

Research

Temporary accommodation in Scotland: two years on

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Shelter

Temporary accommodation in Scotland: two years on

Summary points

This is a summary of an online poll conducted by Shelter in September 2004.

- The vast majority of practitioners say that they cannot meet the duty to provide temporary accommodation to everyone who is homeless.
- The most common reason for not meeting the duty is lack of *suitable* accommodation.
- Temporary accommodation use overall has risen, with furnished flats accounting for the biggest part of that. However, bed and breakfast use has also risen, with almost half of respondents reporting longer stays in bed and breakfast.
- Placing people in temporary accommodation “out of area” is only minority practice but among that minority, its use has increased.
- Despite the recent injection of funding through the “Supporting People” budget the biggest temporary accommodation need is for supported accommodation.
- Use of private sector accommodation – eg leasing property from private landlords – is seldom used at present but is expected to become more common in the future.

The poll shows that – although there are some measures that a council can take, such as exploring private sector partnerships or dovetailing support and accommodation – there is still a pressing need for more and more varied temporary accommodation.

Introduction

In September 2002 local authorities took on new responsibilities to provide temporary accommodation to homeless people who, until that point, had only been entitled to “advice and assistance”. This new duty was mainly designed to help single people so that if they were homeless the local council would provide some short-term accommodation and assistance to give them time to find somewhere more permanent to stay.

In the two years since then Shelter’s frontline workers report many examples of people who should have been placed in temporary accommodation simply being turned away. At the same time, local authority staff themselves point out the difficulties they face in making sure enough temporary housing is available to meet demand.

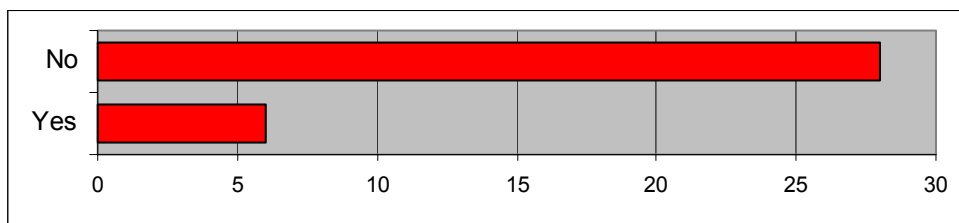
In September 2004, two years after the duty was introduced, Shelter decided to conduct a short poll of housing practitioners via the *Changing Homelessness in Practice* pages on our website. 34 responses were received, 22 of whom identified themselves as working in a homelessness section of a local authority. This note details those responses¹.

¹ We readily recognise that this is more in the nature of a *poll* of housing practitioners, reporting their *perceptions* of patterns rather than anything more thorough. Nevertheless, the same patterns are often evidenced by Scottish Executive statistics so the perceptions of practitioners, as those who are dealing directly with temporary accommodation, should certainly not be dismissed.

