

# Briefing

## Access to support to prevent homelessness: proposal for the Housing Bill

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# Shelter

## Access to support to prevent homelessness

### Summary

The Housing Bill going before the Scottish Parliament in 2010 presents a perfect opportunity to clarify and strengthen the way support is provided to homeless households.

- Sometimes the provision of accommodation is not enough to make sure people can keep their home - they may require additional support to ensure they can sustain their home in the long term.
- Many local authorities already offer a wide range of effective housing support services to households but there are still cases where people do not receive the support they require to retain their home. The Housing Bill is therefore a chance to build on current best practice to provide a consistent level of support across Scotland.
- Support could be as simple as help applying for a community grant, providing budget advice or help with moving, while some people may require more specialist support such as counselling services. It may just be a case of councils acting as a gateway to services by linking up clients to existing support services in their local area.
- Shelter proposes that local authorities assess a household's support needs at the time of a homelessness assessment, followed up by linking into appropriate services to meet any identified support needs. The provision of services could be by registered social landlords (RSLs), voluntary providers or other bodies.
- As well as having clear advantages for individuals, timely and appropriate support is key to preventing homelessness and tackling problems before they escalate to crisis level.
- Access to support is cost-effective. An analysis of a tenancy sustainment project in North Ayrshire found that for every £1 invested, there was a social return of investment of £8.38.
- The provision of support is also affordable within the current funding amounts already provided by the Scottish Government to councils for housing support for homeless people.

New legislative provisions are necessary to guarantee that all households who are in the most housing need receive the support they require to keep their homes. Although effective housing support already exists for some, greater emphasis is needed to ensure support is consistent and targeted. It is also necessary in order to progress and embed prevention work and reach the 2012 homelessness commitment.

## Introduction

The Housing Bill going before the Scottish Parliament in 2010 is an opportunity to clarify and strengthen the way that support is provided to households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. It could ensure people not only have a right to housing but also access to the support they require to keep their home. It is universally recognised that the provision of accommodation on its own is not always enough to make sure people can keep their home. Local authorities already do provide a wide range of support services to households, such as advice, guidance and help with practical skills to enable them to sustain their tenancy. The Housing Bill is a timely opportunity to build on current best practice; recognising the valuable role of existing housing support services and the need to secure such services for all households who require assistance to settle into and stay in their home. Taking a wider perspective it is clear that access to support would also progress efforts to prevent homelessness and reach the 2012 homelessness commitment, which is one of the key National Indicators identified by the Scottish Government as part of its National Performance Framework.

This paper outlines why the Housing Bill presents a perfect opportunity to use legislation to strengthen and clarify what is already in place for many households who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

## What would access to support look like?

We envisage that access to support would translate into local authorities providing all households assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness with **an assessment** of their support needs. In general this would be done as part of a homelessness assessment, with referral to more specialist assessment if particular needs require it. A good and accurate assessment is crucial to identifying the various support that will enable a household to sustain or move into a new tenancy.

Councils would then also have a duty to follow this up, where required, by **securing appropriate services** to meet households' needs as identified by the assessment.

While the duty would lie with individual councils, they may look to registered social landlords (RSLs), voluntary providers or other bodies to undertake the assessments or provide the services on their behalf.

## What is meant by support?

The support needs required by households are wide ranging as are the appropriate responses. Many people will need only low level housing related support, particularly (but not only) at the point when moving into a new property, such as help with moving, furnishing a flat, dealing with repairs and connecting to basic utilities. Other forms of assistance may include information on welfare rights, such as applying for Community Care grants and resolving issues over benefits, help with form filling and advice on budgeting. Some people will need higher levels of support over a longer period of time or more intensively for example to deal with health issues, drug or alcohol misuse or a neighbour dispute or to provide specialist forms of counselling.

A legal definition for housing support services already exists within the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001:

'housing support services' includes any service which provides support, assistance, advice or counselling to an individual with particular needs with a view to enabling that individual to occupy, or to continue to occupy, as the person's sole or main residence, residential accommodation other than excepted accommodation.<sup>1</sup>

There is no reason why this would need to be altered since it is broad enough to cover the full range of support required by households.

