A Qualitative Evaluation of The Childhood Trust's Decorate A Child's Life Programme

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Executive Summary

Child poverty rates in the UK have risen significantly in the last five years. In 2019, 35% of children in the UK were living below the poverty line, whereas only 30% were in poverty in 2015. Poverty rates vary across the UK with some regions faring considerably worse than others. London is home to approximately 1.89 million children, 39% of whom are in poverty. Despite being one of Europe's richest cities, England's capital has the highest child poverty rate in the country and one of the highest in Western Europe. A key driver of London's high poverty rate is its housing market; house prices in 2019 were six times higher than what they were in 1970 after adjusting for inflation. [1]

There is increasing recognition that safe, secure, and stable housing is a critical component of social mobility and as such, is a valuable tool for combatting the impact of poverty, particularly upon children. Poor quality and insecure housing, on the other hand, often underpin poverty and material deprivation and can severely impact a child's life chances. [2] Unfortunately, a sizeable amount of London's social and private housing stock is in poor condition. For many low-income families, securing a home in London "*often translates into suffering inconceivable conditions at the bottom end of the private rental market, where people are at the mercy of rising rents and unscrupulous landlords*". [3] Pre-pandemic, the wider social costs arising from poor quality housing were expected to amount to £18.6 billion. [4] The impact and consequent deprivations of poor housing conditions experienced by children growing up in poverty have been amplified by the pandemic, which has required children to be locked down for months at a time in sub-standard and often over-crowded accommodation.

Children growing up in low-grade accommodation often experience poor physical and mental health as a result of living in unsafe, unsanitary, or overcrowded conditions, which can be detrimental to their development and educational attainment. [5] However, previous research has revealed that positive changes to one's living conditions can improve mental health and produce positive psychosocial benefits. [6] One of these benefits is increased agency, fueled by the process of including individuals in decision-making regarding the aesthetics and functionality of their home environment. [7]

[1] Greater London Authority. (2019) *Housing in London: 2019*, UK: Greater London Authority.

[2] Social Mobility Commission. (2020) *Monitoring Social Mobility - 2013 - 2020: Is the government delivering on our recommendations?* London: Social Mobility Commission.

[3] The Childhood Trust. (2019) Bedrooms of London - The context to London's housing crisis and its impact on children, London: The Childhood Trust.

[4] Roys, M., Nicol, S., Garrett, H., and Margoles, S. (2016). The full cost of poor housing, UK: BRE Trust.

[5] The Marmot Review. (2010) Fair Society, Healthy Lives, UK: The Marmot Review.

[6] Curl, A., Kearns, A., Mason, P., Egan, M., Tannahill, C., and Ellaway, A. (2015) 'Physical and mental health outcomes following housing improvements: Evidence from the GoWell study', Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health (1979), 69(1): 12-19.

[7] Mackay, R. (2003) 'Family resilience and good child outcomes: An overview of the research literature' Social Policy Journal of New Zealand, (20): 98-118.

A cross-sectional study on the effects of home improvement projects found that changes to occupants' living spaces "*were associated with occupants' ratings of the internal quality of their dwellings, which in turn was positively associated with feelings of control and of status*". [8]

Informed by and in response to this research, The Childhood Trust developed the **Decorate A Child's Life** (DACL) programme to help alleviate some of the worst aspects of poor housing conditions upon children in poverty in London. By creating clean, safe and functional spaces, DACL improves the mental health and wellbeing of some of London's most vulnerable children and young people.

Since June 2019, the programme has been delivered in partnership with Kingfisher and Katharine Pooley. With financial support from Kingfisher, DACL has delivered renovations benefitting 3,427 children and young people.

The present report details the findings from a qualitative evaluation of the programme's bedroom renovation projects, which sought to understand the extent to which participation in the DACL programme can foster positive childhood experiences.

