



Open the door
Housing staff on the homes we have
and the homes we need

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Introduction

Scotland has a housing crisis. We have a crisis with the availability, the cost and the quality of our housing. This impacts on the lives of those who find themselves inadequately housed, or at the mercy of a system which seems increasingly designed to make it difficult to sustain themselves in secure accommodation. This crisis also impacts on the workforce trying to deliver social housing in Scotland. They are struggling to maintain a quality of service against a background of often declining resources and increased financial pressure, yet as their workload increases the value of their wages declines.

This brief report looks at scale of the problem. Seeking to go beyond the raw statistics we bring to bear the experiences of housing staff via the results of a survey of UNISON members working in social housing who are on the front line of trying to cope with Scotland's housing crisis.

We need as a matter of urgency a large scale investment in both building and refurbishing social housing. The case for this is both moral and pragmatic. Addressing the market failure that is Scotland's housing crisis will meet a crying social need; it will also provide skilled jobs. Done properly it would also reduce carbon use through better insulation and reduced use of energy to heat inefficient homes, help tackle health inequalities and reduce pressure on other public services.

Any plan for social justice – and Scotland has had no shortage of talk of social justice in recent months – must have housing at its core.

The scale of the problem

Scotland has approximately 1.46 million owner-occupied homes, 368,000 privately rented homes, 277,000 homes rented from housing associations and 318,000 homes rented from local authorities. There are currently 23,000 long-term private sector empty homes across Scotland.

The most recent Scottish Government Housing Statistics record that there are 179,954 households with outstanding applications for social housing; of these some 29,500 are households on transfer lists meaning 150,000 households are waiting to enter social housing. The response to this in terms of house building is woefully inadequate. Only 10,686 dwellings were built between March 2013-14 by the private sector, 2,911 dwellings built by housing associations and 974 dwellings built by local authorities.

Allied to this are issues around the quality of housing. 349,000 homes in Scotland are affected by dampness or condensation. 647,000 households are in fuel poverty in Scotland. A total of 54 per cent of Scotland's social housing currently falls beneath the Scottish Housing Quality Standard. 65,000 households are overcrowded in Scotland. This represents 3 per cent of the total number of households.

UNISON has outlined the inadequacy of current approaches and outlined a different vision for housing in Scotland in our paper [Making Homes for a Fairer Scotland](#). We have also outlined how greater investment in social housing could be funded through using some of the assets represented by public sector pension funds in our publication [Funding and Building the Homes Scotland Needs](#). This would put these funds to a socially (and literally) constructive use in building a fairer Scotland.

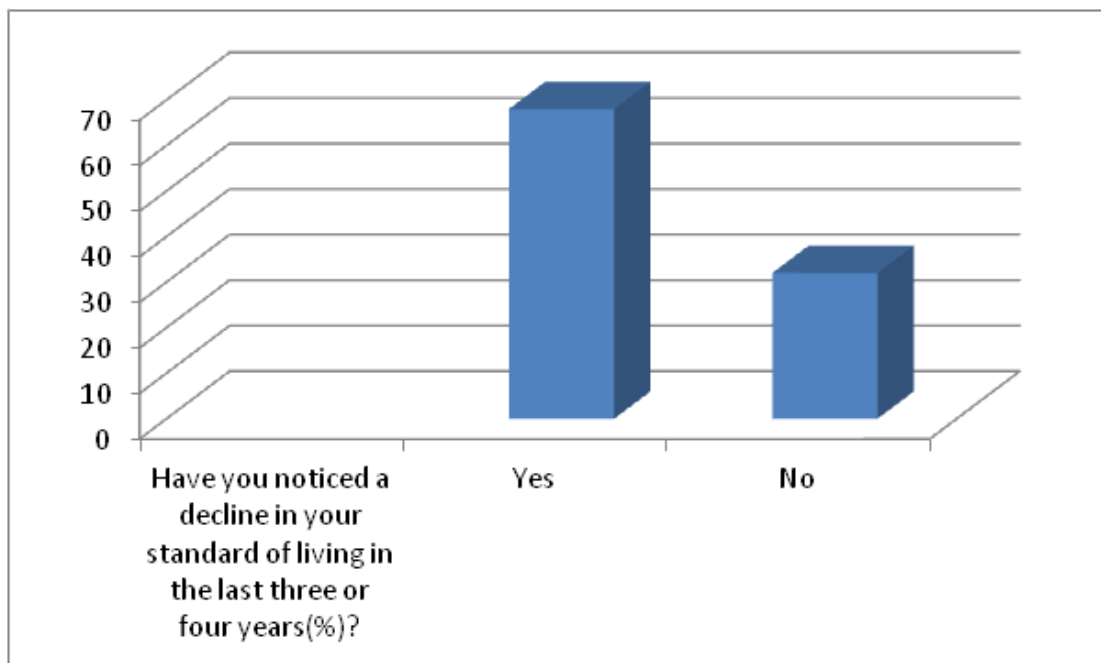
We surveyed a range of UNISON members involved in all aspects of providing housing services: housing officers, housing assistants, lettings officers. We asked them about their work in recent years; how it had changed; what impact, if any, funding changes had had on their work in terms of workload and pressure; the impact of welfare and benefit changes; and how their own standard of living was holding up in 'the age of austerity'.

