

Home is the Foundation

Perspectives on prevention from people with experience of homelessness

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Crisis

Together
we will end
homelessness

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the people who gave up their time to share their experiences and stories with us. We hope you feel that this report represents you and it has the impact needed to make sure everyone is able to get the support they need, when they need it. It was a privilege to meet and talk to you all. We would also like to thank the partner organisations who helped to facilitate this project: Action for Children; Turning Point Scotland; Inverness Foodstuff; Your Voice Community Care Forum; Move On Highland and the Crisis Edinburgh Skylight.

Executive Summary

Scotland has some of the best protections in the world for people who lose their home. But with 8% of people in Scotland – around 1 in 12 – having experienced homelessness, it is clear far too many people are being forced to experience the trauma of housing crisis. It does not have to be this way.

The best way to end homelessness is to stop it happening in the first place.

Ending homelessness does not mean that no one will ever lose their home again. It means that, through prevention, homelessness only happens very rarely, that when it does happen it is brief, and that once it has happened to an individual or family, it is prevented from happening again.

By acting earlier and offering support before someone hits a point of emergency, we can reduce the number of people pushed into homelessness.

Legislation due to come to the Scottish Parliament in 2023 has the potential to make Scotland a world-leader in homelessness prevention. It will introduce new duties on public bodies aimed at enabling people to access the support they need, when they need it, to avoid being pushed into homelessness.

The principles underpinning the work of the Homelessness Prevention Review Group² were driven by people with first-hand experience of homelessness, and they set the direction of travel for proposals for an ambitious new legal framework. It is vital that the voices of experts by experience continue to be central to the design and implementation of one of the biggest changes to homelessness policy in a generation.

“It would be a good idea I think if, when things started to go wrong, like when you’re starting to get behind... if that could then trigger some sort of help, some sort of support to become involved”

The proposals have the potential to ensure people have access to assistance at an earlier stage, preventing them from reaching crisis point, while retaining strong rights for individuals and giving them a voice and more control during the process. They would help clarify the legal framework, join up services and provide more accountability.

The Scottish Government consulted on these proposals in 2022 and has committed to bringing forward legislation which meets these policy intentions later in 2023.

² Homelessness Prevention Review Group (2021) *Preventing Homelessness in Scotland: Recommendations for legal duties to prevent homelessness: A report from the Prevention Review Group*. Available from: Scotland Prevention Review Group (crisis.org.uk)

What we did

We wanted to create the opportunity for people with experience of homelessness to meaningfully contribute to the prevention policy agenda.

To inform the changes needed to make preventing homelessness a priority, Crisis carried out focus groups around Scotland, partnering with local services in six areas:

- Action for Children in West Dunbartonshire
- Turning Point in the northeast of Scotland
- Inverness Foodstuff in Inverness
- Crisis Edinburgh Skylight in Edinburgh
- Move On Highland in Caithness and Fort William
- Your Voice Community Care Forum in Inverclyde

Key findings

This research highlights the very different circumstances that serve as the route into homelessness for different people. The triggers for a young person who has been asked to leave the family home are very different from the triggers for someone who has experience of problem substance use and experience of the criminal justice system. Similarly, the triggers for someone who has experienced bereavement, lost his job and gradually accumulated rent arrears are very different from the triggers for a woman who has experienced domestic abuse and struggled to get a joint tenancy transferred into her own name. It is essential that the policy and practice surrounding the new homelessness prevention duties is designed to respond to these very specific and often intersectional routes into housing crisis.

What people have told us they want and need for the future:

- Help at an earlier stage, with proactive identification of warning signs of housing crisis
- Support that is empathetic and supportive rather than judgemental

- Support that is driven by the person, their needs and desires, rather than by processes
- Help navigating complex systems of support
- Ways to take back control over their circumstances
- Support to create a home
- A safety net for when everything else has failed

This requires:

- Support services that are visible and aren't seen as stigmatising
- A responsive and joined-up approach from services which take responsibility and work together
- A resourced frontline
- Strong leadership
- Adaptation to local circumstances

People demonstrated a wide range of preferences in considering what their best housing options would be. What was apparent through the focus groups was that people want:

- Flexible housing options so they can live in circumstances that are right for them
- Honest communication about options and follow up support
- A housing system that works for people in housing crisis
- The ability to afford housing and to move on with their lives without financial traps
- A housing and support system that makes good economic sense



Introduction

Homelessness strips people of their dignity. It is frequently demoralising and traumatic. It robs people of a sense of agency, and it can have long term impacts on their mental and physical health, social connections, finances and general wellbeing. Too often Crisis hears of people failing to receive help until the last minute, even when they have sought assistance from public services at an early stage. At worst, people are told that they will not be able to get support until they make an application for homelessness assistance.

We refuse to accept that.

Homelessness should be rare, brief and unrepeatable. To prevent housing problems from becoming housing emergencies, Scotland needs to embed a culture of early intervention and shared public responsibility, while giving people choice and control over their own lives. Perhaps most importantly, this system must be designed in partnership with people who have experience of homelessness.

Putting in place a more person-centred approach and a culture of co-production, with the voice of the applicant being central - empowering people to take greater agency over their circumstances - is central to achieving our shared ambition to end homelessness in Scotland.

This report presents the views of people with experience of homelessness, on what a new approach to homelessness prevention should look like.

Background

In 2018, homelessness experts recommended that the Scottish Government and local authorities put a much stronger focus on helping people facing housing difficulties before they reached crisis point. One of the ways they said that should be done is through changing the law so that it prioritises help as early as possible.

There was widespread support for this approach from Scottish Government, local authorities and others supporting people in housing crisis and so more work was done to develop what this might look like.

Another group of homelessness and housing experts, called the Homelessness Prevention Review Group, talked to over 100 people and organisations to help them develop their proposals. They worked with people with experience of homelessness, frontline workers

and people from other services such as health, social care and families' services supporting people with housing problems to identify the changes needed in the law.

The Scottish Government agreed with the recommendations the Group made, and in early 2022 opened up a nation-wide consultation on the proposals, with the intention of creating new law during 2023.

What is being proposed

The Homelessness Prevention Review Group recommended changing the current homelessness system, so that:

- Public bodies engage in early intervention, based on the principles of asking people about their housing situation and, where necessary, acting upon that information;
- Local authorities assist people at risk of homelessness at an earlier stage – six months rather than the current two months – working in partnership with relevant partners and with services designed to meet the needs of particular groups at risk of homelessness;
- There's a clear menu of steps available, which would address people's risk of homelessness;
- The assessment process is more person-centred, focusing on the causes of the situation and working with the individuals affected to identify their preferred next steps and housing outcomes, and providing support so that it does not happen again in future;
- People can choose from a wide range of housing options according to their needs to resolve their homelessness, with strong safeguards to make sure the accommodation is stable and suitable to the needs of the household.

These proposals have the potential to ensure people have access to assistance at an earlier stage, preventing them from reaching crisis point, while retaining strong rights for individuals and giving them a stronger voice and more control during the process. They would help clarify the legal framework, join up services and provide more accountability.

The Scottish Government consulted on these proposals in 2022 and has committed to bringing

forward legislation which meets these policy intentions later in 2023.

About this report

To inform the changes needed to make preventing homelessness a priority, we wanted to hear more about people's experiences of housing crisis, and what was (or was not) done to prevent them from becoming homeless. Alongside this, we also wanted to widen opportunity for people with experience of homelessness to meaningfully contribute to the prevention policy agenda, by consulting with a larger number and wider range of people with experience of homelessness and of being at risk of homelessness, including people living outside the central belt of Scotland.

To achieve this, we carried out focus groups around Scotland, partnering with local services in six areas:

- Action for Children in West Dunbartonshire
- Turning Point in the northeast of Scotland
- Inverness Foodstuff in Inverness
- Crisis Edinburgh Skylight in Edinburgh
- Move On Highland in Caithness and Fort William
- Your Voice Community Care Forum in Inverclyde

The six focus groups included young people who had experienced homelessness at age 16-17, people who had experienced domestic abuse, people who had experience of sleeping rough, people with experience of problem substance use, people who had served in the Armed Forces, and those who had experienced homelessness due to financial difficulties and eviction from private tenancies. Twelve men and eight women with experience of homelessness took part in the focus groups.

The report starts by looking at the impact of experiencing housing crisis on the individuals we spoke to and summarises some of these experiences. It then goes on to look at what the warning signs of a housing crisis and potential homelessness might be. Next it discusses the principles and culture that people felt are needed so that services and support work for them when crisis may be experienced, and what has to be in place to make that happen. Finally, it explores what people want and need from the housing options offered to them.

Facing housing crisis is...

Undignified

"I think part of it as well is not making you feel like you're some destitute ...I felt low enough in myself, with the situation that I was in. I didn't need that on top, making me feel even lower, like I was begging to get help. Being treated with dignity."

Stigmatising

"There's still a terrible stigma. You don't go asking for help until you tend to be away over your head in it. Being more aware of who you can turn to would be really helpful, definitely."

Hard to think about

"You always think it's not going to happen to you... until it does."

Shocking

"It was like Jesus! And I'm like 'this is happening to me?'"

Frightening

"He listened to me rambling, physically in tears, saying to him 'I don't know where to go, please help me, please help me'..."

Overwhelming

"Suddenly I couldn't function. I'm putting the computer on and staring at the computer and like I don't know what buttons to pick."

Disempowering

"They tried to move me to a town that was 58 miles away. Now, I worked here, and I was like, I can't get to work! I can't move that far, it's two hours travel! And they were like, 'well, it's homelessness, so some people just have to take what they're given.' ... you don't get a choice in the matter, if you want a roof over your head you take it."

Often the final stage of lots of other issues

"I really struggled myself to address things, and I was well bogged-down in debt, the loss of my mother, at the one time... and I just couldn't get myself round to facing and talking to people."

Sometimes predictable

"Just getting stuck in that situation where it is unsustainable and you're choosing between bills, rent, food, clothes, you know just the essential things and cancelling all the unnecessary direct debits."

Preventable

"That's the difficult part... noticing... I think that's the hard thing, see, for me becoming homeless, there was maybe things that'd been going on for years that had become your norm, so they weren't obvious."

