ALACHO
ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL AUTHORITY CHIEF HOUSING OFFICERS

Ariane Burgess
Convener, Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP
By Email
24 June 2024

Dear Ms Burgess

Housing Emergency

Thank for your letter of 28 June 2024 asking for more information on the background to the declaration of housing emergencies by ten Scottish local authorities in recent months. You have asked questions around four broad themes:

The reasons and background to the declaration of housing emergencies by local authorities;

The local strategies that are being put in place to respond to the emergency;

Commentary on problems associated with empty council homes and the data available; and

Local strategies for buying homes on the second-hand market.

I will address each of these broad areas in turn.

Local Housing Emergencies
I note from your letter that you will be contacting those councils that have declared emergencies directly, they will be best placed to set out the specific local circumstances that led them to declare a housing emergency and the actions they are now focusing on in response. Where we hope we can add some value is around the wider picture.

We have gathered some data on our own account particularly around homelessness services as part of our work to get a better understanding of the challenges that are driving these decisions and impacting directly on service provision. As you will see from this material, the situation across Scotland varies considerably from Council to Council both in the extent of the challenges they face and the specific local drivers.

It is not a coincidence that Argyle and Bute rather than one of the big city authorities was the first to declare an emergency. They have faced particular problems arising from a shrinking private rented sector and an inadequate supply of social and affordable homes. The emerging failure in our housing system are general and widespread and are impacting on rural, urban and island communities with much the same degree of intensity but there is some significant local variation in how this is driven. The main point of crisis for all the Councils that have declared emergencies has been the intensity of pressure on local homelessness services.

Most of the key metrics relating to homelessness started to deteriorate prior to the start of the pandemic. The various lockdowns and other constraints on service delivery and additional pressure on households during this period certainly contributed to the current situation but they are not the cause of it.

The cost-of-living crisis and the economic disruptions over the past two years have also layered on a set of additional substantial challenges for households and service delivery.

The statistics published by the Scottish Government show homeless presentations rising over the past five years in most, though not all council areas[1]. At the same time figures from the Annual Return on the Charter[2] (ARC) show the number of homes available to relet has declined from pre pandemic levels. Over the past five years in the local authority sector alone there have been over 8,000 few council homes available to let than was the case in the five years prior to the pandemic. RSLs have seen a similar reduction in turnover. These two factors alone go a long way to explain the growing pressure on homelessness services.

The best evidence we can provide of the intensity and breadth of the challenge is contained in the attached report of our most recent "RAG" survey. The report includes details of how the survey is conducted and its purpose, so there is no need to repeat any of that here.

By way of some commentary though, in December 2023 the Scottish Housing Regulator published a statement in which it concluded that:

> "Our judgement is that the demands on some councils now exceed their capacity to respond and in others it soon will. We therefore take the view that there is systemic failure in the delivery of services to people experiencing homelessness in some local authorities and an immediate risk in others.

This conclusion was consistent with the results of our RAG survey carried out in November that year (included in the attached report). The overall situation has deteriorated since then.

In response to our most recent survey officers in 15 Councils considered that in relation to the supply of temporary accommodation; their ability to meet the requirements of the unsuitable accommodation order and the supply of permanent lets their status was "red" defined as "Struggling to cope, frequent statutory breaches".

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[1] Main+tables_homelessness+in+Scotland+2022-2023.xlsx (live.com)
[2] Figures from Scotland's Housing Network ARC data analysis tool.

A further 11 reported either amber ("Head above water but only just") or red on all three service areas. Only three Councils reported green across all areas of service delivery.

Whilst there were some signs of improvement in 6 Councils including two of the three that had achieved an "all green" return, the overall picture is one of increasing pressure and increasing rates of statutory failure across most councils.

This survey also included a question about preparations for the early prisoner release programme that started at the end of June. This process is now complete and has been largely successful though it will be some time before we have a full picture of outcomes. It is, however, an example of an additional pressure arising from pressures in other service areas that can impact directly on the capacity of homelessness services to cope with demand.

The range of comments included in the report demonstrate how close many councils are to the point of systemic collapse. That is, a point where they simply have no temporary accommodation to offer and may have little option but to turn new presentations away. Some Councils may already be facing a situation where they are receiving more homeless applications than they have voids available to provide settled accommodation.

There is little prospect of any immediate improvement, and it is likely that the numbers in temporary accommodation and open cases will continue to rise for the foreseeable future. We have been clear in discussion with the Scottish Government that "business as usual" isn't working. The underlying problem is a chronic and general shortage of social rented homes.

Developing local responses to emergencies

Not all the Councils that have declared emergencies have, as yet published their action plan. However, looking at those that are available there are a number of common themes. These include:

- Increasing/maximising lets to homeless households including RSL lets;
- Reducing voids and relet times;
- Improving processing times for social welfare fund and other emergency payments to support quicker moves into settled housing;
- Bringing empty private sector homes back in to use, usually through the Empty Homes Partnership;
- Purchasing properties on the second-hand market for use as either temporary accommodation or mainstream lets;
- Increasing activity to prevent homelessness;
- Improving the response to domestic abuse to move to a "perpetrator moves" approach where possible and safe to do so;
- Improving housing outcomes for those leaving prison;
- Improving access to the private rented sector for homeless households where this is appropriate;
- Exploring or extending private sector leasing schemes;
- Increase access to Housing First type services; and
- Working closely with a variety of voluntary and statutory partners including IJBs and health boards and specialist providers of services to those long term in the homelessness system.

This isn't a definitive list, and the emphasis placed on each action varies according to local circumstances and priorities and the availability of resources. Most of these actions have featured in a variety of homelessness action plans over the past ten years. To that extent, the response to date has, for the most part, been broadly within the range of "business as usual". It has also been constrained by the lack of resources to support new or additional revenue born services or capital investment in additional homes.

The one thing that all our members agree on however, is that we need more social rented homes if we are going to eliminate the current back log, reduce the number of households in temporary accommodation and successfully transition to a rapid rehousing model. Your committee is already well aware of the general challenges that the cuts to the affordable housing supply programme last year and this have produced. The reduction in social and affordable housing completions will reduce the capacity of the sector as a whole to respond effectively to current pressures on homelessness services.

The Scottish Government has not, as yet produced its own action plan but we are clear that something beyond "business as usual" is required. In this context we would draw your attention to the main conclusion in our RAG survey report. That is that a "focus on flexibility in supporting local responses rather than a centrally driven solutions is likely to be most effective." In particular we are of the view that much more flexibility and responsiveness is needed in the delivery of the Affordable Housing Supply Programme.

Empty Council Homes

We have been aware of problems in returning empty homes to use since the early months of the pandemic. In response to this ALACHO members have discussed the problems and shared best practice on a number of occasions. Most recently we held a "deep dive" discussion on the issue at the end of April this year. A copy of the report of these discussions and an overview of the relevant statistics at that time is attached with this letter. We concluded that as at the end of March this year there were 5,366 additional empty council homes over and above the long run pre-covid average.

