

Research report

Furniture for the homeless: A house without furniture is not a home

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Summary

- Ensuring homeless persons have adequate furniture is essential if they are to maintain their new tenancies and avoid repeat homelessness
- This has been widely recognised in the past but there is a danger that financial pressures on councils will lead to cuts in this non statutory service
- Furniture reuse projects have played an important role in supplying furniture to homeless persons in Scotland, but the removal of grant funding has left many of these projects dependent on sales to the general public and reduced the number of homeless persons they are able to help
- There is a pressing need for more guidance and advice to councils by the Scottish Government and COSLA on best practice in this area
- There is also a need for a more joined up approach between councils and the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to ensure that DWP Community Care Grants are used to best effect.

Introduction

1. Having a home is much more than having a house. A home is a place which provides warmth, familiarity and a sense of security. Its furniture and furnishings and manner of its decoration provide a sense of personal identity.
2. Having a satisfactory range of furniture and furnishings is as essential for homeless people who are being rehoused as it is for those fortunate enough not to experience such a trauma of homelessness. Without this, it is much more likely that the tenancy will fail and that the cycle of homelessness will be repeated; a considerable cost to both the person concerned and to local authorities who have the statutory duty to rehouse homeless persons. Providing help with furniture and furnishings is a very basic form of homelessness prevention for impoverished households moving into unfurnished flats. And it can be cost effective too as indicated by the evidence from case studies undertaken by CRISIS¹ and the

¹ Crisis (2003) How Many, How Much? Single homelessness and the question of numbers and cost, London: Crisis

Scottish Council for Single Homelessness (SCSH)² which suggests that a straightforward case of homelessness can cost some £15,000 to the public purse. The case study graphically illustrates the problems that can arise where this help is not provided.

Jimmy Hogg - a Shelter Homeless Client

Following marriage breakdown and losing his job in 2009, Jimmy became homeless and then went initially into temporary accommodation then secured his own tenancy. He had neither furniture nor any money to buy any. He had no electricity for the first 4 weeks of the tenancy and no help in setting up his tenancy. He did not know who to ask for help with furniture and furnishings and was unaware of the possibility of getting furniture from reuse projects.

After 4 weeks of sleeping on the floorboards Jimmy abandoned the tenancy. His housing benefit application had been lost and with no housing benefit in place, he rapidly built up arrears. With Shelter's help he received backdated housing benefit and he has appealed against the decision by the council that he should be considered as intentionally homeless.

3. The Scottish Government and COSLA issued guidance in April 2009³ on the Prevention of Homelessness. This provided a comprehensive overview of the philosophy and principles of homelessness prevention, risk factors for identifying homelessness and the measures that can be taken to prevent homelessness. This is a valuable report but it only contains very brief references to the need to provide furniture in the context of rehousing homeless people into the private rented sector (PRS) and as a means of helping tenancy sustainment to avoid repeat homelessness. The underlying assumption may be that providing help with furniture and furnishings in relevant cases is so basic that it hardly needs a mention. Indeed a review of homelessness prevention activities in Scotland by Heriot Watt University⁴ found that only 2 councils in 2005/2006 (Western Isles and Inverclyde) did not refer to furniture schemes in their homelessness strategies.

² SCSH (2007) Tenancy Failure – how much does it cost?

³ The Scottish Government and COSLA (April 2009) – Prevention of Homelessness Guidance

⁴ Hal Pawson, Emma Davidson, Gina Nelto, Heriot Watt University, Scottish Executive Social Research (2007) – Evaluation of Homelessness Prevention Activities in Scotland

4. There is a commitment by the Scottish Government to provide settled accommodation for all unintentionally homeless households by 2012. This is a key national target for measuring the Government's performance in meeting its strategic objectives for Scotland. Ensuring that homeless households have adequate and sufficient furniture and furnishings is a key part of ensuring the provision of settled accommodation.

Providing help with furniture – the policy context

5. The importance of furniture was recognised by the Homelessness Task Force (HTF) which reported in 2002. It noted that:

“For many homeless people, the offer of an unfurnished tenancy is not enough because they lack the means to provide basic furniture. In these circumstances, the tenancy is unlikely to be viable or sustainable.”

The HTF made 2 specific recommendations – a furniture grant scheme under which housing providers could apply for a grant if the accommodation is to be let to a homeless person and support for furniture reuse projects, which could provide an inexpensive source of furniture for homeless persons, through the establishment of a national co-ordinator and support for reuse projects in Scotland. It noted the work undertaken by Glasgow City Council to develop a furnished tenancy programme and recommended the provision of 1,000 furnished tenancies a year for 5 years.

