

Homelessness emergency in Scotland

Briefing for housing emergency debate: Wednesday 22nd November



About Crisis

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 campaign for the social changes needed to solve it altogether. We know that together we can end homelessness.

Summary

- There are now over **29,600 households in the homelessness system**, the highest level since records began. As of March 2023, there were 4,735 households with children in temporary accommodation, including over 9,500 children.
- **The Scottish Housing Regulator has warned of “a risk of failure” and there are increasingly urgent calls** from the housing and homelessness sector for more investment, and a strategic approach to tackling the problem.
- Frontline homelessness services in Edinburgh are seeing as many as ten people per night turned away from the Council’s out of hours service and **struggling to access temporary – or even emergency – accommodation.**
- Scotland has some of the strongest statutory homelessness rights anywhere. But those rights mean little if Scotland’s local authorities are unable to meet the immense demand that they face. **It is critical that the budget provides councils with the investment they need to meet their duties and to protect people from homelessness.**
- Scottish Government has committed to changing the law so there is a stronger focus on early intervention to prevent homelessness and a responsibility on a wide range of public bodies in support of this. **Getting these homelessness prevention duties right must be a cross-government priority.**

Homelessness Emergency in Scotland

The latest annual [homelessness statistics for 2022/2023](#) show that there are now more people in the homelessness system in Scotland than at any time since records began. More people are now sleeping on the streets and more children are growing up without a settled home. The number of people being made homeless is at its highest since 2012. The statistics show a homelessness system under immense pressure, with more households becoming homeless each year than those leaving the homelessness system.

This is a critical moment for Scotland. We can push on and take the first steps towards the end of homelessness, or we can watch as progress slips, with thousands of people forced to suffer the consequences.

- There are now **29,692 households in the homelessness system**, the highest level since records began.
- The number of applications and households assessed as homeless now **exceed pre-pandemic figures** and are **at their highest level in over a decade**. Households assessed as homeless have increased by 10% on the previous year and are 2% higher than their pre-pandemic levels.
- The number of households in **temporary accommodation is at an all-time high**, with 15,039 households in temporary accommodation at the end of March 2023, an **increase of 6% on the previous year** and continuing a trend of increasing numbers in temporary accommodation since 2017.
- There were **4,735 households with children in temporary accommodation** at the end of March 2023, an increase of 9% on the previous year, meaning there were **9,595 children in temporary accommodation in March 2023**.
- **Length of time spent in temporary accommodation is also increasing**. The average number of days spent in temporary accommodation has increased to **223 days**, 9 days longer than the previous year's average and **40 days longer** than the average in 2018-19.

The view from the homelessness sector: Urgent support is needed

As a result of these concerning trends, there are **increasingly urgent calls** from the housing and homelessness sector for more investment, and a strategic approach to tackling the problem.

The **Scottish Housing Regulator** and **Audit Scotland** have both published concerning reports (February and May respectively) highlighting that councils are failing to meet their statutory duties, the worsening situation with temporary accommodation and lack of social housing. The thematic review from Scottish Housing Regulator on homelessness duties found that “some councils are **reaching the limits of their capacity to respond** effectively to the demands from people applying for help, the range of policy and statutory requirements they must meet and impacts from the wider economic context,” and that there is **emerging risk of systemic failure** in the provision of homelessness services.

- **10th July** - **SOLACE** published a report in association with **ALACHO**, which draws attention to Local Authority Housing and Homelessness services “experiencing unsustainable pressure reflecting the critical lack of capacity in local housing systems in Scotland.”
- **1st November** - [ALACHO and CIH sent a letter](#) to the Housing Minister, setting out their “significant concerns regarding the lack of strategic response to the obvious and growing pressures on the housing and homelessness system.”
- **2nd November** - [Edinburgh Council declared a housing emergency](#)

The view from the frontline in Edinburgh and the Lothians

“Things are as bad as we’ve ever seen them. There are frequently queues around the building of people trying to access council homelessness services for support. Temporary accommodation is full, so more and more people are being turned away. The council are understandably prioritising families, meaning it is the single homeless individuals who often aren’t getting support. It is priority need in all but name. Not only are we seeing an increase in people sleeping rough, but also an increase in the complexity of the support needs amongst this group. We are seeing more people with extreme trauma and psychiatric needs.”

