

SPICe**The Information Centre**
An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

9th Meeting, 2021 (Session 6), Thursday 4 November 2021

Homelessness

Introduction

At today's meeting, the Committee will hear from:

- **Maggie Brünjes**, Chief Executive of [Homeless Network Scotland](#), a knowledge-based membership organisation.
- **Lorna Campbell**, Financial Wellbeing and Revenues Manager at Dumfries and Galloway Council.
- **Lorraine McGrath**, Chief Executive of Simon Community Scotland. Specialist homelessness service provider whose principle client group are people with multiple and complex vulnerabilities.
- **Dr Beth Watts**. Senior Research Fellow at the [Institute for Social Policy, Housing and Equalities Research \(I-SPHERE\) at Herriot-Wat University](#). Lead author of the [Homelessness Monitor: Scotland 2021](#). This is the latest edition of a longitudinal study into the homelessness impacts of recent economic and policy developments in Scotland.
- **Gordon McRae**, Assistant Director, Shelter Scotland. Provides services, policy and research and campaigns to create the best outcomes for people in housing need.

This paper provides some background on homelessness and current developments before suggesting the themes for discussion at today's meeting.

Background

Councils' statutory duties to homeless people are set out in the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987. If a homeless person is unintentionally (where that is assessed) homeless then the council must secure 'settled' accommodation. Although they may have to spend some time in temporary accommodation first.

Homelessness applications to councils had been steadily rising pre-pandemic, with the number of households assessed as homeless having grown by 10% in the period 2016/17-2019/20.¹

During the pandemic year, 2020/21, homeless applications to councils declined (although not everyone who is homeless will make an application to a council).

- In 2020/21, councils received 33,792 homeless applications, decrease of 9% compared to 2019/20.
- In 2020/21, 27,571 households were assessed as homeless in 2020/21, a decrease of 13% compared to 2019/20².

Since around 2010 homelessness policy has centred on the prevention of homelessness. Homelessness received more political attention last parliamentary session, partly driven by concerns about an increase in visible rough sleeping. The previous Local Government and Communities Committee [Inquiry into Homelessness](#), in 2018, identified that not all homeless people were getting the services they were entitled to under legislation and highlighted concerns about the standards of temporary accommodation in some areas.

In 2017, the Scottish Government set out its objective to eradicate rough sleeping and established a Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group (HARSAG) to identify what was needed to end rough sleeping and transform the use of temporary accommodation. A five-year programme of funding for homelessness services (around £50m) and additional investment in alcohol and drug services was also announced.

The HARSAG recommendations formed the basis of the joint COSLA and Scottish Government 2018 Ending Homelessness Together Action Plan. The plan included:

- the introduction of council five-year 'Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans' to reduce the use of temporary accommodation and rehouse homeless households more quickly
- a national Housing First Scotland pathfinder programme. Housing First means that people are provided with mainstream tenancies and given the wrap-

¹[The homelessness monitor: Scotland 2021](#)

² Scottish Government (2021) [Homelessness in Scotland: 2020-21](#). Note that not all applications are assessed in the same financial year.

around support that they need. The Scottish Government aim for this to be the default option for people with multiple and complex needs.

HARSAG was reformed in June 2020 in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and made an additional 105 recommendations. An updated [Ending Homelessness Together Action Plan](#) was published in October 2020 with an increased emphasis on the prevention of homelessness.

The Scottish Government's [Ending Homelessness Together: annual report 2021](#) was published on 7 October 2021.

The written submissions acknowledge that progress is being made with the Ending Homelessness Together Action Plan. However, they also highlight the need for sustained focus and the need to tackle system level challenges. For example, Shelter Scotland states that ending homelessness will not be possible without addressing the fundamental lack of affordable housing supply in Scotland.

Theme 1: The COVID-19 pandemic

One of the first priorities during the pandemic was to provide safe accommodation for anyone sleeping rough or staying in shelters, where people had no opportunity to socially distance.

Councils along with their partners, made efforts to house all of those in need (including those who would not otherwise be eligible for homelessness support i.e. those with no recourse to public funds in hotel rooms, short-term lets and other temporary accommodation). In winter 2020-21, rapid rehousing centres were established in Glasgow and Edinburgh offering hotel accommodation with a multi-agency assessment process.

There were also a range of other supportive policy measures including restrictions on evictions, additional funding for discretionary housing payments and rapid rehousing transition plans and UK Government changes to benefits.

