

People not process:

An action plan for the delivery of Scotland's homelessness commitment

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Summary

- Shelter Scotland is calling for a new ten year Action Plan addressing homelessness prevention and crisis services in Scotland. The Action Plan must respond to current and future challenges for housing and homelessness advice services and set out the key objectives at national and local level. It will help to maintain focus and leadership on the continuous improvement of services and help to deliver on the ongoing commitment made to homeless households through the landmark 2012 legislation. The Action Plan should be built on the aspiration to deliver holistic, person-centred services which allow flexibility and choice, and lead to sustainable housing outcomes for all service users.
- Scotland has in place the most progressive homelessness legislation in the world which gives a right to housing for all unintentionally homeless households¹. The last ten years has seen the sector move towards delivery of the '2012 Commitment' and as part of that process, there has been a largely positive shift in the culture, practices and partnerships of service delivery.
- We now have a strong, progressive legislative framework which includes the right to housing support and temporary accommodation, but there is more to meeting the needs and aspirations of homeless or potentially homeless households than rights and duties. We now need to build holistic and responsive services around this legislative framework to allow people to make the choices that are right for them.
- With the significant weakening of the welfare state, it is more important than ever to ensure that vulnerable households are offered support before they are pushed into crisis. For those who do find themselves without a home, a strong housing safety net should be there to provide the services, advice and information they need to help build a pathway out of homelessness.
- The rights of homeless households must be protected but the distinction between statutory and non-statutory households facing crisis should not exclude anyone from the services they need to rebuild their lives. Rough sleepers, sofa-surfers and other 'hidden homeless' must be a priority.
- Despite restricted public spending now and for the foreseeable future, working in partnership across public services – including health, social work and criminal justice will improve outcomes for individuals and will help to meet not just housing, but health, employability and other national priorities. We need genuinely

¹ The Homelessness (Abolition of Priority Need Test) (Scotland) Order 2012
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/sdsi/2012/9780111018187> - this gives anyone who is found to be unintentionally homeless the right to settled accommodation.

integrated services and funding arrangements to respond to people's housing needs regardless of the agency they initially approach.

- The rebalancing between prevention services and crisis response is already underway through the Housing Options model and the strengths of this approach should be extended to deliver the best possible service for all those coming into contact with it. Specifically, taking a holistic and person-centred approach to people's needs and aspirations, working in close partnership with other housing providers but also a range of social work, health, money advice, support agencies and specialist services and building in flexibility and choice to the approach.

Recommendations

The Scottish Government should commit to establishing an expert working group to produce an evidence led Action Plan for the delivery of homelessness and housing advice services over the next ten years. People, not processes should be at the heart of this plan, which will not only produce better outcomes, but stronger partnerships and more effective use of resources. This plan should focus on delivering the following principles and objectives:

- **A person-centred service**
- **Integrated services**
- **Tailored services for at risk groups**
- **A pathway out of housing crisis**
- **Consistent, outcomes based services**
- **A stable housing sector**

Introduction

Scotland has the most progressive homelessness legislation in the world². The rights enshrined in legislation, mean that every unintentionally homeless household is entitled to permanent, settled accommodation. Over the past 10 years the reform of homelessness services has changed both the culture and delivery of services³ for those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. The landmark '2012 Commitment', which removed the distinction between homeless households with and those without 'priority', is now a reality. There is now an opportunity for the Scottish Government to work with the housing sector to take stock of what has been achieved and more importantly, identify what the priorities should be for the next decade.

Nothing should be allowed to undermine the progress and improvements that have been made, but we must now build on the framework we have in place. There is a danger that with the '2012 Commitment' in operation, there might be a sense of 'job done' politically and the drive to innovative homelessness and prevention policy and practice will be lost. Yet there remain significant challenges: there has been a sizable shift in both politics and economics since the Homelessness Task Force set out its recommendations in 2002, there are competing demands on the sector, restrictions on public spending and structural changes to the welfare system through the Westminster reforms. All of which threaten to significantly erode the housing safety net in Scotland.

This paper lays out the principles that Shelter Scotland wants to see underpin a new National Action Plan and the good service characteristics we should be working towards in the next ten years. Informed by our policy work and housing support and advice services, this paper identifies what is required to build on the strong legislative foundations already in place, and the core elements that will ensure every part of the system delivers for those who are both statutorily and non-statutorily homeless.

² The removal of 'priority need', laid down in the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003 and realised at the end of 2012, was coupled with a high political priority placed on homelessness policy in the early post-devolution years of the Scottish Parliament.