In our discussions around this our members are clear that this is, for many councils, a problem to solve, however, it isn't a solution to our problems in homelessness services.

In April this year there were already clear signs of a strong focus on reducing void numbers and some anecdotal evidence of progress. And whilst the published data is usually perfectly adequate to understand performance around voids in normal times, the current housing emergency and the concerns around void levels are such that more regular reporting is required. To address this, we have been working with Scotland's Housing Network to gather a monthly snapshot of Council void numbers.

This data collection started in May this year and the initial, all be it partial returns suggest that further progress has been made. Across the 11 councils where we have two full returns; 10 have achieved a reduction in the number of empty lettable homes. Across all 11 returns the overall reduction is 14.8%. We hope to be able to provide a more complete picture based on a full set of returns from July.

The reasons for the rise in the number of voids is well understood. Setting aside the restrictions in place during the pandemic, the problem has largely been caused by significant delays in the clearing, repair and replacement of electricity meters and a shortage of craft labour both in directly provide repairs teams and through external contracting. These issues and the approaches adopted by Councils are set out in the attached report.

We have had a number of useful discussions with Scottish Government officials around this issue and we understand that Ministers are keen to help where they can, particularly in relation to the level of service from utility companies.

Where Councils have been able to put in place either a voids power supply contract with a specific utility company or engage the services of an intermediary to support the switching of supplies (and the work required to meters) this has had a significant impact. But these services are not available through any of the main procurement frameworks. As a result, Councils must manage often complicated local procurement processes to secure the service they need. Scottish Government officials have expressed a willingness to explore options to address this and we hope to progress this proposal in the coming months.

We would conclude this section by noting that the current level of empty local authority homes is too high. It would help to have more detailed and up to date figures to track the scale of the challenge and the progress in meeting it. We have taken steps to address this and hope to be able to provide up more up to date figures later this year.

It is, however, a problem that Councils are aware of and are actively addressing. There are early signs that this is having an impact. But bringing all the excess voids back in to use won't fix the problems in our homelessness services. One head of housing recently observed that the service he manages had reduced voids by two thirds, back to pre-pandemic levels. The shortage of both temporary and permanent accommodation in the area remained unaffected and pressure on the homelessness service had increased.

The underlying problem is a shortage of social rented homes. It is difficult to see how the current homelessness crisis can be resolved until this is addressed.

Local property purchase programmes
Buying homes on the second-hand market has been a feature of both the Affordable Housing Supply Programme and local investment programmes for many years. As an alternative to new build, it offers a flexible way to meet specific needs, ensure that underspends are avoided, and it can extend social housing provision into areas that may have significant levels of private renting and owner occupation but no genuinely affordable homes. Second hand homes are also usually less expensive than new build though repair and improvement costs can be considerable.

For the most part numbers have been low compared to new build and often associated with specific objectives including consolidating ownership in blocks to ensure that improvements can be made to all the homes in the building or to support local regeneration programmes including demolition and redevelopment. However, second hand purchases aren't separately identified in the Affordable Housing Supply Programme (AHSP) annual outturn reports, so it is unclear how many are completed each year or how costs and value for money compare with new build or between council areas.

There are mixed views across the sector as to the value of purchasing second hand homes. There may be concerns about the displacement of other local buyers or driving the market and pushing up prices. And there are some areas where the number of sales is so low that there are few opportunities to purchase. This is particularly likely in remote rural and island communities.

There are, however, some sellers that see an advantage in selling to the local council. This may be because of a desire to sell quickly, or to avoid expense and time to market a property. This is more likely to be the case where a close relative has died, or the seller lives some distance away.

Most Councils tend to focus on buying homes previously sold under the right to buy, "buybacks" as they are often called, but in other areas there has been a deliberate effort to purchase suitable properties in private developments.

In general terms councils will set out clear search criteria that support specific strategic agreed objectives (like consolidation of ownership or area regeneration) or to meet a particular need (in the case of larger or adapted homes for example). The risk of out competing first time buyers can be avoided by not engaging in closed bidding, withdrawing an interest in a property where there is clear interest from local buyers or focusing on buying "off market".

Most Councils will only consider buying with vacant possession, though there are some instances where it makes sense to acquire a property with the tenant in residence if that tenant will simply present to the Council as homeless if the landlord proceeds with an eviction.

The Scottish Government has been generally supportive of local house purchase schemes and has always been willing to fund them through the AHSP provided that they are part of a clear strategy, and the overall programme is included in the SHIP. There have, however been some concerns about inconsistencies and a lack of transparency around the level of grant made available and the variation of grant levels between Councils.

The recent allocation of sums within the AHSP to encourage second hand purchases has had only a limited impact on overall activity, partly because in previous years there has been no additional money available and partly because those councils that are mostly likely to buy are already actively doing so as part of their mainstream AHSP.

There is a perception that in the current climate the approach taken by the Scottish Government lacks flexibility. Properties funded through the AHSP can't, for example, be used as temporary accommodation, or at least not immediately. Grant is generally provided on a flat rate basis with no opportunity to take account of size or repair and improvement costs. Where funding becomes available in year as a result of a delay or the abandonment of a development included in the SHIP, it isn't always possible to redirect those resources to property purchases. This may result in funds be allocated to another Council area.

Second hand property purchase is probably one of the areas where greater flexibility in the Scottish Government's approach to the use of AHSP grant could assist councils in reacting more quickly to opportunities to meet particular needs, mange the overall funding allocation more flexibly and develop local strategies that closely match local needs and opportunities.

Concluding comments
As we noted at the start of this letter, each council will have it's own specific response to the questions you have aske us. What we have tried to do is pull together some of the broader themes and issues and present the Scotland wide picture more clearly that the published statistics can do.

We see no tension in the fact that some Councils will hold different views, these will be shaped by local circumstances and experience. One of our key conclusions is that the response to the housing crisis now being felt across much of Scotland has to be driven locally and tailored to local needs.

We are also clear that the central challenge is to increase the supply of social housing. To achieve this in the current resource context we need to look beyond business as usual and find new and more flexible approaches. We are concerned that part of that response will be upward pressure on rents. In fact, on the assumption that no additional capital resources are going to be made available in the short to medium term, the Scottish Government's ambition to stick to its current target of 110,000 affordable homes by 2032 is only likely to be achieved if rents increase substantially. It isn't clear if this is part of the overall plan to achieve the target.

We hope that these comments and the attached reports are helpful, we would welcome an opportunity to discuss them with the committee in more detail if that would be helpful.

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Senior officers RAG survey June 2024
Homelessness services and preparation for the early prisoner release programme

Introduction

As part of our continuing efforts to understand progress and challenges in the delivery of homelessness services ALACHO has carried out a simple RAG (Red/Amber/Green) survey of senior officers working in housing and homelessness services every six months since the early days of the pandemic.

