

Response to the Social Security Advisory Committee's call for evidence on social security and separated parents

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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.

Shelter Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Social Security Advisory Committee's call for evidence on social security and separated parents.

In our experience, social security can adversely impact non-resident parents, resident parents and their children in a number of ways, and this is intrinsically linked to how social security interacts with housing and homelessness.

Firstly, Child Benefit (CB) and Child Tax Credits (CTC) are usually paid to the main carer. In instances where there are separated parents, CB and CTC are paid to the parent with whom the children normally or mostly stay. The entitlement to CB or CTC is used to determine that the parent requires additional room(s) for children and their Housing Benefit is increased to reflect this. For the non-resident parent, they must prove their own Housing Benefit eligibility and because they do not receive CB or CTC they are often deemed to need a single person's rate of Housing Benefit, despite any custody or access arrangements which would necessitate the non-resident parent having spare room(s) for children to stay in on visits.

If a non-resident parent becomes homeless or joins a waiting list for social rented accommodation, their limited entitlement to Housing Benefit will mean that they are often only offered bedsit or one-bed accommodation for the reasons set out below. This is especially problematic if the non-resident parent is aged under 35 and can therefore only access the shared room rate.

Some local authorities try to exercise flexibility, incorporating part time care arrangements into bedroom entitlement for accommodation, but due to the stock pressures they are under, they must prioritise this for other applicants whose children reside with them full time. However, some local authorities have told us that even if more suitable or larger accommodation was available then affordability is a major problem for single applicants, as they will have to bridge the gap between what their Housing Benefit will cover and the actual rent.

This process has a huge impact on their ability to have access to and spend time with their children, even where their ex-partner/child's plan encourages and supports this access. It also puts the wellbeing of the whole family at risk, and as one Shelter Scotland adviser put it:

"We can often feel a bit hopeless advising clients in this situation. It is practically very problematic not to mention heart-breaking for many families."

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