

Aberdeen **campaign briefing** Are You With Us?

October 2019

Until there's a home for everyone.

shelterscotland.org

Shelter
Scotland

Are you with us?

Shelter Scotland helps over half a million people every year struggling with bad housing or homelessness through our advice, support and legal services. And we campaign to make sure that, one day, no one will have to turn to us for help. We're here so no one has to fight bad housing or homelessness on their own.

We're fighting for a Scotland where everyone has a place to feel safe. Where no one chooses between food and rent, and no one sleeps on the streets. We all have the right to a good home and we want to make it the law. **Are you with us?**

Scotland has some of the most progressive housing legislation in the world, and over time people should be finding it easier to secure the safe home that is so vital to a fulfilling life. **But whilst housing is a human right, there is a gap between this technical right and what is protected under domestic law.** And too often the existing laws and housing rights remain beyond the reach of too many. **People don't know what their rights are** and public bodies, struggling under the weight of cuts in services and increases in demand, are **unable to enforce them.** For thousands, a safe, secure and affordable home is still out of reach. We believe that citizens need better protection to secure their right to a home.

We are campaigning for a Scotland where:

- Stronger laws ensure there is a right to a safe, secure and affordable homes for all.
- Everyone knows and can defend their housing rights.
- Laws are not broken, and rights are upheld

This briefing focuses on the local iterations of these issues in Aberdeen, using official statistics, insight from our local advice and support service, as well as a consultation with Aberdeen-based stakeholders in August 2019. It also makes recommendations for local and national action to help more people achieve their right to a safe, secure and affordable home.

More information on the campaign is available at:

shelterscotland.org/areyouwithus

A national campaign briefing is also available for download.¹

¹ Shelter Scotland (2019), [Are you with us? National campaign briefing](#)

SHELTER SCOTLAND IN ABERDEEN

- Last year, 706 households in Aberdeen approached Shelter Scotland for support with their housing, including through our national helpline and our Aberdeen Community Hub.²
- 37 of those households were either currently homeless or facing homelessness that night.
- 448 of those households were at risk of homelessness after that point.

The Aberdeen Community Hub is a one-stop shop for anyone who is homeless, facing homelessness or needs advice about a housing related problem. The Hub offers specialist advice on housing, money & debt, and welfare benefits as well as local Lay Representation at Heritable Court and access to a team of solicitors who all make sure people's rights are represented and fairly enforced. We work to engage with and involve those with lived experience of homelessness in the city and to reach new individuals and groups in need of help through our innovative Time for Change approach. We help and support anyone dealing with issues affecting their ability to find or keep a home.

KEY STATISTICS IN ABERDEEN

- In 2018-19, 1,629 homeless applications were made to Aberdeen City Council.³
- 1,300 households were assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness, and 85 households were reassessed as homeless within the same year.
- 394 households were living in temporary homeless accommodation on 31st March 2019, including 105 children.
- The night before making a homeless application 60 households slept rough, and 105 households slept rough in the 3 months leading up to their application.
- 54% of households assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness assessment identified as having a least one support need.
- 18% of children in Aberdeen live in poverty.⁴
- 21% of households in Aberdeen live in fuel poverty.⁵

² All statistics in this section are taken from internal Shelter Scotland data from 2018/19

³ All statistics relating to homelessness are taken from Scottish Government (2019) [Homelessness in Scotland 2018/19](#)

⁴ End Child Poverty [Poverty in your area 2019](#) Accessed October 2019.

⁵ Under the current definition. Scottish Government (2019) [SHCS Local Authority Analysis 2015-2017](#)

HOUSING THEMES IN ABERDEEN

This section outlines the key housing issues that were identified at a local stakeholder consultation event in August, combined with insight and data from our local advice hub.

Affordability

Aberdeen has a complex socio-economic make up with many people priced out of the housing market in the rental sector because of unaffordable private rents, and a lack of appropriate social housing stock available. Housing providers provided feedback that they are struggling to plan because of the uncertainty around future funding which is affecting building plans.

- **Increase supply of socially rented homes:** To tackle issues of housing availability, an increase in housing supply is essential. Stakeholders agreed that providing funding for social housing providers is crucial to ensure that the building of social homes continues at pace into the next parliamentary term to overcome the decades of underinvestment.
- **Increase supply of affordable homes:** It is also vital to consider the best use of existing stock in Aberdeen, particularly bringing long term privately owned empty homes back into use. Aberdeen City Council and the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, hosted by Shelter Scotland, are part funding an Empty Homes Officer in Aberdeen who is working to bring empty homes back into use. This post is funded for a fixed period so it is imperative there is long term commitment to fund this work locally with a focus on how this can increase the supply of affordable housing.

Home owners

Some households are experiencing issues with negative equity in their homes largely attributed to the downturn in the oil industry and the effect this has had on the housing market and there appears to be a rise in the number of homeowners in mortgage arrears. For example, the hub is experiencing an upsurge in the number of homeowners requiring the hub's assistance to prevent repossession of a mortgaged home. Stakeholders attribute this to the downturn in the oil industry in the North East.

