

# Alex Rowley

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## Housing in Crisis: Why we must build more public sector houses



# The Case for addressing Scotland's 'housing crisis'

Scotland has a housing crisis and more must be done now to tackle this unacceptable situation before it spirals further out of control.

I take the view that adequate housing should be a right for every man, woman and child in our country. And it is a right that should be realised for all of Scotland as it cannot be acceptable, indeed, it is tragic that so many are living in sub-standard poor-quality accommodation or no accommodation at all.

My experience as a member of Fife Council and as a Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) has been that the most common issue constituents contact me about and ask for my help with is housing. It is heart breaking to hear some of the experiences of individuals and families and this issue, that was once powerful enough to bring down governments, must once again be put to the top of the political agenda in Scotland.

Last week I met Kasia Smith and her daughter Marysia when campaigning in Johnston and she told me the difference her new home made for her family and their lives. Her daughter suffered from respiratory problems as a result of the damp conditions they lived in and since moving into their new housing association house, she has not required hospital treatment, something that was a regular occurrence when in the old house. She also said she used to spend 25% of her income on fuel, that figure is now down below 5%.



There are still too many families who are told by their landlord that the black damp on the walls is condensation. As Kasia said to me, she had the heating on full and then the windows open for ventilation and none of it helped with the condensation, but on a low income this costs them a fortune. This is not an uncommon experience for many families living in Scotland.

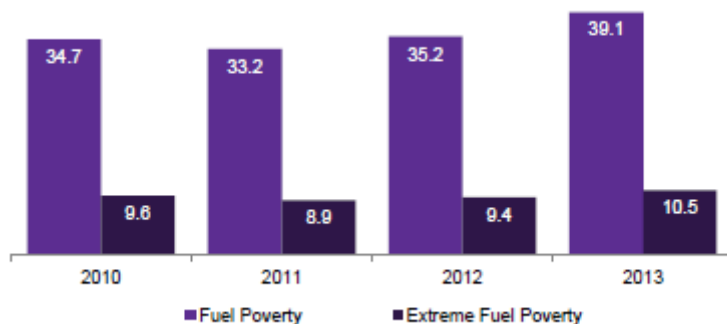
The fact that over 1 in 10 households in Scotland today are affected by damp, condensation or both is not acceptable and just imagine the additional costs this puts on our health services, time lost through illness not to mention the human misery it causes.

Norman Kerr, Director of Energy Action Scotland spoke recently about the failure to tackle fuel poverty in Scotland saying that the levels of fuel poverty are at their highest ever stating; “Higher than when we first started to measure it, higher even than when we first defined the problem and higher than the resources we have available to tackle the issue.”

This cannot be right and we must take action to address the cold and damp conditions of many properties. We need a target for the eradication of both poor housing and fuel poverty, and that is why Kezia Dugdale has announced our proposal for a ‘Warm Homes Act’ placing a duty on landlords to improve properties and address fuel poverty.

- **Over 1 in 10 households in Scotland affected by damp, condensation or both.**
- **An estimated 940,000 (39%) households in Scotland are in fuel poverty.**

Figure 1: Fuel poverty and extreme fuel poverty rates (% of all Scottish households)



Source: Scottish House Condition Survey 2013 (Scottish Government, 2014a)

The most common thing I hear from people who move into new-build council housing is that the heating and fuel efficiency is amazing. And this is one of many reasons why we must build more public sector houses.

Shelter Scotland have said we need to build 12,000 affordable houses a year to stand still. The Scottish National Party (SNP) have said their manifesto will commit to building 50,000 affordable homes over the next 5 years of which 35,000 they say would be for social rent. The Scottish Labour Party have said we will meet what Shelter Scotland say, which is 60,000 affordable houses, with 45,000 of these being for social rent.

Given the scale of the crisis in housing in Scotland both these commitments from Labour and the SNP are to be welcomed as anything that attempts to tackle the scale of the issue is a step in the right direction.

- **173,587 households on local authority housing waiting lists.**
- **36,000 households accepted as homeless.**
- **75,000 households deemed as overcrowded, representing 3% of all Scotland's households.**

Hence, whilst I welcome the SNP commitment, it is clear it will not solve the issues but does go some way to doing so. However, as I pointed out when I recently spoke in a debate on Public Services, Tackling Inequality and Growing Scotland's Economy, the SNP in 2011 said they would build 30,000 social houses but once in power they changed this to affordable. There is a big difference and this meant we did not get the new rented houses so desperately needed.

- **The rate of new social sector housing completions fell by 44 % between 2010 and 2014 from 5,700 to 3,200.**

So we can see that the numbers of council and housing association houses being funded by the government, under the SNP proposal, must more than double each year from the current position and I believe we need a national strategy, followed by a local housing programme to make this happen. And make it happen we must, there can be no going back on this pledge.

There was a school of thought in Scotland for a while that the private rented sector could meet the housing demand in Scotland, but in my view this has turned out to be wishful thinking. It is true that there has been a massive expansion of the private rented sector but this has principally been a result of a lack of supply within the public sector.

- **Over the last ten years, the number of people living in the private rented sector has doubled to 368,000.**
- **An estimated 80,000 families with children live in the private rented sector.**
- **In the last ten years, 33,800 local authority homes have been lost from the social rented sector through 'Right to Buy'.**

I remember when the Right to Buy was introduced and if you walked up a street you could see who had bought their house from the new windows and doors! Nowadays, in many former council estates you can see the same, but it is the council houses that have the new doors, windows and roofs and where the former council houses are owned for private let they tend to be in a less well maintained state.

