

Sex for rent in Scotland

Topic briefing

November 2018

TOPIC BRIEFING: SEX FOR RENT

Key Points

- **Sex for rent is an abhorrent, exploitative practice** which is preying on vulnerable people who are already facing housing difficulty.
- Shelter Scotland absolutely condemns this crime and anyone involved in the exploitation of anyone regardless of who they are or where they are living.
- Shelter Scotland is anecdotally aware of sex for rent arrangements across Scotland in previous years. There is currently **no Scotland specific evidence** on the extent of sex for rent.
- Shelter England found that over **250,000 women across England have been asked for sexual favours** in place of paying rent by their landlord over the past five years¹.
- There is **cross-sector support for the Scottish Government legislating** against this practice.
- Shelter Scotland believes that **more investigation is necessary** here before making recommendations.

What is sex for rent?

By sex for rent, we mean an arrangement where someone is being asked for payment for the housing costs in the form of sexual favours. This could take place in several ways:

- Someone who entered into a tenancy agreement with a landlord, who, if unable to pay rent, may be asked for payment in sexual favours.
- A vulnerable person on a low income who never enters into a tenancy agreement and is asked for payment in sexual favours.
- This payment could be for free accommodation, a reduction in rent, or to write off rent arrears.

Alongside clear exploitation, these arrangements present risks around whether the tenants have sufficient housing rights and security since a tenancy agreement is unclear.

¹ Shelter UK (2017) Tenant survey: sex for rent question. Unpublished. See also the Times article on the research: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/250-000-tenants-were-asked-for-sex-hkb36qlvc>

The current situation

Shelter Scotland is anecdotally aware of offers of free or reduced rent in exchange for sex in Scotland in recent years, but it is not an issue that our housing advice and support services have been approached on. This is the same experience that other organisations – which we have discussed the issue with – have had. The lack of evidence and data may be for a number of reasons. There is a stigma around sex for rent and people may feel embarrassed or trapped, preventing them from reaching out for help. People might not know that this advice and support is available, or possibly not know that sex for rent arrangements are illegal.

There is limited data on the extent of sex for rent practices. The only available quantitative data is from Shelter England from a survey conducted in August 2017.² Female tenants in England were asked if they had ever been asked by a landlord for sexual favours in exchange for free accommodation, a discount on the rent, or for writing off rent arrears. In a weighted sample:

- 6% of respondents, equivalent to over 250,000 women in England, have been asked for sexual favours in exchange for rent by their landlord over the past five years.
- This includes 140,000 women who have been offered sex for rent in the last year alone.

Their research showed that this is a more prevalent issue in London due to the larger and more pressured rental market. Living Rent estimate this figure suggests in the last year there have been 1000-2000 occurrences of sex for rent in Scotland³.

In Scotland, there is widespread, cross-sector support calling for Ministers to legislate against this practice, as was seen with the unanimous passing of a motion at SNP Autumn 2017 conference⁴, along with the STUC youth conference in 2018 which called for Ministers to legislate against sex for rent⁵.

² Shelter UK (2017) Tenant survey: sex for rent question. Unpublished. See also the Times article on the research: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/250-000-tenants-were-asked-for-sex-hkb36glvc>

³ Our understanding is that Living Rent based this estimate on the Shelter 2017 research, extrapolating the percentages to the Scottish population. Herald Scotland (2018) <http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/16266066.campaigners-demand-state-inquiry-into-scotlands-sex-for-rent-scandal/>

⁴ Holyrood (2017) <https://www.holyrood.com/articles/news/snp-conference-calls-scottish-government-ban-sex-rent>

⁵ SFHA (2018) <https://www.sfha.co.uk/news/news-category/sector-news/news-article/stuc-youth-conference-calls-for-independent-inquiry-into-sex-for-rent-scandal>

The wider context

Sex for rent is an extremely serious example of the exploitation of vulnerable individuals for which there should be serious criminal charges and repercussions, but it is, at least in part, fuelled by shortfalls in Scotland's housing system.

The opportunity for exploitation is present because our housing system limits the choices available to people through a lack of affordable homes, and there is not a strong safety net to stop people falling into housing and financial hardship. When options are limited, vulnerable individuals may be directed towards the private rented sector or staying with a live-in landlord where they may feel unable to protect themselves. To begin tackling this exploitation, we must ensure that there is sufficient housing options and support in place for vulnerable people experiencing housing difficulty.

Recommendations

There is a lack of data and evidence on sex for rent arrangements in Scotland, and as such we do not have or feel it is necessary to have specific recommendations to tackle sex for rent. We will continue to monitor this issue through our advice and support services.

While legislation could be considered or passed depending on the scale of the problem, there are many measures linked to the housing crisis which would be taken forward in order to halt some of the push factors behind this crisis.

- We must ensure that there are sufficient housing options and support in place for vulnerable people experiencing housing difficulty.
- Tackling the lack of affordable housing and ensuring there is a strong housing and welfare safety net for everyone in Scotland will help to reduce the opportunity for this exploitative practice.
- Where exploitation does take place, individuals must have recourse to justice to challenge these practices.

Contact

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Appendix

The following table outlines the responses to the Shelter survey in 2016.

For the following question, we would like to remind you that your answers remain anonymous and are never analysed individually. As a reminder, there have been reports in the media recently about 'sex for rent', whereby landlords ask for sexual favours in exchange for free accommodation, a discount on the rent, or for writing off rent arrears. Have you, or anybody you know, ever been offered 'sex for rent' by a landlord? (Please select the option that best applies in each column)		
Yes, Myself	Female renters	Estimated number of women
Unweighted base	2224	4.23m
Weighted Base:	1954	4.23m
Yes, in the last 12 months	3%	139,314
Yes, not in the last 12 months but in the last 5 years	3%	119,835
Yes, longer than 5 years ago	2%	77,491
No, never	90%	3,794,084
Prefer not to say	2%	103,744
Net: in last 5 years	6%	259,149
Net: ever	8%	336,640
Source: YouGov survey of 3978 private renters in England, July- Aug 2017. Estimated numbers calculated by using Census 2011 and English Housing Survey 15-16 to establish an estimate of the number of Females aged 18+ that are renting privately in England, which is 4.234468 million		

Shelter Scotland helps over half a million people every year struggling with bad housing or homelessness through our advice, support and legal services. And we campaign to make sure that, one day, no one will have to turn to us for help.

We're here so no one has to fight bad housing or homelessness on their own.

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