About the workforce

We sampled UNISON members at the sharp end of social housing provision in local authorities and housing associations. Among the occupational group surveyed, respondents included housing officers of every stripe, lettings officers and assistants, accommodation management officers, specialists in community or factoring, and members of rent teams.

Of our respondents, 71% worked for local authorities with 29% working in housing associations. The gender breakdown of the workforce was 55% female 45% male. The vast bulk of the workforce are: 86% full-time; 14% part-time; with a very low level (2.5%) on temporary contracts.

Like other workers in public services, housing staff have been experiencing years of zero or minimal pay. 68% of respondents to our survey said that their standard of living had dropped in the previous three or four years. Respondents outline how wages have failed to keep up with prices and many report not simply having to cut back but struggles to make ends meet



What the housing staff say

“I used to food shop every week and now make do with shopping every fortnight. I only use one heater as electric bills are up. I’ve not had a holiday for the last three years.”

“Basic expenditure has increased significantly whilst earnings are not rising at same rate.”

“Costs of food have rocketed and fuel costs in our rural area have remained almost static and certainly a lot higher than the more populated areas.”

“There’s less money after all the bills are paid. Shopping is more expensive. Inflation is above any pay rises so there’s less money to spend.”

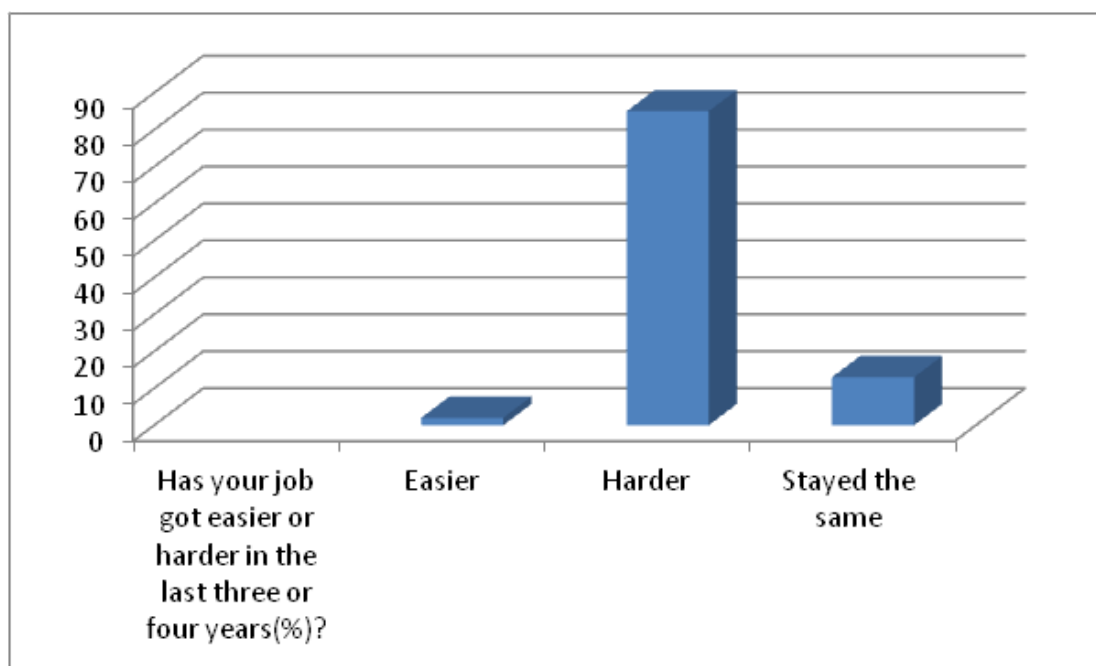
“I do not shop on a weekly basis and only tend to buy what is needed.”

