
HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE HOMELESS?

Key points:

- 36,465 households applied as homeless in 2018-19, an increase of 3% on the year before.
- 29,894 households were assessed as homeless in 2018-19, an increase of 1% on the year before.
- 29,163 adults and 14,043 children were assessed as homeless last year.
- Statistics only go some way towards showing the extent of homelessness in Scotland: an unknown number of people experience 'hidden homelessness'.

A completely accurate measure of how many people are homeless in Scotland does not exist. The main reason for this is that not everyone who is homeless makes a homeless application to their local council: an unknown number of people in Scotland experience **hidden homelessness**, meaning that they do not appear in official statistics.³

There are many reasons people who are homeless don't appear in official statistics:

- They may never make a homeless application because they don't realise they are homeless – due to perceptions of homeless as solely rough sleeping, many people in overcrowded conditions or staying with friends or family may not think of themselves as homeless.
- Some people may choose not to make a homeless application because of the perceived trauma and lengthy processes involved. They may choose to stay with friends or family until they get back on their feet, rather than risk being placed in temporary accommodation outwith support networks. They may also feel there is stigma attached to applying as homeless, or might feel it restricts their choice of housing because in some areas they would get less offers of permanent accommodation than if they apply through the standard waiting list.
- Some people may not feel able to make a homeless application. Some individuals might not feel ready to engage with services, or may have had

³ For more info on hidden homelessness, see our short briefing on the subject: Shelter Scotland (2018) [Hidden Homelessness](#)

bad experiences with support services in the past. This is particularly the case for people with multiple and complex needs.

- Some people try to make a homeless application, but experience ‘gatekeeping’. This means the local authority refuses to take their application, or they are deterred from making the application. This practice is unlawful, but unfortunately widespread.⁴

Of the available indicators, official government statistics around homeless applications and assessments give us by far the most accurate picture of homelessness in Scotland.

How many people apply as homeless?

Any household in Scotland has the legal right to make a homeless application to their local council; the council has a legal duty to accept an application. Once an application has been taken, the council goes on to decide whether the household is indeed homeless. Applications are made by *households*, rather than individuals. Those households might contain one person, or they might contain many more.

✓ Application statistics **do** show us the number of **households** who made a homeless application.

✗ Published application statistics **do not** show us the number of **people** contained in households who made an application. (This is recorded and available by special request to the government, but not shown in the main statistics).

✗ **Application** statistics **do not** show us the number of households who were assessed by the council to be homeless. For this, we need to look at the **assessment** statistics.

✗ Application statistics **do not** show us the number of households who tried to make an application, but were turned away. Despite the legal obligation for councils to accept a homeless application from anyone, Shelter Scotland is aware of instances in which councils have stopped people from exercising their legal right to make a homeless application. This practice is unlawful, and is known as **gatekeeping**.⁵

⁴ Shelter Scotland (2018), [Evidence of gatekeeping in Glasgow City Council](#)

⁵ For more info on gatekeeping, see our briefing about gatekeeping in Glasgow: Shelter Scotland (2018), [Evidence of gatekeeping in Glasgow City Council](#)

