

Edinburgh Poverty Commission: Places

Shelter Scotland Consultation response

What are the biggest challenges to securing and sustaining an affordable home in Edinburgh?

Despite Edinburgh's apparent prosperity and attractiveness as a place to live, many people are struggling to sustain a home that meets their needs.¹ Last year, 3,229 households applied as homeless and on 31st March 2019 1,515 households were in temporary homeless accommodation.² In 2018-19, 565 households in Edinburgh approached Shelter Scotland for support with their housing, including through our national helpline and our Edinburgh Community Hub.³ Below we outline several areas which prevent people in Edinburgh from finding and keeping their homes:

- Lack of affordable and social housing
- Homelessness system and temporary accommodation
- Lack of support

Lack of affordable and social housing

Regardless of the sector a household lives in, housing in Edinburgh is becoming increasingly unaffordable.

The private rented sector in Edinburgh is the largest in the country with 25% of households renting privately, compared to just 14% nationally, equivalent to nearly 60,000 households.⁴ Since 2010, average private rents in the Lothians have increased by 46%, compared to 25% nationally. The average advertised rent for a two-bedroom property in Lothians is now £973⁵ and it's worth nothing that, given this includes rents in East, West and Midlothian, the average rent in the City of Edinburgh will likely be substantially higher. Estimates suggest less than 2% of properties available in Edinburgh are affordable to people in receipt of local housing allowance.⁶ For many of our clients, this means renting privately is becoming more and more of a struggle for them, if it was ever an option at all.

Many low-income households also struggle to use the private rented sector due to "No DSS" policies: Around two thirds of private landlords would prefer not to let to tenants who

¹ Shelter Scotland (2019) [Are you with us? Edinburgh campaign briefing](#)

² Scottish Government (2019), [Homelessness in Scotland 2018-19](#)

³ Internal Shelter Scotland data from 2018/19

⁴ Scottish Government (2019) [Scottish Household Survey - Annual Report 2018 - LA Tables](#)

⁵ Scottish Government (2019), [Private sector rent statistics: 2010 – 2019](#)

⁶ October 4th 2019, <https://www.edinburghnews.scotsman.com/news/people/just-1-50-housing-benefits-can-afford-rent-flat-anywhere-edinburgh-new-figures-show-643089>

claim housing benefit.⁷ Shelter Scotland spoke directly to private renters about this, some of whom had experience of this happening in Edinburgh. One said, “landlords have huge snobbery over what tenants they will accept, most properties refuse [housing benefit]”.⁸

The prices and practices that prevent low income households from using the private rented sector therefore place increased pressure on the social rented sector, as does the (for many) prohibitively expensive cost of buying a home. The cost of a flat or maisonette, for example, increased from £170,889 in Edinburgh in November 2010 to £214,763 in September 2019, compared to a Scottish increase from £96,400 to £113,642 over the same time period.⁹

In March this year there were 20,917 applicants registered EdIndex, the social housing waiting list in the city.¹⁰ And yet Edinburgh has a small social rented sector: at present, just 14% of households in the city rent in the social sector, compared to 23% across Scotland.¹¹ Against the context of demand, there is clearly a need for substantial investment in social house building in Edinburgh.

However, many households in the social rented sector are also struggling with the cost of their housing almost a quarter of households in Edinburgh who rent from a social housing provider have an annual income of less than £10,000, and the same proportion say they are “not managing well financially.”¹² 83% of households in the social rented sector in Edinburgh are on housing benefit or the housing element of Universal Credit.¹³

Finally, housing costs aren’t limited to rent or mortgage payments. Many of the people Shelter Scotland support face up-front costs that are particularly prohibitive, such as substantial deposits or charges for rent in advance, and high ongoing fuel costs,¹⁴ that many households struggle to pay.

Homelessness system and temporary accommodation

Scotland has some of the most progressive housing legislation in the world including rights to temporary accommodation for those who are experiencing homelessness. But in practice, applying as homeless can be complicated. It requires numerous appointments, information sharing with regards to benefit and immigration status, and, all too often, awareness of statutory rights. Shelter Scotland advisers regularly find that this can be

⁷ Shelter Scotland (2017), [Shelter Scotland briefing: 'No DSS'](#)

⁸ Shelter Scotland (2018), [How to tackle 'No DSS' policies: views from private renters](#)

⁹ UK House Price Index, [Comparison of average price of flats and maisonettes for two locations](#)

¹⁰ Scottish Government (2019) [Housing Statistics for Scotland - Housing lists](#)

¹¹ Scottish Government (2019) [Social tenants in Scotland 2017](#) [Chart 5.8]

¹² Scottish Government (2019) [Social tenants in Scotland 2017](#) [Chart 5.22]

¹³ Calculated using Stat-Xplore

¹⁴ 17% of households in Edinburgh live in fuel poverty under the current definition. Scottish Government (2019) [SHCS Local Authority Analysis 2015-2017](#)

overwhelming for people in crisis, and many need thorough and informative support through the complex process; support often unavailable.

