Briefing

Homelessness prevention in Scotland

From the Shelter policy library

April 2006

www.shelter.org.uk

Shelter

Prevention of homelessness in Scotland

Summary

Shelter welcomes the increased attention being paid to the prevention of homelessness following the Ministerial Statement on the Abolition of Priority Need in December 2005. To meet the target of ensuring that all unintentionally homeless people are entitled to permanent accommodation by 2012, there is a need for prevention services to be stepped up in order that local authorities are better equipped to meet demand on their limited housing stock and for households to be able to avoid the crisis and disruption of homelessness.

The prevention of homelessness can encompass a huge array of activity; however, this paper concentrates on measures that are currently in place and those that are associated with housing, homelessness and related social policy and practice. This is mainly due to the fact that these are the areas in which central and local government are able to exert influence. In ensuring that prevention work is effective, a monitoring and evaluation framework is needed, within which such work operates, and Shelter welcomes the Scottish Executive's current attempts to develop this.

While welcoming more prevention work, there is a danger that an over emphasis on this type of activity can lead to people being denied their rights under homelessness legislation. This is a criticism that has been levelled in other parts of the UK, where an increase in prevention work has led to a perception of increased gatekeeping practices, which seek to prevent people making homeless applications rather than attempt to identify long term solutions to people's homelessness. This is a path Scotland needs to avoid.

Introduction

Shelter supports efforts to increase the provision of services to prevent homelessness and welcomed the Scottish Executive's recognition of the importance of prevention in the Ministerial Statement on the Abolition of Priority Need, delivered to Parliament in December 2005.[1] Shelter believes that prevention of homelessness can describe a wide range of interventions and activities. For example, this can include measures that increase the amount of affordable housing available, as well as support targeted at individuals who may be at risk of becoming homeless due to specific issues such as financial or personal difficulties.

---

[1] Scottish Executive (2005) Helping Homeless People, Ministerial Statement on Abolition of Priority Need by 2012

This paper describes Shelter's view of current prevention activities and makes recommendations as to how the prevention of homelessness should be taken forward. Prevention will constitute an essential component of the work being undertaken across the country to ensure that the 2012 deadline for the abolition of priority need is met.

The prevention of homelessness was significantly represented in the recommendations of the final report of the Homelessness Task Force, Helping Homeless People.[2] However, much of the work that has been undertaken at a local level since this document was published in 2002 has concentrated on tackling homelessness, while the prevention agenda has not moved forward to the same extent. Local Homelessness Strategies required councils to include plans to prevent homelessness. However, reviews of strategies have revealed wide variation in what councils have included in their plans and raised concerns as to how much of these have actually been translated into practice.[3]

During a survey of all local authorities and their readiness to meet the target of abolishing the priority need test by 2012, only one council included a significant reduction in anticipated levels of homelessness due to prevention work.[4]

Defining homelessness prevention

There is no single definition of homelessness prevention in use in Scotland. Shelter in England uses the following definition:

> *Shelter defines homelessness prevention as that which prevents situations of urgent housing need from arising in the first place. In general this refers both to far-reaching structural provisions (e.g. which increase the supply of social rented housing or which increase security of tenure) as well as other interventions into individual circumstances which make it considerably less likely that an occupant would lose their home during difficult economic or personal times (e.g. tenancy sustainment services or defending possession proceedings). Schemes which enable people to find alternative or better housing before urgent situations arise also play an important role in helping to prevent homelessness.*

There is a wide range of activity that can be described as making a contribution to the prevention of homelessness. While there is also a wealth of research and literature regarding the individual factors that contribute to people becoming homeless such as relationship breakdown, ill health, addiction issues or being discharged from an institution,

---

[2] Homelessness Task Force (2002) Helping Homeless People, Scottish Executive
[3] Kinbank Research (2005) An overview Report on the Progress of Local Authority Homelessness Strategies – Internal Report to Shelter Scotland
[4] Scottish Executive (2005) Analysis of Local Authorities Pro-Formas to Assess their Ability to Meet the Abolition of the Priority Need Test. Conducted by Tribal HCH.

it is also worth considering that there are many people who experience these difficulties but do not become homeless. Research on the role of advice and information in relation to homelessness, published by the Glasgow Homelessness Network, identified that the following personal factors can contribute to people being able to manage transitions in their housing situation more successfully and thereby prevent homelessness:[5]

- Positive social networks of family and friends.