The evaluation revealed four **key themes** that demonstrate the programme's impact on its beneficiaries:

1. **DACL produced a 'knock-on' effect in beneficiaries' lives**
2. **Beneficiaries experienced increased pride in their homes**
3. **Participation in the programme empowered beneficiaries**
4. **Participation in the programme improved beneficiaries' relationships**

For several families participating in the programme, the redecoration project produced a 'knock-on' effect, which saw 60% of the parents in the evaluated projects adopt new, positive behaviours relating to how they cared for their homes. While some families redecorated and reorganised their sitting rooms to be more functional, others deep cleaned and decluttered their homes to free up more space for their children. Importantly, these types of behaviour changes can have long-term impacts on the attainment of the children in the home, as clean-living spaces have been evidenced to directly improve educational attainment amongst school-aged children. [9] Furthermore, the aforementioned parental behaviours could be particularly helpful in allowing children to feel safe and protected in the home, which is a valuable positive childhood experience.
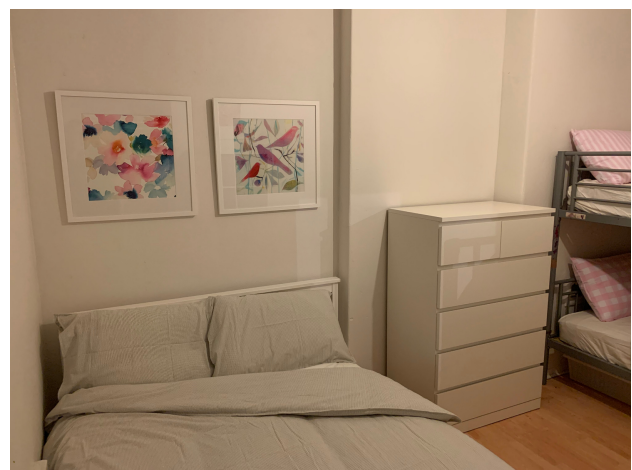
[8] Curl, A., Kearns, A., Mason, P., Egan, M., Tannahill, C., and Ellaway, A. (2015) 'Physical and mental health outcomes following housing improvements: Evidence from the GoWell study', Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health (1979), 69(1): 12-19.
[9] Gottfried, A.W. and Gottfried, A.E. (1984), 'Home Environment and Cognitive Development in Young Children of Middle-Socio-economic-Status Families', in A. W. Gottfried (eds), Home Environment and Early Cognitive Development: Longitudinal Research, New York, Academic Press Inc. pp. 57–115.

80% of the referral partners interviewed reported that their families started to take pride in their bedrooms and homes after participating in the programme. Accordingly, 'increased pride' was the largest theme in the dataset. One family was so proud that "*as soon as the rooms were done, they asked all of the family around*" to come see it. Several referral partners noted that the personalisation of the bedroom renovations fostered feelings of pride amongst family members, which aligns with previous studies finding that changes to residents' living spaces are positively associated with increased feelings of status and control. [10]

In the theme 'empowered beneficiaries', referral partners (40%) noticed changes in beneficiaries' confidence after the redecoration projects. Participants reported that the cleanliness and functionality of the renovated bedrooms provided children with proper space to complete their schoolwork and play, empowering them to feel a sense of control at home and to make positive choices. All of the referral partners interviewed but one (80%) commented on the utility of the new desks provided in the redecorations, especially in aiding children with their studying and schoolwork. This finding is particularly interesting in the context of studies demonstrating that a lack of space and tools to complete schoolwork can negatively affect children's confidence and perceptions of their own capabilities. [11]

In line with previous research on the effects of overcrowding on childhood development, the theme 'improved relationships' highlighted the link between the functionality of living spaces and familial relationships. 40% of the referral partners interviewed reported that their families experienced a reduction in sibling tensions as a result of the redecoration projects. One parent explained that his children argue less now that the flat has two separate desks. Another referral partner noted that the renovation helped a boy and his father to communicate better, which could have great implications for the programme's ability to foster positive childhood experiences, namely, the ability to share one's feelings with their parents and feel supported by their family.

Three sisters' bedroom before and after DACL - Lambeth, January 2020

[10] Curl, A., Kearns, A., Mason, P., Egan, M., Tannahill, C., and Ellaway, A. (2015) 'Physical and mental health outcomes following housing improvements: Evidence from the GoWell study', Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health (1979), 69(1): 12-19.
[11] Evans, G. W. and Saegert, S. (2000), 'Residential Crowding in the Context of Inner City Poverty', in S. E. Wapner, J. E. Demick, T. E. Yamamoto and H.E. Minami (eds), Theoretical Perspectives in Environment-Behavior Research, New York, Plenum. pp. 247–268.

