

## Shelter Scotland's response to the Equal Opportunities Committee call for written evidence – Having a Home and Keeping a Home: Follow up Inquiry

### Key Points:

- The Regulator's recommendations for new national guidance for Housing Options should be adopted by the Scottish Government.
- Appropriate support and mediation services should be made available to all young people to help prevent homelessness.
- Minimum temporary accommodation standards should be produced by the Scottish Government and partners to ensure temporary accommodation is a stepping stone out of homelessness.

### Introduction

Shelter Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Equal Opportunity committee's 'Having a Home and Keeping a Home' follow-up inquiry having submitted written and oral evidence<sup>1</sup> in 2012. In this report we have drawn on a discussion with young service users who have been supported by our safe and sound project in Dundee.

### Context

Last year over 12,000 young people aged between 16 and 24 made homelessness applications in Scotland. Over 1,900 of these applications were made by someone under the age of 18.<sup>2</sup> Since our 2012 briefing, the numbers of homeless applications amongst this age group have fallen. And yet, 12,000 young people applying as homeless is still too many. A safe, secure home is crucial for everyone's wellbeing and every year in Scotland tens of thousands of young people are living in unsuitable accommodation or in a state of uncertainty because of homelessness or the risk of homelessness. Addressing poor quality housing and homelessness are key components in eradicating child poverty and for ensuring that vulnerable young people do not get trapped in a cycle of housing crises and repeat homelessness.

Homelessness compounds a number of the problems faced by young people. This is particularly evident with mental health problems and/or the onset of (or exacerbation of existing) substance

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<sup>1</sup> Shelter Scotland (2012) Briefing: Equal Opportunities Committee Inquiry – Having and Keeping a Home: steps to preventing homelessness among young people

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/45498.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Homelessness Statistics Annual Reference Tables Scottish Government (2011)

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Housing-Regeneration/hmlss1011>

misuse problems. There is particularly strong evidence that homelessness impedes young people's participation in employment, education or training<sup>3</sup> which in turn can impact significantly on all areas of a young person's life and wellbeing.

"it's made me depressed not having a place to call my own, it affected college: I had low attendance as I was depressed so I left." [Shelter Scotland service user]<sup>4</sup>

For young people, the most common reason for homelessness is relationship breakdown, typically with parents or step-parents. For many this is a consequence of long-term conflict within the home and often involving violence.<sup>5</sup> Around half (46 per cent) of young homeless people lived with their parents or family before becoming homeless.<sup>6</sup> In 2012-13, 40 per cent of young people became homeless because they were asked to leave their accommodation, 28 per cent were asked to leave due to a household dispute or relationship breakdown, with 35 per cent of these disputes being violent or aggressive.<sup>7</sup>

"One night my mum said just get out – I said no – she said just get out so I said fine and packed a bag and went and stayed at my friend's house" [Shelter Scotland service user]

### **What is your experience or involvement with youth homelessness?**

Shelter Scotland helps many young people through our advice and support services. We run a free national advice helpline and projects supporting individuals in specific groups or geographical areas. Shelter Scotland's helpline took 14,764 calls in 2013-14, of which 21 per cent were made by people aged under 25.<sup>8</sup> For a fifth of these the reason for the call was for advice around homelessness.

Shelter Scotland also launched a new service in July 2012 called 'Safe and Sound', based in Dundee, to tackle challenges faced by young people resulting from housing instability and family relationship breakdown in Tayside and Fife after receiving funding of almost £700,000 from the Big Lottery Fund. It is run by Shelter Scotland in partnership with counselling, mediation and family support charity Relationships Scotland, with referrals from other local agencies and organisations. It offers support and resolution for young people who have left, or are at risk of leaving, home in an unplanned way. Safe and Sound has helped over 230 young people in less than two years.

### **Has the number of young people presenting as homeless changed?**

Since our 2012 briefing, the numbers of homeless applications amongst 16-24 year olds have fallen. Last year over 12,000 young people aged between 16 and 24 made homelessness

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2008) *Youth and homelessness in the UK*

<sup>4</sup> All quotes in this briefing are from a small discussion group held with young people supported by the Safe and Sound Project on May 9 2014

<sup>5</sup> JRF (2008) *Youth and homelessness in the UK*

<sup>6</sup> Youth Homelessness Analysis 2012-13 Scottish Government (2013)

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Housing-Regeneration/RefTables/adhoc-analysis>

<sup>7</sup> Youth Homelessness Analysis 2012-13 Scottish Government (2013)

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Housing-Regeneration/RefTables/adhoc-analysis>

<sup>8</sup> Information on age was recorded for 5598 of the 14,764 calls (38%).

applications in Scotland, compared to 19,000 in 2010-11, this is in the context of an overall drop in homeless applications over the past few years. Just under 2,000 of these applications were made by someone under the age of 18, down from over 3,000 in 2010-11.<sup>9</sup>

