HOMELESSNESS DURATION IN SCOTLAND: HOW LONG DOES REHOUSING TAKE?

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Date: May 2021

This Data Insight explores the length of time that housing support is given to homeless households in Scotland by local authority housing teams.

Background

The Scottish Government places prevention at the heart of its approach to ending homelessness[i]. However, it may not always be possible to prevent homelessness from occurring. If it does occur, it should be as brief as possible[ii]. Following recommendations published in 2018 by the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group (HARSAG)[iii], and the subsequent High Level Action Plan[iv], Scottish Government began a transition to a 'Rapid Rehousing' approach to assist households experiencing homelessness[v]. Rapid Rehousing aims to provide settled accommodation as quickly as possible. Most recently, the commitment to Rapid Rehousing was reiterated and strengthened in responses to the COVID-19 pandemic[vi].

There is currently limited published data on the time it takes between someone approaching the local authority for support (usually called 'homelessness applications') and being moved to settled accommodation. The only available data tells us the average time, in days, between assessment and case closure. For homelessness applications closed in 2019/20 the average case time was 224 days[vii]. In 2019/20 more than 28,000 homeless households in Scotland were assisted and their applications closed[viii]. Of these applications, 75% were closed with an offer of settled accommodation.

This Data Insight draws on aggregate data from Scottish Government to explore the length of time between homelessness applications and an offer of settled accommodation. We aim to provide a baseline against which progress of the Rapid Rehousing approach can be measured.

Findings

- In 2019/20, just over 50% of all homeless households that were offered settled accommodation in Scotland had their applications closed in less than 160 days.

- 11% of homelessness applications took 500 or more days to be closed.

- There was substantial variability between different local authorities, with the median offer of accommodation taking from 62 days (Perth and Kinross) up to 779 days (Midlothian).

These findings show that it is taking a long time for some people experiencing homelessness to be offered settled accommodation. This reinforces the Scottish Government decision to pursue a shift towards a Rapid Rehousing approach.

What we did

This research looked at all people approaching their local authorities for homelessness assistance and the time it took until they were offered 'settled accommodation'. Settled accommodation refers to a tenancy lasting for at least six months provided by a local authority, Housing Association or the private rented sector. We looked at applications that closed in 2019/20 and focused on 'case duration', defined as the duration in days between a case opening and closing.

The Scottish Government publishes figures on the average duration of statutory homelessness assistance of all cases, regardless of why they were closed. Our interest was in case duration for those offered settled accommodation. To get a good understanding of the data distribution we explored the median (or middle value), interquartile range (or values that mark 25% of cases either side of the median), and the minimum and maximum number of days.

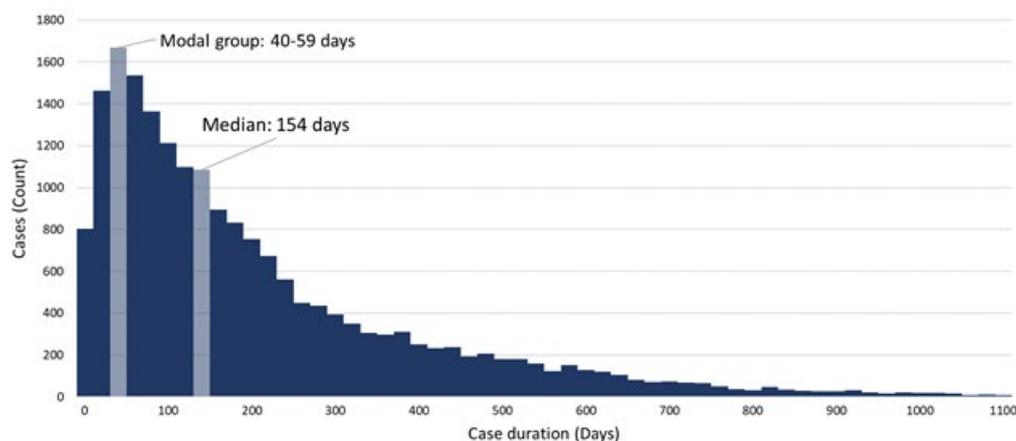A request was made to Scottish Government for:

(1) aggregated data relating to case duration for the whole of Scotland. Data were grouped in 20-day increments to reduce the risk that a person could be identified, and;

(2) information about the distribution of case duration for each local authority (i.e. median, interquartile information, and minimum/maximum values).
Applications are made by households, which could comprise several individuals.

