

Section 2 Commentary



Chapter 5 Housing needs, homelessness and lettings

There was a further sharp reduction in the numbers of households accepted as being in priority need and homeless in England in 2006, following on from the reductions in 2004 and 2005. Homeless acceptances have also been reduced in Wales over the last two years; but not in Scotland (See Figure 2.5.1 and Compendium Table 90).

This continuing reduction in levels of homeless acceptances in England and Wales is remarkable, in that it has occurred during years where both home-ownership affordability continued to worsen (Compendium Table 42a) and access to social sector housing through waiting lists became more problematic due to a further decline in levels of lettings available for new tenants (Compendium

Tables 97a and 98). As Figure 2.5.1 clearly shows, levels of homeless acceptances did not begin to fall in the early years of the 1990s until well after the peak of the last housing market boom, when house prices fell and access to private sector housing became that much easier, and levels of available lettings for new tenants also rose.

However, while access to home-ownership continued to become more problematic for low to moderate income households in 2006, there was a continuing growth in the private rented sector, both generally (Compendium Table 54) and in terms of the numbers of lettings made available to lower income households in receipt of housing benefit (Compendium Table 116a).

If the growth of the private rented sector provided opportunities for many households unable to access home-ownership, and for local authorities to be far more proactive in trying to advise and assist households to access the private rented sector, that does not account for the quite different trajectory of homeless acceptances in England, Scotland and Wales. Scotland, as well as England and Wales, has seen a rapid growth in the private rented sector (see Commentary Chapter 2), but nonetheless has seen no significant fall in levels of homeless acceptances.

The obvious difference between England and Wales on the one hand, and Scotland on the other, is that in England and Wales central government has been strongly encouraging authorities to make more effective use of the private rented sector, and to more widely adopt proactive policies to reduce levels of homeless acceptances, and more particularly the numbers of households in temporary accommodation.

In England, CLG have surveyed the extent to which local authorities utilise a range of homeless prevention measures, and the extent to which they estimate those measures have prevented households from becoming homeless.¹ Those surveys suggest that the number of preventions rose from just over 49,000 in 2005/06, to an estimate of almost 72,000 in 2006/07.

However, it should be noted that the 2006/07 estimate is significantly higher than the numbers authorities indicated that had been assisted by