Meeting the duty

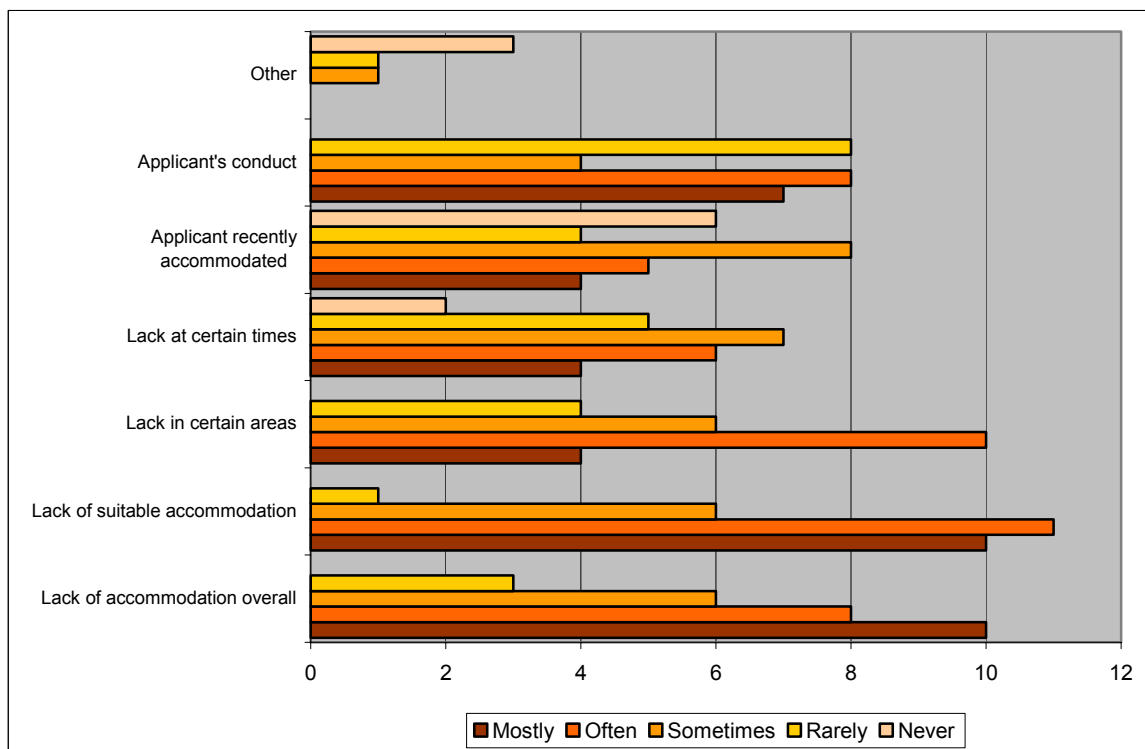
Only six out of the 34 respondents (18%) were able to provide temporary accommodation for everyone that was assessed as homeless. The remaining 28 were not able to do so.

Do you think you are able to provide temporary accommodation for everyone you assess as homeless?



Only 1 in 6 housing practitioners thinks they can meet the legal duty to provide temporary accommodation. We asked practitioners to say why they could not meet the duty.

What do you think makes you unable to provide temporary accommodation?



For most practitioners the problem was simply lack of accommodation. 21 said that lack of *suitable* accommodation was “mostly” or “often” a problem, while 18 gave a similar response to lack of accommodation overall. We did not explore any further what these suitability problems were but they could relate to accommodation for people with additional support needs, for example (the later section on future requirements gives some backing to this).

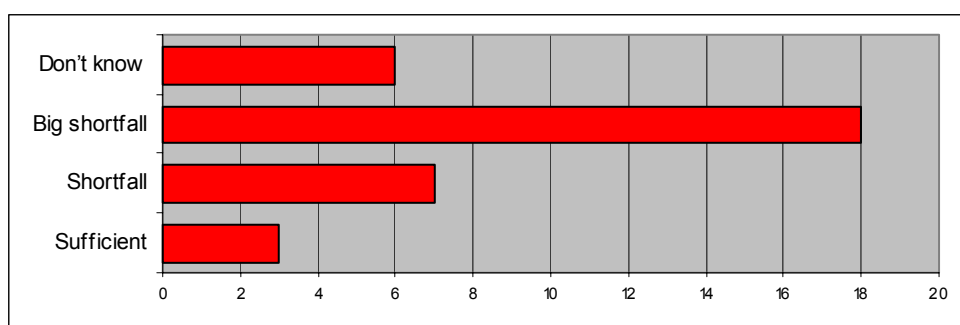
Sometimes it may be that the accommodation itself is available but the support needs to be delivered to that accommodation.

“We have increased the number of temporary homeless flats we provide from 30 to 200 over the past year or so. Many of the unresolved issues relate to management systems and costs for more chaotic clients and people with medium to high support needs”

14 practitioners thought that the shortage of temporary accommodation in particular *areas* was a problem. 10 thought that there was a problem at particular *times* of the year (an example would be summer time for authorities where there is a strong seasonal tourist industry).

Overall, and not really surprisingly, there is a problem of funding. 18 respondents said that they faced a big shortfall in funding for temporary accommodation, while a further 5 said that they faced a shortfall to some extent. Only 3 said they had enough money and the remaining 6 were not sure.

