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As living costs rise, furniture poverty grows behind closed doors

Schemes for families who can't afford beds and basic furniture are experiencing unprecedented demand as households struggle

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“Without furniture you can't do anything,” Afham tells me as he recalls how he, his wife and three young children found themselves in an empty flat in Newham. Afham is no stranger to adversity. “I'm originally from south Asia where I fought against injustice. In 2001 they broke my legs and threw me into the road thinking I was dead. I came to the UK and worked as a disability support teacher and my wife also teaches, but neither of us is allowed to work anymore.”

Afham's work papers were rescinded when new rules changed an asylum seeker's right to work. The loss of his home soon followed and his family was evicted just three weeks after his wife gave birth. With barely enough money for food and serious health problems, starting from scratch

seemed impossible. “I cannot work because I am an asylum seeker, so we just can’t afford furniture,” he explains. Then a friend of Afham’s recommended Homestore.

Since 1989, east Londoners have donated good quality furniture to Homestore. It is then sold exclusively to local people on low incomes, alongside affordable new white goods. All deliveries and collections are free of charge.



Afham and one of his sons. Photograph: Larissa Alves

Afham was amazed when he stepped into Homestore and saw what he could afford. “I couldn’t believe it with my own eyes. My kids were excited because they’d had nearly three months of no furniture. It was simply life saving.”

Many east Londoners find themselves in Afham’s shoes. Some come to Homestore after homelessness or time in a refuge. The charity I work for, Quaker Social Action, set up Homestore in 1989 as a practical, compassionate response to this need. What began in a tiny church hall has grown into a team of five people in Stratford. Around 70 local people give their time to keep the deliveries going.

Without schemes like Homestore, high-cost rent-to-own lenders can be very tempting, despite interest rates of up to 94%. When there’s no money for food or fuel, even charity shops can be too expensive. We recently compared 139 prices at Homestore with four other local charitable stores. The average price of an item elsewhere was £52.82, compared to £14.23 at Homestore.

It’s about more than just savings to our customers. When asked to sum it up, one person simply said: “We stopped sleeping on the floor.” Around 14 million UK households cannot afford one or more essential household goods at any one time (pdf). Each year, around 2,000 east Londoners on low incomes apply for a Homestore membership, and demand among working families is growing. In 2004, 65 working people registered with Homestore. This figure rose to 126 in 2009 and 254 in 2014. Today, 44% of Homestore customers are in some form of work, and 30% are, like Afham, living with a disability. As living costs rise, furniture poverty is growing, but it’s happening behind closed doors.



Homestore staff with a new bed. Photograph: Flix Films

Families and social landlords can both win from an increase in furnished tenancies. Research from the Human City Institute indicates that these encourage longer occupancies while reducing abandonments and rent arrears. Unfortunately, many social housing providers require properties to be emptied before new tenants arrive.

Addressing these problems will ease the pressure but they won't help families in the private rental sector who come to Homestore when affording deposits and monthly rent has had to come before a good night's sleep in a bed.

There is real dignity in owning the basic items that make home life possible. We should not dump our unwanted furniture and instead pass it on to a reuse scheme, if one is available in such a tough funding climate. For Afham, such schemes are a lifeline, for him and others. "Thanks to Homestore, now we have a computer table which we use when volunteering and providing legal assistance to vulnerable people," he explains. "It meant our survival and our future."

This article was amended on 3 March 2016 to correct one of the quotes from Afham.

If you live in east London you can donate furniture to Homestore or apply for membership on Quaker Social Action's website. Proof of low income is required. Those elsewhere can use the Furniture Reuse Network to find similar schemes.

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