

# **Extreme weather provision during a housing emergency:** Briefing for decision makers

June 2025

Everyone needs a safe place to stay. This briefing supports decision-making to ensure suitable accommodation is available during winter and other extreme weather events in a housing emergency in Scotland.

## 1. The Housing Emergency

- 1.1 In May 2024 the Scottish Parliament declared a housing emergency. A formal recognition of severe challenges in Scotland's housing system, including rising homelessness and a shortage of social and affordable housing.
- 1.2 Thirteen of Scotland's 32 councils have also declared a housing emergency at a local level, starting with Argyll and Bute Council in June 2023 and including the largest councils by population, Glasgow and Edinburgh.
- 1.3 The Scottish Housing Regulator has identified 10 councils, including Glasgow and Edinburgh, as either facing systemic failure in delivering homelessness services or at high risk of such failure, with the number of people who are homeless and their needs surpassing the system's capacity to respond effectively.
- 1.4 Rough sleeping puts lives at risk, especially during winter. It is most prevalent in Scotland's largest councils with greatest housing pressures, notably Edinburgh and Glasgow, as well as in Fife, Highland and Aberdeen.

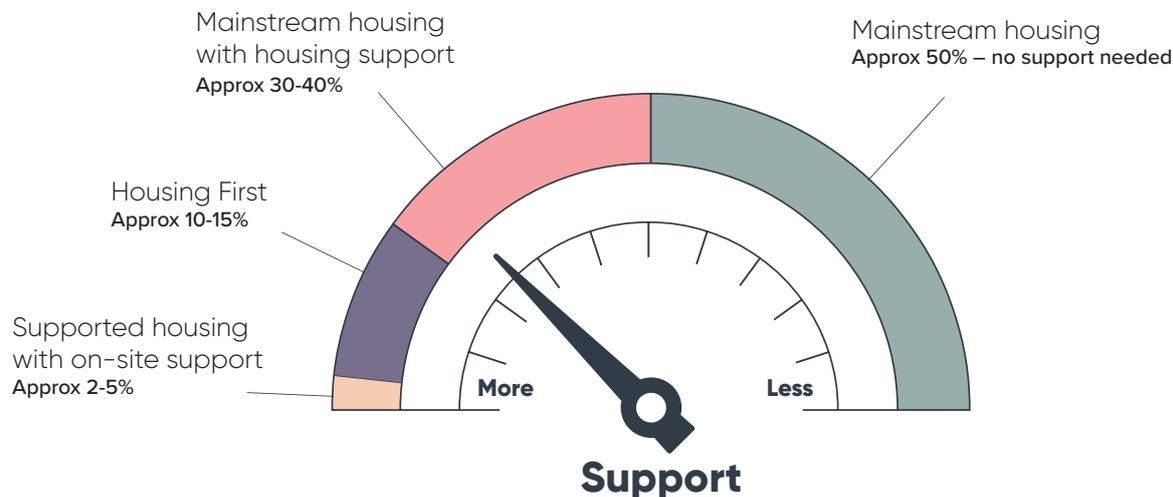
## 2. Homelessness before the housing emergency

- 2.1 Since devolution in Scotland, the homelessness sector has undergone a radical transformation – centring people's rights and options, and moving away from large-scale shared accommodation, night shelters, soup kitchens and from initiatives that create stigma by ringfencing people affected together.
- 2.2 The evidence was clear this worked, with homelessness reducing by over 40% in the period that followed to 2016-17. However, numbers affected have started to increase since (aside from the covid period) and today we see the highest number of people in temporary accommodation on record (16,330 at March 2024).
- 2.3 The national 'rapid rehousing' policy was the corrective response in 2018, recognising that the rising use of temporary accommodation was an unintended consequence of world-leading housing rights. It also acted on the evidence that most people want mainstream housing and not 'homeless' accommodation.
- 2.4 Rapid Rehousing is the core objective of the joint Scottish Government and COSLA Ending Homelessness Together plan since 2018 and has wide backing across the housing and homelessness sector. Regrettably, this policy period was not assertive enough in correlating the lack of housing supply to homelessness.

### 3. Housing after homelessness

- 3.1 Half of households who present to their local council for help with homelessness in Scotland just need housing with no support needs reported.
- 3.2 Most people needing support can be assisted at home in mainstream housing, typically through visiting housing support services. The local authority often commissions housing support services from third sector organisations.
- 3.3 A smaller group of people have more intensive health and social care needs. Around 10-15% are estimated to be best fit for [Housing First](#) – ordinary housing, with extraordinary support.
- 3.4 Just around 2-5% of people who experience homelessness want a [shared and supported housing](#) option – either because they don't want, or haven't been able to sustain, a mainstream housing offer.
- 3.5 The balance of settled housing options after homelessness is illustrated below and based on best available evidence that has sought to quantify this:

[Image 1: rapid rehousing preferred options, when homelessness has not been prevented]



## 4. Overlapping risk: rough sleeping and unsuitable temporary accommodation

- 4.1 Rough sleeping is the most visible form of homelessness and puts lives at risk. There are relatively low levels of rough sleeping in Scotland compared to other parts of the UK, although numbers are rising following COVID-era lows. While all parts of Scotland report some rough sleeping, it is concentrated in Edinburgh and Glasgow.
- 4.2 Most people who need temporary accommodation while settled housing becomes available are able to access decent quality temporary furnished flats provided by councils or housing associations.
- 4.3 However in pressured areas, there is also an increasing use of unsuitable temporary accommodation where single people are more likely to be accommodated. This includes hotel rooms, b&bs and shared forms of accommodation of the standard that puts people in the way of harm, including from violence, abuse and exploitation.
- 4.4 A [review of international research](#) provides robust evidence that night shelters and hostels can pose a risk to safety and physical and mental health. The report said: “Hostels and shelters protect residents from many of the risks associated with sleeping on the street, but present their own health-related hazards. The onset and/or escalation of drug misuse amongst residents is widely reported, the risk of communicable disease transmission high, and deterioration in mental health common. The management of antisocial behaviour is an ongoing challenge for staff.”
- 4.5 For many people, there is an interaction between periods of rough sleeping and unsuitable temporary accommodation, as they try to find a ‘least bad’ option for their circumstances. Because of this, it is important to consider solutions to rough sleeping alongside the use of unsuitable temporary accommodation.

## 5. What is tolerable? Extreme weather provision

- 5.1 The housing emergency in Scotland puts people at risk of harm in a range of ways, which is heightened during winter and other extreme weather events.
- 5.2 The prevalence of rough sleeping and unsuitable temporary accommodation in Glasgow and Edinburgh underscores the critical need for robust extreme weather protocols and provisions in these cities especially.
- 5.3 In an ideal scenario, we could swiftly address every case of homelessness that isn’t prevented. Drawing on current knowledge, we would provide mainstream housing for most, Housing First where needed, and offer high-quality supported housing for a smaller group. While the housing and homelessness sector has the expertise to achieve this, they lack the houses and other resources to deliver it.
- 5.4 Until we reach the end of the housing emergency in Scotland – what accommodation options during winter and other extreme weather events are tolerable, and what are not?
- 5.5 The decisions we make today are pivotal for the winter ahead. We must avoid actions that would exacerbate the crisis, such as neglecting people’s safety, creating stigma or prioritising short-term fixes over sustainable solutions. Instead, our choices must steadily guide us toward a better scenario, as illustrated:

[Image 2: decision making checklist for accommodation options during extreme weather]

## Accommodation options during extreme weather