³ For a detailed analysis of the '2012 Commitment' and the work of the Scottish Executive's Homelessness Task Force, see 'Progress and drift: a review of the Homelessness Task Force Recommendations' (Shelter Scotland 2011)

http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_library/policy_library_folder/progress_and_drift_a_review_of_the_homelessness_task_force_recommendations

Housing Options prevention

Scotland's legislative framework is the most progressive in the world⁴ and realises an aspiration that **everyone** who is homeless in this country is a priority. The '2012 Commitment' as it became known, has served as a catalyst for the recalibration of homeless services and there is broad agreement that we have got the legislative foundations right⁵.

In 2010, as a response to the pressure on local authorities to meet the 2012 commitment, the Scottish Government endorsed the Housing Options approach⁶ which had been implemented across England a few years earlier. This put an explicit focus on the prevention of homelessness by taking a more holistic and person-centred approach to anyone going to the council for help with their housing. Rather than processing everyone as a homeless applicant, if delivered effectively, the housing options advice model considers the needs, and aspirations of that person or household. This information is then used to have an informed discussion about the options that are both available and realistic. This should empower the person to make choices that suit them about their housing future and where possible prevent a housing situation turning into crisis. As part of this discussion, the option of a homeless application should always be discussed.

The approach is still in the early stages and local authorities and their partners are developing new processes, IT systems and structures which have impacted on the numbers of homeless applications in the past two years. This model has had a significant impact on the way homelessness services are being delivered and the partnerships that

⁴ 'Scottish Homelessness Policy: Advancing social justice?' Robina Goodlad (2005)

http://scottishaffairs.org/backiss/pdfs/sa50/sa50_Goodlad.pdf

⁵ Shelter Scotland 'Progress and Drift: A review of the homelessness task force recommendations' (Feb, 2011)

http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_library/policy_library_folder/progress_and_drift_a_review_of_the_homelessness_task_force_recommendations

Scottish Parliament, Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee Report 'Homelessness in Scotland: The 2012 Commitment' (2012)

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/48589.aspx>

⁶ 'What are my options: Delivering a person-centred housing and homelessness advice service in Scotland' (Shelter Scotland: March 2013)

http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_library/policy_library_folder/what_are_my_options_delivery_a_person_centred_housing_and_homelessness_advice_service_in_scotland

All local authorities across Scotland are delivering a form of housing options advice, and the five geographical 'Hubs' have been utilised to share practice and commission research and training as councils develop approaches that suit their specific local authority and the clients they work with.

are being developed across local areas. It is important that these developments are captured and built on in a planned and strategic way over the next ten years.

The 'ideal' homelessness and housing advice service

The 'ideal' homeless service should not be a homeless service at all because the label restricts the range of responses available. Instead it should be a personalised advice service focusing on housing but facilitating access to a range of services, support and advocacy. One of the outcomes of the personalised housing advice service may be a homelessness application, but as part of a range of options discussed focused on meeting individual need.

A post-2012 homelessness service in Scotland should encompass far more than the delivery of a council's homelessness crisis response and integrate a wider range of council and external services. This would build on the principle of early intervention which underpins the Housing Options prevention approach. For example, when a person approaches their council or housing provider in some level of housing need, that approach should be the start of a positive engagement to resolve the housing issue, but also to consider other financial, health, employment, relationship or other issues or support needs that person has.

For some clients, the issue they face is singularly accommodation-based and in resolving that, the local authority/house provider will have enabled the household to move on from a one-time incidence of crisis. However for some, making a homeless application is a symptom of wider issues and is often the end point of a long journey towards crisis. What this means is that while a housing solution can resolve the 'housing' issue, it cannot begin to unravel and resolve the deeper and more complex issues. A homeless service should be versatile enough to respond to both ends of this spectrum and anyone in-between.

By balancing resources more evenly between prevention and crisis, the household has the widest possible choice with the confidence that the statutory safety net is preserved should they wish to exercise that right. This also allows the local authority to make the best use of its resources rather than providing a blanket and untargeted response. By targeting homelessness prevention activity more effectively there will be a cost benefit to housing, but also to other public services as problems are unravelled and solved before they become too complex, or support is put in place as early as possible for those with complex and ongoing needs.

The three key elements of a housing and homelessness advice service model - the strategic, preventive and responsive elements - should be designed to work together to ensure an efficient and co-ordinated approach:

- **Strategic:** taking a 'corporate approach' to local housing need, working with a range of local and national partners and taking account of the wider economic and political landscape.
- **Preventive:** working to identify key groups at risk of homelessness and to provide robust statistical information of what is working.
- **Responsive:** effective crisis services that meet statutory duties, and are effective, informative and person-centred.

