

The Herald Society

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The Herald Society pages are dedicated to life and work in the public and voluntary sectors. Every Tuesday, this is the place to turn to for news and analysis of all that matters in the NHS, schools, social work, social care

and the voluntary sector. Through initiatives such as the Herald Society awards, as well as through coverage in these pages, we aim to highlight some of the remarkable work being done by public services to

improve the lives of individuals and communities across Scotland. We also cover the policy clashes, management challenges and often thorny controversies affecting these crucial areas. If you want to

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Slowing down the revolving door

An innovative scheme is supporting families to break out of the cycle of homelessness. **By Jolene Campbell**



CHILD'S PLAY: Carrie Ann Davies and her son Devrin enjoy life at home in Niddrie, Edinburgh, after being supported by Shelter. Picture: Gordon Terris

MUCH of the media swallowed the recent line from the Scottish Government about the reduction in the

56,609 homeless applications in Scotland, down 4.9% from 2007.

But behind the spin, some picked up on a rise of almost 900 families with children applying to councils as homeless, with the figures having risen 20% between December 2007 and March of this year.

Add in the rise in applications for temporary accommodation over the year and a steep rise in applications to most local authorities this quarter, the figures start to tell a different story.

About one third of homeless applications in Scotland are from families with children. Those families are currently the only people designated to be in priority need of a home. But families who have been homeless are also most at risk of falling through the cracks to become homeless again – unless they get crucial support.

Homeless charity Shelter is helping to provide that support with the Families Project. It started as a pilot in Edinburgh and due to its success the model has been rolled out to South Lanarkshire, Glasgow, and Dumfries and Galloway.

The Edinburgh project celebrates its 10th anniversary this

year. It started after research found little or no support was offered once families were handed the keys to their home. Research into why tenants presented as homeless again after moving into a new home indicated that tenants needed more support.

The Families Project meets that need for homeless families living in temporary accommodation and helps them to settle into their permanent home. Project workers visit families and offer practical and emotional support to adults.

Paula Robertson, manager of the Edinburgh project, said: "Most of our referrals for Edinburgh are as a result of domestic violence and relationship breakdown. Drugs, alcohol and mental health are all huge players and there are more complex cases for families now, including debt."

"The impact of homelessness for all families is devastating, particularly for children. If a family already has a problem with mental health, the experience of being homeless will exacerbate it. And the parents are so busy trying to get out of it for their children's sake that they forget about their own well being."

For local authorities rates of failed tenancies commonly lie between 20% and 50%. The rate of people presenting as homeless again with the Families Projects

is just 4% over five years, suggesting that the project is tackling the revolving door syndrome. Alison Watson, Head of Services at Shelter said, "With families the cycle of homelessness is more acute. We can be working with families where children are third or fourth generation homeless. To break the cycle you need to keep the support in place until the family can stand on their own two feet."

The success of the project is down to the dedicated relationships. Children's services build on the adult support with child support workers who are qualified in art, drama or play therapies. Research from south of the border shows that mental health problems are three times as common among homeless children up to a year after being re-housed.

Watson said, "There can be so much going on for adults and to support the children through the trauma of homelessness, that can be straw that breaks the camel's back. Children who are homeless could be moved school several times a year. We want to make sure above all that these children don't become the homeless adults of the future."

With the growing caseload for homeless teams, the pressure on limited housing stock makes it challenging for local authorities to accommodate families. In Edin-

'Trying to get out of being homeless was almost a full time job'

Carrie Ann Davies stays in Niddrie with her three children: Tristan, five, Tiara, three, and one-year-old Devrin. He was born while Davies was living in temporary accommodation in a high rise flat in a block where the lift didn't work. Before she was homeless, she stayed in a private rented flat for three years until her landlord decided to sell. "I had my name on the council waiting list already because private renting is expensive. When the landlord gave me six months notice I started looking for other places. When I didn't find a place I stayed at mum's. Being pregnant, with two kids, and staying at my mum's wasn't working, so I ended up in temporary accommodation." "I never had friends round because I was embarrassed. Shelter helped me cope and settle the kids. Shelter spent

time with us and made kids see that there would be something else at the end of it. Our support worker Brock visited once a week and called often. I didn't see a way out before he helped me."

Davies spent a year in temporary accommodation, until the Families Project helped her move into her new home, a housing association secure tenancy. "The kids are so happy now. I have much more time for them. I had been so focused on trying to get out of being homeless – it was like a full-time job."

"Now I am always finding things to do or fix and recently got a wee drill. The kids think I am like Bob the Builder! I am near family and I can now focus on getting back to finding work. My goal is to have a job by February."

burgh, some can spend over a year in temporary accommodation.

David Carlin, 49, lives in Edinburgh with his wife and two children. On the day they moved to temporary accommodation a lorry took their furniture into storage. They didn't know where they were going. His family was one of the first to be helped by the Shelter Families Project.

Carlin said, "Homelessness can happen to anyone. You don't have to be sitting on the pavement with a bit of string round your waist."

After working for years in construction with sporadic work and building up debts they struggled to pay the mortgage and put their flat

on the market. It sold quickly leaving them with nowhere to go. The council housed them in a temporary flat for over seven months.

"The kids were one and a half and six weeks old when we were homeless. From the first meeting with Shelter I had a strong feeling that they were on my side. They helped me deal with the council and understand my rights. They were my voice and kept me sane."

Shelter's families' projects get funding from their local councils and can save local authorities at least £2.1 million a year – the cost of a failed tenancy is at least £22,000 before staff costs or police and health services are taken into

account. With cases becoming more complex the true longer term costs are harder to track. Shelter hopes its model can be extended to other areas. The numbers of people going to Shelter for help has risen and there are concerns about the impact of the economic downturn. The Edinburgh service operates at full capacity.

The underlying trend of the recent homelessness figures is certainly reflected in Edinburgh, Robertson added. "The amount of referrals we have had recently has increased, to a point where we are unable to meet the demand. There is no question that there is a need for this kind of service."