The survey asks our members in each council to express their view of the current position in relation to three key elements of the service. These are:

The supply of temporary accommodation;
The ability to meet the requirements of the unsuitable accommodation order; and
The supply of permanent accommodation available to meet the needs of homeless households.

We provided the following descriptors as a guide to completing the survey:

Red-	Struggling to cope, frequent statutory breaches
Amber-	Head above water but only just
Green-	Coping with the current situation and no obvious risk of it getting worse.

For the June 2024 survey we also included an additional question about preparations for the early release of around 500 short term prisoners close to the end of their sentence. This was due to start with the first of four tranches in late June 2024.

The Scottish Government and the Scottish Housing Regulator both publish a wealth of detailed statistical information about the performance of these services. The RAG survey is intended to reflect a more personal view of housing professionals of the overall picture of service delivery.

Our intention in using the RAG format is to try to get behind the numbers and understand something of the pressure faced by those delivering and managing these services and to provide a readily accessible overview of the ability of each service and the sector as a whole to meet the statutory obligations and the needs of homeless applicants.

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Our latest survey was carried out between 6 and 28 of June 2024 (one response was received in July). Officers from all 32 councils responded, many provided additional comments on specific aspects of service delivery. These have been anonymised and published in full.

The results are set out at the end of this report. The results of the RAG surveys from November 2023 are also included for comparison.

What we found

Overall service provision

We summarised the results of our November 2023 survey as:

> "[Half of the officers] responding no longer have confidence that they can meet their statutory obligations all the time, only one reported that it was confident of meeting its duties all the time across all three questions. These results show widespread deterioration since May [2023] and a significant reduction in confidence when compared with the most challenging periods during the pandemic."

The results of our most recent survey show that there has been a general deterioration in the confidence expressed by our members since then. But the picture is mixed, three members reported an "all green" position.

The published statistics demonstrate continuing evidence of rising presentations, record numbers in temporary accommodation, widespread statutory breaches of duties to homeless applicants and increasing waiting times for those in need of a home. The number of open cases not in temporary accommodation, most of whom are also waiting for an offer of rehousing, indicates, an increase in the number of applicants making their own arrangements for temporary housing rather than accept what is on offer from the Council. This trend puts a significant question mark over the sectors capacity to reduce numbers in temp. over the short to medium term.

This level of challenge is evident in the responses we received. The overall picture across the 96 possible responses (three for each of 32 Councils) is shown in the table below together with the figures from November 2023.

RAG survey results summary

	November 2023	**June 2024**
Green	11.4% (11)	12.5% (12)
Amber	40.6% (39)	32.3% (31)
Red	48% (46)	55.2% (53)

Over half (55.2%) of all responses were "red" up from 48% in November 2003. Whilst the total number of "green" responses has risen by one, the number of amber responses has fallen significantly.

Overall, 7 Council reported a deteriorating position and 6 showed improvement on the November 2023 returns.

Two respondents reported an improvement such that they are now confident that they can meet statutory duties consistently. In contrast five Councils are now showing as all red where previously they reported at least one amber or green. Only two councils that previously reported three "red" returns have improved from this position.

15 respondents (46.8%) assessed all three aspects of their service as "red", that is "struggling to cope, regular statutory breaches", this is an increase of 3 compared to November 2023.

Two (6.2%) reported two out of three red, the same as November 2023. Five (14.2%) reported three ambers, again, the same as November 2023. One of these caveated this by saying that they were close to red on all three.

Three Councils, (9.3%) reported green across all three questions including one that has sustained this level of service over the past six months.

Overall, the picture is one of significant and rising pressure in most areas. However, in 11 councils (34.3%) officers reported green or amber on all three questions, the same number as November 2023.

The comments published with these results make clear the level of sustained effort required to achieve compliance in most of these areas and the continuing fragility of current levels of performance. In a small number of councils, it appears that homeless presentations are now greater than the number of permanent lets available. These areas are at risk of a rapid rise in numbers in temporary accommodation and open cases.

We noted in our report in November 2023 that there was very little resilience left in any part of the system and expressed the view that many councils will face significant difficulties if they are called to respond on a civil contingencies basis to any emergency that results in people being forced from their homes.

The emergency prisoner release programme and the growing pressure from refugees and asylum seekers have stretched capacity to the limit in many areas but it is to the great credit of officers across the sector that services continue to function, all be it with widespread breaches of statutory duties and considerable cost to many homeless households who face long periods in sometimes unsuitable temporary accommodation and, in the case of some vulnerable individuals, significant safeguarding risks.

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Early prisoner release programme
In general terms preparation for the current programme of early prisoner release is mixed but more positive than other areas of homelessness services. Whilst seven respondents reported a "red" status and just four "green", most of the comments on this issue suggested that preparations were progressing well, that discussions with colleagues in Justice and the Scottish Prison Service were ongoing and information was being provided at the right time. Most of those responding "red" did so because of weaknesses in communications with Justice colleagues though the wider stresses on the homelessness service were also clearly a factor

Additional comments were more likely to reference uncertainty arising from the ability of those being liberated to apply to any authority rather than just their "home" area than was the case in relation to core homelessness services. There was, however, some recognition that any movement of this sort was likely to be on a "swings and roundabouts" basis.

Expectations for outcomes from this process both in terms of homelessness and reoffending are generally low. There is also concern about the possible impact of future early releases programmes.

In the light of this there is an urgent need to take steps to ensure that the SHORE standards are implemented consistently across the prison estate ahead of the planned changes to release some long-term prisoners early.

Conclusions

Over the past six months pressures on most homelessness services have continued to grow. Presentations appear to be rising whilst the number of social rented homes available to let is declining[1]. Only modest progress has been made in increasing allocations to homeless households and the backlog of cases in temporary accommodation and those making their own arrangements has grown.

In this context the relative success of the recent early prisoner release programme is positive, but it has again demonstrated the importance of the implementation of the SHORE standards consistently across the whole prison population.

One of the most notable features of these and past results in relation to core homelessness services is the lack of a clear pattern across urban, rural, city, large, small, remote or island Councils.

The same is true between stock holding and stock transfer authorities. The one exception to this is east central Scotland where Edinburgh, Fife, two of the three Lothian Councils, Clackmannanshire and Falkirk are all reporting "red" on all three

[1] This conclusion is based on early results from the 2023-24 ARC made available by Scotland's Housing Network.

indicators. Even here however, Midlothian is bucking the trend and reporting all "amber".

The comments provided by respondents present a picture of significant and rising stress in most areas. The sector appears to have moved from systemic failure across a small number of councils mainly in the central belt to a more general failure in service delivery across much of Scotland. This is expressed most clearly in the number of statutory breaches reported and less obviously, but of more concern, in the harm experienced by those caught in the system.

