



Housing and Homelessness

This section comes with an important health warning. Homelessness is not a problem isolated from other challenges someone might face, and the solution to it will certainly not be found without considering the wider picture. I have tried to point out many of the links with poverty, poor physical and mental health, substance dependency, etc. But this report really should be read as an exploration of a single corner of often complex networks of issues.

National picture

It's hard to get accurate estimations for the number of people who are experiencing homelessness. Official figures only take account of those people who approached their local authority for help and were accepted under the statutory criteria (including residency rights and local connections, unintentional homelessness, and fitting a priority need category). We can say that over a quarter of a million people are living in official temporary accommodation nationally, and many more (one estimate suggests 3.3 million people) are sofa-surfing, and living in bed and breakfast accommodation, squats and hostels outside of the system. These numbers have risen sharply over the last decade.

Those most likely to be affected by homelessness are increasingly the vulnerable – those without a social safety net. These include:

- Young people, of whom 24% are LGBT.
- Single-parent families
- People who have been in care
- Ex-offenders

Poverty accounts for 25-50% of the explanations for someone experiencing homelessness as an adult. Put another way, your chances of becoming homeless are significantly influenced by whether you have experienced poverty. The rollout of Universal Credit has exacerbated housing problems for low-income households as it is paid in arrears, often following delays, and is paid directly to the tenant, increasing the danger of rent arrears. Physical and mental health problems, and trauma are also overrepresented in homeless people.

Street homelessness has been on the rise across the country for some years now, particularly in London (which accounts for a quarter of the total rough sleepers nationally)

and the North-west. Research from the Institute of Public Policy Research suggests a rise of 42% in homelessness in the 91 predominantly rural local authorities since 2010 (though it should be remembered that total numbers in these areas can be very small). Obviously, acute homelessness has significant implications for other aspects of life, especially health. The life expectancy for a homeless person is an astonishing 30 years lower than for the rest of the population. The Government's [Rough Sleeping Strategy](#) was published in August 2018, looking at prevention, intervention and recovery.

It is difficult to get reliable information on **youth homelessness**. Centrepoin't's [Youth Homeless Databank](#) allows comparison of data supplied by local authorities on the numbers of people aged 16 to 24 recorded as receiving help with housing, as well as the numbers presenting as homeless to their council. Only one in 10 young people requesting help with housing from their local authority were accepted as homeless. Over half of those reported no successful positive action.

Concern continues to be raised about the **lack of affordable housing** nationally, the relative insecurity of private tenancies (the involuntary ending of a private sector tenancy is now the primary factor given for homelessness), and the poor quality of some housing stock. Housing benefit does not cover rent in 95% of the country.

Those at the lower end of the **private rented sector** are generally at greater risk of poor-quality housing, insecure tenancies and high housing costs. There has been a sharp spike in the number of 'no fault' evictions from private rented housing. The profile of private-sector renters is changing. A recent report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that: *'The private rented sector is often seen as a transitional tenure for many groups, particularly students and mobile young people, but it is also increasingly being used as a longer-term tenure by a mix of households. For example, a much greater proportion of families with children are now living in this sector.'* The report suggests that nowadays for many there is less of a housing ladder, and more of a housing treadmill, as tenure is more precarious, and moving house often realises only small benefits.

High housing costs can preclude households from spending adequately on other things, such as healthy food, educational opportunities, or transport, with wide-ranging consequences. Unaffordable housing, or inflexible private tenancies can limit people's resilience to changes in their situation, for example a change of job, illness, domestic violence, the birth of a child. Insecure housing can also force change on a household, and, especially those on low-incomes can find this difficult to manage.

Three in ten people live in what Shelter calls **'bad housing'** (overcrowded, cold, damp, in poor repair), rising to four in ten of private rental tenants. A cold, damp home can exacerbate respiratory problems such as asthma, as well as a range of other health conditions. Poor housing is also associated with a number of mental health problems: 19% of adults living in poor quality housing in England have poor mental health outcomes, including stress, anxiety and depression. BRE Trust has estimated that poor housing costs the NHS £1.4bn annually in first-year treatment costs alone.

But housing is about more than just bricks and mortar. The impact of unaffordable, inadequate or insecure housing on people's **wider health and wellbeing**, finances, and sense of social inclusion, is increasingly well understood. Having to move frequently as a result of insecure housing tenure, for example, can seriously disrupt children's education, and can have implications for employment.

Poor housing can undermine wellbeing in a variety of ways. A sense of impermanency in accommodation can result in residents having less of an investment in their local neighbourhood, and having fewer of these kinds of links with their community. A recent ONS study found that renters were more likely to be lonely than homeowners, though more research is needed to establish the nature of this link.

