



SHELTER SCOTLAND BRIEFING: ABERDEEN'S HOUSING EMERGENCY, 5 SEPTEMBER 2024

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.

Where we are now

- **Aberdeen is in the grip of a devastating housing emergency that is damaging lives.**
- **The council's own workers have rated their own services as 'Red' in ALACHO's latest RAG rating – staff simply do not have the tools to respond to the emergency situation.**
- **The Scottish Housing Regulator has placed Aberdeen's homelessness services at a heightened risk of systemic failure – this is a problem that goes beyond existing work in the city and requires an emergency response.**
- **Current interventions, although welcome, do not address the need for structural change in the city's housing and homelessness system.**
- **Declaring a housing emergency in Aberdeen will show Aberdonians that their representatives understand the scale of the problems facing our communities and will create an imperative to take urgent and radical action to find solutions.**
- **The declaration must be matched by commitment to develop a Housing Emergency Action Plan which identifies where the council can make progress, acknowledging existing work, and identifies where additional support is needed.**

Evidencing Aberdeen's Housing Emergency

- **Live homelessness applications up 64% in the year to September 2023.**
- **A 105% increase in the number of children in temporary accommodation in the year to March 2024.**
- **Households in temporary accommodation up 11% in the year to March 2024.¹**
- **534 breaches of the Unsuitable Accommodation Order in 2023/24, up 143% since 2022/23**
- **Around 360 council properties deemed to be unsafe due to the presence of RAAC.**
- **The Scottish Housing Regulator forced to state that the city's homelessness services are at 'heightened risk of systemic failure'.²**
- **Over 1,300 properties classed as voids, as of 31 March 2024.³**
- **Over £12.5m of rental income lost due to void properties since 2019.⁴**

If we fail to tackle the emergency in the city, more and more families will be stuck in the homelessness system, damaging lives and fostering lifelong disadvantage and trauma for children across Aberdeen. None of us should be prepared to stand by and let that happen.

¹ Scottish Government (2023), [Homelessness in Scotland, update to 30 September 2023](#).

² Scottish Housing Regulator, [Aberdeen City Council Engagement Plan 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025](#).

³ Aberdeen City Council (2024), Transitioning towards Rapid Rehousing Performance Report Year 5.

⁴ Annual Return on the Charter, Indicator 18.2 Rent Lost through empty properties.

Why declare?

The declaration creates an **imperative to act**. It acknowledges the scale of the problem we are facing and says to those suffering at the sharp end of the housing emergency that we hear you, and we are going to do whatever it takes to help.

A declaration **acknowledges the extreme circumstances we are in**, that current responses are not adequate in the face of deepening problems and the shock of the RAAC emergency, and commits us to moving forward together. **A declaration is a call to action and must be a starting point for substantial actions** to tackle the housing emergency.

The nature and urgency of the emergency would **validate action on allocations, public land, and planning that would not be appropriate during normal times**. It can strengthen the council's hand when advocating for Aberdeen's interests with national governments on issues such as RAAC, and strengthen the case for the introduction of innovative new policies such as compulsory sale and purchase orders that would not be appropriate during normal times.

Existing approaches, such as the ongoing work alongside Homewards, add value to efforts to tackle homelessness. However, **current plans are not making the structural change needed across the whole housing system, and we continue to see a worsening picture in the city**. The recent report from ALACHO – based on evidence from the council's own workers – and the Scottish Housing Regulator placing homelessness services in the city at heightened risk of systemic failure show the deepening problem.

The Regulator's landmark intervention on the city's homelessness services must be read in the context of **routine breaching of legal duties and people's housing rights not being upheld**. This is unacceptable and we know that this impacts on already disadvantaged communities more than on others. **The system is broken and biased, and the council is breaking the law as a consequence**. It is an emergency, and the council should acknowledge that.

It is vital that a declaration is backed up by the development of a Housing Emergency Action Plan that sets out the actions the council will take to tackle issues in the city, but also, crucially, where it is unable to do so without additional support. **Aberdeen City Council did not create this emergency on its own, and it cannot fix it alone**. But it can only fix it if councillors acknowledge the scale of the problem and commit to an emergency response to tackle it.

Trapped in the system

The latest statistics show more people becoming trapped in Aberdeen's homelessness system for prolonged periods of time:

- There were 725 live homelessness applications on 30 September 2023, an increase of 64% compared to the previous year – reflecting a growing backlog in the system
- The number of children in temporary accommodation increased by 105%, reaching 174 as of the end of March 2024
- The number of households stuck in temporary accommodation increased by 10% in the year to March 2024
- 141 more households entered temporary accommodation than left it between April and September 2023

The homelessness system in Aberdeen is busier than ever, and the growing backlog in homelessness services and temporary accommodation proves the system is struggling to cope.

Housing rights not being upheld

The increasing pressure on homelessness services in the city means that Aberdeen City Council is often unable to meet its legal duties to households applying as homeless. This is particularly challenging around the Unsuitable Accommodation Order.

