

Scottish Housing Regulator

National Panel of Tenants and Service Users 2018/19

Thematic Report: Homelessness Services

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. This report provides an overview of findings from the 2018/19 programme of National Panel engagement commissioned by the Scottish Housing Regulator.

Background

- 1.2. The National Panel was established in 2013 as a way for the Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) to engage with tenants and other users of social landlord services. The Panel fits into SHR's wider approach to communication and engagement with service users. The Panel is used to gauge the priorities and experiences of service users. This helps to shape SHR's focus in its role as regulator of social landlords.
- 1.3. The Panel seeks to engage with a good cross-section of tenants and service users. The current membership includes tenants, factored owners, tenants of social rented Gypsy/Traveller sites and people who use homelessness services. A large-scale Panel refreshment exercise over the last year has involved the replacement of more than a third of the existing membership to maintain engagement levels. Recruitment to the Panel is ongoing to ensure that the Panel continues to reflect the views of all key groups of service users. The Panel is widely promoted through several channels to ensure that those not normally involved in engaging with social landlords are represented. For example, more than three quarters of Panel members are not involved in RTOs.
- 1.4. Panel membership stands at 425 at the time of reporting, although this number is expected to increase over the coming months as new members continue to join. A profile of the current Panel membership is appended to this report.

The 2018/19 programme

- 1.5. The work programme this year was based around several key themes, including:
- tenant participation;
 - digital access to services;
 - rent affordability;
 - Gypsy/Traveller site standards; and
 - the experience of people who use homelessness services.
- 1.6. Panel engagement across these themes incorporated four main engagement strands:
- A full Panel survey issued to all retained and new Panel members (overall response rate of 60%).
 - In-depth telephone interview engagement with Panel members to explore themes emerging through the survey in more detail (total of 41 interviews).
 - Interview-based research with homeless service users through visits to homeless service access points and telephone interviews. This included those currently in temporary accommodation (supported and dispersed), and those who had been re-housed through the homeless system. Total of 69 interviews across 8 local authority areas.

- Interview-based research with tenants of social rented Gypsy/Traveller sites through a mix of site visits and telephone interviews. Total of 55 interviews across 10 sites.
- 1.7. This report integrates quantitative survey results and qualitative findings to provide a rounded view of participants' views and experiences.

2. USERS OF HOMELESS SERVICES

Key messages

A lack of clarity on entitlement to accommodation and the suitability of temporary accommodation were key concerns when first contacting homelessness services - particularly for those without prior experience of services.

Participants' circumstances contributed to the diversity of needs at the point of contacting homelessness services. For those reaching crisis point without alternative accommodation, speed of service response was the major concern.

The suitability and safety of temporary accommodation were key to participants' experience. Key challenges included feeling unsafe, poor condition housing, disruption for children and financial difficulties.

A substantial proportion had stayed in multiple temporary accommodation options. The frequency of moves and associated insecurity had been a challenge for some, particularly those with children.

Participants feeling comfortable with staff and able to speak honestly about their needs appear to have been key factors for those who have had positive outcomes.

Time taken to access settled accommodation was a challenge for those who felt their temporary accommodation was unsuitable for their needs. Some were unsure of whether they could sustain their current temporary placement for the time required.

- 2.1. The work programme for 2018/19 qualitative fieldwork involved individual interviews with current service users and people who have recently used statutory homelessness services. This included current Panel members with experience of homelessness services, and engagement across a number of local authorities to access current and recent service users.
- 2.2. Findings are based on qualitative feedback gathered through in-person, telephone and email interviews with 69 households with experience of homelessness services across 8 local authority areas. Reflecting the focus on experience of temporary accommodation, all interviewees were currently or had recently been in temporary units. This included households currently in dispersed temporary accommodation, those in supported temporary accommodation, and those who had accessed a social tenancy via homelessness services.
- 2.3. Fieldwork focused on several broad areas of service experience. This included experience of first accessing homelessness services, of accessing temporary accommodation, views on temporary accommodation, and experience of accessing settled accommodation via homelessness services. Interviews also considered support needs (including specifically for those with children), and sought to identify the aspects of homelessness services which had the greatest (positive or negative) impact on service users' experience.