In your view, how well does the availability of funding match your ability to provide temporary accommodation?



We anticipated that there might be a problem, irrespective of supply of accommodation, of homeless applicants being refused access to accommodation because of their recent conduct (for example, anti-social behaviour). While this was mentioned by 15 as “mostly” or “often” an issue the numbers were not as high as for those in relation to accommodation supply problems. Similarly, 9 said that applicants who had recently been housed by the authority might not get temporary accommodation.

There is nothing in the law which permits applicants being declined a service because of recent conduct or housing history. This is best seen in the context of overall shortages of temporary accommodation: when there is a mismatch between supply and needs then the squeeze might be placed on applicants who are perceived not to deserve a service as much as others.

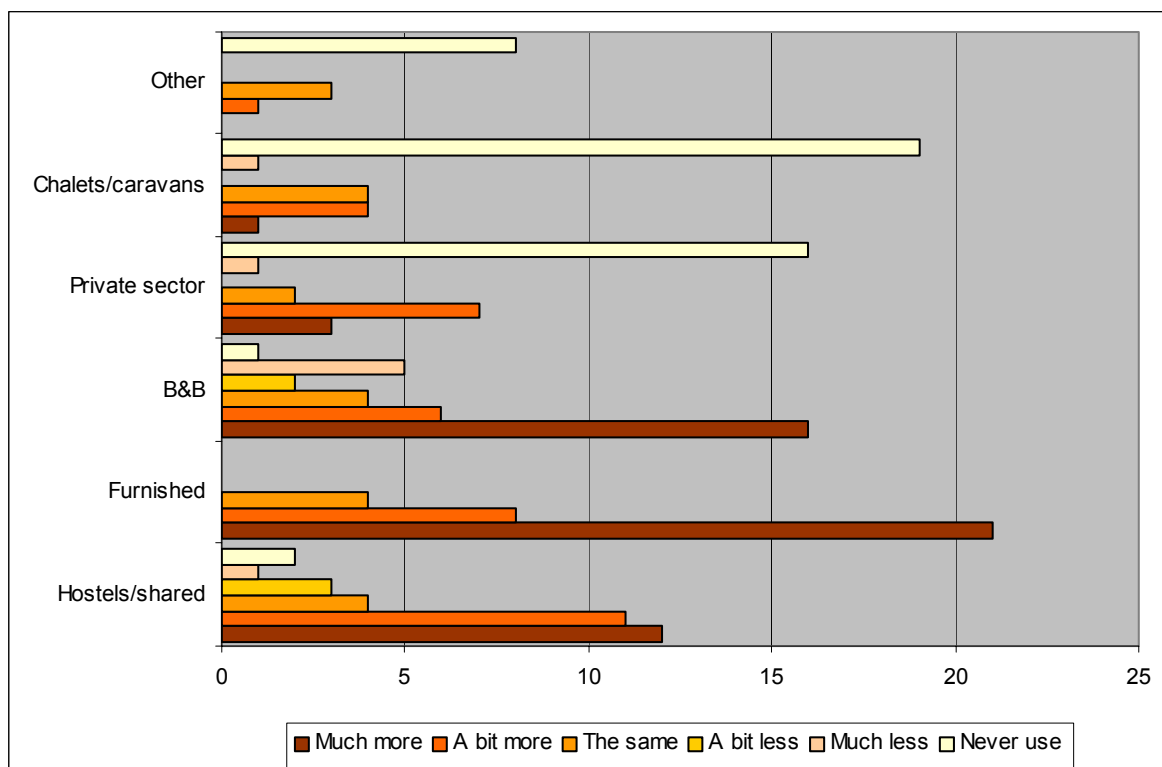
“We are still unclear on when the duty to provide temporary accommodation to non priority households has been discharged and when we should accept reapplications. Our main problem with temporary accommodation other than the overall rise in demand is the numbers who require supported/supervised accommodation due to chaotic lifestyle/substance/alcohol issues. We are encountering more and more applicants who have been excluded from all

other providers' accommodation due to issues mentioned and local authorities are expected to provide accommodation."

