

Action plan

Local authorities and homelessness: an action plan for elected members

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Shelter

Scotland has the most ambitious homelessness programme in Europe. Local councils are at the heart of how that programme is delivered. Shelter believes that newly-elected councillors are crucial in the drive to house all homeless people by 2012. This target, which is set in law and has been internationally acclaimed, will need to be fully implemented in the council term 2007-11.

Tackling the challenge means preventing homelessness where possible and ensuring that sufficient homes are available for those who still become homeless.

Shelter is campaigning for funding for 30,000 more affordable homes for rent in Scotland to come out of the Comprehensive Spending Review (<http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/home/home-7428.cfm>). Funding for more houses will help to ease the pressure on waiting lists and temporary accommodation.

This action plan summarises the practical steps that your council can take to ensure that ambitious homelessness targets are turned into reality.

Scotland's internationally acclaimed programme to tackle homelessness received cross-party backing in 2003 and an opinion survey of people in Scotland in 2006 showed that 67 per cent backed the 2012 homelessness target as a top or high priority for Councils.

Our action plan is divided into two sections, **Increasing housing supply** and **Preventing homelessness**:

Increasing housing supply

1. Lobby for more money from central government

Local councils need more money to invest in services: both direct investment in new affordable homes and specific investment in homelessness services like temporary accommodation and support for some people to stay in their homes. Local government collectively can turn up the volume on the case for more investment. Shelter has submitted a detailed proposal for 30,000 affordable homes to be built in the next spending review period 2008-11 and we would warmly welcome local authority support.

2. Use existing money effectively

In the last few years changes in the rules for borrowing, payment of historical debt and the level of discounts offered under Right to Buy have opened up new flexibility for councils to build new homes or support other providers to build. Councils can also reduce council tax discounts on second homes as a way of raising more money specifically for affordable housing.

3. Build better partnerships with other providers

Housing associations and other types of 'registered social landlords' now own 4 in 10 homes in the social housing sector. However, far fewer lets of housing association homes go to homeless people than is the case in council housing. There is now a legal mechanism for councils to refer homeless people to a vacant housing association let: much better use should be made of it.

4. Make better use of the private rented sector

In some parts of Scotland there is more private rented housing than social housing. Councils can develop private rented strategies which may include accreditation schemes and leasing schemes. They can also enter into specific leasing schemes that can temporarily house homeless people at much lower cost than using bed and breakfast hotels.

5. Make the planning system work for affordable housing

Councils can adopt planning policies which ensure that private developments over a certain size (say 15-25 homes) set aside a proportion of the development for affordable homes (typically around 25 per cent). To make it work well, councils need planning officials with the skills to negotiate effectively. It also needs a definition of 'affordable housing' which is truly within reach of people on low incomes.

6. Modify Right to Buy

Right to Buy is a standardised policy which applies in much the same way in very different circumstances. Councils can apply to ministers to have some areas designated so that Right to Buy does not apply to new tenancies. Some councils have done this already. Nationally, Shelter is arguing that councils need to have greater local flexibility to decide when Right to Buy will genuinely add to the diversity of choices locally or when it will undermine access to housing.

7. Make better use of empty homes

Empty homes in either the public or the private sector are a waste. Social landlords need to manage voids effectively. However, far more homes are empty in the private sector. Councils can use 'lead tenancy' schemes and in rural areas, there is a grant from Communities Scotland to return empty homes to use.

Preventing homelessness

As well as providing more homes to house homeless people we need to get better at preventing homelessness happening in the first place:

8. Make eviction a last resort

There is good understanding of the misery that anti-social behaviour can cause or the difficulties that non-payment of rent can bring. However, eviction simply displaces these problems rather than solving them. It is much more cost-effective to try to deal with problems in situ rather than to pick up the pieces after homelessness has happened. Improving housing benefit administration can tackle some rent problems; new systems for other landlords advising councils when eviction is imminent are about to be introduced; and referral to specialist agencies can help deal with difficult behaviour problems

9. Provide housing support

Housing support has a good track record of helping people to make a success of a tenancy but its future is now under threat as national budgets are cut back. Councils need to lobby for funding to be retained and made available for new services. Shelter itself runs support projects for formerly-homeless families and single people; we welcome discussion about further services of this kind.

10. Develop the network of housing advice

Every council has a legal duty to make sure that housing advice is available in its area. However, the network is still patchy. Shelter believes that all areas should have an independent centre, offering advice directly to people, taking referrals from and providing back up to other service providers. We run our own housing aid centres as well as a national telephone and web-based advice service.

Shelter can help – get in touch

Shelter is committed to working with local authorities and individual elected members to prevent homelessness and end bad housing. As well as our direct services to clients (<http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/advice/index.cfm>) we offer:

- training (<http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/home/home-818.cfm>) and targeted information for practitioners (<http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/policy/policy-420.cfm>)
- professional seminars (<http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/home/home-7483.cfm>)
- information on homelessness and housing law (<http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/policy/policy-4958.cfm>)
- policy work (<http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/policy/index.cfm>) and lobbying to make housing a high priority

We welcome dialogue with councils and councillors throughout Scotland.

To contact us: e-mail policyscotland@shelter.org.uk or telephone 0844 515 2471