

Shelter

Briefing for Debate on Housing: 8th May 2008

Shelter welcomes the wide-ranging debate on housing issues in motion S3M-1848. The lynchpin of housing policy in Scotland is the drive towards meeting the 2012 target on homelessness. Shelter believes that this target should be at the heart of Scottish Government housing and social justice policy.

Key points:

- The 2012 target - to give all unintentionally homeless households an equal right to a home - is the jewel in the crown of Scottish housing policy. As a nation, we should be proud of this internationally-acclaimed target and it is critical that it remains as focus of Scottish Government policy.
- However, progress towards 2012, and an “interim” target in 2009, is variable across Scotland. The majority of local authorities are moving in the right direction, but slowly.
- New reporting arrangements for local authorities brought in under the Concordat mean that progress towards 2012 could be more difficult to track in future.
- Local authorities need to meet the target on two fronts: by creating more permanent social lets and taking action to prevent homelessness.
- Shelter urges the Government to commission an independent assessment of the homelessness reform programme, to ensure that it can be delivered by 2012.

The 2012 target at the centre of housing policy

Scotland has led the world in legislation to address homelessness and social injustice. The 2003 Homelessness Act received international acclaim and earned Scotland an international human rights award. The eyes of the world will follow how successfully Scotland puts the new rights into action.

Delivering on the vision of a Scotland where everyone has the right to a home is something this Government should be rightly proud of. It is critical that Government policy remains focused on this goal, and Shelter expects to see a high profile given to tackling homelessness in local authority single outcome agreements.

Progress towards 2012

The target is to ensure that by 2012, all unintentionally homeless people have equal access to permanent housing. The legislation recognised the challenges local authorities faced and built in a phased approach. The interim target in 2009 is for local authorities to have got halfway to 2012 from where they were in 2003/4. So far, progress towards this target has been patchy:

- 3 local authorities have exceeded expectations and reached the 2009 goal in 2006/7
- 20 local authorities are moving in the right direction to meet 2009, although not always fast enough.
- 8 local authorities, based on figures for 2006/7, are moving in the wrong direction to meet the target.
- one local authority has committed to meeting the 2012 target and abolish priority need in 2007-08.

The case for independent assessment

The most recent annual report from the Homelessness Monitoring Group (April 2008) drew attention to the significant challenges that remain to achieve 2012. Shelter is concerned that monitoring progress and local authority performance in tackling homelessness could be hampered by changes in the way that local authorities report to national government under the Concordat. Shelter urges the Government to commission an independent assessment, with two aims: to provide an objective stock-take of where we've got to and how far there is to go to meet the target; and to set out recommendations for actions central and local government should take to meet the target.

Meeting the Challenge

Shelter recognises the challenges that local authorities face to ensure that the right to a home becomes a reality. The approach to meeting this challenge must be two-fold, creating more homes for those in crisis, and preventing the crisis in the first place. We have a number of recommendations for how this may be done.

More homes:

- Addressing the backlog in the planning system and making sure affordable homes, for sale and for rent, are completed
- Giving local authorities more flexibility over the local operation of the Right to Buy
- Investing in bringing empty homes back into use
- Making sure that RSLs house their fair share of homeless households

Preventing homelessness:

- Reducing the use of eviction by social landlords, particularly for rent arrears
- Addressing administrative problems in the benefit system
- Making use of housing option assessments to allow people to look at the full range of housing options, not just social housing.

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