Yet, one person said:

"Preventing homelessness – it just isn't being done. Waiting for someone to be at crisis point is just not doing any good because you're then having to put all the pieces back together and managing to fix it. It's like... everything is completely broken by that point."



So, how did people feel that help could be provided before reaching crisis point, when it may be too late to prevent someone losing their home? We asked people what were some early signs that a crisis may be developing.

Early signs housing crisis may be looming

People's routes into housing crisis are diverse. But often, pressures combine together to create an emergency. For some, there is a build-up of factors over time, like illness or being pulled deeper into poverty. In other cases, a sudden event – like bereavement, loss of employment or relationship breakdown - pushes people who are already struggling over the edge.

Financial problems

Many focus group participants spoke about financial difficulties as a cause or trigger of housing crisis. Several people talked about the gradual build-up of problems over time:

"It's a juggling act, you know. I was thinking of which one to do. You can't afford the rent, but as long as that's paid, you think right the roof is okay, but we can't do anything under the roof. It's just those choices. But unsustainable, that people are caught in that. That's the problem."

Financial difficulties could hit crisis point when circumstances changed suddenly, such as the loss of employment, relationship breakdown, health issues, or a combination of these factors.

"For me the first signs are, like, when you lose your job or something and you struggle to pay your rent... you get into difficulties for a reason. There's an event or this kind of thing that prevents you to act in a proper way. To lose control of your life, you know?"

"So first of all, arrears. Often people are working or living and really just trying to get through and they're just managing, but then something happens like illness or a break-up, or one partner has disappeared. Or, like, a granny, because grannies are so special, even if their knees are going, they can still sit in a chair and look after the children, so when a granny dies...I think those are kind of big things. She'd be helping with the children."

The impact of pandemic restrictions had led to some participants losing employment.

"What happened at the start of Covid was I'd moved out to a private rented cottage in the country and the rent that I was paying for this place I was able to cover through my job... I was a welder by trade... [then] I lost my job due to Covid and all that."

"About six months ago I got a little behind on my rent and I was served a notice to quit notification from the landlord... And, I had an operation...a few years ago now... and because of the heavy lifting because of the job... it was a problem... and my mum had dementia at the time and I was a carer and so... on returning [to work] it was still covid so I found it really difficult to get back into work... and the arrears kept building up, and I had a few extensions but in the end I thought I'd like to get out, you know."

Rent or mortgage arrears and other debts was a common sign for many that their housing was becoming at risk.

"I got myself into trouble with some mortgage arrears... mortgage arrears was the first sign. I had a real depression about it and couldn't see a way out or anything like that."

"A lot of young people end up getting into debt, whether that be official debt or whatever. Just, owing out money. That tends to be a big issue... credit card debt, people end up owing money for certain things... even just general bills, falling behind on payments such as rent, rent arrears. Getting something on hire purchase and not being able to pay it back, or having no intention to pay it back in the first place."

Many participants talked about the interaction between housing and the benefits system, where there is often a shortfall between rent and Local Housing Allowance rates.

"I'm paying £500 per month for this place so I've got a £75 a month shortfall, and that's what I'm saying, it doesn't take long if you've got a £75 per month shortfall, so, after 7 or 8 months you're going to be reaching that point where the letting agents are going to be chasing you, and all that just increases your anxiety..."

"My rent was £1,200 a month, so that really wasn't sustainable, and you could only apply for Discretionary Housing Payment for a certain amount of time, and that you couldn't carry on living in this place, it's just silly. It was unsustainable."

One person who had to go into hospital described their anxiety about whether benefits would continue to cover her housing costs for the duration of her stay in hospital, or whether she would lose her home:

"When I've been in hospital, it's always things like Housing Benefit, you're told that it can't be longer than two or four weeks or something, but, like, I went in

for my mental health so it's just at the back of your mind and you're like, 'oh, well...' I mean, I'm never in long periods of time, but at the back of my mind I'm thinking, if I was going to be here for two months, am I going to have a home to go back to? ... It's like, you need to get better, but you're worried that you won't have anywhere to live"

Some participants spoke about the role that family, friends and other support networks would play in easing financial pressures. Conversely, it was noted that the absence of a support network could also be a contributing factor to housing crisis.

"I'm in a really fortunate position in that my family have been really supportive, but if you haven't got family, you're going to find yourself very quickly in a position where you're going to have three or four months of arrears."

One person described getting trapped in a situation where their circumstances were unsustainable, but they couldn't afford to leave them:

"You couldn't pay your rent or have any money to live on, or you just couldn't do it at all, so...but then we also had the problem when we couldn't actually afford to move. Because you have to put everything in place to do that, so... Its huge, rolled in together, you know. It's being that trap of the catch-22 of not being able to move out of a situation."

The early identification of financial warning signs, such as the accumulation of arrears, and timely offers of support, is an important means of early intervention so that the situation is less likely to escalate into crisis.

Relationship breakdown

Relationship breakdown was the second most common reason for losing a home that people spoke about. For some young people that meant being asked to leave the family home, for others it was breakdown of a relationship with their partner, and for some it was escaping abuse.

Even where people did not lose their home, relationship breakdowns often had implications for their ability to pay rent or mortgage payments. One participant found that when his relationship broke down, he was no longer able to afford the mortgage payments on his own. Another said:

"My situation changed with affordability over the period. When I first went to that property my ex-partner was also included so he was paying part of the rent but then that disappeared, which meant that everything I had was going to the rent. Quite a shift shall we say. It was still too much."

A young person spoke about being asked to leave the family home or being "kicked out," and how difficult it was to know it was coming, even if there might have been signs for years leading up to that experience.

"For me, there was abuse going on at home, but it wasn't as easy to notice because I wasn't covered in bruises; it's like... words... and so this went on for years and, like, nobody really took notice. And I would say little things but nobody really picked up on that and so it would get turned around to me... like I was disruptive. Like I was just a disruptive teenager and stuff. That wasn't the way I viewed myself, it was the way other people viewed me. And so that became my norm, that people weren't listening... It got to the point where I broke and I was like, no, it's better me not being at home."

She went on to describe the suddenness of being asked to leave the family home, even though things had been problematic for years.

Increased awareness of and access to information, advice and support at the point of relationship breakdown could help people to deal with these situations.

"When you get kicked out it's quite sudden in a way. You can't say, 'you'll be kicked out in four weeks' or 'you'll be kicked out in eight weeks' because you don't know. It's as if something snaps. Or at least, for my situation anyway, it was like something snapped... And it's all been quite sudden. It got to the point where I was staying in my car, and so, you know, I couldn't be doing that for weeks so there's not that amount of time to tell you that's going to happen. So that's the difficult part... Noticing... I think that's the hard thing, see, for me becoming homeless, there was maybe things that'd been going on for years that had become your norm, so they weren't obvious."

The participant also described a system that was difficult to navigate, and detailed how she went to several places for help before she received the support that she needed.

"I went to housing and put in an application, and then never really got anywhere with that, and I was staying with a friend and that application didn't really go anywhere. And then I think I filled in an application for homelessness, and then...I don't know, I got really confused! But then it got to the point where social work agreed that I shouldn't be at that home anymore."



Domestic abuse

Several female participants recounted their experiences of domestic abuse which could lead to the loss of their home. Often the build-up was slow.

“He was the nicest guy you could ever meet and [then] six months into the relationship, it turned where...he was pretty violent. The domestic abuse team were involved a couple of times, but again I’m the type of person who always wants to see the best in people, so I knew he had issues himself, but I forgave because he said he was going to get help...Again, I thought everything was great and then six months later it happened again and then I realised myself mentally I was going down a slope where I had never been before. Where my life had been up here and then all of a sudden it was down at the bottom. So, I decided that he had to go.”

Her partner was convicted and sent to prison. She went on to describe how she had to make the decision to leave her home after he was released from prison, knowing that he had previously breached multiple bail orders.

“I decided then, even though I loved where I stayed, I loved my wee flat, everything, that if I wanted peace and

if I wanted to get my life back, I had to move. I had no choice, I had to move. So, the police domestic abuse team, they were the ones who put me in touch with the council. So, the council, it was my first point of call [name of council worker], who listened...It wasn’t a case of ‘oh I know exactly what you’re going through,’ because she didn’t. What she said to me was ‘that is absolutely awful. If there is anything I can do to help, then I will do it.’ Which she did...she said to me ‘for you, for work, to carry on your life, where do you want to go?’ And in my head, it was as far away from this person as possible. Moving away from my family, my daughter, my grandson, out of the town was the best thing for me...So they helped me get a house out in [location]. Then [council officer] moved me to [charity worker] who was absolutely amazing.”

“I could have stayed in my flat in [area] if it hadn’t been for the threat of violence from my ex-partner... I just felt in myself, I’d got to a point when I was really low and I just knew that if I wanted my life back... at the start I was like ‘this so-and-so isn’t going to get me down, I’m staying here’ but then it got to the stage where something had to give... and it was me. My mental state was going downhill, my work, everything, and I realised, if I want my life back, I was going to have to take control.”

On the other hand, someone else wanted to stay in their home once their abusive partner was put in prison, but couldn’t get the tenancy transferred to them.

Jenny’s story*

Jenny was married and living in a two-bedroom council house with her husband. The relationship began to break down and her husband became abusive and physically violent towards her.

“He got himself in a lot of trouble, he got himself arrested. He’s currently serving a prison sentence just now. He tried to kill me that night.”

The council house was in her husband’s name, and she tried to persuade the council to let her stay in the house, and so did her ex-husband when he was in jail.

“I was trying to fight to keep that house. And because the majority of the stuff I’d bought and paid for myself... and believe it or not he was even trying to get the council to give me that house. He was trying to fight for it from in prison for me.”

The council were unresponsive to Jenny’s requests to move the tenancy into her name.

“I was trying to ask for it, I can’t remember the councillor’s name, but he just ignored my phone calls, my emails, and I tried complaining and they just said he’s not in at the moment... And the council were just ignoring my calls.”

In the end, Jenny had to move out of the house, and for three years was staying with family and friends.

“I never got the house. ... It ended up being three years that I was staying between my mum, my dad, other people. Couch surfing. ... And the house is still sitting empty now. And all the furniture got scrapped.”

*Pseudonyms have been used throughout this report



Mental health needs

Throughout many of the experiences of participants, escalating mental health difficulties featured prominently; difficulties that could often lead to other challenges like financial or relationship issues.

