Temporary accommodation residents have their say and work with local council to improve services – through a groundbreaking and award-winning approach to policymaking through theatre

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Temporary accommodation is an increasing concern for London households, as new figures highlight with an estimated 183,000 Londoners – at least one in 50 - in temporary accommodation (London Councils[1]) – the highest ever recorded level of homelessness in the capital. The new shocking figures show that there is at least one child in every classroom in London is currently living in temporary accommodation. In response, Groundswell, temporary accommodation residents and local council staff in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea have worked together in an innovative and revealing new participatory democratic project, using theatre.

Councillors and senior staff from Kensington & Chelsea agreed, with the audience of over 60 residents and staff, on policy proposals in three key areas, around the council's approach to resident experience, triage and support, and staff systems and support. These proposals were agreed following a performance and debate, led by people with experience of temporary accommodation and Housing Options teams, the culmination of a legislative theatre (LT) programme, which has held its final performance at The Tabernacle Theatre.

The aim of this project was to find ways that the existing experience of the temporary accommodation system can change for the better. It achieved this by enabling conversations between people with lived experience of homelessness and housing options officers working in the system. The performance highlighted some of the key issues people faced, and through audience interaction and debate, also called for change in the policies and systems of temporary accommodation, as well as being used to encourage the co-production of potential solutions in response to the temporary accommodation crisis affecting so many.

Joanne Drew, Co-Chair of the London Housing Directors' Group, said: "London faces a homelessness emergency, with more than one in 50 residents of the capital currently living in temporary accommodation. Boroughs support homeless Londoners as best we can, and projects like this are important for listening to and learning from the lived experience of those in temporary accommodation. We are as determined as ever to improve Londoners' experience of temporary accommodation and to work with partners in tackling homelessness in the capital."

Cllr Sof McVeigh, Lead Member for Housing in Kensington & Chelsea, said: "For the thousands of households across London waiting year after year in temporary accommodation, the very definition of 'temporary' is stretched. We are working hard to help more and more people leave temporary accommodation behind, but we know that the system also needs radical solutions. It is really important to hear directly from our residents about their ideas for improvement and to better understand the pressures that Council staff are under in the face of ever-growing demand. I am really grateful to everyone who shared their experiences through the legislative theatre session."

Kensington & Chelsea Council's Executive Director of Housing and Social Investment Dan Hawthorn said: "This was my first experience of legislative theatre and I was really struck by how it made space for a discussion where the perspectives of residents, staff, senior managers and other practitioners from outside the Council were all given equal time and equal weight. It was a particular privilege to be part of the 'Policy Team'. It was challenging at times, but I got a huge amount out of seeing and thinking about the range of constructive suggestions that everyone made."

Speaking passionately about families living in TA in Kensington & Chelsea, Thienhuong Nguyen, Home-Start Scheme Manager said: "Not having a choice of where you live is incredibly difficult. But for families having to live in unsuitable temporary accommodation and then be expected to be the best parent possible...the pressure that both children and parents are under is extraordinary. Families supported by Home-Start WKCHF support living in TA show incredible strength to tolerate in the most challenging housing circumstances. Their courage and determination in sharing their stories needs to be matched by our courage in listening and creating real positive fundamental changes. Groundswell's Legislative Theatre brings these issues to light in a way that no document can."

The final performance celebrated the journey participants experienced together and provided a space to

have a constructive dialogue, enabling people to work together to create real change. At the end of the event, a Policy Team, including Councillor Claire Simmonds and Executive Director for Housing and Social Investment, Dan Hawthorn, and other staff, residents and charity leaders from the borough, each made a pledge as a result of what was discussed and presented on the day, which they plan to implement, or make some progress on, in the next six weeks. Some of the key themes identified on the day centred around funding limitations and needs, wellbeing of staff and TA residents, interaction styles, accountability, technological issues, cross-working and more.

Katy Rubin, a legislative theatre practitioner, who co-led the process, said, “Legislative Theatre is an innovative participatory policy-making practice with a strong track record of success among local and regional governments in the UK and internationally. After receiving awards in Greater Manchester and Medway for innovative participatory policymaking, it's exciting to see Kensington and Chelsea Council and residents join this growing movement, collaborating across various roles and experiences to jointly improve services. This is, hopefully, just the beginning of a creative, arts-based participatory democracy tradition in Kensington and Chelsea.”

Michael Chandler, CEO of Groundswell, said: “We’re extremely excited to be overseeing and facilitating this important project, which led to these important commitments from Kensington & Chelsea senior management and councillors. Groundswell knows that the people closest to the issues are best placed to inform the solutions, and that amplifying the voice and participation of lived experience is vital for real, meaningful change. Having seen both the challenges residents in temporary accommodation face, and the potential of Legislative Theatre to open up conversations between residents and services and lead to real change, we’re pleased to see these real commitments, and hope this project will create positive change, together, for everyone.”

NOTES

Groundswell is working with families supported by Home-Start Westminster, Kensington and Chelsea and Housing Options staff to create the event. Groundswell were commissioned by the London Housing Panel Temporary Accommodation Working Group – a collaboration between the Panel, the London Housing Directors’ Group (LHDG) and Greater London Authority with the support of Trust for London.
About Groundswell

Groundswell is a charity creating solutions to end homelessness, that come directly from people who have experience of homelessness. We work with people with experience of homelessness, offering opportunities to contribute to society and create solutions to homelessness. Participation is at our core because the experience of homelessness is crucial in making decisions that affect lives and ultimately help people to move out of homelessness.

The experience of homelessness should not limit your voice, restrict your future or damage your health. We aim to address four key issues: homelessness; health inequalities; lack of participation in service delivery and policy; and a society that does not work for everyone. We achieve this by ensuring people can access health care; offering progression opportunities for people with experience of homelessness; and by creating change in policy and practice – working towards Stronger Voices, Healthier Lives and Better Futures for all.
Website: www.groundswell.org.uk

[1] ‘Emergency’ warning issued as London homelessness hits new records | London Councils - Localgov Drupal

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