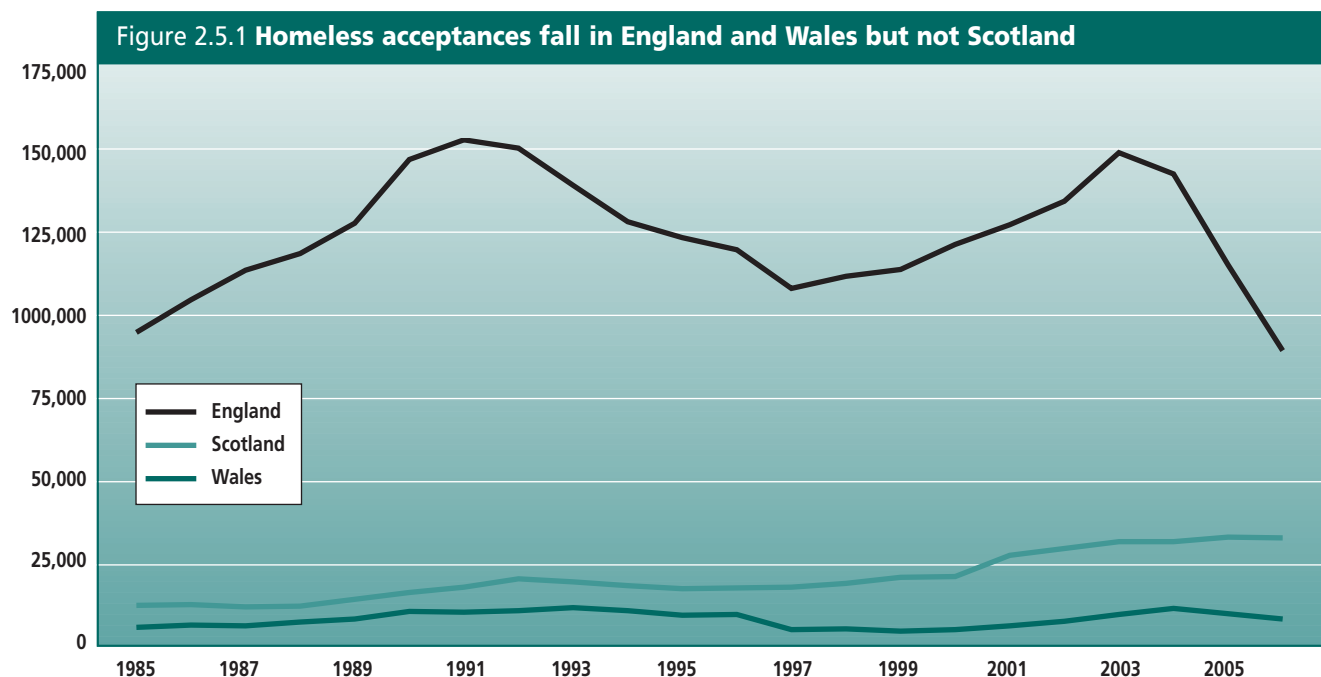


Table 2.5.1 Households assisted through homeless prevention measures in 2006

Prevention measure	Households assisted
Rent deposit scheme	11,010
Rent bond scheme	5,367
Private sector coordinator resource	5,094
Discretionary housing payments via housing benefit team	4,307
Links with housing benefit administration	2,370
Home visits in all cases	8,081
Home visits in some cases	3,330
Active referrals to floating support	4,686
Early warning systems with housing providers	3,656
Formal referrals to CAB and other agencies	3,509
Frontline homeless prevention fund	2,688
Formal external mediation	2,001
Mediation carried out by staff	1,798
Sanctuary type schemes	1,840
Total	59,737

Source: Homelessness Statistics, June 2007 and Local Authority Survey of Homelessness Prevention, Policy Briefing 19, CLG, 2007.

particular prevention measures during the 2006 calendar year, as shown in Table 2.5.1. Despite the discrepancies in these different estimates (which were based on incomplete returns from local authorities) it is clear that the increasing level of homeless prevention actions by local authorities, a good proportion of which relied on making more effective use of the private rented sector, accounted in very large measure for the decline in the numbers of homeless acceptances in England in 2006.

A balanced assessment of the role of both the 'enabling' and 'gate keeping' dimensions of authorities' homeless prevention activities in England is provided by Hal Pawson in the latest issue of *Housing Studies*.² His account emphasises the important role of the authorities' orientation to the discharge of their legal duties, and the impact this can have notwithstanding the constraints of an unchanged legal framework.

Wales has followed a very similar policy approach in promoting local authority prevention activities, and in one sense has gone even further by setting specific targets for the reduction in the numbers of homeless acceptances, as well as targets to reduce the numbers of homeless households in temporary accommodation. The Welsh Assembly target was set to reduce the numbers of priority need homeless households found to be unintentionally homeless to below 8,000 by 2008.³ In practice this target was more than exceeded in 2006.