6. Both of these recommendations were accepted. In relation to furnished tenancies, some £7m was channelled through Communities Scotland from 2003/04 to 2005/06 to create furnished tenancies. In 2005/06, some £3m was spent on creating over a 1,000 tenancies. However, with the absorption of specific grants into the general local government funding settlement, local authorities are now encouraged to determine their own policy on assistance for furniture for homeless households.
7. In relation to furniture recycling, a Furniture Project Co-ordinator was appointed within Community Recycling Network for Scotland (CRNS) funded directly by the Scottish Government and this has helped to develop links between furniture reuse projects and local authority housing staff throughout Scotland. The co-ordinator has also been able to support local furniture reuse projects through the sharing of good practice, publishing a toolkit for local authorities and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) developing best practice models for furniture provision with particular councils. There are now some 54 furniture reuse projects in Scotland.

8. Homeless households can also apply to obtain funding for furniture through the community care grants available through the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). In 2008/09, the DWP provide some 34,000 community care grants in Scotland with an average grant of £458 although the DWP are unable to say how many of these grants went to homeless households for furniture but it is likely to be a relatively small part of the total. Moreover, the average grant is relatively small in comparison with the average grant to local authorities under the former SG scheme (approx £3000 in 2005/06) and anecdotal evidence suggests that it can take a long time for grants to be decided, especially if the applicant is initially rejected and has to go to appeal. In many cases, the homeless person will be required to pay rent on two properties during this process – temporary accommodation intended as a stop gap following homelessness and the new tenancy which has no furniture. This can mean a large build up of debt.

Providing help with furniture – the experience at local authority level within Scotland in 2010

9. To provide better information on what actually happens at local level, CRNS with the support of Shelter, carried out a survey of local authority officers responsible for homelessness strategy in March 2010. All 32 councils were contacted and almost 70% responded. Councils were asked about the need for assistance with furniture and how this need was met. They were also asked about the funding position at the present time and the prospects for the future.
10. The key results from this survey were as follows:
 - A large majority of Homelessness Officers highlighted the importance of furniture for the sustainment of tenancies by homeless persons.
 - Many emphasised that prompt assistance with furniture helped homeless persons to move quickly into their tenancy and some spontaneously criticised the delays in processing applications for Community Care Grants by the DWP.
 - Local authority officers varied in their estimates of the number of homeless households that needed support with furniture but generally, where a figure was given, it was in the range of 25% to 75%. Almost all local authorities anticipated that the demand for furniture was likely to increase as they moved towards the 2012 target.
 - Local authority practice in responding to this need also varied – 2 councils said that they did not provide any furniture but of the remainder almost all provided beds and bedding and white goods and a majority provided some help with

carpets, curtains/blinds and seating. Two thirds of those providing help used a mixture of new and second hand furniture with the remainder relying on new furniture only. About two thirds of those supplying furniture used “starter packs” for their requirements. These are generally supplied by furniture recycling projects but can contain a mixture of new and second hand furniture.

- Some local authorities mentioned that budget cuts were limiting the items they can provide. Most local authority homelessness officers were not aware of their budget for furniture for 2010/2011 or replied that there was not a specific budget as such at the time of the survey in March. But a significant majority had longer term concerns about future funding.

Providing help with furniture – the experience of the furniture reuse projects

11. Furniture reuse projects have played an important role in providing help to homeless households in Scotland and many were set up initially explicitly for this purpose. CRNS has been undertaking regular surveys of furniture reuse projects since 2003.
12. In general, the number of projects and service users grew rapidly from 2003 to 2007 and has levelled off since then. But the number of service users describing themselves as homeless fell in both absolute and percentage terms from 28,500 in 2007 (27% of users) to 17,600 (17% of users) in 2008 and 6,200 in March 2010 (12% of the users in the survey). Because of variations in the number and type of reuse projects responding to the surveys and the extent to which projects collect information on their customers, the precise figures may not be reliable but they should be indicative of the general trend.
13. This trend reflects significant changes in the way in which furniture projects have to operate to stay financially viable. In 2003, the majority of projects provided a free service to all users and were supported by grant aid; by 2008, only 18% provided a “free” service supported in this way; 32% had a single pricing structure and 50% had a tiered pricing structure with lower prices for homeless and other low income households. In effect, many furniture reuse projects have found it necessary to offset reductions in grant aid and direct funding by local authorities through income from sales to the general public. However, there is a clear danger that furniture projects will be forced to focus increasingly on their general customers at the expense of homeless persons and to retain the best furniture for sales to these customers. The case studies below illustrate the contrasting experience of those projects who receive local authority support and those who operate without direct funding.