Trends in temporary accommodation use

We asked practitioners to tell us how they thought temporary accommodation use had changed over the last two years (ie since the new duty was introduced). Overall temporary accommodation use has risen. The biggest rise has been in furnished flats, with 21 respondents saying that there had been "much more" use of this accommodation. However, worryingly, second highest was bed and breakfast hotels – the poorest quality and most expensive form of temporary accommodation² – with 16 respondents reporting much more use and another six saying its use was a bit more. Only 3 respondents reported using private sector accommodation – one of the main alternatives to B&B – much more. 16 respondents never use private sector schemes.

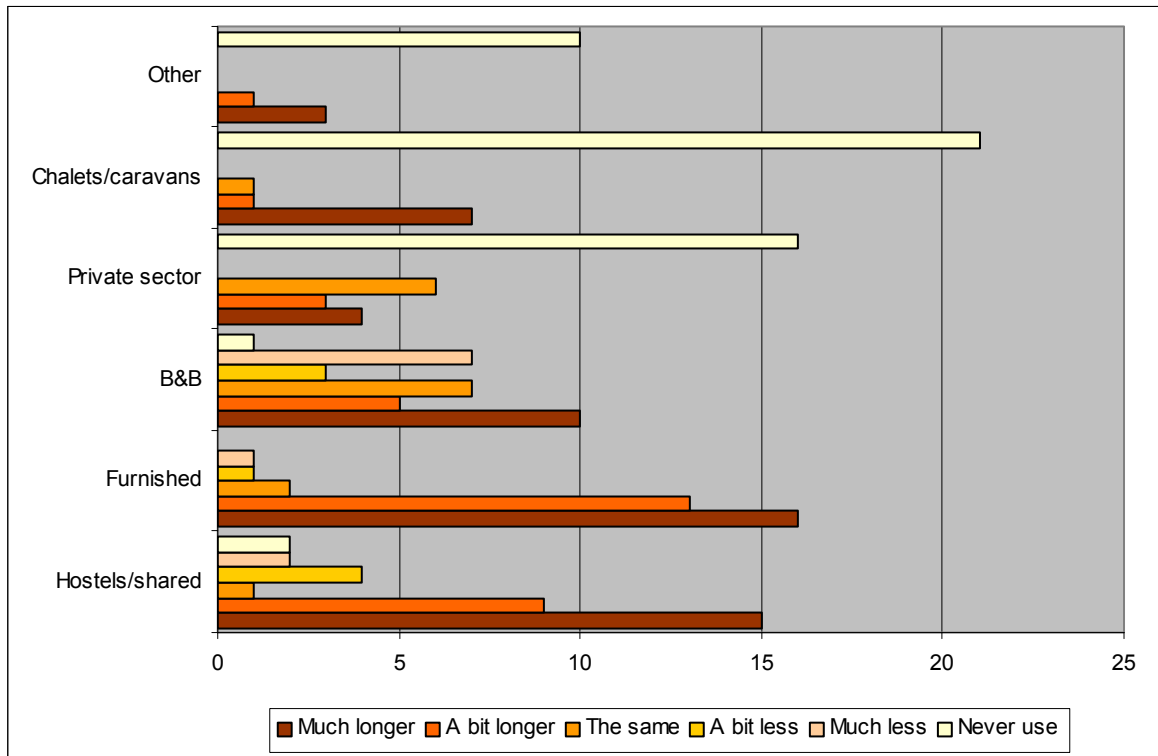
How do you think that your use of temporary accommodation has changed in the last two years?



We asked a similar question about the last two years but this time focusing on the average lengths of time people stayed in temporary accommodation. 15 respondents thought that homeless people were spending longer in B&B (10 of them "much longer"). 15 respondents report average times in hostel or shared accommodation as being much longer too.

² For relative costs of bed and breakfast hotels see "Temporary Accommodation for Homeless Households in Scotland", Shelter Scotland, 1996.

