

# CHiP practitioner article

## Tackling the challenges of providing temporary accommodation in the Highlands

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# Shelter

## Tackling the challenges of providing temporary accommodation in the Highlands

**Hilary Parkey, Housing Strategy Officer at the Highland Council talks about the challenges of providing high quality temporary accommodation to homeless households in rural parts of Scotland.**

Mr McTavish is preparing to leave Inverness's housing office to move temporarily into a flat provided by the Highland Council. He knows that he will have a warm bed to sleep in tonight, with a roof over his head and a reasonable amount of time to find a more secure, permanent home. He'll be helped to find this by one of Highland Council's Accommodation Officers. She'll give him advice and information about his different housing options and will work with him to find him a new home.

Two years ago, being one of the many people living in the Highlands assessed as homeless but not in priority need, he'd have had no such guarantee of somewhere to stay.

### **The Highland context**

The right to temporary accommodation for people who are found to be homeless but aren't in 'priority need' for a long enough period to give them a reasonable opportunity to find alternative accommodation, has arisen from the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. This Act significantly extended both the rights of homeless people to be provided with accommodation and the duties placed on local authorities and housing associations. It removed the restricted duty to accommodate only those believed to be in 'priority need'.

In addition, the Act has also extended other local authority duties. councils are required to provide temporary accommodation to all applicants they believe to be homeless until a decision on their application is made and, further, people assessed as being unintentionally homeless and in priority need are now entitled to permanent accommodation, except where there is record of anti-social behaviour.

Housing associations also have new duties to provide housing for unintentionally homeless people in 'priority need' when asked to do so by local authorities.

These changes in legalisation are very positive and, it is hoped, will help to reduce the negative effect that homelessness has on people's lives, their health and opportunities for the future. They have, however, led to significant new responsibilities for local authorities and, as considerably more people are entitled to temporary and permanent housing, the impact has led to correspondingly massive increases in the amount of financial, staff, time and other resources that we invest in tackling homelessness.

Three years ago in the Highlands, 305 households (2001/2002) were provided with temporary accommodation. Last year, this rose to 1,014 households (2003 /2004).

Our non-Housing Revenue Account costs associated with dealing with our homeless duties (e.g. bed and breakfast costs) have risen from around £300,000 in 2001-2002 to over £1 million in 2003–2004. In addition, other spending on homeless services has also increased.

Whilst we welcomed the extra resources received from the Scottish Executive to implement our homelessness strategy, the new duties have placed considerable new burdens on the council. But the challenges that we face in meeting these new duties are more than just financial.

## **Coping with a shortage of housing**

In most parts of the Highlands we have a massive undersupply of affordable housing. House prices have been rising beyond the reach of first time buyers, many communities face competition in the housing market from those buying second homes or moving here (often to retire) and many rural homes are rented out by the week to holiday makers.

On the other hand, because many people don't have enough money or secure enough incomes to buy housing, renting from the council or housing associations is their only choice.

### **Reduction in housing stock**

Our council housing stock is reducing each year because of the 'right to buy'. However, housing associations, because of the limited funding that is available to them and because of problems accessing land that can be developed at an affordable price, can't build enough to replace these houses. For every three houses that have been sold, only one has been replaced.

This has led to great increases in the numbers of people waiting for council or housing association housing. It has also led to massive increases in the numbers of people applying as homeless. Four years ago, almost 900 people applied to the council as homeless and, by last year, this had more than doubled to 2051 people.

Without an increase in the supply of housing, it's a revolving problem. As pressures on all housing have been mounting, this has not only made it increasingly difficult to find temporary accommodation to meet our new duties but also increasingly difficult to access permanent accommodation. More and more we are dealing with log jams – people staying in temporary accommodation for longer and we're increasingly using less suitable accommodation, such as bed and breakfasts, when ideally we'd rather not use it at all.

This typical example illustrates our difficulties. Recently, knowing that all other temporary accommodation in Skye was full, our Homeless Duty Officer had to make around 30 phone calls to bed and breakfasts one night, all of which were full or wouldn't house homeless people, to find accommodation for one household.

