

Having and Keeping a Home: steps to preventing homelessness amongst young people



Follow-up Inquiry by Scottish Parliament Equal Opportunities Committee

Written evidence from Citizens Advice Scotland

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Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS), our 61 member bureaux and the Citizen Advice Consumer Service helpline form Scotland's largest independent advice network. Advice provided by the Scottish CAB Service is free, independent, confidential, impartial and available to everyone. Our website, Adviceguide, also provides the public with up-to-date information on a range of topics. We are champions for both citizens and consumers and in 2012/13 we helped over 314,000 people deal with over a million issues.

Context of evidence

In 2012/13, citizens advice bureaux advised on a total of 6,213 new issues relating to homelessness, representing 1.21% of cases in bureaux. Compared to the previous year, there was a slight decline in the number of homelessness issues (1.4%) despite the overall number of new issues increasing.

Of these issues, almost half of the cases related to threatened homelessness (2,921, down 1.4% on the previous year). There was a small rise of 0.6% in the number of issues relating to local authority homelessness services (1,665). Perhaps most significantly however, there was a 3.3% decline in the number of new cases of actual homelessness amongst CAB clients in 2012/13, with a total of 1,627 new issues reported.

Figures for the nine months covering April – December 2013 show these trends continuing, with the proportion of all new issues related to homelessness decreasing, including the proportion of cases where a client sought advice because they were actually homeless.

This evidence is based on the experiences of citizens advice bureau clients aged 16-24 across Scotland in 2013/14 who sought advice because they were homeless, or were under threat of becoming so.

What is your experience or involvement with youth homelessness?

Has the number of young people presenting as homeless changed?

Evidence from citizens advice bureaux shows that clients under the age of 25 are more likely than older clients to seek advice on a homelessness issue. From available client data, in 2013/14 those aged 16-24 made up 1 in 10 of all clients, but accounted for 16.5% of those presenting with an issue related to homelessness. Interestingly however, this gap has narrowed compared with the previous year, where 9.2% of all clients in 2012/13 were aged 16-24, but young clients accounted for 19.2% of clients with a homelessness issue.

Taken together, the citizens advice bureaux statistics would suggest that homelessness issues have slightly declined since 2012. This is backed up by wider figures from the Scottish Government which indicate that the number of homelessness applications fell by 13% in 2012/13 compared with the previous year.¹ Figures for first three quarters of 2013/14 show this downwards trend continuing², matching the corresponding fall in homelessness-related CAB enquiries.

Our finding that homelessness is more prominent amongst CAB clients aged 16-24 is also true for the population at large. Homeless households have a younger age profile than the population at large, with the Scottish Government's statistics indicating that more than one-third of homeless applications (8,637 of 25,763) were made by 16-24 year olds in 2012/13.³

In their statistical release, the Scottish Government note that *"it is very unlikely that the large reduction in homelessness applications...is a consequence of any changes in the social and economic factors which cause households to approach councils for assistance...all things being equal we might have expected homeless applications to increase in the present recession and also as a consequence of Welfare Reforms."*⁴ This assessment would seem to concur with evidence from citizens advice bureaux of rising demand in a number of areas that might be expected to indicate a parallel increase in homelessness applications.

For instance in the past year, citizens advice bureaux have advised a rapidly increasing number of clients in crisis who required a referral for a food parcel because they were unable to afford to eat.⁵ There has been a significant increase in the number of benefits sanctions issues in Scottish bureaux, which in some cases has led to hardship and debt.⁶ Payday loans are one of the fastest growing areas of advice in citizens advice bureaux and to the citizens advice consumer helpline service. Our evidence shows that concerns regarding the use of payday loans are

¹ Operation of the Homeless Persons Legislation in Scotland: 2012-13, p. 2 - Scottish Government <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0043/00434119.pdf>

² Operation of the Homeless Persons Legislation in Scotland: Quarterly Updates – Scottish Government <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Housing-Regeneration/RefTables>

³ Operation of the Homelessness Persons Legislation in Scotland: 2012-13, p. 45

⁴ Ibid, p. 5

⁵ Voices from the Frontline: Food parcels and the benefits system – Citizens Advice Scotland, April 2014 <http://www.cas.org.uk/publications/voices-frontline-food-parcels-and-benefits-system>

⁶ Independent Review of Sanctions: Response from CAS – Citizens Advice Scotland, January 2014 <http://www.cas.org.uk/publications/independent-review-sanctions>

focused mainly on young people under the age of 34 and the use of the loans are predominately for essentials such as food, energy and rent.⁷ The number of clients seeking advice on social housing arrears increased markedly following the introduction of changes to the social sector size criteria – the so-called Bedroom Tax – during 2013/14.⁸

Set against this backdrop, the fall in number of homelessness applications is a particularly positive sign and indicates that policy changes in this area by local authorities and the Scottish Government have had some success.

