



Housing and Mental Health in Edinburgh Survey Report, 2023

AdvoCard and Edinburgh Community Voices

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Edinburgh Community Voices and Collective Advocacy

Collective Advocacy brings people together to talk about their experiences, raise issues and take collective action.

AdvoCard works with people in Edinburgh with lived experience of mental health issues, supporting them to:

- Discuss issues which are important to them and find common ground
- Campaign and raise awareness about the issues which are important to them
- Have a stronger influence on the planning and delivery of services in Edinburgh
- Feed into policy at a local and national level
- Use their valuable experience and expertise to make a difference for other people with lived experience of mental health issues

Edinburgh Community Voices is a collective advocacy group for people in Edinburgh with lived experience of mental health issues. AdvoCard facilitates and supports the group.

Edinburgh Community Voices meetings take place face to face and online. If you are interested in taking part, or would like to hear about other ways you can give your views, please go to www.advocard.org.uk.

Introduction

Over the last few years, we have been hearing more and more about the impact housing issues are having on people's mental health.

We decided to carry out a survey to try to learn more about this issue, to raise awareness and to push for change.

Our survey ran from August to October 2022. The survey was open to anyone who lives in Edinburgh and who has lived experience of mental health issues.

People responded online (on our website), by sending their response to us in the post, or by speaking to a collective advocacy worker face to face or on the phone.

18 people contributed to the survey.

This is what they told us.

Trigger Warning: To make you aware, in case it is something you may be affected by, there are small references to suicidal thoughts on pages 5 and 21.

Summary

The people we heard from live in a mix of housing:

- Social housing
- Temporary housing
- Private rental housing
- Mid-market rent housing
- Homes which they own themselves

We heard about a wide range of issues:

- Long waiting times to get a social home.
- Difficulties with the application process for getting a social home.
- People with mental health issues being housed in social homes which don't meet their needs. Not being given priority status for moving to homes which would meet their needs.
- Unaffordable private rent.
- Rent going up.
- Issues with housing conditions.
- The impact of damp and mould on physical health.

- Repairs not being carried out for long periods of time.
- Repairs not being carried out properly – just covering up the problem (e.g damp), not addressing it.
- Private rental tenants being afraid that their rent will be put up if they ask their landlord to carry out repairs.
- For homeowners, difficulties arranging shared repairs.
- Poor heating system leading to cold home and high energy bills.
- Poor insulation and/or window glazing leading to cold home and high energy bills.
- Concerns about security and issues with neighbours. Lack of action being taken by mid-market rent landlord and housing associations to address these concerns and issues.
- Noise pollution.
- Lack of a garden or other green space.
- Issues with transition of services (mainly healthcare services) after moving home.
- Concerns about accountability of housing associations.

- A vulnerable female housing association tenant being bullied by the housing association and by contracted workmen. Lack of availability of female workers in the housing association.
- A privacy breach affecting housing association tenants.

For many, these issues had an impact on their mental health, including increased stress, anxiety and low mood, re-traumatisation, increase in suicidal thoughts, and triggering symptoms of pre-existing mental health issues.

Changes

We asked people if there were any changes which could be made to housing and the housing system in Edinburgh which would improve life for people with lived experience of mental health issues. These are the changes they would want to see.

Changes relating to the overall availability of social and affordable housing:

- More affordable housing generally
- Being able to get a social home and not being trapped in a private let: having the security and peace of mind that you have with a roof over your head that's yours.

Changes relating to the application process for social housing:

- EdIndex should be simpler.
- Better communication for people bidding on housing, including advice, instead of just potential bid offers going through.
- In the EdIndex application process, more space should be allowed on the form for people with mental health issues to talk about these.
- When decisions about the development and allocation of housing are being made, mental health needs should be taken into account. For instance, factors which could negatively impact mental health like street noise. And factors which could positively impact mental health like access to a garden or a spare room in the home to play music, read, write, or do artwork.

Changes relating to social and temporary housing:

- Don't run housing associations like businesses.
- Housing associations should have greater accountability.
- Priority must be given to the welfare, rights and individual needs of tenants.

