



A framework for declaring a housing emergency

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.

This document sets out why we're in a housing emergency, why a declaration is important, and what the process of declaring a housing emergency should involve as well as a draft declaration motion.

Introduction

THE HOUSING EMERGENCY

Scotland is in a housing emergency. The Scottish Housing Regulator's report stating the homelessness system is 'at risk of systemic failure',¹ further warnings from the Accounts Commission that housing and homelessness services are at risk², and SOLACE essentially declaring a housing emergency³, should waken all of us up to the reality of the situation Scotland is in. Local authorities cannot do more with less and services are buckling under the strain – with devastating impacts on people across the country who do not have access to a home that meets their needs.

Whilst the housing emergency affects different parts of Scotland in different ways, this is a shared challenge. Decades of underinvestment in social housing and frontline services suffering with over a decade of austerity policies, combined with rising material and labour costs for building, and unexpected demands and challenges such as the pandemic, the cost of living crisis, and the illegal invasion of Ukraine mean Scotland is in an unprecedented situation.

Safe, secure and affordable housing provides a crucial foundation from which individuals and families can thrive⁴ and the first principle of the Housing to 2040 strategy underpins that everyone has a right to an adequate home⁵. And yet, across the country people do not have access to this human right, with a report by CaCHE and the Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers estimating that over a million households, or 41% of all households in

¹ Scottish Housing Regulator (2023), [Homelessness Services in Scotland: A Thematic Review](#)

² Accounts Commission (2023), [Local Government in Scotland](#)

³ SOLACE (2023), [Housing in Scotland: Current Context and Preparing for the Future](#)

⁴ For example, HACT (2023) [The Social Value of Social Housing](#) (Shelter Scotland), and Commission for Housing and Wellbeing (2015) [A Blueprint for Scotland's Future](#) (Shelter Scotland)

⁵ Scottish Government (2021), [Housing to 2040](#).

Scotland, do not have a home that would meet the international human rights standards⁶. Similarly, a Shelter Scotland report which gathered experiences of rights holders on housing in Scotland concluded that five of the seven elements of the right to adequate housing would be rated 'amber' from the input from our lived experience panel – with one, affordability, rated red.⁷ Essentially, Scotland has a long way to go to realise people's human right to adequate housing.

At the starkest end of the spectrum, we can see the situation worsening with numbers of households and children in temporary homeless accommodation spiking alongside an all-time high of open homeless applications nationally.

WHY DECLARE A HOUSING EMERGENCY?

An emergency situation requires an emergency response. 'Business as usual' isn't working. There is a need to prioritise action by mobilising existing resources, re-evaluating current approaches, and advocating for additional resources to effectively overcome the challenges our system faces – as well as holding others accountable for their responsibilities.

By declaring a housing emergency, we can acknowledge the extreme circumstances we're in and move forward together. The current situation is not normal.

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; but if we get housing right, we have every chance of success. By using a human rights approach to declare a housing emergency and shape the next steps, we can ensure this vision becomes a reality.

Declaring a housing emergency

To make sure your housing emergency declaration has lasting impact for the communities who need support the most, you will need to consider a process that works for your local authority.

The work cannot begin and end with a declaration: the declaration itself needs to be backed up with action, to be a statement of intent of what you and your colleagues are going to do in the months and years ahead to tackle the housing emergency in your area.

We want to help you get this process right, which is why we have laid out a suggested process for your local authority to go through to ensure that your declaration makes the biggest possible difference for your communities.

- 1. Propose a motion at full council.⁸ The motion should:**
 - a. call for fellow councillors to support the declaration of a housing emergency in your local authority and acknowledge the various challenges that need to be overcome.**

⁶ The ALACHO report provides three alternative figures ranging from 1,832,000 to 1,021,000 households where indicators are reduced. Gillian Young (2021), [The Right to Adequate Housing: Are We Focusing On What Matters?](#) (ALACHO and CaCHE)

⁷ Location was rated green, affordability red, and security of tenure, accessibility, habitability, cultural adequacy, and availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure were rated amber. Shelter Scotland (2023) [The Right to Adequate Housing: A report by the Diffley Partnership](#)

⁸ A draft motion is provided in the appendix.