Homeless applications are beginning to rise again

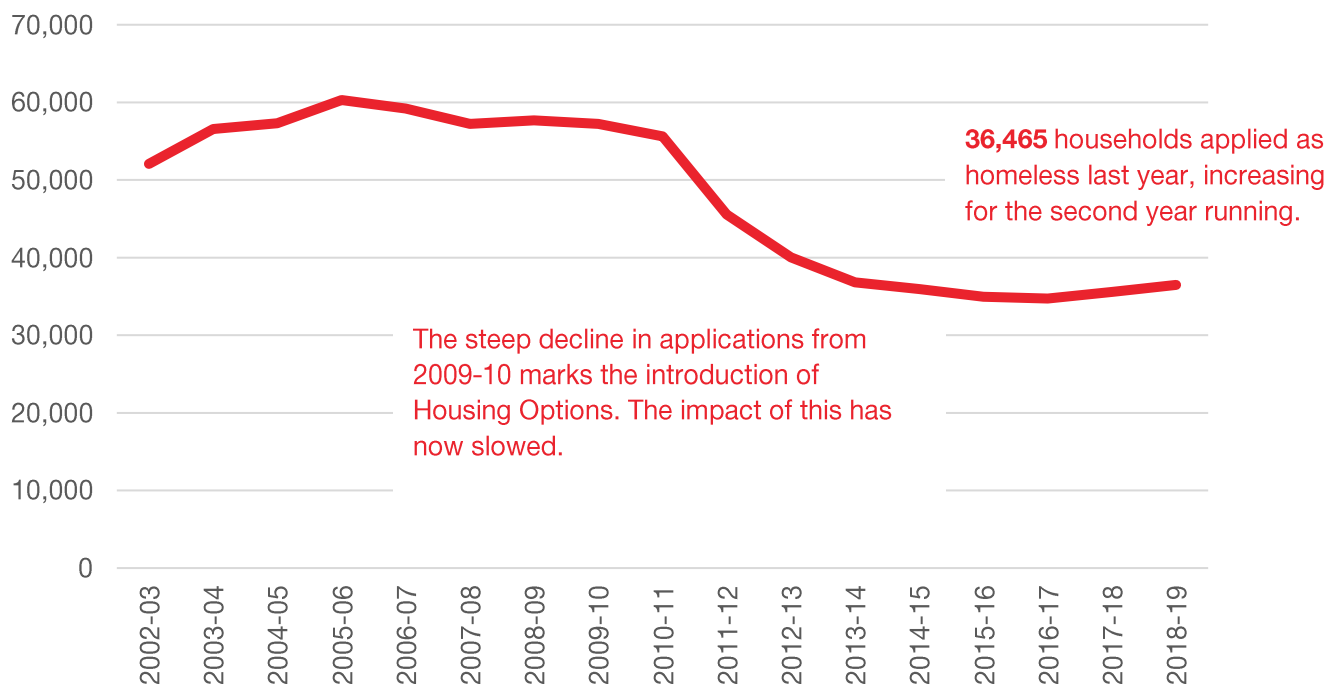


Chart 1: Total homeless applications in Scotland by year, 2002-03 to 2018-19.

The most recent data release shows that between April 2018 and March 2019, **36,465 households applied as homeless to their local council**. That’s approximately the same as the population of Stirling.

This number has increased by 3%, or 892 households, compared to the year before, which marks the second year running that there has been an increase in applications. This slight upward trend in homeless applications confirms that the sharp decrease seen after 2010-11 was caused by the introduction of a concentrated preventative approach to homelessness undertaken by local authorities known as Housing Options, rather than any improvements in tackling the underlying causes of homelessness.

The recent increase is particularly concerning given that there has been a lot of political focus on homelessness over the past couple of years, beginning with the £50 million Ending Homelessness Together fund announced in the 2017 Programme for Government and the creation of the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group. The recent increase in applications shows that while this focus is, of course, welcome, further efforts must be concentrated on prevention in order to tackle the root causes of homelessness and stop people having to go through the turmoil of applying as homeless in the first place.

The 3% rise in applications is not consistent across the country
 There is considerable variation in how numbers of applications have changed since 2017/18