Accessing and engaging with homelessness services

- 2.4. Most participants had accessed homelessness services via their local Council access point or housing office – the latter most common for those with prior experience of homelessness services. The majority had accessed services without any difficulty, although a small number referred to challenges explaining their circumstances and needs to frontline Council staff. This included language difficulties for those with English as an additional language, lack of clarity around entitlements (for those with refugee status or returning to Scotland from outwith the UK), and a small number who felt that staff had been ‘dismissive’ of their needs. Some noted the role of family or advocacy services to help them navigate this initial engagement with services.
- 2.5. Some had accessed temporary accommodation direct from prison or hospital, with the process managed by a key worker. Participants indicated this support was vital to their experience of the homelessness service. Some felt that they would have been unable to navigate the service without support from a trusted key worker.

The impact of service users’ circumstances and needs

- 2.6. Research participants had contacted homelessness services from a diverse range of circumstances. This included leaving institutions, following relationship breakdown including instances of domestic violence, leaving the family home for the first time and some who had lost their previous tenancy (most commonly related to addiction, rent arrears and health needs). A substantial proportion of participants had spent significant time without settled accommodation prior to accessing homelessness services. Some had stayed in the same insecure circumstances for that time, including examples of significant overcrowding such as parents and young children in family members’ sitting rooms for weeks or months. Others had spent a similar period ‘sofa surfing’ between friends and family members.
- 2.7. It was clear that this variety of circumstances contributed to the diversity of participants’ needs at the point of contacting homelessness services. For example, some of those in highly overcrowded accommodation felt able to remain in these circumstances for a short time if this meant they could access more suitable temporary accommodation. In contrast, those without alternative accommodation were focused primarily on accessing accommodation as soon as possible. The type and quality of accommodation were less of a priority for these service users at the time of contacting homelessness services.
- 2.8. A substantial proportion had experienced anxiety and depression following the breakdown of their previous circumstances and lengthy periods of insecure accommodation. Some had reached crisis point when contacting homelessness services, without alternative accommodation and some unable to pay for transport to services. These were important factors in the level of anxiety experienced, and in the speed of response required from services.

In their words...

“I’d been staying with friends and family for a while – until I used up all of my options.”



- 2.9. Around half of participants had no prior experience of services and this had a significant bearing on their initial experience of presenting as homeless. The most significant issue for those without prior experience was a lack of clarity around *‘what will happen to me’*. This was primarily in the form of anxiety around the kind of temporary accommodation that services would provide. Some also referred to concerns regarding whether they would have a wait to access temporary accommodation (particularly where they did not have alternative accommodation), and how long it may take to access their own tenancy.

In their words...

“I was really anxious... you hear all sorts of stories about the accommodation.”



The role of service staff

- 2.10. Feedback around initial engagement with homelessness services was generally very positive. This highlighted the role of service staff in developing an understanding of individuals’ circumstances and needs, in putting participants at ease and treating them with respect, and in providing clarity on how their application would be dealt with and what they were entitled to. Several participants specifically noted that staff had been a key element in dealing with their concerns when first approaching services, and that this initial engagement started the development of trust.
- 2.11. All participants noted the importance of input from housing support workers and others. This included some who had support in place prior to presenting as homeless, and others who had accessed support for the first time through homelessness services. The extent to which participants felt comfortable engaging with support workers, and in particular felt able to speak honestly about their needs and circumstances, appears to have been a key factor for those who have had positive outcomes. This included several examples of services working with individuals to find a support worker they felt comfortable with (age, gender and language use were noted as key criteria).

In their words...

“The staff were lovely, really understanding. I was worried but they were so helpful.”