“Between mental health issues, that tumbled into drink that tumbled into different things... it got to the stage where there was just so many bills coming through the door that I just... threw them all in a pile and then put them all in the bin. It all just got so overwhelming.”

“There’s all these people, ex-veterans, who can’t cope with anything anymore, suffering from PTSD, who aren’t able to be around people anymore, because they can’t cope so they need to escape. They can’t cope with the pressure because they’ve got so much going on in their heads. My experience, when my relationship broke down, because of lockdown, I slept in my car, and I didn’t know where to go.”

For many people, their mental health was also clearly impacted by the stress of an accumulation of problems. Feelings of shame and stigma were reported by participants, and for some this created a reluctance to reach out and access support until they were in a state of crisis.

“Nobody wants to admit that they can’t do something, like can’t pay their rent or can’t pay their bills or can’t look after themselves. So, you only really admit it when you’re at the crunch point, and when you’re at the crunch point there is no help there, at that moment.”

Mental health difficulties, including difficulties related to trauma, can be a precursor to housing crisis, especially where people feel overwhelmed by managing bills or when it is severely affecting – or has led to the breakdown of – their relationships. And many participants spoke of how housing crisis exacerbated their mental health difficulties, leaving them with less capacity to cope, creating a vicious cycle.

“I’d been in this wee cottage for years and the people who owned it came over to get it back through eviction, and so I had to leave. I was a functioning person; I am a functioning person...then suddenly this happens to you; you think you’re on it and then your brain shuts down because it’s all too much. And this was in the lockdown and I’m like ‘where the hell am I?’”

“I was in a really good job dealing with 25/30 staff every day, by this time [becoming homeless] I couldn’t even fill in a form. So it was [council officer] who filled 90% of everything in. If there was something I couldn’t do. It was just mentally and physically I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t do it. Even though I knew how to do it. I just physically couldn’t. I felt so low.”

In many of these cases there were multiple factors that contributed to the housing difficulties, which built up to crisis point, or one final element was the last straw. Many of these examples also not only highlight the triggers of housing crisis, but the involvement of various services prior to that point, suggesting that there may be missed opportunities to notice and intervene.



What do people need from services at times of housing crisis?

When asked what could have helped them at times of potential housing crisis, and what a genuinely person-centred and preventative approach would look like, participants responded with some clear and consistent messages. The main themes that emerged from these conversations were: early support; the desire to receive support from someone who has had similar experiences; the desire for more informal conversations with less rigid questions; more frequent

contact; having support tailored to the individual; having support to navigate the system, and being involved in the decisions that impact their lives.

Providing help earlier

There are sometimes clear indicators that someone’s housing situation may be at risk. Some of these warnings build up over a long time, while others may only have a very short notice period. They may not be easy for individuals to see when they are in the middle of their situation. In contrast, sometimes people sought help but didn’t receive it. For example:

“I went to Housing, and put in an application, and then never really got anywhere with that, and I was staying with a friend and that application didn’t really go anywhere. And then I think I filled in an application for homelessness, and then... I don’t know, I got really confused! But then it got to the point where Social Work agreed that I shouldn’t be at that home anymore.”

Similarly, a staff member present at one of the focus groups spoke about the value of having more time to work with people facing housing crisis, to prevent that crisis from deepening. They suggested that supporting someone earlier would allow them to put repayment plans in place, for example, in cases where arrears or other debt have been accrued.

One of the proposals that the Scottish Government and COSLA have consulted on implementing is an extended prevention duty which would mean households are defined as threatened with homelessness if they are at risk of homelessness within the next six months, rather than the current two months.

One focus group got really involved in discussing this idea. Participants were supportive and thought it would have helped them when they were at risk. They said it would have given them the time and opportunity to address things:

“I’m sure that’d make a lot of difference to a lot of people. Because I mean, two months... look at all the pressure they’re going to be under in that space of two months. Whereas if its six months, yes, the pressure is still going to be there, but they’ve got a bit more time.”

Pro-active identification of warning signs

On a similar theme, some people felt that agencies could take a more proactive response to identifying and acting on warning signs, which trigger a response from services to prevent people reaching crisis point.

“It would be a good idea I think if, when things started to go wrong, like when you’re starting to get behind... if that could then trigger some sort of help, some sort of support to become involved, you know, maybe a phone call from someone to say, you know, ‘it’s not at crisis point yet, but we’ve noticed you’re having trouble, you know, can we give you any help? Is there anything we can do to assist you?’”

“It can be quite hard for people to – when they get in that situation – to reach out. So, it would be quite good, you know, if when someone was getting in that situation if the onus could be on an organisation to be a bit more proactive ... so... you know, say you’re a Council tenant – I mean it wouldn’t even have to be the Council – they could be independent so you don’t feel, you know, threatened, if it could be some kind of support agency or something so you don’t feel like you’re, you know, in trouble. To help you not get to that point.”

“If someone has got addictions and mental health problems... if somebody is always going to a doctor or has some kind of service involved, you know, ... and that service should be seeing the red flags before they even do! In an ideal world!”

One participant described how it might be useful for services to have a list of triggers or warning signs that they know they need to respond to in a joined-up way.

“There’s usually something going on, it hides another issue behind that, and it would be helpful for it to trigger capability just to... prevent that. To create more noticing between the services, you know? Perhaps a list of things, and when something triggers that list, they say, oh, ok, we need to take care of that. So, services have those processes in their possession already. Because you can’t have one service triggering one thing another trigger another thing, and in the end, the person is in crisis, this person definitely needs something to be done.”

Participants were asked to reflect on their routes into housing crisis and on whether they had engaged with any other services outside the local authority housing and homelessness services. The most common type of service mentioned was GPs or other health services. The second most common was police, most often mentioned in relation to domestic abuse.

Some participants spoke about how well-placed health services are to spot the warning signs, especially when problem substance use is involved, and a few provided examples of where GPs or health professionals had known about someone’s housing situation.

“You know, I was out of work, due to illness. Help from my doctor would be a great help...”

One participant suggested that harm reduction services were a good place to identify where someone may be in housing crisis, particularly given that those with problem substance use may not be in touch with any other services.

These views support the Prevention Review Group (PRG) proposal on introducing a requirement on public bodies to “ask and act” – to identify when someone is at risk of housing crisis and take action to intervene.

Visible and non-stigmatised support

Many people talked about how hard it can be to seek help when things are becoming difficult.

“I think it is hard to ask for help. Because you’re putting yourself in a vulnerable position, you’re asking for mercy. It shouldn’t feel like a handout... but sometimes it does, really.”

“[This charity] has made me feel welcome, the support’s there. Although I have at times felt guilty, taking stuff from them, they’ve still helped me feel comfortable about it. Although it’s a different kind of help, as opposed to benefits. It is difficult approaching people for benefits.”

“I know it personally, there’s a lot of vets [Armed Forces veterans] out there who are still going through it today. And again, the majority of them are too embarrassed to ask for help.”

The shame of needing help was often compounded by not knowing where to go or what entitlements people had.

“I come from a background where there was no concept of benefits, you know, there you don’t have benefits, you don’t know what benefits are. When I got here, I worked hard to make sure I could pay for everything... but when I couldn’t pay anymore, I had no concept of going and asking people for help.”

“What I felt was that because I was working and earning, I had no idea that I could help from anybody. Just because I was working. Even though the council did help me with the deposit, I moved from a furnished to unfurnished and with the rent and the amount of debt I had been left in my name that I was having to pay.”

“At the time I was unaware of what was available, I was ashamed to ask for help, I didn’t know where to ask. And eventually I was encouraged to make an appointment at Citizens Advice. I didn’t know if there were any other services. I was very embarrassed and ashamed.”

“I don’t actually know of the other services that there is if I’m honest with you. Not aware of them. ... But I must admit, the Council is not the first place I would have turned to. It just, wouldn’t have come into my head to turn to the Council.”

“I sort of flinched away from getting help you know, because I thought ‘there’s people out on the street, obviously a lot worse than my situation...’ so I felt guilty approaching anybody, although if I had reached out earlier things might be an improvement on what they are now.”

“So many people don’t know about Discretionary Housing Payments; if you’re working or you haven’t come into contact with benefits before, you just don’t know.”

One participant spoke about having slept in his car because he didn't know how to access services.

"I slept in the car, I hadn't a clue where to go to... plus it was Covid, it was lockdown so I didn't know... there should be another way!"

Some talked about the stigma of being homeless and being on benefits:

"Other people are like 'why are you homeless?' and they start looking at you funny, as if you've done something. Because there's already that stigma around it. And, like, I worked, I had a car, I had everything apart from a house. And so, I wasn't your typical homeless person."

"There's that stigma and prejudice that people on benefits have to deal with ... the idea that 'you're a waste of space, you're on benefits, you're not interested in contributing, you're just trying to take what you can' – that whole attitude is prevalent up here."

This suggests that more information needs to be available so that people know where to get support, but crucially that seeking help is normalised. This may include considering language used to describe services that is accessible and not stigmatised.



A responsive and joined-up approach

Services working together

People spoke about the need for improved joined-up working across services and what one called a "multi-agency response." These points resonated with the proposals of the PRG.

Taking responsibility

Some participants gave examples of where they had tried to access support but were passed from service to service or only supported with one aspect of their problem.

"As a family we got kicked out the house because... we had no choice. We'd quite often go to different people for support and because it was weirdly specific housing issues we were having, we were constantly just kicked to someone else, kicked to a different department. And then it was over Christmas time, so everyone went on their holidays and annual leave and it just [shakes head]."

"So, yeah, she never asked me anything about what I need other than the housing situation. I raised other things, and they were met with a ... 'well, just, go...' because there's no plan, there's no consistency... I know there's advocacy services and all that but I think, [it would have been helpful] if someone from the housing team had said, look, try this organisation."

"I think it is again about getting an inter-agency approach, because people have different specialisms, but it's about building a relationship, so that people feel confident in that kind of multi-agency approach. Because speaking to these support workers they're quite often just not aware of these different specialisms but quite a lot of individuals will just go to their support worker and they will just depend on that rather than looking at other options and whether or not that support worker knows about those other options."

"Interlinking between the services would possibly help with a lot of this. If domestic abuse had been registered by the police, then the council could look into that. I know you shouldn't get access to someone's records but there should be a way of doing that."