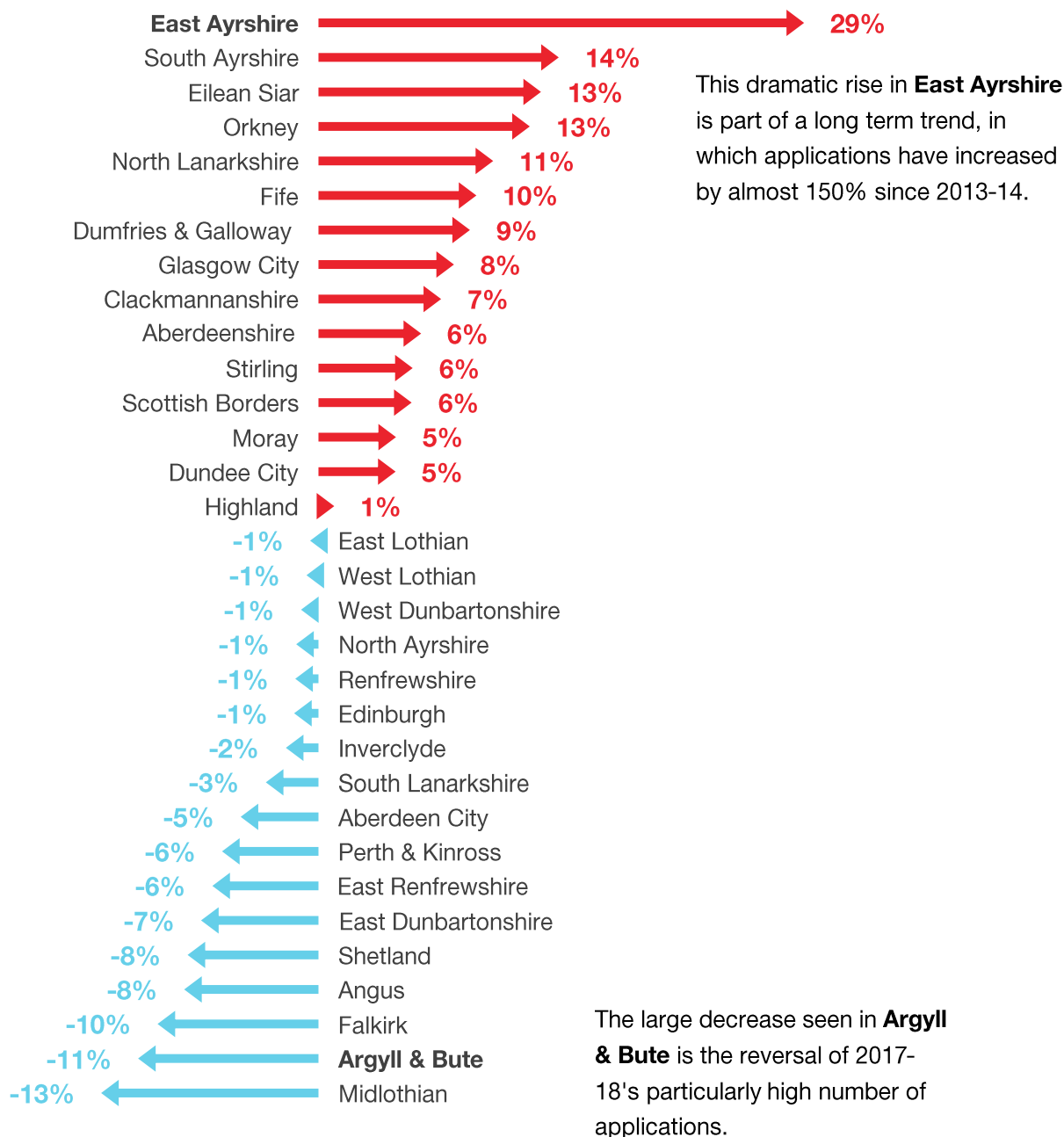
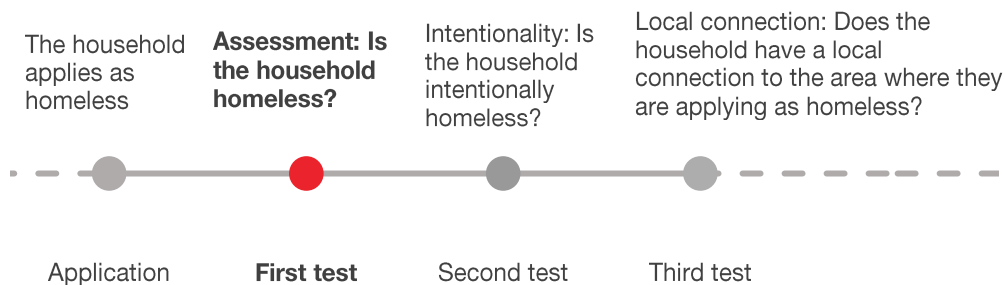


Chart 2: Percentage change in homeless applications 2017-18 to 2018-19 by local authority.

As we can see from the chart above, 15 local authorities recorded increases in applications, while 17 recorded decreases. Some changes, such as those seen in East Ayrshire, South Ayrshire and North Lanarkshire, represent a continuation of ongoing trends. Others, such as the minor decreases seen in North Ayrshire

and West Lothian, are recent deviations from otherwise reverse trends. However, be aware that this chart shows *percentage* change, and therefore in the smaller local authorities (e.g. Orkney, Shetland), the percentages represent very small changes in actual numbers.

How many people are assessed as homeless?



