

Briefing

**Temporary
accommodation:
a summary ten point
plan**

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Shelter

Introduction

Temporary accommodation is accommodation provided by councils to homeless people, either for a short while or for longer periods while they find a permanent home. It is the single biggest part of the homelessness service provided by councils. It is also the area that many housing providers report as being the most challenging. In late November, Shelter held a one-day conference and canvassed the views of homelessness service providers in order to explore the issues and generate practice ideas for meeting the challenges of temporary accommodation. This briefing presents a summary of ten key ideas for providers of temporary accommodation. Following this outline briefing Shelter is looking at developing a full practice briefing building on these key themes to help local authorities in providing temporary accommodation.

Background

It is four years since the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 gave all people who are assessed as homeless the right to temporary accommodation. In 2004 Shelter published 'Temporary accommodation: two years on'¹, research indicating that organisations were struggling to meet unprecedented demand for temporary accommodation in light of these new duties. While much has changed in the two years since this research was conducted, there is still evidence that the duty to provide temporary accommodation to all homeless applicants is one of the most difficult to achieve.

There have been three pressures on councils that have led to increasing numbers of homeless applicants requiring temporary accommodation. Before 2002, councils had to provide temporary accommodation to many homeless people and this was already rising as homelessness generally was rising. With the implementation of the Housing (Scotland) Act in 2002, all homeless applicants were given the right to temporary accommodation for a time, and then in 2004, additional requirements in terms of the type of accommodation that could be given to some applicants were introduced.²

Shelter published an overview of practice in the use of temporary accommodation in May 2005.³ It showed that while many Scottish councils had been reducing their reliance on B&B by developing alternative forms of accommodation, for others use of B&Bs had continued to grow. The following recommendations draw on the research conducted in 2005, and the ideas generated at the Shelter seminar in November 2006.⁴

¹ This report can be found at <http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/policy/policy-421.cfm/plitem/155/>

² The Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2004 requires that any accommodation provided for families with children must meet certain basic standards or be deemed unsuitable.

³ 'Alternatives to bed and breakfast: an overview of practice in Scotland' can be found at <http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/policy/policy-421.cfm/ct/2/sb/15/pg/3/plitem/172>

⁴ Details of the seminar and presentations can be found at <http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/policy/policy-7047.cfm>

A summary ten point plan

1 A strategic approach – adopting a formal strategy

All councils have a duty to produce a homelessness strategy and Communities Scotland is encouraging councils to draw up a temporary accommodation strategy as part of their wider homelessness strategy. A detailed strategy allows a long term planning of temporary accommodation that meets obligations and anticipated needs. A written strategy also allows better joint working and helps to ensure corporate commitment from senior levels of the council. Practitioners at our seminar identified both of these as crucial to meeting strategic objectives such as ending B&B use, and to ensuring that long term financial planning is in place. A strategy for temporary accommodation should be based on a proper needs assessment of those applying as homeless and set corporate targets linked to a specific, measurable action plan.

2 A strategic approach – prevention of homelessness

If prevention measures are prioritised then they can have an impact on the number of households needing to access temporary accommodation. Most common measures are family and youth mediation, rent deposit guarantee schemes to provide access to private sector accommodation, and provision for advice and information on housing options. To be truly effective the provision of prevention measures is a much wider agenda than can be undertaken by housing and homelessness services. Preventing households from going into temporary accommodation can be useful by giving them the option of staying with friends and family while their application is being considered.

3 A strategic approach – reviewing allocations

Increasing the priority given to homeless applicants in allocations policy is an effective way of reducing the amount of time homeless applicants spend in temporary accommodation. To ensure that the allocations policy works effectively to house homeless people it should be linked to a temporary accommodation strategy and the number of lets to homeless households should be monitored on an ongoing basis. Where it is felt that the current system of allocation is not allowing an adequate proportion of lets to homeless households, then consideration should be given to changing allocation policy.

4 A strategic approach – assessing applications

Participants at the Shelter seminar identified assessment procedures as key to a well-managed temporary accommodation policy. In particular, recruiting more staff to manage applications allows specialisms to develop which can both speed up the application

process and allow staff the time to take on casework responsibilities. Supporting staff by providing training and on-going supervision will help staff to identify applicants' support needs and provide a better 'customer-focused' service. Efficient processing of homelessness applications will reduce the time that people spend in temporary accommodation and ensure that permanent accommodation that meets their individual needs is sustainable.

5 Expanding supply of temporary accommodation – making better use of council stock

Over the last two decades the amount of furnished accommodation that councils provide has grown significantly. This has come about partly from councils' own funding and partly from central funding. Furnished Tenancy Grants provided by the Scottish Executive have been an important factor in the development of council stock into temporary accommodation. Typically accommodation is taken out of mainstream stock for a period of up to three years. Councils using this option are keen to ensure that flats and houses are dispersed across a wide area in order to prevent particular properties from becoming stigmatised and to ensure homeless households are placed in sustainable communities.

6 Expanding supply of temporary accommodation – housing association accommodation

For many councils, Housing Association stock makes up a large proportion of social rented accommodation and making use of this stock through Section 5 referrals plays an important role in meeting their duty to provide permanent accommodation. In addition, however, Housing Associations should be asked to play an increasing role in providing temporary accommodation. This may be accommodation leased to councils who manage it as temporary accommodation, or through nomination agreements with Housing Associations

7 Expanding supply of temporary accommodation – private sector accommodation

Many councils are looking to private rented accommodation as a source of temporary or interim accommodation, either through Private Sector Leasing Schemes or Lead Tenancy Schemes. The advantage of using private sector accommodation is that it does not reduce the pool of accommodation available for permanent lets. Private Sector Leasing Schemes typically involves a council entering into long term fixed lease with a private landlord and appointing an agent to manage the property. Rents paid to private landlords are guaranteed for a fixed term and set at below market level. Lead Tenancy Schemes were set up to refurbish empty private properties which can be leased to a RSL to provide temporary accommodation.

8 Targeting resources – getting the support right

Participants at our seminar in November highlighted that the support that is given to homeless households while they are in temporary accommodation is vital to give them the best chance of sustaining a permanent lease. Using the period of time that people are in temporary accommodation can help people to learn skills about tenancy management and give opportunities for families who have been through a chaotic period to stabilise and move on. To achieve this goal, resources should be targeted at providing support to people in temporary accommodation and enabling homeless advice workers design care plans to help people access support.

9 Targeting resources – funding of temporary accommodation

Minimising the use of B&Bs is a cost-effective option since many of the alternatives are significantly cheaper and the housing benefit subsidy available on accommodation leased from RSLs and private landlords is substantially higher. 'Spend to Save' Schemes are an innovative approach to reallocating money from B&B budget to be reinvested for any purpose that prevents homelessness or a long stay in B&B. Among the uses this money is put to are ideas such as interest free payments to tenants in rent arrears to prevent eviction, recruiting more staff to provide outreach housing support and purchase of stock on the open market to convert to temporary accommodation.

10 Targeting resources – more permanent accommodation

Clearly the lack of permanent accommodation for applicants to move into creates a great strain on temporary accommodation. Maximising overall housing supply will mean less time spent in temporary accommodation. Shelter is calling for a significant increase in the amount of money available for building new affordable housing for rent from the Comprehensive Spending Review in 2007. The ongoing impact of the Right to Buy further reduces the houses available, and makes it harder for councils to predict what stock will be available in the future. Where problems are identified councils can use pressured area status to remove areas of housing from the Right to Buy for five years.