Grangemouth Enterprises Ltd (GEL)

Grangemouth Enterprises Ltd (GEL) was established in 1982 when mounting concern about levels of unemployment and poverty in the Grangemouth area brought together interested individuals who explored how they could contribute to the growing need for local job creation initiatives.

Since its creation the organisation has developed different ways of addressing the problems of unemployment and poverty in the area and now supports the local community through the provision of training and volunteering opportunities; provision of furniture and white goods to homeless clients, and by reducing the amount of waste going to landfill through repair, reuse and recycling.

GEL operates out of three premises in Grangemouth, one of which is a shop that sells good quality used furniture and computer equipment, which is uplifted free of charge from local residents, to the general public. The income from sales allows GEL to provide local people with training and employment opportunities and also allows the organisation to provide household goods at low or no cost to people who are in need.

In 2008 GEL embarked on a partnership with Falkirk Council and another local furniture reuse organisation, Falkirk Homeless Project. This partnership, called Quickstart, has allowed Falkirk Council to develop a furniture provision service for people who are moving out of homelessness while also linking into other community benefits such as training and volunteering. A pilot ran from January 2009 until July 2009 and through the pilot period alone the two furniture projects diverted 41.55 tonnes from landfill and helped 155 homeless clients.

Today Grangemouth Enterprises Ltd has 18 permanent employees of whom 33% are people with disabilities. Last year they provided training and employment placements to 87 people living in Falkirk and they have 10 regular volunteers.

The Furniture Project Stranraer

The Furniture Project Stranraer is an award winning social enterprise based in Stranraer and servicing the whole of Wigtownshire. It was set up to provide affordable furniture and jobs to people in its community. The project receives donations of furniture from the community. It does not receive any funding from Dumfries and Galloway Council or RSLs to provide furniture to people moving out of homelessness, so creative approaches have had to be found.

People suffering from hardship can be referred to the project by a number of agencies including Women's Aid, CABs and council departments; they are then offered a discounted price on furniture and white goods. The project also offers a 'paying up scheme' to people who come through the referral system and need furniture quickly, because, for example, they are moving into a house without furniture. The referring agency must agree to underwrite each referral in case of non-payment.

The project subsidises its low cost service with the money it makes through sales of reused goods to the public and its house clearance and garden maintenance services.

Conclusions

14. There is widespread recognition that, for many homeless households, help with furniture and furnishings is an important part of ensuring tenancy sustainment. Some homeless households may already have their own furniture although some of these will require help with storage. But for many the process of becoming homeless, which may often include moving out of the family home for the first time, living on a temporary basis with relatives and friends or moving out of institutional care, means that the homeless person can too often have little if any furniture when the offer of a tenancy is made.

15. Social landlords, both local authorities and RSLs (who were not included in the survey described above) are aware of this and many have responded by providing help. As mentioned above, all but 2 councils mentioned furniture schemes in their homelessness strategies in 2005 and 2006 and the survey in 2010 also found that all but 2 councils responding provided furniture in some cases. But the extent and nature of the assistance varies considerably from local authority to local authority and there is a need for greater consistency of approach. For the future, there is a danger that this is seen as a non statutory service and subject to cuts at a time when demand is likely to increase as the distinction between homeless households in or not in "priority need" is abolished in 2012.

16. Furniture reuse projects have played an important role in supplying furniture for the homeless in Scotland, but the removal of the grant funding available for the initial establishment of these projects has left them increasingly dependent on income from sales to the general public. The numbers of homeless households helped by furniture projects has fallen in recent years and there is a clear danger that this will fall further if local authorities further reduce their funding.

17. As part of the concordat with local authorities, the Scottish Government has abolished the ring fenced funding that was previously available for furnished tenancies and merged this into the general financial settlement. This clearly puts the onus on the Scottish Government and COSLA to take the lead in giving advice to local authorities on best practice. This could be a simple addition to the guidance that has already been published on prevention of homelessness more generally. This should include guidance on when assistance should be provided, the basic minimum required by any homeless household and how best to make use of the expertise and resources of the furniture reuse sector.

18. As already noted, DWP funding for Community Care Grants may be provided but the sums involved can be relatively modest and it can take some time before a decision is made. The DWP are currently consulting on possible reforms to the Social Fund and, in particular, they are consulting on the possibility of transferring responsibility for Community Care Grants along with an appropriate budget to the Scottish Government. As things stand, there is a pressing need for a more joined up approach between councils and the DWP.