- 2.12. A small number of participants had difficulty building trust with support staff, had not had a consistent worker through their time with the homelessness service, and/or had felt that they had insufficient contact with their support worker. This appeared to have had a significant impact for these participants in terms of feeling able to ask for support with issues such as benefits and financial management, and feelings of isolation for those without access to informal support networks.

Temporary accommodation

- 2.13. Reflecting the focus of the research, all research participants had experience of temporary accommodation. Around two thirds were in temporary accommodation at the time of interview, most in supported or dispersed accommodation¹. A small

¹ Participants in supported accommodation typically had their own room or bedsit in a unit with shared kitchen and/or lounge facilities, and with on-site staff providing support (most with a 24 hour

number were in bed and breakfast accommodation at the time of interview, although a substantial proportion had previous experience of bed and breakfasts.

Accessing temporary accommodation

- 2.14. Most felt that they been able to access temporary accommodation within the time expected, and most had done so within 24 to 48 hours. Speed of access was a key factor in participants' initial experience of homelessness services, particularly for those without access to alternative accommodation. This included some who had been placed in emergency accommodation for a short period (typically up to 1-2 weeks) while the service found more suitable temporary accommodation.
- 2.15. Some had waited for a period while the service accessed suitable temporary accommodation. Feedback indicated that services were clear on entitlement to emergency accommodation, and staff were sensitive to individual needs in agreeing whether they would be best served by remaining in their current accommodation for a period. While some highlighted the emotional distress and uncertainty while they waited for temporary accommodation, most felt they had been in a position to do so. However, a small number felt that they had to wait longer than was sustainable, and that services had not recognised the difficulties caused by having to seek accommodation with family and friends. This was particularly the case for those who had continued to 'sofa surf' while waiting for temporary accommodation.

Moves between temporary units

- 2.16. A substantial proportion of participants had stayed in multiple temporary accommodation options. This typically involved an initial period in bed and breakfast or hotel accommodation before a more sustainable option became available, although some had moved between different supported or dispersed accommodation options. Some described positive examples where services had responded to participants' difficulties with their initial accommodation placement to find something more suitable. For example, some noted that changing temporary accommodation had helped to access the level of support required, had provided a more suitable mix of residents, had supported access to their children, had enabled more regular contact with family and friends, and had reduced costs (for those paying for accommodation).
- 2.17. However, others referred to disruption and distress caused by moves between multiple temporary accommodation options. Several participants noted that their initial stay in bed and breakfast accommodation had effectively been day-to-day, as they were asked to make daily contact with the homelessness service for an update on alternatives. This had contributed to their feeling unsettled and anxious during this time. Others had received notice of only a few hours prior to a move, causing difficulty for those working or attending college, and/or without access to transport.

In their words...

"Moving so much has been unsettling. My daughter was really stressed and not eating."



presence). Those in dispersed accommodation were in self-contained flats or houses taken from the landlord's 'mainstream' housing stock for use as temporary accommodation.

- 2.18. Several of those with children had moved between multiple temporary units, and this had been a particular challenge. Some noted that moves had enabled them to access more suitable accommodation and appreciated that the outcome justified the disruption. However, others felt that moving between temporary accommodation units had caused undue distress to their children. This included reference to the time taken for children to adjust to new environments, particularly where parents struggled to make bed and breakfast accommodation feel 'homely'. Some suggested that multiple moves had caused children to feel unsettled and added to difficulty adjusting to new accommodation. It was also noted that multiple moves caused significant disruption to routines around school, particularly for those without transport.

The quality and suitability of temporary accommodation

- 2.19. Feedback indicated a diversity of views on the quality and suitability of temporary accommodation. Most were broadly positive about the condition and quality of dispersed and supported accommodation, and on the provision of furniture and white goods to allow individuals to settle in quickly. Others reported problems relating to the quality of accommodation, with the most significant being:

- Poor condition accommodation in need of repair and/or redecorating
- Properties being difficult to heat, and subject to condensation and mildew. This included a small number who felt unwilling to bathe small children in the bathroom due to poor condition and mildew.
- Some lacking amenities that participants had expected to be provided, including freezer facilities and small kitchen appliances such as microwave and toaster.