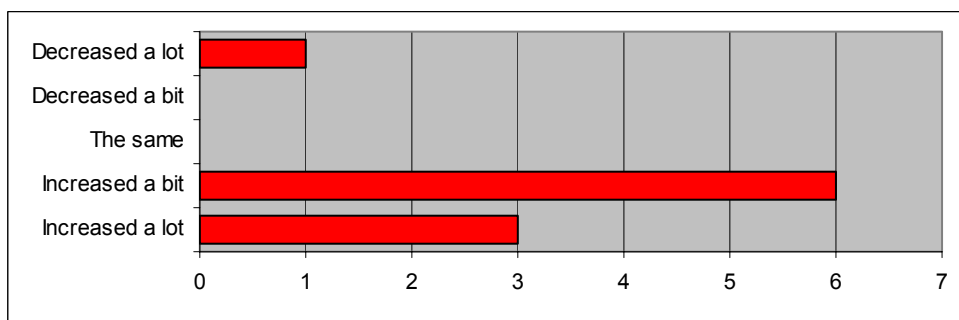
How do you think that average times spent in temporary accommodation have changed in the last two years?



Out of area placements

One of the most problematic uses of temporary accommodation is where one council decides to house a homeless applicant in temporary accommodation outside its own area. Only 10 respondents said they did this but, worryingly, 9 of those 10 said that their use of out of area placements had increased in recent years.

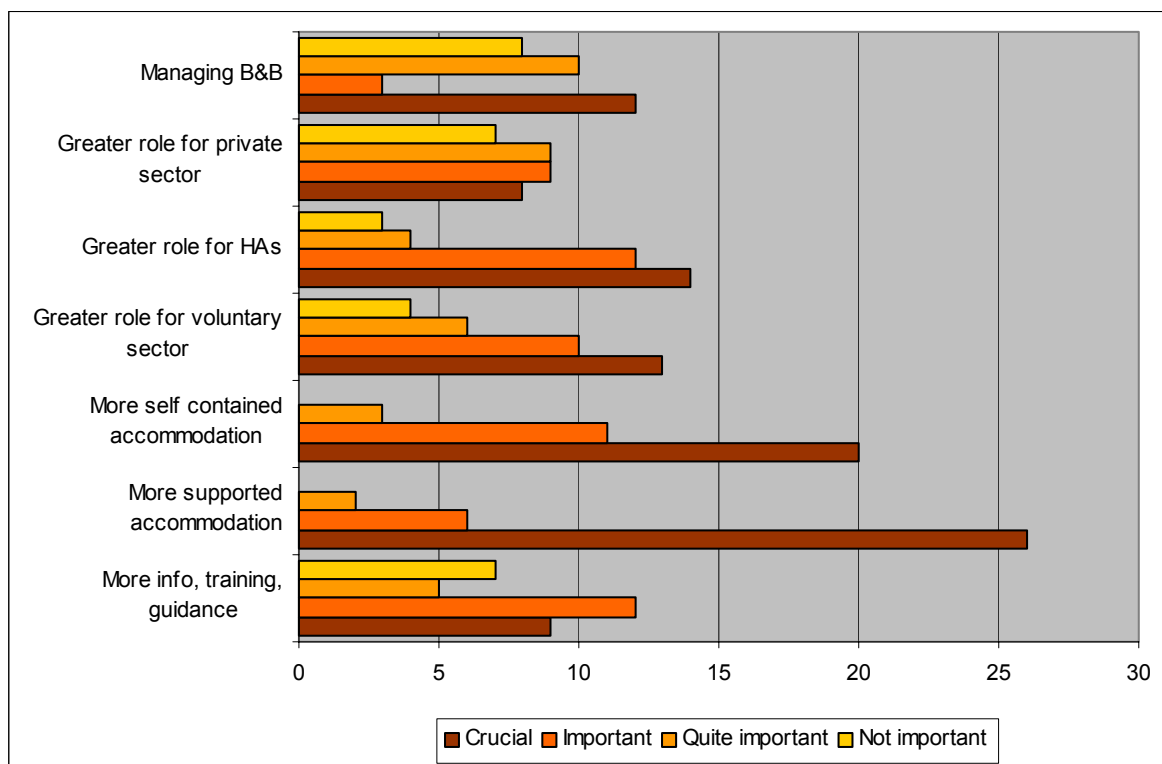
How do you think the practice of placing people in temporary accommodation outside your council area has changed in the last two years?