About the workforce

55% of respondents reported they regularly work over their contracted hours. Working outside normal office hours is a normal feature of the work of many housing staff. They are as a consequence of contracts involving flexi-time arrangements. Many staff reported that it was routine for them to accrue flexi-time, but be unable to use it. Many also report increased admin loads in recent years - the completion of which involves working over their normal hours.

Staff numbers are generally in decline. While 12% of respondents say staffing levels in their workplace have increased, over half (58%) report that staff numbers have declined. Comments from staff indicate that in many workplaces if staff leave they are not replaced those on long term sick are not covered for. This has a knock-on effect on workloads.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given this decline in staff, when asked if their job has become easier or harder in recent years respondents were overwhelmingly of the view that things have gotten harder.



There were a lucky, but wholly unrepresentative 2% for whom life has gotten easier, but no fewer than 85% report the opposite experience. While decreasing staff numbers are certainly a factor in this, staff also pointed to other causes. Staff spoke of the difficulty of trying to maintain standards of service. The shortage of available housing stock making placing clients harder is the most frequent complaint. Changing policies, themselves attempts to cope with declining resources, are also often cited as complicating factors. Changes in welfare legislation have also added to the difficulties facing staff.

What the housing staff say

“New allocation policy means different skills involved. Colleagues are leaving or changing work pattern to part-time but not replaced. IT systems not fit for purpose, meaning we sometimes have to do laborious work to get results.”

“A lot more responsibilities have been added on to the job.”

“More specialist work, more partnerships with other agencies, which is good but increases amount of work, extra procedures, extra pressure when other staff off sick with stress.”

“Same number of presentations but less housing available in the private sector. Very stressful when you have no accommodation, no B&B and you have to tell customer you cannot accommodate them.”

“The job becomes harder each year with new laws relating to housing and benefits. Working in the rent team is challenging enough but with new laws on housing benefit for EU nationals and the ever changing benefit system, I find that the team is constantly having to redevelop and evolve its knowledge and skill set. Learn on the job and external training. The post is no longer generic rent collecting, it’s evolved into an income-based post which knowledge of the benefit system is essential.”

“Numbers of people increased. Less housing available.”

“I work with homeless people the pressure is increasing relentlessly. Demand is increasing as resources dwindle.”

About the service

When asked what had happened to funding for their service in recent years 68% of respondents replied that it had gone down. Staff are unequivocal on their view that this has impacted on the standard of the service provided. There are reports of less time being able to be spent with clients. They also point to the role of changes to the benefits system in increasing rent arrears which has contributed to the problem. In their responses staff indicate a high degree of frustration about not being able to provide the level and quality of service that they would like.

What the housing staff say

“We are always being asked for ideas on how to save money. Void properties are not at the same standard as they were.”

“Have to keep checking with management before getting repair work carried out to make sure funding is available.”

“We are trying to meet the same targets with less money.”

“We cannot provide as good a service as we used to. There has been a reduction in jobs and reduction in service due to more tenant charges. Also, the lack of money means lack of increase in salaries. Totally demotivating.”

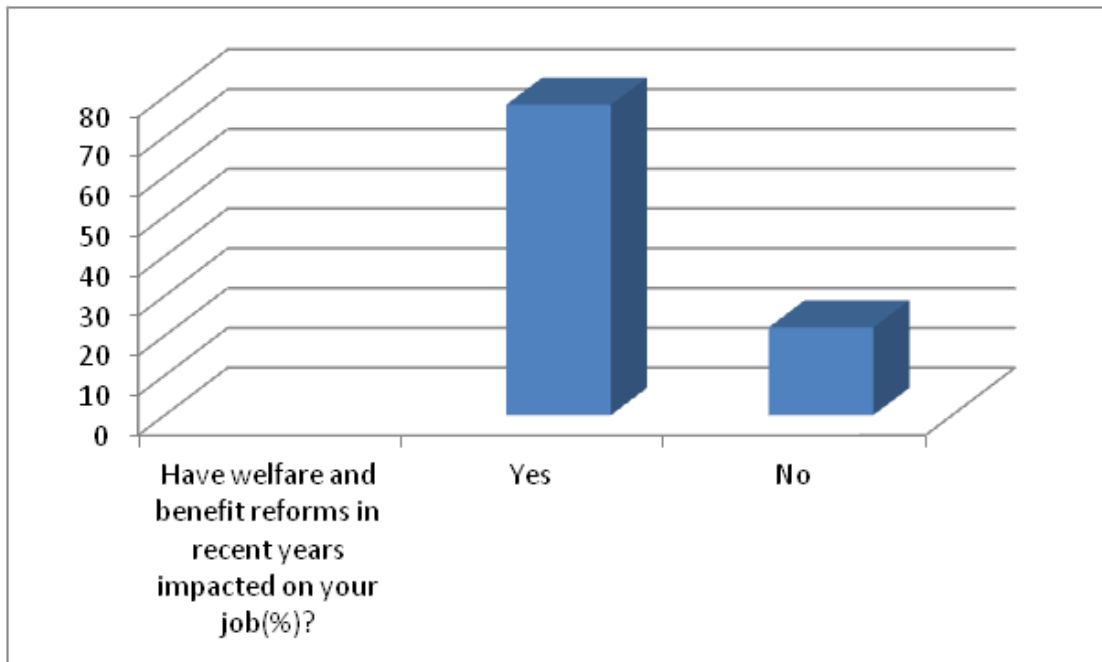
“Lower staffing and a delay in filling vacancies have a negative impact on service delivery.”

