The Essential Items

What does a household need to escape Furniture Poverty?

END FURNITURE POVERTY.ORG

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Furniture Poverty is the inability to access the basic furniture and appliances that provide a household with a decent quality of life and allow it to participate in the norms of society.

- End Furniture Poverty launched a consultation in November 2016 with the main objective of assessing how essential different furniture items are, with a view to using this list to help define who is in Furniture Poverty according to whether they own or can access this furniture. The consultation also asked respondents about items that are particularly difficult to access, and which barriers exist to helping those in Furniture Poverty.

- There were 101 respondents to the survey. Most respondents worked in the housing sector, but other respondents included those working in the charity sector, universities and for local authorities.

- The list of items deemed to be essential is as follows:
    - Bed, bedding and mattress
    - Table and chairs
    - Sofa and/or easy chairs
    - Wardrobe/drawers
    - Carpets in living rooms and bedrooms
    - Curtains or blinds
    - Washing machine
    - Refrigerator and freezer
    - Cooker/oven
    - TV

- The main barriers cited as preventing people in Furniture Poverty from getting the items they needed were:

    - **Low income** – people simply not earning enough or getting enough through their benefits to be able to afford the items they needed
    - **Funding eligibility** – existing sources of financial help having too narrow criteria, meaning that people who needed help were not eligible to apply for it.
    - **Amount of funding** – pots of funding and money, including Local Welfare Provision schemes, are not big enough to help everyone that needs it

- Respondents did not feel that the list of basic furniture and appliances would change much over the next five years.

- People who responded tended to support the use of the term Furniture Poverty as they felt it was clear, concise and would help to raise awareness of the issue.

- The list of Essential Furniture will go on to influence the work that End Furniture Poverty will be doing moving forward. It is hoped that the list will also inform the work of people working in the housing and poverty sectors, serving as a definitive, unifying list.

- The consultation will be repeated in 2 years' time to ensure it is maintained as up to date as possible.

INTRODUCTION

Furniture Poverty, defined as the inability to access the basic furniture and appliances that provide a household with a decent quality of life and the allow it to participate in the norms of society, is often a hidden problem that affects millions of people across the UK.

It is not a problem of merely struggling to meet a person's material needs; it is also about feeling able to lead a 'normal' life. Whether inviting family around for dinner or children having a sleepover with friends, somebody living in Furniture Poverty may not feel able to participate in the everyday social interactions that many of us take for granted.

The End Furniture Poverty campaign was launched to research the issue of Furniture Poverty, in order to raise awareness, to educate people about the potential solutions to Furniture Poverty and, ultimately, to ensure that everyone has access to the essential furniture and goods they need to lead a secure life.

In order to do this with any degree of rigour, it became necessary to establish a benchmark for Furniture Poverty, a way of measuring whether or not a household is living in Furniture Poverty. We set out to compile a list of the essential items – the items that a household needs in order to lead that basic acceptable quality of life, including the social aspects of life.

CONTEXT

What is End Furniture Poverty?

End Furniture Poverty is the campaigning arm of the FRC Group, a social business and charity based in Liverpool. FRC Group has nearly 30 years of experience of providing furniture, both new and pre-loved, to people in Furniture Poverty. Reducing and ultimately eradicating Furniture Poverty is at the heart of everything that FRC Group does.

End Furniture Poverty was launched in 2015 to research the issue of Furniture Poverty, in order to raise awareness, to educate people about the potential solutions to Furniture Poverty and, ultimately, to ensure that everyone has access to the essential furniture and goods they need to lead a secure life.

Why create a consultation?

In discussions with people we often found that the term 'Furniture Poverty' was a very broad one, with different meanings to different people. To some, an appliance such as a washing machine was considered absolute indispensable, whereas some thought it nonessential. The primary aim of compiling the list is to ensure that organisations and individuals are all talking about the same thing when discussing the issue of Furniture Poverty.

Furthermore, the list of Essential Items serves as a way of gauging whether a household might be living in Furniture Poverty. By assembling a list of the essential items – the items that a household needs access to in order to lead that basic acceptable quality of life, including the social aspects of life – we gave ourselves a benchmark by which to judge whether a household was living in Furniture Poverty.

This list will also serve as a foundation for some of our work moving forward. While the list will serve as a very rudimentary measure of whether a household is in Furniture Poverty, the debates and conversations sparked by the consultation have opened new avenues that we may choose to explore further down the line.

