

Shelter's housing advice online

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Advice online is the housing advice section of the Shelter website. First launched in April 2004, funding from the Vodafone UK Foundation has since allowed for a drastic overhaul and expansion so that it now covers a wider range of housing issues. Its aim is to empower people by providing them with knowledge of their housing rights, and to suggest to them practical ways of enforcing these rights.

Kirsty McKechnie and Elaine Macintyre, as Writer/editors on Advice online, discuss the rationale behind this resource and tell us how it is being used and received.

Who is Advice online for?

Anyone who can access the Internet will be able to use Advice online to look for information about housing issues. For this reason we have tried to keep the information simple and easy to understand, as we have to assume that readers will have no prior knowledge of housing law.

Research shows that many people are more comfortable with modern technology than face-to-face contact and prefer to resolve their problems anonymously via the Internet or email. Therefore, in addition to information on a wide range of housing related subjects, Advice online includes self-help downloads such as sample letters and checklists for people who are confident managing their own affairs.

A quote recently published on the Depaul Trust website illustrates just how useful and empowering electronically presented information can be. A homeless person speaks of how he prefers to use money he collects on the street to buy time online in Internet cafes rather than food. He feels it's worth it because using the Internet makes him part of a community where he is an equal member and being homeless doesn't define him. We can take from this that in these circumstances accessing advice and information online is likely to be preferable to using other methods that don't carry the same advantages for some homeless people.

What's covered?

Currently Advice online provides information about:

- Homelessness, including advice on making a homeless application to the council and sleeping rough.

- Finding accommodation, in the private and social rented sector, buying a home and securing other types of housing, including supported accommodation and mobile homes.
- Renting rights for many different tenancies and types of accommodation, including council and housing association accommodation, private rented properties, tied accommodation and mobile homes.
- Paying for accommodation, including information on rent, deposits and other household expenses, benefits and debt.
- Eviction from many different types of tenancy.

We are planning to publish information about the following topics over the forthcoming months:

- Repossession
- Repairs and unsuitable housing
- Families and households, including relationship breakdown
- Neighbourhood issues
- Complaints and court action.

In addition, a section of the website specifically devoted to [young people](#) focuses on housing issues which are particularly relevant to 16 to 25-year-olds and areas where this age group are more likely to experience difficulties, such as [leaving care](#) or problems in [student accommodation](#). Where legislation is different for the age group in question, specific pages have been written and can be accessed from the young people's section, for example, [benefits for 16 and 17-year-olds](#). Over the next few months, this section will be expanded to include additional content such as quizzes and 'real life stories', designed to help young people find out more about key housing issues and prevent them getting into difficulties when they leave home.

Similar versions of Advice online have been published in the English and Northern Irish sections of the Shelter website, to reflect the rapidly diverging legislation of the different countries.

How can it help?

Advice online is structured to meet its aim of empowering people with knowledge of their rights and practical means of enforcing them. Each section begins with a broad overview of the topic, before going on to provide more detailed information. This tiered structure means that visitors can understand their basic rights and discover their options quickly. They can then choose to read on, or contact Shelter's free housing advice helpline or other advice agency.

We recognise that people approach their problems from different angles. For example, if someone is being unfairly evicted, they may think that they need to find new accommodation, when in fact, with a bit of help and advice, they may be able to prevent the eviction from taking place at all. Clear links between the different sections accommodate these different

approaches and offer people as many problem-solving options as possible. Future plans for self-assessment tools and quizzes aim to help people examine their housing situations and find a tailored solution.

To ensure that the information remains practical, most pages are read by Shelter Housing Aid Workers, who check that the advice is useful in a 'real world' situation. Unfortunately, there is at times a gap between legislation and practice, and Advice online aims to bridge this gap by explaining not only how things should happen, but also how they may actually happen in reality, and what our readers can do if this is the case. For example, someone making a homeless application might not be aware that the local authority has a duty to provide temporary accommodation whilst it carries out its inquiries. Advice online therefore pre-empts the possibility that the person may be told, or may already have been told, that there is no temporary accommodation available and states that if this has happened then the applicant should seek advice.

How does it fit in with Shelter's current services?

The overall intention of Advice online is to complement existing Shelter services. We hope that, with the help of Advice online, readers will feel confident either to resolve their problems themselves or to approach an appropriate agency for advice and assistance. We include links to, and contact details for, a number of national agencies with expertise in areas related to housing, such as National Debtline for debt and money advice and Scottish Women's Aid for domestic abuse. For readers unable to access Shelter's Housing Aid Centres and support projects, we also stress that Citizens Advice Bureaux may be able to help.

Does it work?

Concerns that people would misinterpret housing information have been alleviated by reports from our colleagues in Northern Ireland and through observing user testing. Housing Advice Northern Ireland's Advice online was published before the Scottish version, and since its launch, advisers in Northern Ireland have found that clients are coming to the advice service armed with more informed inquiries. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has also provided positive feedback regarding the information and has not reported problems of people approaching them with false expectations of their rights.

In recent user testing sessions, Advice online was also positively received.

Further information

If you have any comments about Advice online or have ideas for content that could be added in future, we would welcome any feedback. Please contact Elaine Macintyre at [**elaine_macintyre@shelter.org.uk**](mailto:elaine_macintyre@shelter.org.uk)

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