Once a household applies as homeless, the local authority then makes three decisions:

1. Firstly, whether the household is indeed homeless (or threatened with homeless within two months)

28,792 households were assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness between April 2018 and March 2019.

This means that **82%** of households who applied as homeless were judged by their local council to be homeless or likely to be homeless within the

...and this figure has remained fairly stable over the past 6 years.

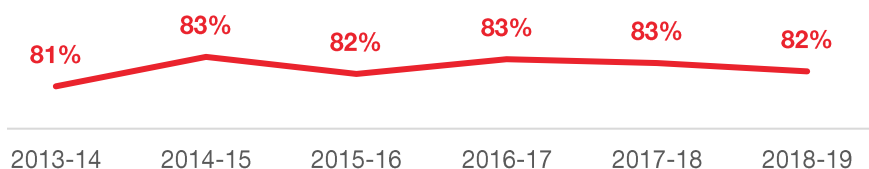
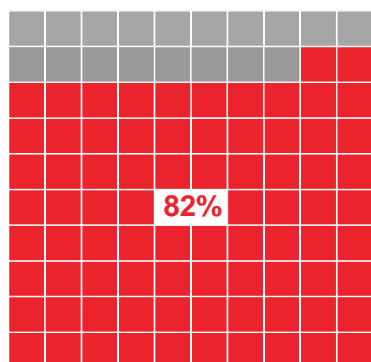
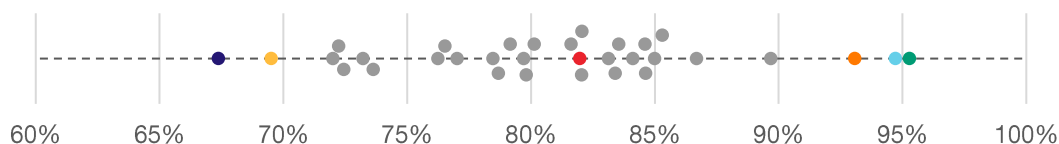


Chart 3 (left): The percentage of households who applied as homeless in 2018-19 that were assessed as homeless.

Chart 4 (right): The percentage of households who applied as homeless that were then assessed as homeless, by year, 2013-14 to 2018-19.

Some local authorities have assessment rates which deviate considerably from this 82% average. This means that, of all the households who come to them to apply as homeless, the proportion they assess as homeless is considerably greater or smaller than the national average.



Moray and **Dundee City** both have significantly lower assessment rates, at **67%** and **70%** respectively...

...while particularly high assessment rates are found in **Midlothian (95%)**, **Edinburgh City (95%)**, and **Highland (93%)**.

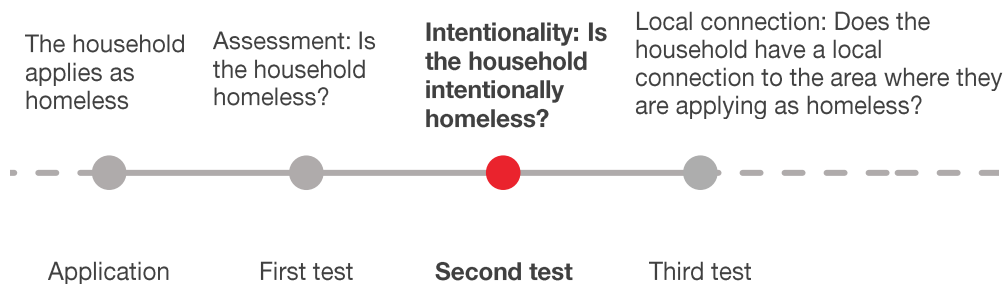
Chart 5: Assessment rates by local authority, 2018-19.

It is hard to draw firm conclusions as to why a particular local authority has an assessment rate that differs significantly from the national average without knowing more about how they run their services. It might be to do with how their homelessness and housing options services interact, it might be due to level of need in the area, or there might be other reasons.

29,163 adults and 14,043 children

were assessed as homeless in 2018-19. This is a total of 43,206 individuals.

Intentionality



1. If the local authority decide that the household is indeed homeless (or threatened with homelessness), they then make a second decision: whether the household is **intentionally homeless**. This asks whether the applicant deliberately did something which caused their homelessness, or deliberately failed to do something which would have averted their homelessness. Sometimes this decision can be made instantly, but sometimes it can take longer. Local authorities should make these inquiries within 28 days of a household making an application, though it can take longer under exceptional circumstances: i.e. if more information or investigation is required to properly assess someone’s application.