- Meaningful occupation – being employed, volunteering, in training or in education.

- Access to a relevant range of advice and information in relation to their circumstances and situation.

- Sufficient financial resources.

These points underline the huge range of relevant issues that impact on homelessness and its prevention. While such issues are important, this paper concentrates on those that are more directly linked to services traditionally associated with housing and homelessness, not least because these are the ones which the Scottish Executive and local authorities should be able to influence within their housing policy and practice roles.

It must also be ensured that any increase in preventative measures is not accompanied by a reduction in other work which is crucial to tackling homelessness in Scotland, such as increasing the amount of available affordable housing. Some discussion around homelessness prevention seems to assume that prevention will reduce housing demand and decrease pressure on housing resources. In some cases this is appropriate, such as mediation services being provided to a family in dispute, in a way which makes it possible for a young person to remain in the family home. However, this is not necessarily always the case. This point is illustrated by a quote from a local authority employee in Tribal HCH's Analysis of the 2012 Pro Formas research for the Scottish Executive:

> *'prevention activity such as work in prisons and hospitals can be more accurately described as 'crisis prevention' through early intervention rather than homelessness prevention. Most preventative work does not necessarily negate housing need. Rather housing need is dealt with earlier rather than at the point of crisis. Therefore people still require accommodation although they do not necessarily present as homeless to*

---

[5] Glasgow Homelessness Network (2006) The role of advice and information in the prevention and alleviation of homelessness in Glasgow

> *access it. We do not therefore anticipate any significant decrease in housing need as a result of preventative work."*[6]

Evaluating and measuring the impact of prevention

Communities Scotland has noted within its Regulation and Inspections reports that most of the local authorities inspected to date are increasingly attending to the prevention of homelessness. However, it is currently impossible to assess the extent to which these activities are successful in preventing homelessness as there is no evaluation framework to assess these.[7] Furthermore, the Scottish Executive does not currently monitor or measure the effects of homelessness prevention work through the data that is regularly submitted to the Executive from local authority homelessness services. However, this information does include the reasons that people provide for becoming homeless and this can be a useful starting point for designing services which are intended to prevent homelessness.

Measuring the impact of prevention is a particularly difficult area. If the outcome of a prevention intervention is that the household does not have to make an application for assistance, this data is obviously not included in the homelessness statistics. However, as levels of homelessness are often inferred by the number of applications received by local authorities, were prevention measures to be available only when an application is made this may artificially inflate the perceived levels of homelessness in Scotland. Shelter Scotland has not used the number of applications as an indicator of the prevalence of homelessness for several years and encourages other organisations to do likewise.

A further danger of linking prevention measures to homelessness applications is that this may encourage gatekeeping practices to develop. This describes situations where people are discouraged from applying as homeless to a council through inappropriate advice and information. This practice is discussed later in this paper.

In England there is a specific performance indicator on homelessness prevention.[8] Councils are required to report figures to the UK Government for instances where households approaching a council as homeless are provided with advice which results in the situation being resolved without the person having to make an application for assistance under the homelessness legislation. Advice services designed to prevent homelessness are available to all people who approach a council in England and Scotland, believing themselves to be either homeless or threatened with homelessness.

---

[6] Scottish Executive (2005) Analysis of Local Authorities Pro-Formas to Assess their Ability to Meet the Abolition of Priority Need Test. Conducted by Tribal HCH.
[7] Communities Scotland (2005) Key Themes from Inspections: Homelessness
[8] Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2005) Best Value Performance Indicator 213 Housing Advice Service: Preventing Homelessness

As such, these services are provided to people who would not otherwise be eligible for assistance under homelessness legislation in England. Further analysis of homelessness prevention in England is contained later in this paper.

The Ministerial Statement on Abolishing Priority Need

As required under the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003, the Scottish Executive Minister for Communities made a statement to the Scottish Parliament in December 2005 on progress towards the abolition of the priority need test by 2012. The Act means that by 2012 all unintentionally homeless households will have a right to permanent housing. Shelter welcomed the Minister's recognition of the important contribution that the prevention of homelessness will play in achieving the 2012 target. We also welcome the two specific new initiatives that were outlined in the Ministerial statement, intended to assist local authorities in planning and evaluating their prevention activities.[9]

Research is being commissioned with the aim of identifying an effective evaluative framework for homelessness prevention. This will be conducted by the Scottish Executive and overseen by a Research Advisory Group comprising of various key stakeholders. The research is intended to identify what prevention activities seem to work best for particular 'at risk groups' and to make recommendations on how local authorities and other agencies could evaluate their prevention activities. The research process will comprise of a mapping exercise of current prevention activities, including monitoring processes, and will explore the views of key stakeholders on the effectiveness of prevention work.