## The case for support

For some households, support is necessary to ensure they sustain their tenancies and avoid repeat homelessness. Support is a vital tool for meeting the Government's commitment to guarantee a permanent home for all unintentionally homeless persons by 2012. It also makes clear financial sense for councils and the Scottish Government.

### 1. Accommodation on its own is not enough

The reasons why people end up homeless can be complex and the experience of homelessness can often create or exacerbate the problems faced by people. Identifying the issues faced by these households followed up with the provision of appropriate support, alongside the provision of housing, is necessary if we are to secure people's housing situation in the long term and reduce homelessness.

While some tenants will require little or no additional support others will require assistance to prevent future homelessness, as noted by a Scottish Government report into how councils can achieve the 2012 commitment:

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<sup>1</sup> See section 91(8) Housing (Scotland) Act 2001

Homelessness isn't just a housing problem nor just about housing supply - important as that is! For many people it is just about getting a house and getting on with their lives.....However a substantial number of homeless people, as already noted, do present with other issues which also have to be addressed and call for further resources and the involvement of a wide range of other services and agencies if these are to be resolved.<sup>2</sup>

According to the Scottish Government's homelessness statistics a third of households (13,733 or 33 per cent) assessed as homeless in 2007-08 were identified as having one or more support needs.<sup>3</sup> Nearly three quarters of the support needs identified were related to support for a mental health problem, drug or alcohol dependency or help with basic housing management / independent living skills.<sup>4</sup>

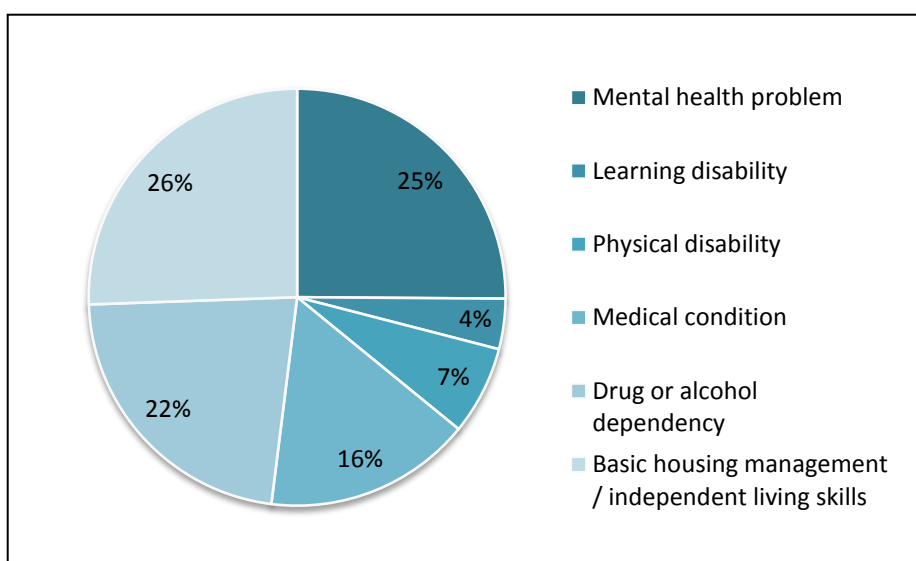


Figure 1: Types of support needs identified in households assessed as homeless<sup>5</sup>

Some groups of people are more likely to be in need of support than others; for example, Fitzpatrick's research on youth homelessness found that all 25 of the young people she worked with required some type of assistance such as material and practical assistance and general support, while others also required emotional or special support.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Scottish Government (2008) *Towards 2012: Homelessness Support Projects*, March. Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/03/27152416/5>

<sup>3</sup> Calculation using Scottish Government (2009) *Operation of the Homeless Persons Legislation in Scotland: 2008-09*, September. Referred to hereafter as Scottish Government (2009)

<sup>4</sup> Scottish Government (2009)

<sup>5</sup> Scottish Government (2009)

<sup>6</sup> Fitzpatrick, S (2000) *Young Homeless People*, Macmillan Press Ltd

## 2. Support is key to prevention and meeting 2012

The prevention of homelessness plays a vital role in meeting the Scottish Government's commitment to give all unintentionally homeless households a right to permanent housing by 2012.<sup>7</sup> It is widely recognised that timely and appropriate support is key to both preventing homelessness by dealing with problems before they escalate to crisis point and assisting families to cope with homelessness and move on into permanent housing.