As things stand it is likely that the number of households in temporary accommodation and the number of open cases will continue to rise for the foreseeable future.

However, one of the most striking features of the overall picture is of local variability in both the extent of pressures and the drivers behind them. It suggests that a focus on flexibility in supporting local responses rather than a centrally driven solutions is likely to be most effective.

Tony Cain
ALACHO Policy Manger
23 July 2024

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RAG survey results November 2023 and June 2024

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RAG survey results 2023-24								
Council	November 2023				June 2024			
	Supply of temp	Meeting the UAO	Supply of permanent lets		Supply of temp.	Meeting the UOA	Supply of permanent lets	Preparation for emergency prisoner release
Aberdeen								
Aberdeenshire								
Angus								
Argyll and Bute								?
Clacks								
Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar								
Dumfries and Galloway								
Dundee			/R					
East Ayrshire							/R	/R
East Dunbartonshire								/R
East Lothian								
East Renfrewshire								
Edinburgh								/R
Falkirk								
Fife								
Glasgow								
Highland								
Inverclyde								
Midlothian								
Moray								
North Ayrshire								
North Lanarkshire								/R

Orkney								
Perth & Kinross					/R		/R	/A
Renfrewshire					/R		/R	
Scottish Borders								
Shetland	/R	/R	/R				/R	
South Ayrshire	/R	/R	/R		/R	/R	/R	/R
South Lanarkshire								/R
Stirling								
West Dunbartonshire								
West Lothian								

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Homelessness service provision

RAG survey June 2024

Comments collection

Comments that were made in addition to the Red-Amber-Green (RAG) rating response to the survey carried out in June 2024 are reported in full. Each bullet point represents the start of comments from a different respondent. They have been anonymised with some text replaced in square brackets to indicate where this has been done but otherwise the comments are as they were submitted.

1) **How is your supply of suitable and useable temporary accommodation holding up in the light of current demand.**

- Red – daily battle to ensure enough temp provision.

- The Council's temporary accommodation strategy monitoring tool identified that an additional 50 placements were required for 2024/25. The demand for temporary accommodation is also higher than normal. Very few households have alternative options. Pre last year on average approx. 40% of households required temporary accommodation; last year this figure was almost 80%. Households with no local connection are arriving in the area on an emergency basis requiring emergency accommodation that day. Often with health issues and high support needs.

  We have also lost a majority of our temporary accommodation procured from the Private Sector (Lead Tenancies) however many landlords are selling their properties due to cost of living costs etc. Pre-covid we had approx. 85 lead tenancies we currently have 29. Where the property is x council stock we have tried to buy these from open market however if used as temp we are not securing the Scottish government funding to reduce the costs.

  Potential Judicial Review challenges have increased but we have managed to resolve pre court for most. Costs for legal support etc has been high to defend actions

- Green – managing to carry a few vacancies most days and only the odd short-term blip has required a night or two in B&B.

- We haven't breached for about 6 weeks until this week although still heavily reliant on B&B / hotel type accommodation. We are struggling to divert properties to temporary accommodation from HRA / RSLs due to residualisation (turnover in properties that have been temp before, clustering of temp etc.) A sudden pressure - such as early prisoner release, resettlement demand etc. would place us back deeply in the red. We have paused flipping etc. because of financial reasons and struggling with replacements. Allocations was 59% last year but demand is still outstripping supply.

- Supply continues to hold up well however homelessness has been busier over April and May with 20% of all homelessness applications coming from other authorities which has reduced supply more than normal.

- Red - we have a high number of UAO breaches and no sign of a reduction in demand. About 20% of presentations in 2023/24 were from households with no local connection to [this area] with the majority of them needing temporary accommodation.

  Our supply has also been put under significant pressure from resettlement schemes, in particular UASC

- With applications from outwith this was the data for April:

  [council] = 5
  [council] = 1
  [council] = 2
  [council] = 1
  Outwith Scotland = 3 (wales, newcastle & knareborough)

  The general pattern is high amounts from [nieghbouring authority] and then a spread from other areas. We continue to get very vulnerable people from other areas who advise they were not wanting to move but were encouraged to move by support services (not housing). We think this maybe down to caseloads and budgets with services keen to move people away so they don't need to support them.

  I acknowledge there will also be people moving out of [this area].

- Red – we are currently utilising B&B to enable the [ ] Council to full fill its statutory requirement. This is resulting in a number of breaches of the UAO as placements within B&B are exceeding 7 days. We continue to full fill our statutory duty to provide Temporary accommodation albeit B&B.

- Response – We are facing pressure and the factors contributing to this include, requests from applicants that would normally approach our surrounding neighbours. Increase on our own properties to be upgraded and thus less availability for temporary accommodation as decant properties. High costs for private lets in [the council area]. Now a reduction in the affordable housing supply budget.

- Amber / red – stock of furnished flats is slowly increasing, but we are still using B&B on a daily basis, but number staying in B&B is kept in single figures

- Amber. We reduced our stock in line with demand and to reduce financial expenditure associated with temporary accommodation. Supply remains tight and is managed day by day.

- Red - Demand is outstripping supply and unsuitable accommodation is being used on a daily basis. This is despite increasing supply by creating additional units of temporary furnished flats

- There continues to be significant demand on our temporary accommodation. We are continuing to have a regular reliance on hotel accommodation for short term periods to meet demand from presentations. The number of homeless application has been steadily increasing, in 2023/24 we received 936 homeless applications, up from 875 in 2022/23, and indications are that homeless application are steadily increasing.

- RED We have increased our use of temporary accommodation significantly, and despite this, we are still not able to meet the demand using suitable temporary accommodation. This is partly due to the increased times that people are spending in temporary accommodation. We are continuing to look at alternative accommodation options to meet the demand for temporary accommodation, such as shared tenancies and properties in multiple occupation. Despite this, we are regularly using unsuitable such as short-term hotel accommodation, and breaching the UAO regularly as a result. We do not envisage that we will be able to stop use of this accommodation in the near future, with continued high demand on the service. Many of our placements were brief, and not followed up with further stays with us – suggesting that some approaches to us will be transactional, to meet a need at that time, however clearly do not want permanent housing in the [this] area.

- Temporary accommodation is under significant pressure.

- At 31 March 2024, [the council] held 244 HRA houses for use as dispersed temporary accommodation and 20 self-contained flats within [a] hostel. In addition, we have a contract with [the local] Women’s Aid to provide 6 bedrooms in their refuge, and 19 dispersed properties. The demand for temporary accommodation continues to be high and we experienced a 6% increase in demand for homeless assistance during 2023/24. At 31 March 2024 we had 275 households across all types of accommodation, which is an increase of 12% on the same day in 2023. Although we had 11 spaces on that date, 4 of them were Women’s Aid accommodation. Our temporary accommodation stock is utilised as interim accommodation for young people leaving care and in situations where we have to decant tenants as a result of fire or flood within their permanent tenancy. Therefore the amount of empty houses at the 31 March 2024 is not reflective of the daily levels of availability temporary accommodation and in some instances throughout the year we have reached our full capacity.