This could include a lack of social housing, the consequences of decades of underinvestment and funding cuts, the pressure on local housing services due to insufficient housing options, rising numbers of families trapped in temporary accommodation, and a lack of suitable homes to meet the needs of everyone in the community.

b. commit the council to specific actions to tackle the emergency.

This should instruct officers to develop a housing emergency action plan and include high level commitments to monitor progress.

2. Develop the housing emergency action plan.

Your housing emergency action plan should take a whole-council approach, and lead change by drawing together the various different teams and plans within the council to ensure the entire authority is working towards a common goal of realising people's right to adequate housing by addressing the housing emergency.

It should be developed through engagement with relevant sectoral partners and governmental bodies (this could include health, education and social security agencies, for example), and it should seek and incorporate the views of individuals with lived experience of the emergency.

It should identify targets in the short, medium and long-term, and include reporting mechanisms to the relevant council committee and a mechanism for scrutinising progress at least twice per year, to identify if further changes or actions need to be taken. All of this should be developed taking a human rights-based approach.

It should note that there is already significant work within the council in improving housing in your area, and highlight that this is an opportunity to bring some of this to the forefront and prioritise much of the existing strategic housing work, helping to translate existing policy into meaningful action and shared purpose.

3. Approve the housing emergency action plan

The plan should be developed and brought back to councillors to approve within six months of the initial housing emergency declaration, with buy-in from across the political spectrum.

Your local housing emergency action plan

WHAT SHOULD THE PLAN INCLUDE?

The housing emergency action plan isn't another strategy – it is a framework which prioritises actions and considers what and how things could be done differently.

The housing emergency action plan should cover the following actions:

1. Determine ownership

- a. Provision should be made for a senior owner to coordinate action across different departments and functions.

2. Define the problem

- a. What does housing emergency look like in your local authority area?
- b. With incorporation of the UN right to adequate housing in the pipeline through a new human rights bill, and corresponding obligations on local authorities to

meet minimum obligations on housing and progressively realise people's housing rights, what is people's experience of housing in your local authority? This should consider all elements of the right to adequate housing including security of tenure, habitability, accessibility, affordability, cultural adequacy, availability of services and location elements.⁹

- c. Your understanding of the problem should be developed through participation including input from communities facing most barriers to realising their housing rights.

3. Identify the solutions and barriers

- a. What could you do differently given the housing emergency context and the barriers faced? This should focus on the additionality which could be done beyond existing strategies and commitments. It should include reference to the tools and actions available as well as the additional resources that might be needed to enable these actions or what resources and attention might need to be redirected.
- b. It should consider the gaps and weaknesses in current approaches and how these might need to be overcome: why are current policies addressing the right to adequate housing not sufficient? This document should be used as a tool to get further buy in, action or resources to address this.
 - o It should include some overarching actions you've already done or are doing such as setting up a working or steering group, and defining the problem – these are important steps.
 - o What else needs to be done to bring these back on course? Is an updated strategy needed for one of the areas? Do existing plans need to be better connected? Or do you need further buy in from partners you're not getting at present?

4. Prioritise

- a. Consider where are your gaps? Where are you furthest from meeting the UN right to adequate housing? What are the communities most at risk in your area?
- b. By looking at the data available and by employing that participative approach at point 2, you should be in a position to be able to prioritise actions into short, medium and long-term.

5. Monitor

- a. The plan should include targets in the short, medium and long-term, and include reporting mechanisms to the relevant council committee and a mechanism for scrutinising progress at least twice per year, to identify if further changes or actions need to be taken if progress hasn't been made or has been too slow.