- The us and them culture in housing associations needs smashing down. How would they feel if it was their home? They need to consider it from the perspective of what they would need to feel safe, secure and happy in they own home and apply this to their tenants.
- There should be better training for housing officers, and all housing association and City of Edinburgh Council workers who could be coming into contact with tenants, about working with people with mental health issues, vulnerable people and vulnerable women.
- When bonds are difficult to create, don't keep changing someone's housing officer every six months, moving them from one housing officer to another. They need to build a consistent relationship in order to advocate for people who are vulnerable.
- The male dominated culture in housing associations' assets teams and maintenance teams needs to be changed.
- Housing associations should be recruiting a more diverse team of women workers in maintenance. They should be aware of the impact which men have on some women. Where a female maintenance worker is not available, you should have the option of having a female staff member from the housing association present.
- Stairwells, loft spaces, basements and communal gardens need to be seen as people's homes. People should be notified when work is being carried out in them, especially if they are vulnerable.

- You should have the right to upgrades and refurbishment in your flat, but also the right to say no to these when it is not for health and safety reasons, because of the upheaval it causes. If it is required for safety, make sure the necessary measures are in place to ensure that vulnerable people are and feel safe.
- Standards for insulation and window glazing should apply to temporary housing as well as permanent social housing.

Other changes:

- Rents in the private rental sector need to be more affordable. There should not be as many barriers when it comes to deposits so that people are able to rent a flat in the first place.
- Private rental tenants should be able to have pets as these can help with mental health.
- The issue of noise pollution should be taken more seriously.
- Policies should be introduced to enforce better soundproofing and insulation, to reduce noise. Better insulation would also help with keeping the home warm and reducing energy bills.
- There should be proper investigations and regulations on HMO flats in buildings that do not regularly feature them, to limit the impact on other residents in the building.

- A policy for the tenements people own to be maintained regularly should be introduced. The council 'Novoville' app could be a good idea but they take a fee to use it. (Novoville is an app that is designed to help organise repairs and maintenance of shared buildings like tenements. Some of it is free but parts of it take a commission.)

Full Report

Applying for Social Housing

We heard from two people who have been applying for social housing for years, in order to get out of private rental housing where they have faced issues including poor conditions and unaffordable rent. They responded to the survey together. They both want to have their own social home so that they can afford the rent and know that it is their home and they will always have it. Both have been bidding for one bed flats.

This is how they described their experiences of applying:

'It feels like is anyone even looking at my bid?'

'I don't know if I've got a housing officer. I didn't have one when I was homeless.'

'You feel like they won't help you because you're in private rental.'

One family (two people) who currently live in temporary housing responded to the survey together. They were made homeless because the landlord of their private rental home decided to sell. They told us that the process for applying for social housing has been 'very difficult':

'We were allocated a housing officer who gave us the wrong information and the process of putting our white goods into storage was really stressful. We are still in temporary housing. Bidding on EdIndex for two years has not led to anything yet and sometimes it can feel hopeless.'

Several people who now have a social home told us that they found the application process long and frustrating.

EdIndex is the City of Edinburgh Council's online portal (website) where people can apply and bid for social rented homes.

One person told us that when they first started bidding on the website it kept crashing. They described the process of applying for housing on EdIndex as 'shocking'.

Another said,

'I'm pretty tech-savvy but the website did not work well and it wasn't clear how different options worked or how to know whether you'd picked properties in order of preference. Stressful.'

They also said that they were offered a home and this was great, but they then only had ten days in which to move into the home, and the stress caused by this left them unwell for weeks.

Two people highlighted issues they faced while living in social housing, needing to move due to their home not meeting their needs as someone with mental health issues, but not receiving priority in bidding for a new home or getting help from their housing association.

One of them told us that,

‘it is cumbersome and not fair to movers seeking rehousing on mental health grounds as no real priority given’.

The other person, who was in social housing for twenty years until they moved to their current home last year, told us,

‘I got basically no help from [my] previous housing association, when I was having severe problems with a neighbour which made my mental health issues a lot worse. In the end I got help from family to move elsewhere.’

Some people had good experiences of applying for social housing.

Two people told us that they received help from a social worker to make the application for their social home.

One woman was homeless. She has Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD), and had this at the time when she was homeless, but didn’t know that she had it. She was sofa surfing and in a survival state. She was on the housing waiting list for a while and applied using EdIndex. She had gold priority as a vulnerable woman. The housing association contacted her to offer her the flat, she didn’t have to contact them. That was when her life started to change. Having her own home created the

stability for her to work on alcohol issues and she has now achieved sobriety and rehabilitation. She told us:

‘It was somewhere to start my life again, to rebuild myself.’

