

Briefing for Scottish Government Debate on Ending Homelessness Together

November 2018

Key Points

- **Homelessness is on the rise¹ in Scotland for the first time in nine years.** Every 18 minutes, a household in Scotland becomes homeless. It is critical that more is actively done to *prevent* people from experiencing homelessness and that local authorities have the resources required to adequately fund homelessness prevention and housing support services.
- **People are spending longer in temporary accommodation.²** Last year, households spent an average of 24 weeks in temporary accommodation, and families spent even longer, around 29 weeks.
- **People are being blocked from accessing their housing rights,** Despite Scotland's strong homelessness legislation, we know that there are still issues around people being blocked from accessing their rights. Some local authorities are regularly breaking the law by not meeting their statutory homelessness duties. This includes refusing to take homeless applications, failing to provide temporary accommodation and breaking the Unsuitable Accommodation Order by placing families in temporary B&B accommodation for more than 7 days. The practice of denying people their legal right to homelessness services is known as gatekeeping.
- **It's time for urgent action.** Shelter Scotland welcomes both the recommendations from the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action group (HARSAG) as well as the recent Local Government and Communities Committee inquiry into homelessness and the Scottish Government's new homelessness strategy (published Tuesday 27th November). The recommendations from these reports now need to be turned into action on the ground that makes a real difference to those experiencing or at risk of homelessness.
- **Rough sleeping is just the tip of the iceberg.** We must not become complacent or narrow in our view of homelessness in Scotland. While rough sleeping is the most visible form of homelessness, it is just the tip of the iceberg of a wider structural problem in our housing system. National and local government must work together with partners and stakeholders to respond to all forms of homelessness. This means the right advice, support and information to ensure everyone has a safe, secure and affordable home.

¹ Scottish Government (2018); [Homelessness in Scotland: 2017-18](#),

² Shelter Scotland (2018); [Time in Temporary Accommodation 2018](#)

Background

Shelter Scotland is Scotland's national housing and homelessness charity. We are here so that no-one has to face bad housing or homelessness alone. In 2017/18 Shelter Scotland helped over 21,000 people through our housing advice and support services across Scotland – more than ever before.

Along with our national helpline and local projects, we operate four community hubs across Scotland which offer clients support and advice in Scotland's major cities; Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen.

Shelter Scotland believes that despite Scotland having some of the most progressive homelessness legislation in the world, there is still significant work to be done. We must do more to prevent homelessness from happening where possible, and where this cannot be achieved ensure people are quickly and effectively assisted to move away from homelessness into a safe, secure and affordable home.

Homelessness in Scotland since 2012

The progressive and groundbreaking abolition of the priority need test in Scottish homelessness legislation in 2012 widened access to statutory homelessness services to all homeless households in Scotland, such as single men, who were previously not considered to be 'priority'.

In response to the rate of homelessness applications increasing, the Scottish Government advocated a 'Housing Options' approach which aimed to rationalise the number of homelessness applications being made. The approach was intended to assess a person's situation holistically and examine all the options for housing that were available to them.

Housing Options has contributed to homeless applications steadily reducing, however this trend has slowed and last year we witnessed an upturn in application statistics for the first time in nine years. **There is also a concern that the statistical reduction in homelessness applications driven by the adoption of Housing Options may be masking a lack of meaningful change in relation to the root causes and drivers of homelessness in Scotland.**

Latest figures

In 2017/18 in Scotland:

- 34,972 homeless applications were made, the first increase in 9 years.
- **28,792 households were assessed as homeless** last year; the equivalent of one household every 18 minutes. These households included 43,074 unique individuals of which **14,075 were children**.³
- Both the number of households and the number of children in temporary accommodation increased for the fourth year running. The latest snapshot figures show 10,933 households in temporary accommodation in Scotland, including **6,615 children**.
- 47% of all households assessed as homeless identified as having one or more support need, the majority of whom identified medical conditions and/or mental health conditions.
- Recent Scottish Government research⁴ also showed that homelessness and poor health are inextricably linked; **people who have experienced homelessness were more likely to have a higher level of interaction with health services** and were more likely to have one or more health conditions relating to drugs, alcohol and/or mental health. This confirms the significant role that health services play in addressing homelessness.

We believe that the levels of homelessness and rise in the last year can be attributed to:

- The lack of affordable homes for social rent
- The continuing adverse impact of welfare reform and its impact on affordability
- The increase in people with multiple and complex needs who are not properly supported
- Insufficient and inconsistent prevention work across Scotland's fragmented public services

Recent developments

Among the commitments in the 2017/18 Programme for Government, the Scottish Government convened a **Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Group (HARSAG)**, which brought together key organisations in the sector and beyond to assess all available evidence and make recommendations on how to solve homelessness in Scotland. The group made a total of 70 recommendations and most of these have been accepted by ministers. These recommendations include:

- Improvement of **temporary accommodation** provision, including the introduction of minimum standards, and a reduction in the time spent in TA to ensure that TA usage is minimised.

³ Shelter Scotland (2018); [Getting behind the homeless statistics: update for 2017-18](#)

⁴ Scottish Government (2018); [Health and homelessness in Scotland: research](#)

- A move towards a **rapid rehousing** model in every local authority, which incorporates a Housing First element targeted at people with homelessness which is more difficult to resolve, often due to the presence of multiple and complex needs.
- **Increased focus on the prevention of homelessness**, including the consideration of a new prevention duty.
- **Joint working with other sectors**, including focus on groups who are known to be at higher risk such as prison leavers, care leavers, and those with multiple and complex needs.
- The **review of existing legislation** and updating of key documents including the homelessness Code of Guidance.

Shelter Scotland Recommendations

- **Prevention of homelessness** must be prioritised; we know that homelessness can be catastrophic for households, especially children, and this should be avoided where possible.
- We strongly support the **introduction of minimum standards in temporary accommodation**, which we have been calling for since 2011, and recommend that this is swiftly implemented. Where it is necessary for temporary accommodation to be used, it must be a positive stepping stone out of homelessness.
- **Tailored, flexible and long-lasting support** is vital to helping the most vulnerable people find and keep a home that meets their needs. It is especially important to ensure that the support attached to the approach is well-funded and of high quality.
- Public bodies not directly involved in providing homelessness services must be strategically aligned and work more closely with local authority housing and homelessness services to prevent homelessness from occurring. This is not limited to health services, but also extends to Police Scotland, the Scottish Prison Service and education services among others. **Prevention work should be cross-portfolio** to ensure help, support and interventions are available for people *before* they reach crisis point.
- While Scottish homelessness legislation offers some of the best protections and rights in the world, **we must ensure that people are aware of their rights and are able to access them**. We know this is not always the case in practice, often driven by strains on local resources.

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