⁹ For more information on how the right to adequate housing has been defined and the seven elements, see for example UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), [General Comment No. 4: The Right to Adequate Housing \(Art. 11\(1\) of the Covenant\)](#), 13 December 1991 or Shelter Scotland (2019) [Housing is a human right](#)

Consideration could be given to establishing a steering group to facilitate this if an existing mechanism doesn't exist.

6. Communicate & collaborate

- a. The action plan should bring together stakeholders internally and externally to pool resources and skills and encourage collaboration across teams – beyond the usual housing and homelessness suspects but also ensuring that multiple teams are feeding into each other. To facilitate this, the plan could consider what opportunities there are for cross-functional conversations, and whether you need to set up a working group or space to share actions and updates.
- b. In line with a human rights-based approach outlined below, the plan should also encourage collaboration with the communities that are living in the housing emergency to ensure that their needs and experiences are reflected in the actions considered.

TAKING A HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

The above housing emergency action plan should take a human rights-based approach, following the 'PANEL' principles¹⁰ as follows.

- **Participation:** the action plan should be developed through meaningful participation from people with lived experience, ensuring that the voices of the communities most affected by the housing emergency in your area are involved in shaping the framework as well as other departments internally or external stakeholders that you might need collaboration from.
- **Accountability:** the plan should consider how progress will be measured, and how plans and progress will be communicated to stakeholders. This should include consideration of targets and what scrutiny will be undertaken by the relevant council committee and at what stages, for example.?)
- **Non-discrimination and equality:** the plan should outline how you will take an equalities approach and think about protected characteristics, as well as prioritising people in the most vulnerable situations who face the most barriers to realising rights. This should include the provision of an Equalities Impact Assessment, for example.
- **Empowerment:** the plan should help empower local authorities and staff to meet their statutory duties as well as be able to call for structural change or resources required for them to do so. Consideration should also be given to how rights holders and other bodies can input into the plan, monitor changes and hold all stakeholders accountable for their role in addressing the housing emergency.
- **Legality:** the plan should be focused on how we ensure people's right to adequate housing is respected, protected and fulfilled and how local authorities can meet their statutory obligations where there are currently gaps.

¹⁰ For example, see the Scottish Human Rights Commission, [A human rights based approach](#)

What next?

We want local authorities and other public bodies to be able to declare a housing emergency, and implement the steps necessary to start to tackle it. We'll be bringing together a network of individuals who want to take action on their local housing emergencies, to develop guidance, troubleshoot and share best practice together.

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

Appendix: Draft declaration motion

"<insert name> Council,

Declares that we are in a Housing Emergency.

Recognises the seriousness of the emergency facing [INSERT COUNCIL AREA], which is causing far too many families to experience housing insecurity and homelessness.

Acknowledges the severe impact this housing emergency is having on society.

Notes the extensive evidence highlighting the severity of the housing emergency and the unequal impact that this has on different groups within society, driven by the acute shortage of genuinely affordable social homes.

Agrees that housing is a fundamental human right and that we must do all we can to provide safe, secure homes for everyone in our communities.

Therefore, this council:

1. Agrees we are in a Housing Emergency
2. Commits to the creation and implementation of a >insert local authority area< Housing Emergency Action Plan, which will draw together existing strategies and council teams, aligning these behind the shared goal of tackling the housing emergency, under the supervision of the [RELEVANT CONVENER]
3. Will take a human rights-based approach to delivering the Action Plan, embedding participation, accountability, non-discrimination, empowerment and legality into the process
4. Commits to working with communities, individuals with lived experience of the housing emergency, and internal and external partners to deliver the Action Plan and develop solutions to the housing emergency
5. Will measure, on a biannual basis, progress towards tackling the housing emergency, through scrutiny at the [LEAD COUNCIL COMMITTEE]
6. Requests that the council leader writes to the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister, the Housing Minister, and the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, outlining the actions council is taking to address the housing emergency, and seeks additional resources to help meet the severe challenges."