In their words...

"It really wasn't suitable for children...not safe and intimidating for my daughter."



- 2.20. Location of temporary accommodation was an important factor for a range of participants. The most significant concerns related to the quality of the immediate environment, and whether participants felt safe in the local area. This was a particular concern for households with children; some felt unable to allow their children out to play due to drug paraphernalia and threatening behaviour from neighbours. Others noted that location had been important for their access to family and friends as informal support networks, and/or for access to their children. Some reported lengthy public transport journeys or being required to walk for up to an hour to access children and family members. For others, location was important to ensure they do not have contact with former friends or neighbours where this could undermine their progress and recovery.

In their words...

"We're a long way from family and there aren't many buses...only see them once a week."



- 2.21. Most participants reported having taken some time to adjust to temporary accommodation. For those in **dispersed temporary accommodation** this typically related to feeling isolated, and in some cases adjusting to living alone for the first time (or for the first time in some years). A small number had also felt unsafe and experiencing threatening behaviour from neighbours. This included some asylum

seekers and foreign nationals who felt that there had been a racial or xenophobic element to this behaviour.

- 2.22. Support from homelessness service staff had been important in helping these participants to adjust. This included support around benefits and financial management, access to food banks, and accessing other support or groups in the area. Where participants were able to bring some of their own furniture this had also helped the settling in process, particularly for those with children. However, others indicated that further moves had been required to access accommodation where they felt safe.
- 2.23. Challenges adjusting to **supported temporary accommodation** were most commonly highlighted by those without prior experience of homelessness services. These participants had been anxious when first accessing the accommodation and took some time to settle-in. This included adjusting to the form of accommodation - some had found the move from a family home to a single room a particular challenge. Participants also noted that it could take time to adjust to living under 'house rules' for the first time, and to sharing common facilities and spaces with other residents.
- 2.24. Service staff had again played a key role in the settling-in process for these participants. Building a relationship with a dedicated key worker had been a real positive for many of those in supported accommodation. This was in terms of practical assistance with benefits, access to food banks and attending appointments, but also in having someone with whom participants felt able to speak honestly.
- 2.25. Participants typically referred to **bed and breakfast accommodation** as being the most challenging. Several referred to being anxious when the possibility of bed and breakfast accommodation was raised, and some did experience significant difficulties. This was most commonly around making accommodation seem 'homely', particularly for those with children. Some had felt that the accommodation was unsuitable and unsafe for their children, particularly where there was a high incidence of addictions amongst other residents. Participants also referred to difficulties cooking for a family within the bed and breakfast, some reported having been overcrowded in bed and breakfast accommodation, and some of those with English as an additional language found this a barrier to adjusting to the accommodation.
- 2.26. However, some had found bed and breakfast to be a supportive environment, particularly in accommodation with fewer residents with addictions. This included examples of households with children being placed in bed and breakfasts where accommodation staff had helped households to settle-in. These participants, primarily those requiring emergency accommodation, suggested that bed and breakfast was not necessarily a negative short-term option in their circumstances point.

In their words...

"They found a lovely B&B. Staff were really nice and understanding, helped me settle in."



The role of support officers

- 2.27. Across these forms of accommodation, participants' experience highlights the role of practical and emotional support in enabling them to adjust to and sustain temporary accommodation. This was most commonly in relation to benefits and financial

management, including access to emergency funds for those subject to delays in receipt of Universal Credit. Participants also referred to support staff providing referrals to other services and groups, including food banks and local community groups. In addition to this practical support, it was also clear that relationships built with support staff have been crucial to individuals' experience.

- 2.28. A substantial proportion of participants specifically referred to the importance of having a dedicated support officer. This included some where this ongoing relationship had been important in the service building an accurate understanding of their needs. A small number suggested that they had received less input from their support worker after accessing temporary accommodation, including some who had dealt with staff in the local housing office at this stage rather than the homelessness support team. These participants felt that housing staff had been less understanding of their needs, including the needs of homeless households with children, and this had contributed to a sense of being lower priority once housed in temporary accommodation.