The Ministerial statement also announced the creation of an Innovation Fund for new and replicable demonstration prevention projects and services. £250,000 has been made available from which local authorities can apply for funding for specific projects. A minimum of five projects or services is expected to receive funding. While only local authorities can apply, joint working projects with partners in other sectors may also be considered.

The projects selected for funding are expected to provide a range of services covering a variety of localities and client groups. Applications received through the Innovation Fund will be selected on the following criteria:

- Degree of innovation and potential impact on preventing homelessness.

- Ability to commence and complete the project in place in the timescale required.

---

[9] Scottish Executive (2005) Helping Homeless People, Ministerial Statement on Abolition of Priority Need by 2012

- Potential for broader learning and/or application across Scotland.

- Value for money.

- Range of coverage and/or complementary aspects of the projects.

Applications to the Innovation Fund are to be received by the end of May 2006 and projects will commence during the financial year 2006-07 but may run over into 2007-08. Projects will be expected to provide interim and final reports and will also be expected to self-evaluate the success or otherwise of their prevention scheme.

A selection panel is to be appointed by the Scottish Executive which will both select the projects that will be supported by the Innovation Fund and advise on how the findings from the projects will be publicised.

In some ways it would be better to be clearer about what we are measuring before new projects start. We accept, however, that the prevention of homelessness needs to be taken forward as soon as possible. To do this it is appropriate that new projects and services are not delayed by waiting for the research to be completed. In order to minimise the potential risk of having no established evaluation framework and to maximise the learning opportunities entailed in both these strands of work, Shelter would encourage strong links between those managing the new projects commissioned through the Innovation Fund and the evaluation researchers, in order that both can be kept fully informed of the lessons being learned from the other.

Current homelessness prevention in Scotland

The following sections describe activities being undertaken around the country to prevent homelessness occurring. As stated earlier, prevention can be interpreted to cover a huge variety of interventions and services at various levels and are far beyond the scope of this paper. As a starting point therefore, we have used the Scottish Executive Statistical Bulletin that provides the reasons households provide for their homelessness in order to consider the context within which prevention measures will operate. A further relevant consideration is where changes in social policy can make the most impact. For example, the Scottish Executive has a great deal more influence over public services and systems that are contributing to homelessness than it does over, for example, established social trends, individual circumstances and issues such as relationship breakdown.

The Statistical Bulletin for 2004-05 states that by far the most common reason for people becoming homeless is that their parents, relatives or friends can no longer accommodate

them.[10] This accounts for 35 per cent of all homeless applications. A further 23 per cent of homelessness applications are as a result of relationship breakdown. All in all, around one in six homelessness applications involve violence or harassment, either within the existing home or in the area in which people are living.

These are the areas within which it is most difficult for public policy to intervene in and effect change, particularly in the short-term. They stem from long-standing and deep-seated changes in society, such as the shape of families and the polarisation of neighbourhoods. The areas in which housing and homelessness policies can make a difference are those that are likely to have a relatively modest impact on overall homelessness. Estimates of the potential effect of prevention measures on overall homelessness typically range from four per cent to ten per cent. However, this should not deter agencies from taking forward initiatives to prevent homelessness as positive changes can still be made. The impact in particular localities and for individual people might be much greater than the overall scale implies. The crisis and disruption of homelessness should be avoided wherever this is possible.

Housing advice and information

Although the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 required councils to ensure that there is housing advice and information available free of charge within their area, research conducted for Shelter has indicated that this provision is still varied and lacking in some areas.[11] Most local authorities appear to have recognised the importance of advice and information services and are responding to this by creating strategies for such services to be fully implemented within their area. This generally contains a commitment to achieve the Homepoint National Standards of Advice and Information for housing advice provision.