We plan on revisiting the list every two years to ensure that the list stays up-to-date with changes in trends and society and remains relevant to modern day Britain. For example, some items may not be as essential in two years, while some new items may become indispensable.
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METHODOLOGY

The consultation itself was a set of 12 questions divided into four sections. A full set of questions can be found in the Appendix, but the main thrust of the different sections was as follows:

1) Contact details
This allowed us greater insight into the types of sector and what kinds of exposure to Furniture Poverty the respondents would have. It also proved useful in ensuring that the responses we were collecting were of sufficient quality – i.e. that the respondent worked with or in close proximity to Furniture Poverty.

2) Furniture items
A list of 19 items (*see next section*) which respondents were asked to rate from 1 to 5 according to how essential they were (with 1 being 'not essential' and 5 'absolutely essential'). This section also included questions about any items that respondents felt strongly should be included or excluded.

3) Questions about furniture items
For respondents with direct experience of working with people in Furniture Poverty, the section contained questions about how the list might change over the next 5 years, which items are particularly difficult to access and what common obstacles exist to people in obtaining these items.

4) Questions about the End Furniture Poverty campaign
The final section was a more reflective exercise about the End Furniture Poverty campaign itself. The questions addressed whether the creation of the essential list is a valuable exercise, whether Furniture Poverty is a useful term to use for this type of poverty, and whether respondents were willing to be involved further in the campaign.

The survey opened on 14th November 2016 and closed on 22nd December 2016. It was circulated to the End Furniture Poverty mailing list, and various contacts and networks.

Where does the list of the 19 items originate?

The initial list of furniture items that the consultation is based on research conducted by the Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK (PSE) research project, led by the University of Bristol and with collaboration from five other universities: University of Glasgow, Heriot-Watt University, The Open University, Queen's University Belfast, and the University of York and two research institutions: the National Centre for Social Research and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

The team involved in this research project have conducted four surveys over the last 40 years (in 1983, 1990, 1999 and 2012). The aim of these surveys was to identify an overall list of items and activities that the British public felt everyone should be able to access in order to reach a minimum standard of living. Respondents are asked what they deemed to be 'necessities' – something the PSE defines as "something which everyone should be able to afford, and no one should have to do without."

The 2012 survey asked about 76 items and activities (46 for adults and 30 for children) in total. These items were first decided upon by in-depth focus groups across the UK to ensure they reflected a broad range of opinions. The list ranged from the ability to attend funerals and weddings to having household contents insurance or a suitable place for homework.

For our purposes, it is advantageous that some of the items and activities included in the 2012 survey and previous surveys are items of furniture. The surveys did not include every possible furniture item because the consultation process would have been exhaustively long, so key items that were indicative of others of a similar type were chosen. Over the course of the four surveys, they included seven items which we would class as furniture within our definition of Furniture Poverty.

These were:

- Bed, bedding and mattress
- Dining table and chairs
- Carpets in living room and bedrooms
- Curtains or blinds
- Washing machine
- Refrigerator and freezer
- TV

The list is not exhaustive and there are some obvious omissions to this list which most people would instinctively class as essential furniture items. However, from some of the other activities deemed 'essential' by the survey, we are able to glean a further set of items to include.

Cooker and oven
In the 2012 PSE survey, 91% of people said that 2 meals per day for an adult is a necessity, and 93% think that 3 meals per day for a child is a necessity. It is safe to imply that those same people would say that a cooker/hob is also a necessary in order to cook these meals.

Sofa/easy chairs
Given that in the 2012 survey, 64% of people thought that a dining table and chairs were essential, it is understood that a similar proportion of people will think that somewhere comfortable to relax is as important.

Wardrobe or chest of drawers
69% of people in 2012 thought that having appropriate clothes to wear for a job interview is a necessity. In order that these clothes can be properly stored, the person will need to have a wardrobe or chest of drawers.

In order to fully understand just how essential each element of these items are for people, we ungrouped some of the items that had been associated in the original surveys, such as the bed, bedding and mattresses, giving us a full list of 19 items which is then included on the survey.

RESULTS & ANALYSIS

Respondents

The total number of respondents was 110. These came from a range of backgrounds and sectors (see figure 1), with the majority coming from Housing Associations across the UK.