“Funding is from tenant’s rent, it is becoming more difficult to collect arrears.”

“We are having to deal with more and more complaints regarding, roads, parks, fly tipping, dog fouling, common repairs all due to lack of resources and cut backs. Not being able to take the lead on common repairs due to council policy since November 2011.”

Fully three quarters of respondents cite changes in welfare and benefit legislation as having had an impact on their job. At its bluntest, welfare changes have made life more difficult for tenants and this in turn has created problems for housing staff.

Benefit changes have meant changes and upheaval for staff as well as clients. Changes to housing benefit - including the ‘bedroom tax’ - have both put pressure on the Housing stock and increased arrears. Staff report an expanding role as they try to ensure clients have access to funds in order to avoid or pay down rent arrears. Staff report an entirely unsurprising increase in frustration, both on their part and that of their client, as the twin pressures of less money and higher demand impact on people’s lives. It is clear that recent benefit changes have delivered little except hardship. The ‘bedroom tax in particular’ has signally failed.



What the housing staff say

“[Benefit changes] have impacted massively and it will only get worse. Rent arrears have risen and you cannot take what people don’t have.”

“The knowledge required to advise clients on claiming benefits is extensive and the completing the appropriate paperwork is very time-consuming. Although there have been additional staff taken on to assist, there has still been a huge impact on the workload of area office staff, particularly in the rent arrears teams.”

“The Housing Policy changed to mirror the “bedroom tax” rules in 2013, this has made trying to house applicants in appropriate housing more difficult and in turn has resulted in many unhappy clients that we have to deal with on a daily basis.”

“Due to bedroom tax and direct payments of housing benefit to tenants we are seeing an increase in rent arrears and homeless rising due to more evictions.”

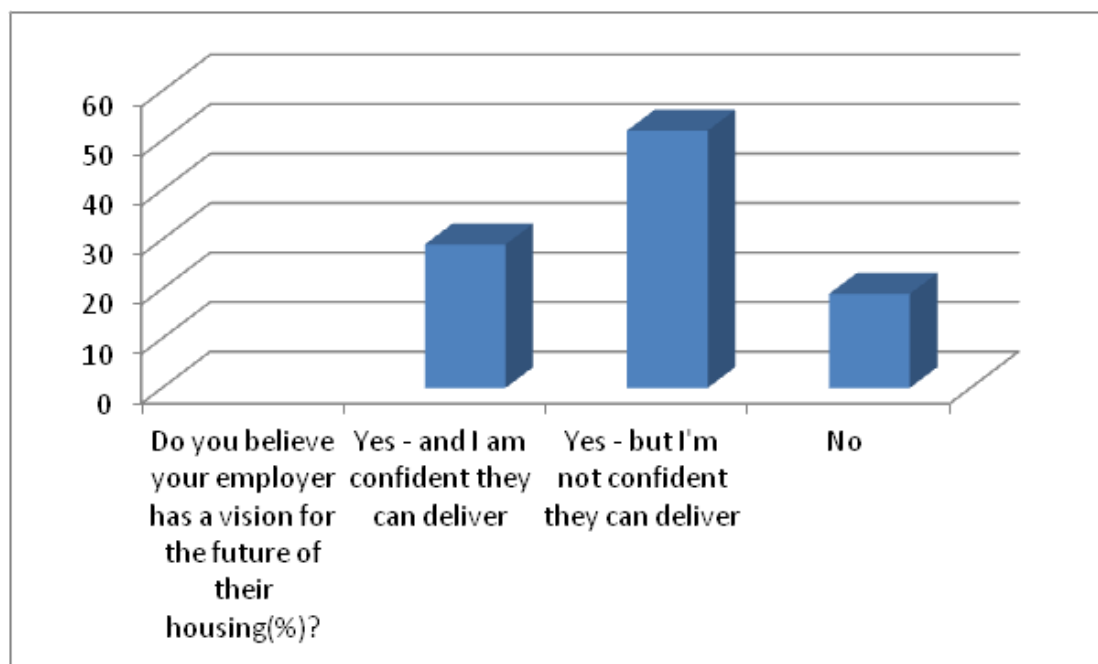
“Increased arrears cases, housing benefit taking longer to process, many cases of DWP sanctions affecting housing benefit payments, allocations more difficult due to insufficient stock of one bed properties.”