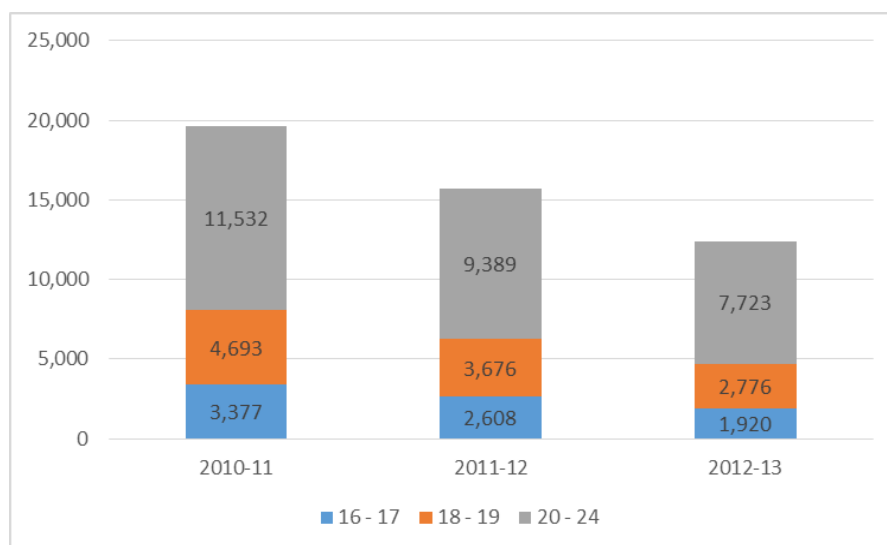


Figure 1: Number of homeless applications by age and year

### The Housing Options approach and the Housing Support duty

Though this reduction may look promising, Shelter Scotland has concerns in relation to this reduction. The focus since 2012, and indeed preceding it, has been on prevention of homelessness. The Housing Options approach has added to this on the front line, however concerns over this were raised recently in the Scottish Housing Regulator’s 2014 thematic inquiry,<sup>10</sup> in particular about the possible diversion of individuals (from all age groups, not just under 25s) approaching their council to make a homeless application into other avenues for example into the private rented sector, or sofa surfing. The regulator’s report into the effectiveness of the Housing Options approach highlights this:

*“We found that Housing Options has contributed to the reduction in the number of people having a homelessness assessment. We also found that the diversion of people from a homelessness assessment to Housing Options was not always appropriate. It is likely that in such cases this has resulted in an under-recording of homelessness as a number of people with clear evidence of homelessness or potential homelessness do not go on to have a homeless assessment.”<sup>11</sup>*

This could explain some of the reduction in numbers of homeless applications by this age group. This diversion of some individuals away from the homelessness route affects not only the duty of the local authority to house a homeless young person, but also the wider support the individual should receive, for example in line with the new duty for local authorities to provide housing support

<sup>9</sup> Homelessness Statistics Quarterly Reference Tables Scottish Government (2014) <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Housing-Regeneration/RefTables/HomelessOcttoDec2013>

<sup>10</sup> Scottish Housing Regulator (2014) *Housing Options in Scotland: a thematic inquiry*

<sup>11</sup> Scottish Housing Regulator (2014) *Housing Options in Scotland: a thematic inquiry*, p5

to homeless households introduced by the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 and which came into effect on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2013.<sup>12</sup>

Shelter Scotland is publishing a report compiled from information collected from local authority officials through a short informal telephone interview as a result of this new support duty. A total of 27 authorities were interviewed in late 2013 and the first quarter of 2014. 3 councils responded specifically about the effect of the new duty on young people. Midlothian Council noted that most of its support was delivered to young people aged 16 to 25 and it had overcome engagement issues by employing young people's workers who had been involved in mediating with families to prevent homelessness and also in outreach education work in 2nd, 5th and 6th years in schools and in a 16+ forum. West Lothian Council was intending to focus housing support more on employment initiatives since many of its support services were delivered to young people. North Lanarkshire Council also reviewed its protocol with Social Work colleagues to ensure that young people who were looked after and accommodated are properly supported through the pathway planning process and have housing involvement at an early stage. Whilst the practical application of this support aspect is encouraging, as noted above the duty only applies for councils to individuals making a homeless application.

*“Staff in some councils are working to targets for the reduction of homelessness applications as a performance measure for Housing Options. The use of reductions in numbers of homeless applications as a solitary measure of the success of Housing Options can introduce the risk of organisational behaviours that act against the achievement of good outcomes for people in need. We saw a number of examples where local authorities had targets in place and where people who were homeless were not being provided with appropriate advice and assistance in accordance with the homeless legislation.”<sup>13</sup>*

Shelter Scotland echoes the Regulator's call for enhanced guidance for local authorities on the delivery of Housing Options. The Regulator also identified that for some local authority Housing Options interviews support needs assessments were completed, but *“also many where there was no or only brief discussions about support needs”*.<sup>14</sup> They highlighted positive practice in some councils offering the same support needs assessments to those who make homeless applications as for those who go through their Housing Options process.