In their words...

"[Support workers] take the time to get to know you, I can talk to them about anything."



Settled accommodation

- 2.29. Around a third of participants had accessed settled accommodation via homelessness services. This included those who had their own tenancy at the time of interview, and those who were in temporary accommodation but had previously accessed settled accommodation through homelessness services.

Time taken to accessing settled accommodation

- 2.30. Feedback indicates that participants were varied in their expectations of the length of wait they may have to access settled accommodation. Some reported that service staff had provided an indication of the length of wait they might expect at the point of presenting as homeless. However, most indicated that services had not been able to provide information on likely timescale. As such, other residents in temporary accommodation appears to have been important in shaping individuals' expectations.
- 2.31. Most of those who had accessed settled accommodation indicated that this had been broadly within the time they had expected. Indeed, for some this had happened more quickly than expected, including a mix of those housed through housing register and those via Choice Based Lettings (CBL). Nevertheless, a substantial proportion of participants had waited for a period of 1-2 years or more to access their own tenancy. While this may not have been significantly longer than they had expected, feedback made clear that this length of wait could have a negative impact on individuals' wellbeing and mental health. This was particularly the case where participants had felt unsafe or unhappy in their temporary accommodation.

In their words...

"It could be another year here and we can't stand that. I'm looking for anything better."



- 2.32. In addition to the time taken to be rehoused, the extent to which participants had been kept up to date of their status while staying in temporary accommodation was also an important factor in their view of services. Views were mixed on the extent to which they had been kept up to date of their progress, including some who felt they had been a lower priority after accessing suitable temporary accommodation. However, most had received updates via their support worker and were broadly satisfied with this aspect of the service.
- 2.33. Participants in areas with Choice Based Lettings also reported a mix of experiences. Few had difficulty using CBL systems, and there appears to have been adequate support available to those having difficulty. However, some indicated a lack of clarity around how CBL related to their place on any other housing registers. Moreover, several participants had bid on a substantial number of properties prior to securing their own tenancy. This had contributed to frustration around the length of wait for settled accommodation.

Making the move to settled accommodation

- 2.34. Views on the standard of settled accommodation were broadly positive, and appeared to have been influenced for some by appreciation that they had been able to access their own tenancy. Participants reported some quality and condition issues, including a small number who had felt required to undertake substantial redecorating to their accommodation. However, feedback was positive on landlords' work to remedy any significant condition issues or disrepair.
- 2.35. Participants' experience indicates that the transition into settled accommodation is an important element for tenants going on to sustain their tenancy. Experiences here appear to have been broadly positive. Those who had accessed settled accommodation referred to support from homelessness services and other agencies as helping this settling-in process. This included funding for furniture and white goods, setting up rent and bill payments (including dealing with any rent arrears), and links to other services including education and community groups. Those accessing RSL tenancies also referred to the initial interview as having been a useful opportunity to get to know service staff, and for landlords to understand individuals' circumstances and needs.
- 2.36. Some also referred to the importance of more emotional support when accessing settled accommodation. This included support (while in temporary accommodation) to build confidence and skills, and maintaining contact with households after the move to identify any problems and to act as a social contact. The only negative comments around support were examples where participants felt staff had not been able to maintain sufficient contact after re-housing. Some had experienced loneliness and social isolation, and emphasised that maintaining or establishing new support networks had been important in sustaining their tenancy.

Making a difference for service users

- 2.37. The final part of engagement with users of homelessness services asked participants to consider the process as a whole, to identify the aspects that had made the biggest positive difference and those that had presented the biggest challenge. Consistent with the diversity of experience discussed above, participants mentioned a broad range of positive and negative factors. However, some common themes emerged and these are summarised below.

What has made the biggest positive difference for people using homelessness services?