"It [the council] could then link into other support, like if there's a link into mental health services and schools and they can create that support together instead of it being passed on to someone else and passed onto someone else. Link together and work together."

This was not just about passing referrals on, but services actually working together to “take notice” and put support in place. When it worked well though, people were really appreciative.

“My son was just made homeless, because he was expecting the jail... actually, everyone told him he was going to jail, so he gave up his place. So, he’s had to move back with me momentarily, but actually the council was brilliant, and they’ve actually got him keys to a house, which is really quick... no I can’t actually fault the council.”

The services people most said they had engaged with before they lost their housing was health and police, particularly amongst those who had experienced domestic abuse. Some people spoke about the difficulties of finding housing on coming out of prison, which could mean that they went into temporary accommodation with people they were trying not to associate with.

“If you’ve come out after doing a stretch in the jail, trying to find housing after that is a massive struggle. Never mind trying to find employment and that whole system... because I spoke to, some of my friends who’d come out of young offenders, and they’ve struggled to find housing.”

Others lost housing while in prison and did not receive support to find housing before they were released:

“There was actually a guy I’d stayed with, and he was taken in on remand or something – he was taken into prison – but it got found out that he didn’t do whatever it was that he was in for, so obviously got let out after a few months after they found out that it hadn’t happened, ... but he’s not had anywhere to go back to.”

Others felt there could be a role for education: one older participant shared a story about how his high school had stepped in when he and his family faced homelessness decades ago:

“if it wasn’t for my high school intervening to help my mother, I dread to think where we would have ended up. It’s thanks to the school that, back then,

actually helped us. Because that was due to a marriage breakup. But if they hadn’t intervened, I don’t know where I would have ended up... more involvement is needed.”

One participant stressed the need for third sector services to be involved, alongside statutory agencies.

“I think they’re putting too much [emphasis] onto the professionals here, and there’s a lot of room for third sector groups to be involved in this. They’re the ones who’re actually going to get to the people affected, they’re the ones who are actually at the front... I would put more emphasis on ground level partners.”

Support to create a home

One major theme that came up was the support that was available to people when they moved into new tenancies following a housing crisis. Many participants spoke about moving into properties with no furniture or white goods, and one spoke about how stigmatising it felt to access furniture through a Scottish Welfare Fund Community Care Grant, where there was limited choice available.

“I was moved into that house with not even so much as a bed, but it was [council workers] as well, my first point of call who filled in forms for crisis grants and whatever... so I could get furniture for my house and I was made to feel that size [gestures between finger and thumb] because ‘sorry, you know what, you’re not going to get that money to go pick the couch that you want. What you will get is I’ll give you this plastic couch that I give everybody because you know what I don’t trust that you’re actually going to go and buy that.’ It’s awful.”

Others who had been provided with support to access furniture and white goods spoke about how much of a ‘life saver’ it was for settling into a tenancy when they had nothing.

“When I stayed in a treatment centre in Glasgow, the council provided us with white goods. That is an absolute life saver when you have nothing, and I mean nothing – just the clothes on your back. More schemes like that would be beneficial for folk.”

Some spoke about how difficult it was to sustain a tenancy without the basics required for settled living.

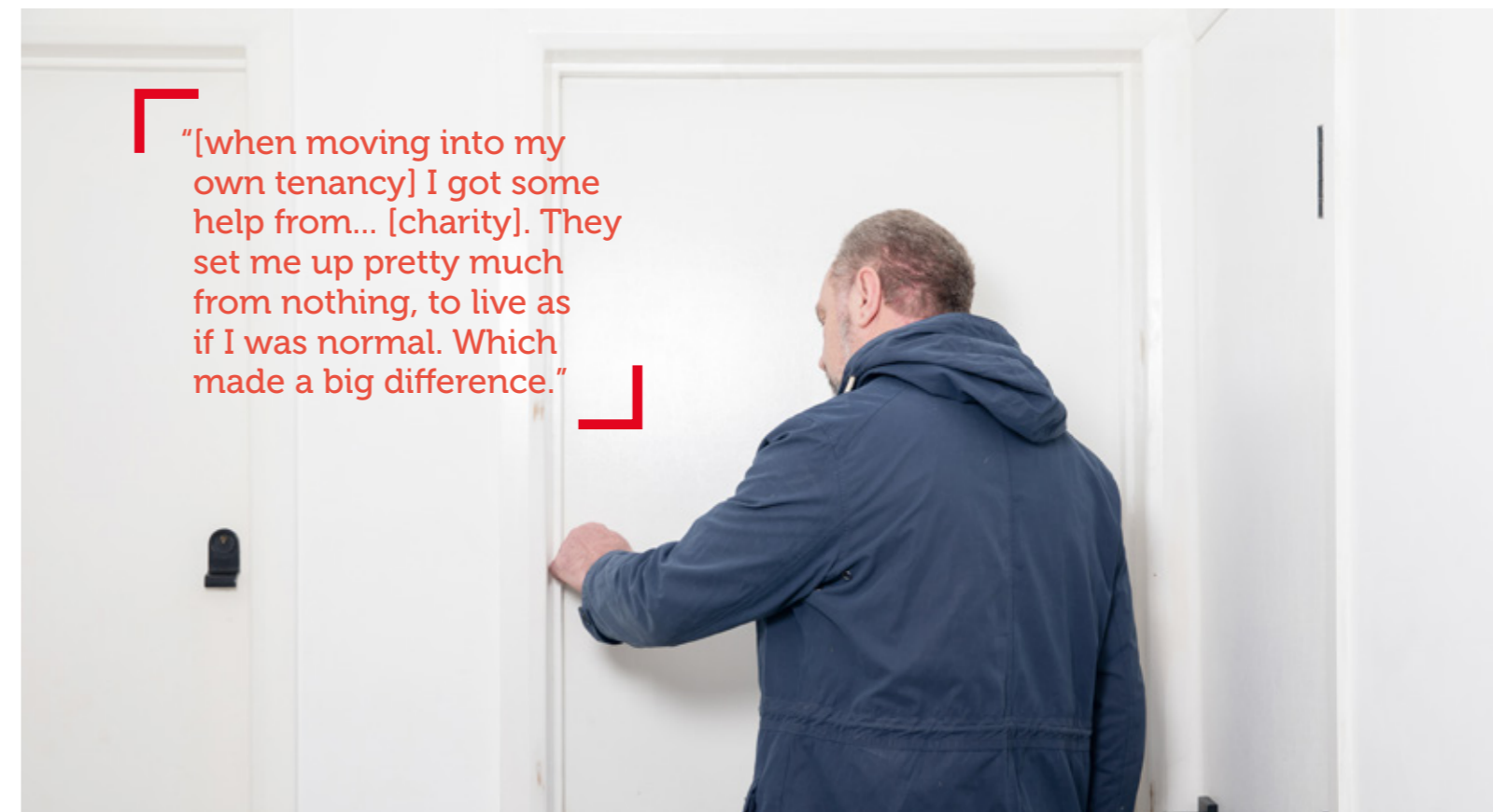
“That happened to [my partner]. The council did nothing whatsoever to help. When she left they said she had given up her tenancy. They said just to stick it out.”

A young person who had experienced homelessness, spoke about how difficult it was to move out of temporary accommodation and into a new unfurnished property with very little notice, meaning there was no time to source furniture.

“Depending on where you’re moving to and where you’re moving from, depends how long you get, so you can have from one day to about two weeks... I don’t think anyone knows how long you’ve got until you’re told... It could be a day. Because I’d stayed in [supported accommodation] and didn’t have anything and I was meant to be moved by the next day... Those first few weeks were hell!”

Some participants discussed how helpful grants and goods in kind from charities could be in supporting someone to settle into a new home.

“[when moving into my own tenancy] I got some help from... [charity]. They set me up pretty much from nothing, to live as if I was normal. Which made a big difference. The furniture was paid for, and all the basics to get going was all paid for, I didn’t have to try and fork out for it. For me, that was the critical point going from thinking ‘there’s no end to this’ to actually ‘...there’s a start.’”



What do people in housing crisis want services to look like?



Empathetic and supportive

When people are experiencing shame about the situation they find themselves in, it can be extremely difficult to seek assistance. Some participants described the impact of not receiving an empathetic response:

"I think some people [providing services] don't seem to have empathy and don't seem to be able to think, 'how would I feel if I was in that situation?' And try and make it as easy for you as they can... so it can feel sort of, almost punitive, like they're almost taking some joy out of their power over an individual."

"They sounded like they weren't interested in my situation. I can feel that, because I'm a person, a human, it must be that you pick up on that automatically. Sometimes you feel it is not enough."

"If you're the service that people come to at what for many people will be literally the worst point in their lives, especially for young people who are going through homelessness, that is, so far, the most they've struggled. So, if when they reach out for help, they get met with people who don't care, that's awful. That feels absolutely terrible."

"The first 'no' that I got – and it was a very abrupt no – just turned me off and I said, well, I'd rather be living under the trees. Because I'm not going to fight with people who have no understanding of what I'm doing and who I am."

Another young person who had experienced homelessness with his family expressed how it is "the worst feeling in the world" to be told that it is not somebody's job to help with a situation.

Conversely, people highly valued good support:

"So [council worker] from the council, he tried everything. Believe he was on that computer constantly, to see 'because you're just over that threshold you can't get this, you can't get that.'"

"I think it just depends who you get to be honest. I saw that guy [name] and he was brilliant."

"The council have actually worked tremendously well with me... I must admit, this time around, they really have taken my mental health on board and the fact that I'm working with people and trying to sort things."

Peer supported

Two focus groups spoke about feeling more comfortable opening up to people who understood what they were going through on a personal level.

"I think, being able to talk to someone who has actually walked your path, and been in your shoes... having that support mechanism within the council itself with someone who truly understands the situation you're in because they have walked that path... You've got more chances of someone opening up and actually talking if that person has actually walked in your shoes and understands because they've been there themselves."

"You might have your support person from the council, but if you've got someone who has been in the same situation and they literally know what you've been through..."

One suggested that training people who had lived experience of the homelessness system would be a good way to enable this.

"Having an advocate that understands your personal situation – that would be a big step forward. They would need to be trained in how to support someone, and maybe someone with lived experience. The council could start giving jobs to people who have been in that position, who can get training on offering peer-to-peer support."