Glasgow Homelessness Network published a report in January 2006 exploring the role of advice and information provision in the prevention and alleviation of homelessness. This underlines the importance of housing and homelessness advice being available across a range of services some of which may not traditionally be associated with having a role in preventing homelessness, for example, financial advice services, law services, services for refugees and asylum seekers. Furthermore, advice and information services aimed at preventing homelessness need to be accessible to a wide variety of potential audiences as each individual's circumstances are likely to be unique, as will their resources and capacity for coping with housing difficulties.[12]

---

[10] Scottish Executive (2005) Statistical Bulletin, Housing Series, Operation of the Homeless Persons Legislation in Scotland: national and local authority analyses 2004-05
[11] Kinbank Research (2005) An overview Report on the Progress of Local Authority Homelessness Strategies – Internal Research for Shelter Scotland
[12] Glasgow Homelessness Network (2006) The Role of Advice and Information in the Prevention and Alleviation of Homelessness in Glasgow

Shelter welcomes this recognition of the range of advice and information services that are required and how these need to be available in different settings and be consistent with other areas of advice and information. In light of this we particularly welcome the fact that the Scottish Executive and Communities Scotland are reviewing the current arrangements to ensure a more strategic approach to housing and homelessness advice which is consistent with other advice provision such as that concerned with financial and legal issues[13]. Shelter would welcome the publication of guidance in this area which provides specific clear practice information for local authorities in ensuring that advice services are holistic and consistent across the range of relevant issues.

The public sector

Evictions – social rented sector

Communities Scotland research has indicated that between 2001 and 2004 local authority eviction rates declined slightly (0.64 per cent to 0.59 per cent of all council tenancies), however, there was a rise in the rate of evictions from Registered Social Landlord (RSL) tenancies (0.48 per cent to 0.54 per cent).[14] This equates to 1,537 evictions and a further 1,911 tenancies being abandoned following an eviction decree being granted but before the actual eviction has taken place, and represents one in every 200 social sector tenancies. Scottish Executive figures also show a 4.4 per cent increase in the number of people applying as homeless following the loss of a social rented tenancy through rent arrears or antisocial behaviour between 2003-04 and 2004-05.[15]

Research has also suggested that larger landlord organisations are more likely to evict than smaller ones and that eviction rates in the social rented sector are higher in urban than rural areas. Social landlords have attributed the main factors in influencing eviction rates as being changes in the policies and practices of organisations, administration of housing benefit, the changing profile of tenants and a more general acceptance of debt within society.[16] These findings may be of particular concern with the general trend towards larger RSLs along with the rising levels of personal debt, which may result in more people suffering financial difficulties.

Section 11 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 also placed a duty on all landlords and mortgage lenders to inform local authorities whenever they are instigating proceedings to either evict a tenant or repossess an owner occupied property. The Ministerial Statement

---

[13] Scottish Executive (2005) Helping Homeless People Ministerial Statement on Abolition of Priority Need by 2012

[14] Communities Scotland (2005) Evictions in Practice: Evictions by RSL and Local Authorities in Scotland, 2001 – 2004.

[15] Scottish Executive (2005) Homelessness Statistical Bulletin 2004-05

[16] Communities Scotland (2005) Evictions in Practice: Eviction by RSL and local authority landlords, 2001 - 2004

in December pledged that this Section would be commenced during 2006. A consultation on the design of this scheme is anticipated over the spring/summer of 2006.

Housing Benefit

Housing benefit (HB) is intended to provide assistance to low income households in meeting their housing costs. However, the HB system has been criticised as a potential contributory factor in homelessness. The main issue in relation to this is the time that it takes for new HB claims to be processed, causing claimants to fall behind with their rent payments which can lead to homelessness. Other HB issues include the single room rent restriction, which restricts HB for people under 25, and the number of private landlords who refuse to let properties to people in receipt of HB. Focus group participants in Communities Scotland research on eviction in the social sector estimated that almost all households evicted for arrears had encountered problems with HB.[17]

While improvements have been made to HB administration overall, it still takes an average of 33 days to process a new claim, with some of the worst performing councils taking over 100 days.[18] The 2001 Housing (Scotland) Act placed a duty on courts to take delays in housing benefit claims into account when considering repossession for rent arrears cases. This section of the Act came into force in July 2004, however, there appears to be no research available into any impact that this may have had and we would welcome further information on the effect of this measure.

