

# Topic briefing

## Children experiencing homelessness

November 2019

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This briefing is an update of our July 2018 paper on children experiencing homelessness. This document is part of a series of topic briefings relating to housing and homelessness.

You may also be interested in our topic briefing on time in temporary accommodation 2019. All our briefings, reports, and consultation responses can be found in our Policy Library, at [https://scotland.shelter.org.uk/professional\\_resources/policy\\_library](https://scotland.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_library)

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## Key points

- In 2018/19, 14,043 children were in households assessed as homeless, which is equivalent to 38 children becoming homeless every day.
- On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019, 6,795 children were living in temporary accommodation. This is the fifth consecutive year that this figure has increased.
- Households with children spend longer, on average, in temporary accommodation than those without children (219 days to 166 days).
- Homelessness can have particularly devastating effects on children, leaving them unable to realise their potential to live healthy, happy lives. These consequences have been shown to worsen the longer a child is homeless.

## Background

Homelessness has been shown to have long-term negative consequences on various areas of a child's life.



Children who have been homeless are three to four times more likely to experience **mental health problems** than children who have never been homeless, even a year after they've secured a permanent home.<sup>1</sup>



According to teachers, children who are homeless or in bad housing are often **late, exhausted and struggle to maintain relationships** with other children.<sup>2</sup>



Bad housing can increase the risk of **severe ill-health or disability** by up to 25% during childhood and early adulthood.<sup>3</sup>



Children who have been homeless are more likely to experience **repeat homelessness** throughout their lives. The earlier a person becomes homeless, the more likely they are to have five or more homeless experiences.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Shelter (2006), [The chance of a lifetime](#)

<sup>2</sup> Digby A and Fu E for Shelter (2017), [Impacts of homelessness on children – research with teachers](#). Kantar Public

<sup>3</sup> Shelter (2006), [The chance of a lifetime](#)

<sup>4</sup> Mackie P and Thomas I for Crisis (2014), [Nations apart? Experiences of single homeless people across Great Britain](#)

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There are various statistics available to indicate how many children experience homelessness in Scotland. The Scottish Government's annual published homelessness figures contain counts of the number of children in temporary accommodation, and it is also possible to track the number of children contained within households assessed as homeless.

However, it's important to remember that statistics can only tell part of the story. An unknown number of people, including children, experience hidden homelessness, meaning they do not appear in official figures.<sup>5</sup> Some people aren't aware that they can make a homeless application. Others, especially families, exhaust all other options – including staying with friends and family, and even separating their children – before going to the council for help. Finally, due to their immigration status, some families are not eligible to make a homeless application.

Since 2017, homelessness has been an increasing priority for the Scottish Government and significant work has been undertaken around it, including an extensive inquiry by the Scottish Parliament Local Government and Communities Committee. This work culminated in the Scottish Government and COSLA launching the Ending Homelessness Together High Level Action Plan in November 2018.<sup>6</sup> This action plan pulls together the various workstreams from Government and Parliament, and condenses them into 49 recommendations that are broadly in line with our call for change and address many important areas, such as the improvement of temporary accommodation and the provision of high-quality tailored support. Whilst this plan is welcome, we need to ensure there is sufficient continued attention and resource to make the changes required to achieve the outcomes outlined. It is also important to focus on the upstream **prevention** of family homelessness which is the most effective way truly tackle this issue and minimise risk and damage for children and young people.

### Children in households assessed as homeless

Official figures relating to the numbers of homeless applications and assessments are recorded on a household level, rather than an individual level. However, Shelter Scotland requested further unpublished statistics from the Scottish Government about the number of children contained within homeless households, and the age breakdown of children in these families.