The written evidence highlights positive aspects of the approach including:

- quick action by councils supported by Scottish Government funding
- a reduction in rough sleeping
- a step-change in multiagency working that enabled positive engagement with long histories of rough sleeping and complex needs
- empowerment of staff to respond with immediate actions
- pooling for expertise across third and academic sectors via the Everyone Home Collective facilitated by Homeless Network Scotland.

I-SHPERE's submission noted that some concerns emerged regarding, "the wellbeing of those accommodated in hotels in response to the pandemic and their exposure to exploitation and other forms of anti-social and criminal behaviour. These

issues were especially acute in Glasgow during the early stages of the pandemic, when insufficient on-site support was available to this group.”

In terms of moving out of the pandemic, Shelter Scotland state that emergency measures put in place to protect tenants during the pandemic should remain in place in order to stop homelessness from happening in future as we recover from the pandemic.

Simon Community Scotland’s submission said that:

“Recognising that the routes into homelessness may be changing as a result of the economic impacts of the pandemic. We need to think differently about how we reach and respond to this potentially emerging risk before the trauma of a homelessness crisis leads to enduring harms and increased complexity of need.”

I-SPHERE’s submission indicated that a:

“range of short-term measures are modelled as being able to alleviate a post-pandemic rise – and in fact reduce – core homelessness, with the biggest potential associated with the use of rapid rehousing to settled accommodation e.g. social rehousing quotas for core homeless households, maximising prevention, implementing the Unsuitable Accommodation Order, and increased welfare benefit levels making the private rented sector more accessible. Specifically in relation to rough sleeping, the most impactful practices would be prioritised access to settled housing and continued use of the special COVID-related provision of hotel type accommodation.

Theme 1: The COVID-19 pandemic. Members may wish to discuss:

1. How successful was the homelessness response to the COVID-19 pandemic in protecting rough sleepers and preventing homelessness?
2. What aspects of the emergency approach to homelessness should continue as we recover from the pandemic?
3. Were there any limitations to the homelessness response to the pandemic that we can learn from?
4. Whether there is likely to be an increase in homelessness presentations to councils given changing circumstances such as the end of furlough and longer notice periods coming to an end in the private rented sector? If so, are there any measures that could be taken to prevent this?

Theme 2: Temporary Accommodation

One of the impacts of the pandemic is that there has been an increase in the number of people in temporary accommodation as COVID-19 [restrictions limited the ability of councils to move households into permanent accommodation](#).

The number of households in temporary accommodation had been at a stable high of 10-11,000 for the decade up until March 2019.³

At 31st March 2021 there were 13,098 households in temporary accommodation, a 12% increase from the previous year.⁴ Councils are working to reduce this backlog.

The average length of stay in temporary accommodation has also increased. For homelessness applications that closed in 2020/21, that had taken up temporary accommodation, they spent an average of 199 days in temporary accommodation compared to 187 days the previous year.⁵

The Scottish Government has extended the ban on the use of 'unsuitable' temporary accommodation (mainly B&B type accommodation) for all homeless households unless in exceptional circumstances (via The Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2020) Previously this ban just applied to households with children. However, the extension of the order was delayed due to the pandemic and only came into force at the start of October 2021.

The evidence from I-SPHERE, based on the homelessness monitor, indicates that nine local authority survey respondents anticipated that the extension of the order would pose funding and resourcing challenges.

Theme 2: Temporary Accommodation. Members may wish to discuss:

5. How successfully are councils reducing the increased use of temporary accommodation during the pandemic period?
6. How prepared are councils to respond to the extension of the Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order to all homeless households?
7. Whether councils in rural areas face any specific challenges in reducing the use of temporary accommodation?

Theme 3: Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans, Housing First and Partnership Working

Council's Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans are a key to the delivery of the Ending Homelessness Together Action Plan.

The [homelessness monitor](#) notes that:

³ [The homelessness monitor: Scotland 2021](#)

⁴ Scottish Government (2021) [Homelessness in Scotland 2020-21](#) statistics.

⁵ Scottish Government (2021) [Homelessness in Scotland 2020-21](#) statistics.

“Around half of local authorities have already made changes to social housing allocations policies as a result of these Plans, primarily increasing priority to homeless households. While the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted implementation, the Plans were seen to have supported responses to the crisis, including via enhanced partnership arrangements. Despite increases in the Scottish Government funding committed to implementation, there are concerns that the Plans remain acutely under resourced.”

A similar point about under resourcing was made in a [Chartered Institute of Housing Scotland report on council progress with implementing RRTPs](#).