- **Increase rights awareness:** There is support and advice available for households facing mortgage arrears, and it may help to be able to reach those in need at an earlier stage.

Tenants

High rents and expensive deposits for private rented accommodation means some people struggle to find somewhere they can afford.

The practice of charging rent in advance in socially rented accommodation has resulted in barriers for some tenants in Aberdeen in finding suitable housing.

Changes to the benefit system such as Universal Credit and the use of sanctions have worsened the ability of clients to fully understand their rights and navigate the system of support to sustain tenancies. For example, it was felt by stakeholders that Discretionary Housing Payments are not always accessible for those who might require them.

Furthermore, the lack of support for wider issues including mental health was seen to affect people's ability to overcome affordability issues.

- **Strengthen housing rights:** Exploration of protections that could be put in place to ensure private rented accommodation is truly affordable for tenants, for example ensuring that local housing allowance covers a sufficient proportion of properties, would help to ensure affordable housing is available for everyone.
- **Increase supply of socially rented homes:** Socially rented homes are generally more affordable than privately rented homes. Increasing the supply of social housing will help address affordability issues.
- **Rights awareness:** There is support and advice available for households struggling to pay their rent, for example through the social security system or support to put in place affordable arrears repayment plans. Reaching those in need at an earlier stage would help to address issues before they reach crisis point.

Social sector evictions

The hub continues to experience high volumes of cases seeking help with rent arrears who are facing eviction. The majority of people who contact the hub for this purpose are tenants of Aberdeen City Council.

The Aberdeen hub is contracted by Aberdeen City Council to defend these arrears cases which the council is pursuing court eviction for. Advisers feel that this court action is being used "as a means of debt collection" and that pre-action requirements are not effectively being used as a holistic way to address the root cause of the arrears.

- **Strengthen housing rights in practice:** Whilst all social landlords have to follow pre-action requirements before evicting a tenant, it was felt this is not being used to its best effect in Aberdeen. There might be opportunities to revisit arrears policy, particularly that of the council, to see whether there are areas this could be strengthened or amended building on the partnership working between Aberdeen City Council and Shelter Scotland. Some of this work has already started, for example the council investigating how they can more effectively signpost to support services like Shelter Scotland and others operating in Aberdeen at an earlier stage of arrears management.

EEA nationals

Advice and support providers in Aberdeen are seeing an increase in the number of EEA nationals seeking help with housing, welfare, money and debt. The Aberdeen hub helps a significant number of EEA Nationals whose rights to benefits and housing are wrongly being denied, due to confusion over treaty rights. The hub has worked with many people in this situation whose benefits have been wrongly stopped and who have faced destitution until Shelter Scotland intervened and clarified a person's entitlements. There are concerns that this situation is likely to only worsen and become even more complex as the UK's relationship with the rest of the EU changes as a result of Brexit.

The growth in this client group is expected to continue, and there is a concern about the lack of support available for people, especially those with no right to remain.

- **Strengthen housing rights:** Exploration of how housing rights and support available to this group could be strengthened would be welcomed in Aberdeen. Representation from stakeholders on the No Recourse to Public Funds North East Partnership is an avenue to pursue this and other relevant work further.
- **Rights awareness:** Training for frontline staff to ensure people aren't being incorrectly turned away would be beneficial.

Accessible housing

Stakeholders raised some concerns regarding the type of housing available now and being built for communities in and around Aberdeen. Specifically, it was highlighted that there is a shortage of accessible homes. Properties do not meet peoples' needs and many people have challenges getting adaptations made to their existing homes for which there is a lack of funding.

- **Strengthen housing rights:** The human right to adequate housing includes that housing must be accessible for the household. This could be met by ensuring housing is built to certain standards initially but also by making sure funding is made easily available for adaptations when required.

Security

There are still concerns by private rented on their security in their tenancy, affecting their confidence to challenge landlords on issues such as disrepair.

- **Rights awareness:** Increasing awareness of rights and how to enforce rights amongst tenants for example by using the First-tier Tribunal (Housing and Property Chamber) is also part of the solution.

Are you with us?

Shelter Scotland is seeking your support in campaigning to make housing rights front and centre nationally, and locally in Glasgow. **Are you with us?**

1. Sign the petition today to make housing rights, human rights at shelterscotland.org/areyouwithus

2. Adopt the Charter for Change: Get your employer or organisation to adopt the [Charter for Change](#) and commit to make the changes Scotland needs to ensure there's a safe, secure and affordable home for everyone.

Your pledge of support could be to take forward some of the actions identified in this briefing as crucial to strengthen people's housing rights and experiences in Glasgow.

3. Become a housing rights defender: Use your voice to raise awareness about the housing emergency - and the solutions. Share information on social media with the hashtag #areyouwithus, and stay in touch with our campaign for more information and some specific acts you can take.

4. Sign up to be a Shelter Scotland campaigner: and hear from us on new campaigns, policy work, opportunities to get involved and information on what's going on in your area https://scotland.shelter.org.uk/get_involved/campaigning

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Please support us at shelterscotland.org

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