**14,043 children were in households assessed as homeless (or threatened with homelessness) in 2018/19.**



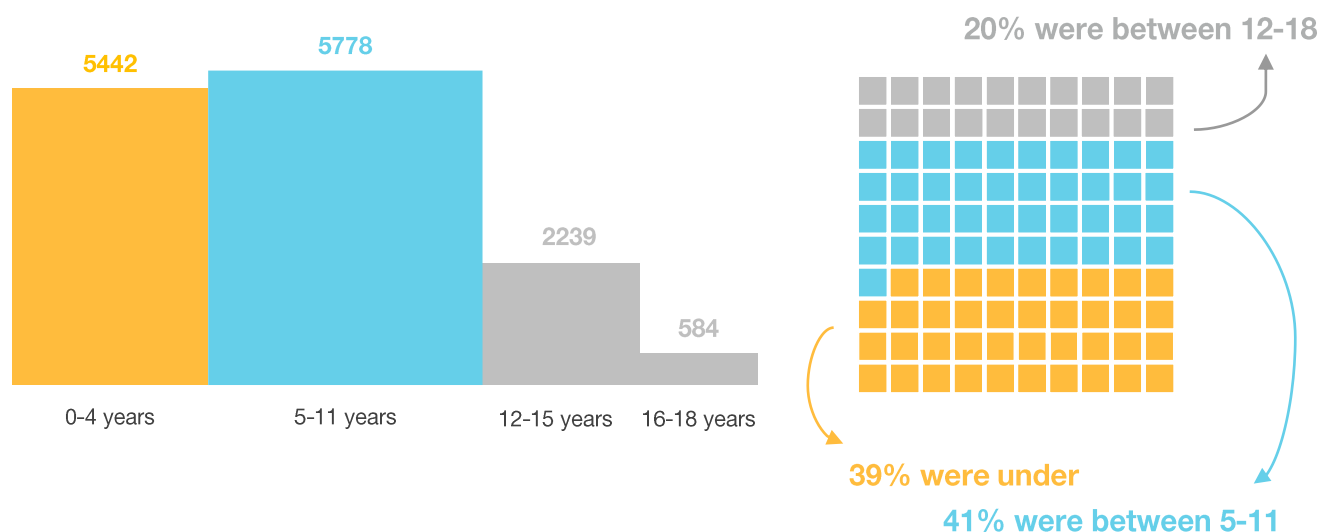
**This is a 5% decrease compared to the year before.**

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<sup>5</sup> Shelter Scotland (2018); [Hidden homelessness topic briefing](#)

<sup>6</sup> Scottish Government and COSLA; [Ending Homelessness Together High Level Action Plan](#)

## 80% of children in homeless households were under 11



The high number of young children reflects the experiences of our advisers, who regularly assist families with young children who are experiencing pressure in other ways, for example being subject to the benefit cap,<sup>7</sup> and the prohibitive cost of childcare. However, given what we know about the worsening impact of homelessness the earlier someone becomes homeless, it is positive that a significant decrease was seen in children who are experiencing homelessness aged 0-4 compared to 2017-18, and that this figure has been consistently decreasing since 2014-15.

### 0-4 years

▼ 7%

### 5-11 years

▼ 2%

### 12-15 years

▼ 6%

### 16-18 years

▼ 8%

It is important to note that these figures do not include 16-17 year olds making an application on their own: only those who remain within a household with adults.

Emma<sup>\*8</sup> is single mum with children who became homeless. She is staying in temporary accommodation with her children, but she can't afford the rent due to the benefit cap. She has asked the council if the temporary accommodation can be made permanent, in order to reduce the rent, but this is unlikely to happen. Her depression is getting worse as she worries about being evicted. When she approached the council for help again, the homeless officer said she should give two of her children to her former partner or her mum so that she would no longer be subject to the benefit cap and could afford her housing.