Towards an Action Plan for delivering homelessness and housing services in Scotland

Shelter Scotland is calling for the Scottish Government to establish an expert working group tasked with producing an evidence led Action Plan for the delivery of homelessness and housing advice services in Scotland over the next ten years. This plan should focus on delivering the following principles and objectives:

1. A person-centred service

The service should be designed around people not processes. Although the statutory homelessness duties give people important rights to services including temporary housing, housing support services and settled accommodation, how people engage with both statutory and non-statutory services should be an active choice rather than people being a passive part of a process happening to them.

Services should be structured around the needs of the customer, especially considering that many people will be approaching the council at a time of crisis or stress. With the shift towards a more holistic advice service model, clients are increasingly being empowered to make choices about their housing future. Informed choices can only be made however, if the advice and information that people are given is informed, relevant and non-coercive. Advocacy, and where possible peer advocacy, should be available for people who need guidance and support to navigate services and to make sense of advice and information they are receiving. In appraising which housing 'options' are available and realistic for a household, it is critical that advice and information is factual and accurate based on that

person's circumstances. This should not be a linear process but allow for movement from prevention services into statutory response depending on circumstances.

Ideally, housing advice should be independent, or have independent elements, so it remains a separate process from that of allocating housing which is becoming an increasing scarce resource for local authorities. In line with the recalibration of other public services, local authority homelessness and prevention teams should incorporate elements of co-production and work with service users to design and deliver the service. Regular service user feedback is now standard practice but councils should seek to involve service users in the design and redesign of services to make them as effective as possible.

2. Integrated services

The role that housing plays in the delivery of many national priorities around health, wellbeing, educational attainment and employability needs to be more fully recognised politically and in terms of resource. A pivotal part of this is committing to the notion that 'homelessness' and preventing it wherever possible, is a priority for social work and health services alongside housing departments. Many of the groups who are disproportionately represented in the statutory homeless population have already been engaging with other public services before finding themselves in housing crisis. We need strategic partnerships to provide a better and more efficient service and to try and help people before they reach crisis point. For example, GPs and midwives should have named local contacts and referral routes established if they identify a housing issue as part of their health care provision rather than considering health and housing needs separately.

Despite a raft of explicit recommendations from the Homelessness Task Force around health and homelessness, little concrete progress has been made to address these and there remain considerable inconsistencies in service delivery across the country. Issues remain around barriers to access, gaps in mental health service provision and problems with health care professionals identifying and referring potentially homeless households who need housing advice. We know that 34% of those assessed as homeless have one or more support needs; 39% of these have a mental health support need and 33% have drug or alcohol dependency support needs⁷. The integration of the health and adult social care agendas provides an opportunity to deliver consistent quality services, but housing currently remains an external partner when it should be part of the same conversation.

⁷ Scottish Government Annual Homelessness Statistics (July 2013) Table 7

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Housing-Regeneration/RefTables/PublicationTables2012-13>

Evidence shows that everything from poor educational outcomes, poor mental health and wellbeing through to obesity, can be reduced when people have access to good quality, affordable, settled housing in areas they want to live in. Shelter Scotland has recently established a Commission on Housing and Wellbeing which brings together a range of experts across social housing policy fields under an independent chair to examine the links between housing and the welfare of people in Scotland across a number of national indicators. With housing contributing to improvements across a range of policy areas, there needs to be corporate buy-in to both the supply of affordable housing and the delivery of the best possible services to help people to find and keep a healthy home. Strategic partnerships need to be extended to define joint priorities and, more importantly, to access funding streams and to measure financial and social return on investment.

3. Tailored services for at risk groups

Despite a significant drop in homeless application numbers in the past four years⁸, certain groups continue to be disproportionately represented in the application and assessment statistics. These 'at risk' groups walk a well trodden path in patterns that are replicated in other parts of the UK. In particular young people leaving care, prison leavers, military personnel leaving the armed forces, and young people leaving the family home all seem to be at a higher risk of housing crisis. We know that 32% of all homeless applications were from households headed by a young person between the age of 16-24 years, when across Scotland only four per cent of all households in Scotland are headed by a young person under 25⁹. Similarly, it is estimated that a third of the current care leaver population have had to register as homeless¹⁰ and that 20% of them are still homeless a year after 'leaving' care. Equally, there is a proven link between settled housing for liberated prisoners and reduced reoffending rates¹¹.

