



SHELTER SCOTLAND BRIEFING: HOUSING EMERGENCY DEBATE, 15 MAY 2024

Shelter Scotland exists to defend the right to a safe home and fight the devastating impact the housing emergency has on people and society. We work in communities to understand the problem and change the system. We run national campaigns to fight for home.

Since the Housing Emergency was last debated in November, the situation across the country has got significantly worse. 10,000 children are stuck in the misery of temporary accommodation, with no safe home to grow up in. Five local authorities have now declared housing emergencies, alongside the Chartered Institute of Housing Scotland and the Scottish Trades Union Congress. [City of Edinburgh Council has admitted](#) it will be unable to build any new affordable homes this year, while local authorities such as Aberdeen and West Lothian face severe difficulties due to the presence of RAAC.

The Scottish Housing Regulator has deemed ten local authorities to be either in systemic failure, or at heightened risk of systemic failure – **47% of Scotland's population are living in areas where homelessness services are failing**. Failing local services in certain local authorities are having a growing impact on their neighbouring authorities. Local authorities do not exist in a vacuum and problems in one area have a damaging impact elsewhere.

This is a national housing emergency, and it requires action from national government to tackle it.

It is time for Scotland's parliament to come together, to accept that we are in a housing emergency, and to commit to urgent action to address it. The 10,000 children trapped in temporary accommodation right now cannot wait any longer.

Key messages

- **The 138% increase in the number of children stuck in temporary accommodation since 2014 is a national scandal.**
- **The new First Minister has said eradicating child poverty in Scotland is his 'driving mission' – this is a chance for his government to show they are serious. You simply cannot tackle child poverty without tackling homelessness.**
- **Declaring a national Housing Emergency will show that MSPs understand the scale of the problems our communities are facing and the fact that it is impacting every part of the country. It creates an imperative to take urgent and radical action to end the emergency.**
- **The declaration must then be matched by commitment to action in the form of buying and building the social homes we desperately need, fully funding local homelessness services, and ensuring that existing housing rights are upheld and enforced.**
- **We cannot sit by while 45 children become homeless every single day – the government must accept there is a growing housing emergency and take the actions needed to end it.**
- **The Housing Bill will deliver change in the next Parliament not this, but the scale of the emergency requires immediate action right now.**

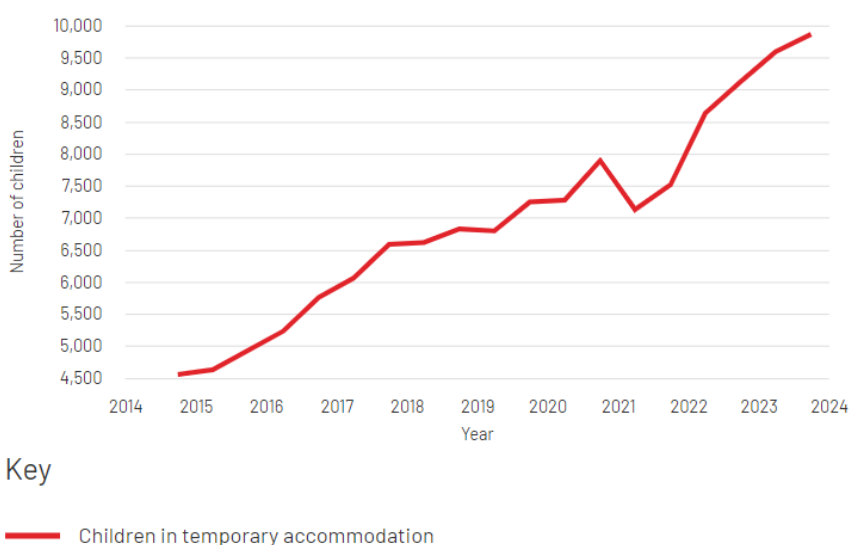
Scotland's Housing Emergency

Scotland is in the grip of a devastating housing emergency which damages lives every single day.