Is there more support available, for instance mediation, counselling, supported accommodation or funding?

How have things changed for young people experiencing homelessness since 2012?

'Having and Keeping a Home' reported family breakdown to be a principal cause of youth homelessness. Young CAB clients who seek advice on homelessness issues often have been evicted from the family home, or feel they have nowhere to live as a result of a breakdown in their relationship with their parents.

CASE STUDY: Homeless due to family breakdown

- *A North of Scotland CAB reports of a 16 year old client who was employed full-time as a trainee hairdresser. Her father has told her she can no longer live at home and has refused to give her access to collect her belongings, including her hairdressing equipment. The client has temporary accommodation with a friend's family and needed advice on what support she might be entitled to and on how she can get her property returned to her.*

Given this, it was recognised in the report that mediation to help resolve family disputes could play an important role in preventing youth homelessness, by helping 'bridge the gap' between a young person and their family before escalating into a situation where they are left without a home. Whilst we do not have evidence of the extent to which mediation is being used in this situation, in at least one case the actions of a homeless services unit appeared to inadvertently exacerbate a family dispute causing a young client to be illegally evicted. This shows the importance of mediation being appropriate and sensitive to the particular situation when it is used.

CASE STUDY: Inappropriate Mediation

- *An East of Scotland CAB reports of a client aged under 25 who has been living in a flat owned by her mother, paying £200 per month rent. The client was told by her mother that she had to leave as she wanted to rent the flat out for market rent. The client went to the local authority's homeless services unit who advised her that she was not homeless without a notice to quit from her mother. They phoned the client's mother and advised her that the client could take legal action, which the client was not intending to do. She returned to her*

⁷ Payday lenders: business as usual – Citizens Advice Scotland, April 2014
<http://www.cas.org.uk/publications/payday-lenders-business-usual>

⁸ Voices from the Frontline: The Bedroom Tax and Disabled People – Citizens Advice Scotland, November 2013 <http://www.cas.org.uk/publications/voices-frontline-bedroom-tax-and-disabled-people>

flat and found that the locks had been changed. She contacted the police who advised that if she forced the door to get her belongings she would be liable for the damage but would not be charged. The client did this and is now staying with her aunt. The client returned to homeless services, but was once again advised that she was not deemed to be homeless.

In 2012, the Equal Opportunities Committee heard 'troubling' evidence that young homeless people were being offered temporary accommodation of the very poorest quality. Citizens advice bureaux have reported cases where clients, including those with young children, have been allocated temporary homeless accommodation that is of substandard quality. As part of written evidence on the Housing (Scotland) Bill, CAS supported a call from Shelter Scotland to ensure that the 'right of repair' should be extended to people in households with children and pregnant women placed in temporary accommodation⁹, which would strengthen their rights to get these issues addressed quickly.

CASE STUDY: Poor quality of temporary accommodation

- *An East of Scotland CAB reports of a 21 year old client who is living with her 23 year old partner and their 3 year old son. They had been declared homeless a year ago, and have been placed in a private let as temporary accommodation by the council. However, the property was in a state of disrepair. The roof was leaking and windows and doors to the outside would not shut properly resulting in drafts and dampness. As a result, the client was having trouble heating the house and has large fuel bills which she is struggling to pay from her Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). The client has asked for the repairs to be carried out for over a year and they have still not been carried out, due to the roof being shared between three different properties. The client fears raising an issue for fear of losing her tenancy.*

'Having and Keeping a Home' reported a number of difficulties with Community Care Grants (CCGs), including taking an excessive time to process and sometimes being of an insufficient amount to cover the basic needs of starting out on a tenancy. Since that time, the Scottish Government has assumed responsibility for CCGs as part of the new Scottish Welfare Fund. Their responses to the report detail a number of changes they have made to criteria, including to the target timescales for processing and payment.¹⁰

In the cases of 16-24 year olds with a homelessness issue we have in recent months, issues with CCGs have not featured prominently. For all clients, the number of new cases related to Community Care Grants reported by citizens advice bureaux dropped by 9.8% between 2011/12 and 2012/13. Whilst not conclusive, this may indicate that the reforms in this area have had some effect.

