

National Housing Emergency debate

Briefing for MSPs, 15 May 2024



Key points for MSPs:

We know that together we can end homelessness. But at present, we are going in the wrong direction. At a time of crisis, it is essential that Government goes above and beyond to address the problem early - before the housing and homelessness emergency becomes ingrained in society. But also, that Government puts in place robust measures to prevent future flow into the homeless system, otherwise the housing emergency will not end, and instead, it will become the norm.

Declaring a national Housing Emergency will only be of benefit to Scotland if success is clearly defined and action targeted at the root causes is taken swiftly by Scottish Government. That means:

1. More support for Local Authorities to relieve pressure on temporary accommodation, and reduce reliance on Unsuitable Temporary Accommodation.
2. Reverse the cut to the Housing Budget to build more social and affordable homes, so that if someone loses their home, they can be rapidly rehoused into accommodation that meets their needs.
3. Ensure new measures to prevent and respond to homelessness earlier, as outlined in the Housing Bill, are robust and backed by sufficient resources. **The best way to end homelessness is to prevent it from happening in the first place.**

Crisis is the national charity for people experiencing homelessness. We help people directly out of homelessness, including through our Skylight service operating in Edinburgh and the Lothians, and we research and campaign for the social changes needed to solve it altogether.

Background

According to the Scottish Housing Regulator, **Edinburgh and Glasgow councils' homelessness services are already in systemic failure, and another eight councils are at risk** of this: Aberdeen City, Dumfries and Galloway, Dundee City, East Lothian, East Renfrewshire, Fife, Stirling, West Lothian. The Regulator is engaging with a further 15 councils regarding their homelessness services.

Homelessness is the most acute form of poverty. And once people have experienced homelessness, they are more likely to experience it again: **more than one in eight (12%) homeless applicants last year had already been homeless in the past five years.**

Biannual figures covering homelessness in Scotland in the six-month period from 1 April 2023 to 30 September 2023 showed:

- We have reached record levels of homelessness in Scotland: 30,724 households in the homelessness system (up 10% compared to previous year). **This is the highest number of households since records began**
- Number of people sleeping rough is on the rise - 23% rise in number of people (888) making applications who had slept rough the night before
- **9,860 children living in temporary accommodation in Scotland** on 30 September 2023 (up 8% compared to 30 September 2022)
- 15,625 households in temporary accommodation on 30 September (up 10% compared to September 2022)

1. More support for Local Authorities

The Rapid Rehousing agenda, while being significantly impacted by the pandemic, has been shown to be highly effective in supporting partnership working and improving focus on homelessness prevention. This provides a strong base to develop working from, especially if it can continue to be resourced and refined. Local authorities see Rapid Rehousing funding as crucial to reducing the use of temporary accommodation: [28 out of 30 local authorities](#) said the ending of funding would impact their efforts to reduce the use of temporary accommodation. [Research](#) has highlighted the problems that short term funding has created in sustaining the benefits of rapid rehousing.

Scottish Government has commissioned several pieces of exploratory work through various Task and Finish Groups, resulting in a suite of recommendations on homelessness prevention, temporary accommodation, supported accommodation, and monitoring the impact of efforts to address homelessness. While some progress has been made on these, many recommendations are still awaiting further attention. Scottish Government must provide greater clarity to local authorities, and others, about the future strategic direction of its policy agenda and expenditure priorities for ending homelessness in Scotland. Crisis would welcome the Scottish Government acknowledging concerns raised by local authorities, the Housing Regulator and housing investors and developers regarding the use of temporary accommodation, and the urgent need for developing future housing supply.

2. Reverse the cut to the Housing Budget

Government should develop a cross tenure housing strategy for Scotland, based around society's needs. Sufficient money must be allocated to ensure that house building is able to keep up with demand. Therefore, the **decision to cut the Housing Budget should be reversed as a matter of priority** so that Scotland gets back on track with building the volume and types of homes it desperately needs. Building enough homes, particularly social homes, is one of the most effective ways to prevent homelessness.

Crisis welcomes Scottish Government's recognition of the need to tackle affordability in the private rented sector. We believe the proposals outlined in the Housing Bill will require more detail and an assessment of unintended consequences on access and affordability of the housing market for those on the lowest incomes. However, to solve the overarching problem of affordability, Crisis believes the most effective measure is to **increase the supply of social housing**, considering local demand and size and type of properties needed. Scotland needs a vision for housing across all tenures to ensure that everyone has access to a home that they can afford and live in well. This will be one of the most effective ways of both preventing and responding to homelessness and is a necessary policy lever to sit alongside the introduction of new prevention legislation.

3. Prevent homelessness

Crisis strongly welcomes the introduction of stronger homelessness prevention measures in the Housing Bill, including a duty to provide assistance six months before someone is likely to lose their home, and requirements for a range of public bodies to support people when their housing is at risk. We believe these measures are much needed, especially at the point of a housing emergency. Robust preventative systems are a key missing component of the Scottish system. Alongside the transition to rapid rehousing, it is a key building block to ending homelessness and moving away from a system that manages homelessness after it occurs to one that can achieve rare, brief, and non-recurring. **If designed and delivered well, with sufficient resource, they have the potential to transform our housing and homelessness system from one centred around a crisis response, to one which is designed to act early, stabilise housing with a package of holistic support, and prevent the trauma of homelessness for many.**

The homelessness prevention proposals will have to be introduced carefully and effectively to prevent overburdening local authorities. But **with sufficient vision, ambition and resource, the measures could have the potential to transform people's experience of housing difficulties and significantly take pressure off local authorities having to support so many people in a housing emergency.** Reducing the level of uncertainty, indignity and trauma that many people experience as a result of becoming homeless is the right thing to do – creating stability for all aspects of our lives, whether family life, health, employment, children's education, social networks, and so on.

Crisis believes that Scottish Government should set out a **clear vision of what homelessness prevention will look like in practice.** This would enable the culture and behavioural change needed and would allow for the development of a coherent ecosystem of prevention and early action support for people facing housing precarity, and the councils facing a housing emergency.

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