### **Supply challenges**

So how have we been dealing with these supply challenges? In the last three years we have increased the number of properties we use as temporary accommodation by almost 100 units. We have done this in several ways by:

- designating more of our council housing stock as temporary housing and furnishing it;
- using funding to acquire and refurbish housing that we are now leasing from our housing association partners as temporary accommodation;
- increasing the amount of housing that we lease from private owners both for temporary and permanent use and furnishing it;
- leasing, from our Registered Social Landlord partners, more of their mainstream housing stock; and
- setting up two small scale hostels in Inverness.

### **Moving people on to better housing solutions**

As we recognise that living in temporary housing can have a harmful effect on people's physical and mental well-being, we're continually working to make sure that we can move households on to more permanent housing as quickly as possible. Not only should this make their situation better, but also we are then able to re-use the temporary accommodation for others. It also helps us as we try to reduce our reliance on undesirable and costly bed and breakfast accommodation.

### **Allocation policy**

We're intending to change our allocation policy so people are more likely to be permanently re-housed quickly. Previously, people who were homeless and in priority need received 80 re-housing list points to reflect their homeless status.

In addition, where appropriate, they were awarded points that reflected their temporary situation in the accommodation we'd placed them in - for example, if this meant they had to share facilities they would be awarded points for this or if they were overcrowded, points would again be awarded. Depending on their type of temporary accommodation, this made it difficult for us to move some homeless households on to permanent accommodation.

Whilst this was important in helping us move people quickly on from bed and breakfasts, blockages were resulting elsewhere. To overcome this, we intend to change our policy so that points for homeless households are increased; we will no longer apply points for overcrowding and sharing of facilities when homeless points have been awarded; and additional points will be awarded for each month that is spent in temporary accommodation to make faster throughput possible.

### **Advice and information**

We've also placed much more importance on providing good quality and effective advice and information. Our officers, sometimes along with our partners who provide housing support, work more closely with homeless people so that they can secure permanent housing solutions. Hopefully, they will also be less likely to become homeless again.

Providing effective advice and information is challenging and resource intensive. We're working to improve this part of our service through training, setting out service statements and standards and making sure there's easy access to better resources. A group involving a wide range of our partners is helping us take this forward.

### **Rent deposit/guarantee scheme**

We've also been piloting a rent deposit and guarantee scheme in some parts of the Highlands. Whilst projects like this don't create more houses on the ground, we hope that as well as helping to prevent homelessness in the first place, the scheme will assist us to move people quickly through temporary accommodation into more permanent housing.

This project has encountered a number of challenges. For example, because landlords know that they can pick and choose their tenants (as demand is so high), many have only been interested in cash deposits rather than guarantees. This makes the scheme very costly and administratively more difficult. The pilot has also prompted our Finance colleagues to work with us to improve our local housing benefits processes. We are now awaiting the evaluation of this pilot, which will help us decide its future direction.

### **Managing temporary accommodation**

The growth in the provision of temporary accommodation has obviously led to a far bigger management function. Temporary accommodation officers have also been appointed not only to manage the housing but also to provide support to people living in them and to liaise between them and other housing providers. Their remit includes:

- Managing temporary accommodation e.g. furnished properties, bed and breakfast etc.
- Maintaining the approved bed and breakfast accommodation list.

- Carrying out inspections on temporary accommodation and making sure Homes in Multiple Occupancy (HMO) licences exist.
- Maximising housing benefit by assisting with forms and liaising with benefit team to access all necessary information within time scales.
- Minimising void rental loss by ensuring quick turn over.
- Making sure that any spend on refurbishment, furnishings etc is within rental incomes for these services.
- Carrying out visits to homeless people in temporary accommodation to provide housing support, including assistance with forms, advice on housing options/tenancy matters, arranging further housing support if required, etc.
- Keeping up to date inventories of furnished accommodation and resourcing replacement equipment or furniture when required.
- Dealing with all maintenance issues for the furnished accommodation.