<sup>7</sup>Shelter Scotland (2018), [Shelter Scotland evidence for the Work and Pensions Committee inquiry into the benefit cap](#)

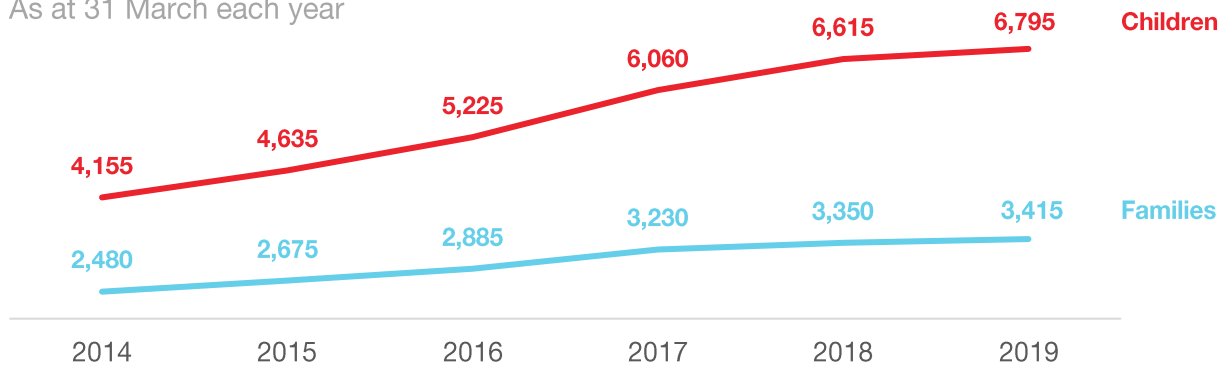
<sup>8</sup> All names have been changed throughout this document to protect the identity of Shelter Scotland clients.

## Children in temporary accommodation

This decrease in the number of children in households assessed as homeless is not reflected in the number of children and families in temporary accommodation, which is rising.

### The number of children and families in temporary accommodation has risen for the fifth consecutive year

As at 31 March each year

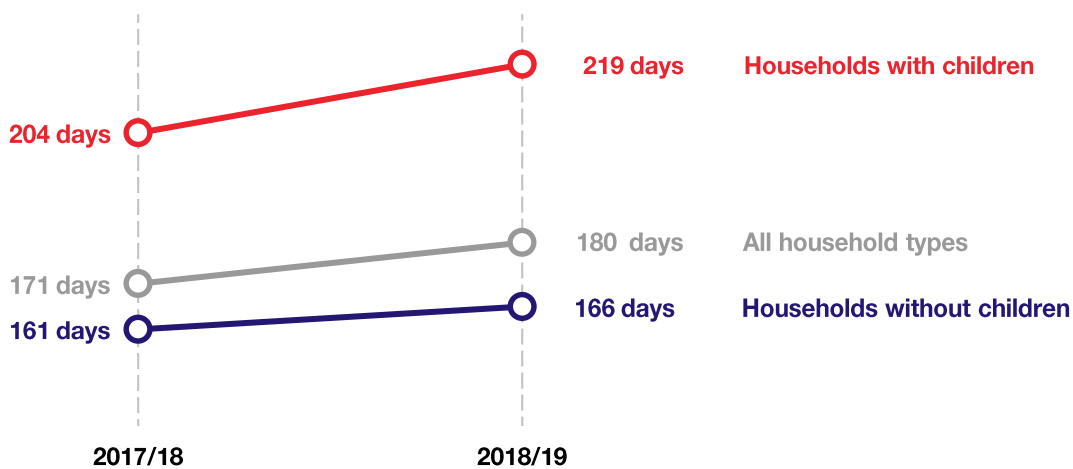


This latest increase means the number of children in temporary accommodation has increased by 64% since 2014.

We also know that **households with children tend to spend longer in temporary accommodation than households without children**. The time spent by all households in temporary accommodation is increasing, but this is particularly the case for households with children.