- A record **9,860 children trapped in temporary accommodation** – up 138% since 2014.
- **45 children become homeless every day.**
- A household becomes homeless every 16 minutes.
- A **10% increase** in households becoming homeless compared to last year.¹
- **Local Authority homelessness services in systemic failure across the country.**
- Routine **failure by local authorities** to uphold housing rights.
- A **failure to deliver the social homes** we urgently need and a significant slowdown in new social housing developments in the last year.
- Private **rents continuing to rise** despite emergency legislation, and household incomes and the UK Government's **Local Housing Allowance rates are failing to keep pace.**

This is an emergency that damages health, wellbeing, education and the economy, and leaves tens of thousands of people without anywhere to call home. It is **a national scandal.**

Number of children in temporary accommodation in Scotland 2014 – 2023



Why a national declaration is necessary

During the debate on the Housing Emergency in November 2023, now-First Minister John Swinney, and now-Deputy First Minister Kate Forbes, made important contributions. Mr Swinney said: *“It is a fundamental right and an absolute necessity that people in our society should be appropriately housed. Safe and secure housing is essential to ensure that individuals are able to participate fully and effectively in our society with a stable base and that individuals are able to provide a good-quality environment in which children can be brought up.”*

He went on: *Various members have said that we should declare a housing emergency. I understand that aspiration and the seriousness of the point. [...] However, I respectfully say to Parliament that it is not enough just to do that. Substantial actions must be set out on how we will*

¹ Scottish Government (2023), [Homelessness in Scotland 2022/23](#).

address the issue [...] If we want to declare a housing emergency, we have to be prepared to put our money where our mouth is."

Deputy First Minister Kate Forbes spoke in a similar vein, arguing: *"For those who are caught in temporary accommodation, are at risk of homelessness or are struggling in other ways to access warm housing, it feels like an emergency."*²

We agree with the points Mr Swinney and Ms Forbes made in November. However, **a national emergency declaration is a vital first step in acknowledging the scale of the problem** our communities face across Scotland. To continue to refuse to accept we are in a national Housing Emergency would show that MSPs continue to fail to acknowledge the scale of the problem and will continue to fail to take the urgent and immediate actions communities from Aberdeen to Annan are crying out for.

The declaration creates an **imperative to act**. It acknowledges the scale of the problem we are facing and says to those suffering at the sharp end of the housing emergency that we hear you, and we are going to do whatever it takes to help.

Declaring an emergency says to the 10,000 children in temporary accommodation that they won't be trapped in temporary housing forever, that their elected representatives understand that this situation is not acceptable and that an emergency response is needed.

A declaration **acknowledges the extreme circumstances we are in**, that 'business as usual' responses are not working and commits us to moving forward together.

A declaration accepts that **things must change, and they must change now**.

The now-First Minister said in November that declaring itself was not enough – and we agree. But **a declaration is a call to action and must be a starting point for further substantial actions** to tackle the housing emergency.

The nature and urgency of the emergency would validate action on allocations, public land, planning, and compulsory sale and purchase that would not be appropriate during normal times and strengthen calls for actions such as permanently unfreezing Local Housing Allowance. It would also give the impetus for Scottish Ministers to bring forward an urgent Housing Emergency Action Plan to tackle the issues raised by the Scottish Government's own expert homelessness Task and Finish groups, including actions which will reduce the number of children stuck in temporary accommodation and the need to improve capacity in local government to prevent more local homelessness services falling into systemic failure. Just as the pandemic emergency forced an emergency response, the housing emergency requires the same kind of approach from government and local authorities.

That is why we are calling on the Scottish Government to accept there is an emergency, to declare that emergency this week, and to **commit to developing an urgent Scottish Housing Emergency Action Plan with a central goal of finding permanent homes for the 10,000 children currently stuck in temporary housing** before the next election.

The new First Minister has emphasised the importance of building consensus in order to deliver for the people of Scotland. Declaring an emergency presents an important early opportunity for him to show that he is serious about this and is listening to the tens of thousands of people across the country who need urgent action to find them a safe, secure home.

If the government fails to do this, their driving mission of eradicating child poverty will remain out of reach. Simply put, **you can't tackle child poverty without tackling child homelessness**.

² [Scottish Parliament Official Report](#), 22 November 2023.

Responding to the emergency

An emergency declaration must be backed up by emergency action – declaring in itself will not deliver the kind of structural changes that we need to see across the country. Only action from every layer of government will achieve that.

We have been consistent in our support of Scottish Government calls for the UK government to unfreeze and uplift Local Housing Allowance, to end the hated two-child limit and so-called rape clause, to scrap the Bedroom Tax and benefit cap, and ensure Scottish Government capital funding is increased rather than cut. To take the Bedroom Tax example, scrapping this across the UK would free-up tens of millions of pounds in Scotland every year and enable that money to be spent on other forms of housing support.