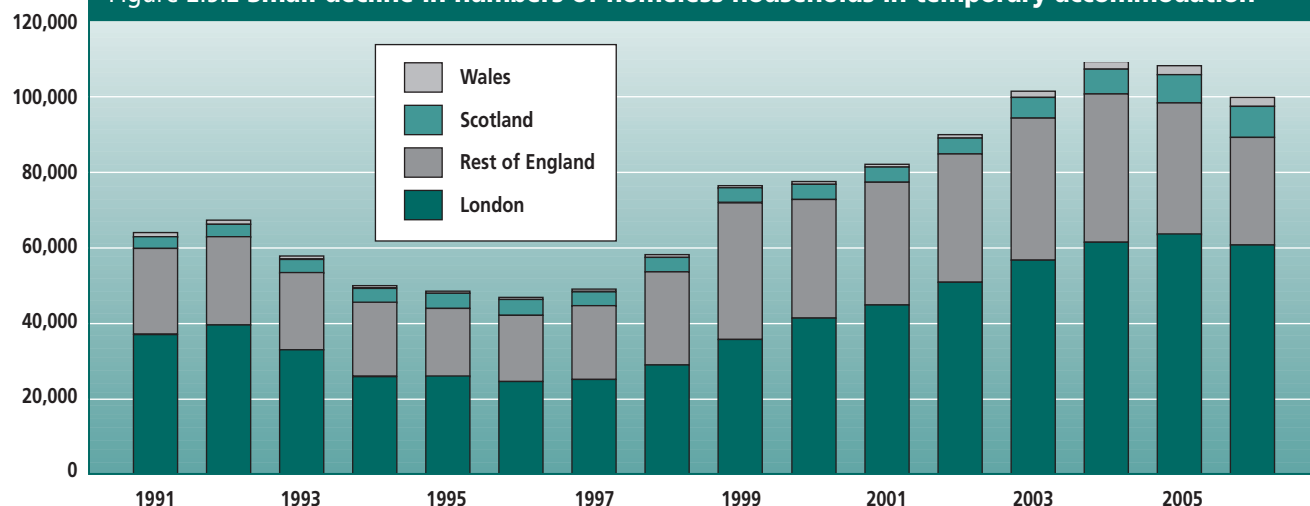
Temporary accommodation

Despite the sharp fall in levels of new homeless acceptances there was only a modest reduction in the numbers of priority need homeless households in temporary accommodation by the end of 2006 (Figure 2.5.2). Nonetheless, there were still just over 100,000 homeless households in temporary accommodation in Great Britain at the end of the year, of which almost 6,000 were in bed and breakfast accommodation.

In addition there were over 9,000 households 'homeless at home' at the end of the year in England and Wales (Compendium Tables 91a and 91b). It should be noted that the England figures for 'homeless at home' households now only include households where the authority has accepted the 'main duty' towards them.

In England, the government has set itself the target of halving the overall numbers of homeless households in temporary accommodation by 2010,

Figure 2.5.2 Small decline in numbers of homeless households in temporary accommodation



Note: Excludes homeless at home.

compared to the level in 2004 (of just over 100,000). This will require a reduction in numbers of some 40,000 in just four years. This will be difficult to achieve, notwithstanding the plans for increased output of new social and affordable housing over the next few years.

One factor contributing to that difficulty is the continuing decline in levels of relets from the existing social sector stock. That decline is partly related to housing market affordability, as fewer existing tenants can afford to move out of the sector, but it is also in part a long-term gradual consequence of past sales of dwellings under the right to buy scheme (and the failure to reinvest the resulting receipts in replacement dwellings).

It is notable that the numbers of lettings to new tenants by local authorities and housing

associations in England fell from 266,000 in 2003/04 to 229,000 in 2005/06 (Compendium Table 101) despite a small upturn in new build completions over those two years (Compendium Table 100). The planned rise in new social sector rented dwellings, to some 45,000 in 2010/11 (see Contemporary issue Chapter 4, *All Plans Ahead*) will on its own just be sufficient to reverse the decline in relets over the last two years.

Rough sleeping

The numbers of single people recorded as sleeping rough in England have not changed significantly over the last five years, but have remained below a third of the level in 1998 (see Figure 2.5.3), when the government set in train targets, policies and programmes with the express aim of reducing the numbers sleeping rough at that time.

Those programmes have been widely accepted as being successful, and the target set in 1998 for a two-thirds reduction in the numbers sleeping rough by 2002 has been met – and sustained. That assessment has not been seriously challenged, notwithstanding some doubts about the notoriously difficult task of obtaining accurate figures on the numbers of people sleeping rough. An account of those programmes, and their impact, can be found in a recent CLG policy briefing.⁴

References

1. *Homelessness Statistics*, June 2007 and *Local Authority Survey of Homelessness Prevention*, Policy Briefing 19, Communities and Local Government, 2007.
2. 'Local Authority Homeless Prevention in England: Empowering Consumers or Denying Rights?', H. Pawson, *Housing Studies*, Volume 22, Number 6, 2007.
3. *National Homelessness Strategy for Wales 2006–2008*, Welsh Assembly Government, 2005.
4. *Homelessness Statistics June 2007 and Rough Sleeping – 10 Years on from the Target*, Policy Briefing 20, Communities and Local Government, 2007.

Key Reading

Homeless Statistics, Communities and Local Government.
Corporate Plan 2006-09, Housing Corporation, 2006.
Housing Corporation annual report and accounts 2006-07, Housing Corporation, 2007.
Operation of the homeless persons legislation in Scotland: National and local authority analyses 2005/06, Statistical Bulletin HSG/2006/6, Scottish Executive.
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Northern Ireland Housing Statistics 2006-07, Department for Social Development, 2007.