Some participants had experience of giving or receiving peer support and advocated for it as good way of achieving this aim of being supported by someone who has had similar experiences.

"The peer support group that I run, I ken that the guys are speaking to me about other little things that they wouldn't speak [about] to their doctor or whatever... they're speaking to me about it. And then, I'm able to signpost them onto something else, using my own experiences."

"There's a befrienders thing they could do... So having someone who's been through it who can be like 'I didn't pay for gas and electric for ages' and who is able to explain the consequences of that. ... But, you know, someone who's been through something similar could be like 'no, right, this is what needs done.'"

Focused on individual needs

When asked what kinds of questions people wished the council had asked them when they approached them for support, one participant – a young person with experience of homelessness – talked about wanting to be treated as a person:

"First and foremost, 'are you ok?' it sounds a bit silly, but they need to make sure the young person is actually alright. Obviously, if they're coming to support from the council, they're probably not! Then to ask, have you reached out to anybody, is there any other support that you think you would need? Like, talking to you like a person, rather than a number."

Several participants talked about how support seemed focused on the process rather than the person. A reliance on processes and questions could feel like it didn't connect with what they needed as individuals. They spoke about a desire for a more personal approach which relied less on processes and rigid questions, and more on getting to know the person and their situation.

"The criteria get worse and worse... the questions and what they're trying to tell you is getting further from the truth of what you need. I think a lot of folk just want to explain their situation and just get a foothold, like, just a base... which you can be in for a year or as long as you need... and the rest of it will fall into place. Often, people can help themselves."

"Let someone talk rather than asking them questions. Give them an

opportunity to explain their situation and what they feel they need. Really try your best to get as near as you can to that. Rather than making the person fit the box, make the box fit the person.”

“They need to know everyone is different and just because their story makes them similar to someone they have maybe helped before, they can’t just go ‘ok, we will do this and this’. They need to get to know you as a person, and that helps you open up them as well. If they show an interest.”

When experiencing a difficult and vulnerable situation, people felt a relational approach which helped them to feel comfortable was critical.

“[It’s better if] meetings are quite informal... not sitting in the council with suits and ties, it should be quite informal. I think that puts young people at ease. I would feel a hell of a lot more comfortable going to a café or McDonald’s and talking to someone and the first questions asked being ‘are you alright?’ and then ‘what can we do?’ Rather than meeting at the council and filling out forms, where it is obvious that someone is just doing their job. Even if the outcome is the same,” I know for a fact that one approach would make me feel a lot better.”

“Speaking from my experience, it’s the more informal places [that I prefer], who don’t sit you down before you go in and take everything but your shoe size, you know, all your details before you can go in and have a cup of tea. That isn’t good to start with. The more informal a place is, the more comfortable you feel talking to people.”

One person talked about how he ignored written communication from the council because he felt overwhelmed:

“I just didn’t know where to start with a lot of stuff. You start getting letters in from the council saying that I might be losing my house and I just ignored it all... I think it’s important for people because otherwise they just sweep it all under the carpet when you’re taking drugs.”

Several people talked about the benefit of someone taking an interest and an individualised approach.

“I have had lots of criminal justice social workers. But I got an early intervention social worker, and he changed my life. He was the last one I had, and he got me to where I am now. It shows that if there is an officer that is going to do it, then how seriously they take their job [matters]. It just took one social worker to change me, but I had had lots.”

One participant who had experience of homelessness but was now working for a charity providing support to others, talked about the importance of having what he called a holistic ‘personal care plan’ in place, which set out all the different kinds of support that an individual needed.

“When we work with New Scots [refugees and asylum seekers], we talk about having a... almost like a personal care plan covering everything from their mental health to their... you know a holistic approach, every part of a person. So, plans like that, like how Social Work would use it with a member of the community that they’re supporting, something like that for the housing and homelessness team to say ‘that person needs X, Y and Z’ it’s not just the housing that they need, but these are the areas of advice that they need. Like, their benefits because they’ve been sanctioned or have been cut unfairly and that’s causing them to be homeless, it’s not their fault, so surely we should be putting them in touch with the citizens advice bureau or whatever. You know, a plan should be developed.”

Issues with paperwork, and particularly with joint tenancies, received some discussion in the groups. Participants reported having to wait a long time to have their tenancy changed, preventing them from being able to take control of their lives, and sometimes leading to potential homelessness.

“If you are in a joint tenancy, they need to pay more attention. If someone says they need help then they need help, they shouldn’t be told ‘if you do this, you will be made homeless.’ That is a slap in the

face, and after that you will never want to offer help again.”

Someone else talked about trying to keep their home after their partner was imprisoned for domestic abuse, but she couldn’t get the tenancy transferred into her name, even with her partner’s support. This meant she sofa surfed for three years, while her former home remains empty.

“I was trying to fight to keep that house. And because the majority of the stuff I’d bought and paid for myself... and believe it or not he was even trying to get the Council to give me that house. He was trying to fight for it from in prison for me... I never got the house. ... It ended up being three years that I was staying between my mum, my dad, other people. Couch surfing. ... And the house is still sitting empty now. And all the furniture got scrapped.”

Trustworthy and non-judgemental

Building a relationship and developing trust was considered vital in helping people open up and receive the support they needed, especially when people are fearful or have had a history of trauma.

“[The CAB adviser] gave me back my self-confidence. So that I could speak

and be open and honest. She made me feel at ease, and like I could talk to her about anything no problem, on all sorts of subjects. I had whole carrier bags of mail unopened, and she helped me to go through all of that.”

A couple of people spoke about how it takes time to build up a relationship with somebody to trust them, especially if or when there are mental health problems involved. For example, one participant with experience of trauma and who was suffering from PTSD said:

“Me personally, I just close down, I don’t want to speak to anybody, don’t want to go near anybody. But if you close down and you’re scared to reach out, but then how are they going to know? Some people need a lot more time than other people. That’s a major thing. People think ‘ah, well, we’ll just meet up, you know, it’s not a problem, we’ll have a chat’ but they’re not realising that that person doesn’t want to express what they’re actually feeling, what they’re going through.”

Some people commented on the judgement of having “made oneself homeless” (often called intentional homelessness) created difficulties for people trying to leave damaging situations and prevented them from getting help.



“The idea of ‘making yourself intentionally homeless’ is very broad. A lot of the time you don’t want to be making yourself homeless, it isn’t your first choice, but you don’t have any other option. To then be told you are getting no help whatsoever, to get out of difficult circumstances, it’s just draining. Where do you go? What do you do? You just feel like you’re banging your head against a brick wall and there’s no escape. There needs to be a lot more understanding in some departments.”

“My son broke up in his relationship during covid. It wasn’t a good relationship for either of them. But when he went to the council, they said that because of covid and everything there is nothing they could do, that he would be making himself homeless and so he should go back and patch things up. It’s not good.”

One issue that was mentioned by a few participants was a reluctance to approach the council homelessness services for support if someone was already in debt to the council for either council tax arrears or rent payments.

“With the welfare and debt advice, you’re not going to go to the people you owe to ask for advice.”

“I’ll tell you why a lot of folk will not go to the council for help, it’s because if you’re suffering from homelessness, you probably owe them council tax and that... and you’re not going to want to speak to the people that you owe £12,000 to... So, there’s got to be something like, oh look, you can come and speak to us, and we’ll help you with it – and they will!”

In such cases, working with third sector organisations or having someone who can advise or advocate on their behalf may provide a buffer and reduce anxiety about being pursued for old debts when in crisis.

Assistance to navigate the system

Participants said one of the hardest things was knowing how to navigate a complex system, especially when they were in crisis and their mental health had been affected, making decision-making more difficult.

“When I spoke to the Homelessness Team, it took me weeks and weeks to get through, and when they eventually told me what options I had they said I’d need to register as homeless.”

“The people are not aware about what should be done or who they should be contacting to start a process. I was aware of that, but it has to take time too, to meet a person. To give me the right address or numbers to start a contact with someone who can be referred.”

“That’s the important bit, about navigation. Because I find when I’m incredibly stressed, trying to make rational decisions, I often panic and make a very wrong decision... But to have someone who could be a sounding board, but also someone who is experienced, you know, who knows the system. It’s having that confidence behind your decision which then will help to reduce anxiety because then... that relief is great, if you think things are actually being sorted, confidently.”

Sometimes a lack of communication from services made this harder.

“And then the support you get is shocking from the council. They do a mad sheet with you, and then my woman actually went off sick and I didn’t hear from anyone for ten weeks! And it wasn’t until she came back that she explained what had happened. She’d been in hospital and stuff, but no-one had told me anything. So, they’d just disappeared. But honestly, they don’t offer any support.”

Many participants spoke about the desire for more proactive contact from staff, and support that is tailored to individual’s needs.

“More one-to-one support. You need one-to-one support. And you don’t always have the capability to contact them... So there should be a wee bit more support in place.”

“I’ve been asking them about the points system and how it works, but I’m pretty low down the list, you know, for priority, because I’m a single bloke... But, after chasing them it became clear that I wasn’t going to get anything more from them so... I felt like I was being penalised.”

One person talked about how a third sector organisation had advocated for him:

“[when I became homeless] the charity here helped me to get in touch with the housing people. And the housing people were just a no-go at all, they just weren’t interested, until [redacted] from [charity] said ‘no, he needs a place... he needs to be able to be housed’ and suddenly someone was saying ‘ok, well, fill in the forms and we’ll look at it.’”

Supporting people to regain control of their lives

For many people, experiencing housing crisis was a disempowering process that had a severe impact on their wellbeing and confidence. Some people commented that having to fight further for support at this time made it even harder:

“I think of myself as someone who is quite confident talking to people, I know my rights, I’m educated... but I felt absolutely deteriorated. I didn’t want to fight, I just wanted somewhere to live!”

Others talked about the barriers that some of the legal homelessness tests created. At the point of carrying out the research, the test within the homelessness system for having a local connection was still in effect (this was suspended in Scotland in autumn 2022). Several people discussed this in the focus groups. Some had tried to leave difficult situations but received no support to get their life back on track.