Background

Since 2016, poverty rates in the UK have been relatively stable, rising from 21% of the population living in poverty to 22%. [12] However, these figures, which pre-date the COVID-19 pandemic, do not reflect the fact that poverty and the risk of poverty impacts distinct and diverse social groups to varying degrees and in different ways. For example, women, children, black, Asian, ethnic minorities, and large families are significantly more likely to fall into 'deep poverty' than other social groups. [13] In 2018, Phillip Alston, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, described child poverty in the UK as *"a social calamity and an economic disaster"*. [14] Moreover, following the COVID-19 pandemic, child poverty rates in the UK are set to rise significantly with an additional 200,000 children expected to fall below the poverty line as *"emerging data show the pandemic tracking along social fault lines"*. [15]

London's Housing Crisis

London's housing crisis is buttressed by a shortage of social housing stock, which has forced low-income families to rely on the private rental sector for housing. In the last decade, the number of Londoners in poverty living in privately-rented accommodation has increased by 90%. [16] In 2019, 243,551 households were on London local authorities' social housing waiting lists. [17] 930,000 (or 39% of) private renters are in poverty in London as compared to 890,000 or 37% of social renters. [18] This is unsurprising as a two-bedroom private rental in London is "*more than twice the average for England.*" [19] Rent prices in London's private market have grown by 29% since 2008, compared to a 21% average increase for the rest of the country. [20] Concurrently, rents for social housing properties in London have risen by 13%. [21]

[12] Full Fact. (2020) Poverty in the UK a guide to the facts and figures, www.fullfact.org/economy/poverty-uk-guide-facts-and-figures/

[13] Edmiston, D. (2020), The depth and profile of UK poverty has changed considerably - official statistics must start capturing this reality amidst COVID-19., LSE British Politics and Policy, London, LSE.

[14] Alston, P. (2018) Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights. In: U. Nations (ed), United Nations Human Rights Council, United Nations.

[15] Sinha, L. E. A. (2020) 'Children are being sidelined by covid-19', BMJ.

[16] Trust for London. (2020) London's Poverty Profile 2020, UK: Trust for London.

[17] Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020) Live tables on rents, lettings and tenancies, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-rents-lettings-and-tenancies

[18] Trust for London (2020) Poverty and type of housing. https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/data/poverty-and-housing-tenure/

[19] Tinson et al. (2017) London's Poverty Profile 2017, UK: Trust for London.

[20] Trust for London. (2020) London's Poverty Profile 2020, UK: Trust for London.

[21] Ibid.

Poor Quality and Unsuitable Housing

Housing can be considered unsuitable for a family for a variety of reasons; however, problems with overcrowding and damp are the most common reasons cited for families referred to the DACL programme. Overcrowding is determined by local authorities according to the room and space standards laid out in the 1935 Housing Act. These standards are not generous in their evaluation. For example, kitchens and sitting rooms can be considered suitable sleeping spaces as long as they're of a certain size, and children under the age of 10 are not counted as persons in these evaluations. As a result, very few households legally qualify as overcrowded. These standards explain how the DACL programme has worked with families of four legally housed in one-bed flats.

A girl's bedroom before DACL

Overcrowding tends to be more problematic for larger families and negatively impacts children more adversely than adults. [22] A number of studies on early childhood development concur that social withdrawal is heightened among preschool children in crowded environments. [23] Overall, children living in overcrowded homes are more likely to be neglected, ignored, and experience negative interactions with their parents and siblings. [24] Furthermore, children in crowded homes are more likely to exhibit higher levels of neuroticism, problematic behaviour at school, and psychological distress. [25] In 2011, London's Planning and Housing Committee found that approximately 331,000 children in the capital lived in overcrowded conditions, and approximately one third of all children living in social housing in London were overcrowded. [26]

Damp and cold are also common housing problems for low-income families. Cold houses have been proven to negatively affect physical health by increasing blood pressure, increasing asthma, and reducing resistance to infections. [27] Furthermore, damp and cold housing are associated with a range of mental health issues, including anxiety surrounding energy affordability, concerns about impacts on physical health, and higher levels of depression. [28] Typically, the effects of cold and damp accommodation are interrelated as cold and damp environments are a source of cumulative stress for families; poor accommodation produces a range of stressors that exponentially reduce wellbeing upon interaction. [29]

[22] Greater London Authority. (2011) Crowded houses Overcrowding in London's social rented housing, UK: Greater London Authority.

[23] Evans, G. W. (2006) 'Child Development and the Physical Environment', Annual Review of Psychology, 57(1): 423-451.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Greater London Authority. (2011) Crowded houses Overcrowding in London's social rented housing, UK: Greater London Authority.