If a household is found to be intentionally homeless, the local authority only has a duty to provide advice, assistance, and temporary accommodation – if required – for a reasonable period. On the other hand, if a household is found to be unintentionally homeless, the local authority has a duty to help the applicant find permanent accommodation (and provide temporary accommodation in the interim if the household requires it).

5% (1,525 households) of those who were assessed as homeless were found to be **intentionally** homeless...

...and this figure has remained fairly stable over the past 5 years.

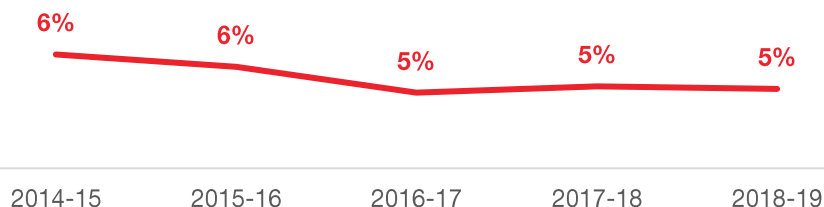
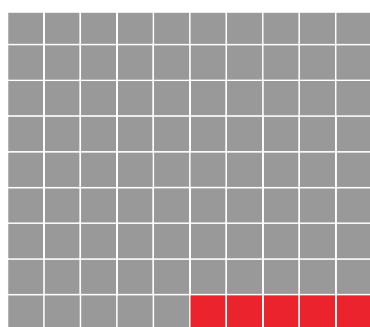


Chart 6 (left): The percentage of households who were assessed as intentionally homeless, of all households who applied as homeless, 2018-19.

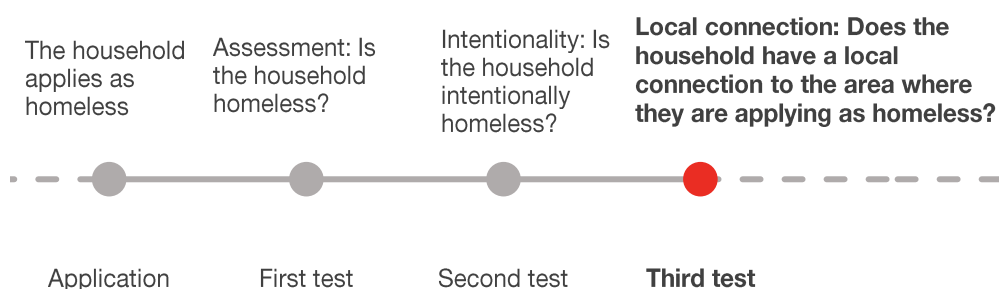
Chart 7 (right): The percentage of households who were assessed as intentionally

homeless, of all households who applied as homeless, by year 2014-2019.

It is Shelter Scotland's experience that intentionality decisions are often applied inappropriately. Our advisors regularly work with clients who have been given an intentionality decision, and are almost always successful in overturning that decision. This shows that the decisions were incorrect in the first place, and unnecessarily prolonged people's experience of the homelessness system.

Earlier this year, the Scottish Government consulted on the future of the intentionality test, and has since announced that the duty for local authorities to investigate intentionality will be scrapped, to be replaced by a discretionary power. This change will come into effect in November 2019. Shelter Scotland supports this, but recommends the removal of intentionality tests altogether.⁶

Local connection



2. The local authority then decides whether or not the household has a local connection to the area in which they are applying as homeless. In order to have a local connection, a household must fulfil one of the below criteria:

- Be normally or previously resident in the area, and the residence was of their own choice;
- Be employed in the area
- Have family associations
- Have special circumstances

The main Scottish Government statistics release does not include statistics around local connection. Shelter Scotland advocates for the removal of the local connection test entirely,⁷ as it prevents a local authority from considering a household's needs holistically, and hinders households from moving on from

⁶ Shelter Scotland (2019). [Response to the Scottish Government's consultation on local connection and intentionality.](#)

⁷ Shelter Scotland (2019). [Response to the Scottish Government's consultation on local connection and intentionality.](#)

homelessness. **We therefore welcome the announcement from the Scottish Government that they plan to remove the local connection requirement.**

People must be trusted and empowered to make decisions that are best for them, and we embrace the removal of unnecessary barriers that currently prevent them from doing so.