She went back to college. She was able to start addressing her mental health issues, including getting a diagnosis of C-PTSD. Unfortunately, issues with the housing association have meant that she has been re-traumatised, as described later.

Housing Conditions and Repairs

Issues with housing conditions and repairs were faced by people living in social housing, temporary housing and private rental housing, and also homeowners.

A number of people talked about facing significant delays for repairs once they had reported the issue to their landlord or housing association.

The two people who live in private rental flats live in the same building, but in different stairs, with different landlords and letting agencies. The railing in the wardrobe in one person’s son’s bedroom is missing, so he has to put his clothes in boxes. The building was badly flooded in February 2022 after problems with the pipework. The flooding caused damp in the flats. Repairs were not made until late August 2022. However, things were not actually fixed, they were just covered and patched up. The carpet in one person’s flat which was damaged in the flooding has not been replaced. The other person found that the damp from the flooding led to a worsening in their asthma, for which they had to take steroids.

They are both too terrified to ask their landlords to do the necessary repairs in case the landlords put the rent up and evict them if they can't afford it. They feel that the landlords get to decide what they want to fix in the flat and when.

The family who live in temporary housing told us about issues with repairs they have faced in their flat:

‘Our boiler had been faulty since we arrived but had reached a point of no possible repair a year into staying here, with the landlord refusing to get a new one until the housing association demanded so. Our kitchen window blew open and had to be fixed but it took six months.’

A number of people who live in social housing told us about delayed repairs.

One person had issues with damp – they kept reporting the issue to their housing association but waited a long time for the repairs to be carried out. They ended up moving home, with the repairs only taking place a few weeks before they moved out.

Another told us of multiple issues in their home needing repaired but not being fixed: the main door buzzer to their flat; broken cupboards; the shower mixer.

We heard from one person about repeated problems they experienced where they were left without running water and where problems with the building's electricity supply meant that the whole building had no lights and the entry door was not secure. They felt that they were fobbed off whenever they tried to contact the housing association about the issues.

They told us:

‘I now keep a stockpile of bottled water in my one bed flat as I may not have the mental fortitude necessary to contact them if it happens again, and they did not exactly rush to fix it even after someone eventually believed me .’

They also had a problem in a previous flat where there was a mouse infestation. Inadequate repairs to seal up the holes meant that the mice kept getting in.

One person told us about multiple issues which affected not just their flat but their neighbours’ flats as well, including a leaking roof, problems with black mould going back to at least 2005, internal cracks in the plaster in tenants’ flats, and structural cracks in the outside of the building. The cracks in people’s flats would be painted over, and then reappear in hot or cold weather. The housing association did not call out a surveyor to look at the external cracks until they had reached the bottom floor from the top floor.

Three of the people who responded are homeowners. We heard from them about the difficulties involved in arranging or keeping on top of repairs, including the stress and cost involved with arranging shared repairs, co-ordinating with other owners in the building. One of them also told us that mental health issues can make it difficult to keep on top of house cleaning and repairs.

Other Housing Issues

The cost of rent was a big issue for the two people who live in private rental flats. Every year, their rent goes up significantly. One of them told us that they couldn't afford their flat in the first place when they moved in, but moved there because they were desperate after being evicted from their previous flat.

One person who lives in a mid-market home raised the issue of security concerns and lack of action from their landlord:

'My mid-market property is lovely and I feel lucky to live there, however the communication from the landlord is abysmal and we have had a few security breaches recently. This included a smashed glass door, someone breaking into the bin shed and sleeping there, drugs being used at our front doors and people trying the handles of tenants' doors. The landlord have not provided any help i.e. CCTV or suggestions to make the area safer.'

Another person, who lives in social housing, told us that there is a problem in the communal stairwell of their block of flats with other tenants smoking. It's not possible for the person to leave or enter their flat most days without inhaling somebody else's smoke, which is a problem for them as they have asthma. The housing association have not taken any action to address the issue.

Noise was something which reported as an issue by five people. This noise included:

- Noise from neighbours – including impact noise, social noise and loud music
- Noise from repair works within the building
- Noise from the street / late night pubs and clubs

- Traffic and helicopters
- Noise from city events in the summer, including festival events

One person told us that their bedroom faces out onto a very busy road which is noisy with traffic, street noise and noise from a local night club which is open late.

