

Factsheet

Homelessness in Scotland 2003-2004

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Shelter

Homelessness in Scotland 2003-2004

This paper provides current information on homelessness in Scotland. It outlines the extent of homelessness and the main reasons why people become homeless. It also considers what needs to be done to tackle the problem of homelessness in Scotland. It argues that many challenges lie ahead and that there are substantial obstacles to be overcome in order to implement a progressive agenda, which will resolve homelessness in Scotland within a generation.

Before moving into the main body of the paper, it is worth considering what we mean by homelessness. When people think about homelessness, they usually think about people sleeping rough. But homelessness is a much wider problem, affecting hundreds of thousands of families and individuals each year. Homelessness is much more than being without a roof over your head; homelessness is being without a *home*. That means being without somewhere warm, safe and secure; without somewhere you can welcome friends, receive post or carry out many other aspects of daily life.

The Homelessness Task Force considered it important to define what is meant by homelessness. It also set out a wider understanding of homelessness recognising that:

'it extends to those who are living in insecure or intolerable accommodation simply because they have nowhere else to go, and to those who are threatened by homelessness even if they do not yet come within the statutory definition'.

This marked a very progressive way to define homelessness within the context of Scottish housing policy.¹

To be without a home is unacceptable in the twenty-first century. It is degrading and damaging to individuals and the community, and has enormous social and economic costs for us all. At Shelter, we want a long-term solution to homelessness because we believe that everyone should have the right to live in a decent, warm, safe home.

The policy context

Over the past decade, there have been significant changes to the legislative and policy context surrounding homeless in Scotland. The Rough Sleepers Initiative (RSI) was introduced to Scotland in 1997. When the Scottish Executive took over from the Scottish Office in 1999, it continued the RSI programme and set a target of ensuring that no-one

¹ For full details of the Homelessness Task Force's definition of homelessness refer to Appendix B in its final report, *Helping Homeless People: An Action Plan for Prevention and Effective Responses. Homelessness Task Force Final Report, 2002.*

need sleep rough by the end of 2003. The RSI formally ended as a separate programme in March 2003 (although councils are continuing to fund services). Attempts to meet the target were carried out with the voluntary and public sector, suggesting a new 'consensus' approach to tackling homelessness in Scotland.

In a post-devolution era, the new Scottish Executive hit the ground running in terms of homelessness policy. The Homelessness Task Force (HTF) was established in 1999 and its first report, published in April 2000, focused on legislative proposals, virtually all of which were incorporated into Part 1 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. There were two main homelessness provisions in the Act.

- **To reform local authorities' strategic function** by placing a duty on each local council to produce a homelessness strategy; by placing a duty on each council to make advice and information available free of charge to everyone; by establishing a single regulatory body, for councils and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), called Communities Scotland.
- **To increase the rights of homeless people** by giving everyone the right to interim accommodation on application; by giving every non-priority applicant the right to temporary accommodation and advice and assistance; by giving minimum rights to hostel dwellers.

This gave Scotland an opportunity to increase the rights of homeless people radically, and to improve the kinds of service they receive from councils.

Following the enactment of the 2001 Act, the next phase of the HTF's work comprised a more fundamental review of homelessness policy and law, with its second and final report published in February 2002. The report contained 59 recommendations to be implemented over a decade, to bring about a 'step change in the incidence of homelessness'. Five of the recommendations proposed legislative change, which is now enacted through the Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003.

The 2003 Act has been described as the most progressive homelessness legislation in Western Europe, by giving everyone in Scotland the right to a home by 2012. A key recommendation of the HTF in 2002 was to radically reform the homelessness tests that were introduced in 1977. The Act places a duty on the Scottish Executive to introduce a strategy for the expansion and eventual abolition of priority need by 2012, gives intentionally homeless people the right to a short tenancy with support, and suspends the local connection test. The 2003 Act also introduced powers for the Scottish Executive to limit the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for families with children. As of 6 December 2004, local authorities can only use bed and breakfast accommodation in specific circumstances.

The Homelessness Monitoring Group (HMG) has been set up to drive forward the implementation of the HTF's recommendations. The following two sections outline the scale and nature of homelessness in Scotland. They demonstrate that Scotland has a long way to go to ensure that all people living here have a home.

What is the scale and nature of homelessness in Scotland?

- In 2003-04 **51,195** households applied as homeless to their local council in Scotland, 6% more than in 2002-03.²
- This means that **every week** approximately **985** households will go to their local council and apply as homeless.
- These households contained **26,584** children, 7% more children than in 2002-03.
- In 2003-04, the majority of households applying were **single-person** households (64%), mainly men. **Single parents**, predominantly women, accounted for the next largest group (23%).

These households may have a roof over their heads, but they are often living in inadequate 'temporary' housing which damages their health and well-being. This means having to live in places like temporary hostels and bed and breakfast hotels, or sharing insecure and over-crowded conditions with other families.