The Scottish Government is particularly clear that assessment and support are integral to the prevention of homelessness. The *Code of Guidance on Homelessness* advises that in relation to preventing repeat homelessness local authorities need to bear in mind that 'solutions to homelessness should be based on a **thorough assessment** of the household's needs, including support needs.' [my emphasis]<sup>8</sup> The recently published *Guidance on the Prevention of Homelessness* clearly advocates for councils to take a proactive, early intervention approach, also stating that 'homelessness prevention activity should focus on providing **sustainable housing outcomes** based on **person-centred assessment** and planning measures' [my emphasis].<sup>9</sup> It goes on to highlight the valuable role of housing support:

Housing support has an important part to play in preventing homelessness... [alongside] some of the more intensive and specialist support services that many people at risk of homelessness will need, eg substance misuse, family counselling services etc...

## 3. Benefits of support for household

Effective support which prevents homelessness or helps reduce the impact of homelessness has clear positive benefits for households. Homelessness can severely impact on people's physical and mental health and well being as they cope with the stress and uncertainty of their situation. Homelessness can also have particularly severe implications for children's health, education, relationships, development and general well-being.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> As laid out in the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003

<sup>8</sup> Scottish Government (2005) *Code of Guidance on Homelessness* May. Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/05/31133334/33366>

<sup>9</sup> Scottish Government and COSLA (2009) *Prevention of Homelessness Guidance* June 2009. Available at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/274719/0082198.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Shelter (2006) *Against the Odds: An investigation comparing the lives of children on either side of Britain's housing divide*

## **Access to support helped one family to stay together in a safe and secure home**

The following family's story shows how support not only benefits people's quality of life and general wellbeing but also cuts costs to the public purse, related for example to tenancy breakdown, temporary accommodation and foster care.

### **Why was support needed?**

Paula\*, age 20, was struggling. Her three children were in foster care due to her partner's abusive behaviour. She became homeless when forced to leave her home following a split with her partner. Social work requested she was placed in a temporary furnished flat so the children could be returned to her care, however, the homeless team wanted to place Paula in a large women's hostel. Social work referred her to Shelter for housing advice and advocacy.

### **What support was provided?**

Shelter successfully advocated for Paula to be provided with a temporary furnished flat. Shelter Support Services, following an assessment of the family's needs, devised a support plan which would enable the family to make the transition into their permanent home and be able sustain it independently. The types of support provided were:

- Advocacy and assistance with talking to her homeless caseworker
- Securing school places for the children in the local area and funding for uniforms
- Advice and assistance with money, benefits and applying for grants
- Practical help with moving into permanent accommodation and getting funding for furniture.
- Getting to know the local area and linking family into the local GP, community centre and activities such as Brownies
- General help to settle into their new home
- Working with the children to help them deal with the uncertainty and upheaval
- Regular contact with other agencies eg liaising with social work to coordinate support, advocating for the family at children's hearings and referring family members to other services such as counselling and support groups.

### **How did support help?**

Support has enabled Paula to sustain her tenancy, keep her family together and help her and the children settle into their new local area. Without support Paula was at risk of entering a cycle of homelessness with her children remaining in care or at risk of going in and out of care. Paula said: 'I couldn't have made it without the support we received and don't ever see myself being homeless again because I now know how to keep my home'.

\* Names have been changed

#### 4. Access to support is cost effective

There is a strong financial case for early assessment and support for households. Once households reach crisis point and become homeless the support they will need to find and sustain another tenancy increases as do the financial costs to local authorities.

A cost and benefit analysis of Supporting People funding in 2004/05 found that while £107m was spent on housing support services for homeless people this led to a financial benefit of £129m.<sup>11</sup> This means that for every £1 invested in housing support there was a return of £1.20. This saving is likely to be conservative since it does not quantify the quality of life improvements.

Other research funded by the Scottish Government has identified an even higher level of benefits. A social return on investment (SROI) analysis of North Ayrshire Fab Pad, a project set up to support homeless people to sustain new tenancies, found that for every £1 invested in the project, a social return on investment of £8.38 was realised. This was due to reduced tenancy turnover and anti-social behaviour, increased ability of tenants to pay rent, reduced health care costs and welfare benefits due to moving into employment.<sup>12</sup> The payback period of this investment was found to be four months.