Another person told us that noise from neighbours in the middle of the night affects their school-going children as they cannot sleep.

The family who are in temporary housing live immediately below a five person HMO (House of Multiple Occupancy) flat. They have had many problems with noise from the HMO flat. They said that some tenants have been considerate but due to the poor quality of the building and lack of insulation there can be many different forms of noise coming from above including impact noise, social noise and music which is so loud they can feel vibrations. The landlord of the HMO flat has done nothing to address the issue.

Inadequate insulation was something which was mentioned by another person as factor in the noise problems they experience.

Two people who both live in social housing told us that they don't have access to a garden. Access to a garden would greatly help their mental health and wellbeing.

We heard from several people about the difficulties they have heating their home. One told us that this was due to having inefficient and expensive storage heaters. The others mentioned poor insulation and rising energy costs.

One said,

‘[Very poor] insulation and rising energy costs means it's difficult to have adequate heating which negatively affects both mental and physical health and there are a lack of community accessible heated spaces in winter where a person of low means can be without having to pay to be there and be able to keep warm.’

The family who are in temporary housing told us that their flat is extremely cold in winter due to the poor insulation and single glazed windows. The majority of their heating bill is spent on heat leaking out.

We heard from one person about their concerns about how much their electricity will cost them in the future, and the impact these concerns have on their mental health. They own their own flat and also have to pay ‘estate management factoring fees’ which are extremely expensive.

We carried out the survey in summer / early autumn and did not specifically ask about heating and energy costs, so although only three people mentioned the issue here, it is likely that more people are affected.

One person was forced to move from their flat, which they own, after a fire as a result of arson in a neighbouring flat. When this happened, they had to move GP practice, meaning they no longer had access to a community link worker. A year later, they had to move again as their rent was being paid by the insurers who said that their current rent was too high. This meant having to move GP practice again, despite the impact this would have on their mental health. They have also had problems with council tax. They are currently having to pay council tax on both the empty flat, still affected by

fire damage, and the rental flat where they are staying, despite telling the council their circumstances and making them aware that they are on benefits.

We heard from a woman with Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD) due to trauma which took place before she moved into her flat (she also told us her experience of applying for social housing, see page 11). We are identifying her gender as it is necessary in order to understand the significance of the issues described. She told us about bullying she has experienced from workmen doing repair and refurbishment work in her flat and apartment building.

She has the right to be given sufficient notice when workmen come to do non-emergency work. However, they turn up unannounced, even for planned work. They don't even press the intercom at the bottom of the stair, they just knock on her front door. She has told her housing association about this issue on numerous occasions but the issue has not been addressed. She is not able to live in her flat during the week because she is scared that the workmen will turn up when she is on her own. She can only be there during the week if there is a support worker with her. She had to pay a personal assistant (support worker) to be there to support her so she felt safe when a gas engineer was coming round. But the gas engineer didn't turn up at the time he was supposed to, and came at a completely different time when the personal assistant was not there.

During a kitchen refurbishment, there were nine aggressive repairmen in the flat at one time. They used her toilet without permission and used her flat as a common room. One of the repairmen bullied another and this was traumatising for her to witness. After the incident, two men from the housing associations came to her partner's flat, where she was staying, to interview her about the incident. One of the men separated her from her partner, who supports her, and interviewed her

separately. He questioned her as if she were the antagonist in an abusive incident. She thought the man from the housing association was there to provide reassurance but he came to blame. She felt and continues to feel bullied by the housing association. She originally had a female housing officer who she liked. They were taken away and she now has a male housing officer. She hasn't been given the option of having female maintenance staff.

There was a separate incident with a breach of privacy affecting all the residents in her stair. A folder was placed in the stairwell at the main door with photos of the different flats, including addresses, flat numbers, posters, personal possessions, clothes, and underwear. This folder was intended for asbestos removal workers, but it was accessible to anyone coming into the stairwell. The tenants complained to the housing association, and the folder was taken away, but they haven't had an apology.

Another person raised a concern about the level of accountability which housing associations have:

'I've been in social / community housing for over 5 years and nearly every aspect of it seems suspect. Even if it's not corruption there's a definite lack of care or concern or work ethic, probably because most of us are just grateful to have a roof over our heads and don't want to rock the boat, so they have no accountability.'

