

HOUSING CRISIS, 24.7.19

Deirdre Henderson, Place Edinburgh
Maddie Lou Barink, Living Rent



Facilitator: Stephen McMurray

Catriona MacDonald, Common Weal Edinburgh South West, organiser for that group, has been running a series of events for local residents, short term lets really affecting people in Gorgie, Dalry, Tollcross, New Town Area

Sam Foster Architects – ‘it’s all about the numbers - in terms of units of housing completed for government achievement purposes, but it’s not all about the numbers actually, it’s about the quality, and it’s not affordable and it doesn’t address our climate crisis. Recently helped organise a conference on Scotland’s Housing Conference

James McDonald Reed - occupies 1st Airbnb free tenement in Edinburgh, fought against black market hotels and got them shut down

Ariel Killick: Australian Gaelic Artist, Clearances Diaspora Returnee, heavy touring experience in Highlands & Islands, smallest schools in Scotland, rolls of only 8, 12 – ‘Now it’s not Sheep, it’s Short Term Lets’

Willie Black, Edinburgh RIC, Poverty Campaigner in Edinburgh, fighting for better outcomes for people who have been made homeless, women affected by rape clause, having more than 2 children, evicted, put into totally unsuitable BnB accommodation
Ian, recently lived in Berlin, good experience with what’s happened with Airbnb there

Janice Foster, from Glasgow School of Art, Researcher, researching building performance evaluations

Allan Armstrong, Edinburgh RIC, former chair of Lothians Anti-Poll Tax Federation, sees Living Rent campaign as the most successful autonomous and democratic campaign to have emerged in Scotland recently

Murdo Ritchie, past chairman of his tenants' association in Glasgow, and committee member of the campaign against Glasgow housing stock transfer, Living Rent member
Jean, Pensioners for Indy, WFI, place next to her turned into an Airbnb

Pat Smith, RIC Edinburgh, of a generation when lots of social housing was built, saw as a young person, the difference that made to people's lives, their lives were transformed in every way.

Deirdre from Place Edinburgh

Place Edinburgh came about 18 months ago from frustrated people living next to AirBnBs and struggling to get anywhere with the Council, so decided that they wanted to make a participation request, under community empowerment act, where people have a say on local services that impact them, trying to inform policies to deal with these changes. Put in participation request, not a constituted group, that caused a bit of a problem with the Council, has raised questions for Council about who group really represents, what they needed from group was to show that group represented different parts of Edinburgh, wanted to be able to work with group, group has put forward a document re what they wanted to change, but quite difficult for group to show that as a totally voluntary group – realised branding quite important, so did that, and they wanted to find out what other people thought, and wanted to get discussion going. Council then last August brought out a report about what they thought - 8th August Strategic Committee, recommending 45 day limit before having to get change of use for a commercial use. Changed complaints procedure so a bit quicker. Short Term Let Consultation from Scottish government, following on programme for government in September every year, commitments for year, since Place has been going around talking to community groups, and feeding back to MSP's and Council, and trying to collate recommendations, didn't want to stop people in Edinburgh from doing what they've always done, letting out flat or room for short period during fringe etc. while they went on holiday. Wanted to stop black market hotels, where locals end up effectively being Concierges, and over tourism is a symptom of these properties being allowed to grow without enough regulation, massive escalation over last 5 to 10 years.

Looking at people's human rights – couching this campaign in terminology of human rights terms. Have been quite surprised about how much confusion around defining short term lets,

Recommendations

People can get license, showing you have insurance – first tier

Second tier – looking at a limit of 28 days – more about the turnover of people, all these strangers in your personal space, most properties in Edinburgh are tenement properties, advocating much more stringent checks for 2nd tier. If someone wants an AirBnB/Short Term

Let's business, have that in particular blocks, rather than located in residential blocks. You have to show AirBnBs causing hassle, sending evidence, onus on residents, can take a lot of work and time, 6 months for people to collate that evidence.

Place want a simple online system, don't want it to be a big a burden to report
Local Development Plan happened a few years ago

HOU6 taken out of 2010 Local Dev Plan, said that housing should be priorities for housing, Place is asking for that to be reinstated, without that, tested case law is based on those kinds of plans, so that has to be reinstated

Tourists will know they're not disrupting the local community. Won't face same overcrowding

Neighbours will feel safe and relaxed, will know who owner is as issues arise, people will be able to collect taxes, rubbish processed correctly and safely

Residents pay for homeless accommodation via Council tax, but homelessness also arises due to homes being taken out of long term resident accommodation in city, so this cost also incurred.