The charity/social enterprise category of respondents included a range of organisations, such as:

- Charitable trusts that specialise in donating money to people in urgent need of furniture
- Furniture recycling and reuse organisations
- Charities working directly with people at risk of furniture poverty such as those at risk of homelessness and ex-offenders
- Organisations specialising in financial inclusion projects

Respondents from Housing Associations had a range of different roles, including those with responsibility for Furnished Tenancies, Tenancy Officers, and Advice Officers.

Other respondents included representatives from housing infrastructure organisations such as Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA), the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH), and the National Federation of Arm's Length Management Organisations. We also had individuals from primary schools and universities giving their views.

The Essential Items

Figure 1 below shows the average ranking for each item. Five means the item is 'absolutely essential' whilst one is 'not essential at all'. The ranking of the items broadly mirrors what most people might judge to be the 'basics' items that allow someone to satisfy their basic survival needs. Items such as wardrobes and the TV, which some people might judge to be a luxury, are towards the bottom of the list.

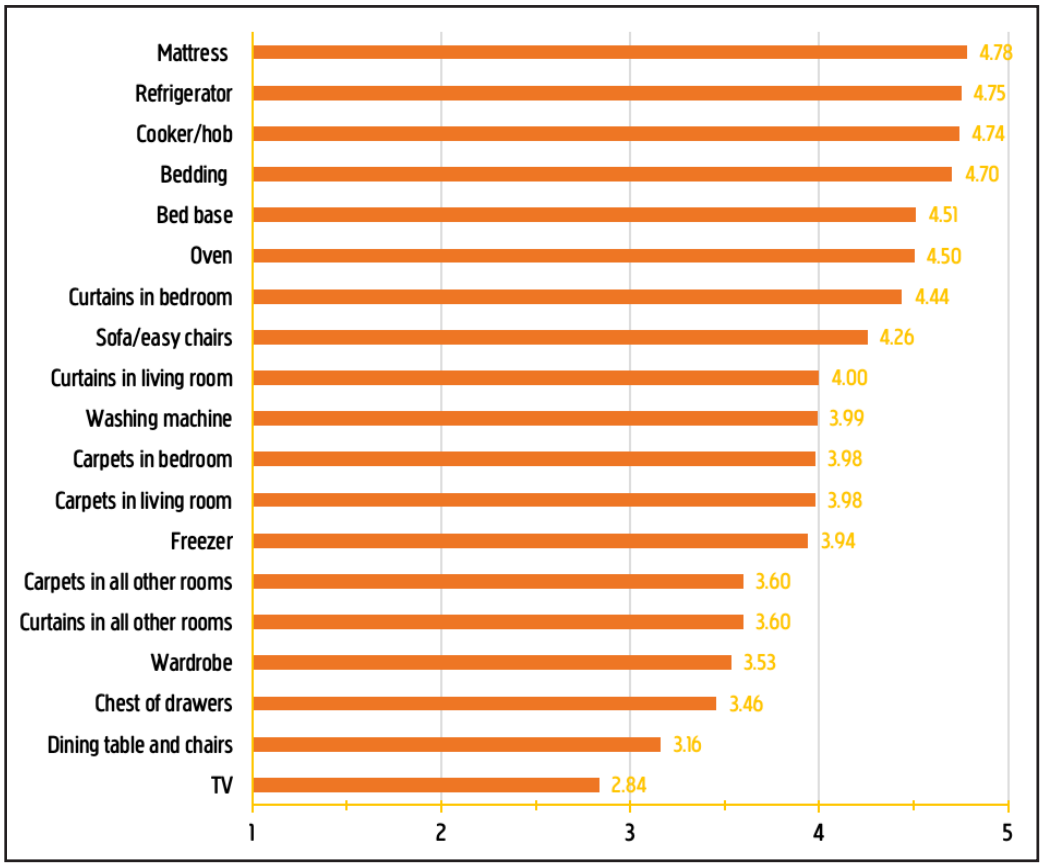


Fig. 1: Average response for the question: How essential are these items?

Figure 3 shows the standard deviations for the different items, shown in order of how essential the items were considered to be. There was generally a high level of consensus for the items that were judged most essential, and a lower level of consensus for items that were judged as less essential.