#### 5. Support acts as a stepping stone

The provision of support for people while waiting in temporary accommodation for a permanent home will make sure people are ready to settle into and sustain their tenancy when the opportunity arises, thus helping to reduce repeat homelessness. Living in temporary accommodation should not worsen a household's situation or impede their improvement. Access to support is an opportunity to ensure temporary accommodation is a stepping stone, rather than a hindrance, into a permanent let.

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<sup>11</sup> Scottish Government Social Research (2007) *Supporting people: costs and benefits – final report*, Tribal Consulting. Available at

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/207283/0055011.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Tenancy breakdown cost is £8,765 and the cost for FabPad is £2,500/head plus the social added value. For every £1 that has been invested in the North Ayrshire Fab Pad project, a social return on investment of £8.38 has been realised. The added value per participant was found to be £19,238.

The payback period for the investment was found to be four months.

<http://www.sroiproject.org.uk/media/8362/ArtsFab.pdf>



## **Access to support prevented eviction and repeat homelessness**

### **Why was support needed?**

Joanne lives with her partner and one year old child and had been homeless before. Joanne was on benefits but had not provided the correct forms to receive housing benefit. As a result Joanne had fallen behind with her rent and was being threatened with eviction. It also became evident as support was provided that Joanne's financial difficulties were far deeper, with debts for utilities building up. The housing officer, housing association and Shelter Support Services worked together to make sure Joanne and her family did not lose their home.

### **What support was provided?**

Support focused on advice and assistance related to debt management, benefits, budgeting and advocacy support.

Support included:

- Assistance to claim back dated housing benefit.
- Helping Joanne to look at her finances and what she could afford to realistically pay towards rent arrears caused by a housing benefit shortfall.
- Liaising with the housing association to agree a weekly payment plan and monitoring to check payments were made.
- Successfully advocating for court proceedings for eviction to be ceased.
- Helping Joanne to prioritise her debts and set up manageable payment plans to all creditors.

### **How did support help?**

Early support prevented Joanne and her family becoming homeless again and provided her with the skills to remain out of difficulties in the future. Joanne now knows how to manage her money, where to go for advice should she need it and what the consequences are for not keeping up with payments. She is no longer stressed and worried about escalating into greater debt and losing her home. Joanne now has a part time job with the aim of moving off benefits, and is more able to focus her attention on caring for her child. Without support Joanne was at risk of entering a repeat cycle of homelessness, simply due to not taking up housing benefit and financial mismanagement.

\*Names have been changed

## Why do we need legislation?

Many local authorities already provide support to homeless households. Legislation, backed up by suitable guidance, would help to ensure a consistency of approach both across and within local authorities.

### 1. Need to strengthen prevention of homelessness work

Despite the widespread recognition of the importance of preventing homelessness, there is still insufficient prevention work happening on the ground, as noted in the Scottish Housing Regulator's (SHR) recent report:

But across the sector landlords need to give more focus to preventative work, particularly in the early stages of new tenancies, and develop better indicators to assess where to target their efforts in tenancy sustainment.<sup>13</sup>

The same report goes on to state that one of the recurring themes in poorer performing local authorities is 'weaknesses in basic assessments'.<sup>14</sup>

So, the proposed new duty would give legislative substance to the increasing policy attention on the need to prevent homelessness, helping make sure prevention happens in practice.

### 2. Need to create a consistent level of support across Scotland

Although support is available to many households there are still too many cases where a household does not receive the support they require to maintain their home. In some cases this may simply be because although the support services exist they are not linking up with their prospective clients. Councils should act as a gateway to services - assessing support needs and working with households to link into the appropriate services, provided by themselves or other organisations.

Rather than assessment and support being dependent on voluntary action and good practice by councils we need legislation to ensure a consistent approach is taken to carrying out assessment of support needs and take action to meet those needs that are identified. This will improve the quality of prevention and homelessness services and mean all homeless households can access the support they need.

