

Agenda Item	4
Report No	HP/13/26

The Highland Council

Committee: Housing & Property

Date: 20 May 2026

Report Title: Homelessness Update

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 Homelessness in Scotland is governed by several key pieces of legislation, including: The Housing (Scotland) Act 1987; The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001; and The Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003. Managing, mitigating and supporting people through homelessness is a priority for the Council and touches on a range of services and functions across the organisation.
- 1.2 Local authorities have a statutory duty to assist people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. In recent years, additional legislative requirements have been introduced by the Scottish Government to extend these duties. These changes are intended to improve the quality and standards of temporary accommodation, where required, and to support a more person-centred approach to service delivery that resolves homelessness as quickly and appropriately as possible.
- 1.3 The service is focused on ensuring compliance with statutory duties relating to homelessness, while improving the overall quality and consistency of the service. As a result of the work undertaken by the Housing Options team, together with wider service and provider improvements, the Council continues to be compliant with the relevant legislative requirements. Temporary accommodation placements are provided in self-contained units, with a priority approach applied to families and households with identified additional needs, supported through the targeted use of Council-owned housing stock.
- 1.4 This report provides information on homelessness across Highland, including legislative duties and Highland's performance to addressing homelessness.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to **consider and agree** the progress in mitigating homelessness and delivering secure housing outcomes in Highland.

3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** – There are no additional resource implications arising from this report. There continue to be recurring pressures on the annual General Fund homelessness budget as a result of ongoing homelessness demand. The efforts to increase homelessness prevention activity and the continued good performance in terms of limiting the use of external temporary accommodation, are essential in managing these pressures and mitigating expenditure.
- 3.2 **Legal** – There are no legal implications arising from this report however, the Council has duties under The Housing (Scotland) Act 1987; The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001; and The Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003 and respond to and address homelessness.
- 3.3 **Risk** – The number of people presenting as homeless is demand led. The numbers have been increasing in recent years, a pattern that is mirrored across Scotland. The approaches detailed in the report by the Housing Options team are critical in terms of managing and responding to presentations of homelessness but also, critically, in preventing homelessness occurring in the first place.
- 3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – There are no health and safety implications arising from this report.
- 3.5 **Gaelic** – There are no Gaelic implications arising from this report.

4 Impacts

- 4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.
- 4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.
- 4.3 This is a monitoring and update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5 Background and Legislation

- 5.1 In Scotland, homelessness is defined in section 24 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987. A person is considered homeless if they have no accommodation in the United Kingdom or elsewhere, or if they have accommodation that it would not be reasonable for them to continue to occupy. This includes circumstances where a person is unable to secure entry to their accommodation, where occupation would place them at risk of abuse or violence, or where they have no legal right or entitlement to occupy the accommodation.

- 5.2 Homelessness duties are governed by a range of primary legislation, including the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, the Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003, and the Housing (Scotland) Act 2025. Legislative requirements relating specifically to the type and minimum standards of temporary accommodation are set out in secondary legislation, including the Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2020 and the Homeless Persons (Suspension of Referrals between Local Authorities) (Scotland) Order.
- 5.3 Local authorities are required to adhere to the Scottish Government's Code of Guidance on Homelessness, found here:-
<https://www.gov.scot/policies/homelessness/homelessness-guidance/>
- 5.4 Compliance with Unsuitable Accommodation legislation has presented challenges across all local authorities. Highland remains compliant because of targeted service and provider improvements, which support placements into self-contained temporary accommodation whereby households have sole access to kitchen and bathroom facilities. This includes a prioritised approach for families and households with identified additional needs, making effective use of Council-owned housing.
- 5.5 Supplementary legislation relating to local connection referrals were implemented by the Scottish Government to support individuals and families to exercise choice in settling within different local authority areas. Highland has had 44 applicants from outwith the Highland area since 31 March 2025. This figure is smaller than the majority of other local authorities, particularly urban councils. While it has added some pressure to homelessness demand, it should be noted that the applicants have not all been housed permanently in Highland. As set out below, Highland has been successful in achieving compliance with these additional legislative requirements, although this has required extensive and ongoing work by local Housing Teams to implement and sustain the necessary arrangements.