Case law available on Twitter, showing case law re recently a property in Riddles Court, wanting to let for 4 people for 40 days a year and for something like 3 days a week, turned down as too much, even 30 days turned down.

Enforcement so important, Council now have a webpage and can report problems with short terms lets much more easily.

Flat in Grassmarket Council took all the key safes off outside and said to landlords you shouldn't be running this as a business, landlords tried to sue Council
If the government gives the powers to Councils to influence these things,

You'll see keysafes on Council railings, they're not supposed to be there, so you can report them. If you don't report, Council won't know. Even if they're not causing you a problem, can report. And Council can check.

AirBnBs often don't have addresses on websites, bit of detective work required sometimes. Cockburn Association, very interested in last year re short term lets, report Our Unique City, highlighted price of rents going up, re 75% of properties bought in Edinburgh in last year estimated to have been bought from outside Scotland, suggests for investment primarily Developer in Quatermile, before it goes on market, apparently sold 50% in Singapore – question about how this benefits city

Now consultation closed with Scottish Government, civil servants seem to be quite open to people sharing their views, when Councils do get some sort of powers eventually, Place want to be ready to show people support their recommendations - so support via social media support important. Journalists want people to do video diaries, but not always safe, people don't always want to share because can invite issues or intimidation from owners etc.

One tenant heard through walls a group singing a song about how happy they were their friend got out of prison, smeared material over Close, served enforcement notice, if tenants complain, will get often intimidating response getting into your stair from owner, your close, saying you're threatening my business. This flat has also had the police in, and police have given tenant an emergency alarm if threatened by owner or short term let occupants. There are laws that Council can use, but don't, but often down to funding, enforcement unfortunately doesn't mean Council have power to make fines, to remove licensing from short term let owners etc.

If more than 6 people complain about a short term let, complaint goes to a different level of assessment. Reporting whenever you can, unless you give Council address and evidence or issues, difficult for them to act

Whilst tenants don't like key safes, because even owner won't meet them to assess who's there, can cause insurance issues, don't glue them up or remove them because sometimes they're there for people receiving social care support – and Council can easily see who is getting social care

Can go onto Councils planning portal, and will see where people have planning permission for short term lets, very view visible, and Council will almost certainly not give you one in a tenement,

Landlords more likely to try and get front door accommodation for short term lets. However accessible accommodation, e.g. without stairs needed for an ageing population and more with disabilities so important that this is taken into consideration.

Losing a valuable accessible home for people

Has Airbnb engaged in the conversation?

Edinburgh has more than half of AirBnB properties in Scotland, most are for entire properties Inside AirBnB Research site online – can show location of these all over Edinburgh 'infecting entire community'

Airbnb have a very strong hold on this, partnered up with Edinburgh fringe, paid them £25,000, so they use very clever tactics, selling 'live like a local', but locals say '**locking out locals**' out of the housing market, '**locals can't live locally**'. Airbnb have lobbied a lot of MSPs. Planning bill only come out every 10 years. Airbnb met with Conservative MSP ten times, amendment that has now said re setting up working group, seems like written by that MSP, when Andy Wightman's proposals would have meant action could have been taken place sooner, now somewhat into the long grass

Vancouver, New Orleans – people in New Orleans, now regulations that people can't own a property if they're not going to live there

New Jersey – hollowing out centre of areas, and Airbnb trying to get owners to fight back – PR stories about how much money going into economy, how much generated, but a lot of restaurants closing down because more people doing self-catering, and affecting locals ability to have a community and talk to someone in community when something goes wrong.

ASSC – association of self caterings, Fiona likes to constantly spin it, saying it's about housing, not about self catering, locals have to do what they can because journalists don't often counter this, locals don't have PR departments etc, Place looking to be a collective

Maddie from Living Rent

Housing crisis – how expensive it's becoming for people to just live with a roof over their head

Years ago a small group of activists advocated for rent controls, that later became Living Rent, a Tenants' Union really, really active part of how they get things sorted – democratic group

Homelessness –

Fear of losing your house traps people in situations where they shouldn't be in like, in Amsterdam, people in abusive relationships not able to leave spouses because how are they going to afford somewhere else to live? Not irregular to hear about similar cases in Edinburgh, detrimental effect on people already in tough situations.