Changing temporary accommodation practice

Given the shortfalls and concerns articulated by respondents we asked what might make things better.

What do you think would help you in the provision of temporary accommodation? Please select all that apply.



There is striking consensus that more supported accommodation is needed, with 26 out of the 34 regarding it as “crucial”. 20 also saw more self-contained accommodation (eg furnished flats) as crucial. The consensus around more supported accommodation is consistent with the reported problems people face getting access to temporary accommodation because of past conduct: their behaviour might pose challenges to service providers. It is also consistent with the view that the biggest barrier to meeting the temporary accommodation needs of homeless people is lack of *suitable* accommodation.

It is worth noting that this perceived shortfall of supported accommodation comes after the biggest ever increase in general funding for housing support through the Supporting People budget. The budget is now being cut back but this poll provides strong evidence that there is yet more to be done in bridging the gap to meeting homeless people’s support needs.

We also asked about the role of other providers: 14 respondents saw a greater role for housing associations as crucial, with 13 saying the same for the voluntary sector and 8 for the private sector. It is difficult to know whether this reflects dissatisfaction with the current role played by these different types of organisation or whether it is simply a reflection of the overall scale of the challenge.

As reported above, bed and breakfast use is rising, despite a strong consensus that it is often unsuitable. Some councils have accepted that B&B is going to be part of the landscape in the short term and are seeking more actively to manage it: 12 say that managing B&B is crucial to responding to temporary accommodation needs.

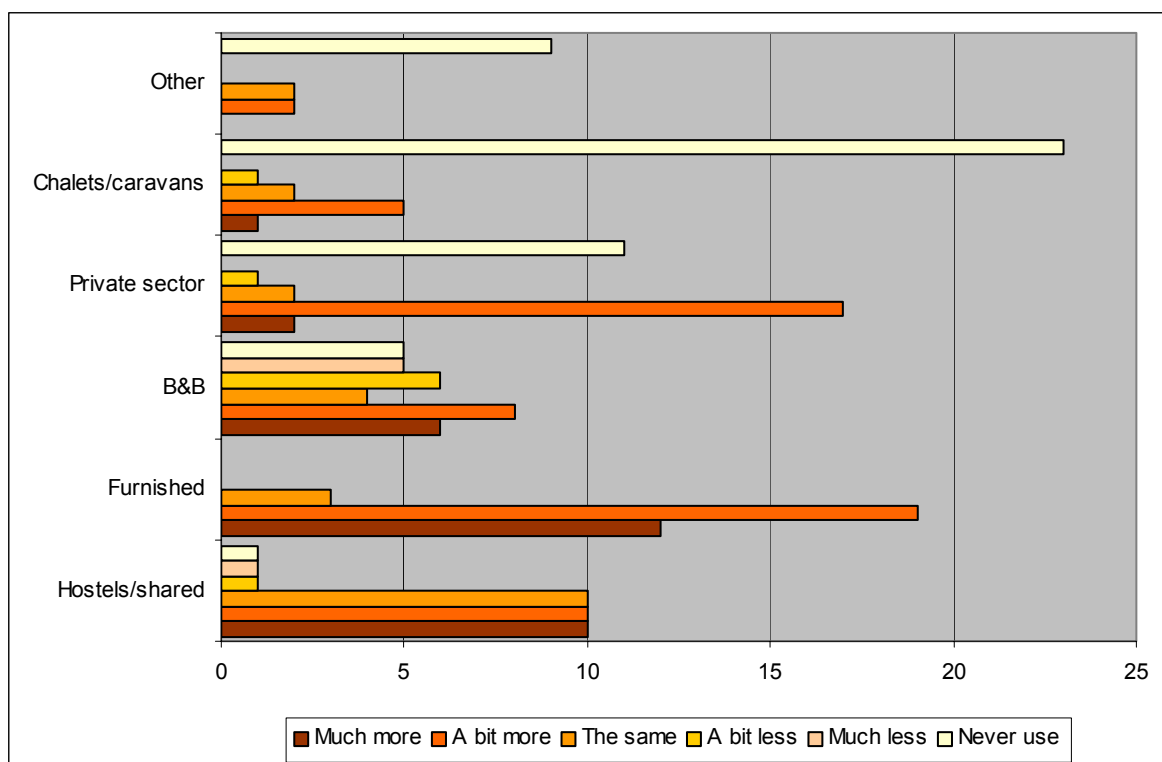
“A problem is that there is a prevailing opinion that bed and breakfast accommodation is always unsuitable. This has led to targets to reduce its use and therefore to constraints using it when it is necessary, eg for emergency stand-by use, for roofless applicant with no prior knowledge of the person, for a client who has recently lost accommodation.”

