



A window of opportunity

Executive summary

James Mullaney, August 2024

Foreword

Scotland has some of the strongest rights in the world for people experiencing homelessness. Yet, as this report shows, opportunities to provide support to someone in housing crisis, to prevent them becoming homeless in the first place, are still being repeatedly missed.

Based on in-depth interviews with 15 people on how they lost their home, all of those who took part in this report had been in contact with at least three public services before becoming homeless, though on average it was five.

Almost all had been in touch with local authority housing services in the six months prior to becoming homeless.

Almost a third had reached out to domestic abuse services or helplines in that period.

In total it found that 80% of the interviewees had contact with health services in the six months before they became homeless.

The report found that, in total, the 15 interviewees had been in touch with at least 80 services combined prior to homelessness.

That's 80 opportunities to prevent homelessness, missed. It's 80 separate moments when a red flag – warning that someone was in a state of housing insecurity and needed help – was ignored.

The cost of these missed opportunities to prevent homelessness is massive. For individuals, it means suffering and stress that could have been avoided. For local authorities, it means ever growing demand – demand which is pushing councils across Scotland beyond the point where they can cope. And for wider public services, it means the knock-on effects of homelessness on the health system, on criminal justice and beyond continue to echo – tying up resources and making the jobs of hard working professionals even harder.

Measures contained in the new Housing Bill (Scotland)¹ contain a route towards a new preventative approach towards homelessness. Changes to the law, to allow people to get help earlier and to widen responsibility for homelessness prevention across public services provide a clear blueprint towards a model where people can get help before they reach a point of crisis.

However, this will only happen if the new duty to prevent homelessness is embedded in practice. Laws are important – but practical and cultural change are just as vital in ensuring that people benefit from earlier and more holistic help to avoid entering a traumatic and increasingly costly homelessness system.

Achieving that means more detail from ministers on how these plans will operate in practice. Widening responsibility for homelessness prevention will take pressure off public services, but as the changes are embedded, they will require staff operating outside of housing-related roles to take on new responsibilities – and it is vital they understand them.

And as this report shows, the move to prevention won't just mean a change in how public services operate, it will also mean widening awareness among the general public of the causes of homelessness and how they could be at risk.

Ultimately, these changes will require a cultural shift in how we, as a society, treat homelessness. Making that shift towards preventing homelessness before it occurs will take work, but the benefits will echo well beyond the housing and homelessness sector.



Matt Downie,
Chief Executive, Crisis

Acknowledgments

We would like to send our thanks to all participants of this research for sharing their experiences with us.

1. <https://www.gov.scot/news/housing-bill-published/>

Executive summary

Despite Scotland having some of the best protections in the world for people who lose their home, around 1 in 12 people have experienced homelessness and there is currently limited legal provision around homelessness prevention.²

The new Housing Bill (Scotland) will expand the legal duty to prevent homelessness to a number of different public bodies, sectors, and services with the aim of ensuring relevant frontline staff ask the right questions and act within their powers to help empower individuals and households to address a housing crisis up to six months before it occurs. If successful, it should mean more households will avoid being drawn into an expensive and stressful homelessness system unnecessarily. This new prevention duty is likely to apply to some frontline staff whose occupations are not traditionally seen as having a focus on homelessness prevention or housing, though in many cases, they have played a part in delivering this type of help in the past.³

While placing a legal duty on public sector bodies to prevent homelessness is a positive step forward, the impact of this new policy will depend on how well it is embedded in the culture and practice of public bodies. At a time when most public organisations are under immense financial and staffing pressures, additional duties are unlikely to be universally welcomed, particularly in an area

where neither frontline staff nor leaders may understand the need for their involvement.

The aim of this research was to explore in-depth the experiences of people who have previously entered the Scottish homelessness system to find out what help was available before they became legally homeless and what else might have helped during that early “window of opportunity” period. We wanted to know what services people contacted in the lead-up to a housing crisis and at what stage; whether they received help; and whether the help they received was early enough to play a role in preventing homelessness. The research also aimed to identify learning that could be used to improve the journey for others facing similar housing emergencies in the future.

Who is at risk?