“It’s like you’ve got no right to be there. If you’re not born and bred in that town, you’ve got no chance. They just want to get you back to where you’ve come from, but you’re leaving areas for a reason. Places you’ve lived all your life – because you’ve got problems there. You’re not just going to get up one morning and say ‘you know what? I fancy a move.’ You know, you move because you’ve got problems. And then you want to try somewhere else and they say ‘no, you’ve got no local connection.’”

Participants stressed the importance of being involved in the process and decision-making that affects their lives. People wanted to feel listened to and like they were an equal partner in the decisions being made about their housing and support needs. This could then empower them to move forward.

“If you were involved in it. If you weren’t just told this, that and the next. You’re actually involved in it. That would make a huge difference.”

“Sit me in an office and talk to me. Because if I’m in control of my life, if I’ve got a chance to be in control of my life... if I get an idea in my head about careers, I might be able to do it...”

One woman escaping from domestic abuse spoke of how this could work really well, by being listened to, treated as a person and asked what she needed:

“So, I decided then, even though I loved where I stayed, I loved my wee flat, everything, that if I wanted peace and if I wanted to get my life back, I had to move. I had no choice, I had to move. So, the police domestic abuse team, they were the ones who put me in touch with the council. So, the council, it was my first point of call [name of council worker], who listened. Who listened to me. It wasn’t a case of ‘oh I know exactly what you’re going through,’ because she didn’t. What she said to me was ‘that is absolutely awful. If there is anything I can do to help, then I will do it.’ Which she did, she then got me in touch...she said to me ‘for you, for work, to carry on your life, where do you want to go?’ ”



What is needed to prevent people from experiencing housing crisis?

A resourced frontline

One person talked of not being able to access any support, and having to beg a caretaker for help:

“Do you know who actually helped me in the end? The caretaker in the council building. It was the caretaker. Obviously, it was during lockdown and there was nobody in the offices; I actually spoke to him, probably because I was pretty low, but he actually was a wee God-save. He listened to me rambling, physically in tears, saying to him ‘I don’t know where to go, please help me, please help me’ and he was like ‘there’s nobody here, but I am going to go get a list and I will put you in touch with who you need’ and it was [council worker].”

While this is laudable, and made a big difference in this case, the system should work so that every individual in need receives a consistent level of support which helps them address the problems they are facing.

One member of staff who helped to host the focus groups offered insights into the reasons why support from housing officers was sometimes lacking, particularly citing caseloads as a cause.

“A lot of Housing Officers have so much going on that they don’t even know who that person is. And that’s not their fault because they’re just going through a list of things thinking ‘I’ve got to get this letter out, I’ve got to get that letter out’

but when people approach services like ourselves or other charities, we can take the time.” (Staff member)

Similarly, whilst highlighting how well-placed primary care and other health services are to identify housing crises before they happen, some participants were keen to stress how difficult it was to even get an appointment at the GP, and shared a perception that services were too stretched to help.

“My doctor helped me with something to do with the police, so they do help with issues. If it’s going to help your health. But, the doctor is such a hard person to speak to. You’re really needing folk at the frontline.”

There may be different models of providing support, such as workers attached to GP surgeries. However, in order to provide the sort of service described here that will help prevent people reaching housing crisis, there need to be sufficient resources to support this work, and caseloads need to be manageable.

Staff in different services also need to have an understanding of housing issues and processes. One member of staff who had experience of homelessness spoke about his experience of intentionality, including being inappropriately encouraged by his social worker to ‘make himself homeless’ so that he could access housing.

“I had a lot of homelessness when I was younger, right, and the first point

of contact I got was a social worker telling me to make myself homeless, so I was then able to get a place in [city]... but I was only able to get it for 28 days because I’d made myself intentionally homeless, and then I was back on the streets... the one thing that was a bit nippy about it was the 28 day process you’ve got to wait for a decision to be made about whether you are intentionally homeless or not. The anxiety that created.” (Staff member)

Others talked about the lack of knowledge of other services and support:

“The police domestic abuse team, all they had said to me was that they were on part of the housing board now and ‘oh if you’re struggling, please come back to us because we’ll help you get moved.’ So, the question I did ask the police domestic abuse team – which was seemingly a brand-new department – was, who do I contact? What’s the number? They couldn’t give me it. They couldn’t give me it! They said to me, ‘oh phone the council.’

“Going into the schools and raising awareness is really important... But even some of the teachers, and the pastoral care teachers too, they don’t know. Even though, on paper, they’re the ones the young person should be able to turn to for housing support... if you don’t know this that’s a bit of a problem.”

Relevant to local circumstances

During the two focus groups in the Highlands, participants spoke about the difficulties of accessing support and services in rural areas.

“It takes time to have an appointment. Or, if you need a specialist for whatever problem you have, it takes time of course for you to find the right specialist for you to talk with. The geographical space, it makes it more difficult.”

“It’s common knowledge there’s not enough manpower in Caithness and Sutherland.”

This may mean it is more difficult for services to respond quickly in rural areas, and underlines the importance of mechanisms for early identification. Different approaches may be needed to help people in emerging crisis in different areas.

Strong leadership

Two people spoke of the need for leadership to be taken at the political level, to organise a system of services and resources that will enable the kind of culture change that can enable agencies to take a more preventative approach.

“It is good to have responsibility on different bodies, like landlords and everything, but first we need responsibility at a higher level, for the government to take responsibility. For the government to create things that will allow people, like the council, like the GPs, like the landlords... But it has to come from higher; the decision to make and organise this kind of system. But if there’s tools that everyone can use... and you can recognise easily, it would be better.”

“When you’re looking at joined-up-working and co-production and all that stuff, that’s going to be really valuable. I hate all those words! Because they just sound really wishy washy but see when you’re speaking about an issue like this, with different agencies all getting involved and they’re all communicating with one another and have all the same goals and aims that they’re all shooting towards, there’s definitely scope for improving that communication between the agencies because [at the moment] it’s pretty much non-existent.”

A role for others?

It is not just statutory services that can provide assistance. When discussing their routes into losing their homes and the sorts of services they had come into contact with, some participants mentioned others who had helped them, in particular employers and private landlords who sometimes helped with signposting people where to go. One participant explained how it was her employer who had put her in touch with the council and support organisations.

“It’s just through my work, my boss got me into contact with people like you. Got in touch with [council worker] and then she got me in touch with [charity worker] and he helped me get my deposit for my rent and I paid my deposit back. Got grants for white goods and didn’t have to pay that back and they really helped and it was amazing.”

In one case, a letting agent made adjustments to rent based on what the tenant could afford.

“I also went into arrears, and they put me in touch with [letting agent]. And that was quite handy because I’m not really good with budgeting or accounts, but they actually did a sort of valuation of what I could afford. So, I actually ended up being able to afford the rent.”

Another participant talked about the importance of landlords engaging with the council to draw attention to when a tenant of theirs is in trouble, and the council or the government providing a service which would support that person to manage their rent through a difficult period.

“One thing I really want is the ability to, when someone is in trouble, to intervene where someone needs it. Rather than that problem hitting that person and them being floored by it. So, private landlords should be forced to contact support services and say, ‘this person can’t pay their rent, help them’ and there must be some plan in place where the government can cover their rent for a few months to help them. Something like that. Suddenly it changes the game.”



Housing options and moving on

The proposals on housing options are a core part of the recommendations for expanding legal duties to prevent homelessness. Those who took part in this research project were living in a diverse range of accommodation – some were in settled housing, some were in temporary accommodation. Others had no accommodation at all, and were instead sleeping in tents or cars. All had their own views about what guided their preferences for the kind of housing that would feel like

home, and by extension the kind of housing that could be sustainable and supportive in the longer-term.

During the focus groups, we explored the factors that influence their preferences, and the kinds of constraints that might give rise to trade-offs between these factors. What emerged was that the factors influencing housing preferences were very individual, being strongly influenced by previous and current experiences, with no one criterion trumping all others.

“What emerged was that the factors influencing housing preferences were very individual, being strongly influenced by previous and current experiences, with no one criterion trumping all others.”

Factors in housing preference

Participants were presented with a list of factors that might influence their preferences about where they wanted to live, and asked to list the top three factors that were important to them.²

It was very clear that people had widely differing preferences and priorities, depending on their needs and circumstances.

Location was a key factor for eleven people, for whom being close to employment, health support, childcare support and community networks was a priority.

“Obviously I want to live in areas that are close to my work, close to family, because I don’t want to go to the opposite end of town where I don’t know anyone, where it’s going to take me a long time to get to work. I’ve got an eight-and-a-half-month-old and I need to be able to take him to nursery and take him to my mum’s and I can’t do that if I’m the other side of town. I’d need to get up at four o’clock in the morning.”

“For me, there are some things I can’t compromise on, like location. Because every couple of days I have to pick up medication, so I can’t be too far away [from a pharmacy]. When I moved over here, I had to travel every day to get my medication.”

In other cases it was about avoiding certain locations, particularly those who were leaving difficult relationships or those in recovery wanting to avoid other people who use drugs. For some, this meant prioritising a rural location.

“I ended up having a nervous breakdown after that relationship [breakdown] and going through the family courts... which left me with horrendous anxiety and panic attacks. I couldn’t go to the supermarket or anything like that. I couldn’t be around loads of folk, still

can’t, though it’s getting better. So, location meant being in the countryside and getting away from folk.”

Safety and security was mentioned by seven people, including everyone in the young people’s focus group and women who had experienced domestic abuse. People were also explicit about the links between safety and mental health.

One older man spoke about his need for peace and quiet that would not trigger his PTSD.

“From me it is the safety of the place. The security of the place too. Because you can’t get in the front door unless you’ve got front door keys to get in, but nobody can access our places, and that’s quite a major thing, especially for me... because, at night, they don’t even know if I’m in or not because I just like sitting in the darkness. Which I know is not healthy, but it’s just my mindset at the time and the environment I want to be in.”

A young man spoke about how living somewhere he didn’t feel safe would trigger his anxiety:

“Safety is first, I don’t want to live somewhere that I don’t feel safe. For me, I struggle with anxiety, so I don’t want to live somewhere that I don’t feel safe and I feel unsafe a lot of the time anyway.”

Security of tenure, or tenancy type, was the third most mentioned factor, discussed by five participants. The discussion focused primarily on social, private and mid-market tenancies, and the issue elicited mixed views from participants. Some were adamant that their preference was for a social rented tenancy, whereas others were more relaxed about the tenancy type, as long as they had all their other preferences met.

