

Anti-Poverty Spotlight: Housing and homelessness

As part of our anti-poverty campaign, the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) will be focusing on a different part of social work practice and the impact of poverty.

1. Background

There are many causes of homelessness. From a lack of affordable housing and low incomes, to leaving prison and having nowhere to go. Often being homeless happens through no fault of the individual, and they are a victim of circumstance.

Homelessness is not just rough sleeping. While rough sleepers are visible to services and authorities, many people are sofa-surfing, or living in unsuitable temporary accommodation provided by the local authority. There are also people squatting and/or living in unlawful accommodation such as garden annexes.

People living in low paid jobs, living in poverty, and poor quality of insecure housing are more likely to experience homelessness.

The British Association of Social Workers has [published a position statement on housing and homelessness](#) including recommendations. In January 2022, BASW England worked with Shelter and other organisations to produce [homelessness guidance for social workers](#). While it focuses on English law and policy, it contains a summary of research evidence that is of relevance to other nations in the UK.

2. What legislation does housing and homelessness operate under?

UK-wide:

- Equalities Act 2010

In England and Wales

- Housing Act 2004
- Tenant Fees Act 2019
- Housing (Wales) Act 2014
- Renter Reform Bill 2023 (currently going through Parliament)

In Scotland:

- Housing (Scotland) Act 2014
- Housing (Scotland) Act 2010
- Housing (Scotland) Act 2006

In Northern Ireland:

- Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1981
- Housing (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2010
- Housing (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011

3. How do social workers work under this legislation on this issue?

The provision of suitable, affordable housing plays a vital role in supporting individuals and families. It is thus of central importance to social work and social workers. Social work looks at the needs of the whole person and housing is part of meeting those needs.

Suitable, affordable housing is crucial to effective support and ensuring everyone can be a participating member of society. For example, in terms of adult social care, care leavers, people with mental health problems or families in need.

The risk is that poor housing is so commonplace in the lives of people that social workers cease to notice it. In a phrase used by the [BASW Anti-Poverty Practice Guide](#) housing need becomes part of the 'wallpaper of practice', ever present and thus unnoticed. Even if the current government adopted a policy of investment in new social housing and embarked on massive building programme it would take many years to make good the backlog. Since the housing crisis is not going to be resolved any time soon housing issues will continue underpin the social work task.

4. How does poverty affect this issue?

Since access to adequate housing is primarily about having sufficient money, economically poor people are more likely to be roofless, homeless or to be in overcrowded, inadequate accommodation.

Since people who use social work services are often economically poor, social workers will often be dealing with issues where housing, or more specifically lack of appropriate housing, is a major underlying issue. Disabled or frail elderly people may be in housing which does not meet their needs. Parents with young children may be in temporary 'bed and breakfast' accommodation, care leavers may be 'sofa surfing', asylum seekers may be trapped in poor quality private rented accommodation, victims of domestic violence may be unable to leave their abuser because they have nowhere else to live.

Those with NRPF may face eviction due to a loss of job and because of their status are not entitled to benefits or social housing. Members of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community, although they may not seek 'bricks and mortar' accommodation, face legislation that criminalises setting up encampments on private land¹⁷ and may result in their caravans and mobile homes being confiscated. These are some examples, but there are many other ways that housing issues impact on the task of social work. Underlying all these problems are the high costs of housing and inadequate income to meet not just rental costs, but other accommodation related costs, for example, fuel bills. Those groups that are overrepresented among the economically poor – single parents, women, Disabled people, people from Black and other Minority Ethnic backgrounds, those with No Recourse to 8 Public Funds (NRPF) – will also be overrepresented in those struggling to meet their housing costs. Further, overcrowded and inadequate housing generates health and social problems. Inadequate housing (for example, damp and mould) can lead to worsening health¹⁸. Overcrowded housing means, for example, that it is harder for children to do homework leading to educational under attainment. Poor accommodation has also been identified as a factor in safeguarding children and children coming into care.

5. What is BASW's campaign calling for?

BASW's campaign- Social work stands against poverty- is urging the UK Government to introduce a freeze on evictions during the cost-of-living crisis to prevent further homelessness. BASW UK Chief Executive, Dr Ruth Allen and BASW UK Chair, Julia Ross have written to the Prime Minister and Chancellor calling for this policy to be implemented.

The UK Government implemented a temporary pause on evictions in England as an emergency measure during the covid pandemic. Subject to exceptions, it was not possible to deliver a notice of eviction or execute a warrant or writ of eviction. Notice periods for most types of tenancy were also temporarily extended.

[Research carried out by Shelter](#) found that, since the eviction ban was lifted, no-fault evictions by bailiffs soared by 143%. The risk of homelessness increased by 76%.

Through the Cost of Living (Tenant Protection) (Scotland) Act 2022, the Scottish Government implemented a limited ban on the enforcement of evictions in Scotland from 6 September 2022 as an emergency measure during the cost-of-living crisis. This is expected to remain in place until at least 30 September 2023, with the possibility it could be extended for another 6 months.

6. Further reading

Crisis – <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/about-homelessness/>

Shelter – <https://www.shelter.org.uk/>

St Mungos - <https://www.mungos.org/>

Citizens Advice - <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/housing/homelessness/applying-for-homeless-help/getting-help-from-social-services-if-youre-homeless/>

Professional Social Work magazine - <https://www.basw.co.uk/resources/psw-magazine/psw-online/social-work-and-homelessness>

British Association of Social Workers - <https://www.basw.co.uk/what-we-do/campaigns/homelessness>