



**Scottish Housing
Regulator**

National Panel of Tenants and Service Users

Year 3 (2015-16)

**Mini-report 2: Homeless Services – experiences of
service users**

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SUMMARY FINDINGS

The National Panel fits into SHR's wider approach to communication and engagement with users of social landlord services, and is used to gauge their priorities and experiences. In this way the Panel findings help to shape SHR's focus in its role as regulator of social landlords. Panel members are volunteers and the Panel remains open to new recruits on an ongoing basis, with **membership standing at 481** as at June 2016.

There were four main exercises conducted with the National Panel in its third year (2015-16): (i) a **full survey** of Panel members; (ii) **two "Vox Pop"** text message and web-based surveys; (iii) **in-depth qualitative** discussions with 87 Panel members; and (iv) visits with **homeless service units** (51 interviews completed).

This programme of work sought to explore service users' views across a range of topics including: the drivers of service satisfaction; rents, affordability and value for money; dealing with anti-social behaviour; landlord performance reporting; keeping service users informed and involved; experiences of homeless service users; and understanding and awareness of SHR. Elements of this work programme also link to other aspects of SHR's work, including analysis of the Scottish Social Housing Charter and the ongoing SHR Thematic Inquiry Programme.

This mini-report is part of a series of publications from Year 3 of the National Panel research. It covers **individuals' experiences of accessing and using homeless services across Scotland**. See the SHR website for the [Year 3 Headlines Report](#) and other related publications.



Users of Homeless Services

As part of the National Panel research in 2015/16, Craigforth spoke to people who had recently used homeless services. The findings reported here are based on **in-depth interviews with 51 individuals across four local authority areas**. This included individuals in temporary accommodation, as well as individuals who had recently accessed permanent accommodation via homeless services. Key points of note are:

- ❖ A minority of participants reported difficulties accessing homeless services, and most were positive about the speed of access to temporary accommodation. However, it was clear that the extent of any prior knowledge of "the system" had a significant impact on this experience – and the degree of emotional distress encountered.
- ❖ Several participants made reference to the levels of anxiety and emotional distress experienced prior to and during their experience of homeless services. The extent to which participants highlighted aspects of homeless services as particularly helpful was in some cases closely related to the extent to which these helped to ease their anxiety.

- ❖ Participants identified the role of service staff as a significant positive. This included a specific focus on the practical and emotional support provided by service staff, highlighted as particularly important for the success of individuals' initial transition into homeless services and temporary accommodation.
- ❖ Views were generally positive on temporary accommodation, and to some extent this reflected real anxiety prior to accessing accommodation. However, a small number of participants did encounter difficulties adjusting to issues such as a lack of privacy, sharing facilities, noise, and the mix of residents, and these could have a significant impact on their mental health. A longer-term concern for some participants was a feeling that their "life is on hold" while they are in temporary accommodation.
- ❖ Interviews identified some lack of understanding around accessing a permanent social tenancy, and particularly the extent to which individuals are required to make separate applications to each landlord, and how priority operates across different landlords.

1 USERS OF HOMELESS SERVICES

- 1.1 The statutory objective of the Scottish Housing Regulator is to safeguard and promote the interests of tenants and others using social landlords' services. This currently includes around 40,000 people and their families who may become homeless and are seeking help from local authorities.
- 1.2 The SHR National Panel research in 2015/16 included gathering feedback from people who had recently used homeless services across Scotland. The research involved individual in-person interviews with 51 people to find out more about their experiences of accessing services and finding accommodation. This work follows on from the 2014 SHR Housing Options Thematic Inquiry and SHR will use the feedback to inform its regulation of homeless services and housing options.
- 1.3 Due to the limited number of Panel members with experience of using homeless services, and the challenges of retaining homeless service users as long-term Panel members, this fieldwork strand extended beyond existing Panel members. Findings presented here are based on feedback from individuals in temporary homeless hostel accommodation, in dispersed temporary accommodation, and who had recently accessed a social tenancy via the homeless service.
- 1.4 The interviews focused on a number of broad areas of experience for users of homeless services – (i) accessing services and temporary accommodation, (ii) aspects of services which make the greatest difference to individuals' circumstances and experiences, (iii) challenges and difficulties experienced, and (iv) views on temporary and permanent accommodation. We consider the main points emerging across each of these themes over the following pages.

