

Better Support for homeless people in the Housing Bill

Summary

“A key theme of our recommendations in this report is that all the varying needs of people affected by homelessness must be assessed and addressed individually, effectively and flexibly. If they are not, purely housing solutions are unlikely to be sustainable.”

Homelessness Task Force, 2002

The recommendations above, from 2002, are as relevant today as they were then. The current Housing (Scotland) Bill is a major opportunity to strengthen the way that homeless people who need support are assessed and provided with appropriate services.

- Shelter Scotland is proposing a straightforward amendment to allow better access to good quality, timely housing support for homeless people, with the aim of preventing homelessness and sustaining tenancies. We envisage that the amendment would require local authorities to provide:
 - a) a simple assessment of housing support needs for all households assessed as homeless, and
 - b) secure relevant advice and support services to meet housing support needs identified in the assessment.

This provision echoes the framework which is now in place for homeless households accommodated in the private rented sector under section 32A of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987.

- We recognise that many of these housing support services already exist and are made available to homeless people. All that we are seeking to do is ensure that homeless households are consistently directed towards these services.
- The number of homeless households who require housing support is estimated to be at about a third of those assessed as homeless. The range of support needs will vary depending on the individual needs and circumstances. In many cases the support services are modest. Support may include help with form filling, claiming benefits, emotional support or assistance to engage with other professionals.
- There is clear evidence that housing support services are neither assessed nor provided for all homeless households who may need them.
- Alongside the social benefits of housing support for homeless households, and the communities in which they live, there is strong evidence of the cost benefit not only to housing and homelessness services but across health, social services and criminal justice.

- Better support is not a new idea; it echoes the priorities set out in the Homelessness Task Force recommendations, the Code of Guidance for Homelessness and the list of key influencing factors in meeting the 2012 commitment. While we know that this has led to good practice for some, we need to give legislative substance to these efforts to make sure that homeless households in need are consistently directed towards appropriate support services.
- Any additional costs of strengthened duties would be quickly outweighed by the savings made across services from preventing homelessness, and from the positive social impact on improving the lives of the most vulnerable in Scotland and helping them to contribute and participate more fully in society.
- Our Better Support proposal is backed by a range of politicians, voluntary organisations and local authorities.

Background

“A key theme of our recommendations in this report is that all the varying needs of people affected by homelessness must be assessed and addressed individually, effectively and flexibly. If they are not, purely housing solutions are unlikely to be sustainable.”

Homelessness Task Force, 2002

The Homelessness Task Force made this recommendation eight years ago. It is as important a recommendation as the more frequently highlighted commitment to accommodate all unintentionally homeless households by 2012. But while there has been an improvement in the provision of support for some, even many households, it would be a bold assertion that it was universally provided for all those who need it. Giving the same emphasis to the need for support as to the need to accommodate simply restates the Task Force’s emphasis on these dual responses.

Shelter’s proposal for Better Support as an amendment to the Housing (Scotland) Bill has received a positive reception to date from a range of individuals and organisations and we hope to continue this into Stage two. In the Stage one parliamentary debate there was cross party support for Better Support from Labour, Liberal Democrat and Scottish National Party MSPs. The Local Government Committee’s Stage one report on the Housing (Scotland) Bill was also open to Better Support but asked for further evidence of its merits. Similarly the Minister for Housing and Communities also asked for further information on the impact of Better Support.

Shelter’s proposal is backed by a cross-section of organisations that also see the value in giving housing support services a firmer legal footing. Those in support include: Barnardo’s Scotland, Capability Scotland, Impact Arts, One Parent Families Scotland, Quarriers and Quarriers VIP group, SAMH, Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People, Scottish Churches Housing Action, Scottish Youth Parliament, Tenants Information Service

and Veterans Scotland. Our viewpoint is echoed by the housing convenors for local authorities in Dundee and Stirling.¹

Better access to good quality, timely housing support will allow those facing the spectre of homelessness to access the right support to keep their home. Not everyone facing homelessness receives the support they need to settle into, manage and keep their home. Too often people fall through the net - we need better support to connect the needs of homeless people to the support, advice and advocacy services that are available to them via the council and other organisations.

This paper provides an overview of the main arguments in favour of Better Support as we move into Stage two of the Housing Bill.

What is Better Support?