“It doesn’t really matter. If it’s the right house, it’s the right house. I’d be just as comfortable with a private landlord as a social landlord, as long as it was affordable.”

“Just as long as it feels like home.”

Currently private tenancies and social tenancies are the two main legal routes into settled accommodation through the homelessness system. There appeared to be an assumption in the group that social housing was the default housing option, though several spoke about what they viewed as the challenges of accessing social housing.

“I don’t even think about social housing anymore because to me it just feels so impossible to get it. And plus, my kids are older now so I’ve no chance.”

“It really depends on the urgency. If I needed to leave and I got offered a Council house and it wasn’t my first or second or third choice, I’d probably still take it.”

Another wanted to live in the country for her mental health but recognised this limited the tenure types available to her:

“You can’t get a council house out in the middle of nowhere, so you’re left with no option but to go private.”

However, several expressed nervousness about entering the private rented sector due to a perceived lack of security of tenure.³

“I would say my top three would be security of tenure – although I have had problems with the council in the past – I would never go private, purely because you never know how long your tenancy will last. At least with the council you are secure, unless you stop paying your rent to something like that.”

“[A council flat is preferable] because if you’re private you are signing, what, a 12-month lease, then they can turn around after that 12 months, and say ‘look, you’re out’. But the council won’t house you because you are in accommodation. There’s no way I’d go down the private route...”

“To privately rent feels more risky really, because if you’re renting privately you

could be given notice or whatever is on the contract, you could be given at any point. Whereas if you’ve got social housing, you’ve got more security.”

One participant spoke about mid-market rent⁴ feeling much more secure than renting privately because it was more affordable:

“Now I’m in mid-market it feels much better for me, well a lot better than when I was paying £1,200 rent, because now I can afford food! But I’ve always done private rentals but not mid-market. This is a new one for me. So, the leap down to me feels quite secure.”

Finally, one person spoke about other factors beyond tenure type which could impact how secure a tenancy feels:

“I mean, my landlady is someone I knew from before because she was someone I worked with, so it was someone it was easier to deal with. So, the security of the tenure is for me a most important thing because if I didn’t have that it would have caused some difficulties.”

When it came to the **size or type of property**, four people discussed the importance of having a home big enough to meet the needs of the household and those dependent on them. One young person wanted more than one room so his siblings could come and stay if they experienced family difficulties.

“The size of the rooms, for me that’s important because especially if you have siblings, if they have a problem with other siblings or with mum... they can come for example to my house and they can stay in another room, or if there was a small garden they could play in the garden.”

For a couple of people, **accessibility** was incredibly important. Two participants talked about their need for a ground floor property or a property with a lift because they had health conditions which limited their mobility and ability to manage the stairs.

² The list can be found in the appendix.

³ It should be noted that it was not clear if participants were aware of the recent changes to private tenancies which aim to give greater security of tenure.

⁴ This is a tenure type where people live in private tenancies offered by social housing providers at a rent between social and private rents.

"I have emphysema. I can struggle depending on the temperature outside. So if I stayed on, God knows, the third or fourth floor, it would be dependent on the temperature whether I could go out that day. Accessibility is definitely a factor for me, and going into the future it is something I will think about more."

"If it wasn't the right size or whatever, I could deal with that, but it's more in terms of meeting my specific needs. If I was 20 stories up, I couldn't manage that because it wouldn't meet my health needs, so it really depends. I would opt to sleep in my car and that would be because I'd know it was going to be detrimental to me and my health."

Cost and affordability was prioritised by three people.⁵ People highlighted considerations around affordability of rent, including shortfalls between rent and benefits, and juggling other living costs.

"Cost as well. It's all well and good if there's the perfect flat in the perfect place and I can't afford it!"

"For me it would be cost, I know at the moment I'm getting support from the state but eventually I'm going to have to pay my own way... I think it is all about the finance. It's all about... I'm in this place [private let] and eventually I'll be getting work and needing to pay for it myself and I'll be paying everything and wonder if it will be affordable."

"the difficulty of juggling housing costs and council tax when you're working... so for me the first thing would be the cost."

Related to the conversation about security of tenure, three participants prioritised the **time it takes to access a property**. They commented on how the urgency of being rehoused depended on the circumstances they were moving on from.

"It depends on the situation. If I was still with my ex-partner, I wouldn't have waited a year. But now I would wait for a secure tenancy. Otherwise, you are just

starting the problem all over again when the lease runs out."

"It's important to have somewhere where you know you can be safe, and that you have somewhere to stay. But it depends where you are waiting, if you are in a good enough position, I would wait a couple years. It depends on your situation, if you are in a place like [a hostel], you do not want to be based there long term. No one does, it is doing no-one any favours. It's a horrible thought to be based there for five years."

Several people mentioned other factors than those listed. Two people spoke about community and neighbours and two discussed pets, which were an important source of emotional support, especially after violent or traumatic experiences.

"I had a rescue [dog], and part of the adoption process was that I had to be on a ground floor. So, even though I had been in a really [bad] situation, my dog and my cat were like family to me... I would, when I felt like life was rubbish and I couldn't move forward anymore, I would just sit there and tell the dog. So, I knew myself that when I was moving that I had to find somewhere I could take the pets."

"I was told that I'd need to give my dog up. And I don't have support networks, I don't have family, so for me... who was going to take my dog?"

Others had specific factors that were important to them in their accommodation, like living by themselves.

Throughout the discussions about housing options the interaction between housing and mental health was a consistent theme. This is perhaps unsurprising given the impact on housing crisis on people's mental health:

"The next one is light. Sometimes you go into places and it's all dark and there's no windows and that would just make me want to commit suicide!"

What people want...

Flexibility in housing options to meet individual needs and circumstances

Ultimately, the discussion demonstrated that housing preferences are highly individual, as this participant pointed out:

"I feel like I can't really choose. There's a lot on that list that are really important depending on your situation. Like, if you've got a wheelchair then accessibility is going to be a top priority."

"It all comes down to choice, giving folk that choice, and if you don't give them the choice, they can't take steps to improve mental health or addiction. A home is the foundation of everything else."

People talked about the different trade-offs that might need to be made regarding housing preferences, particularly in light of the reality of the housing market.

"It really depends on the situation. If it didn't tick any of the boxes I probably wouldn't, but if it ticked a couple of boxes, like it was the right number of bedrooms in the right location... then I probably would."

"Like, I'd love to live in the West End of Glasgow but that's not feasible. So, they all do really link in with each other, if that makes sense."

One participant spoke about how he was willing to accept a property in a rural area outside of the city

because he would be able to access it quicker, and it would be affordable for him.

"When I moved out of temporary accommodation into a house in [area]. The thing is, if you don't choose a house that's too big for you and everything else, the Housing Benefit will cover all your rent... so all you're left with is your council tax bill..."

Honest communication and follow up about housing options

There was some discussion about the information people were provided with on their housing options.

Some participants said their council had mentioned Private Residential Tenancies as an option to prevent or alleviate homelessness, but others had not been provided with that information or been signposted to other services who might be able to help.

"The council said, well, they didn't talk about private tenancy, I had to find out all of that on my own. And I know there's advocacy services and all that, but I think, if someone from the housing team had said, look, try this organisation, because they might support you into a private tenancy or support you to explore these other routes."

⁵ It should be noted the research was carried out before the cost of living crisis intensified.

At times, Housing Officers were quite upfront about what those trade-offs were.

"I was told that if I went down the mid-market route, I'd have a choice in where I wanted to stay, whereas if I went down the route of a.. is it a PSL? A Private Sector Lease? I wouldn't have a choice of where I could stay. It would be whatever is there, you have to take it."

Someone who was only eligible for a one bedroom property commented:

"The lady at the council said 'you might get offered a two-bedroom place, but only if no one else wants that house or area'."

People seemed to appreciate this honesty. One participant spoke about being supported to choose a property which was more suitable to her needs and was going to be affordable to her, which she spoke about as the 'injection of reality' that she needed:

"It was good having that realism. The reality there. So you're not going to get in trouble again. That was a really good service that they did. An injection of reality."

Another person talked about the follow up support they didn't receive but would have valued to help them with the transition on entering a new home:

"You need a housing officer who will check in on you and make sure you are happy – is everything working out, are the bus services ok, you won't know this stuff until you move. I moved to [location] and it was the most terrible few years of my life, and I was just stuck there. If there had been a housing officer, who took me into consideration..."



A housing system that works for people in housing crisis

Many participants spoke with realism, and in some cases frustration, about the state of the housing market and the limitation this placed on their housing options. The lack of social housing was a recurrent theme. Other themes included lack of housing for particular needs, empty homes not being made available quickly, and not enough new housing being allocated:

"It's impossible to get social housing. It's impossible. I've been bidding for years ... I was pretty much told it was pointless to bid for housing. I can't even tell you when I started! 2003 I think was when I started."

"It's so much easier to get into the private sector and the mid-market sector than into the social sector... It's ridiculous."

"The amount of housing that's being built... why can't more of that be allocated? There should be so many allocated for those who are homeless."

"There are so many empty houses out there that the council have not put on their website, it's unbelievable."

At the same time, private rented housing was viewed as having its own challenges.

"Prices are quite high. You're maybe paying £550 a month for a private let. The housing prices are really high, I don't know why."

Alongside the costs of renting privately, there are also high initial costs involved, including the deposit and the first month's rent. This participant spoke of the value of rent deposit guarantee schemes to make moves into private renting easier:

"That time, the only option – again [I was] lucky to have people to help – was rented property. But then, you've got to have a month's rent in advance, plus your first month's rent. I mean you're looking at maybe £1,000 before you can

go anywhere! And it can be a figure that is just way out of reach... [A rent deposit guarantee scheme] would have been very helpful indeed. As I said I started working again after that, so it wasn't like I was... I would have been in a position to pay that back, if that had been available. That would have been excellent."

Others spoke about particular gaps in the housing market, both geographically and regarding house size:

"The size and type of home – what I find difficult is that you have to bid on houses, but I am just bidding myself, so I am only entitled to one bedroom, but most one beds that come up are sheltered housing. I'm not quite ready for sheltered housing just yet..."

"There's not a lot of housing in Inverness. You have to relocate."

"The amount of housing that's being built... why can't more of that be allocated? There should be so many allocated for those who are homeless."

