



SHELTER SCOTLAND BRIEFING: HOUSING EMERGENCY DEBATE, 22 NOVEMBER 2023

Shelter Scotland exists to defend the right to a safe home and fight the devastating impact the housing emergency has on people and society. We work in communities to understand the problem and change the system. We run national campaigns to fight for home.

The choices made on housing today have implications for decades to come. Just as we continue to live with the impact of policy decisions made since the 1980s, the decades of underinvestment and ongoing austerity policies, policy and spending decisions made now will impact our communities far into the future.

We are in a housing emergency, and that requires an emergency response from government.

Key messages

- The Scottish Government must **declare a housing emergency** and commit to taking urgent emergency action to address it.
- Declaring an emergency will allow MSPs and the government to recognise that the housing system **is broken and show the leadership needed for the emergency to be tackled.**
- There is consensus across the housing and homelessness sector and beyond **that business as usual will not address the exceptional levels of homelessness** and housing unaffordability people in Scotland are currently experiencing.
- Scottish Government must **buy and build 38,500 social homes by 2026** to reduce housing need, tackle the backlog in temporary accommodation and ensure **AHSP (Affordable Housing Supply Programme) grant money is used exclusively to deliver social homes.**
- **Councils must be given the support and resources they need** to uphold housing rights and prevent homelessness services from failing.

Scotland's Housing Emergency

Scotland is in the grip of a devastating housing emergency which damages lives every single day.

- A record **9,595 children trapped in temporary accommodation** – up 130% since 2014.
- **45 children become homeless every day.**
- **A household becomes homeless every 16 minutes.**
- A **10% increase** in households becoming homeless compared to last year.
- Local Authority homelessness services are busier than ever, with record numbers of open homelessness applications.
- Couples with children spend just under **a year trapped in temporary accommodation**, on average¹
- Routine **failure by local authorities** to uphold housing rights.

¹ Scottish Government (2023), [Homelessness in Scotland 2022/23](#).

- A **failure to deliver the social homes** we urgently need and a significant slowdown in new social housing developments in the last year.
- Private **rents continuing to rise** despite emergency legislation, and household incomes and the UK Government's **Local Housing Allowance rates are failing to keep pace**.
- Warnings of **a broken and failing housing system** from the Scottish Housing Regulator², the Accounts Commission³, and the Scottish Government's own expert Task and Finish Group on Temporary Accommodation⁴
- **Local Authority Chief Executives have stated⁵ Scotland is experiencing a housing emergency** and emergency action must be forthcoming.

By acknowledging that we are in a housing emergency the **Scottish Government can lead the consensus on immediate actions** to tackle it. It is an emergency that damages health, wellbeing, education and the economy, and leaves tens of thousands of people without anywhere to call home. It is **a national scandal**, and the government cannot ignore it any longer.

Despite the first principle of the Scottish Government's own Housing to 2040 strategy being the right to an adequate home for everyone⁶, across the country people do not have access to this human right. A report by CaCHE (Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence) and the Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers estimates that **over a million households, or 41% of all households in Scotland, do not have a home that would meet the international human rights standards⁷**.

Scotland has a long way to go to realise people's human right to adequate housing, and the statistics speak for themselves: 45 children losing their home every day, rights not being upheld, services failing to cope. There can be no doubt – **this is an emergency**.

Why declare?

We were pleased to see all five political parties on the City of Edinburgh Council come together earlier this month to say enough is enough and declare a housing emergency, with a commitment to delivering an action plan rooted in human rights to ensure their declaration leads to meaningful action. This follows a similar decision by Argyll and Bute Council to declare an emergency in their area earlier this year.

We urge the parliament and the Scottish Government to follow suit.

As all political parties in Edinburgh acknowledged, an emergency requires an emergency response. 'Business as usual' is not working. There is a need to prioritise action by mobilising existing resources, re-evaluating current approaches, and advocating for additional resources to effectively overcome the challenges our system faces – as well as holding others accountable for their responsibilities.

By declaring a housing emergency, we can acknowledge the extreme circumstances we are in and move forward together. **The current situation is not normal.**

It is vital that **declaring an emergency is not an end**. Simply declaring will not create the kind of structural changes that are necessary to address the emergency we are facing. That is why **we**

² Scottish Housing Regulator (2023), [Homelessness Services in Scotland: A Thematic Review](#)

³ Accounts Commission (2023), [Local Government in Scotland](#)

⁴ Scottish Government (2023), [Temporary Accommodation Task and Finish Group: final report and recommendations](#)

⁵ SOLACE (2023), [Housing in Scotland: Current Context and Preparing for the Future](#)

⁶ Scottish Government (2021), [Housing to 2040](#).