The Commission on Housing and Wellbeing whilst recognising the importance of the private rented sector highlights key specific issues that must be addressed:

- **Short assured tenancies typically of six months duration.**
- **Unaffordable rents.**
- **Poor quality and badly managed housing found in the ‘bottom end’ of the sector.**

For many trying to move from benefits to work, the cost of private lets can be a barrier to work and is a real problem for low income families.

- **The average private rent is 86% higher than the average social rent.**

So for many the option of private rent is sadly not an option they can afford.

- **Over the last ten years, an estimated 140,000 private rented sector households were living in relative poverty.**

So whilst the private rented sector has a role to play, my argument is first there must be further regulation introduced to ensure better quality, better rights for tenants and price caps. This is not an area that can simply be left to the market and we must have a programme of council house building across Scotland with a renewed commitment to grow the council and housing association housing sector.

- **Almost 11,000 households languishing in temporary accommodation, including 625 children.**

We all in Scotland want a more fair and more just society where everyone gets a chance but if you live in poor housing or worse with no housing, shunted around in temporary accommodation with nowhere to call your own, then what impact does that have on the rest of your life, as a child what impact on your ability to feel secure and focus on things like learning?

- **The recent Commission on Housing and Wellbeing found that half of all housing in Scotland falls short of official quality standards.**

So far we have discussed the clear need to address poor housing and a lack of housing and the major benefits this will bring to people who on a daily basis suffer from living in poor housing and from not having housing. There are however wider economic benefits to be had for a programme of improvement and new house building in the public sector.

- **Improving access to decent, low-cost social housing to increase disposable incomes, preventing material deprivation and improving work incentives.**
- **Supporting economic growth through direct and indirect employment opportunities and Gross Value Added (GVA) generation.**
- **Supporting the development of economically, physically and socially sustainable communities.**

It is also a fact that the industry itself is warning of a skills gap with fewer and fewer opportunities for young people to gain an apprenticeship and a trade that will set them up for life.

Where local councils are overseeing and directing new house building programmes in the public sector, they are able to put conditions into the contracts that companies must commit to giving young people an apprenticeship.

I recently met a group of apprentices working on new council houses in my Cowdenbeath Constituency and I am absolute in my determination that more young people are given such an opportunity.



- **Increasing the proportion of young people in learning, training or work —apprentices employed by housing contractors, sub-contractors & suppliers.**

A national housing programme will also help create and support thousands of additional construction jobs in Scotland and should have a national training programme put in place to sit alongside it and ensure that local people are given access to training and support to get jobs.

I also recognise that the level of house building in the private sector must be increased dramatically if we are to address the problem of under supply and ensure those who want to buy are able to do so. In 2013, 14,885 homes were built in Scotland the lowest number of homes since 1947 when 12,149 were built.



So a national housing strategy must also include 'build to buy' and should involve all partners including local authorities and house builders.

- **An averagely priced house now costs about five times the average annual income putting owner occupation beyond many people in Scotland, especially young adults.**

We must also look to assist people who want to get on to the housing ladder and are struggling with cost and being able to access a mortgage. By increasing supply we would be able to address inflated costs resulting from the failure to meet demand and at the same time government must put in place support to help first time buyers.

- **The quality of a child's housing has a direct link to educational attainment, the likelihood of unemployment and poverty.**

There are so many knock-on consequences of poor and unsuitable housing that it should mean it becomes a national priority. It is true that a majority of us have decent homes but we should make clear the kind of society we want is where all of us have decent homes.

- **Poor quality housing has a direct link on both mental and physical health problems.**

There are many reasons, some outlined here, but many more as to why we must make sure that the commitment to build more social houses and the need to tackle the levels of poor housing and fuel poverty are not allowed to be watered down and forgotten after the election this May.

- **People of all political parties and none should be encouraged to come together at a community level and demand a national housing strategy.**

# **2016 – A national and local campaign to end the housing crisis in Scotland**

## **We Must Demand:**

- **A ‘National Housing Strategy’.**
- **Councils empowered to establish local ‘House Building Partnerships’.**
- **Allocation of numbers of social housing to be built in each area with clear and measurable targets for new-build and improvement.**
- **A national land audit of all public sector land and first priority on that land for house building led by local councils.**
- **A properly financed programme with measurable targets year on year to eradicate poor housing and fuel poverty in Scotland.**

I am sure there are other measures that will be required to set up a national strategy and local planning body for delivery, and it should be a requirement of a new incoming government to set out how it intends to deliver on the promises it has made on housing.

The Commission on Housing and Wellbeing produced a comprehensive report with many recommendations and would be a good starting point for any new government. Please see their website here for further reading: [www.housingandwellbeing.org](http://www.housingandwellbeing.org)

The main point of this paper is that we have a housing crisis in Scotland and the failure of governments to address this is no longer acceptable and requires a consensus to be built into every community that we need action now.



*Alex Rowley wants to see the building of new council houses across Scotland and says the Scottish Parliament can do this, it just needs politicians with the will-power to make it happen.*

**Having access to a safe, secure and damp free home is surely a very basic requirement of every human being in Scotland in the 21st century. It is a tragedy that so many men, women and children living in our country in 2016 do not have that basic right and it is a failure that we should expect our Parliament and our Government to address.**



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