[27] Boomsma, C., Pahl S., Jones, R., Fuertes, A. (2017) '"Damp in bathroom. Damp in back room. It's very depressing!" exploring the relationship between perceived housing problems, energy affordability concerns, and health and well-being in UK social housing', Energy Policy, 106: 382-393.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Liddell, C. and Guiney, C. (2014) 'Living in a cold and damp home: Frameworks for understanding impacts on mental well-being', Public Health (London), 129(3): 191-199.

Housing and Wellbeing

Housing can have profound effects on an individual's health, and causal relationships between poor housing and poor health are well established. [30] Both the housing environment as well as the mental stress of housing costs can affect one's physical and mental health. Research has found that high levels of wellbeing are associated with having a home in good repair, living in a neighbourhood with attractive buildings, and living in a quiet and peaceful environment. [31] Moreover, comfortable and stable housing contributes to an increased ability to cope with the challenges of life without the impending stress of the basic need of shelter. It's important to note that lack of income alone is not an indicator of poor mental wellbeing. How a low-income family fares *"is not simply a matter of how much income the family has, but how they cope with the struggle of managing with limited resources."* [32] Cleaner, more functional living spaces can aid families in devising strategies to manage such limited resources.

Research has demonstrated that positive changes to one's living situation can improve mental health. For example, changes to physical space such as new kitchens and bathrooms have shown *"positive associations with mental health one year after the intervention and beyond."* [33] Improving aspects of one's living space, particularly when residents have a choice in household elements such as colour or layout, have also been seen to produce psychosocial benefits. [34] A cross-sectional study on the effects of home improvement projects found that changes to occupants' living spaces *"were associated with occupants' ratings of the internal quality of their dwellings, which in turn was positively associated with feelings of control and of status."* [35]

A teenage boy's bedroom after DACL - Newham, October 2019

[30] Curl, A., Kearns, A., Mason, P., Egan, M., Tannahill, C., and Ellaway, A. (2015) 'Physical and mental health outcomes following housing improvements: Evidence from the GoWell study', Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health (1979), 69(1): 12-19.
[31] Bond, L., Kearns, A., Mason, P., Tannahill, C., Egan, M., and Whitely, E. (2012) 'Exploring the relationships between housing, neighbourhoods and mental wellbeing for residents of deprived areas', BMC Public Health, 12(1): 48.
[32] Mackay, R. (2003) 'Family resilience and good child outcomes: An overview of the research literature' Social Policy Journal of New Zealand, (20): 98-118.
[33] Curl, A., Kearns, A., Mason, P., Egan, M., Tannahill, C., and Ellaway, A. (2015) 'Physical and mental health outcomes following housing improvements: Evidence from the GoWell study', Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health (1979), 69(1): 12-19.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.

Poverty, Housing and Childhood Outcomes

The relationship between poverty and childhood outcomes has been well-documented in research. Poverty during childhood has been connected to a multitude of disadvantageous outcomes, including *"reduced cognitive ability, poor academic achievement, poor mental health and conduct disorders."* [36] Consequently, poverty not only impacts children's home life but also follows them into school. School performance of children in poverty demonstrates lower achievement levels while poor mental health and conduct disorders challenge students' ability to create and maintain healthy relationships with their classmates and other people.

Positive parental characteristics and positive parenting techniques are significant to childhood development, which the home environment can either promote or inhibit. A number of studies concur that overcrowding can cause psychological and emotional stress in parents, leading to increased conflict between parents and children. [37] A significant portion of these studies have found that the design, layout, or functionality of the home contributes to the tension and relationship strain experienced. A significant portion of these studies have found that the design, layout, or functionality of the home contributes to the tension and relationship strain experienced. [38] Furthermore, studies have found positive correlations between the cleanliness of homes and the educational attainment of children. [39] Some researchers have attributed this to a link between clean and organised homes and positive parental characteristics, such as efficiency and ambition. [40]

For children, a lack of quiet space and study space in overcrowded homes can be particularly detrimental to their cognitive competency. [41] Several studies have demonstrated that children living in overcrowded accommodation are unlikely to have the sufficient space and tools to complete their schoolwork. [42] This in turn has been found to affect children's school performance and notably, children's perceptions of their skills and scholastic ability. [43] These challenges have been exacerbated by the pandemic, which has seen a shift to home-schooling for months at a time. Children growing up in poverty and living in poor-quality or overcrowded accommodation are unlikely to have a sufficient home learning environment and as a result, the 'education attainment gap' will widen.