This wealth of evidence around groups who are at a greater risk of homelessness has not translated into consistent, targeted interventions and services remain patchy. Specialist services should be delivered in partnership with the agency or agencies that have the skills and experience to be most effective, whether that is within the council or through a voluntary provider. This means services should be available not just once they make a

⁸ The last set of annual Scottish Government data for the financial year 2012/13 showed a 13% reduction in the total number of application from the previous year. This is part of a downward trend from a peak of 60,684 applications in 2005/06 down to 39,827 in 2012/13, a reduction of 34%.

⁹ SCROL (2001) *S05 Age of Household Reference Person (HRP) by sex and living arrangements*.

¹⁰ <http://www.whocaresscotland.org/professionals/publications-briefings-research/>

¹¹ 'First home: Second Chance – An evaluation into the effects of housing on re-offending' (Vision Housing/Interserve, November 2012)

homeless application but when they leave their stable accommodation and are most at risk. In addition to these groups, within the homeless population there is a group of people with multiple and complex needs¹² who require specialist services, support structures and accommodation options to manage the range of issues they face.

Shelter Scotland has recently established a number of projects in partnership with other providers to provide specialist support for at risk groups. The 'Safe and Sound' Project in Tayside and Fife provides support for families with young people when appropriate, to resolve disputes to try and avoid a young person having to leave the family home in a dangerous or unplanned way¹³. A similar service has been established to provide specialist housing advice and support for prisoners and prison leavers through the Supporting Prisoners Advice Network (SPAN) delivered by Shelter Scotland and Sacro¹⁴. Pre-liberation housing advice for prisoners can help them to plan for their release in the hope of creating stability and reducing the chance of sliding back into offending behaviour.

These projects and many others like them across the country are in line with the wider prevention agenda however, they are primarily funded by charitable trusts rather than through mainstream funding. It is far most cost effective to target resources and help people avoid housing crisis and a negative cycle of homelessness than allowing people to fall through various nets and have a long engagement with public services including social work, criminal justice and health.

4. A pathway out of housing crisis

As outlined above, a fully integrated housing and homelessness advice service should enable people to tackle not just their housing situation but get specialist advice and information on other services if they chose to. However long people engage with the housing and homeless services, that time should be as positive as possible and aim to build confidence, skills and capacity to move away from housing crisis.

Although data is not publically available on how long people are spending in temporary accommodation, given the rise in entitlement over the past ten years and the lack of availability of permanent lets, we know some households are spending months or even years in transition waiting for a permanent home. In some cases, the quality of housing is very low and communication can taper off leaving people feeling isolated and unsettled.

¹² Multiple exclusion homelessness in the UK

www.sbe.hw.ac.uk/documents/MEH_Briefing_No_1_2012.pdf

¹³ Shelter Scotland/Relationship Scotland 'Safe and Sound Project'

http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/about_us/how_we_make_a_difference/specialist_services_in_scotland/safe_and_sound_project

¹⁴ Shelter Scotland/Sacro 'SPAN Project'

http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/about_us/how_we_make_a_difference/specialist_services_in_scotland/prison_advice_project

People in temporary housing will be there because of a crisis period in their lives and being left for months in temporary housing, sometimes in an area away from their social networks¹⁵ can exacerbate pre-existing problems.

In recent years housing providers have put a lot of resource into tenancy sustainment and an obvious extension of this work is pre-tenancy support. People in temporary accommodation are explicitly waiting for a settled home but often this time is not used effectively to ensure that the transition out of homelessness is sustainable. Despite the high cost of providing these services, there is a considerable cost-saving across public services if repeat homelessness and failed tenancies are avoided.

Some people may have very low level or no support needs but others may have needs which could be met while in temporary accommodation, for example, improving their financial capability, getting specialist support for mental ill-health, learning to cook, enrolling in an educational programme or undertaking treatment for addiction or alcohol issues. Whatever level the support needs are at, these services should be made available and referral routes in place so this isn't 'dead time' but positive engagement on route to a permanent home.

5. Measuring success of consistent, outcomes based services

By the end of this Action Plan, homelessness services should aim to have evolved to a point where the balance is struck between early intervention and crisis response. This will look different in different local authority areas, but we should continue to monitor delivery against a series of national benchmarks and indicators to ensure a certain consistency of service. We have become used to appraising the success of homelessness service through application and assessment statistics. While this is an indicator that must be monitored, it is increasingly unrepresentative of all those who engage with local authority homeless and housing advice services. With the transition to housing options well underway but the reporting mechanisms still playing catch-up, we are still in a position where we know significantly more about those who make a formal homelessness application than those who engage with the service but do go on to exercise their rights under homelessness legislation.