6 Legislation in Practice

- 6.1 Under the above legislation, local authorities must accept and process homeless applications from individuals who believe they are homeless or who are at risk of homelessness. It is important to note that the vast majority of homeless presentations in Highland are from people who are from or are residing in the communities in which they present and result in allocations of secure tenancies to these same households.
- 6.2 Each homeless application must be subject to investigation to determine whether Highland Council has a statutory duty to provide assistance to the applicant. These investigations may include establishing whether the applicant is homeless or threatened with homelessness, whether they are eligible for assistance, whether they have a local connection, and whether any factors such as intentionality require consideration in line with legislative powers and guidance.
- 6.3 Local authorities may discharge their statutory homelessness duties through a range of housing outcomes, including supporting access to home ownership, the private rented sector, mid-market rent, or securing a social housing tenancy.

- 6.4 The housing service provides housing options advice throughout an applicant's homeless application. As circumstances can change over time housing options that were not previously available may become suitable. Advice and assistance offered to applicants includes the following: -
- Clear, accurate and robust housing options advice with a view to securing appropriate solutions
 - Financial assistance, including access to the Rent Deposit Scheme
 - Liaison with estate agents and private landlords
 - Engagement with Mid-Market Rent providers
 - Referrals to the welfare team to maximise income and in turn, improve housing affordability.
- 6.5 A decision must be reached within 28 days of the homelessness application being submitted. During this assessment period, the Council has a duty to provide suitable temporary accommodation. Highland Council continues to perform strongly in this area, with applications assessed in an average of 15 days, significantly exceeding the statutory timescale.
- 6.6 Where Highland Council determines that no statutory rehousing duty applies, applicants have the right to appeal the decision within 21 days, where new information or a change in circumstances is presented. Since April 2025 the service has received six appeals, four of which were not upheld, one is under consideration, and one was upheld due to the applicant providing further information that was not provided to the officer at the time of presentation. In all cases, suitable temporary accommodation must continue to be provided until the appeal process has concluded.

7 Homelessness Prevention

- 7.1 Effective homelessness prevention is fundamental to the management of homelessness. In Scotland, the legislative requirements place a proactive duty on local authorities to engage with individuals at an early stage to prevent homelessness and to alleviate homelessness when prevention is not possible. This is an explicit statutory responsibility and is embedded in how local authorities deliver homeless services.
- 7.2 Intervention includes advice on housing options and rights, preventative interventions such as tenancy sustainment, assessment of what support needs individuals have to ensure these supports are made available (detailed in section 8), and routes into alternative accommodation.
- 7.3 The Housing (Scotland) Act 2025 turns homeless prevention into a shared, enforceable public sector duty with local authorities at the centre of delivery and co-ordination. The act places an 'Ask and Act' duty on local authorities and a range of other public bodies.
- 7.4 Relevant public sector bodies must, at appropriate points in service delivery, ask individuals if they are homeless or threatened with homelessness. If this risk is identified they must take reasonable steps within their own functions to remove or minimise the risk and facilitate access to help, including referrals to the local authority where appropriate.

7.5 It is important to note this is a preventative, anticipatory duty and not a referral only function. The guidance encourages housing risk awareness into routine contact points.

7.6 The Act amends existing homelessness legislation so that Councils must intervene earlier than before, with risk recognised up to six months before homelessness, rather than the previous two months. There are ongoing discussions with Scottish Government about the impact of these proposed changes and Highland will lobby for funding to ensure this is deliverable. Statutory guidance on the Act will be issued by Scottish Government in due course.

8 Tenancy Sustainment

8.1 Tenancy sustainment is embedded across homelessness and housing legislation and tenancy sustainment activity flows directly from homelessness prevention and advice duties. Tenancy sustainment is broadly defined and encompasses a wide range of activities that support individuals to maintain their accommodation.