[36] Mackay, R. (2003) 'Family resilience and good child outcomes: An overview of the research literature' Social Policy Journal of New Zealand, (20): 98-118.

[37] Dockery, A. M. et al. (2010) Housing and children's development and wellbeing: a scoping study, Melbourne: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.

[38] Bartlett, S. (1998) 'Does Inadequate Housing Perpetuate Children's Poverty?', Childhood, 5(4): 403–420.

[39] Gottfried, A.W. and Gottfried, A.E. (1984), 'Home Environment and Cognitive Development in Young Children of Middle-Socio-economic-Status Families', in A. W. Gottfried (eds), Home Environment and Early Cognitive Development: Longitudinal Research, New York, Academic Press Inc. pp. 57–115.

[40] Dunifon, R., Duncan, G. J. and Brooks-Gunn, J. (2001) 'As Ye Sweep, So Shall Ye Reap', The American Economic Review, 91(2): 150–154.

[41] Wachs, T. D. (1990) 'Must the physical environment be mediated by the social environment in order to influence development? A further test', Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, (11): 163–178.

[42] Gove, W. R. and Hughes, M. (1983) Overcrowding in the Household, New York: Academic.

[43] Evans, G. W. and Saegert, S. (2000), 'Residential Crowding in the Context of Inner City Poverty', in S. E. Wapner, J. E. Demick, T. E. Yamamoto and H.E. Minami (eds), Theoretical Perspectives in Environment-Behavior Research, New York, Plenum. pp. 247–268.

Evaluation Results

Our evaluation revealed four key themes, which illustrate the programme's impact upon its beneficiaries.

1. DACL **produced a 'knock-on' effect** in beneficiaries' lives
2. Beneficiaries experienced **increased pride** in their homes
3. Participation in the programme **empowered beneficiaries**
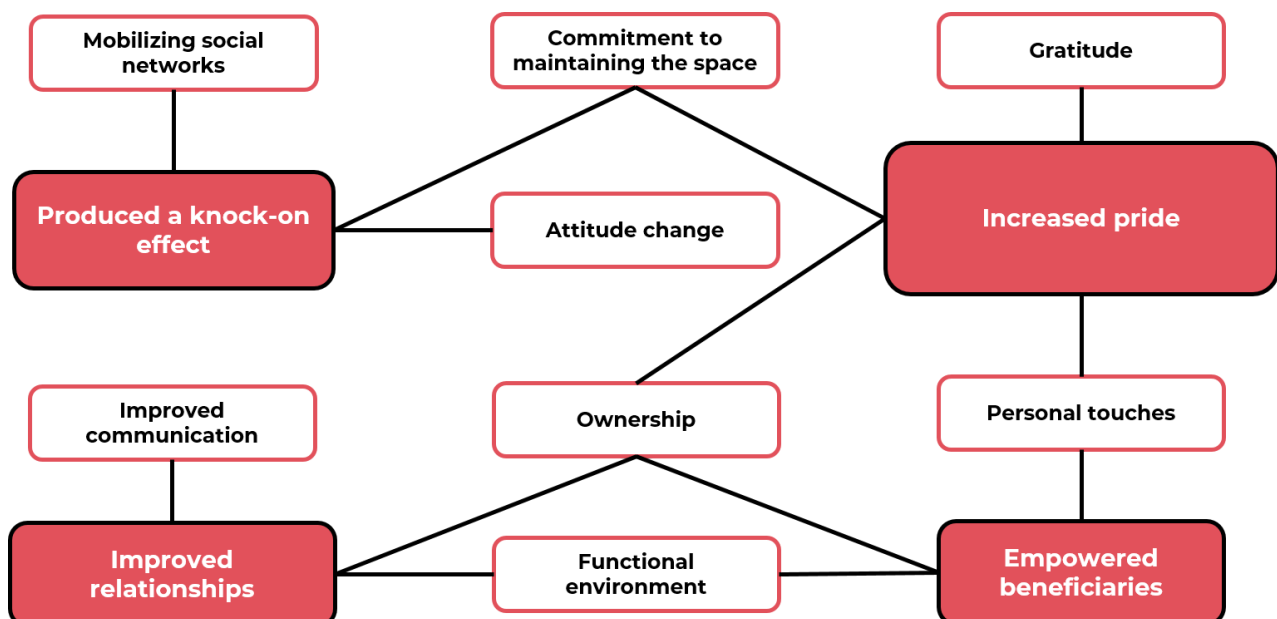4. Participation in the programme **improved** beneficiaries' **relationships**

Figure 1. Results of the thematic analysis conducted in the DACL impact study

DACL produced a 'knock on' effect

For several families (60%) participating in the DACL impact study, the redecoration project produced a 'knock-on' effect, serving as a catalyst for change in other parts of their lives. While some families redecorated and re-organised their sitting rooms to be more functional, others deep cleaned and decluttered their homes to free up more space for their children.