If and when households do make a homeless application, temporary accommodation is not always the relief from crisis and poverty that it is designed to be. In June 2018, Edinburgh Council's Homelessness Taskforce stated that demand for temporary accommodation was exceeding supply,¹⁵ and the most recent statistics show that this demand is only increasing.¹⁶ This means that households are being kept in unsuitable accommodation for increasing periods. In fact, in 2018-19, there were 465 breaches of the Unsuitable Accommodation Order in Edinburgh last year – accounting for 75% of all breaches in Scotland.¹⁷ Being in temporary accommodation can have financial implications: temporary accommodation can be extremely expensive, and benefits do not always cover the whole cost of temporary accommodation. This is exacerbated further as many households experiencing homelessness are working and not always in receipt of housing benefit. Furthermore, being in temporary accommodation can place additional pressures on household income such as transport costs if the property is further from the household's network, or food costs if there are no cooking facilities. As a result, households can find themselves accruing arrears even before they move into a permanent home.

Lack of support

42% of households assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness identified at least one support need.¹⁸ However, it is not just the homelessness system which individuals need additional support to access. For people already in, or moving into, permanent accommodation, there is a lack of tenancy sustainment support. Many Shelter Scotland clients find themselves needing help with the complex and opaque benefits system, to apply for grants for furniture and white goods, to manage bill payments, or to tackle disrepair issues. All these matters are essential for sustaining a tenancy, but can be very difficult especially for those in their first property or those with mental health issues or complex needs. Errors or delays paying bills can cause serious debts which can take years to pay off, compounding existing poverty.

There also seems to be a lack of permanent supported accommodation, which is often the accommodation of choice for individuals with complex needs. According to our advisers, the majority of supported accommodation seems to be available only on a temporary basis, or for just one year, before individuals are expected to progress on to mainstream accommodation. Whilst this might be suitable for some people who may only need

¹⁵ City of Edinburgh Council (2018), [Housing and Economy Committee Thursday, 7th June 2018](#)

¹⁶ Scottish Government (2019), [Homelessness in Scotland 2018-19](#)

¹⁷ Scottish Government (2019), [Homelessness in Scotland 2018-19](#)

¹⁸ Scottish Government (2019), [Homelessness in Scotland 2018-19](#)

temporary support to gain the necessary skills to manage a tenancy, there is a need for supported accommodation on a permanent basis.

How does the cost and availability of transport in Edinburgh affect people's ability to work, study or access essential services?

All too often, households who apply as homeless are placed in temporary accommodation far from their support networks, places of work, or their children's school. In our experience, in an effort to minimise disruption to children's lives, many parents try to continue sending their children to their original school rather than moving them somewhere closer to their accommodation when they don't know how long they'll be there for. However, the price of public transport can be prohibitive. Our advisers have also worked with families in which single parents have been unable to go work due to the time they spend taking children to school, which leads to loss of income.

How does the fact of inequality between places in Edinburgh affect the ability of communities to work together to improve their areas?

Stereotypes

It is the experience of Shelter Scotland advisers that stereotypes of some areas of Edinburgh are a barrier for households experiencing homelessness from accepting offers of accommodation there. Whilst not directly related to communities working together, these attitudes are difficult to shift, and aren't conducive to general improvement.

Community action vs private developers

However, there have been a number of examples of communities coming together to make bids under Community Right to Buy legislation, or in similar efforts to take ownership - literal or not - of a local area. For example, in Marchmont, a community group proposed to buy the Sick Kids Hospital under the (then) new urban right-to-buy laws, in order to build affordable housing and a community space. However, the building was sold to private property developers instead. In Leith, an area with a very different SIMD profile to Marchmont, members of the local community came together to set up the Save Leith Walk campaign to prevent the demolition of much-loved buildings by a private developer. This campaign has been successful so far, as the plans have been rejected, but it is understood that an appeal has been lodged by the developer. These are just two examples, but show that communities of all income profiles *do* come together to try to realise their own visions for their areas, but aren't always successful in the face of big business.

What has been successful and what more can the city do to address these issues?

Many of these issues come down to, at their root, a lack of supply of affordable housing. The bottleneck in temporary accommodation, rising rents and house prices, and

communities taking matters into their own hands, all stem from a simple deficit in affordable and social homes. Despite the substantial house building efforts involved in the Affordable Housing Supply Programme, socially rented homes in Edinburgh make up just 15% of all dwellings; a figure that has been consistently falling.

In recent years, a rise in short term lets has had a uniquely acute pressure on Edinburgh's housing system. Recent research shows Airbnb listings account for 16.7% of dwellings in Edinburgh's city centre,¹⁹ meaning less housing stock is available for arguably it's primary purpose: to house people. Urgent action is required to ensure that housing stock is used to its best effect to meet the needs of the resident population.

A variety of measures will be required in the city to tackle availability issues including assessing the use of section 75 agreements, regulating the use of stock for non-residential housing such as short term lets and privately owned empty homes, and building new homes. Edinburgh City Council have recently committed to funding an officer within the council to tackle the problems of empty homes which is a great first step, and the council have also shown commitment to tackling the issue of short term lets.

It is clear that significant investment is still needed, but the housing sector faces a cliff edge in terms of housebuilding targets post 2021. As a local authority with particular housing pressures, Edinburgh must make the case that large-scale investment in affordable housing is still needed beyond the lifetime of this parliament.

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¹⁹ October 28th 2019, Indigo House, <https://indigohousegroup.com/short-term-lets-research/>