Also initial research into the Local Housing Allowance scheme, intended to streamline the administration of housing benefit in the private rented sector has indicated that there has not been a significant reduction in the times taken to process claims in the pathfinder local authorities.[19]

Tenancy support

Local authorities have increased the provision of housing support services to people affected by homelessness in recent years. These services have largely been funded through Scottish Executive Supporting People funding. Currently, however, there are concerns that the Supporting People budget is being reduced at a time when the requirements on local authorities to provide these services are increasing. In financial year 2005-06 the overall Supporting People budget was cut by 12 per cent.

There have also been concerns about recent changes to the calculations used by the Executive in determining the allocation of Supporting People funding to each local

---

[17] Communities Scotland (2005) Evictions in Practice: Eviction by RSLs and local authority landlords, 2001 - 2004
[18] Shelter (2005) Policy Briefing: Housing Benefit
[19] Shelter (2005) On the Right Path? The Interim Finding of Shelter's Research into the Housing Benefit Pathfinders

authority area. The new formula targets funding to areas which are assessed as being particularly deprived through the Index of Multiple Deprivation. While Shelter does not argue against support being targeted to where it is most needed this change in the funding mechanism has created a situation of winners and losers. The Index of Multiple Deprivation calculation can mask pockets of deprivation that exist in otherwise affluent areas and to determine funding on this alone results in valuable services being lost to people in these communities who are in need of housing and other support. Further, it is not obvious to us that authorities charged with cutting Supporting People budgets have yet done so in a very strategic way.

There is also a lack of evidence as to the impact of support services on tenancy sustainment. Such an evaluation framework will be essential for the design and delivery of effective future support services to prevent homelessness. Shelter would expect this to be an integral component of the forthcoming Scottish Executive research on prevention and also understand that several local authorities are currently attempting to design a suitable research methodology in order to explore this issue.

Questions are likely to persist about the availability of support to individual households. Councils need robust and comprehensive systems to ensure that all those who are in high risk groups for becoming homeless are targeted for the provision of housing support. The role of assessment is crucial in ensuring that people are offered support services that are suitable for their needs. However, there is evidence that people are not routinely assessed for their housing support needs as part of their homelessness application and that support received by homeless households is often more determined by what a local authority has financial resources to deliver than by any assessment of what support may be required.[20] It is essential that people are provided with an assessment of any potential housing support requirements as part of their homelessness application and that support needs identified are met. One possibility worth revisiting is the development of a standard template for homelessness assessment.

People being discharged from institutions/care

The Homelessness Task Force recommendations identified people being released from prisons, young people leaving local authority care, long stay hospital patients and people leaving the armed forces as being at high risk of becoming homeless.[21] As such, local authorities are charged with ensuring that there are appropriate mechanisms and systems in place to prevent homelessness occurring within these groups of people.

---

[20] Anne Douglas & Shonagh McEwan (2005) Supporting People? The impact of changes to supporting people funding to services for homeless people in Scotland, Shelter
[21] Homelessness Task Force (2002) Helping Homeless People Scottish Executive

Of these groups, prisoners and care leavers appear to be those best served by the provision of targeted advice services.[22] However, with 2,796 people applying as homeless on being discharged from prison in 2004-05, the provision of these services is not yet comprehensive.[23]

All local authorities now have Throughcare teams that advise and support young people who have been in local authority care. These, however, are mainly provided through social work services and there are concerns as to the level of awareness that exists among social workers of homelessness legislation.[24]

It is now common for local authorities to have protocols in place for those leaving an institutional care setting, to ensure that people do not become homeless at the time of their discharge. Although this represents progress, there is, as yet, a lack of empirical evidence as to the effectiveness of these in practice. Furthermore, while protocols have been developed these are by no means comprehensive in all local authority areas regarding the institutions with which protocols are required.[25]

Private sector housing

Evictions

As the private rented sector of the housing market is dominated by short assured tenancies, it is relatively straightforward for landlords to be able to remove a tenant from their property. Most simply await the end of the tenancy and serve notice on the tenants who subsequently leave. Scottish Executive figures indicate that there were 5,127 households who applied as homeless due to losing a private sector tenancy in 2004-05, an overall rise of 20 per cent (731 additional households) from the previous year.[26] Of these, 960 were as a result of rent arrears (854) or antisocial behaviour (106).