How this intersects with independence, Alison Thewliss questions to home office, concerning Serco evictions, making 300 refugees homeless, key change evictions, not able to access stuff, often thrown away, Living Rent in Glasgow been organising against that, have been able to delay evictions so far, pushing MPs to push Home Office - their response – they didn't even realise that this wasn't a devolved issue! Really important that we get full control over housing situation, landlord class dominant Tories will not deliver this

Radical Independence Campaign trying to look at these issues more cohesively, shifting focus away from just Scottish exceptionalism, and housing one of those issues.

How we get successes with Living Rent – how this can be applied to housing activism
One of the most important things we do when deciding whether worth running a campaign – what opportunities are there to change this situation, what manpower, what skills needed where, how long can we keep going on a certain campaign, set really clear targets when we want objective to be achieved. Mainly requires pre-research ahead of time, including mapping out areas and avenues that can be explored more fully later, meaning, researching what people are willing to do, what solution they want, having that lead where activism grows

Seen immense success with campaign to refurbish Muirhouse places, constantly trying to push Council for more and better options for tenants in those highrises, reports from 1960 about these highrises causing serious issues, vast volunteer led work, door knocking, raising awareness about possibilities to pressure Council to fix it, using a lot of discipline and perseverance

What could be useful – people often don't know what's going on in Council chambers or in Holyrood, but they know what's affecting them, often desperate for avenues for being heard and change. Communicating that helpful knowledge is not necessarily arcane or inaccessible, investing time in communities in educating people to see what avenues they have for change.

Another thing they've been doing with Living Rent in Edinburgh is addressing holiday lets – most pertinent issue just now is a lot of landlords are using them as a way to circumvent the

rent controls Living Rent fought so hard to achieve – they're renting them out to students who might not know their rights or holiday lets, they've signed contracts that are horribly exploitative and undermine rent controls passed – Living Rent want better and more exhaustive rent controls that put more of a cap on rents so it's more affordable for normal people. Shambolic and typical way that people in power can circumvent people who don't know their rights – Living Rent have been opposing that at every turn, petition to put a cap on holiday lets still growing, Council gives excuse re not implementing rent controls not meant to be implemented on a Council area basis, supposed to apply to each neighbourhood, then you have to prove that that area is much more expensive than areas around, so difficult to put together evidence, almost impossible to get those rent control zones implemented at all, so they need loads more members and money and resources to be able to put more pressure on Council and government to enact rent controls that will be more effective for people.

Rent controls so important to prevent landlord circumventing them, there's just not the money to build more Council housing, without independence, not way for Scottish government to allocate budgets to build more housing, way devolution set up means SNP cannot spend that much unless they increase taxes across the board, cannot increase budget without that, that puts Living Rent in a very tough position when making any demands on government, just not a viable way, that's why we have to advocate for private landlords to have some cap on what they're earning from people.

In studies done, says that millennials and downward have no chance of ever being able to buy a home in the communities that they grew up in if like in Edinburgh and other big cities where tourism and combination of gentrification that results from it, creating a situation that house prices are so high, requirements for getting mortgages so intense, so no hope of ever getting out of rent loop, for my generation and others stuck in rent, have to make the burden of rent less, they would have more to spend on other things, invest in economy rather than on rent, means that you're limited in the jobs that you can take, the employers you can take, 1 month's rent is enough to bankrupt most people. Rent controls the quickest way to decrease everyone's monthly costs

Living Rent also well placed to fight against the Serco evictions and discrimination against tenant's from other countries being told that they need to put more than 2 months deposit or pay 6 months ahead of time, is that even legal, reports of that, but it's hard to prove that that's what landlords are doing. Requires more people coming together to fight this. Believes a member led union the best way, having an organisation that has membership behind it scares politicians, don't want 25 people showing up outside their constituency office, makes them wary but very receptive to talking – Living Rent has achieved some success for individual tenants, Glasgow – Wineford, Maryhill, more and more branches opening for living rent, what they need in Edinburgh is an increase in membership and volunteers and diversification of the kinds of people involved. Branch meetings 1st Monday of every month in Tollcross community centre, mobilise your neighbours, if you're a homeowner, please support, single largest org able in Scotland to stick it to landlords.