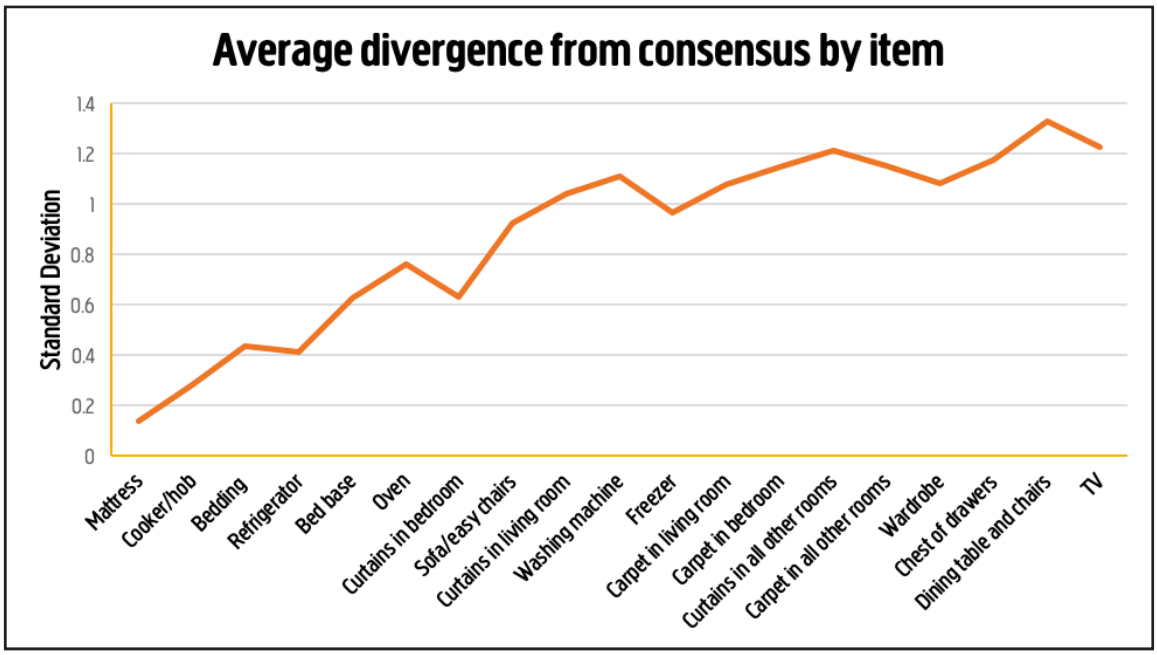


Fig. 2: Standard deviation for how essential the furniture items are

Any items that should not be on the list?

We asked respondents whether they thought that any of the items on the list should not be included or defined as essentials.

Of 101 respondents, 21 mentioned that a TV should not be on the list. Some qualified this, saying that a television might be a greater priority for some people depending on their circumstances. For example, a TV might be more important to a family with young children. Another said that it was important because, for an isolated person, a TV might be their only source of company. Others said that it was important but would not belong on a list of items that was about defining and avoiding destitution.

Other items not deemed to be essential by some respondents were curtains in rooms other than bedrooms, floor coverings / carpets, wardrobes, chest of drawers and dining table and chairs.

There was some opinion that whether items were essential or not depended on the property in question – if rooms overlook public places, blinds will naturally be more of a priority. Washing machines will be more essential for families or people with a disability who may be more likely to soil clothing.

Finally, one person thought that floor coverings should not be essential for people as this classification might divert resources from providing white goods for example. It is probable that this either/ or mentality might have informed some respondents' answers. This study is more interested in finding all of the items that make up a minimum standard, rather than looking to find what items are more important than others.

Any items that should be included that we haven't added?

Of the 24 people who answered this question and felt that something extra needed to be added to the list of essential items, the majority of suggestions specified cutlery, crockery and cooking materials as extra essential items.

Another popular suggestion from 9 respondents was a microwave because they are a cheaper initial cost than cookers and ovens, and if a family is struggling with paying utility bills, may reduce the amount because they speed up the cooking process.

Kettles, toasters, computers and printers, clothes dryers and cots were also mentioned as potentially essential items.

Are there any items that are particularly difficult to access? If so, why?

There were 68 responses to this question. Almost half of the comments (31) mentioned that white goods were more difficult to access than some other items. The main reasons cited were:

- White goods are more expensive
- Not enough organisations to meet the demand
- There are some additional Issues around transportation / collection costs and installation of items
- Specific criteria for specific items – it was mentioned a few times that washing machines are difficult to access for single people

Beds and mattresses were the also mentioned frequently. This was because of a lack of second-hand provision, the fact that many people have preconceived ideas about preloved mattresses, and, once again, transportation.