- We don't have enough and at points have nothing to offer people.

- RED. In line with the national picture, [the council] continues to experience increased levels of homelessness presentations and associated demand for temporary accommodation. The high use of temporary accommodation and significant length of stay is further compounded by the pressures being felt by neighbouring authorities and their ability in some instances, to offer only 'out of area' emergency accommodation – leading applicants to apply to another LA in the hope of a more suitable temporary accommodation solution.

- Amber – the difficulty we have faced is void turnaround time with housing providers with a bottleneck of moving people on from temp. This seems to be easing with the introduction of a new contractor with our largest housing provider however demand remains high and additional pressures are anticipated with early release of prisoners.

- 2023/24 has seen the trend of depressed lets in the area continue, with under 600 mainstream lets across the entire year
  Live homeless caseload of 1400
  11269 housing applications as of April 2024, approx. 300 per month in new applications
  Average of 177 in b&b each night throughout 2023/24
  Over £3.5 million (net) in prevention work achieved during the year
  [the council] declared a Housing Emergency in [earlier this year].

- RED – Required to block book hotel accommodation to meet increased demand over last few weeks at a considerable service cost, increase in roofless households led to increase pressures, no increased supply through new build until after the Summer.

- Red – We have been continuing to use hotels to bridge the gap between the volume of useable furnished temporary accommodation and the increased demand for homelessness assistance, but equally the longer journey times, increase stays in temporary accommodation, leading to less turnover of our temporary accommodation. We have increased our numbers of suitable temporary furnished properties (rising from 400 on 31/3/23, to 469 on 31/3/23) and continue to do so, whilst also focusing on reducing the journey time.

- Significant pressure at present with constant turnaround required to keep up with demand.

- Increasing use of B&B due, in the main, to increasing backlog of live homeless cases. However we are currently undertaking a review of our temporary accommodation stock in order to ensure we have capacity to meet increasing demand. This will also involve an exercise around reviewing suitable applicants for flipping temporary accommodation tenancies.

2) How would you assess your ability to meet the requirements of the revised UAO?

- The Council have not breached the unsuitable accommodation order since 2018 and have significantly reduced numbers placed in bed and breakfast since however this year and last year we have seen in an increase. No breaches yet but its becoming more and more difficult.

- We are exploring/piloting the "shared" options introduced by other LA's and looking to open a new "Rapid Access" facility later this year due to increase in emergency placements.

- Potential Judicial Review challenges have increased but we have managed to resolve pre court for most. Costs for legal support etc has been high to defend actions.

- Green – per above very little B&B use, have probably technically breached on a couple of occasions in the past 3-6 months but far from systemic.

- We are reporting positive progress again UAO but only because we have repurposed hostels by adding support to buildings that are not fit for purpose. We do reduce reliance on B&B / hotel type accommodation for short periods but any release in pressure is quickly soaked up as we promote movement through hostels to flats etc. We are taking risk based decisions to recover properties which is in conflict with the legal advice following the [recent] Sheriff Court judgement in relation to recovery of possession but going to court for every empty temp accommodation property is not workable. I remain deeply concerned about safeguarding within hotels and B&Bs - it is a horrific incident waiting to happen and my only mitigation is the presence of HSOs and basic QA checks on the premises. On this basis, significant use of non commissioned premises warrants a red.

- At the moment we do not have any concerns about our ability to meet the UAO. As we are mainly a rural authority applicants can be displaced from their local area at first as we cannot have supply in all settlements.

- Red - as above we have a high number of breaches for 2023/24 with no sign of reduction in 2024/25. We have always had to use hotel accommodation outwith the local authority area. However, this has usually been in neighbouring authorities with good transport links. Demand (and complaints from neighbouring authorities) has meant we are having to look considerably further away to source accommodation

- Red – as above we are breaching Unsuitable Accommodation Order (UAO) as we are placing customers in B&B which is exceeding the 7 day rule.
- Response – It is a daily struggle but we are meeting the requirements of the UAO.

- RED – its is just not possible to meet the revised UAO during this sustained pressure on social rented housing and increase in homelessness.

- Green, continuing to meet the requirements.

- backdrop of reduced central government funding we are considering our position and the framework for declaring a housing emergency.

- Red - There have been a substantial number of breaches and these are continuing

- There is significant pressure on our temporary accommodation team to manage accommodation placements. In 2023/24 we had 3 breaches of the UAO, 2 of breaches involved more than one placement in hotel accommodation and the accumulative period exceeded 7 days, the other case was a placement in excess of 7 days. We are continuing to use hotel accommodation on a frequent basis, therefore, a risk remains that future potential breaches may occur.

- RED From previously being in a position where we rarely breached the UAO, we are now doing this frequently on a monthly basis. The fact that we are using short-term hotel accommodation means that are breaching on this basis, rather than meeting the increased requirements of the UAO. At present, our focus needs to remain on providing accommodation to those who are most in need, prioritising our properties for families as thankfully we have not placed any children in B&B (yet), We are continuing to identify additional hotel/B&B accommodation to build capacity for our continued increase in demand for temporary accommodation.

- Very challenging and requires creative solutions which sometimes we cannot provide despite our best efforts.

- [the] Council currently utilises dispersed accommodation from our own housing stock, in addition to Women's Aid accommodation. This allows us the ability to increase the number of units if required, however this has an impact on the mainstream stock available for permanent let. We do not currently have concerns regarding our ability to meet the requirements of the UAO. Our hostel ([] direct access accommodation) has been significantly renovated to make all rooms self-contained (with exception of 2 emergency overnight rooms), therefore we have not breached the UAO. However, as we have reached full capacity in some instances this could have resulted in breaches had demand dictated this.

- We are regularly using B&B, hotels and I don't see that stopping anytime soon.

- RED. Despite continued hard work, [we] are not able to meet the statutory obligations of the UAO, with several breaches occurring each week. Although work is undertaken to mitigate against these breaches, increased demand continues to outstrip supply. The suspension of local connection, demand in respect of asylum seekers & refugees, emergency prisoner release programme etc., all place additional pressure on the supply of compliant shared accommodation and result in placements in unsuitable accommodation as an emergency resort. The Scottish Housing Regulator in its most recent Engagement Plan with the Council has asked us to continue with best efforts to meet our statutory duty to provide temporary accommodation in compliance with the Order.

- Amber – meeting duty but having to resort to out of area BnB for around 8 residents at a time. Regular breach of UAO.

- Red – prioritising reducing the length of time households are in unsuitable accommodation has been positive (but a breach is a breach), probably our least red red!