What we found

Figure 1 shows the distribution of case durations for the whole of Scotland. These cases closed in 2019/20 with an offer of settled accommodation. The median or middle value for case duration was 154 days. The lowest value was 0 days, and the highest was 3,955 days—almost 11 years. The most common (modal) case duration band was 40-59 days.

Figure 1: Distribution of case durations for cases closed with an offer of settled accommodation grouped in 20-day increments, 2019/20

NB: X-axis has been stopped at 1100-1119 to improve interpretability of figure

Over half (51%) of all cases closed in 2019/20 were resolved in under 160 days (Table 1). Just under 20% of cases were closed in under 60 days, and slightly more than 11% of cases were closed in under 40 days.

Table 1: Breakdown of case durations for cases closed with an offer of settled accommodation grouped in increments of days, 2019/20

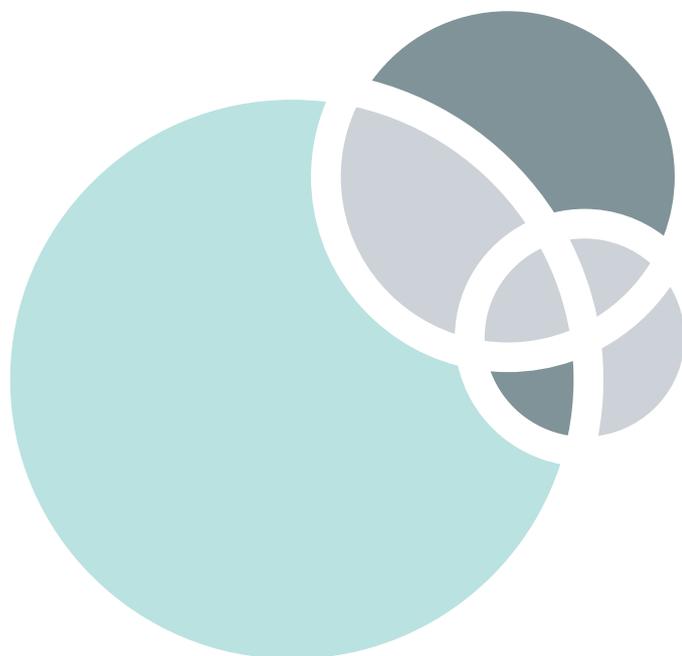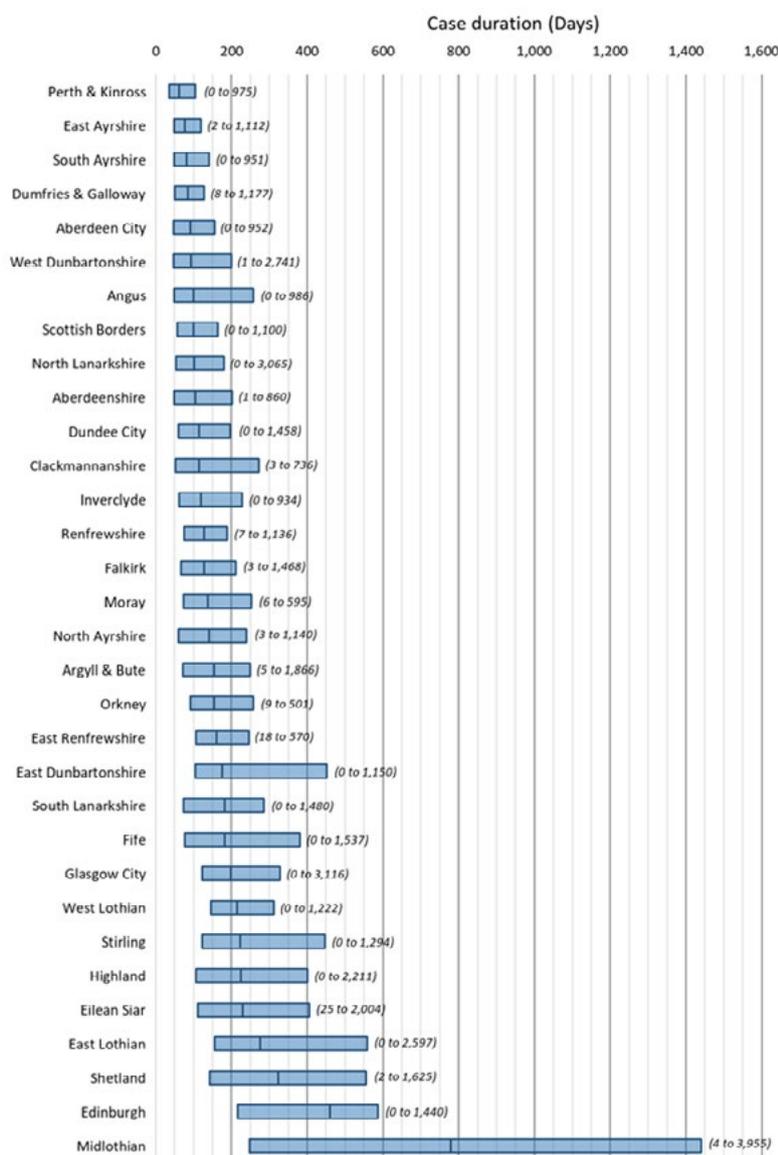|	Number	%	Cumulative %
0-19 days	803	4	4
20-39 days	1,462	7	11
40-59 days	1,669	8	20
60-79 days	1,536	8	28
80-99 days	1,365	7	34
100-119 days	1,212	6	40
120-139 days	1,099	6	46
140-159 days	1,085	5	51
160-199 days	1,729	9	60
200-299 days	2,876	14	75
300-399 days	1,662	8	83
400-499 days	1,125	6	89
>500 days	2,251	11	100