Language – disturbing – homeless people and families – we need to change language about people living in homes as well, around people under a lot of pressure in their lives
Vested interests – MSPs have to put down their vested interests – Councillors - not sure if this is available about them – transparency about people involved in key decisions - we don't know what's also driving decisions of local decision makers

Monthly meetings of Living Rent in Edinburgh but not in August – last Wednesday of the month

Contributions from the meeting

Serco – Living Rent have seen people with clearly visible disabilities

People with disabilities applying to get their home adapted face a mountain of paperwork, sometimes so much trouble, people would prefer to ask family to help out rather than go through paperwork.

People being refused tenancy because of disabilities? Landlords might give a different reason, but may be due to disability and adaptations needed – people can fight this under the Equality Act – reaching out better to disability organisations who are better at advocacy, often focussed on adaptations rather than accessing actual housing & tenancies (perhaps) Landlord apparently had to pay 30% tax on his rents, passing it onto tenants, making him pay more, as his tenants were leaving his other flats, he'd turn it into an Airbnb – possibly landlord talking shite and making an excuse to raise rent. Landlords need to pay income tax, no way that they're allowed to pass that back onto rent – possibly because he went over the tax threshold, and then had to pay more tax?

Place – Berlin experience – Edinburgh way behind, in most cities in Europe – it's not that 'is it an issue?', where in most places, it's clearly an issue and the question is how can we fight it? In discussions with civil servants, are they in touch with other European countries, in consultation, seemed to be some info out of date - why? – Airbnb have had closed door discussions with Council, but asked under freedom of information but couldn't access that info – annex at end of Council report last August, Place tries to keep an eye on other countries with Airbnb and how they're trying to circumvent laws. Place – tourism so important to Council, has a strategy re growth over next 15 years, some Councillors previously certainly have been dragging their feet, but seem to be changing their tune, but when constituents start writing to them, feels there has been a bit of change – initially Airbnb said they'd come up with proposals – 45 days 'plus festivals' – well Edinburgh is a festival city – **residents say they want a 'restival'**! Many cuts have led to reluctance, but Council can no longer ignore, seeing a bit of a seachange.

Berlin – Ariel – City just bought back 600 flats from private landlord due to rapid rent rises, attempts to control this and provide more social housing.

US – 'engaging networks – a sort of petition tool, when anybody signs up to it, automatically sends an email to all their Councillors, MSPs etc, very effective because it clogs their emails, really gets their attention – has seen them overwhelmed by campaign – a really good tool Edinburgh's got a perfect storm of ingredients – victories important because they increase confidence that things can change. Edinburgh's been built on a lack of building, 10 20 years of not building social housing, because they were seen as working class housing that failed, so disincentive to repeat those initiatives, Councillors arguing against what are now seen as ghettos – when system created mass unemployment, areas suffered. Not allowed to go to market to borrow on future building. **Council housing now called social housing – used to be 60,000 Council properties in Edinburgh, now only 16,000 – is population going down? No** – schools knocked down – political leadership in Edinburgh sees tourism as primary revenue stream, as well as student accommodation, where once were working class

estates, now money to be made in student accommodation – students now moving to Muirhouse because it's affordable. Put decking all over garden, now parties all night Couchsurfing has morphed to big business –

Council is looking at as much quantity tourism as possible, trend developing through speaking with tourists, James MacDonald Reed, new trend from speaking to scores of tourists – city hopping, fly from NY to London, 1 night, selfie – 1 night in Edinburgh, food delivered on Uber, don't spend any local money, several flats in Fountainbridge cater for that specifically, similar to issues on North Coast 500 with BnB's struggling to cope with tourists seeking to do it as fast as possible and only staying one night, those BnB's seeking to enact 2 night stay minimum

Derelict land – meeting with Land Commission Scotland – load of schemes available for derelict places that are not being used, there are various ways locals can contest that and apply to get Council can force a sell of these places to Council, or to sell to a local group seeking ownership – recently been launched, Land commission doing tours to raise awareness, but perhaps not to many places like Muirhouse – look into who owns derelict land, and call Land Commission to look into options