The below diagram shows the proportions of households at each stage of the application process.

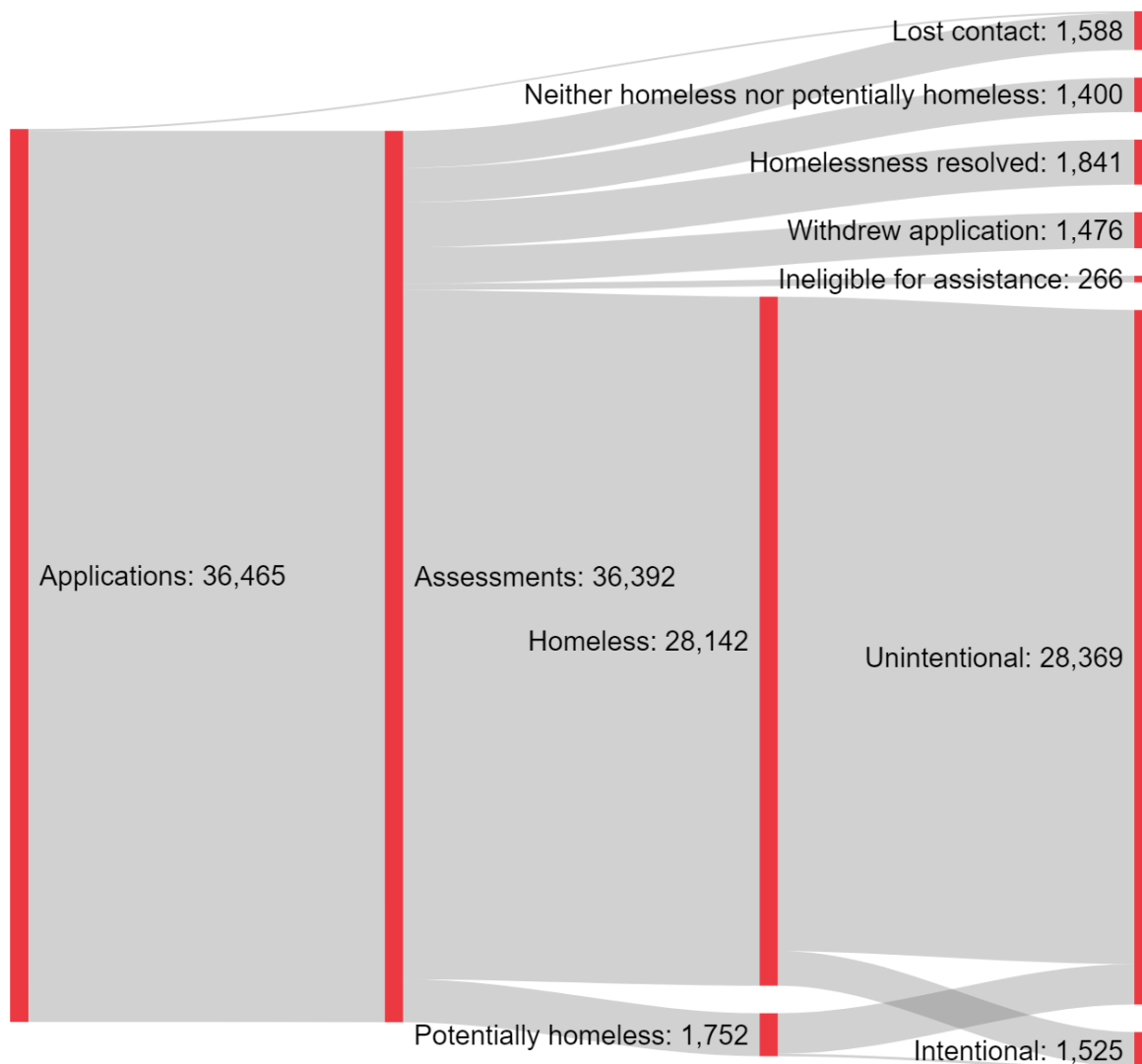


Chart 8: Number of households at each stage of the homeless application process, 2018-19.