Main Findings

- A survey of local authorities identified a total of 4,121 residential mobile homes. This total included sites licensed for residential use, residential units on mixed sites with holiday pitches as well, and individual residential mobile homes used by staff on sites licensed for holiday use. However, information drawn from case studies in different areas of Scotland suggests that this figure of 4,121 is an underestimate of the total number of mobile homes in Scotland.

- The tenure profile of mobile homes in Scotland was very distinctive compared with England and Wales. A far greater proportion of residents rented caravans, mobile homes and other temporary structures from private landlords in Scotland compared with other countries within the United Kingdom.

- The number of households living in individual mobile homes (that is, not located on park home sites with a number of pitches) in remote and rural areas is likely to be indicative of stress in the housing market of these areas and a strong argument for the targeted development of permanent affordable housing.

- Qualitative interviews with fifty residents showed that the majority of respondents were very satisfied with living in mobile homes, although this feeling was not universal. Some of the positive aspects of mobile homes included living in: an affordable type of accommodation; an attractive location; a safe environment with a strong sense of community, and a form of accommodation that was accessible and readily adapted to suit residents’ needs. Negative aspects included: vulnerability to bad weather; fuel poverty; some people lived in caravans not intended for residential occupation; and, poor relations with some site owners.

- Although most respondents who lived in park homes on licensed sites were satisfied with their sites and the way in which they were managed, there were strong concerns about the management of a small number of sites across Scotland. In particular, it was emphasised that the current legislative framework requires adequate means of enforcement and penalties to deter the unscrupulous behaviour of a small number of site owners.
Introduction

The research considered two main groups of mobile homes in Scotland. The first concerned residents who lived in park homes on licensed sites with a site owner. Secondly, the research focused on people who lived in individual caravans and mobile homes on unlicensed sites, or sites that were exempt from licensing.

The aims of the research were to:

- Identify the number, location and composition of licensed mobile homes sites throughout Scotland;
- Where possible, identify unlicensed sites and quantify the extent of isolated single units;
- Explore the reasons why people are living in mobile homes;
- Explore the nature and extent of any issues and problems experienced by residents of mobile homes;
- Consider the extent to which any problems identified are addressed by the existing and recently implemented legislation.

Methods

Three sources of data were used to derive an estimate of the number and location of residential mobile homes in Scotland, including: an analysis of 2001 Census data; a postal survey of local authorities; and, finally, data identified from directories and websites.

A case study approach was used to investigate in detail the incidence of individual mobile homes within localities of Argyll and Bute, Highland and Midlothian. Three sources of data were used to quantify the number of individual mobile homes within these localities, including the 2001 Census, the Valuation Roll and information drawn from local informants.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were undertaken with fifty residents of mobile homes, which included forty residents living in park homes on licensed park home sites, and also ten residents of individual mobile homes, outwith licensed sites.

The number of residential mobile homes in Scotland

The local authority survey identified a total of 4,121 residential mobile homes. This total included sites licensed for residential use, residential units on mixed sites with holiday pitches as well, individual residential mobile homes used by staff on sites licensed for holiday use, and an estimate of individual units exempt from licensing within authorities.

Information drawn from the case studies suggested that the total of 4,121 was an underestimate of the total number of mobile homes in Scotland, especially those mobile homes that were exempt from licensing or that were unlicensed.

The tenure profile of mobile homes in Scotland was quite distinctive compared with England and Wales. A far greater proportion of residents rented their mobile homes from private landlords in Scotland compared with other countries within the United Kingdom. Thirty four per cent of residents in Scotland rented a caravan, mobile home or other temporary structure from a private landlord compared with 18 per cent in England and Wales.

Exploring the reasons why people are living in mobile homes

Respondents described a variety of reasons for wanting to live in mobile homes. The most common factor cited by respondents was financial: house prices were viewed as way beyond what respondents could afford. For many respondents, especially those who had moved from urban areas, living in a mobile home was viewed as preferable to the other housing choices that were available to them such as buying an apartment or social rented accommodation.

However, in remote rural areas in particular, the supply of affordable alternatives to either rent or buy was viewed as especially problematic. An underlying theme running through the interviews with residents in individual units was the lack of an alternative affordable solution to housing needs in the remote rural areas where these people lived. Thus, the number of households living in individual mobile homes in remote rural areas can be regarded as indicative of stress in the housing market of these areas.

The nature and extent of any issues and problems

The majority of respondents were very satisfied with living in mobile homes, although this feeling was not universal. Amongst those respondents who expressed negative views about living in a mobile home were residents in rural areas who felt that there were no other viable options open to them. Positive aspects of living in mobile homes included:
■ More affordable accommodation, not just in terms of buying a home, but also maintenance, running costs – and less housework;

■ An opportunity to live in very attractive locations that would otherwise be unaffordable;

■ Living in a neighbourhood with like minded individuals, often with a strong sense of community;

■ A safe environment, mostly free from anti-social behaviour;

■ Accommodation that was accessible and readily adapted to suit a resident's needs.

Negative factors associated with mobile homes included:

■ Vulnerability to bad weather;

■ Expensiveness to heat;

■ Living in caravans that were not intended for permanent residential occupation;

■ Living in park homes could be affected by poor relations with the park owner.

The research identified a range of specific problems experienced by respondents on licensed sites in relation to difficulties with a small number of park owners, such as: site owners requiring homes to be sold through them, or blocking sales altogether; damage to personal property; allegations of harassment, intimidation and threatening behaviour; increases in pitch fees at an unacceptable level; inadequate supply of electricity to park homes; poor maintenance of sites, and claiming over the legally permitted commission rate on the sale of park homes.

One emerging issue is the considerable potential for confusion for residents over whether mobile homes can legitimately be occupied permanently, and whether mobile homes have to be vacated for part of the year if they are located on sites or parts of sites which have a license for holiday use only.

The extent to which any problems are addressed by the legislation

Affordable warmth and fuel poverty were highlighted as significant issues by the research. Although people living in mobile homes in Scotland are not eligible under the Central Heating Programme, the Scottish Government is reviewing its fuel poverty programmes to ensure that they are operating fairly across Scotland and that they are focussing upon the fuel poor. As part of this work, the Government is considering what can be done to alleviate fuel poverty for residents of hard to heat homes such as mobile homes.

Tenants who rent mobile homes from private landlords do not appear to be covered by recent developments in the rest of the privately rented sector in Scotland. Further, the recent changes in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 with regard to mobile homes were focused upon residents who own their mobile homes, rather than tenants. There also remains a degree of uncertainty over the security of tenure that people who rent mobile homes can enjoy.

Park homes were a popular type of accommodation for the majority of respondents, and most were very satisfied with their homes. Although it was evident that most respondents were also satisfied with their site and the way in which it was managed, there were strong concerns about the management of a small number of sites across Scotland that would appear to merit policy attention.

A key conclusion was that without the necessary enforcement available to back current legislation, the small number of unscrupulous park home owners identified in this research may well feel able to evade their responsibilities with relative impunity, continuing to taint a sector that is otherwise performing a valuable role in helping to meet housing needs in Scotland.
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