- Red - We continue to breach the unsuitable accommodation order, by having single people in hotels for longer than 7 days, at year end we recorded 529 placements lasting longer than 7 days this was an increase of 222 in 2022/2023. We continue to offer accommodation to anyone who requires and recorded zero, no temporary accommodation offered, in 23/24 and continue to maintain this year to date.

- No issues at present

- Due to the impacts of Storm Babet [] in October 2023 we were facing increased levels of breaches of UAO due to a period of time where we paused all allocations of housing. We are still playing a bit of catch up with this, however our breaches have been decreasing month on month since March and have always been below double figures – reporting at Amber RAG status. We continue to place focus on moving those out of B&B as quickly as possible as soon as an alternative becomes available and are only using B&B for single applicants.

3) How would you describe the supply of permanent lets against the current demand from homeless clients?

- Red – reduction in relets across our RSL sector is having a major impact on our homelessness queue.

- The Council provide 50% of allocations to the Homelessness List. The waiting times were reduced during the RRTP however continue to be high.

	Current	Pre RRTP
1 Bed	2-3 years	3-4 years
2 bed	1-2 years	2-3 years
3 bed	2-3 years	4-5 years
4 bed	up to 12 months	3-4 years

- Allocated just under 55% last year, tracking under 50% target so far in Q1 and journey times well under six months.

- We have seen a recovery in year with lets getting back to over 2200. Not quite the pre-pandemic highs of 2500 but an improvement - however - not denting the backlog or getting back to preventative allocations etc. The reduction in the budget and prospects for the affordable housing programme make for grim prospects going forward. A stop or even a slow down in new build supply and acquisitions will have a direct and devastating impact on homelessness so, again, justification for a red.

- We still have low backlogs of homelessness and are able to manage supply. It has increased slightly over past few months but 98% of open homeless cases have been open for less than 6 months.

- Red - not suffice. We have significantly more homeless presentations that available lets. Our tenancy sustainment has improved and turnover is down adding to this issue.

- We think the overspill from [neighbouring council] is definitely a driver but the attraction of the [our] schools and general perceived affluence of the area we suspect is also driving it.

  We have had a handful of cases of refugee families from south of the border who have googled "nice places to live in Scotland"...

- Amber however we have had to raise the percentage and look like we will need to do it again, we have experienced a further 20% increase in presentations.

- There has been a real slow down of available lets despite allocations from RSL partners being a priority from September 2023 – March 2024. We have been advised that 4 of our RSL partners are now returning to normal allocation processes and not all vacancies going to homeless lets. We will continue to monitor the impact that this potential could have on supply for permanent.

- Response – Due to existing housing legislation we will not be able to accommodate the rising demand any time soon. We have recently updated our own Allocation policy and although public response was to decrease percentages to let to Homelessness, we kept this at 60% lets to Homelessness which was fantastic for those in the homeless system or about to be.

- Amber / Red – revised target of 55% of general lets to homeless applicants is being met. Still need RSL’s to step up to same level as the Council – and sustain this level.

- Amber/Red. We continue to experience issues with void property conditions delaying the time spent in temporary accommodation. Additionally homeless demand is concentrated to the [one settlement] area, adding to waiting times. This also needs to be balanced with lets from the general housing lists, the numbers of which are increasing year on year.

- Red - Completely insufficient for demand. Backlog continues to increase

- In 2023/24, 936 homeless applications made to the Council. 414 (52.2%) of our overall lets in 2023/24 were made to homeless households. As at 10/6/24, there were 532 'open' homeless cases and around 260 homeless households in homeless temporary accommodation.

- RED We have continued to see annual decreases in the numbers of social rented properties becoming available to let each year, while we are seeing an increase in homeless applications in recent years. This means that people are taking longer to be rehoused, with increased times spent as homeless, and also using temporary accommodation for longer times. This continues to place increasing pressure on our use of temporary accommodation. With the increased use of temporary accommodation, this also impacts the number of properties we have available for permanent mainstream lets. We also know that due to the difference in rents locally council housing is the preferred options especially given the financial situation our customers find themselves in. Our lets to Homeseekers weekly do not cover the amount of presentations we are receiving far less address the numbers already I temp. In March 2024 we received 90 homeless applications, 122 requests for temporary accommodation, we had 489 temp places filled and advertised 33 permanent lets for Homeseekers.

- Demand far outweighs supply, particularly given the demands from other routes out with homelessness. For example, NHS Complex Cases eg significant mental health addiction which requires properties for people to be supported in, Care Experienced Young People requiring independent living, Childrens Services young people who are placed out with [the council are] requiring return to the area, refugee resettlement programmes, Unaccompanied Minors requiring outcomes, lack of housing options (other tenure types) means existing tenants are looking for social housing to resolve changing housing need. All of these take permanent lets out of usage for homeless clients,

- During 2023/24 we let 53% of our stock to homeless households compared to 45% in 2022/23. Since 2019/20 we have continued to increase lets to homeless households to ensure that demand is met. Unfortunately, this has limited the number properties available for let to other housing needs groups and could be a contributory factor in respect of the increasing levels of approaches for homeless assistance.

- Not enough, which can be seen as there is more people making applications than getting moved onto permanent lets so the number of open cases is going up.

- RED. The percentage supply of social lets to homeless clients remains at similar levels to previous years, with just over half of all allocations going to homeless households. Homelessness in [the council area] is a structural issue with a lack of flow through the housing system, resulting in long periods in temporary accommodation. Tenancy conversions have eased this pressure on permanent lets in more recent times but there will be associated impacts going forward. Reduced availability in the private sector due to greater competition and affordability issues and use of the sector for households from Ukraine, mean that reliance on, and demand for, social housing will continue to grow.

- In terms of declaring a 'housing emergency', the Council continues to consider it's position in light of the pressures it faces and the actions put in place to mitigate

- Amber – the percentage has always been low in [the council area], historical misuse of non-compliance with S5 is an issue. This forms a significant part of an independent review being undertaken and we are on the precipice of introducing a LLI to increase percentage lets and tighten up the S5 referral process.

- Red – We're still seeing a slowdown in available stock to get some churn going in, new build activity towards late Summer will help

- Red - During 23/24 homeless applicant demand increased for the 2nd consecutive year, albeit at a more modest rate of 0.6% when compared to the 26% experienced in 22/23. The 1780 applications received in 23/24 is the highest level seen since 2011/12. Our year 5 RRTP report (23/24) identified the continued shortage in supply for lets to households experiencing homelessness. In the local context of [the council] this has been further impacted by our participation in the programme to provide [] homes for Ukrainian families, and people fleeing the conflict. Further to this in March this year we began a rehoming programme for residents who have been impacted by the discovery of RAAC within their home, further reducing the availability of stock for households experiencing homelessness.

