Shelter Scotland

40 years on

Shelter
Graeme Brown, Director of Shelter Scotland
Foreword

Looking through the reports, the photos and the press clippings produced over the years, the overwhelming sense I get is one of immense energy – energy which has launched new projects, given birth to new campaigns, and sustained a massive programme of work since 1968.

It is impossible to do justice to that sheer volume in just a few pages. For every achievement illustrated here, there are many more that have made an equal impact. To all our supporters, volunteers, funders, partners and friends, my heartfelt thanks for making it all possible.

I have thought a lot about how to describe this year’s milestone. Shelter was set up as an emergency response to a dire problem in the 1960s, so it is worth taking a moment to reflect on why we are still here and are needed as much as ever. Forty years is not really a cause for celebration.

But I feel proud to be in a movement which has harnessed so much energy for change, engaged some of the leading people of our times, and shown itself to be a powerful force for good. I hope you will join with us in being part of that movement.

Graeme Brown
Director of Shelter Scotland
The appalling state of many Glasgow tenements, such as these photographed in July 1968, helped galvanise support for the newly launched Shelter Scotland.
Shelter Scotland was formed in 1968, harnessing the anger and compassion that had catapulted Shelter into the nation’s conscience in 1966.

Right at the start, Shelter’s founders recognised that the housing problems in Scotland were as acute as anywhere else in the UK. These problems demanded immediate attention. But the founders also saw that, with separate Scottish law and institutions, the campaign in Scotland needed a different response.

So the Scottish campaign was launched on 3 October, with Ronald Dick as its first director, and chaired by Sir David Steel, later to become the leader of the Liberal Party and first Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament. Other leading figures included Richard Holloway, later Bishop of Edinburgh and chair of the Scottish Arts Council; Winnie Ewing, at various times MP, MEP and MSP; and entertainers Stanley Baxter and Andy Stewart.
The immediate focus of Shelter Scotland was the appalling legacy of slum homes in the towns and cities, where poor health and overcrowding were rife.

Shelter Scotland lay behind the formation of several housing associations, including Castle Rock Housing Association in Edinburgh, which as Castle Rock-Edinvar, goes from strength to strength today.

Overcrowding was rife in the 1960s. In more recent times, the sale of many of the largest council houses through the Right to Buy scheme means there is still a chronic shortage of family-sized homes – and overcrowding remains a problem today.
In 1971 Shelter opened its first housing aid centre in Scotland, based in Edinburgh. Housing aid came on top of Shelter’s work as a campaigning voice and ensured that we could give direct one-to-one help to people in housing need. Shelter’s housing aid network grew through the 1980s and 1990s and now includes a partnership with all of Scotland’s Citizens Advice Bureaux.

Before the 1977 homelessness legislation, parents who became homeless faced having their children taken into care.
But no campaign was more important than the battle to give homeless people some basic legal protection. In 1966, the harrowing final scene of landmark TV drama *Cathy Come Home* had exposed the failings of the welfare state, as Cathy, newly evicted from a hostel, has her children forcibly removed, and taken into care.

Families gained a right to accommodation in 1977, but all too often this meant months, or even years, stuck in bed and breakfast hotels.

Following years of relentless campaigning, in 1977, legislation was passed in England and Wales that provided a right to housing for people who were homeless. The original bill was watered down, with most single people or childless couples excluded. Nevertheless, the Act proved to be a landmark in the fight against homelessness.

The legislation took another six months to go live in Scotland, because some local authorities and politicians sought to halt it. Events like these proved how crucial it was for Shelter to have a dedicated Scottish set-up.
In the 1980s the campaigning climate grew more difficult, as the Conservative Government set out to reverse some of the assumptions about the role of the state in the provision of homes. The Right to Buy was introduced in 1980, and three decades on, has resulted in the sale of over half a million local authority homes. Over the same period, spending on new social housing was cut back dramatically. Later in the decade, benefit cuts to young people were vigorously, but unsuccessfully, resisted.

The changing tenure of Scottish housing 1971–2007*

* This graph shows how the composition of Scottish housing has changed dramatically since the launch of Shelter Scotland, with a huge decline in the number of people renting from social landlords and an even larger rise in the number of owner-occupiers.
In this political climate we began to measure our progress in positive outcomes from projects and services, rather than programmes and legislation.

Shelter launched The Rural Housing Initiative, which focused initially on bringing empty homes back into use. The Initiative helped set up a new breed of community-based rural housing associations, and posed a rural housing challenge for the fledgling government agency, Scottish Homes.
Shelter also launched eight Care and Repair projects throughout Scotland that helped older people who needed their accommodation adapted to allow them to stay in their homes. In Edinburgh, we piloted a project working with young unemployed people to build homes, which enjoyed praise, and a visit, from HRH Prince Charles.

In the 1980s, Shelter piloted Care and Repair, a new approach that combined advice provision with the delivery of practical home improvements.
In 1992 Shelter in Scotland and England became one charity, albeit with a distinct Scottish set-up for campaigning, policy and direct services.

Early in the decade we launched the Scottish Housing Law Service to offer free, expert legal help to people with acute housing problems.

Shelter continued to raise awareness of the increasing number of young Scots who were destitute on the streets of London. Our Returning Home initiative helped those who wanted to come back to Scotland to do so.

