

Homelessness

Homelessness is once again on the Scottish agenda as the credit crunch and expected economic downturn puts added pressure on already stretched homeowners. Homelessness numbers steadily rose for the seven consecutive years up to 2007, reflected in the doubling of homelessness problems brought to Scottish bureaux during this time. Last year, Scottish bureaux dealt with over 8,000 issues related to homelessness – the equivalent of 22 each day of the year.

Case evidence from Citizens Advice Bureaux throughout Scotland shows that clients experience a myriad of problems related to threatened and actual homelessness, with certain vulnerable groups in society being particularly affected including:

- Families
- Young people
- Migrant workers
- Clients with mental health problems.

Families

Scottish Government figures show that there were over 29,000 children in households that applied as homeless in 2006/07¹, with over three-quarters under the age of twelve. National evidence indicates that there is a widespread lack of suitable housing for homeless families – in March 2008, there were 118 households with children in bed and breakfast accommodation². Bureaux report:

- Families with three or more children living in cramped conditions in bedsits or B&Bs while the local authority struggles to find accommodation that is big enough
- Families can be stuck living in overcrowded temporary accommodation for months if there is no suitable housing available, although the maximum statutory time for these circumstances is two weeks.

¹ Scottish Government statistics - <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/10/30092316/36>

² Scottish Government statistics - <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2008/09/29094948>

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|| *A West of Scotland CAB reports of a client who lost his local authority tenancy while receiving treatment for mental health problems in hospital. While the client was receiving care, the local authority judged the property to have been abandoned, and changed the locks after disposing of the client's possessions, clothes, and personal papers. Upon being discharged from the hospital, the client found that he had been made homeless.*

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The Scottish Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux - Citizens Advice Scotland
(Scottish charity number SC016637)

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Young people

Young people are particularly susceptible to homelessness due to family difficulties and a lack of experience of sustaining a tenancy on their own. Scottish Government figures show that almost 20,000 young people³ aged 16-24 applied as homeless in 2006/07 – 1 in 30 young people in Scotland⁴. Bureaux report that:

- Young clients can rotate round various friends' houses for somewhere to stay. These clients are 'hidden homeless' – they do not report as homeless and are unknown to the local authority
- Young clients are leaving their family home, often after falling out with a family member, without alternative accommodation and without the necessary skills to attain and maintain a tenancy.

Migrant workers

Migrant workers, especially those recently arrived from countries in Eastern Europe, have experienced problems finding suitable accommodation and subsequently many have experienced homelessness. Bureaux report:

- Many migrant workers have accommodation tied to their employment, with clients complaining of poor living conditions and overcrowding. However, often there are no other housing options and additionally, a loss of employment can lead to homelessness for the worker
- Migrant workers lose their homelessness rights if they lose their job and haven't worked continuously in the UK for 12 months previously, limiting their options if they lose their home.

Clients with mental health problems

Scottish bureaux have reported a number of clients who struggle to maintain a tenancy due to mental health problems:

- Clients can require periodic residential care for their health problems, which can mean the loss of a tenancy while they are receiving care. Bureaux have reported clients who have returned to their tenancies to find their locks changed and personal property disposed of by their landlord
- Clients with mental health problems can be ill suited to maintaining a tenancy, and struggle to keep up with bills and repairs
- Bureaux have reported clients with health problems made far worse by their experience of homelessness, particularly when staying in a hostel.

CAS proposals for change

The Scottish Government has made homelessness a priority issue and progress has been made towards the target of providing all unintentionally homeless people a permanent home by 2012. However, the number of homeless applications has risen steadily since 2001/02, and with the expected economic downturn affecting already stretched homeowners, it is likely that homelessness will continue to rise in Scotland. In response to this:

- The Scottish Government should support homeowners in financial difficulty to stay in their homes by continuing and expanding the Mortgage to Rent Scheme
- Local authorities in Scotland should review and ensure that they have enough suitable accommodation that is available at short notice for homeless families with children.

³ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/10/30092316/36>

⁴ Scottish Household Survey – mid-year population estimate for 2006 for 16-24 years olds living in Scotland

Case evidence

|| *An East of Scotland CAB reports of a family with four children who have had to live in unsuitable accommodation since becoming homeless. The family have been staying in a B&B for two months, and were offered a two bedroom flat by the local authority. They were told that they could use the living room as a bedroom, but the clients thought this offer was unsuitable and rejected the accommodation. Due to the lack of suitable housing in the area, the clients have been told that they are unlikely to receive another offer of accommodation in the following four months before Christmas.*

|| *A South of Scotland CAB reports of a 16 year old female client who was told to leave home by her mother and is currently living in a tent outside the town. The client has stayed with various friends, but has no money, family contacts, or social worker. She contacted the local authority to apply as homeless and was given a three bedroom council house, but had to give it up as it was needed to house a family. She has had two crisis loan applications rejected.*