Accessing homeless services

As noted above, the people interviewed included a mix of new homeless service users, and those with (sometimes extensive) prior experience of homeless services. Feedback makes clear that these individuals often have quite different experiences in accessing homeless services:

- 1.5 Around half of participants had previously presented as homeless, and it was clear that the extent of any prior experience (and knowledge) of "the system" has a significant impact on individuals' experience of accessing homeless services.
- 1.6 In terms of understanding how to access homeless services, most of those without prior experience had made an initial approach to their local Council office, or had been pointed by family or friends towards a specific homeless service access point. This latter route reflects the number of participants who had been "sofa surfing" with family and friends prior to making contact with the homeless service.

- 1.7 A minority of participants referred to having difficulty accessing homeless services. This included those who reported negative experiences of their first approach to Council offices (where these were not local housing or homeless service access points), and who felt that staff handling their initial approach lacked some understanding of their circumstances. A small number of individuals had also received support from third sector organisations to access services (e.g. appealing homeless decisions, understanding rights).
- 1.8 In terms of accessing temporary accommodation, participants were generally positive about the speed with which services had found accommodation. This included a mix of individuals who had presented as homeless to Council services (often requiring immediate accommodation), and those who had made a more planned move where they had an identified exit date for their current accommodation (including those in institutions). Many participants expressed their gratitude around the speed with which homeless services were able to find them accommodation. Nevertheless, there remained some who referred to having made multiple approaches to homeless services before suitable temporary accommodation could be found.
- 1.9 A common point highlighted by participants, was the degree of emotional distress experienced by individuals seeking to access homeless services. This was most acute for those without prior experience of services, but was also raised by those who had previously presented as homeless, and focused primarily on the uncertainty around “where I might end up”. Many references to positive aspects of homeless services were in the context of helping to reduce anxiety and stress experienced by service users.

Aspects of service most valued by service users

Engagement with homeless service users included a specific focus on identifying the most valued aspects of service, in terms of individuals’ experience of services and in improving their circumstances and wellbeing. As is noted above, a number of participants made reference to the levels of anxiety and emotional distress experienced prior to and during their experience of homeless services. This was of particular relevance to the specific points highlighted below – for many participants, the extent to which these aspects of service reduced their levels of anxiety was a key factor in the value they are ascribed.

- 1.10 Participants identified the role of service staff, and particularly those in temporary accommodation units, as a significant positive. Staff were described as friendly and approachable, and crucially as treating individuals with respect - “they treat you like a normal person”, “they really care for you”. These attributes were seen as especially important in enabling service users to raise concerns or issues. Some of those with previous experience of homeless services also referred to differences in levels of staff contact associated with the size of temporary accommodation units. This appeared to relate primarily to larger units where the number of residents means that staff have less one-to-one time with individuals, although some also referred to differences in staffing arrangements resulting in less contact time with staff.

Some participants were clearly aware of differing staff availability across accommodation units, and this appeared to be a factor in their experience of these services.

- 1.11 The practical and emotional support provided by service staff was also highlighted by nearly all participants – and was a key focus for those with mental health and/or other particular needs. This was identified as vital to the success of individuals’ initial transition into the service and temporary accommodation, and also the transition to a permanent tenancy for those who had made this move. Participants referred here to support from homeless service staff and temporary accommodation support staff, and also from other services providing counselling, information and advice, and employability support.
- 1.12 A number of participants who had been sleeping rough and/or moving between friends and family prior to accessing homeless services clearly saw providing “a roof over my head” as the most significant aspect of their experience of homeless services to date. These participants emphasised the importance of the safety and security of temporary accommodation, emphasising the extent to which the accommodation was “calmer” than previous living arrangements. Some participants felt that this had contributed to a stabilising or improvement in their mental health while in temporary accommodation.
- 1.13 The importance of “a roof over my head” was also reflected in a broader point raised by a number of participants, that the ultimate outcome of their experience of homeless services (in finding suitable settled accommodation) was their over-riding concern.

Challenges and difficulties for users of homeless service

Participants also made reference to a number of specific issues and aspects of service which had caused them difficulty during their time using homeless services. Again a number of these points were raised in the context of emotional difficulties experienced by service users, although some issues reflected more practical concerns:

- 1.14 Difficulties adjusting to the living arrangements in temporary accommodation were mentioned by a number of participants – and especially those without prior experience of homeless services. This included reference to sharing of facilities, noise, “house rules” around visitors and curfew times (although some felt that rules helped them to feel more secure), and the balance between an accommodation unit being a temporary home for residents and a place of work for staff.
- 1.15 Participants also referred to difficulties adjusting to the mix of needs accommodated within some accommodation units, particularly where this included those with significant mental health and/or substance misuse problems. Most participants appeared to have made these adjustments, but a small number reported significant ongoing difficulties.