“The funding from the Executive is running out 2006, we need a longer timescale to enter contracts for new build, leases etc. there needs to be a big expansion in services, especially accommodation with support for those with complex health and social problems. Finally, B&B is not always a bad option for single people without kids.”

Respondents also see the need for more guidance, information and training on temporary accommodation but as secondary to the supply issues: 9 saw these as crucial, with a further 12 seeing them as important.

The future

Thinking ahead to 2005, over that year, how do you think that your use of the following forms of temporary accommodation will change?



Finally, we asked practitioners to tell us what they thought the future held. The majority of respondents expected the use of hostels or shared accommodation to rise. Almost all thought that the use of furnished accommodation would rise. Views on bed and breakfast were more mixed: 14 thought it would rise and 11 thought it would fall. The most dramatic change was in the expected use of private sector accommodation: although it is used very little at the moment, more than half of respondents (19) thought that the use of this form of accommodation would rise in the future. This would bring Scotland more into line with parts of England where private sector leasing schemes have been part of the temporary accommodation landscape for 15 years or more.

“At present, we are struggling to cope with demand and are relying heavily on B&B. Supported accommodation for young people and those with addictions or mental health issues is totally insufficient at present. Current temporary accommodation is becoming log jammed due to a local housing shortage and the high number of priority homeless awaiting permanent accommodation. If further funding is not made available it will not be possible for this authority to fulfil its statutory duty to homeless households.”

Conclusions

This short paper details the perceptions of practitioners from half or more of Scotland's councils about temporary accommodation. It shows that most practitioners think that they cannot meet their duty to provide everyone who is homeless with at least temporary accommodation.

The poll was not able to record every angle of a complicated topic.

“You ask no questions about the real processes of referral especially with reference to the assessment process which I feel is one of the key issues. Appropriate and detailed assessments would facilitate an increase in appropriate referrals and perhaps longer periods of accommodation sustainment. Currently access to temporary accommodation (especially with reference to LAs) is a "Duty Assessment" rather than a "Needs Assessment". This, in my opinion, is more relevant to "revolving door" cases than anything else. Even in the voluntary sector accommodation services are accessed not according to need or appropriateness but whether or not the applicant is deemed to "fit" the culture in the accommodation at that time or the applicant fits the expectations and aspirations for the accommodation of the manager and staff at that time. Where other criteria are placed upon the accommodation provider the service received by the client is either inadequate or inappropriate leading to the breakdown of the accommodation. Someone somewhere has to become much more proactive in the design and funding of appropriate services led not by perceived or statistical needs but based on an accurate analysis of accurate and reliable needs assessments which should be undertaken for EVERY homeless presentation.”

As some respondents argue, there are things that councils can do to improve things. These include looking at how they dovetail housing support with accommodation; managing bed and breakfast placements more actively and minimising out of area placements. But two key roles for national government are identified:

- Provision of funding, both for capital projects and for provision of support to enable people to manage in accommodation.

- Either directly, or through its agencies, developing guidance and assistance for councils on how to interpret the duties they have.

If there is to be sustained goodwill among practitioners to implement the yet more radical Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003 then some of the current barriers to providing good quality temporary accommodation need to be addressed.

Shelter Scotland, October 2004