The latest official statistics show:

- 534 instances of a household being kept in temporary accommodation which was deemed by law to be unsuitable to their needs (in breach of the Unsuitable Accommodation Order) – up 143% in a year.

To be clear, this means the local authority is routinely breaking the law. The struggles Aberdeen City Council is facing in upholding the law on housing and homelessness rights were [noted by the Scottish Housing Regulator](#) as part of their unprecedented set of interventions on Scotland's homelessness services.

The Regulator has said that homelessness services in Aberdeen are at 'heightened risk of systemic failure' due to an inability to uphold existing housing rights, and may soon be unable to respond to demand from people in need of support. This intervention by the Regulator portrays a homelessness service unable to meet demand, and staff within the council being let down by a broken housing system.

Council staff have equally acknowledged the scale of the challenge in the city, rating themselves as RED on all counts in ALACHO's latest survey of housing officers across Scotland. Quite simply, staff are being let down by political choices at UK, Scottish and local level, and citizens across Aberdeen are paying the price for that.

Case study: Unsuitable Accommodation Order breach

Our client presented as homeless after a relationship breakdown following a spell living with a sibling. They were provided temporary accommodation in a hotel in Aberdeen city centre which had no cooking or laundry facilities, apart from a kettle and access to the staff microwave. The hotel was extremely noisy due to being opposite a nightclub.

Our client suffered from a variety of mental health issues which exacerbated their situation. Despite our advocacy requesting they be moved to suitable temporary accommodation, our **client remained in the hotel for over a month, in breach of the Unsuitable Accommodation Order. When challenged, Aberdeen City Council acknowledged the UAO breach but said there was nothing they could do due to the level of demand on their services.** Our client was finally provided with permanent accommodation, before they had received an offer of suitable temporary accommodation, following intervention from Shelter Scotland's law service.

Our client said: *"Life completely changed being in the hotel, I began to isolate myself from friends. My mental health declined; my diet was terrible. Day to day living became very hard. I felt I wanted to give up, I got to the point where I didn't have any fight left in me. I didn't want to be around other people, I just wanted to be alone. In doing so, I felt like I lost control and lost who I was.*

"After three months of living in the hotel, I was offered a permanent flat through a housing association. I came to view the flat and, it felt like I'd won the lottery. As soon as I left the viewing, I burst into tears. It felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders, I felt hope for the first time since becoming homeless."

Homes not fit for purpose

Aberdeen's housing emergency has been deepened by the crisis in Balnagask and the presence of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) within around 500 homes.

This issue is symptomatic of Aberdeen's wider housing emergency, and mirrors many of the issues our services have seen in recent years on homes not being fit for purpose or meeting the needs of individuals. Issues such as damp and mould have been commonplace and continue to damage the health and wellbeing of individuals across Aberdeen.

The immediate safety concerns around RAAC have been swiftly dealt with by the local authority to the best of their ability, but this is the kind of shock to the housing system that an already broken system does not need and will likely have implications for years to come.

The impact of the RAAC issue as well as the need to find homes for refugees and people seeking asylum, particularly from Ukraine, shows the additional strain that Aberdeen's housing system is under. It is absolutely right that the city is doing all it can to welcome people fleeing war and violence, but the city needs additional resources from Scottish and UK governments to ensure those individuals and families who are making Aberdeen their home are supported to make their lives here. A fully functioning housing system would be better able to respond to these emergency situations.

The council is failing to meet its own targets on allocations to homeless households, while void levels have increased "exponentially" according to the council's own figures – with over 1,325 lettable properties marked as void at the end of March 2024. Data from the Scottish Housing Regulator shows that Aberdeen City Council has lost more rental income due to voids than any other local authority over the past 4 years. Over £12.5m has been lost over the period – 17.2% of the national total.

Failure to make full use of existing stock, coupled with pressures emerging from some homes being unsafe and unsuitable, is deepening the housing emergency in Aberdeen, and making it more difficult for the city to be the open, welcoming place we all want it to be.

Case study: Disrepair

Our client was living in an Aberdeen City Council property with her two children but the conditions were having such a negative impact on their lives that they chose to move into a private rented property instead.

The **council property suffered from infestation, disrepair, mould, anti-social behaviour, as well as being cold**. The property was so cold that the client and her daughter slept in the same bed, while the younger son often stayed with his grandmother. His school noted that his health was much improved when he did so. Antisocial behaviour also led to the client sleeping in her car.

Repairs were not carried out with the required urgency by Aberdeen City Council, leading to the Housing Support Officer to recommend a move to the private rented sector instead. Our client said: *"The move from Council to private has been life changing mentally and physically... not having mould or the fear of slipping down icy indoor stairs is a major relief in itself, not to mention the lack of beasties in our tap water and coming from every crevice."*

Declare a housing emergency

Business as usual is not working. It is time for the council to come together, declare a housing emergency, and take the action needed to respond to this emergency situation. People cannot wait any longer.