Shelter Scotland is proposing that the Housing Bill includes a straightforward amendment to allow for better support for homeless people with the aim of preventing homelessness and sustaining tenancies. We envisage that the amendment would require local authorities to provide:

- a) a simple assessment of housing support needs for all households assessed as homeless, and
- b) secure relevant advice and support services to meet any housing support needs identified in the assessment.

We recognise that many of these housing support services already exist. All that we are seeking to do is ensure that homeless households are consistently directed towards these services.

Better support will vary depending on the individual needs of the homeless household. It may be help with filling out benefit forms, budgeting, linking them up with drug and alcohol services or linking them up with local support networks in their local area.

This amendment would ensure equal treatment of homeless households no matter where they are housed. There is already a statutory definition of housing support services in section 91(8) of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001.² Under the 2001 Act, councils must provide housing support to households who are given Short Scottish Secure Tenancies. There is also a legislative requirement to provide support for homeless households housed

¹ Shelter Scotland Councillors Newsletter, May 2010. Available at: http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_library/policy_library_folder/shelter_scotland_-_councillors_newsletter_05_-_may_2010

² The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 states that 'housing support services' includes any service which provides support, assistance, advice or counselling to an individual with particular needs with a view to enabling that individual to occupy, or to continue to occupy, as the person's sole or main residence, residential accommodation other than excepted accommodation.'

in the private rented sector.³ Since it is not apparent that homeless households housed in the private rented sector would have greater support needs than homeless households generally (indeed, the opposite is likely to be true) then we are simply suggesting extending these provisions to cover all homeless households with support needs.

How many homeless people are likely to have additional support needs?

According to Scottish Government statistics, approximately a third of those assessed as homeless also have at least one additional support need.⁴ It could be argued that the actual figure is likely to be slightly higher since not all councils currently record the types of support needs identified.

However, a snapshot of single people presenting as homeless in Glasgow found that fewer than you might expect were identified as having additional support needs - 21 per cent of homeless households, where a homelessness integrated assessment (HIA) was completed were identified as having additional support needs.⁵ On many occasions these were low level housing-related support services, particularly at the point of moving into a tenancy where a crisis can easily occur when people need to access benefits, furnish a flat and connect to basic utilities.

In Stirling, the types of support identified in the housing support plan include for example, emotional support, budgeting and debt advice, assistance with benefits and form-filling and help to engage with other professionals. Depending on the needs identified housing support officers can refer clients on to the income maximisation team, social work, youth support, voluntary sector housing support services, money advice services and the resettlement officer.

³ New secondary legislation under section 32A of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 went 'live' in February 2010. For the first time, it is permissible for local authorities to discharge duties to homeless people by providing accommodation in the private rented sector. However, there are a number of qualifying conditions, one of which is that any requirement to provide housing support is both assessed and met.

⁴ Scottish Government (2009) *Operation of the Homeless Persons legislation in Scotland: National and Local Authority Analyses 2008-09*, 4 Sep

⁵ Quilgars, D and Bretherton, J. (2009) *Evaluation of the Experiences of Single People Presenting as Homeless in Glasgow*, Centre of Housing Policy, University of York, February. Referred to hereafter as Quilgars, D and Bretherton, J. (2009)

How housing support helped Ian settle into his new home

Melville Housing Association's Housing's Tenancy Support service has two tenancy support workers who help new tenants settle in, with the aim of increasing tenancy sustainment. Ian tells how it helped him:

'I was in quite a bad way before I got a house with Melville. Things weren't going well for me, I'd been in hospital and then in a homeless hostel for about six months. When I found out I'd got a house I was pleased but I was moving to a new area where I didn't know anybody and I didn't have anything for my house or any money. It was good to be able to talk to the support workers about my worries and to feel I wasn't on my own.

Even before I moved in my support worker helped me stay longer in the temporary accommodation so that I was able to get things together before moving. When I moved in the support I got was brilliant. I had no idea there were so many people you could apply to for help. With their assistance I was able to buy furniture, appliances, carpets and curtains.

When I moved in the house was pretty empty and I didn't have any idea how I would fill it or even make it liveable, but with Melville's help it really feels like a home now. I also feel like I'm settling in to the local community. I feel like I've taken a big step forward from where I was a year ago and **I don't think I could have done it on my own.**'

What are the social benefits of Better Support?