On a practical level, too, **family connections and wider social networks** play an important role in enabling people to establish and keep a home. This includes finance for paying bills, but also relates to the ability to furnish a home, and supply basic cooking equipment, etc. Informal social networks can be invaluable as a source of financial, practical and emotional support, whether that's tiding people over with small loans or help with a deposit, having someone to stay in between tenancies, or helping out with donations of furniture or equipment. Those who lack these connections can be at a disadvantage. And yet an inadequate home can make people reluctant to invite guests round, or unable to reciprocate childcare favours, etc, creating a vicious circle of exclusion and vulnerability.

What's on the horizon?

The **Homelessness Reduction Act** passed in spring 2018 imposes legal duties on local authorities to take positive steps to relieve and prevent homelessness. It requires councils to provide advice to everyone, without eligibility criteria, 56 days (up from 28) before they are at risk of becoming homeless. All eligible applicants will then have to receive an assessment and personal housing plan, outlining what action the tenant and the local authority will take to avoid the person losing their home.

Housing First is a relatively recent idea which operates on the principle that if a homeless person is housed quickly in stable accommodation, with a package of support around them, instead of moving through successive stages of emergency shelter, transitional hostel, etc, moving towards independent living, then they are in a better position to sort out other difficulties they might have, such as substance misuse. This is in contrast with a conditional model that requires an individual to, for example, cease drug use *prior* to being securely housed. This has shown to be a successful model, even with long-term rough sleepers, with high levels of maintenance of tenancy. Read more at: <https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/>. The testimony from one Housing First client: 'That front door to me is an identity'. The approach is generating interest across the UK, and will be adopted by Torbay Council in April 2019 (see below).

The view from Devon

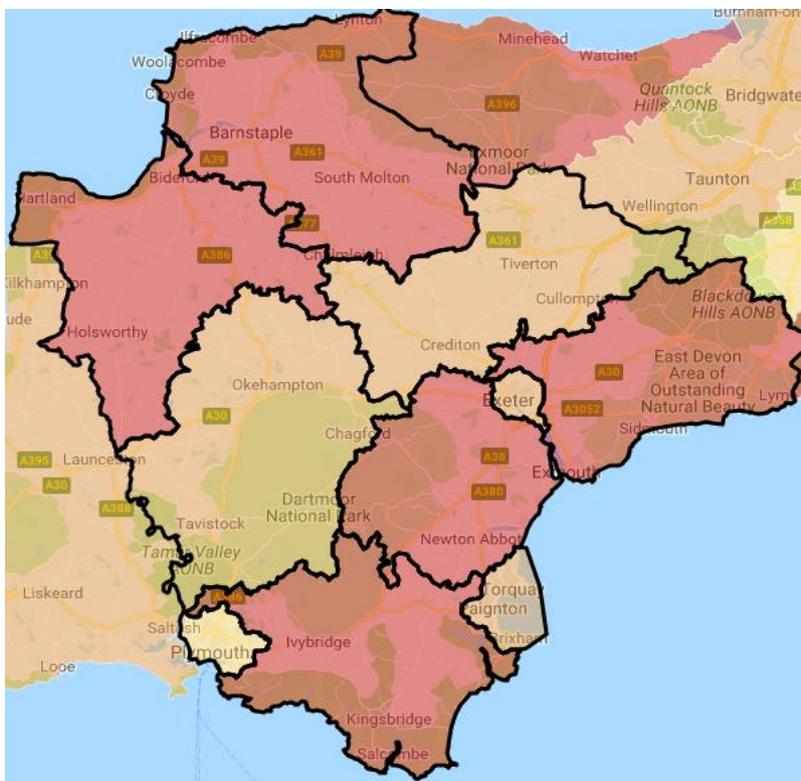
The familiar image of chocolate-box thatched cottages and charming fishing villages can obscure some serious inequalities when it comes to housing in the county, and some very place-specific problems.

Housing Issues

There are significant variations in the affordability of housing across the county (see map below). Housing is least affordable in the South Hams, and most affordable in Plymouth.

Parts of the county have very high levels of second-home and holiday home ownership. Nearly 46,000 people were registered in the 2011 census as having a second address in Devon; in the South Hams this amounts to 92 people with a second address for every 1000 residents, the fifth-highest rate in the country. The rate in Plymouth however is only 27 per 1000 permanent residents (source: ONS).

The Country Land and Business Association recently published a [report](#) on the number of rural settlements deemed by local authority planning regulations to be 'unsustainable', that is unsuitable for further development, often as a result of their distance from essential services such as post offices, bus services and primary schools, thereby trapping them in a cycle of decline. Although the data is incomplete, Devon's planning rules appear generally less rigid than in some areas, and affordable housing is still being built in rural areas, albeit in relatively small numbers. That said, Mid-Devon, the only Devon local authority to do so, lists 26 'unsustainable' villages.



Housing affordability, 2017. (Areas in red require between £9,169 and £53,464 more than 4.5 times an average annual salary to purchase an entry level house).