### Households with children spend more time in temporary accommodation

And the gap is widening

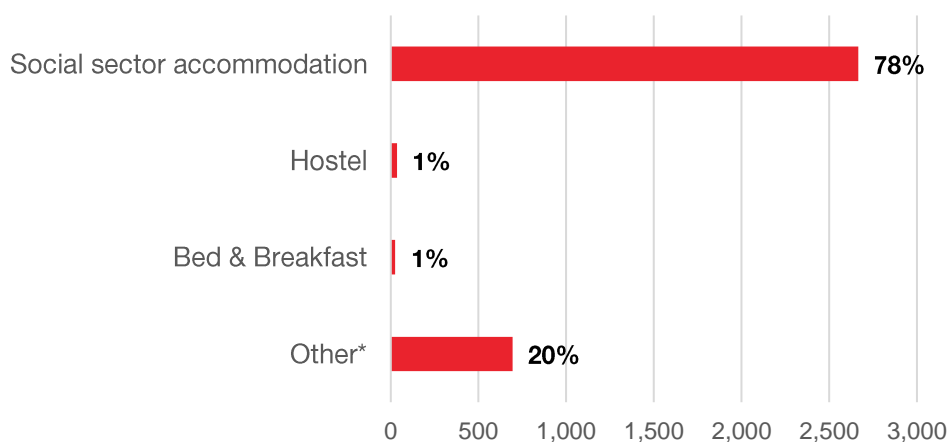


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Local authorities use lots of different types of temporary accommodation to fulfil their duties to households applying as homeless. Some accommodation is classed as ‘emergency accommodation’, such as privately-owned bed and breakfast hotels (B&Bs) or hostels (both privately owned and local authority run). Other forms of temporary accommodation are temporary furnished flats or houses owned by the local authority, other registered social landlords, or properties leased from the private rented sector.

## The majority of families were in social sector temporary accommodation

As at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019



\*‘Other’ accommodation includes women’s refuges and other accommodation not owned by the local authority.

Conditions vary as well as the services and support which is offered, and the facilities included. The individual situations of families can make some accommodation more suitable than others dependent on the distance from schools, support networks, and areas that the family know and feel safe.

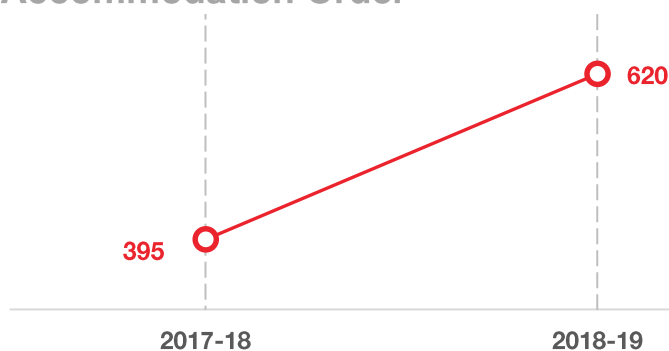
Fiona\* made a homeless application after experiencing domestic abuse. She was offered temporary accommodation but it was far from her home, her support network, and would have meant multiple expensive bus trips to her child’s nursery. Instead, she moved in with her young children to her mum’s house. She slept on a sofa bed in overcrowded conditions for three months until a suitable home became available for her and her children.

### Unsuitable Accommodation Order

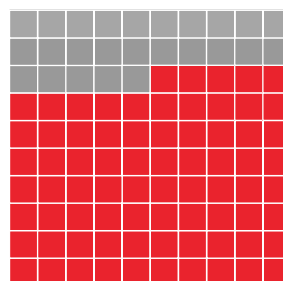
The Unsuitable Accommodation Order specifies the number of days which households with children or pregnant people can be placed in unsuitable accommodation such as hostels or B&Bs. In October 2017, this order was amended to reduce the limit from 14 days to 7 days. Since this reduction, the number of breaches of the order has increased dramatically.