Housing support has clear positive outcomes for homeless people's lives, as illustrated in Ian's story, helping to sustain tenancies and prevent homelessness. Research into the benefits of Supporting People services for homeless individuals and families in England identified a wide range of ways people's lives were improved:⁶

- **Improved quality of life for the family/individual** - including greater independence, decreased vulnerability, improved health, and greater choice of options on where and how to live
- **Greater stability** – this is important in allowing homeless households to deal with other issues in their lives such as education, unemployment, mental health problems, substance abuse and offending and behavioural problems
- **Improved educational achievement** – children are able to regularly attend the same school, and can do so regularly with less disruption
- **Decreased social exclusion** – homeless children are at greater risk of bullying and frequent moves can make them more isolated from their peers

⁶ Capgemini (2009) *Research into the financial benefits of the Supporting People Programme, 2009*. Available at: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/financialbenefitsresearch>

- **Long-term benefits to children** – better educational achievements and improved health outcomes in the long term
- **Families can be kept together**
- **Families are able to live independently** – allowing life skills to be passed to children and therefore having benefits to society over the long term.
- **Decreased fear of crime**
- **Easier access to appropriate services**
- **Improved involvement in the community** (benefiting both the individual and society)

Housing support also has longer term benefits that cannot so easily be quantified financially, for both individuals and the communities in which they live enabling them to contribute and participate more fully in society. The considerable financial return possible from housing support is discussed in the next section.

It is only possible to get housing support right if it is informed and shaped by an assessment process. Assessment is key in making sure people receive the right support to enable them to settle into a new home and do not fall into a cycle of repeat homelessness. Research into single people's experiences of homelessness in Glasgow found that homeless people viewed the assessment process as a necessary one:

Service users tended to be pleased when detailed assessments were made of their needs; concerns for them arose when there was a lack of assessment that then resulted in inappropriate placements.⁷

Service users also valued support as an important tool for preventing further crises:

Quite a number of service users also suggested that quicker action on becoming homeless would have prevented them becoming 'lost' in the homelessness scene for many years.⁸

So consistent assessment is critical. Of course, we recognise that there may be gaps, delays or mismatches between assessment and provision of services. But it is still important to have assessment in place as it helps to better plan services and to ensure that people are directed towards what is most effective for them.

⁷ Quilgars, D and Bretherton, J. (2009)

⁸ Quilgars, D and Bretherton, J. (2009)

What are the financial benefits of Better Support ?

We recognise that local authority budgets are under considerable pressure which makes it particularly relevant to look at initiatives that will make efficiency savings across a range of services. Alongside the clear social benefits of good quality, timely and tailored support for homeless households there are significant financial benefits Better Support can bring to councils and to government.

A social return on investment (SROI) analysis of North Ayrshire Fab Pad, a tenancy sustainment project, identified a high return. For every £1 invested in the project, a social return on investment of £8.38 was realised.⁹ This was due to reduced tenancy turnover and anti-social behaviour, increased ability of tenants to pay rent, reduced health care costs and welfare benefits due to moving into employment. The payback period of this investment was found to be a mere four months.

Supporting People funded services for homeless households in England were found to have a cost benefit not only to housing and homelessness services but also across health and social services and criminal justice (see table 1). Approximately 60 per cent of the cost benefits of Supporting People were for services other than housing and homelessness. Therefore Better Support has the potential to make efficiency savings right across the various council and Scottish Government budgets, as opposed to posing a threat to spending in other sectors.

In addition, the assessment process is a useful tool for ensuring that the planning and commissioning of services is needs led: *'if there had been good assessment then you can plan and commission appropriately... (Statutory Sector Provider)'*¹⁰

This has the potential to ensure councils commission and deliver services that best meet local need and at the same time make sure scarce resources are used effectively and efficiently.

⁹ Tenancy breakdown cost is £8,765 and the cost for FabPad is £2,500/head plus the social added value. The added value per participant was found to be £19,238. Available at:

<http://www.sroiproject.org.uk/media/8362/ArtsFab.pdf>

¹⁰ Fitzpatrick, S., et al (2009) *Glasgow Hostel Closure and Re-provisioning Programme: Interim Findings from a Longitudinal Evaluation*. Available at:

<http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/chp/publications/PDF/The%20Glasgow%20Hostel%20ClosureWEB.pdf>

| | Cost £m |
|--|----------------------------|
| Cost of providing SP services to homeless households £m | (286.80) |
| Other cost areas affected | Benefit / (cost) £m |
| Housing costs | 85.70 |
| Homelessness | 70.60 |
| Tenancy failure costs | 23.00 |
| Health service costs | 97.30 |
| Social services costs | 1.70 |
| Crime costs | 164.10 |
| Total benefit from other cost areas | 442.40 |
| Overall net benefit | 155.60 |

Table 1: The costs and estimated net benefits of Supporting People services to homeless households with support needs in England (Cappgemini, 2009)

How will Better Support help councils meet national outcomes?