8.2 Tenancy sustainment can include the following interventions depending on circumstances and needs: -

- Financial and income related support
- Tenancy rights and responsibilities
- Liaison and advocacy with landlords
- Practical and housing-related support
- Signposting and referring to services which they require e.g. health, mental health, addiction services
- Crisis prevention and early intervention including identifying risk such as anti-social behaviour and domestic abuse
- Outreach housing support.

8.3 While local authorities have a statutory duty to assess housing support needs and ensure support is available, tenancy sustainment can be delivered by a range of partners, including social landlords, third-sector organisations, health and social care services, and advice providers.

8.4 The Housing service has recently appointed three Tenancy Sustainment Assistants based in Caithness, Mid-Ross and Inverness. Further recruitment is planned across the remaining teams in Highland, including additional posts for Inverness. The roles have been developed in response to learning from engagement and involvement with tenants across Highland and feedback from housing staff. In particular, there is the need to respond quickly and timeously to requests for low level support. The roles have been designed to support early intervention, strengthen communication, provide timely and responsive support to identified needs, and maintain a clear focus on achieving positive outcomes. More sustained intervention support continues to be provided by external third sector partners.

- 8.5 Meeting the diverse needs of homeless households has become increasingly complex. This reflects a range of challenges, including rising demand from individuals, the need to access specialist health and addiction services, households with specific needs and complex family and lifestyle dynamics.
- 8.6 Staff wellbeing is a priority for the service, particularly given the complex, challenging and sometimes emotionally demanding nature of the cases staff manage. There has been a renewed focus on staff attending offices to enable access to peer support and management oversight. Managers meet regularly with staff both on a one-to-one basis and within team settings, and targeted training is provided to ensure staff have the skills, tools and support needed to protect their wellbeing. This is in addition to the corporate policies regarding staff wellbeing.