Homelessness

The government is changing the way it requires local authorities to report figures for those presenting as statutorily homeless, with some confusion ensuing. From April to June 2018, 1063 households in Devon were accepted as owed a homelessness duty by their local authority, whether prevention or relief. This figure excludes Torbay, for which no data was submitted.

Rough sleeping figures for 2017 show significant internal variation. Mid Devon, Teignbridge, East Devon and West Devon have barely any rough sleepers, while Exeter has a bigger problem proportionally than Birmingham or Manchester.

	Ratio per 1000 households
England	0.2
Exeter	0.65
North Devon	0.49
Torbay	0.39
Plymouth	0.23

Rough Sleepers in Devon. Source: Office for National Statistics, 2017.

Although rough sleeping tends to be clustered in urban areas, problems of homelessness in rural areas present significant challenges for supporting agencies. The cost and availability of public transport is a factor, and the difficulty of accessing adequate advice and support, as well as the consequent difficulties in accessing shelters and hostels. Carefully planned outreach work is necessary to meet vulnerable people 'where they are'.

Torbay Council have recently announced their adoption of a Housing First policy from April 2019, following a detailed feasibility [report](#) conducted by Crisis in 2018, and in close collaboration with the voluntary sector. The plans announced include measures to engage private landlords, given the need for private rented accommodation to enact the policy.

Housing Quality

Aside from affordability, the principal problem with housing in Devon is its poor quality. The Index of Multiple Deprivation conflates barriers to accessing housing and services into a single domain, and scores for inside (central heating, housing quality) and outside (traffic, air pollution) living environment into another, which is less than helpful. It is possible to look separately at scores for 'indoor environment', which combines information on the proportion of homes without central heating, and those failing to meet the Decent Homes standard. On this measure, all Devon's local authorities fall within the 20% most-deprived in the country, and many LSOAs are within the top 10%.

Drill down even further, and the picture is equally gloomy. Devon has uniformly high numbers of homes without central heating: 4.9% compared with a national rate of 2.7%. Torridge is the worst-affected area, with 6.4% of homes lacking central heating, and nearly 60% of homes not connected to the national gas grid. Devon County Council's [Joint Strategic](#)

Strengths and Challenges: What is being done?

Tackling a systemic problem such as homelessness is challenging, and requires an equally systemic approach which looks at root causes as well as addressing acute need. The most effective work in this area takes a holistic approach, of varying degrees, and works in partnership to help deal with other related issues. Much of what Devon Community Foundation funds in this area is place-based work, which is adapted to the specific needs of the local community, and responsive to the opportunities available locally. This might mean appropriate outreach arrangements to allow people to access a service without having to travel too far. Or it might mean making the most of local resources to help promote sustainable livelihoods.

Teignbridge Homeless Action Today (THAT: www.thatfoodbank.com) is based in Buckland, Newton Abbot. They provide food parcels to individuals and families in need, whether homeless or not, but also produce special non-cook parcels for street homeless, and a Home Start pack for those moving into new accommodation without essential items such as crockery, bedding and cooking equipment (supported by a grant from DCF in 2016). They can also supply gas and electricity key top-ups. This kind of practical support can help those moving on from insecure accommodation gain stability and a more stable future.

Churches Housing Action Aid Team (CHAT) Mid-Devon was founded in 1995 in response to a need to support people in mid-Devon facing difficulties with insecure housing and homelessness. Devon Community Foundation has made grants totalling over £34,000 to CHAT to support this work. CHAT advisors work from an office in Tiverton, and offer by-appointment outreach in Crediton, bringing free, impartial housing advice and tenancy support to people at a very local level. This is especially important given the lack of public transport between Tiverton and Crediton, and the withdrawal of council services from the town. CHAT runs a food bank in Tiverton, and also works alongside Exeter Community Energy to host an energy clinic to provide support to those at risk of fuel poverty.

Resources

More than a Number: The Scale of Youth Homelessness in the UK. Centrepoin, 2018

Rough Sleeping Strategy. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, August 2018.

Housing and Life Experiences: Making a Home on a Low Income, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2018.

Barnes, M., Cullinane, C., Scott, S. and Silvester, S. (2013). *People living in bad housing: Numbers and health impacts*. UK: Shelter.

<https://www.nongasmap.org.uk/> shows the percentage of homes not connected to mains gas

Nichol, Simon, Mike Roy, Helen Garrett, *The cost of poor housing to the NHS*, 2015: BRE Trust.

[*Tackling the homelessness crisis: Why and how you should fund systemically*](#), NPC, November 2018

[*The Homelessness Monitor*](#), Crisis, 2018. Produced annually.

Centrepoin's Youth Homeless databank: <https://www.yhatabank.com/> allows comparison of data from different local authorities on the number of people aged 16-24 recorded as having received housing and/or homelessness support, and how many approached their council for help.