The **most common reasons** for making a homelessness application in Scotland are being asked to leave home and household disputes, with these reasons making up around 59% of cases in 2022/23.⁴ Around 26% of homelessness applications in this period were as a consequence of being asked to leave a parental or family member’s home. This increased to 45% if we add those applicants who were asked to leave by friends or partners.⁵

Domestic abuse is the main cause of women’s homelessness in Scotland.⁶ Although such



abuse is sometimes perpetrated against men, research consistently shows that women are overwhelmingly more likely to be victims and to report loss of accommodation as a result.⁷ In some instances, people may not directly apply as homeless following a domestic abuse situation, instead temporarily seeking refuge with friends or family. This may then mean that when this arrangement is no longer tenable and they do apply as homeless, the main reason for application may be recorded as “asked to leave” rather than domestic abuse.⁸ Young people can also be the victims of abuse and people that identify as LGBTQ plus have been recognised in particular as groups for whom this is an issue. For example, the LGBT youth commission found that 69% of homeless LGBTQ plus young people had experienced violence, abuse, or rejection from the family home.⁹

Official statistics show that people from minoritised ethnic communities are disproportionately more likely to experience homelessness, and research shows that structural racism and discrimination plays a role in putting people’s housing at risk.¹⁰

In addition, there is also a significant number of homeless applications from households who have been successfully granted refugee status but have not been able to secure permanent housing before being asked to leave Home Office accommodation. As the Home Office continues to tackle a sizeable backlog of asylum applications by streamlining claims, it is expected that the number of households seeking homelessness assistance will increase further.¹¹

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)

3. <https://www.gov.scot/news/housing-bill-published/>

4. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/homelessness-in-scotland-2022-23/pages/reasons-for-homelessness-andprior-circumstances/>

5. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/homelessness-in-scotland-2022-23/pages/reasons-for-homelessness-andprior-circumstances/>

6. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/homelessness-in-scotland-2022-23/pages/characteristics-of-the-homelesspopulation/>

7. <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/domestic-abuse-is-a-genderedcrime/>

8. <https://www.gov.scot/news/protecting-people-from-domestic-abuse/>

9. <https://lgbtyouth.org.uk/national-programmes/youth-activism/youth-commission-housing-and-homelessness>

10. Bramley, G., Fitzpatrick, S., McIntyre, J., & Johnsen, S. (2022). *Homelessness amongst Black and minoritised ethnic communities in the UK: a statistical report on the state of the nation*. Heriot-Watt University.

11. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-67576618>

Discharge from institutions such as prison, hospitals and care without suitable housing also contributes significantly to the number of homelessness presentations. Despite being at its lowest proportion of the overall homelessness total since 2008-09, homeless applications recorded as having been from people leaving prison, still represents 4% of the total and 1,437 individuals in 2022-23.¹² This only includes those applicants who have revealed this information, and so the actual number may be higher still.

What help is available now?

Several recent **external factors and events have impacted homelessness presentations** in Scotland. The global Covid-19 pandemic and a number of economic shocks led to emergency legislation being enacted to provide additional protections for social and private renters against rent increases and many types of eviction. The emergency changes also included additional safety nets for homeowners with mortgage payment deferrals, payment holidays and a temporary ban on home repossessions. Some of this legislation has been extended until March 2025.¹³

All local authorities have a legal duty under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 [see also refreshed guidance from 2019] to carry out an assessment of homelessness in their area and a to prepare and submit to Scottish Ministers their strategy on how to prevent and alleviate it.¹⁴ All local authority departments and relevant local agencies are expected to work together to prevent homelessness occurring

wherever possible. They are also expected to explore the factors which may cause repeat homelessness so that actions can be taken to prevent homelessness recurring in future.¹⁵

However, **Scotland is the only nation in Great Britain not to have a clear and comprehensive legal duty requiring local authorities to prevent homelessness.** This means that there is no legal duty on public bodies to cooperate to prevent someone from experiencing homelessness. There are some requirements in place in Scotland in certain cases, such as a duty on landlords to notify a local authority if they intend to take eviction action against a tenant but prevention of homelessness duties are less well developed legally.¹⁶