### **What new approaches have been introduced, and how effective have they been?**

The other, more positive, aspect of prevention has been around support and mediation work that has been done. In 2011, Shelter Scotland conducted research into the links between young runaways and later instances of youth homelessness<sup>15</sup>. This research showed clearly that young people who run away from home before they are 16 are consistently identified as being at high risk

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<sup>12</sup> Scottish Government (2013) *Housing Support duty to homeless households – Guidance for local authorities* <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2013/06/3279/2>

<sup>13</sup> Scottish Housing Regulator (2014) *Housing Options in Scotland: a thematic inquiry*, p5

<sup>14</sup> Scottish Housing Regulator (2014) *Housing Options in Scotland: a thematic inquiry*, p14

<sup>15</sup> Research report: *Running away and future homelessness – the missing link?* (April 2011)

[http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/348013/Running\\_away\\_and\\_future\\_homelessness\\_FINAL.pdf](http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/348013/Running_away_and_future_homelessness_FINAL.pdf)

of homelessness and having housing problems in later life. The findings highlighted that the vast majority of young homeless people (84 per cent) had also run away overnight from home or care when they were under 16.<sup>16</sup> Many had run away more than once, and as part of this experience they had often slept rough and sometimes stayed away from home for more than four weeks. This research suggested that any focus on preventing homelessness needs to tackle the issues faced by young runaways and put resources into early intervention for those under the age of 16.

Early intervention for young people and their families has been shown to be successful and has provided an alternative for young people facing homelessness. The regulator report identified that some local authorities employed a mediation approach themselves in an attempt to resolve relationship breakdowns resulting in homelessness, particularly with young people whose parents are asking them to leave home. Whilst it was acknowledged that *“independent and voluntary mediation, conducted by trained mediators, can deliver good and sustainable outcomes...some of what was described as mediation was in fact protracted discussions between the local authority and parents about the likelihood of the young person being allowed to stay; third parties we spoke to expressed some concerns that this approach could further damage relationships between the young person and parents, particularly where the young person has complex needs”*.<sup>17</sup>

The Safe and Sound service, run by Shelter Scotland in partnership with Relationships Scotland works to reduce the risk of homelessness for young people in Dundee and across the greater Tayside and Fife areas, facilitating family mediation and the safe return home for those who have run away, or where this is not possible, helps them to find and keep suitable housing of their own.

An evaluation report<sup>18</sup> was published in May by the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships who carried out a one year programme of monitoring and evaluation. Of 187 referrals between December 2012 and December 2013, 53% were referred because the young person was homeless or at risk of homelessness. However, other referral categories included running away and being forced out, emphasising that for many there was potential for homelessness further down the line.

There are several key points that have been highlighted as key to the project’s success. Having a dedicated worker to approach and ask for questions, and who will actively contact them too, is crucial.

“(my worker) made me feel like everything was a lot clearer – they explained it to me”  
[Shelter Scotland service user]

“everything was cloudy before I sat down with my worker and they explained everything  
– no one had done that before” [Shelter Scotland service user]

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<sup>17</sup> Scottish Housing Regulator (2014) *Housing Options in Scotland: a thematic inquiry*, pp14-15

<sup>18</sup> The Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (2014), *Safe and Sound Project: Evaluation Report*, [http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/news/may\\_2014/praise\\_for\\_safe\\_and\\_sound\\_project](http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/news/may_2014/praise_for_safe_and_sound_project)

Whilst the Safe and Sound service has received great results, it only helps people in the Tayside locality. Shelter Scotland would like to see a similar level of support for young people no matter where they live in Scotland. This is in line with the Regulator's recommendation for independent and skilled mediation services to be made available.

### **Temporary Accommodation**

Despite a focus on prevention and an understanding of the benefits in this, there were still over 12,000 homelessness applications last year. We need to ensure that we get the services for homeless applicants right too. Our service users have told us that after approaching the council for assistance, the thought of staying in homeless accommodation is often not seen as an option for young people. Local homeless hostels were viewed as having have bad reputations therefore young people don't want to use them as they don't want to be associated with living in those places.

"as soon as you say (name of hostel) people judge you and think 'junkie'" [Shelter Scotland service user]

"I think it'd take me back – I've come so far in the last year" [Shelter Scotland service user]

The support given to young people experiencing homelessness and the temporary accommodation that is offered before being moved on to settled, permanent accommodation is vital. Shelter Scotland has called on the Scottish Government to produce minimum standards for temporary accommodation.<sup>19</sup> We share the concerns of Barnardo's Scotland in the use of temporary accommodation especially for care leavers and note the relatively high proportion of previously looked-after children who spent time in bed and breakfast accommodation. We echo Barnardo's Scotland call for these standards to reflect the needs of young people and vulnerable groups, including care leavers, in particular. Temporary accommodation is the crucial first step away from homelessness and should be a positive move away from crisis.

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<sup>19</sup> Shelter Scotland (November 2013) *Temporary Accommodation Standards: Campaign Briefing* [http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/professional\\_resources/policy\\_library/policy\\_library\\_folder/temporary\\_accommodation\\_standards\\_campaign\\_briefing](http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_library/policy_library_folder/temporary_accommodation_standards_campaign_briefing)