- Despite a programme of new builds in the city, continued partnership working with RSLs (who have also been building in the city) and continued use of both an internal team and contractors to focus on our voids, we have still experienced an increased journey time. Voids are not turning around as quickly as needed to meet the demand, we also have an imbalance between the size of property that becomes available and the homeless demographic that qualifies for them with an increasing demand for a general need supply of bedsit and one bed properties than becomes available.
- Reduction in supply is limiting our ability to meet demand. We are managing at present but this is a result of increasing lets to homeless clients, and therefore having an impact on other groups

- Demand currently outweighs supply and in line with other local authorities, [the council] has now declared a Housing Emergency. This again, is in relation to the large backlog of homeless cases awaiting permanent housing solutions. We are in the process of reviewing our targets for lets to homeless in an attempt to reduce the backlog.

4) How prepared are you for the Emergency Prisoner Release Programme due to start in July. I'll feed this into the discussions with the SG community justice teams on this issue.

- Unprepared due to lack of available of temporary accommodation and lack of through put into permanent housing due to RSL reduction in turnover.

- Initial discussions have taken place with SPS and key partners and numbers have been shared however following abolishment of local connection numbers are really unknown. Our approach to avoid hostel type/unsuitable accommodation for those leaving prison will be unachievable due to current pressures on temp.

  We had originally identified a property for home leave – this may now not be possible due to early release.

- Relatively low prison population from [council area], negligible impact anticipated.

- Not prepared at all. We don't know the numbers, profile or breakdown yet but, as said above, any minor influx of demand will break us

- we're prepared as can be but accommodation will be a struggle.

- We are unsure about level of impact this will bring. Although it previously happened during Covid this was prior to local connection changes. As [the council] has the prison for the [area] it is difficult for us to know what the impacts could be and authorities where there are prisons could be adversely affected over others, highlighting again the risks caused by changes to local connection as all authorities are not equal. It would therefore had been helpful for there to have been some discussion prior to the decision being taken.

- We are having discussions with our criminal justice teams but given demand, many of these prisoners will be placed in hotel accommodation outwith the area for a considerable period of time.

  Given the demand from households outside [this area] we anticipate that this will also be reflected in increased applications from discharged prisoners from neighbouring authorities which will add additional pressure.

[We] are one of the eight authorities highlighted at being at risk of systemic failure. We have a meeting planned with the SHR at the end of June to discuss our position. Declaring a homeless crisis has been discussed with the administration but not yet approved.

- Amber/red however we are still waiting on the details of numbers, nothing confirmed yet.

- We are dealing with small numbers and work very closely with our CJ team to plan all releases so are as prepared as we can be.

- We are working closely with our partners within the Prison establishment and weekly meetings are now in the diary to discuss the tranches and the impact on [the] Council. However, initial discussions is that the numbers will be low. We are hoping to find out today how other Prison will communicate any customers within their estate and returning to [this area].
- Response – [the council] has a fortnightly meeting with our partners for person centred, trauma informed plan for prison releases. Although a longer lead time would have been helpful for planning and for us to provide more suitable long term accommodation, Housing Services always does its best to help as many applicants and tenants as possibly can.

- On early release I think we are as prepared as we can be, good buy in across the partnership, looking at a hub to direct enquiries in with partners across HSCP and housing committing to delivering so positives there, good info available through existing SHORE program so using that to estimate numbers and check where we are with plans and starting to try to identify additional temp in preparation. Another thing adding to the pressure but we are preparing best we can.

  The Emergency Prisoner Release Programme will put additional pressure on the homeless service which is already dealing with homeless of around 1600 and being able to source additional suitable temporary accommodation on top of what is required now will add to an already pressurised service.
  We are currently trying to ensure that all liberations that we currently are aware of have received a housing options appointment, this is to ensure if they already have secure accommodation that this is kept for their release and identifying who will require accommodation to enable us to establish numbers and source temporary accommodation. The local connection will also have an impact as the SPS will provide us with details of who will be getting released from [this area], however all releases can present to any local authority and as we have already seen an increase in presentations from applicants out with the area [], we could be having to deal with additional presentations and sourcing accommodation in addition to the liberations we will be aware of.

- We anticipate that the numbers involved for [this area] should be able to be incorporated within 'business as usual' – but this is largely because 'business as usual' is pretty much bonkers 😉. We have a good homeless prevention team who have a strong focus on supporting those leaving prison, and we hope to be able to prevent homelessness in some cases, but may require to offer B&B for others who require temporary accommodation. We are prepared, and in itself this won't break us - but it feels like just another turn of the screw alongside the impact of PRS pressures, asylum seekers receiving positive decisions, impact of 'local connection' pause, sourcing accommodation for UDP's, and so on and it's the compounding nature of all these pressures that may eventually tip us into an 'emergency' situation. As you know Tony, as ever it's the frontline staff /services who feel this pressure the most.

- Key stakeholders involved with the Covid Early Release Programme have re-introduced regular meetings however until we are in receipt of the numbers and details of those being released, we can't plan any further. Any more pressures on the system at this time will have a significant impact on our ongoing ability to meet statutory homelessness duties and measures beyond the initial 4 week tranche identified is beyond comprehension. There is no resilience and increased pressure across all budget lines to continue to identify savings. Homelessness Services required to be ring-fenced and appropriately funded on a long term basis to meet ongoing challenges and policy commitments.

  The Annual Assurance Statement didn't identify issues with compliance in relation to homelessness duties. Given the ongoing pressures on the housing system against the backdrop of reduced central government funding we are considering our position and the framework for declaring a housing emergency.

- Red - Our service is already incapable of meeting demand and any additional pressures will exacerbate the situation.

- Officers have been involved in meetings with Justice Services colleagues to discuss and plan the Council's response, however, in the absence of actual numbers it is difficult to determine the impact and how we will respond. Taking account of the pressures generally on the homeless service, this will add further pressure to an already difficult situation.

  On an other general point, following the removal of local connection restrictions, our Housing Options Team are seeing evidence of an increasing number of presentation from households outwith [the council area]. In addition, presentations from households with complex needs or those are known to other services due to MAPPA continue to present significant challenges and place pressure on temporary accommodation

- RED Whilst we have put arrangements in place to undertake checks on the proposed releases which re in the 100's with extremely limited resources, we simply do not have the accommodation to meet such a significant influx. In addition the timeframes for turnaround are extremely tight and does not allow for the requisite planning to take place, especially with services already under pressure. It is extremely concerning that this announcement was made the day after national emergency was declared and appears to afford other public bodies a protection, with housing services having to pick up the slack (again) Please note these views are my own and do not reflect [the] council!

- Unprepared due to lack of detail in terms of numbers, any accommodation needs, areas. Currently all we know is the programme is happening but along with the demands highlighted above – and our increasing homeless demand - we cannot prepare for this and prioritising the people within these categories is nearly impossible as the needs are all high.