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## There has been a 57% increase in breaches of the Unsuitable Accommodation Order



Breaches also occurred in 10 other local authorities



75% of breaches occurred in Edinburgh

This increase in breaches is completely unacceptable, and represents a failure on behalf of local authorities to act within the law. The amendment to the Unsuitable Accommodation Order is welcome, but the dramatic rise in breaches shows the need for greater resource planning at local authority level, and enforcement to ensure that legislation is upheld in practice.

Amanda\* was stuck in a Premier Inn with no cooking facilities for over two weeks, when she and her children became homeless. She had to borrow money to feed her family.

### Support for children who are experiencing homelessness

Homelessness can have a devastating effect on children experiencing it. One specific recommendation in the Ending Homelessness Together Action Plan is to undertake a wellbeing assessment in relation to each child in a household assessed as homeless, to ensure any additional learning or social support required is put in place.<sup>9</sup> Shelter Scotland strongly support this recommendation as one way to safeguard children experiencing the crisis of homelessness.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Scottish Government and COSLA; [Ending Homelessness Together High Level Action Plan](#)

<sup>10</sup> Shelter Scotland (2018); [Shelter Scotland response to the Work and Pensions Committee inquiry into the welfare safety net](#)



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## Conclusion

The trauma of homelessness affects all aspects of children's lives, including health, attainment and relationship building. The most recent data shows that 14,043 children were in households assessed as homeless last year. The decrease compared to 2017-18 data is welcome, but 38 children losing their home per day is 38 too many. Recent data also shows that an increasing number of children are spending an even longer time stuck in temporary accommodation.

A dual approach is needed to tackle this trauma: effective early preventative action to ensure that households never need to apply as homeless in the first place; and, for those who do apply as homeless, good quality temporary accommodation that ensures as short and smooth a transition as possible to a settled home.

Temporary accommodation is an important stepping stone on the way to a more permanent home, and although efforts are being made across Scotland to expedite people's transitions to settled homes and to reduce the use of temporary accommodation as a whole, in many areas we are a long way from that ideal scenario in which households are able to move straight into a permanent home after making a homeless application. **It is therefore vital that temporary accommodation is of good quality.** Unfortunately, this is not always the case at present. Legally enforceable standards are therefore necessary to ensure good quality temporary accommodation.

While we welcome the Scottish Government's plan to introduce minimum standards in temporary accommodation, we would advocate for their introduction much sooner than 2023. We also need to see proper funding for local authorities to deliver any resulting standards, and we need to ensure there is a mechanism to hold authorities to account when those standards are not upheld.

### Recommendations:

- 1. Minimum enforceable temporary accommodation standards should be implemented as soon as possible, and cover not only physical standards, but management and location standards.**
- 2. The use of Bed and Breakfast should be ended entirely**
- 3. These changes should be supported by strong statutory guidance for local authorities.**

More widely, the goal of reducing – let alone eradicating – homelessness across Scotland cannot be achieved without proactive preventative work. The Ending Homelessness Together Action Plan sets out an intention to consider a new duty with regards to homelessness prevention for local authorities, other public bodies and delivery partners.<sup>11</sup> A timescale for this has yet to be released. This proposed

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<sup>11</sup> Scottish Government and COSLA: [Ending Homelessness Together High Level Action Plan](#)

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prevention duty is welcomed by Shelter Scotland; preventing the trauma of homelessness in the first place will always be better than waiting until someone is in crisis. Effective prevention of homelessness is also dependent on a supply of affordable housing and for this reason, efforts to ensure a sustained large-scale affordable house building programme are essential.

**Recommendations:**

- 4. Prevention of homelessness must be prioritised and adequately resourced.**
- 5. The Scottish Government must keep pace with demand and continue to invest in and build high levels of safe, decent and affordable homes in places and communities where people want to live.**

Shelter Scotland helps over half a million people every year struggling with bad housing or homelessness through our advice, support and legal services. And we campaign to make sure that, one day, no one will have to turn to us for help.

We're here so no one has to fight bad housing or homelessness on their own.

Please support us at [shelterscotland.org](https://shelterscotland.org)

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