As there are many checks, such as inventories, to be carried out when people leave temporary housing, these officers have led to a quicker turn-around time in our temporary housing. This is vital given that supply is so scarce and ultimately it reduces our reliance on less desirable temporary accommodation such as bed and breakfast accommodation.

### **Improving standards**

We also took the opportunity of our new responsibilities to improve the standard of our temporary accommodation and the way that it's managed. Housing and accommodation officers, housing association and private landlord representatives now meet regularly to take forward issues associated with temporary accommodation and the actions set out in Highland's Homelessness Strategy. The objectives of this group are:

- Making sure that all temporary accommodation and furnishings are of the same high standard and that it is well managed.
- That there is enough temporary accommodation and that it is situated where it is needed.
- Identifying accommodation that people can move on to from temporary housing
- Working with Furniture Projects so that homeless households can move into permanent housing with, at the very least, essential furnishings.

Some of the tasks that this group are tackling include:

- Training on applying for housing benefit, including the housing benefit verification process, so that housing officers know how they can help people access help with their housing costs.

- Identifying and tackling other housing benefit issues.
- The establishment of agreed minimum quality standards, that all staff work to, for all leased and directly provided temporary accommodation. This also includes an agreed specification for the furniture and equipment.
- A Highland-wide service charging framework for temporary accommodation.
- Mapping of the location of temporary housing across the Highlands to help establish where more temporary housing is needed.
- Working towards the development of a register of private landlords who may be able to house people temporarily or permanently.
- More advertising to attract private landlords.
- Developing a 'risk assessment' checklist to make sure that risks to applicants, landlords, others and temporary accommodation etc. are minimised
- New guidance and procedures to deal with managing behaviour in temporary accommodation including identifying possible housing options for those who've been excluded from some types of accommodation.
- Agreeing ways to assess when people are ready to move on from temporary accommodation and protocols with other agencies to help manage move on.

## **The high cost of temporary housing**

The cost to the Highland Council of providing temporary accommodation is spiralling, as many households don't manage to access housing benefit. There are lots of different reasons for this - many people who find themselves homeless can't provide the proof of identity needed within the timescales set by Council Officers, particularly if they are only in temporary accommodation for a relatively short time as many 'non-priority' households are.

Whether this is because they have other problems to cope with, because they aren't sufficiently part of society's bureaucratic system to have the correct papers or because the system is far too complex for them, it results in the council bearing the brunt of these costs.

Together with our colleagues in Finance Services we're trying to tackle these issues, but this is one aspect of a local authority's business where there are clashing priorities – on the one hand, there is our council's commitment to reduce homelessness and provide best value homeless services and on the other the council's priority to reduce fraud, through use of the verification framework, and improve on performance targets.

Moreover, when we place people in bed and breakfast accommodation, only around half the costs are covered by housing benefit. We're looking for solutions to this and if anyone has any good ideas, please let us know.

### **Reducing bed and breakfast use**

Ideally we'd like to reduce our reliance on bed and breakfast accommodation. Our use of bed and breakfasts is unacceptably high - especially for families with children - but it's often necessary and sometimes a saviour particularly in the remote rural parts of the Highlands.

In these communities, homeless households sometimes prefer to live in bed and breakfasts, albeit for a short time, so that they can live close to existing support networks and schools rather than moving to more suitable accommodation several miles away in areas where transport is scarce.

This brings us back again to the key issue in the Highlands - without a substantial increase in the supply of affordable housing, we won't be able to significantly reduce our homeless problem.

Our new temporary accommodation duties have emphasised to us the difficulties that we are going to face providing permanent housing to all homeless households in 2012. We hope that those who hold the purse strings acknowledge this through increased investment in housing and infrastructure.

### **Further information**

If you would like to contact Hilary for more information, please email [chip@shelter.org.uk](mailto:chip@shelter.org.uk) in the first instance.