"*The best thing that they've done is they actually redecorated the other parts of the house*," said one referral partner. This statement was echoed by another referral partner that referred a family struggling with a severe mould infestation and overcrowding. She commented that, "*They did keep it up and also to my amazement, they actually redecorated other parts of the home.*"

A significant portion of the referral partners interviewed (60%) indicated that their families were more committed to maintaining the cleanliness of the bedrooms and the rest of the home after the redecoration project. "*It's a totally different place, and their attitude is very different as well*", said one referral partner from a project delivered in South London. Having the bedrooms redecorated inspired this mum to address her hoarding issue: "*She had decluttered a lot, a lot. She said some of her things she was trying to send back home.*"

The referral partner for this project emphasised the importance of a positive attitude when addressing housing-related issues. After introducing the family to the DACL programme, the referral partner noticed that the mum's attitude towards her circumstances had changed. After the DACL programme visited the home for the initial site visit, the referral partner said that it was clear that "*they actually wanted the change, and it was refreshing to see that.*"

Importantly, these types of behaviour changes can have long-term impacts on the attainment of the children in the home, as clean-living spaces have been evidenced to directly improve educational attainment amongst school-aged children. [44] Furthermore, the aforementioned parental behaviours could be particularly helpful in allowing children to feel safe and protected in the home, which is a valuable positive childhood experience. Hoarding and poor cleaning habits produce unclean and unsafe environments for children. Parents that keep their homes decluttered and clean are actively creating safe spaces for their children, ultimately contributing to positive childhood outcomes.

[44] Gottfried, A.W. and Gottfried, A.E. (1984), 'Home Environment and Cognitive Development in Young Children of Middle-Socio-economic-Status Families', in A. W. Gottfried (eds), Home Environment and Early Cognitive Development: Longitudinal Research, New York, Academic Press Inc. pp. 57–115.

Two girls' bedroom before and after DACL - Lambeth, September 2019

Beneficiaries experienced increased pride in their homes

The majority of the beneficiaries (80%) reported feeling proud of their homes after receiving bedroom renovations. According to one referral partner, her referred family was so proud that "*as soon as the rooms were done, they asked all of the family around*" to come see it. Several referral partners noted that the personalisation of the bedroom renovations fostered feelings of pride amongst family members, which aligns with previous studies finding that changes to residents' living spaces are positively associated with increased feelings of status and control. [45]

One referral partner said that the personal touches included in the bedrooms incentivized the family to keep the rooms in good condition. She referred a family of six living in a two-bedroom flat in Lambeth. The eldest child was struggling with privacy, as she had to share her single room with her two, much younger brothers. The personalisation of the room made all three children feel proud of their space. The referral partner said it's because of *"the small touches that you guys give to the property."* When asked how she was coping sharing her bedroom with her brothers, the teenager said the small touches to the room has improved the situation because *"everyone has their own space now."*

Accordingly, 60% of the referral partners interviewed indicated that their families were more committed to maintaining the cleanliness of the bedrooms and other rooms in the home after the renovations. A potential explanation for this could be beneficiaries' increased feelings of pride for their bedrooms, Although this notion was not confirmed directly by any of the parents or children interviewed, it aligns with previous studies that disclosed associations between clean and organised homes and positive parental characteristics. [46]

A teenage girl and her two younger brothers' bedroom before and after DACL - Lambeth, November 2019

[45] Curl, A., Kearns, A., Mason, P., Egan, M., Tannahill, C., and Ellaway, A. (2015) 'Physical and mental health outcomes following housing improvements: Evidence from the GoWell study', Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health (1979), 69(1): 12–19.
[46] Dockery, A. M. et al. (2010) Housing and children's development and wellbeing: a scoping study, Melbourne: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.