However, it is apparent that there is a divide here between those items that are easier to access second hand and grant funding, and those that are difficult to find across the board.

The most common items to be mentioned in the latter category were flooring and curtains. Again, certain cost issues were raised around being able to afford to carpet or buy flooring for an entire house. However, whereas white goods are often available preloved and beds with grant funding, these items

Some of the issues mentioned included:

- Few charities and grants offer awards for flooring in the first place
- Carpet is difficult to reuse or obtain cheaply
- Some organisations only provided funding for carpets to those with a disability or if there is a health and safety issue
- Curtains are not one-size-fits-all and difficult to get second-hand.

What are the main barriers associated with helping people to access this full list of items?

There were 74 different answers to this question, and several themes emerged.

The most common answer (25

respondents) was that the people in Furniture Poverty had a low income, so couldn't afford the items that they needed.

This was followed by people in need often not being eligible for charitable funding to give them the money or items they needed. A connected issue that there is simply not enough funding out there to cater for all of the people who needed it. It seems that the provision of more funding, targeted at people who are not currently eligible for funding assistance, would make a real difference for those who are experiencing Furniture Poverty.

The fourth most common answer concerned the cost of delivery and transport of the items. Even if someone was able to buy a good quality, preloved item of furniture they desperately needed, it would be very difficult for them to transport it back to their home. People who are more likely to be in Furniture Poverty are less likely to have cars or access to transport, and alternatives such as hiring a van for the day are prohibitively expensive and would mean that people would not be able to take such items back to where they were needed.

Other reasons cited were:

- Low availability of items that are of a sufficient quality that they can be reused. This is especially the case with white goods and mattresses, as we saw in question 6.
- Expensive credit: people in financial difficulty often only have access to sources of finance that will put them into further debt
- Health and safety or legal obligations: some preloved furniture requires fire retardant labels or PAT testing, and this was viewed as a potential barrier to someone being able to use and access the furniture they really need.
- Culture: some people would prefer to take out unsustainable loans to buy new furniture rather than use preloved or 'second-hand' furniture

A consistent theme was the impact of changes and reductions in Local Welfare Provision (LWP) schemes provided by local authorities. Where previously the Social Fund had offered people help accessing furniture and appliances in times of crisis, a 2012 reform devolved responsibility to local councils. This, coupled with reductions in funding to local authorities, has seen many councils roll back the support offered, while some have abolished their schemes altogether. .

How might the list change over the next five years?

Most respondents felt that the list would be unlikely to change over the next few years.

What do you think more generally about creating a list of Essential Items?

Over 50 of the respondents said that they thought creating a list of Essential Items was a good idea. Some said that the list would come in useful for various purposes, such as:

- Increasing recognition and awareness of Furniture Poverty as an issue
- Helping to bring together different agencies, such as local authorities or charities, to create a more uniform approach towards Furniture Poverty
- To influence social and private landlords about a minimum provision that tenants should expect
- To put more pressure on government and councils providing Local Welfare Provision schemes around what items should be eligible for being funded

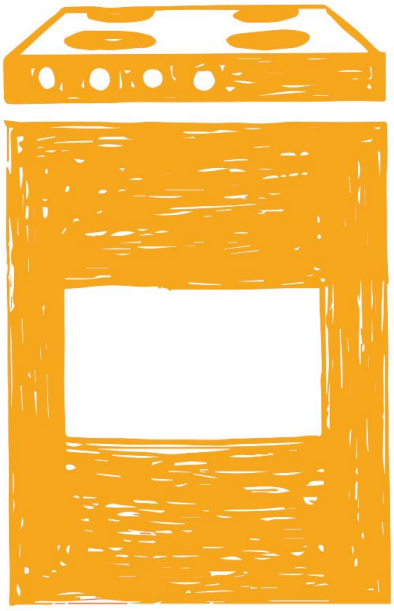
There were some respondents with reservations over creating a list. The main objection was that such a list would imply that the needs of all households were consistent, whilst in reality different households may have different needs. For example, a dining table with chairs might be essential for a family with children but not necessary for a single adult.

Is Furniture Poverty a useful term to use?

It was almost universally (70 out of 81 respondents) agreed that Furniture Poverty was a useful term to use. Most found it to be a clear and understandable term – it is obvious what it relates to – and felt that this would be a useful shorthand for communicating the challenges that people face, much like 'fuel poverty' and 'food poverty' have.