Housing first

The Housing First Scotland pathfinder programme was established in April 2019 in five areas (Aberdeen/ shire, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Stirling) by the Scottish Government in partnership with Social Bite, Glasgow Homelessness Network and Corra Foundation.

The Scottish Government’s Ending Homelessness Together Action Plan monitoring report highlights that:

- The majority of local authorities have been developing their own Housing First programmes alongside the pathfinder and many are already offering Housing First as part of their service provision.
- The latest Housing First pathfinder tracker summarises the progress made in pathfinder areas by 31 August 2021. The number of tenancies started in the pathfinder is 545 with a tenancy sustainment rate of 84 per cent. Nobody has been evicted from their home.
- The pathfinder programme is being formally evaluated by Heriot-Watt University’s Institute for Social Policy, Housing, Equalities Research [and an interim report was published in September 2021](#).

The submissions note some positive impacts of housing first including tenancy sustainment, wider benefits to tenant choice and control of tenants, and gains on partnership working (I-SHPERE).

Challenges noted include:

- ongoing challenges in relation to resourcing, access to housing, levels of buy in from non-housing partners, and maintaining programme fidelity (I-SPHERE)
- It should not be seen as a silver bullet to tackle all homelessness. There also needs to be focus on supporting the majority of people struggling to find a home. Need for funding to ensure people’s rights are upheld and with affordable homes delivered where they are needed (Shelter Scotland)

- Need for a joint planning and commissioning framework with health and social care partnerships enabling the collaborations and resources needed to scale up Housing First. (Homeless Network Scotland)

Partnership working

Housing services need to work in partnership with a wide range of other services to prevent and respond to homelessness.

The homelessness monitor report notes some increased involvement of Health and Social Care Partnerships with over half (17 of 29) local authority respondents reporting partnerships making a positive contribution to the prevention and/or alleviation of homelessness, almost double the number in the 2018 survey (8 out of 28). However, a third of local authorities reported that Health and Social Care Partnerships have had little impact on their ability to prevent and/or alleviate homelessness, and some noted this as a barrier to progressing the rapid rehousing agenda.

Simon Community Scotland's submission cites a number of key emerging priorities relating to partnership working, for example, improved mental wellbeing resources for people within the homelessness system needs to be matched and linked with aligned harm reduction initiatives. It also points to the need for,

“Continued and strengthened recognition that homelessness is as much a public health issue as a housing and accommodation concern”.

Theme 3: Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans, Housing First and partnership working. Members may wish to discuss:

8. What progress are councils making with the implementation of their rapid rehousing transition plans and what are the main challenges?
9. What evidence is there of service users benefitting from rapid rehousing and Housing First?
10. Are there any challenges with implementing and scaling up Housing First that need to be addressed?

Theme 4: People with lived experience of homelessness and groups at risk of homelessness

Involvement of people with lived experience of homelessness

Homeless Network Scotland' submission says that it “provides several platforms for people with lived experience of homelessness to be involved as strategic partners, reality-checkers and change-makers.” This includes, for example, [All in for Change](#) which is a team of around 30 people from across Scotland committed to ending homelessness and each with personal experience of homelessness or with frontline responsibilities.

Simon Community Scotland's submission said that it would welcome ongoing investment in ensuring people with lived and living experience having primary influence, alongside staff involved in direct delivery. It said that the role of and support for the Change Team is invaluable.

Shelter Scotland also welcome the steps being taken in embedding lived experience in policy making in recent months. It has also been able to do this through its [Time for Change](#) by bringing the voices of those most affected by the housing emergency into how we can change policy and practice. It suggests this is an area the Scottish Government – and parliamentary committees – can further develop and it offers its assistance.

Gendered approach to homelessness and at-risk groups

In the Ending Homelessness Together Action plan, the Scottish Government said that, “we and our partners would work together to ensure that our policies and practice to prevent and end homelessness are informed by a gendered analysis of homelessness.”

