you, but the service user is extremely vulnerable.

It should be holistic help – don't refer me to this place, or tell me to go to that place, or that I need to call that place. I don't have travel, I don't have a phone. The less referrals the better.

Decision makers should help organizations like Salvation Army, who are doing the work on the ground, at the forefront of helping the homeless. Places that people trust and where people are coming already. But they are limited. They can't sort out my housing.

You should have everything under one roof. A holistic building. Attending council meetings makes people relive trauma and lose dignity. The fewer referrals the better. Offer holistic support.

You should also make better use of abandoned properties and empty spaces. A place where homeless people can just go, that provides support, no questions asked.

The Homeless Rambler's story



Eva

I'm based at a shelter just outside Camden at the moment, not by choice. I've been sick with endometriosis, cancer, anxiety and depression. That's how I became ill and couldn't work. I used to be a teaching assistant and set up mental health programs with the Samaritans.

Before I moved to the shelter here I was sent on a wild goose chase to get medical information that would help me find suitable accommodation. It didn't matter though because I got placed in an area away from my support work.

I have permanent pain on the small of my back and in my hips which means I'm limited where I can walk. Being placed in an area outside of Camden meant I had to be re-referred for complex anxiety and depression support.

I hadn't heard back for a long time – then they offered me therapy and I said 'yes please I would like therapy.' They offered it to me somewhere which was perfect because I could just get the tube. But then they gave it to someone else with

mobility issues. But I have mobility issues. Now I have to come back to somewhere else for therapy, which is too far and too difficult to get to.

Also, when I moved into the shelter, I found out that I was thousands of pounds in arrears. I was told that because I receive benefits, I would be able to pay them back. But when I moved in nobody explained this to me (about rent). No information is volunteered, you have to push and push for it. All of this has aggravated my anxiety and depression.

My only support is my sister. I have never come across a total lack of inter-departmental communication, especially between the different teams across housing.

I have a brilliant key-worker (through a charity). But her area is not housing and benefits, so all she can do is support me. She can only ask on my behalf.

This is why people fall through the cracks: because they're exhausted. They just give up.

I've made it this far. I'm a strong person. I have my sister and my mother. She and I talk everyday – without that I'd be lost.

Decision-makers need to improve communication within housing and from housing officers to the people they're supporting.

Eva's story



Eva continued

We need more approachable staff – their demeanour can show that they don't care. We need more people like my keyworker, people on t

People need to have respect for the individual's support network. That's what is helping to prevent people from falling through the cracks.

Eva's story



Codey

I've been homeless for 26 years, on and off. My main challenges are alcohol and drugs getting in the way of living a life with my daughter.

At 17 I was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. I'm currently expecting an extension on my licence (serving a prison sentence in the community instead of being in prison), and my aim now is to train for my NVQ. I want to get well and see my daughter.

The staff are good and helpful in this hostel. I've got a great keyworker – she's like a mum to me.

Team Around Me has helped me not go back to prison. I've had chances all my life and I've never taken them, but now I'm really trying to. What keeps me going is my strong desire to change – and I recognize now that I have a choice to change. I want more growth and empowerment and fulfilment for myself.

I'd like decision-makers to make sure they reward people who show change and growth. The Adult Pathway also needs reviewing, especially support with 'move on'. They should support people to set goals and think about their next options from the very beginning.

Codey's story



Eli

I've been homeless in Camden for a long time – 2 years on the street and 9 months in temporary accommodation. It's been hard, trying to figure out where it all went wrong.

There's nothing going on for me at the moment. At this short stay hostel they help me with my lawyer and my health. They got me a GP. Every day they knock on your door in the morning and check you're there. In the afternoon they come and do a welfare check. Somebody cares...it's nice.

It's like a bubble here. We all live on the same earth but in different worlds.

When I slept rough you didn't know what could happen next – you could be sleeping next to a violent person. You don't know.

I want to go back to work and live normally. I want a stable life. I would like support to find a job but I have to wait because of my situation. Sometimes it can feel like the train isn't moving.

I'm waiting for a referral to a lawyer and if that goes well....well maybe I am making myself think like that to feel better.

Sometimes I'm really up, and sometimes I'm really, really down.

I go out to the church that provides food, and then come straight back, unless I have an appointment. I'm in this situation now. I don't fight it, otherwise it will increase my anxiety. The church is good. There are people in a similar situation. People to talk to. You're there looking for solutions but sometimes it can be a bit too much, talking about the same things I am thinking about in my head. Not escaping...

Having someone to talk to would help. Someone who sees things you can't see. A bit of hope.

Eli's story



Ben

I've been homeless for nearly 40 years. Right now I'm in a hostel looking at a move on. The manager here is very good, I'm doing well with the support from staff.

The staff at this hostel actually care about you. My key worker made me a curry on my birthday. They remember important dates like an anniversary of a death.

My nurse at Camden Health Improvement Practice is great. I've worked with them for 5 years, I've got a long term relationship with them. My nurse brought me a voucher and card on my birthday. It made me choke up a bit. I don't know why she did that for me.

There's a lot of stigma around mental health. When you get a diagnosis, you get labelled and put in a box, like "he's a nutter, put him in there...."

Being told I have my own place to live would make a difference but the process of bidding for a property through the council should be made clearer.

Camden council and hostels shouldn't rely completely on the PURF (Pathway Universal Referral Form). People should be able to say in their own words who they are and what has happened. Mine says I am racist and homophobic, but I'm not!

Ben's story



Alex

If it wasn't for this hostel, I would be out committing offences. I'm struggling with addiction. Camden council are telling me it will take 7 years to be housed, even though I'm born and bred in Camden!

I feel disillusioned with the criminal justice system, but I am going to the Tate Gallery today through the Opportunities Team. I like structure and routine.

When I came out of prison, my first Hostel was very good with probation – but the hostel staff were too scared to speak to residents. Routes off the Street Hub were also really helpful with everything, and now 109 Southampton Row hostel is very helpful. They got me into my current hostel from the hostel I was in - the support has been better than I imagined. Felix Project also deliver food to this hostel which is a great help. The Irish Centre is helpful. My probation since has been crap.

My Narcotics Anonymous friends and family, and my support worker here keeps me going.

Mental health is really poor in Camden, we need more in-house psychologists, more day centres and more drop-in centres and quicker access to methadone scripts. If other hostels were like this one, there'd be a lot more achievements.

Alex's story