- 1.16 The uncertainty around transitions into and out of homeless services and temporary accommodation was also referenced by participants. This was clearly a cause of significant anxiety for some. The time taken for services to find a temporary accommodation place, and the length of time that individuals may be required to remain within temporary accommodation were of particular concern here.
- 1.17 A small number of participants reported having been initially placed in temporary accommodation which they felt was not suitable for their needs. These suggested that they had to accept such places, sometimes to the detriment of their wellbeing and mental health even where this was a relatively short stay.
- 1.18 A number of those currently in temporary accommodation units suggested that they were “trapped”, unable to work 16 hours or more due to the level of rent payable if they are not in receipt of Housing Benefit. Some participants explicitly stated that they had to choose between looking for work, and looking for alternative accommodation. In this context, some suggested a need for greater emphasis on training and employability for those in temporary accommodation, to better prepare for a move to settled accommodation.
- 1.19 A range of practical difficulties were also mentioned, particularly around budgeting and food. This included reference to delays in benefit payments.
- 1.20 Interviews identified some lack of understanding around accessing a permanent social tenancy. This was typically in relation to the extent to which individuals are required to make separate applications to each landlord, and how priority operates across different allocations policies.

Views on accommodation

Finally, the research sought to gauge homeless service users’ views and experience of accommodation. Most participants were currently in temporary accommodation (a mix of hostel and dispersed units) but the research also included a small number who had moved to a permanent tenancy. Across this mix of circumstances, fieldwork explored views and experiences in relation to temporary and permanent accommodation, in relation to the accommodation itself and also any concerns or difficulties around settling in to accommodation.

Temporary accommodation

- 1.21 Participants were generally positive around their experience of temporary accommodation. This included comments from those without prior experience of homeless services that accommodation was “a pleasant surprise” and “better than expected”. These comments reflected some real anxiety amongst these participants prior to accessing temporary accommodation.

- 1.22 As noted earlier, participants did identify some difficulties around a lack of privacy, sharing facilities, noise, and adjusting to the mix of residents. Most made clear that they had made this adjustment without significant difficulty, but it was clear that for the small number of participants still affected by these issues, these could have a significant impact on their mental health and wellbeing.
- 1.23 A longer-term concern for some participants was a feeling that their “life is on hold” while they are in temporary accommodation. This was raised in relation to education and training, employment, and family life (particularly access to children under shared custody arrangements). These concerns were most significant for a small number of participants who felt that they had been “forgotten about” as they now had secure accommodation, and who could not see any prospect of a move to settled accommodation in the short-term.

Permanent accommodation

- 1.24 Feedback on permanent accommodation is based primarily on a small number of those research participants who had moved to a permanent tenancy, but also takes account of the views and concerns expressed by those still seeking permanent housing.
- 1.25 Comments from those in permanent accommodation were typically focused on the process of settling into their new accommodation, and the importance of assistance provided by homeless services and others. This included furniture packs, practical assistance to make the initial move, and support around “settling in” (including budgeting). Participants also highlighted the importance of wider emotional support, and in some cases more ongoing support to sustain a tenancy – particularly important for those where this may be the first time living on their own.
- 1.26 A number of those in temporary accommodation also expressed some apprehension around these aspects of a move to permanent accommodation, although most were relatively confident about a move to permanent accommodation. Specific concerns related to furnishing a home, and the practical and emotional support that they may require to sustain a tenancy.
- 1.27 These participants also expressed some concerns around how long they may have to wait for permanent accommodation, and the likelihood of finding accommodation that meets their needs (in terms of location, size and health or mobility needs).

APPENDIX: PANEL MEMBERSHIP

The National Panel was established in spring/summer 2013 as a way for the Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) to engage with tenants and other users of social landlord services. The National Panel fits into SHR's wider approach to communication and engagement with users of social landlord services, and is used to gauge priorities and experiences – and in this way help to shape SHR's focus in its role as regulator of social landlords.

As a mechanism for gathering the views of tenants and other service users, a significant element of the Panel's value is as an accessible group of engaged individuals willing to participate in consultation exercises. As such the focus for the Panel is on ensuring a good cross-section of tenants and other service users, rather than achieving an exact match to the wider service user population.

A total of 57 new members joined the Panel throughout 2015-16, taking the **total membership to 481 as at June 2016**. The Panel is open to anyone who is a social housing tenant or uses social landlords' services. Membership is diverse and includes people from urban and rural areas, across age bands, local authority and RSL tenants. Anyone interested in joining the Panel should contact [Craigforth](#). Contact details are available on its website.

The results reported here are based on in-person individual depth interviews that took place in February/March 2016. Craigforth worked with a number of homeless service providers and support organisations to identify individuals who would be willing to participate in the research.

For more details on Panel membership and profile, please see the [Year 3 Headlines Report](#) (Annex).