⁷ Gillian Young (2021), [The Right to Adequate Housing: Are We Focusing On What Matters?](#) (ALACHO and CaCHE)

are advocating for any declaration to be backed up by urgent emergency action, adopting a human rights-based approach, engaging relevant sectoral partners and governmental bodies (this could include health, education and social security agencies, for example) and incorporating the views of individuals with lived experience of the emergency.

The nature and urgency of the emergency would validate action on allocations, public land, planning, and compulsory sale and purchase that would not be appropriate during normal times, and strengthen calls for actions such as unfreezing Local Housing Allowance. Just as the pandemic emergency forced an emergency response, the housing emergency requires the same kind of approach from government and local authorities.

The response must identify targets in the short, medium, and long-term, and include reporting mechanisms so that elected members and others can scrutinise the progress being made and make recommendations for further action if needed. To help inform the process, **we have created a guidance document** to help public bodies shape what works for them.⁸

The first step, however, must be the government and parliament acknowledging Scotland's Housing Emergency.

Responding to the emergency

Deliver the social homes we need

Without sufficient good quality social homes across Scotland, we will not meet anti-poverty targets, tackle health inequalities, close the attainment gap, reduce homelessness, or alleviate the significant strain on local services; but if we get housing right, we have every chance of success.

The government is failing to deliver new social homes at the rate required to reduce housing need. Year-on-year budget cuts have resulted in a steep fall in both starts and approvals of new social homes (down 8% and 24% respectively in the most recent statistics⁹) – and without those homes the housing emergency is only going to get worse. The tens of thousands of people stuck in the misery of the homelessness system need action now.

We have raised our concerns with the Finance Secretary¹⁰ ahead of the budget and called on her to ensure that the Affordable Housing Supply Programme is protected from the cuts which are looming as part of the reviews of Capital Spending and Infrastructure Investment. **The Scottish Government has no hope of meeting its statutory child poverty targets if it continues to look to the social housing supply budget for savings** at every opportunity.

While we recognise the difficult financial position the Scottish Government is in, failing to deliver the homes needed to lift children out of poverty will deepen that difficult financial situation rather than alleviate it. **The £500m of housing 'failure spend' identified by IPPR Scotland, Save the Children and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation will simply keep growing if we do not deliver the homes needed.**¹¹

Now is the time for the Scottish Government to show it is serious about tackling deep rooted poverty and ending the housing emergency by ramping up investment in social housing. The £3.5bn currently committed to over the course of this parliament will not deliver the homes at the pace or scale we need – the **Scottish Government must use its forthcoming budget to**

⁸ Shelter Scotland (2023), [A Framework for Declaring a Housing Emergency](#).

⁹ Scottish Government (2023), [Housing Statistics for Scotland Quarterly Update to end June 2023](#).

¹⁰ Shelter Scotland (2023), [Letter to Cabinet Secretary for Finance, 12 September 2023](#)

¹¹ IPPR Scotland, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Save the Children (2023) [Tipping the Scales: The Social and Economic Harm of Poverty in Scotland](#).

make social housing its number one priority when it comes to capital spending and increase investment to a level that will see the social homes we need being bought and built at the scale required to reduce affordable housing need.

The Scottish Government can and must do more, and that is why we are renewing our calls for the Scottish Government to ensure AHSP grant money is used exclusively to deliver social homes rather than other, profit-led forms of so-called 'affordable' housing. **Social housing is our route out of this crisis**, and that is where the government's limited funds should go.

We remain concerned that the Scottish Government's response to the Task and Finish Group on Temporary Accommodation will not drive the structural changes needed. There are no new targets, piecemeal funding has been offered, and we have concerns about the limited leadership role the Scottish Government appears to play in the proposed National Acquisition Programme.

The 2024/25 budget must go further and **provide more funding for acquisitions**, so we can quickly deliver the homes we need, particularly larger homes to help get families out of temporary accommodation and to meet the needs of all our communities including some minoritised ethnic groups who are disproportionately affected by the housing emergency.

Fully Fund Homelessness Services

Significant investment in frontline services is required if we are to tackle the backlog in temporary accommodation and ensure people's housing rights are upheld and enforced. **Local authorities cannot continue to be asked to do more with less**, and the warnings from the Scottish Housing Regulator, Accounts Commission and SOLACE should awaken the government to the reality of the crisis being faced in housing and homelessness services.

Over a decade of austerity and real terms budget cuts have left local authority services stripped to the bone while they try to deliver the rightful extension of housing rights from national government. This has resulted in a situation where **legal duties are routinely breached** – and it is people in need of support who are left to suffer the consequences of that.

The Scottish Government **must ensure local services have the resources they need to deliver on existing housing rights**, as well as ensuring the funding is in place and staff are prepared to deliver the suite of new housing rights, such as the UN right to adequate housing.

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