"There are so many empty houses out there that the council have not put on their website, it's unbelievable."

Homelessness system as a route to social housing?

A couple of participants talked about the homelessness system as being a route to social housing, borne out by the rate of homeless households who receive social housing as a settled outcome – over 95%, despite private tenancies being another option in law. There was a conversation in the young people's focus group around the perception that people sometimes use the homelessness system to access social housing, because it is quicker than waiting on housing waiting lists. In the example given, it was suggested that this is something care experienced young people sometimes rely on to access housing.



"I know that when I was homeless, a big issue is that when people are 16, a lot of people who've been in care will sign up as homeless, to get a flat, because it's easier than waiting on the housing list for five or six years."

"I know that when I was homeless, a big issue is that when people are 16, a lot of people who've been in care will sign up as homeless, to get a flat, because it's easier than waiting on the housing list for five or six years. I don't know if there's any other support that could be given because obviously if people are wanting to move out, it's important to look at why, so some sort of support. It's easier to register as homeless, so that's the case in a lot of homeless cases. Because, you could be homeless for say two years, but you could be on the list for five or six, before you get somewhere."

On the other hand, a participant in Inverness spoke about his hesitation to rent privately because he would need to get a job; something that would mean losing his place in the social housing queue.

"You're not going to believe this – she said if you get a job, privately rent, then you'll lose all your housing points! It's true! So, I can't work! Can't work! If I privately rent, I need to work full time. But if I do that, I lose all my housing points... You should be able to keep your points. The points system is ridiculous. You should... if your job falls through and it doesn't work out, you should be able to go back. You shouldn't have to start at the beginning again. You're back two or three years. And sometimes things don't work out so you should have the option."

For this person there was an expectation of getting social housing through the homelessness system. There are a range of routes to accessing social housing, but as in the case of the care experienced

young person above, the homelessness system is sometimes the most effective because of the priority allocated to homeless households. An effective prevention framework will need to tackle this issue.

Allocations systems

Some participants commented on the systems that are used to allocate social housing to people. Different areas use different approaches: some only offer one option to a homeless household, while others have a bidding system using points to prioritise certain groups, intended to give greater choice.

These systems were a source of frustration for participants, who felt they added to the pressure they were under, didn't always help them access accommodation that met their needs, and in some cases were punitive.

"I just got told to go on the council website and start bidding. And you bid maybe three times a week and I've been bidding since 2018... and if you miss a day, you get sanctions as well. You just like... 'oh no, I haven't done that!' and it's... I mean, you're already in crisis and it puts that onto you."

"Sometimes you are being put in areas that say if you are homeless you get one choice. That's it, you are taking it or nothing. But sometimes that puts you back in places or areas that maybe don't suit."

It appears that some allocations systems for social housing may not be able to offer the flexibility being proposed for the new prevention framework.

The right support to afford housing and an end to the homelessness trap

Some participants spoke about how they would have valued some more advice and support on budgeting and choosing housing options that were affordable.

“This is where I think the council have failed me a bit, because I think everybody’s situation is completely different. [My situation is] completely different to someone who is earning £28,000 a year, who probably hasn’t got any debts or hasn’t been in the same situation as me. That’s affordable to them, but to me it wasn’t.”

However, in other cases, it was clear that the council had supported participants to assess the affordability of the tenancy they were moving into.

“It would have been handy at that point to have maybe had a bit of a chat about reality and budgeting. But what was quite good about the second time I went, years later, once that vulnerability came up again. I spoke to [council worker] the fact that they flagged that vulnerability before going to a new property, it meant that it was much more protected in getting into that situation again, it was much more realistic.”

One commented that it was confusing that rents could vary so much between very similar properties.

“The house I’ve got is mid-market and it’s lovely ... the girl at the end of the street, hers is through the council, the exact same house as mine, she pays £400 per month because it’s council, and because mine’s through [housing association] and it’s mid-market, I pay £700. So, that’s what I couldn’t understand.”

Some discussed the challenges of affording rents and the gap between what benefits will cover and the rents being charged.

“I had a shortfall between my rent and my benefits of something like £20 or £30,

which doesn’t sound like a lot but £30 is a lot it makes a difference.”

“The rented market can charge what they want. There is such a deficit between what they [the benefits system] will pay for you and what landlords are asking for. It is important to have a home.”

For people on low incomes, this could lead to challenging choices about how to spend their money.

“I ended up paying £70-80, which was a big change to my costs, but I was living independently in a flat, instead of just a room in a hotel ... and I could still live pretty well on my benefits, erm, because I scrimp and save and do all kinds of things.”

Some discussed the complexities of taking on financial commitments which would be affected by future changes like moving into work and being less reliant on benefits. In some cases there are financial barriers to moving on, particularly as people try to move into work and off benefits.

“It depends on your situation. I’m between a rock and a hard place at the moment because, although the majority of my rent is being paid at the moment, I’ve been told that if I get a job, they’re going to charge me £200 a week. Which, even when I was earning a decent wage, I was paying £675 for rent [per month], which I could just about manage. But it almost puts you off getting a job – which is embarrassing! - before you actually get a job.”



Conclusions

This research reminds us of the very different circumstances that serve as the route into homelessness. The triggers for a young person who has been asked to leave the family home are very different from the triggers for someone who has experience of problem substance use and experience of the criminal justice system. Similarly, the triggers for someone who has experienced bereavement, lost his job and gradually accumulated rent arrears are very different from the triggers for a woman who has experienced domestic abuse and struggled to get a joint tenancy transferred into her own name. It is essential that the policy and practice surrounding the new homelessness prevention duties are designed to respond to these very specific routes into housing crisis.

The research also serves to underline how facing housing crisis can be an overwhelming, damaging and traumatic experience. A key theme running through the experiences shared with us was the immense stress and stigma attached to experiences of homelessness and needing to ask for help. But so much of this can be tackled at an early stage with the right help from the right services.

It is clear what people have told us they want and need for the future:

- Help at an earlier stage, with proactive identification of warning signs of housing crisis
- Support that is empathetic and supportive rather than judgemental
- Support that is driven by the person, their needs and desires, rather than by processes
- Help navigating complex systems of support
- Ways to take back control over their circumstances
- Support to create a home
- A safety net for when everything else has failed

This requires:

- Support services that are visible and aren't seen as stigmatising

- A responsive and joined-up approach from services who take responsibility and work together
- A resourced frontline
- Strong leadership
- Adaptation to local circumstances

People demonstrated a wide range of preferences in considering what their best housing options would be. What was apparent through the focus groups was that people want:

- Flexible housing options so they can live in circumstances that are right for them
- Honest communication about options and follow up support
- A housing system that works for people in housing crisis
- The ability to afford housing and to move on with their lives without financial traps
- A housing and support system that makes good economic sense

This is a critical message to hear and act on, particularly at a moment in which we may be about to create the biggest change to homelessness legislation in Scotland in a generation.

Appendix: Research methodology

Between January and early March 2022, Crisis carried out six focus groups across Scotland with people with lived experience of homelessness. Crisis partnered with local service delivery agencies in six geographical areas:

- Action for Children in West Dunbartonshire
- Turning Point in the Northeast of Scotland
- Inverness Foodstuff in Inverness
- Crisis Edinburgh Skylight in Edinburgh
- Move On Highland in Caithness and Fort William
- Your Voice Community Care Forum in Inverclyde

Two of the focus groups were in person, and four were online. Each focus group lasted approximately two hours. At each focus group there was between three and five participants, alongside frontline service delivery staff. In total, we engaged with 20 individuals with lived experience, and 10 individuals with frontline worker experience.

The focus groups included participants with a diversity of experiences of homelessness. This included young people who had experienced homelessness at age 16-17, people who had experienced domestic abuse, people who had experience of sleeping rough, people with experience of problem substance use, people who had served in the Armed Forces, and those who had experienced homelessness due to financial difficulties and eviction from private tenancies. Twelve men and eight women with experience of homelessness took part in the focus groups. Data on the nationality and ethnicity of participants was not collected.

This project aimed to widen the opportunity for those with lived experience of homelessness to contribute to this developing policy agenda in a meaningful way. The objective was to consult with a larger number and wider range of people with lived experience of homelessness and risk of homelessness, including outside of Scotland's central belt.

To a large extent, the research questions were guided by the questions at the end of the Prevention of Homelessness Duties Consultation which were aimed at people with lived experience of homelessness:

- What are the earliest signs that someone is at risk of losing their home and how might someone know if they were six months away from homelessness?
- What services do people engage with prior to an experience of homelessness?
- Do people with lived experience of homelessness think a duty on public bodies (such as health services, police, landlords), would have made a difference to their experiences?
- What support could local authorities provide which might prevent people losing their home?
- What would make people with experience of homelessness feel like they were being listened to and treated as an equal partner in reaching decisions about their housing needs, and the actions that could be taken to support them?
- What are the most important factors to people with experience of homelessness, when thinking about a housing option that is right for them or their family?

The Crisis Policy and Comms Team in Scotland worked with the Crisis Research Team and Member Involvement Team to develop a Topic Guide which explored issues around the role of other public bodies in homelessness prevention, housing options, and the support provided by local authorities.

The results of discussion about people's housing preferences are presented in the table below for the participants who took part in the exercise.

Location (considering being near to family, work, childcare, schools etc.)	11 participants mentioned location as important to them
Safety/security (considering issues such as domestic abuse, other violence and territorial issues)	7 participants mentioned safety as important to them.
Security of Tenure (thinking about the different tenancies available in the social or private rented sector)	5 participants mentioned the security of tenure as important to them.
Size and/or type of home (such as number of bedrooms, multi-storey, garden)	4 participants mentioned size and type of property as important to them
Accessibility (wheelchair or other access issues, any other medical factors)	3 participants mentioned accessibility as important to them
Cost (thinking about rent, council tax, Housing Benefit/LHA, current or future employment)	3 participants mentioned cost as important to them
Time (taking account of how long you can wait to move or if you need somewhere right away)	3 participants mentioned the time it takes to get a property as important to them.
Other (pets, housemates and anything else that someone might identify)	<p>5 participants mentioned other things as important to them, these were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 - pets 1 – light in the property 2 - community and neighbours 2 – preference for a rural location



Together
we will end
homelessness

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