Concern has also been raised about unlawful evictions from the private rented sector. Shelter has campaigned on this issue for several years, calling for a stronger role for local authorities in the investigation and prosecution process. Councils are best placed to incorporate this function within their overall preventative work and while the police are currently responsible for investigating such allegations, prosecutions rarely result due to

---

[22] Kinbank Research (2005) An Overview Report on the Progress of Local Authority Homelessness Strategies – Internal Report to Shelter Scotland
[23] Scottish Executive (2005) Statistical Bulletin, Housing Series, Operation of the Homeless Persons Legislation in Scotland: national and local authority analyses 2004-05
[24] Kinbank Research (2005) An Overview Report on the Progress of Local Authority Homelessness Strategies – Internal Report to Shelter Scotland
[25] Kinbank Research (2005) An Overview Report on the Progress of Local Authority Homelessness Strategies – Internal Report to Shelter Scotland
[26] Scottish Executive (2005) Statistical Bulletin, Housing Series, Operation of the Homeless Persons Legislation in Scotland: National and local authority analyses 2004-05

police officers not having the detailed housing knowledge often required to pursue a case and competing priorities for police attention.   This campaigning has led to local authorities being required to consider issues of unlawful eviction when applying the 'fit and proper' person test to people seeking registration as a landlord.   While Shelter welcomes the fact that there will now be some local authority input into the process of acting against landlords, we remain concerned that the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that prosecutions come to court remains with the police and Procurator Fiscal. We do however, look forward to working with the Executive and relevant partners to design a system through the new regulations for the private rented sector which more effectively protects tenants from the worst examples of abuse perpetrated by some private sector landlords.

Mortgage to Rent Scheme

Administered by Communities Scotland, this national scheme assists home owners experiencing financial difficulties and who are in danger of having their home repossessed. Owner-occupiers are able to sell the property to a RSL and rent it back from that RSL, preventing their homelessness. Communities Scotland research into the operation of the scheme showed that 125 households had applied for assistance between February 2003 and January 2004.[27]   Of these, 27 applications were completed successfully, 57 were still being processed and 41 cases did not progress to completion either due to the applicant not meeting the eligibility criteria (29 cases) or withdrawing from the scheme. While the scheme has largely been viewed as positive by those who have used the service, criticisms have been levelled at the length of time taken to process applications, the eligibility rules and the lack of knowledge among the public and housing/ financial advisors of the scheme and its operation. This latter point may be something that is included in the context of more holistic advice and information services in relation to both housing and homelessness and financial issues.

It is also worth noting, however, that the Mortgage to Rent scheme will remain modest in its overall impact on preventing homelessness. In 2004-05 mortgage default was provided as the reason for the households homelessness in only 781 cases which represents 1.4 per cent of all homelessness applications in this period.[28]

Homelessness prevention in England

In England, the prevention agenda has generated a good deal more activity than in Scotland in recent years although this has not been without criticism. There are concerns about defining the prevention of homelessness and consequently about homelessness

---

[27] Communities Scotland (2004) Review of the Rent to Mortgage Scheme
[28] Scottish Executive (2005) Statistical Bulletin, Housing Series, Operation of the Homeless Persons Legislation in Scotland: National and local authority analyses 2004-05

prevention activity being more about gatekeeping and keeping the official figures for homelessness applications low rather than being about identifying and facilitating sustainable solutions to people's housing needs.

The prevention model employed in England is based on the three most common reasons for homelessness within the official statistics:

- Being asked to leave by family/ friends.

- Relationship breakdown and domestic violence.

- Ending of an assured shorthold tenancy (AST).[29]

When an applicant approaches a council for assistance in relation to homelessness, a housing options interview will be conducted and if the person's homelessness relates to these reasons, then a potential solution will be identified which attempts to resolve this situation prior to a homelessness application being made. Specific responses have been developed for each of these reasons, however, issues around the private sector have been covered elsewhere in this paper.

Being asked to leave by family/friends

The use of mediation services has been widely promoted in England as a reaction to people being asked to leave due to disputes within a household. The availability of mediation services can be a potentially useful tool in resolving family and relationship breakdown that can result in homelessness. However, there are concerns that when the use of mediation services is compulsory, as often appears to be the case in relation to its use in the context of homelessness, this serves to make it ineffective and can cause further damage to relationships. Mediation should only be used in accordance with the principles of the mediation process which state that it should be voluntary and that the mediator should have no vested interest in whether or not mediation is successful.[30]

Shelter Scotland has published good practice in the use of youth mediation services, which is available on our website.