Housing – a bit like trying to nail custard to a wall. Problem with most housing associations, such a big broad nebulous subject, start being not able to see wood for trees, opening other issues like housing finance. One simple starting point? We believe independence will come, and result in a written constitution, right now – no one has a right to a house – fundamental right that RIC should advocate for a right to proper housing – opens up a crucial question as to what is a house for – for accommodation or revenue – housing especially driven by prejudice – wilful and intentional creation of stigma to mobilise prejudice – phrase like 'housing ladder', 'an 'asset' or , start purging ourselves of these ways of speaking to bring about a paradigm shift in how we look at housing. Fights over stock transfer previously was done by tenants, RIC Living Rent now more led by young people

Tourism – Edinburgh over-dependent on tourism as its primary business model, concentration on city breaks – couple of days – completely unsustainable, Lothian transport guilty as well with Skylink, almost immediately as a route comes up, Airbnb's spring up, more cruise ships. Airbnb where effectively the landlord is an absentee landlord, Airbnb cleaning companies, comes every morning. Social media driving this? Look at Airbnb's posts – what they're doing right now, obvious have saturation issues, now they're targeting smaller towns and villages in more rural Scotland – asking internet, show us which of these four, where would you go – so basically asking internet where basically Airbnb investigating/promoting where they should develop next. Companies exist to run unlawful lets and not stopped effectively

Advocating for tourist tax – advocating £2/night, where actually it should be a percentage of what you pay, so progressive rather than regressive – hostels compared to staying in Balmoral. Took local an hour and a half to get to the beach during holidays, primarily because of tourists – quality of life versus quantity of tourists/income generated. Perception SNP bending over backwards to business and then wonder why some call them Tartan Tories.

Document on short term lets, consultation document – actually looks quite good – opinion from an Academic, Scottish Gov professes that it wants to empower local democracy – talk

about making setting up a framework, range of tools different local authorities can effect or vary within their own locality. Danger when it gets to Scottish parliament, that lobbyists, already there, already got to them on planning bill – just ignored, genuine fear in SNP – tactical caution.

Academic – agrees social housing good – housing associations did play quite a constructive role in old tenement areas in ‘80s, ‘90s, in the past – Slateford Green – millennium project opened in 2000 – railway siding, Carnmore housing association, traditional Scottish tenement, Social Housing for future – Slateford Green a good model, pity it hasn’t been followed up.

Misery and distortion of people’s lives that poor distribution of housing causes – market has profoundly distorted the way people live – the market is an entirely inappropriate way of dealing with and distributing housing. Housing has to be part of the climate emergency – climate campaigners need to think about housing, and housing activists need to think about climate emergency – avoid silo thinking, current housing build plans suggest they will be leaking heating, housing regulations need changing

People have normalised language of housing ladder, housing as assets, rather than normalising language of what the alternatives could look like, emissions passive housing – but people need choice – more existing houses – we need to be able to refurbish them properly, building performance evaluation, we find issues, do measurements and try to understand issues with houses to make them better, 100% of houses haven’t met design targets and we need to make sure they do and upskill workforce – Glasgow art college researcher

Interconnectedness of all these issues, tourism, climate

Other Campaigns

Scottish Ecological Design Association Convention– looking at all these issues, a lot tied up with supply, which takes a while to come through, really good models from around Europe and down south, groups that run their own schemes, finding ways of financing it, developing new models of affordable housing, they’re putting together a summary of conference and a draft manifesto – new schemes shouldn’t be on the outskirts of town that only people with certain amounts of income can afford

Our Unique City – Our past Our City, Our Future: The Cockburn Association– a civic conversation on our urban future

Low Income Families Together *LIFT*

Homelessness campaign – women with more than two children being evicted and put in Bnbs inappropriate

LIFT– now have 5 – 6 workers – *from a victim to an activist*, did workshops, got people from crisis. *LIFT* is proposing calling a forum in Muirhouse area, cosmetic changes, attacks on services – nae good turning up at 8pm at Council when all stitched up and we shout and yell and can’t do anything about budget restrictions – save our services campaign – what they’re going to do is call all traditional unions and campaigning groups, in Craigmillar has lost its

funding and will no longer fund its breakfast clubs, Muirhouse had to cancel all its summer programmes, terrible impact on poorer people

Group called **Citizens** been forming in Edinburgh, reimagining city, one of their projects is to come up with a manifesto, Mike Small central advocate, hoping to have a conference about housing

Poverty – a consultation Edinburgh Council doing on impact of poverty re rent too high – anybody can feed into that, finishing quite soon though.

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Monthly meetings, but not in august – last Wednesday of the month