- We are currently working with our partners to ensure that there is a pathway in place which will allow those that will be homeless on discharge to be appropriately supported by accessing housing advice and homeless assistance at the earliest opportunity. This will also allow for arrangements to be made for temporary accommodation on discharge, where required. Until we know the numbers it is difficult to anticipate the impact on our service. We are also conscious that the suspension of local connection requirements could impact areas significantly, as individuals will have the opportunity to choose their area on discharge. This could impact not only homeless services, but also other support services and wider partners.

- Not even thought about it!

- AMBER. We are prepared for the programme to start in July and have met with Justice Social Work colleagues to determine numbers and begin to arrange suitable planning/provision for the individuals identified. While we are confident in our ability to accommodate these early releases, the impact of local connection remains an ongoing uncertainty in this regard.

- Amber – concerns around the lack of robust data on numbers anticipated. SPS data is very unreliable in normal circumstances and this situation is no different. Given that the other questions are all amber it is a concern that what may be seen as low numbers has a significant impact on our homeless population. We are small, so a small difference has a big impact!

- We have good links with community justice team but have not had actual numbers in terms of early release yet.

- Well prepared but just adds to the pressure, have a working group set up with CJ and good information links, will be an issue but think we'll be across it (the hotel block booking was also influenced by this policy change)

- Amber - We are awaiting further details to understand the people who will be put forward for this programme. Once we have detailed information (expected on the 19/6) we will be in a better position to prepare and understand the likely demand that this will place on a need for new accommodation or a return to a current tenancy. We have a Housing Liaison Officer (Prison) who will be supporting this; however, the concern would be around the likely increase in demand for properties that we will not be able to meet and will therefore be offering hotel accommodation in some cases, which does not provide an ideal environment for continued support through the transition. The process to have a final list of people who will be released on the 26/6/24 is tight giving little time for the person impacted, or the services to prepare and ensure all necessary support is in place. The collation of information across the prison estate has not been great, we have been provided with a list of SPOCs across other establishments and suggested that we seek details from these directly, it would have been ideal if one list could have been provided, further in advance to support planning for the transition.

It appears as of the decision to progress with this programme has been taken in isolation and not within the context of the other pressures and challenges on the housing sector currently, reference has been made to how well this worked during the pandemic, without the understanding that much within housing has shifted since then, and the same resource is not available to be as responsive.

- Plans are in place but lack of certainty, given the existing pressures on accommodation is challenging. Concern regarding the potential for customers to be redirected from other LA's who are unable to cope with demand.

- We are working closely with SPS and Justice colleagues to have a planned approach to the early release programme. We are in the process of trying to identify permanent tenancies for those that will be homeless on release in line with our Prison Protocol.

Local Authority Voids
Situation overview

Current position

The best available data on empty council homes is set out in the "Stock" series of returns to the Scottish Government. These are provided as a snapshot position based on 31 March each year. The full series can be viewed here: [Housing statistics: Local authority housing stock - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)]

Recent press reports[1] have suggested that around 10,000 council homes are currently empty. This report was based on returns to an FOI request from 30 Councils. The figure seems to include all vacant properties.

The most recent published data is for March 2023. At that date Councils reported that they had, in total 11,534 voids (for any reason), or c3.6% of the total stock. Of these 1,008 were void pending demolition leaving **10,526** vacant homes most, or all of which, could be relet at some point. This represents around 3.25% of all Council homes.

The figures for each Council vary significantly, 6 Councils reported total voids of less than 2% of stock. Four reported total voids of over 4%. The highest was 9.2%.

The longer-term position shows that over the ten years from 2010-2019 the average number of reported voids (for any reason) was 7,225. Of these, on average, 2,065 were empty pending demolition. Over this period the average number of empty homes excluding those awaiting demolition was **5,160**.

Based on these two figures the number of excess voids, that is the number above the long run pre-covid average, net of those pending demolition is **5,366** (1.6% of the total stock). It goes without saying that zero voids is neither possible nor desirable.

The conclusion based on these figures is that some local authorities are facing a significant challenge in returning lettable homes to use. But, the problem is far from universal and is significantly better than press reports would suggest and certainly not

[1] Nearly 10,000 council houses in Scotland lie empty despite child homelessness soaring (msn.com)

enough to "…end the child homelessness epidemic" as suggested in the press report noted above. Even if every excess void was let tomorrow, and assuming that 80% were offered to homeless applicants tomorrow it be sufficient to rehouse around 14% of those currently in the homelessness system.

ALACHO Deep dive- summary

Void performance has long been recognised as one of the standard indicators of service effectiveness and value for money. This isn't a new issue, and this is reflected in both the SG's data collection and the Scottish Social Housing Charter. In general terms the focus is usually on rent lost from voids and time in days to relet.

Voids have been the subject of a number of discussions between ALACHO members since the start of the pandemic. The most recent was a "deep dive" held on Friday 26 April.

The practical context in which councils are seeking to improve performance includes the need to manage the normal level of void homes and, within available resources, ensure that the back log and any additional properties purchased on the second-hand market are repaired and improved prior to letting.

The option of simply committing additional resource to the task has to be seen in the context of pressure on rents and the recognition that committing additional resources to return a property to let a week or two early may not make good financial sense. For example, deploying craft workers at premium rates over a weekend or in the evening to return a void a week early could cost a great deal more than the value of the additional weeks rent collected. As in most things there is a balance to be struck.

In this context the key take aways from our deep dive were:

- As demonstrated by the statistics the situation varies significantly across Scotland;
- All of those councils involved in the discussion were working to an agreed plan that had been discussed with elected members;
- Two Councils have, in the recent past, suspended some part of their wider repairs service in order to focus resources on void work. The experience suggests that this has helped but the SHR has raised some concerns about the impact on wider services to tenants;
- The clearing or replacement of electricity meters remains a significant problem across the sector with one Council reporting that it has 3 members of staff full time contacting utility companies to arrange appointments to resolve meter issues. Another said that they had 80 empty homes waiting for new meters to be installed;
- All councils reported constraints arising from the availability of craft labour both internally from their DLO and from external contractors;
- Some councils reported problems with external contractors either not performing as required or charging a premium for the work;
- Some Councils expressed the view that the condition of properties was worse now than in previous years, the suggestion is that this is driven by increasing levels of poverty; and
- Purchasing properties on the second-hand market adds to the challenge.

Though the most important conclusion is that reducing the number of voids will not resolve the shortage of social housing that underpins the current housing emergency.

These challenges notwithstanding, a number of Councils reported significant progress in reducing voids over the past year. We're unlikely to be able to confirm the extent of the improvement until the 2023/24 data returns are available but a number of councils are reporting an improving position.

Scotland's Housing Network is working with the sector to develop a monthly data return that will provide a more up to date view of progress. The first data from this should available during June.

Taking all that into account and given the necessary balance between maintain existing services and working on the voids back log, it is clear that it is likely to take a number of years for overall performance to return to pre-pandemic levels.

Tony Cain
Policy Manager
ALACHO

21 May 2024