Participation in the programme empowered beneficiaries

In addition to cleanliness, a home's functionality and design can positively impact the mental wellbeing of its residents. [47] This was highlighted in the theme 'empowered beneficiaries,' in which beneficiaries emphasized the importance of new, functional furniture items that helped them study and play. 40% of the referral partners interviewed reported that the renovations helped to improve the confidence of their referred children; several identified the functionality of the furniture items, specifically the desks, as the reason for this. New desks were provided to children in all of the projects evaluated. All of the referral partners but one (80%) made comments in their interviews about the utility of the desks, especially in aiding children with their studying and schoolwork. This finding is particularly interesting in the context of studies demonstrating that a lack of space and tools to complete schoolwork can negatively affect children's confidence and perceptions of their own capabilities. [48]

"The kids are just always in their rooms because it has the desk," said one referral partner. Another said that having a desk made a big impact on the children's ability to study. She said, *"they were really happy to have spaces to study rather than having to study on the bed."* She continued to explain that having a desk and a place to study made the children more protective over and careful with their belongings. They started to value their space. As a result, the older kids would be firmer with their little siblings about tidiness. She said, *"they were very much more like 'stop' this is my space. You can't come in here and do that anymore."* The referral partner hoped that this behaviour would have a positive impact on the toddler in the family because it teaches boundaries and sets a precedent for respecting the home.

One referral partner noticed a significant difference in a young boy's confidence to make positive choices after the redecoration. The boy, who is severely autistic, struggles with social interaction and was displaying reclusive tendencies; he had stopped going to school and wouldn't leave his room, not even for meals. The referral partner said, *"there wasn't anything at all on his floor for at least six months. It was still tidy. It was still exactly as you had left it."*

[47] Bartlett, S. (1998) 'Does Inadequate Housing Perpetuate Children's Poverty?', Childhood, 5(4): 403–420.

[48] Evans, G. W. and Saegert, S. (2000), 'Residential Crowding in the Context of Inner City Poverty', in S. E. Wapner, J. E. Demick, T. E. Yamamoto and H.E. Minami (eds), Theoretical Perspectives in Environment-Behavior Research, New York, Plenum. pp. 247–268.

Participation in the programme improved beneficiaries' relationships

For many of the families involved in the DACL programme, living in overcrowded accommodation was negatively impacting on their relationships. The theme 'improved relationships' highlighted the link between the functionality of living spaces and familial relationships. 40% of the referral partners interviewed reported that their families experienced a reduction in sibling tensions as a result of the redecoration projects. One parent explained that his children argue less now that the flat has two separate desks. Another referral partner noted that the renovation helped a boy and his father to communicate better, which could have great implications for the DACL programme's ability to foster positive childhood experiences, namely, the ability to share one's feelings with their parents and feel supported by their family.

Of the projects evaluated, 40% saw a reduction in sibling tensions as a result of the redecoration projects. Two referral partners reported that communication between parents and children improved after the projects and cited the functionality of the new bedrooms as being the driving force for the improvement. Feeling a sense of ownership of the new bedrooms also contributed to improved familial relationships reported one referral partner.

"She felt she had no space to do her work. She just really needed her own space. It wasn't comfortable for her," said one referral partner about a teenager living in Lambeth. The girl's family was struggling with severe overcrowding, and it was affecting her mental health. The teenage girl noted that the desk, beds, and increased storage resulting from the renovation made the room significantly more functional, especially the desk, which she said *"is so good to study and just do work on."* Her father made the point too that his children argued less after the renovation. He said it's *"because now they're not fighting over one thing. They're not arguing like before."*

On another project, the referral partner identified an improvement in familial relationships as a direct result of better communication between family members. Describing the relationship between a beneficiary and his dad, the referral partner said, *"they really didn't have a good relationship. He could be quite abusive with the dad, but [after] he was a lot better with dad – the way he conversed with him."* The project provided a boy with a previously tense relationship with his father the environment he needed to feel independent and valued. Having his own space and functional furniture items also positively affected the boy's relationship with his younger brother. The referral partner said that after the renovation, *"the boys did get on a lot better,"* and they seemed *"to work together and play together more."*

Conclusion

All four themes found in the interviews indicated that the DACL programme positively impacts the mental health and wellbeing of its beneficiaries in the short term, though the long-term scope of this impact requires further investigation. Two themes in particular, 'improved relationships' and 'produced a 'knock-on' effect', showed the programme's potential for producing long-lasting impact on the development of its beneficiaries in relation to fostering positive childhood experiences. The extent of this impact, however, remains unknown, since the research was conducted on projects delivered 6-12 months before evaluation.