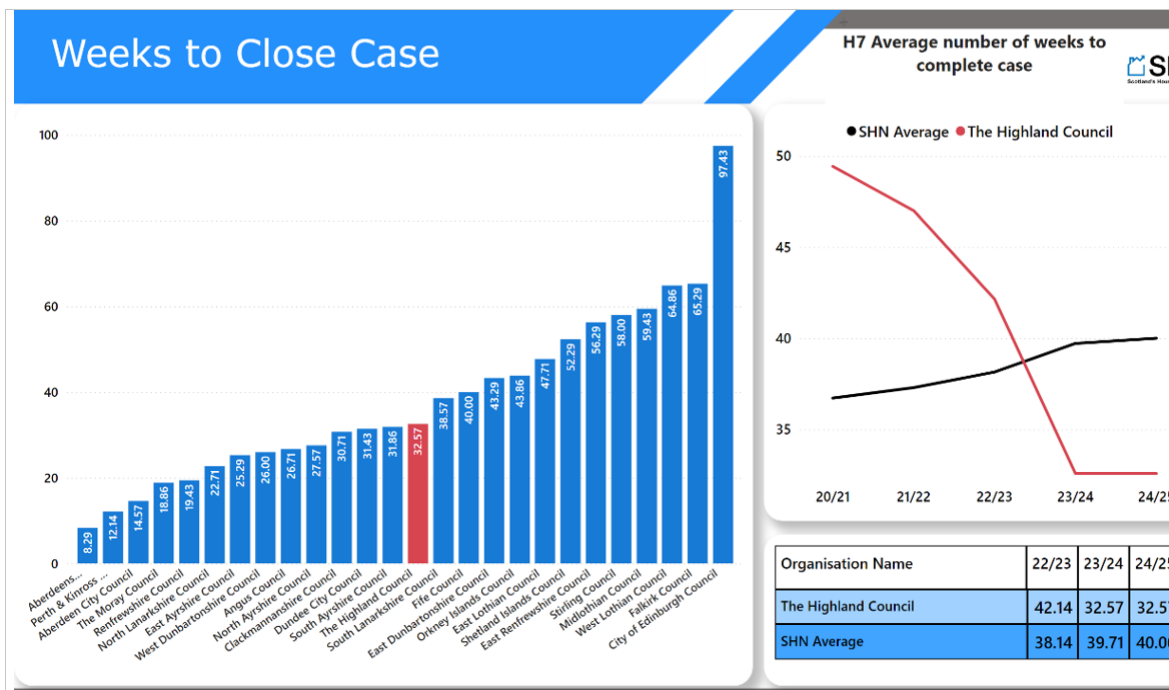
9 Rapid Rehousing

- 9.1 Since 2018, local authorities have had to submit Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans to Scottish Government and review these annually as part of the Strategic Housing Investment Plan.
- 9.2 Where homelessness cannot be prevented, Rapid Rehousing aims to:-
- secure a settled, mainstream housing outcome as quickly as possible;
 - minimise the time spent in any form of temporary accommodation, with as few transitions as possible; and
 - when temporary accommodation is needed, the optimum type is mainstream, furnished and within a community.
- 9.3 Highland Council has successfully embedded its Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan into day-to-day service delivery, ensuring that homeless households are rehoused as quickly as possible and that time spent in temporary accommodation is kept to a minimum.
- 9.4 Where a temporary tenancy within the community meets the household's needs and is assessed as suitable, this can be converted to a mainstream secure tenancy, avoiding unnecessary disruption and preventing the household from having to move again. From 31 March 2025 to 31 March 2026, 61 tenancy conversions have taken place.

10 Current Position and Highland performance

- 10.1 Highland Council's performance in relation to homelessness has improved significantly over the past four years, with a strong focus on sustaining and building on this progress. As a result of this improvement, the Scottish Housing Regulator no longer requires homelessness to feature within Highland's Engagement Plan.

10.2 The average time to resolve a homeless case in Highland is 32.57 weeks, which compares favourably to the national average figure of 40.0 weeks. In the context of the Highland Housing Challenge, Highland has reduced this figure considerably over the last four years in comparison to the national average which has steadily increased. This is highlighted in the below table from the Scottish Housing Network:-



10.3 One of the Service's key priorities is to minimise the length of time households with children spend in temporary accommodation. In 2024/25, the average time spent in temporary accommodation for households with children was 16 weeks, which compares favourably with the national average of around 34 weeks. The 2025/26 statistics are currently subject to the Scottish Government's annual verification process and are awaiting publication.

10.4 As of 31 March 2026, there were 67 households with children in Highland in temporary accommodation, which is reduced slightly from the figure of 70 households at 31 March 2025. All temporary accommodation provided to these households is community-based, furnished and households are resettled into permanent outcomes as quickly as possible.

10.5 Allocations to secure tenancies are largely to those applicants who have a demonstrated need to reside in a community. Members will be aware of the ongoing allocations policy review which needs to ensure competing priorities, including statutory duties, are considered and that the impacts of priority changes are legislatively compliant, and the full impacts of any changes are considered. It should be noted that most homeless households also have other housing needs, and this is reflected in the allocations policy.

10.6 The below table shows the percentage of allocations to homeless households for the previous three years which is a key factor in reducing the time that people spend in temporary accommodation: -

Year	HHR landlords	Highland Council
2023/2024	50%	51%
2024/2025	53%	54%
2025/2026	50%	58%

Members will be aware that continuing to prioritise homeless applications when allocating properties - in line with consideration of other housing needs - has assisted Highland to effectively manage homeless demand and ensure a supply of temporary accommodation so the service can respond to emergency accommodation needs as they arise.

10.7 The reasons for homelessness are often complex and can arise from a wide range of circumstances. While Highland Council places strong emphasis on homeless prevention, some causes are inherently difficult to prevent due to their nature. The three most common reasons for homeless presentations are:-

- applicants being asked to leave their accommodation
- relationship breakdown
- domestic abuse.

The housing service is adaptable to changes in pressures as they arise, for example if there is a reduced supply of privately rented properties or if there is an increase in evictions from the owner occupier and private rented sectors. Emerging trends identified are reported and discussed through the North and Islands Homelessness and Housing Options Hub which is facilitated by Scotland's Housing Network and includes representation from the Scottish Government. Further analysis of the reasons for homelessness presentations is provided in Appendix 1 of the Housing Performance Report, which is reported to this Committee.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

Date: 29 April 2026

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Background Papers: None

Appendices: None