If someone is at risk of homelessness within the next 56 days, they are legally entitled to help to stop them losing their home or help to find another as quickly as possible.¹⁷ All local authorities in Scotland have adopted the Housing Options approach to provide information and advice to anyone in their area facing a housing problem with the aim of preventing homelessness wherever possible by taking "reasonable steps" to support attempts to sustain existing, or secure alternative, accommodation.¹⁸ Housing Options staff explore the reasons and contributory factors which have led to housing instability and aim to provide support to address any underlying issues such as debt, family breakup or mental health problems. Ideally the service provides help to households before they reach crisis point. There is also guidance that frontline staff should follow when providing this help, but the steps

themselves are not currently enshrined in law.¹⁹

Upon closing a homelessness case, **local authorities are also required to assess whether any housing support services are required** by a household, where it believes that support would be of benefit. It also has a duty to provide that support if needed.²⁰ Statistics show that in 2022/23, in 77% of cases an assessment was provided when required. This meant that in 22% of cases where a duty to assess existed, no assessment took place. In only 39% of cases, support was provided, and there were 7% of cases where a need was identified but support was not given.²¹

Findings

In early 2023, Crisis carried out focus groups with people who had experiences of homelessness to understand more about their experiences of becoming homeless and gather their views on homelessness prevention. This work found there was no single route into homelessness, with a wide range of events and circumstances serving as triggers. The resulting research report, "Home is the Foundation", concluded that policy and practice around homelessness prevention should be responsive to very specific causes and interconnected routes into a housing crisis.²²

Crisis followed this report up with in-depth interviews with people who had experienced homelessness to gain a fuller understanding of what their individual journeys into the homelessness system looked like, and in particular, if any of the public services they were in touch with before accessing formal housing support could have taken action that may have prevented their homelessness - or helped to make it briefer, less traumatic, and more unlikely to occur again.

These interviews led to four main findings.

- i. People who become homeless are in touch with public services in the six-month period before a formal homeless application is made.** Frontline staff have an opportunity to identify homelessness risk and provide support.
- ii. People are not always fully aware of when they may be at risk of losing their home.** Even when they are, they may not know where to seek help or feel able to do so.
- iii. Co-ordination between local councils, health services, community organisations and other support networks is essential. There are a number of interlinked factors that contribute to and prevent homeless. Neither challenges nor opportunities can be effectively addressed or harnessed by any one service.**
- iv. Many people who have experienced homelessness will not be able to achieve housing stability unless they are given on-going support** for unmet needs such as mental health care.

Recommendations

Therefore, based on these findings Crisis proposes the following recommendations:

- 1. Scottish Government must provide greater clarity around the responsibilities of housing and non-housing staff to identify housing instability and provide the necessary support.** This would help in creating the training, tools and work culture which positively champions proactive working to find suitable, sustainable solutions regardless of location, household, or tenure type.

12. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/homelessness-in-scotland-2022-23/pages/reasons-for-homelessness-andprior-circumstances/>

13. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/proposed-extension-section-10-cost-living-tenant-protection-scotland-act2022-statement-reasons/pages/4/>

14. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/code-guidance-homelessness-2/pages/3/#>

15. *Ibid.*

16. 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)

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/advice-and-guidance/2019/11/code-guidance-homelessness-2/documents/code-guidance-homelessness-guidance-legislation-policiespractices-prevent-resolve-homelessness/code-guidance-homelessness-guidance-legislation-policiespractices-prevent-resolve-homelessness/govscot%3Adocument/code-guidance-homelessness-guidancelegislation-policies-practices-prevent-resolve-homelessness.pdf> [accessed 10/8/23]

20. *Ibid.*

21. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/homelessness-in-scotland-2022-23/pages/outcomes/>

22. https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/249096/crisis_home-is-the-foundation-report.pdf

2. Scottish Government to establish a **national communications strategy** to educate the general public around the triggers for housing instability, and how, when, and where to get help locally and nationally.
3. Improve collaboration by ensuring case management systems between the key public bodies identified are set up to enable (with consent) **data to be shared quickly between relevant partners** to aid effective joint working where multiple contributory factors impact housing stability. This should be supplemented by clear **cooperation arrangements** between all services who can play direct or indirect roles in securing or sustaining homes – and **clear, measurable standards** for cross-sector working to sustain homes.
4. Scottish Government should produce a set of **resources for all persons to assess their own risk of home loss** at any point, similar to the Scottish Financial Health Check, which would allow households to assess their “housing health”, quickly identifying risk factors which lead to unstable housing and details of local and national help available.

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