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<sup>13</sup> Scottish Housing Regulator (2009) *Social Landlords in Scotland: Shaping up for improvement*. Available at [http://www.scottishhousingregulator.gov.uk/stellent/groups/public/documents/webpages/shr\\_shapin\\_gupforimprovement.pdf](http://www.scottishhousingregulator.gov.uk/stellent/groups/public/documents/webpages/shr_shapin_gupforimprovement.pdf) Referred to hereafter as Scottish Housing Regulator (2009)

<sup>14</sup> Scottish Housing Regulator (2009)

### **3. Ensuring that support is based on need and not tenancy type**

Access to support should surely be based on an informed decision about whether a household requires assistance. At present however a legal eligibility for housing support services is instead defined by type of tenancy – those with a short Scottish secure tenancy (SSST), under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, and homeless households rehoused by councils in the private rented sector with a short assured tenancy, if the relevant regulations are approved by the Scottish Parliament.<sup>15</sup> The proposed new duty would mean access to support would be based on need rather than other factors such as tenancy type.

### **4. Ensuring that support is based on a comprehensive assessment of support needs.**

Homeless households are diverse, as are the circumstances in which they become homeless. Clearly, no one solution will fit all households and support needs will vary - some will have complex emotional needs while others will only need some basic practical assistance and signposting. An individual assessment of each household's need is necessary to identify how best to assist each household.

This is confirmed by a recent evaluation study of a new joint assessment process in Glasgow which found that 'service users were pleased when detailed assessments were made of their needs; concerns for them arose when there was a lack of assessment that then resulted in inappropriate placements.'<sup>16</sup>

Without assessments we risk overlooking the difficulties faced by households and allowing problems to escalate to unmanageable proportions resulting in homelessness or repeat homelessness. A lack of assessment risks households falling through the 'safety net' and not linking into the appropriate services to help them sustain a tenancy. No assessment also risks overlooking the protective/resilience factors a household may be able to utilise to tackle homelessness.

This new duty, therefore, provides an opportunity to promote person-centred support which is based on working with individuals so they receive support that is best suited to them. This is likely to be more effective in achieving positive outcomes for people rather than a one size fits all approach or a lack of pro-active work to link up people to appropriate services.

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<sup>15</sup> See section 34(7) Housing (Scotland) Act 2001; The Homeless Persons (Provision of Non-permanent Accommodation) (Scotland) Regulations 2010

<sup>16</sup> Quilgars, D and Bretherton, J. (2009) *Evaluation of the Experiences of Single People Presenting as Homeless in Glasgow*, Centre of Housing Policy, University of York, February.

## 5. Is this new approach affordable?

Access to support would be well within the current funding amounts given to councils for supporting homeless people and related groups, although no longer ring fenced.<sup>17</sup> We estimate that the cost of access to support for all homeless households with support needs (13,733 households in 2007-08), using Supporting People funding figures from 2004-05, would require under 40 per cent of the funding received by councils to support homeless people and related groups.<sup>18</sup> So, the proposal we are making will not require councils to spend any more than they should currently be spending on supporting homeless people. However, it may require a change of focus in spending to make sure those in most housing need are receiving adequate and appropriate support.

## In conclusion

New legislative duties are necessary to guarantee that all households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness receive the support they require to keep their homes. Although effective housing support already exists for some, a duty is required to ensure support is consistent and targeted. It is also necessary in order to progress and embed prevention work and meet the 2012 commitment. The cost of implementing such a duty will not exceed funding amounts already provided by the Scottish Government to councils for housing support.

Shelter welcomes feedback and comments on the above paper. For further discussion or information please contact Jessie Crawford, Children's Service Policy and Practice Coordinator, on 0344 515 2472 or at [Jessie\\_Crawford@shelter.org.uk](mailto:Jessie_Crawford@shelter.org.uk)

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<sup>17</sup> Homeless and related groups includes people who are homeless or sleeping rough, people who use drugs or alcohol, people who have HIV/AIDS, people who are vulnerable due to young age, people at risk of offending/reoffending, women at risk of domestic violence and people with poor social skills/disruptive behaviour.

<sup>18</sup> This is calculated by taking the number of households assessed as homeless with support needs (13,733 in 2007/08) multiplied by the average cost per client (£2,658 in 2004/05 and rounded up to £3,000) and taking this total (£41,199,000) as a percentage of Supporting People funding spent on homeless and related groups (£107,226,000 in 04/05).