- The number of households in temporary accommodation increased by **20%** between 31 March 2003 and 31 March 2004. On 31 March 2004, there were **6,574** households in temporary accommodation across Scotland. **1,206 (18%)** of these households were in bed and breakfast hotels.
- The use of bed and breakfast hotels increased by **32%** between 31 March 2003 and 31 March 2004. On 31 March 2004, there were **3,833** children living in temporary accommodation across Scotland. **234** of these children were in bed and breakfast hotels.
- The number of children living in temporary accommodation across Scotland increased by **27%** between 31 March 2003 and 31 March 2004.

These figures demonstrate the extent to which homelessness is a much wider problem than being without a roof over your head. That said, there are still people who are

² These figures are taken from the Scottish Executive's Statistical Bulletin, 'Operation of the Homeless Persons Legislation in Scotland: National and Local Authority Analyses 2003-04', published in September 2004.

sleeping rough in Scotland. What's more, there are still people who face very little choice but to sleep rough.

- The most recent figure for rough sleepers, in October 2003, was **328**, down from around 500 in May 2001.³

This figure gives a snapshot of people sleeping rough over the course of the week. Most organisations report higher numbers over a longer period. No count method is perfect, but we cannot be certain exactly how many people sleep rough each night.⁴ Shelter believes that putting a figure on the number of homeless people is not the critical issue: even if one person is forced to sleep rough, that is one person too many.

Yet even these bare statistics do not tell the full story. There are many other people who are described as '**hidden homeless**', which means that they have not approached the council for help and are therefore not recorded in official statistics. People in this situation include those who are sleeping temporarily on the floors and couches of friends, and people living in out-of-season holiday lets or poor quality caravans in rural areas.

It is much harder to tell who 'hidden homeless' people are. Shelter believes that people from ethnic minorities, women and single people are generally more likely to be classified as 'hidden homeless'. People who live in rural areas are also less likely to go formally to the council and present themselves as homeless. Hidden homelessness can therefore be more of a problem in rural areas than in urban centres of population.

Why do people become homeless?

The reasons why people become homeless are varied and illustrate that homelessness can happen to anyone. Of the **985** households that go to their local council and apply as homeless **every week**:

- **367** households make a homeless application because their family, relatives and friends cannot offer them accommodation
- **115** households make a homeless application because a relationship has broken down
- **104** households make a homeless application because of domestic violence.

³ Andra Laird, Shona Mulholland and Diarmid Campbell-Jack, 'Rough Sleepers Initiative - Monitoring the Target of Ending the Need to Sleep Rough by 2003'. [Third report](#) covering the period 2001-2003, George Street Research.

⁴ According to the RSI – Third Report (Laird *et al*) many local authorities had already begun collecting their own statistics or hoped to do so from 2003 onwards. It is also the intention of the Scottish Executive that local authorities collect their own information on people sleeping rough.

- **64** because they are fleeing violence or harassment
- **44** because they cannot afford their rent or mortgage
- **14** because they have had to sell their marital home because of divorce proceedings.
- **31** households make an application as homeless because they have lost their place in temporary housing
- the remaining **246** households face homelessness due to a wide variety of reasons: because they live in overcrowded conditions, because they live in unfit conditions, because the principal earner became unemployed, because of illness, because there has been a death in the family, because of delays in receiving housing benefit, and so on.

These are the reasons recorded in the official statistics, but these statistics fail to fully explain why people become homeless. The explanation that someone may give on their homeless application may only be one within a more complicated set of reasons with a much longer history. For example, a family may have shared a house with another, and being asked to leave that household may just be the last stage in a long episode of homelessness. The family may have earlier lost accommodation of their own and had to go with friends as an emergency measure.

Homelessness is not the fault of the people who experience homelessness; it is the result of a failed housing system.

- There are **136,100** people currently on housing waiting lists across Scotland.⁵
- On 31 March 2004, there were **391,374** public sector dwellings in Scotland, **25%** of these were built before 1944, and only **4%** since 1982.
- Between 1 April and 30 June 2004, there were **360** houses built by housing associations across Scotland.
- In 2003-04 **16,300** council houses were sold through the right to buy.
- The average weekly local authority rent in Scotland has risen from **£33.40** in 1997-98 to **£42.32** in 2003-4, an increase of **27%**.
- The average house price in Scotland has increased from **£57,883** in 1997, to **£103,641** in 2003, an increase of **79%**. The majority of this increase occurred between 2002 and 2003, as the average dwelling price increased by **33%** during that period.
- **360,000 (17%)** of Scotland's houses are affected by dampness and condensation.⁶
- **2,267** households lost their home through evictions and abandonments in 2003-4.