The Scottish Government's HL1 data¹⁶ provides a very detailed picture of homeless households and what housing option they end up taking, but in order to evaluate the

¹⁵ 'Beyond Homelessness – Final Report' (Rock Trust: May 2013)
<http://www.rocktrust.org/index.php/projects/beyond-homelessness/>

success of housing options we need a far better understanding of what prevention is effective and what the client experience is. Once fully implemented, the Scottish Government's PREVENT¹⁷ data will be a useful accompaniment to existing statistical evidence, but we still need to consider the most useful way to record outcomes as the acid test of effectiveness. The Scottish Housing Regulator continues to have a role to play in recording performance through the Scottish Social Housing Charter outcomes, thematic studies and ad hoc scrutiny work as and when it is necessary.

In addition to these formal and largely quantitative measures, we need qualitative feedback reflecting the move towards more person-centred service delivery. As part of the co-production model, service user feedback should play an increasingly important role in monitoring services and shaping improvements.

6. A stable housing sector

Both successful prevention and positive crisis responses need to sit in a wider context of a well-functioning housing market which can respond to the varying needs of families and individuals. There remains tremendous pressure on Scotland's housing stock as a consequence of sale through Right to Buy (RTB), demolitions of unsuitable stock and, historic chronic under investment in new supply of affordable and specifically social housing¹⁸. This is as a consequence of dwindling social housing stock but also because traditional owner-occupiers are locked out of the market because of high-prices and restricted lending conditions. As the only housing tenure increasing the proportion of households it homes – currently 12% – the private rented sector (PRS) needs better standards regulation and a more secure tenancy regime to make it a more attractive choice for people, especially families¹⁹.

¹⁶ Scottish Government, annual homelessness publication (July 2013)

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Housing-Regeneration/RefTables/PublicationTables2012-13>

¹⁷ The Scottish Government Homelessness Statistics User Group announced the PREVENT1 data collection would be mandatory from April 2014

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/15257/22540/hsug15Apr2013>

¹⁸ Since the introduction of Right to Buy (RTB) in 1979 nearly half a million properties have been lost from public sector stock <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Housing-Regeneration/HSfS/Sales>. There are currently 155,100 households on local authority waiting lists

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Housing-Regeneration/HSfS/KeyInfoTables>.

The number of households living in the social rented sector has fallen from 32% in 1999 to 24% in 2012 <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Housing-Regeneration/HSfS/KeyInfoTables>.

¹⁹ 'The case for greater security for private tenants in Scotland' (Shelter Scotland 2013)

http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_library/policy_library_folder/the_case_for_greater_security_for_private_tenants_in_scotland

There are a range of competing tensions across all parts of the housing market in Scotland and the impact of the economic climate and welfare changes means the viable options some people have may diminish. This potentially threatens the aspiration of delivering an integrated housing options advice service. It is crucial that investment in social housing is prioritised in forthcoming Scottish Government budgets and that a realistic and practical, long-term tenure neutral national housing strategy is designed and implemented.

In response to these challenges in the short-term, it is even more critical that the sector protects the interests of the most vulnerable households and works in partnership to make better use of the available stock. This means improving the Section 5 referral system, achieving a minimum standard temporary accommodation and making allocations based on need but also affordability and sustainability. The natural next step for social housing providers working in partnership to deliver housing options is the evolution of Common Housing Registers across all geographical areas. This will help make best use of the stock available, facilitate transfers and mutual exchanges and help people understand clearly the options available to them.

Conclusion

Despite a challenging financial context, competing pressures on the sector and a programme of welfare reform not due to be completed until 2017, the needs of homeless or potentially homeless households must not be allowed to be subsumed within other policy areas and fade from prominence. 'Meeting 2012' was the **beginning** of an ongoing commitment to homeless households and part of this is striving to deliver the best possible service which means positive, sustainable housing solutions.

The achievements of the past ten years were only possible with a high level of political focus and a broad commitment to the agenda from all stakeholders. That strategic focus must be maintained if we are going to consolidate and take forward the commitment to homeless households and achieve positive housing outcomes for all those in housing need. That is why Shelter Scotland is calling for a new National Action Plan focusing on the next ten years to bring together all the existing good practice and innovation and to provide the leadership that is necessary to deliver on the objectives identified above.

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Shelter Scotland helps over half a million people a year struggling with bad housing or homelessness – and we campaign to prevent it in the first place.

We're here so no one has to fight bad housing or homelessness on their own.

Until there's a home for everyone

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