Suitable and safe accommodation	An over-riding concern for some, particularly those at crisis point. Difficulties accessing services or the length of time in unsuitable accommodation were seen as less significant if the eventual outcome was positive.
Homelessness service staff	Highlighted by all including a focus on staff easing anxiety around the initial application process and taking time to understand service users' needs.
Dedicated housing support officer	Highlighted by most, including the importance of having ' <i>someone on my side</i> '. Some felt the progress they had made had been due in large part to developing an effective relationship with their support worker.
Access to advocacy and other support	An important factor for some, particularly those with refugee status and foreign nationals who had been unclear on their rights.
Minimise number of moves	A substantial proportion of participants had stayed in multiple temporary accommodation options. This was a significant concern for those with children who referred to disruption and distress caused by frequent moves.

What have been the biggest challenges for people using homelessness services?

Feeling unsafe in temporary accomm.	Raised by a minority, but a significant concern for these households (particularly those with children). This included reference to incidence of addictions amongst neighbours and quality of local environment.
Poor condition temporary accomm.	Relatively few referred to disrepair or poor condition, but some had experienced significant condition issues. A particular issue for those with children seeking to make their temporary accommodation feel more 'homely'.
Disruption for those with children	Their wellbeing was the key concern for those with children, with a focus on minimising disruption. Moves away from family/friends and difficulty maintaining schools have been a particular challenge for those without access to a car.
Financial difficulties	A common issue at the time of first accessing services if a new benefit claim was being made. A substantial proportion of participants had to rely on access to emergency funds and financial support from family or friends.
Equality and fair treatment	Some felt they had been treated differently due to ethnicity or nationality, by services, staff in temporary accommodation (particularly B&B) and local residents. Some had taken time to find a support officer with whom they felt comfortable.
Length of wait for settled accomm.	A particular challenge for those living in temporary accommodation that they felt did not meet their needs. Some were unsure whether they would be able to sustain their temporary placement for the time required.

PANEL MEMBERSHIP

The Panel seeks to engage with a good cross-section of tenants and service users. The current membership includes tenants, factored owners, tenants of social rented Gypsy/Traveller sites and people who use homelessness services. In terms of the wider Panel profile, the focus is on ensuring membership includes representation across all socio-demographic groups, rather than achieving an exact match to the wider service user population. In this context, some groups such as those in rural areas have been over-sampled to ensure sufficient volume for more focused engagement within these groups.

Ensuring a balanced Panel membership is also a key element of ongoing promotion and recruitment work. This seeks to expand the reach of the Panel in terms of the size of the membership and representation of specific population subgroups. A Panel refreshment exercise has been undertaken during 2018 and 2019 to replace the longest-standing members and maintain engagement levels. This has involved replacing more than a third of the total membership through recruitment of 191 new members at the time of reporting. As a result the total membership currently stands at 425, although this number is expected to increase over the coming months as new members continue to join.

The current Panel profile suggests a number of areas where further expanding Panel membership would improve representation. As noted above, the aim of ongoing recruitment and promotion work should be on ensuring a sufficient number of members within specific groups, rather than an exact match with the wider population. In this context, the current Panel profile suggests recruitment should seek to boost numbers of black and minority ethnic members, factored owners and potential those aged under 35.

A profile of the current Panel membership is provided over the page.

Current membership		425
Age		
Under 35		14%
35-44		16%
45-59		29%
60-74		29%
75+		10%
Unknown		2%
How would you describe your gender?		
Woman		53%
Man		46%
In another way		1%
Housing Tenure		
Council tenant		41%
RSL tenant		44%
Owner		6%
Gypsy/ Traveller site resident		7%
Unknown		3%
Have used homelessness services		
Yes		4%
No		96%
Ethnicity		
White Scottish, British or Irish		87%
White other (inc Scottish Traveller, Gypsy/ Traveller)		9%
Black Minority Ethnic		2%
Unknown		1%
Disability		
1 or more disabilities		39%
No disability		48%
Unknown		13%
RTO membership		
Member of RTO		24%
Not a member of RTO		76%