Some other respondents were less keen. Several saw it as being "too negative" a description while a handful of people queried whether those living in Furniture Poverty would "appreciate the label".

One respondent also pointed out that it was "not obvious that this includes white/electrical goods."



CONCLUSIONS

The results from the Essential Furniture consultation have been useful in improving our understanding of what it means to be in Furniture Poverty. It should also provide us with a consistent definition to serve as the basis of discussions about tackling Furniture Poverty.

In all the items deemed to be 'essential' were as follows:

- Bed, bedding and mattress
- Table and chairs
- Sofa and/or easy chairs
- Wardrobe/drawers
- Carpets in living rooms and bedrooms
- Curtains or blinds
- Washing machine
- Refrigerator and freezer
- Cooker/oven
- TV

While there was clearly greater consensus on some items than others, End Furniture Poverty has taken the decision to include items that are not seen as being universally essential. This is especially the in the with a TV, which many see as non-essential. However, our definition of Furniture Poverty includes everybody being able to achieve a 'normal' standard of living - including the ability to take part in social and societal norms. It is in keeping with this spirit that we have included items such as a television.

The most commonly cited issues that people face in trying to access each of these items were an inability to afford all of the furniture they need and difficulty in finding sources of funding to help cover the costs of furniture. This is especially the case in light of cuts to Local Welfare funding and what is felt to be the narrow eligibility criteria that some charities operate.

Some items on the list (carpets, curtains and mattresses) were singled out as particularly difficult to access. While the obvious barrier to white goods is cost, even on preloved appliances, there are plenty of grants and schemes to help with access to these, whether new or preloved. On these other items, It is especially challenging to find good quality preloved curtains, carpets and mattresses. The problem is further exacerbated by the lack of funding out there from the third sector – carpets and curtains tend to be the hardest items to secure funding for.

If we are serious about tackling Furniture Poverty, we need to look at these issues and create a strategic approach addressing these main barriers. Initiatives such as welfare advice to make sure people are accessing all of the help that they are entitled to and ensuring there are low cost ways of accessing safe credit will be important parts of tackling Furniture Poverty.

It is also worth stressing that unless a person has access to the full list of 10 items then they are still classed as living in Furniture Poverty. Providing access to just one, or several, of the items is not enough. This should hopefully help to foster and encourage a more joined-up, collaborative approach to helping people access these items.

APPENDIX I: COMPLETE QUESTIONNAIRE

Part One

Q1: Contact details
Name:
Organisation:
Email address:

Part Two

Q2: Which items do you think are absolute essentials which no household should have to do without? How important are these essentials? Please express a score between 1 and 5 for the following items, where 1 is 'not essential at all' and 5 is 'absolutely essential':

- Bed base / frame for all members of the household
- Mattress for all members of the household
- Bedding for all members of the household
- Dining table and chairs
- TV
- Sofa and / or easy chairs for all members of the household
- Wardrobe
- Chest of drawers
- Carpets / floor coverings in living room
- Carpets / floor coverings in bedroom
- Carpets / floor coverings in all other rooms of the house
- Curtains or blinds in bedroom
- Curtains or blinds in living room
- Curtains or blinds in all other rooms of the house
- Washing machine
- Refrigerator
- Freezer
- Cooker / hob
- Oven

Q3: Are there any items in the question above that you think categorically should not be on the list? If yes, please list the items and give reasons why.

Q4: Do you think we have missed any items out from the above list? If so, please specify what these items are and explain why you think they should be included.

Q5: Do you work with individuals in Furniture Poverty or have you experienced Furniture Poverty yourself?

Part Three

Q6: In your experience of helping those in Furniture Poverty, are there any particular items that are difficult to access? If so, why?

Q7: What are the main barriers associated with helping people to access this full list of items?

Q8: Do you expect this list of items to change over the next 5 years? If so, how and why?

Part Four

Q9: What do you think more generally about creating a list of Essential Furniture items, and defining Furniture Poverty according to the lack of this Furniture?

Q10: Do you think Furniture Poverty is a useful term to use?

Q11: Would you like to be added to our mailing list so that you can receive regular updates about our research, upcoming events and news?

Q12: Would you be interested in joining End Furniture Poverty as an official Supporter? Under this free initiative, you would join a coalition of like minded organisations across the country, and gain access to a range of pro bono services and specialist events.

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