Westminster has a critical role to play in helping to tackle the housing emergency in Scotland, and we will continue to support calls from the Scottish Government for the UK government to take action, including on ensuring local authorities are properly resourced to deal with the implications of Home Office mismanagement of asylum decisions.

However, this is only part of the solution. There are many things that the Scottish Government can do to make an immediate difference for the 10,000 children trapped in temporary accommodation.

Deliver the social homes we need

Without sufficient good quality social homes across Scotland, we will not meet anti-poverty targets, tackle health inequalities, close the attainment gap, reduce homelessness, or alleviate the significant strain on local services. The Housing to 2040 strategy notes many of these things as being aided by increasing affordable housing supply, as well as the economic benefits in terms of jobs and investment in communities.

However, the government is failing to deliver new social homes at the rate required to reduce housing need, with budget cuts for next year set to see new supply decline even more sharply.

Year-on-year budget cuts have resulted in a steep fall in both starts and approvals of new social homes – and without those homes the housing emergency is only going to get worse with more people trapped in temporary accommodation for longer, and more people unable to have their housing rights upheld.

We remain angered that the Scottish Government chose to cut the **housing supply budget by 26% in cash terms, at a time when the overall Scottish capital budget is only falling by 4% in real terms.**³ We welcome the partial uplift of an £40m for acquisitions announced late last month, but this still leaves the sector facing a £156m cut for this year.

The success of the wider Housing to 2040 strategy, and efforts to fix the broken and biased housing system, rest on the government delivering enough homes in the coming years. That is why we are calling on John Swinney to:

- **Fully reverse the cut to housing supply announced in the 2024/25 Scottish Budget**
- **Buy and Build at least 38,500 social homes during this parliamentary term, with a particular focus on reducing the numbers of families with children trapped in temporary accommodation.** This reflects the recommendation of the Scottish Government's Expert Temporary Accommodation Task and Finish Group.

³ Scottish Fiscal Commission (2023), [Scotland's Economic and Fiscal Forecasts](#), p.6.

A recent response to a written question from Mark Griffin MSP⁴ showed that the 2023/24 £60m National Acquisition Programme had proven successful in acquiring affordable homes across the country, with over £83m being spent on acquisitions.

We urge the government to continue this work to ensure homes are brought into the social sector as quickly as possible to help clear the bottleneck in the homelessness system.

Fully Fund Local Homelessness Services

The Scottish Housing Regulator's confirmation that two local authorities (Edinburgh and Glasgow) were in systemic failure, while eight others (Aberdeen, Dundee, Dumfries and Galloway, East Lothian, East Renfrewshire, Fife, Stirling, and West Lothian) were at heightened risk of systemic failure should awaken us all to the severity of the situation facing local authorities across the country.

Systemic failure means that the level of demand on housing and homelessness services in those areas is surpassing the local authority's ability to respond. That means people are being turned away from homelessness services, unable to access support or have their housing rights enforced. It's a situation that should shame us all and is reflected in the 1,400% increase in failures to provide temporary accommodation in the most recent homelessness statistics.

Failure on this scale constitutes an emergency situation, and one that demands an emergency response. We cannot simply accept people's rights being breached with such regularity – and to be clear, that means local authorities breaking the law – and not demand immediate action to tackle the problem.

Over a decade of austerity and real terms budget cuts have left local authority services stripped to the bone while they try to deliver the rightful extension of housing rights from national government. The Scottish Government must ensure local services have the resources they need to deliver on existing and future housing rights.

We are therefore calling for:

- **Scottish Government to provide additional funding to local authorities to ensure they are able to uphold and enforce housing rights.**
- **Funding to be targeted at local authorities on the basis of need not population and ensure that the money is focussed in areas that need it most – those local authorities experiencing systemic failure and those who have declared local housing emergencies.**

Forthcoming legislative changes

We understand that the Scottish Government has recently published its Housing Bill, which contains potentially important measures to help limit the cost of private renting, to offer greater rights for tenants, and proposals on new prevention duties. This proposal however does not tackle the emergency in the here and now – the proposals won't take effect for a number of years, and as they stand will do nothing to increase the supply of social homes. That remains the key route out of this emergency and must be the focus of emergency action.

That is not to discount the proposals within that bill or to argue that long-term solutions are not also required, but to say that the Bill is not the immediate action that an Emergency Declaration would demand and should not be used to argue that everything is under control as a result.

For further information, please contact David_Aitchison@shelter.org.uk

⁴ Written question, [S6W-26978](#), Mark Griffin MSP to Paul McLennan MSP, answered on 7 May 2024.