One of Shelter’s most fruitful pieces of work around this time was our successful campaign for a Rough Sleepers’ Initiative in Scotland. The programme ran between 1997 and 2003 and ploughed more than £40 million into new projects that successfully arrested the seemingly inexorable rise in street homelessness.

We also set out improvements to the rural housing agenda for the new Labour Government and the Scottish Parliament.
With the support of bus and train companies, Shelter ran a programme to help young Scots who were homeless on London’s streets to return to Scotland.
Shelter’s successful campaign for a Rough Sleepers’ Initiative included this provocative stunt outside the Modern Homes Exhibition in Glasgow in 1996.
2000 and beyond

The advent of devolution gave fresh momentum to Shelter’s campaigns and services in the first years of the new millennium. As a direct result of Shelter’s recommendations, the Government set up the Homelessness Task Force. By 2002 it had set out the most ambitious programme of action on homelessness ever seen in Shelter’s time.

At the heart of that programme was a legal commitment to give all homeless people the right to a home by 2012. This commitment represents the high point of Shelter campaigning and is envied by progressive governments across the developed world. The Government also legislated to limit the use of bed and breakfast hotels for families, following 25 years of pressure from Shelter.

Shelter has enjoyed a good relationship with First Ministers since the Scottish Parliament was founded.

Here, former Shelter Director Liz Nicholson buttonholes the late Donald Dewar at a street demonstration on housing investment.

Alex Salmond, in his first stint as leader of the SNP, backs Shelter’s ‘housing for good’ campaign.
Right at the end of the decade, Shelter launched its first Families Project, providing intensive practical and emotional support to homeless families with children as they made the transition from homelessness into a stable home. That first Families Project was followed by three others.

For six years, we piloted Shelter Housing Action with Rural Communities (SHARC) to help remote rural communities in south west Scotland tackle problems of housing shortage.

Clare’s story

Clare, a mother of three young children, came to our Families Project in South Lanarkshire two years ago.

Clare’s husband was a heavy drinker, and she and the kids had suffered years of alcohol-fuelled abuse. Eventually, Clare began to fear for her children’s safety, and asked her husband to leave.

Life as a single mum was tough for Clare, yet she was determined to hold down the job she loved, as a nursery nurse. But when her baby daughter became seriously ill, Clare had no choice but to give up work.

With no immediate help to pay her mortgage, the arrears began to mount up, and Clare’s home was repossessed. Private rents were beyond Clare’s means, so for two years she and the children were shunted from place to place in a series of temporary flats.

Desperate for security, Clare turned to Shelter’s Families Project. We put pressure on the local authority to find the family a permanent home. When they finally did, we supported Clare with the practical aspects of moving into settled accommodation. With Shelter’s help, Clare and her children put their unsettled past behind them, and made a fresh start.
More than a decade ago Shelter was highlighting problems faced by refugee families from the Sudan, who were living in caravans.

As our services developed, new housing challenges emerged with the arrival of asylum seekers from persecuted communities around the world, and later, with the large-scale migration of workers from Eastern Europe.
The cycle of boom and bust is fuelling the housing crisis. The Government must act now to ensure that the mistakes of the past are not repeated.

In 2008, a long period of bloated house prices has put buying a first home out of reach for anyone on a modest income. While the credit crunch might reverse some of that trend, as we go to print it is to the echo of dire warnings about a collapse in housebuilding and a rise in mortgage repossessions.

Looking ahead – the future of Shelter

What would the founders of Shelter have imagined had we asked them forty years ago to gaze forward to 2008?

Some things would have surprised them. They could hardly have foreseen the way that the internet would transform campaigning and the provision of information, with Shelter Scotland now the largest and most authoritative provider of online housing advice in the country.

Of course, such was the passion with which the campaign was born, that our founders would surely have been frustrated that some of the problems of the 1960s linger on, from damp homes to dark prejudices. They would, perhaps, have been even more dismayed at the avoidable mistakes – the sale of council homes with little thought to replacement; the explosion in youth homelessness in the 1980s; and the continued fixation with home ownership.
But we hope that they would have been delighted by some of the high points too: a determination to try out new ideas in a hostile climate; a commitment to working with people others have given up on; and an ability to respond to the changing social and political environment.

Scotland now boasts progressive housing legislation, which declares that by 2012, everyone who is homeless will have the right to a home. We’re sure that the founders would have celebrated Shelter’s role in making Scotland an international leader in the battle against homelessness.

These characteristics of determination and innovation stand us in good stead for meeting our next major challenge: making sure that the 2012 target is delivered, and that everyone in Scotland has a decent, permanent home.
Everyone should have a home

We are one of the richest countries in the world, and yet millions of people in Britain wake up every day in housing that is run-down, overcrowded, or dangerous. Many others have lost their home altogether. Bad housing robs us of security, health, and a fair chance in life.

Shelter helps more than 170,000 people a year fight for their rights, get back on their feet, and find and keep a home. We also tackle the root causes of bad housing by campaigning for new laws, policies, and solutions.

Our website gets more than 100,000 visits a month; visit www.shelter.org.uk to join our campaign, find housing advice, or make a donation.

We need your help to continue our work. Please support us.

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