⁵ These figures are taken from the Scottish Executive's statistical bulletins: [Housing Trends in Scotland](#): quarters ending 31 December 2003 and 31 March 2004, and also the bulletin for quarter ending 30 June 2004.

⁶ From the [Scottish House Condition Survey](#) 2002.

The real problem is that there is a lack of good quality, affordable housing, or a lack of secure, supported accommodation available, if and when that is required. There is also insufficient support available for people once they obtain a house or flat, to ensure that they can sustain their tenancy.

What's the solution?

Increase the availability of affordable housing

There is an urgent need to increase the number of affordable homes in Scotland. By giving every homeless person the right to temporary accommodation, the Housing (Scotland) 2001 Act has increased pressure on temporary accommodation, while having a knock-on effect on the supply of permanent housing. Essentially, the increase in the numbers of homeless people applying to local authorities, and therefore legally entitled to temporary accommodation, is putting pressure on an already overstretched system.

It is expected that the availability of accommodation will face a double-blow as the Scottish Executive prepares to abolish priority need. Giving everyone the right to a home by 2012 is a far more realist prospect than actually providing these homes. Already, hundreds of unintentionally homeless families in priority need are placed in B&B or other forms of unsuitable accommodation every year, because permanent accommodation is not available.

The number of council houses being sold every year in Scotland continues to rise. The Scottish Executive is committed to providing 5,500 affordable rented homes a year, but Shelter Scotland is concerned that this will only be a short-term solution as a considerable proportion of these new homes could be transferred to the private sector through right to buy in five years. Shelter is urging the Scottish Executive that the review of Right to Buy in 2006 be robust and to consider safeguarding new social housing, so that it will not be allowed to leak from the sector.

Prevention

One of the key elements of homelessness policy is greater emphasis on prevention. Broad prevention activities, such as the inclusion of basic housing information in the secondary school curriculum, can be provided for the whole of a particular age group. Much prevention activity, however, needs to be targeted at groups who are at risk of homelessness.

Prevention work can include the provision of high quality advice and advocacy services, housing management, the resolution of disputes within families and between neighbours through mediation, or the provision of appropriate support for people accessing temporary and permanent tenancies. The Scottish Executive has placed enormous emphasis on the

potential of prevention work, claiming that in the medium term, successful prevention work will reduce the level of money needed for homelessness.

Shelter is not convinced that the level of financial attention given to prevention at present is sufficient to cause a considerable downturn in applications, or in the amount of money needed for services or accommodation for homeless people. It is our view that arguments on the potential impact of prevention work are being overstated given the level of resources allocated.

Develop and expand housing support services

One of the most progressive elements of homelessness legislation in Scotland is the importance placed on the role of support in preventing and resolving homelessness. The 2003 Act placed a duty on local authorities to provide 'housing support services' alongside a short Scottish secure tenancy to applicants found to be intentionally homeless. It is expected that households will engage with support and sustain their tenancy as a result.

The Homelessness Act has, in effect, raised expectations among those providing support and those providing accommodation to homeless people. This has not been followed, however, with sufficient funding commitments to meet those expectations. On 4 October 2004, the Executive announced its next round of Supporting People funding. Many local authorities have seen negligible increases, with Edinburgh facing a cut of nearly £7 million over three years. The impact of cuts like this on the ability of local authorities to meet their legislative duties is a major concern for Shelter.

Conclusion

The landscape of homelessness services, and the rights of homeless people, have been radically transformed since 1999. The promise is for a progressive homelessness agenda to resolve homelessness in Scotland within a generation. Yet homelessness is still an increasing problem in Scotland. Scotland also has some of the worst housing conditions in Europe and is currently facing a lack of affordable housing.

Shelter is concerned that the Scottish Executive is ill prepared for the resource implications of either of the 2001 or the 2003 Acts. If significant investment is not made in housing, the successful implementation of these Acts will be in jeopardy.

Unfortunately, competing priorities within the Scottish Executive and funding constraints are creating ever-greater challenges for the implementation of a progressive homelessness agenda. **A key objective of the Scottish Executive between now and 2012 should be the implementation of the HTF recommendations.**

Further reading

Fitzpatrick, S. (2004) 'Homelessness policy in Scotland' in *Housing and Public Policy in Post-Devolution Scotland*, Chartered Institute of Housing.

Laird, A., Mulholland, S. and Campbell-Jack, D. (2003) *Rough Sleepers Initiative - Monitoring the Target of Ending the Need to Sleep Rough by 2003*. Third report covering the period 2001-2003, George Street Research.

Scottish Executive (2000). *Helping Homeless People: Legislative Proposals on the Homelessness. Homelessness Task Force Initial Report*.

Scottish Executive (2002). *Helping Homeless People: An Action Plan for Prevention and Effective Responses. Homelessness Task Force Final Report*.

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