- **Mark Kennedy, Director of Client Services, Edinburgh**

Rough sleeper count:

Simon Community’s rough sleeper count in September **identified 80 individuals**, which was likely to be an underestimate.¹ As of 15 November, following the opening of the winter emergency accommodation which has alleviated the situation somewhat, Simon Community’s Street Team still had a list of 35 people known to be rough sleeping.

The Council Out-of-Hours service:

Frontline services in Edinburgh are reporting that as many as ten people every night are being turned away from the council’s Out-of-Hours service every night with no accommodation, with as many as 30 households for every single temporary accommodation placement. This suggests there are potentially hundreds of people ‘sofa surfing’ in the city – staying in precarious and unsafe arrangements where they are at risk of exploitation and abuse.

Emergency Accommodation:

The Welcome Centre² opened on 4 October and filled up in the space of two days. It has been operating at capacity since. One of the Welcome Centre managers stressed to us how quickly vacancies are filled – as quickly as people are being supported to move on – and that sometimes people are desperate for a room. She explained that, when they are at capacity, they refer people to City of Edinburgh Council Out of Hours Service, Rapid Access Accommodation run by Streetwork, and if there’s no space there, people are offered sleeping bags, food, and information about where to go for support.

¹ [Daily Record spends harrowing night with homelessness workers fighting rough-sleeping crisis - Daily Record](#)

² Bethany Christian Trust is funded by the City of Edinburgh Council, the Scottish Government and a range of voluntary income to run the Rapid Re-accommodation Welcome Centre in the Haymarket Hub Hotel. Operating for 30 weeks each year, incorporating the winter months, the service provides emergency accommodation (65 rooms) to divert people from sleeping rough, and to support rapid move on to more appropriate accommodation.

Without action we expect things to get worse in the short term

Emergency legislation – the Cost of Living Act – expected to come to an end in March

The emergency 'cost of living' measures introduced to stabilise rents and reduce the risk of eviction into homelessness, will expire at the end of March, with no succession plan in place. These include the six-month deferral in the enforcement of most eviction orders, and the 'rent cap', which has limited private rent uplifts to 3%. There are concerns that, without a plan in place to transition out of these emergency measures, this could lead to an increase in evictions from the private rented sector, with potential rent increases when tenancies are let to new tenants.

Evictions from Home Office accommodation

Another major concern is the Home Office evictions from accommodation, particularly in Glasgow. The Home Office intend to speed up processing of claims from 21 to 7 days, meaning households being evicted with only a week's notice, with no accommodation. This also interferes with people's ability to make a benefits claim. This will potentially add a third to the population currently housed in temporary accommodation in Glasgow.

What needs to happen?

Prioritise tackling homelessness in the Budget

The upcoming Scottish Government budget can be used to increase investment in the Affordable Housing Supply Programme, to deliver the social homes that communities across Scotland so desperately need. There is no route to ending homelessness, or to achieving our national mission of tackling poverty, without more social homes.

The budget should also be used to better support local authorities. Scotland has some of the strongest statutory homelessness rights anywhere. But those rights mean little if Scotland's local authorities are unable to meet the immense demand that they face. It is critical that the budget provides councils with the investment they need to meet their duties and to protect people from homelessness.

Do more to prevent homelessness before people reach crisis point

All of the drivers of homelessness cut across other agendas, including poverty, health, substance use, criminal justice, gender-based violence. If public services ask the right questions to identify housing risk and avoid homelessness, they ultimately contribute to achieving broader aims, including meeting the child poverty targets, improving children's life chances, reducing unplanned and expensive use of health services.

Scottish Government has committed to **changing the law so there is a stronger focus on early intervention to prevent homelessness** and a responsibility on a wide range of public bodies in support of this. Getting these prevention duties right **must be a cross-government priority**.

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