Relationship breakdown/Domestic abuse

Sanctuary Schemes have been promoted in some instances as a means to combat people's fear of violence. Additional security features are installed in the home of a person who has been the victim of crime to reduce their fear of crime and allow them to remain in the home. Sanctuary schemes are often used to tackle domestic violence but have also been used to support the victims of other crimes such as racially motivated

---

[29] The English equivalent of a short assured tenancy.
[30] Scottish Medication Network http://www.scottishmediation.org.uk/mediation/action.asp

abuse. These do not appear to be as widely used as other prevention measures in England. Sanctuary schemes can be useful where they are appropriately used. However, a person having received this service should not be prevented from making a homeless application in the future if they continue to experience threats, harassment or violence.

There appears little knowledge of the use of sanctuary schemes in Scotland and little evidence that they are being considered for introduction.

Gatekeeping

Local authorities in Scotland have a duty to accept and assess an application from anyone over the age of 16 who believes they are homeless or threatened with homelessness.[31] However, organisations working with homeless people in Scotland have criticised councils over many years for failing in this duty and employing gatekeeping measures to prevent people from making an application for assistance. Evidence of this practice was found by Communities Scotland Regulations and Inspection teams in four of the first five local authority homelessness services to be inspected. This was often as a result of reception staff being unclear about referring people to appropriate services, and was attributed to poor staff guidance and training. However, in two of these councils staff were witnessed actively deterring people from applying by informing them of shortages in permanent and temporary accommodation.[32]

There is a fear that an increased emphasis on homelessness prevention may lead to an increase in practices that are designed to prevent people from making a homeless application. This is a criticism that has increasingly been levelled in England since the increased emphasis on prevention worked described earlier.

Part of this issue is related to the way that levels of homelessness tend to be measured. It is still common for the number of applications to be used as the measure of how many people are homeless. As pressure is put on statutory bodies to reduce homelessness this can lead to pressure on local authorities to reduce the number of applications that they receive. For several years Shelter has not used applications as a measure of homelessness and would encourage other organisations to do the same, as this is not a true reflection of the number of households who are without permanent, settled accommodation. On the one hand it can overestimate homelessness (around 25-30 per cent of applicants are assessed as not being homeless[33]) and on the other it does not include people without accommodation who, for whatever reason, do not make an

---

[31] Scottish Executive (2005) Code of Guidance on Homelessness
[32] Communities Scotland (2005) Key Themes from inspections, Homelessness
[33] Scottish Executive (2005) Statistical Bulletin, Housing Series, Operation of the Homeless Persons Legislation in Scotland: National and local authority analyses 2004-05

application for assistance to their local council. As the homelessness monitoring form, (HL1) is being revised and re-issued, it is a good time to seek consensus on the appropriate indicator of homelessness trends.

Conclusion

It is clear that the prevention of homelessness as an area of practice will require to be stepped up for the 2012 target to be met. While activity in this area is increasing there is an obvious need for organisations to be able to evaluate the activity that is currently taking place in order that those areas of practice which are most effective can be adopted more widely. However, there will not be a 'one size fits all' prevention strategy, and a range of proactive and responsive services will be required to stop people from reaching the crisis of homelessness.

The creation of an effective toolkit for evaluation must reflect the differing needs of organisations in preventing homelessness and be flexible enough to assess the impact of short-term interventions on people who are in imminent danger of becoming homeless and longer term work, for example, the delivery of housing education to young people. It is likely that a set of evaluation tools will be required in order to reflect these different areas of practice and the measures being taken to tackle homelessness arising from different personal and housing circumstances.

The use of the innovation fund should also assist in developing new ways of stopping people becoming homeless. There is currently very little information available as to how much will be available for organisations to develop services and for how long the fund will operate. The question of how initiatives will be evaluated will also be relevant within this context.

Local authorities, in preparing for 2012, are realising the importance of homelessness prevention and this will be an area that will increasingly become prominent in the coming years. While this is clearly welcome, an increase in prevention work is likely to have a modest impact on overall levels of homelessness. While the activities described within this paper will prevent some instances of homelessness they cannot contribute to issues of relationship and family breakdown or violence that are attributed as being the main causes of homelessness in Scotland. People will always experience sudden and unexpected changes in their circumstances which can cause homelessness and there will remain an ongoing requirement for services to effectively respond to this and ensure that people can be quickly moved on from homelessness.