Figure 2 shows case duration data for the 32 local authorities in Scotland. It includes the median case duration for each authority, and the values that encompass 50% of cases around the median (25% either side). The speed of rehousing differed greatly across authorities, from a median of 62 days in Perth and Kinross, up to 779 days in Midlothian. Seven local authorities had median case durations of less than 100 days, whilst a further seventeen were less than 200 days. The final eight authorities had medians of 200 or more days.

These differences between local authorities may be partly explained by different geographical and housing market contexts. For example, relatively long case durations in places such as Edinburgh and East Lothian may be attributable to very competitive housing markets. In geographically larger areas, like Highland or Fife, it may take longer to find accommodation in areas where people have connections and are willing to live. It is also possible that a dependence on Registered Social Landlords in local authorities where management of dwellings has been transferred from the authority to housing associations, like Glasgow City and Eilian Siar, are impacting on case durations.

Figure 2: Case durations that represent 50% of cases around the median, for homeless households offered settled accommodation, 2019/20; lowest and highest case durations in brackets

Why it matters

For nearly 50% of homelessness applications it took more than 160 days for them to close with an offer of settled accommodation. Therefore, in most cases homelessness is not brief in Scotland. 11% of cases had to wait over a year and a half (>500 days). This finding reinforces the Scottish Government decision to pursue Rapid Rehousing as its default approach to assisting homeless households but also highlights that much progress is needed to achieve that ambition.

This new analysis provides a baseline against which policy progress can be measured and, more immediately, it may benefit the Scottish Government to report on modal and median case durations in their homelessness statistics. Extreme case durations could have a distorting effect on the mean duration currently being reported.

What next

Case duration may vary by a household's circumstances (i.e. composition) as well as the issues that caused their homelessness (i.e. rent arrears versus fleeing domestic abuse). An intended next stage for this research would be to use individual level data rather than aggregate data. Using individual level data, we can account for a range of characteristics that may affect case duration.

There is limited evidence of the effectiveness of Rapid Rehousing in ending homelessness[ix]. Using individual level data, we can also explore the extent to which Rapid Rehousing can reduce repeat homelessness. Specifically, do reductions in case duration lead to more stable housing outcomes?

Acknowledgements

The authors are very grateful for the comments received on early drafts of this Data Insight from Dr. James White (Cardiff University) and colleagues at the Centre for Homelessness Impact and Scottish Government.

Centre for Homelessness Impact

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[vii] https://www.gov.scot/publications/homelessness-scotland-2019-2020/

[viii] Excluding households where contact was lost.

[ix] https://www.homelessnessimpact.org/intervention/rapid-rehousing

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