Impact on Mental Health

Twelve people told us that the housing issues they experienced had a negative impact on their mental health.

Housing issues which had a particular impact on mental health were:

- Cost of rent and rent increases
- Rising energy costs compounded by poor insulation
- The impact on physical and mental health of not being able to adequately heat the home because of rising energy costs
- Poor housing conditions
- Repairs not being carried out
- The stress of organising repairs collectively with other home-owners in the block of flats
- Noise
- Security issues or other issues with neighbours, and not feeling safe as a result
- Other housing association tenants smoking in the stairwell
- Uncertainty about how long it will take to get a social home
- Having to move GP practice twice in the space of a year, following two house moves

People told us these issues affected their mental health in the following ways:

- Increased stress
- Increased anxiety
- Increased insomnia
- Low mood

- Increase in symptoms of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Feelings of helplessness, feeling sad
- Experiencing suicidal thoughts
- One person ended up being detained in the Royal Edinburgh Hospital after experiencing suicidal thoughts triggered by the housing issues they experienced

These are some of the things people told us about the impact of housing issues on their mental health:

‘It adds to the stress if you’ve already got mental health issues, it gives you more.’

[Regarding poor conditions, high rents and worries about rent increases]

‘I feel less safe when home alone which makes my anxiety go through the roof.’

[Regarding security issues]

‘These issues had a major effect on my mental health. If I had not had help from my family to move to other accommodation last Autumn, I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and at that time a lot of suicidal thoughts.

Thanks to my family I now after 20 years in a social housing flat in a very busy city centre area, have a little house in a quiet residential area, with my own small garden . And slowly my anxiety/ depression are improving.’

[Regarding issues with noise]

‘Constantly stressful. Noise above affects our anxiety and overall wellbeing.
Not knowing if we will find a decent flat offer while dealing with ongoing
noise issues has affected our mood.’

[Somebody in temporary housing experiencing noise issues, while also
bidding for social housing]

The woman with Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD), who has experienced bullying both from workmen and from her housing association, already had C-PTSD because of previous trauma. However, she told us that the whole situation has re-traumatised her and has created new trauma, and she has lost her independence. She feels that she needs her own space but can't live on her own. She has not been able to continue her diploma or voluntary work since 2018. She had been paying to defer but won't be able to do this any longer. Plans for work are out of the window. Rehabilitation of life after therapy has been wrecked by the housing association.

To show the positive impact which housing can have on mental health - one person who had a good experience with their housing told us that ‘my housing has been positive in helping me to stay well’.

Good Experiences

These are good experiences people told us about.

One person told us that they are delighted with their supported flat. Their housing has been positive in helping them stay well. They have a key worker who sees to their needs and the staff are very good. It is also in a peaceful part of town and they find the peace and quiet helps with their mental health.

Somebody who is looking to move from their current social home to somewhere quieter told us that they have been offered help from the council's Housing Options Team.

One person who lives in council housing told us about an urgent repair that was needed a few years ago, on Hogmanay in the morning, when their shower stopped working suddenly. They left a message on the Council's repairs answer machine and had a call back within fifteen minutes. After checking for any obvious problem sources, they were told a plumber would be with them that morning to fix the shower. When the plumber arrived, he said he didn't have the appropriate part. The plumber phoned his boss, who arrived within an hour at the person's home with a brand new shower.

The family living in temporary housing after being evicted from a previous flat by their landlord told us about help they received when they were moving:

'The person in charge of finding us a temporary flat also greatly helped us with the transition with service providers and other things that required immediate notice of a change of address.'

APPENDIX: Survey

1. (For anyone applying for social housing) What has the process of applying for housing been like for you?
2. Do you have or have you had any issues with housing conditions? For instance, damp or mould, or repairs not being carried out. If yes, what are the issues?
3. Are there any other issues relating to housing you would like to tell us about?
4. How have the issues you told us about in questions 1 - 3 affected your mental health?
5. Do you feel your individual needs have been taken into account? (Including needs relating to your mental health issues)
6. Do you have any good experiences you would like to share?
7. Are there any changes which could be made to housing and the housing system in Edinburgh which would improve life for people with lived experience of mental health issues?