Since the removal of the Priority Need Test for homelessness applications at the end of 2012, disputes over this classification have vanished. However, in a number of

⁹ Housing (Scotland) Bill – Written Evidence from Citizens Advice Scotland
http://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/Housing%20Bill_CAS%20Written%20Evidence.pdf

¹⁰ Correspondence between Minister for Housing and Welfare and Equal Opportunities Committee
http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_EqualOpportunitiesCommittee/Scottish_Government_responses_homelessness_report.pdf

cases, such as the one highlighted below, CAB clients have sought advice because they disagreed with a local authority's decision to class them as 'intentionally homeless', and therefore not entitled to be provided with settled accommodation. In the Scottish Government's statistical review of the operation of the Homeless Persons legislation, they found that the number of people assessed as intentionally homeless was at the highest level for 11 years, despite the numbers of homeless applications and assessments both reducing.¹¹ Further investigation of the reasons for this trend would be welcome to ensure that no-one is incorrectly classified as 'intentionally homeless', including whether there has been any change in local authority policies or practice since the abolition of the Priority Need Test.

CASE STUDY: Dispute over assessment as 'intentionally homelessness'

- *An East of Scotland CAB reports of a client aged under 25 who is 6 months' pregnant and on Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). She is about to be evicted from her temporary accommodation, which she is in the process of appealing. Up until a year ago, she had been living with her sister, but moved out after lots of conflict which made living together unbearable. She was then living with her mother until she became pregnant, at which point she was placed in temporary accommodation. However, the council have now decided that she intentionally made herself homeless. The adviser called the council who said that despite their records indicating the client's joint tenancy with her sister ending a year ago, their case worker had "come to the conclusion" that the client had continued to live in the flat until two months ago. The client disputes this.*

'Having and Keeping a Home' touched upon the isolation often felt by young homeless people making the transition into a lone tenancy. In some circumstances, local authority allocation policies could have a role to play by striving to locate a young homeless person in areas local to them, close to family and friends for support where this is appropriate.

CASE STUDY: Need for local allocation

- *A West of Scotland CAB reports of a 17 year old client who is currently living with her 6 month old child in the three-bedroom family home, along with her mother, stepfather, two brothers and two sisters. She has made a homelessness application, but needs a property close to the family home for support. However, the only accommodation the council has offered has been in a town seven miles away, and the council have advised that they only restrict the areas offered for a limited time, and will now make an offer anywhere in the local authority area. The client is concerned that she will have to live a long way from her family.*

A further issue not mentioned in 'Having and Keeping a Home', and potential future challenge, is worth noting. The Housing (Scotland) Bill proposes a number of reforms intended to assist social landlords tackle antisocial behaviour in an appropriate and proportionate manner. Whilst CAS supports these proposals on balance, care must be taken to ensure that those who have engaged in antisocial behaviour, or been accused of doing so in the past do not find themselves in a

¹¹ Operation of the Homeless Persons Legislation in Scotland: 2012-13, p. 26 - Scottish Government

situation where they are left homeless, or are restricted from finding housing, following the implementation of the new legislation by social landlords. Tenants who behave in an anti-social manner are often in vulnerable circumstances, and may require support rather than punishment.

CASE STUDY: Difficulty receiving support to find accommodation

- *A North of Scotland CAB reports of a homeless client under the age of 25. His mother put him out after he was assaulted by his father at the weekend and will not take him back. The council will not house him, temporarily or otherwise. A phone call to his probation officer revealed that he had been evicted more than once, failed to keep up housing payments and had been aggressive towards other tenants. The client was looking for help to get somewhere to sleep tonight.*

Are there additional issues for young people who are leaving care?

How might the implementation of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill help to tackle youth homelessness?

As reported in 'Having and Keeping a Home', care-leavers have been routinely discharged through the homeless route once reaching the age of 16 when they are no longer entitled to support. In some cases, such as the one mentioned below, care-leavers have reported being unprepared for independent living which can lead to a number of problems.

CASE STUDY: Issues facing care-leavers

- *A North of Scotland CAB reports of a client aged under 25 who had grown up in care homes following the death of both her parents. When she turned 16 she ended up in homeless accommodation, and felt ill-prepared for the responsibilities of living on her own and had never heard of Council Tax. As a result she has accrued debts of £13,000, which are mostly a combination of Council Tax and rent arrears. The client now lives with her partner and seven-week old baby daughter and has decided to face her debts. She wanted to know if going bankrupt was her best option.*

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 gives many young people in care a right to remain in care up to the age of 21, and be eligible for aftercare support up to the age of 26.¹² This has the potential to help young people leaving care to avoid having to submit a homelessness application because they can no longer stay in care at 16, and are unprepared for independent living.

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¹² Children & Young People (Scotland) Bill – Biggest Shake-up for 20 years - Government moves to deliver greater support for care leavers – Barnardos Scotland, February 2014
http://www.barnardos.org.uk/barnardos/news/media_centre/press_releases.htm?ref=95876