The invaluable role housing support can play in helping people to settle into their homes makes Better Support a key component of meeting a number of the Scottish Government's National Outcomes, such as tackling inequalities in Scottish society, realising more and better employment opportunities, living longer healthier lives and improving life chances for children, young people and families.

The Scottish Government's commitment to give all unintentionally homeless households a right to permanent housing by 2012 is less than three years away. The introduction of Better Support is a final opportunity to put homelessness prevention and equal access to support central to achieving the 2012 homelessness commitment. Positioning housing support more centrally to 2012 resonates with the Scottish Government's view that *housing and wider support* is one of the five key influencing factors in meeting the 2012 commitment.¹¹

Why not use guidance and promotion of best practice to get Better Support?

There is already a strong emphasis on the need to provide support.

The Homelessness Task Force's action plan, in 2002, to prevent homelessness and deliver effective responses to homelessness, includes assessment and support as an intrinsic thread through its 59 recommendations. The Homelessness Task Force Final Report clearly states that support is not only key to prevention but also that a comprehensive 'fit for purpose' assessment of people's needs and effective referral arrangements are both important for crisis response and finding solutions to homelessness. This emphasis on assessment and support seems to be common sense but eight years on we are still not putting this fully into practice for every homeless person with support needs.

Similarly, the Scottish Government Code of Guidance on Homelessness reiterates the value of support to prevent homelessness and sustain tenancies. It states that assessment and support should be integral parts of the homelessness process: *Assessing and recording housing support needs and making arrangements for housing support services should be carried out by the homelessness officer, where possible, and be built into the housing advice/homeless application process.*¹²

Although we know that good practice exists across Scotland which complements Better Support we also know from the individuals and families we advise and support every day that councils are failing to provide consistent access to the right advice and support for homeless people to settle into and keep their home. This is verified by the Scottish Housing

¹¹ 'Provision of ongoing housing and wider support to help the most vulnerable stay in settled accommodation.' is listed as one of five key influencing factors in relation to meeting the national indicator that 'All unintentionally homeless households will be entitled to settled accommodation by 2012'

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/About/scotPerforms/indicators/Homelessness>

¹² Scottish Government (2005) *Code of Guidance on Homelessness*

Regulator inspection reports: in seven out of the twelve councils who received C or D grades in 2008-10 it was noted that the assessment of homeless people's housing support needs either did not happen at all in some councils or in all cases, or it was not consistently recorded when a support assessment or referral had happened.

The introduction of Better Support will give legislative substance to existing guidance and good practice making sure the standards to assess and address housing support needs set by the best local authorities will be shared by all.

The impact of a lack of support

Lilian and her four children were forced to flee their home due to violence. They were placed in overcrowded emergency accommodation, where they stayed for 18 months. The situation was exacerbated because one of the children had learning difficulties and found it particularly difficult to cope with the situation. He took it out on his mother and siblings and by damaging the property. Lilian struggled to control him. Despite signs the family were having difficulties there was no assessment of the family's support needs. When the family moved into their permanent home they received a bill for £1,600 from the council for damages to the temporary accommodation. This put an extra financial and emotional strain on the family. In addition, the new home had not been adapted to make it physically safe for the boy with learning difficulties.

An initial assessment of the family's support needs when they first presented as homeless could have led to earlier interventions to assist the family. It may have led to a community care assessment to identify the needs of the child with learning difficulties and linking up with local services offering practical and emotional support to the family. This could have potentially averted costs related to child protection procedures and repairs, alongside the benefits of improving the family's quality of life and the children's general well-being.

In conclusion

New legislative duties are necessary to guarantee that all households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness receive the support they require to keep their homes. We need to ensure that housing support is just as central to preventing homelessness as access to a house. Although timely, quality housing support already exists for some, a duty is required to ensure support is consistent and targeted. Any additional costs of strengthened duties would be quickly outweighed by the savings made across services from preventing homelessness and the positive impact on the lives of the most vulnerable in Scotland and helping them to contribute and participate more fully in society.