“I work in rent arrears. Arrears have soared due to the above resulting in an unrealistic workload.”

“We now have to door knock asking tenants about paying the rent, hand delivering letters, DHP forms, completion of DHP forms etc.”

The future

We asked staff if they believed their employer had a vision for their housing stock. 81% believed they did. This is a degree of confidence in leadership which is both outstanding, and frankly very rare in public services at the moment. The difficulty is that despite believing their employers have a vision, 52% believe they will be unable to deliver on that vision. Overwhelmingly, this comparative lack of faith in the capacity to deliver is based around issues of resource and investment. At its bluntest, as one of our respondents put it, “the numbers don’t add up”.



What the housing staff say

“I believe my housing association does have a vision but the expectation on staff to deliver all outputs is increasingly difficult whilst the organisation is currently trying to cut costs.”

“Requires huge investment in their housing stock which was left in limbo for a lot of years we are now paying the price for this indecision.”

“It can’t be delivered due to financial restraints.”

“Staffing levels will make it hard to achieve.”

“[My council] has a very clear vision and puts a lot of work and effort into producing its strategies, however, senior management does not always appreciate, or allow for, the workload involved in properly carrying out the policies, procedures and strategies produced.”

“How is it possible for them to provide for the future of their housing with less staff and more homelessness. It’s not possible.”

Better housing for a better Scotland

Adequate housing is fundamental to any notion of 'social inclusion' far less social justice. Decades of market-led approaches in housing have demonstrably failed. There is an urgent need to build a new housing consensus in Scotland. The political rehabilitation of social housing is an urgent priority. If government see social housing as primarily a last resort there is little chance of it becoming a tenure of choice, or being funded in a way that would allow it to seem a long-term.

The market has failed in housing and whatever prospect it has to deliver are markedly reduced in a time of falling real wages and reluctance to invest. A clear break with model is required. We must invest hugely in public housing. That this will pay bring huge social dividends is almost a cliché of Keynesian demand management. In an underperforming economy with massive need unmet by the market, investment in public housing would create jobs, put money into people's pockets and into local economies. There are other wider benefits, Scotland has world leading climate change legislation with ambitious targets for carbon reduction. So far we have not met them. If we build new housing to a higher standard than currently; if we properly insulate our housing stock; if people aren't using large quantities of energy in an often futile bid to heat damp homes, these targets will be easier to meet.

Such investment will of course need to be paid for and UNISON Scotland would urge government at all levels to make housing a greater priority in spending plans and to commit to raising the money needed to fund such investment. However, government is not the only source of capital for social housing. UNISON Scotland has proposed that moves should be made to direct investment from public sector pension funds into social housing. The Scottish Local Government Pension scheme has assets of over £20bn – investing even a small portion of this in social housing could make a significant difference. We believe this idea meets the needs of both Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) and pension schemes. Post credit crunch RSLs have found it more difficult to obtain capital financing from financial institutions (who have less capital and are tending to lend on shorter timescales than previously). The idea is an attractive one for pension schemes as it meets their needs for investments which are not only stable but also long term. The idea is explored more fully in UNISON Scotland's paper [Funding and Building the Homes Scotland Needs](#).

The pressure placed on those delivering housing services is testament to the inadequacies of our current approach. Those engaged in trying to keep Scotland's people properly housed lack neither enthusiasm for the task nor ideas – but the current approach is grinding them down. In our survey a clear majority believed their organisation did have a vision for the future (a degree of confidence sadly absent in many areas of public services). What was missing all too often was a belief that this vision could be delivered. Only investment can change that and build the homes necessary to create a better future.



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Valuing public services and the people
who provide them



For more information on UNISON's Worth It campaign
www.unison-scotland.org.uk/worthit

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