In addition to documenting the DACL programme's impact, this research project has provided The Childhood Trust with useful insights on the immediate needs of the families supported by the programme. For example, the finding that new desks are typically the most impactful element in the bedroom renovations will help to inform project designs and priorities in the future. Similarly, the fact that several families utilised left over materials to decorate other rooms in their homes demonstrates that the DACL programme could extend its impact by providing families with DIY tools and resources after the redecorations are completed. Most importantly, the interviews analysed in the study have provided the programme with a greater understanding of its service-users, ultimately enabling The Childhood Trust to better support disadvantaged children and young people living in London.

Two young boys' bedroom before and after DACL - Romford, January 2019

Appendix I

Decorate A Child's Life (DACL) is The Childhood Trust's corporate volunteer programme that renovates and redecorates dilapidated bedrooms of children in poverty and local youth centres on which disadvantaged children depend. By creating clean, safe, and functional spaces, DACL strives to improve the sociability, school-performance, and confidence of some of London's most vulnerable children.

Renovation projects are designed by The Childhood Trust's pro bono interior design team and are completed in one day by a group of corporate volunteers under the guidance of The Childhood Trust. Children living in poverty and youth centres that are in need of repair are referred to the programme exclusively by local authorities' Social Services teams and registered children's charities in The Childhood Trust's network.

Since June 2019, the programme has engaged 141 corporate volunteers in renovation projects. As a result, The Childhood Trust unlocked over £250,000 of additional funding from corporate partnerships for the delivery of projects and services supporting approximately 42,000 disadvantaged children and young people in London.

Appendix II

Methodology

The study summarised above sought to understand how DACL has impacted the lives of its beneficiaries and the extent to which the programme fosters positive childhood experiences. The researchers therefore employed qualitative research methods, as such methods are best placed to allow participants to elucidate their own perspectives and to provide detailed accounts of their experiences of the intervention.

Data Collection

To answer the research questions, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with referral partners, parents, and children that participated in recent (2019-2020) bedroom renovation projects in the DACL programme. The sample size (N=7) was determined by (a) the availability of families and referral partners for interview (b) the interest of families in being interviewed and (c) the language skills of the beneficiaries. The researcher interviewed as many referral partners, parents, and children as possible, given the time and resources available. This resulted in seven interviews with individuals associated with five different projects, representing 62.5% of the bedroom renovations delivered by the programme in 2019-2020.

Data Analysis

The researchers analysed the data using thematic analysis, aided by the use of thematic networks informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that identifies, analyses, and organises reappearing concepts in datasets into themes. [49] Themes are abstract entities that bring "*meaning and identity to a recurrent experience and its variant manifestations. As such, a theme captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole."* [50]

[49] Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., and Moules, N. J. (2017) 'Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*.
[50] DeSantis, L., and Ugarriza, D. N. (2000) 'The Concept of Theme as Used in Qualitative Nursing Research', Western Journal of Nursing Research, 22(3): 351–372.

Ethics

The researchers obtained written consent from all subjects interviewed after providing them with details on the purpose of the study and the types of questions that would be asked in the interviews. Participation in the study was not mandatory for participation in the programme.

Limitations and Reflexivity

There are a number of limitations relating to the data and analysis presented in the study. Firstly, the sample size was very small, which impacts the transferability of the findings. A further limitation was the risk of response bias and also that of researcher bias due to their close affiliation with the programme (the researchers are employed by The Childhood Trust, which operates the DACL programme). Out of respect for families and referral partners, interviews for this study were not a condition of programme participation. Despite the small sample size, over 50% of the bedroom renovation projects delivered in 2019-2020 were evaluated.

Research Tools and Design

Prior to the interviews, the researchers developed an interview topic guide, which provided a general structure for the interviewing process. Since the interviews were semi-structured, the researcher asked subjects additional questions depending on their individual circumstances. After data collection, the researchers employed Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach as a framework for the thematic analysis. Robust thematic analyses require a coding process and framework that provide "*a clear trail of evidence for the credibility of the study."* [51] During the coding process, researchers analyse content for important words, phrases, and ideas and attach labels to them. [52] Patterns in the labeled codes are then arranged into overarching themes.

[51] Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., and Moules, N. J. (2017) 'Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*.
[52] King, N. (2004) 'Using templates in the thematic analysis of text', in C. Cassell and G. Symon (eds), Essential guide to qualitative methods in organizational research, London, UK: Sage. pp. 257–270.