The Domestic Abuse (Protection) (Scotland) Act 2021 help prevent women's homelessness by barring the perpetrator of domestic abuse from the home and giving social landlords the ability to transfer tenancies to the victim-survivor. The legislation is expected to be in force by end of December 2022.⁶

A Scottish Government working group published its report [Improving service outcomes for women and children experiencing domestic abuse](#) in December 2020. It said that, “Women's and men's interactions with housing and homelessness services are different, and these differences are unacknowledged and unexplored.” The Scottish Government is working to implement and monitor the recommendations from the expert group. It has developed a draft implementation plan, which will be published once it has been agreed by the implementation group.⁷

The Scottish Government also said that it would develop prevention pathways for groups at particular risks. In addition to the work on improving housing outcomes for women and children experiencing domestic abuse, the Scottish Government has worked on a youth homelessness prevention pathway, to address those at risk of homelessness including young people with care experience or at the edges of care, LGBTI+ young people those involved in the justice or health systems or those who have multiple and complex needs.⁸

⁶ Scottish Government (2021) Ending Homelessness Together Annual report to the Scottish Parliament

⁷ Scottish Government (2021) [Ending Homelessness Together Annual report to the Scottish Parliament](#)

⁸ Scottish Government (2021) [Ending Homelessness Together Annual report to the Scottish Parliament](#)

Homelessness Network Scotland's submission refers to the Fair Way Scotland approach to design out destitution and protect the human rights of people affected by No Recourse to Public Funds. It is an integrated service delivery model provided by experts in the field: Scottish Refugee Council, Safe in Scotland, Refugee Survival Trust, Simon Community Scotland and Turning Point Scotland. Fair Way Scotland, in partnership with Scottish Government and COSLA, has published a 5-year [delivery plan](#) and is getting ready to mobilise. One of its asks of the Committee is 'to help us deliver it and to end this severest form of destitution in Scotland.'

Theme 4: People with lived experience of homelessness and groups at risk of homelessness. Members way wish to discuss:

11. How effectively are people with lived experience of homelessness being involved in homelessness policy and service delivery development?
12. Whether Scottish Government policy takes a sufficiently gendered response to homelessness policy?
13. Are there any more actions needed to help support those groups who might be particularly at risk of homelessness such as care leavers or those with no recourse to public funds?

Theme 5: Homelessness prevention legislation and future developments

In [Housing to 2040](#), the Scottish Government makes a commitment to develop homelessness prevention legislation. The [Homelessness Prevention Review group published their recommendations in February 2021](#).

As part of the Prevention Review Group, Homeless Network Scotland facilitated the Prevention Commission, people with lived and frontline experience of homelessness who played a critical role in shaping the report and recommendations.

Implementation of these recommendations would mean:

- Clarifying the current law and requiring local authorities to take specific steps to prevent homelessness
- Action to prevent homelessness would start up to six months before someone faces losing their home.
- Public bodies, such as health services and prisons work together with housing professionals to ensure that people get help early and do not lose their home unnecessarily.

- Public bodies ask about people’s housing situation to identify any issues at an early stage and act where a problem exists.
- Strategic planning of services such as health and social care and housing so that resources are focused on prevention, gradually moving away from crisis mitigation.

I-SPHERE’s submission noted that the homelessness monitor found that:

“Key stakeholders are overwhelmingly supportive of the recommendations of the Prevention Review Group (convened by Crisis at the invitation of the Scottish Government), and almost all local authority survey respondents identified aspects of the proposals that would work well in their locality, with only half identifying aspects that would be challenging. Likely to work especially well are the emphasis on improved joint working and obligations on wider public bodies. The challenges identified oriented around the practicalities of the proposed new approach.”

Shelter Scotland supports some of the proposed changes but also expresses concern that some of the measures could reduce housing rights. In particular they are opposed to:

“Applying a ‘duty to prevent’ homelessness to people who already meet the definition of statutory homelessness.

Proposals to allow the downgrade of the current requirement for permanent accommodation with ‘stable’ accommodation. “

The homelessness monitor considers policy changes that might reduce ‘core homelessness’ which captures some of the most severe and immediate forms of homelessness (including people sleeping rough, living in refuges and sofa surfing).

“In the longer term, large projected core homelessness reductions could be generated by rapid rehousing quotas, prevention and welfare measures, raising the Local Housing Allowance, and sustained expansion of Housing First and accompanying reduction in traditional hostel accommodation. Social housing supply increases, even when carefully targeted at the most under pressure areas, have limited beneficial effects that materialise only in the longer term, though such changes may enable others measures, particularly rapid rehousing.”

**Theme 5: Homelessness prevention legislation and future developments.
Members way wish to discuss:**

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| <p>14. Views on the need for legislative change around homelessness prevention and whether there are any concerns about implementation of the Prevention Review Group’s proposals?</p> <p>15. Does the Ending Homelessness Together Action Plan need refined in any way? Where does the Scottish Government and its partners need to focus their efforts now to ensure longer term improvements in preventing, and responding to, homelessness?</p> |
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Kate Berry, Senior Researcher, SPICe Research

28 October 2021

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