



Progress on homelessness

Evidence to Local Government and Communities Committee, 11.6.08

Summary of main points

- There is continuing high-level political commitment to Scotland's internationally-acclaimed homelessness programme.
- However, some aspects of delivery are either difficult to evidence or show signs of pressure. In particular, the pace at which local authorities are moving towards 2012 is not sufficient to guarantee all will meet the target.
- In addition, inspections of homelessness services demonstrate that insufficient priority is being attached to those services within local authorities' overall responsibilities.
- The homelessness programme and, in particular, the 2012 target, remains achievable. However, in order for that to happen, we urge the Committee to press ministers for a step change in delivery, focused on three areas:
 - Options to increase housing supply;
 - Measures to embed prevention of homelessness more fully in local practice;
 - A thorough "stock-take" on progress on homelessness, aimed at producing a refreshed action plan.

1. Background

Scotland is currently embarked on an internationally-acclaimed programme of action on homelessness. This was set in motion by the report of the Homelessness Task Force in 2002. The Task Force made 59 recommendations, the centre-piece of which was the commitment that, by 2012, all unintentionally homeless people would be entitled to a permanent home.

A successor body to the Task Force, the Homelessness Monitoring Group was set up in 2002 and has issued annual reports on the progress being made on homelessness. The Task Force was reconstituted in 2007, following the change in Government and issued its most recent annual report in March 2008. This annual report, along with a report by two local government secondees into the Scottish Government's Homelessness Team, forms the backdrop to today's session

Is homelessness policy progressing as planned?

Shelter has been heartened by the firm commitments made by the First Minister, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing and the Minister for Communities and Sport to delivering on the 2012 target: a target which puts Scotland in the vanguard internationally in efforts to achieve greater social equality. The prevailing situation where some homeless people are entitled to the

stability of a permanent home and others are not is simply not tolerable in a nation which prides itself on social justice.

But what really matters now is delivery. Although, as we explain below, the 2012 target is perfectly achievable, recent signs are that the pressure is increasing and that now is the time for MSPs to scrutinise both local and central government closely to ensure that the necessary action is happening.

Some of the signs of weakness are as follows.

By April 2009, local authorities are to meet an interim target to get halfway from where they were in 2003-04 to where they need to be in 2012. For example, if a council gave a permanent home to 40% of homeless people in 2003-04 and it needs to be up to 100% by 2012, then it would need to set policies that made sure it was giving 70% of homeless people a home by 2009.

Based on this 2009 benchmark, as at 2006-07:

- 3 LAs have achieved it already.
- 7 LAs are on target to achieve it.
- 14 LAs are moving in the right direction but not fast enough.
- 7 LAs are moving in the wrong direction – that is, they are giving permanent homes to a smaller percentage of people now than in 2003-04.
- 1 LA – Angus Council - decided to meet the 2012 target in 2007-08.

On this critical indicator, then, progress on homelessness is not as good as it should be. A similar story is seen in other areas:

- Of the 22 homelessness inspections carried out to date by Communities Scotland and now the Scottish Housing Regulator, only one council – Edinburgh – has scored a top mark of A; only two others have scored a B. 12 have received C grades and 7 the bottom D grade, including two in the most recent year.
- It is difficult to tell whether homeless people are successfully sustaining accommodation that is allocated to them as current measurement is weak.
- Prevention of homelessness is still not embedded in homelessness practice so that it is not possible to quantify its benefits.
- The duration of homelessness episodes is increasing as the availability of permanent “move-on” accommodation is reducing.

So, looking broadly at some aspects of progress on homelessness, evidence is either weak or not encouraging.

So what needs to happen to make the homelessness programme work?

While progress has been more limited than might have been wished for, there *has* been substantial progress, such that, in our view, the ambitions of the Homelessness Task Force remain as

achievable as they are desirable. However, we believe that it will take a step-change in delivery now. So our **first recommendation** which we have been working on with other voluntary sector homelessness organisations, is that there should be a full stock-take of progress on homelessness. Our proposal is attached as an appendix to this evidence paper.

However, standing back to assess where we are and what we need to do now must not be at the cost of action on the ground. There is a critical issue of ensuring a greater supply of affordable lets into the system. In our view there are three priorities here:

- A greater focus on the contribution that RSLs can make to housing homeless people (RSLs currently let to homeless people at around half the rate that councils do).
- An enhanced role for a sub-sector of private landlords who are interested in fulfilling a quasi-social role, involving longer term lets; higher management standards and measures to address high rents.
- Better partnerships with private developers to ensure that pledges to build affordable homes as part of developments are translated into units on the ground.

Shelter also supports further reform of Right to Buy, although that will yield benefits in the medium to long term rather than the immediate period leading up to 2012. So our **second recommendation** is to refocus efforts on providing more lets within the housing system. The credit crunch, while seen as a threat to the Scottish Government's overall housing supply target, may also provide an opportunity for affordable housing providers to compete for land and even finished units. Meanwhile, the argument for greater public investment in housing, as a counter-cyclical measure, becomes more compelling.

Finally, the best way to tackle homelessness is to prevent it happening in the first place. Prevention as a theme has been a priority since at least 2005; however, research published in 2007 concluded that turning prevention commitments into practicalities still has a long way to go. The Scottish Government has recently taken a secondment from local government to focus on homelessness prevention. In our view, there is a need to reflect on experience elsewhere in the UK, particularly looking at whether a new approach called "housing options assessment"¹ can complement the rights-based approach embedded in homelessness law. We think there is an opportunity for Scotland to strike out on a distinctive path here.

So our **third recommendation** is for homelessness prevention work to be anchored in a distinctively Scottish model of housing options assessment; and we will happily work with the Scottish Government to develop that.

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¹ Housing options assessment involves working with a client to assess the full range of their needs and *all* of the possible options that might meet those needs; rather than *simply* assessing whether or not the client is eligible for a social rented home.

Appendix: Progress on Homelessness in Scotland: the case for a stock-take

Summary

Scotland's internationally-acclaimed programme on homelessness is now six years into its ten-year span. Although much has been achieved, many of the voluntary organisations working in homelessness in Scotland are concerned that key targets are stalling and that the momentum to address homelessness is slipping. We believe that the Scottish Parliament's Local Government and Communities Committee is in a strong position to press for a stock-take of progress on homelessness to ensure that this pioneering programme stays on track and continues to enhance Scotland's reputation abroad. We suggest a number of ways in which this might be done.

1. Introduction

The ten-year programme of change on homelessness in Scotland has now been underway for more than six years. With the end point now looming, we believe that there is a strong case for taking a wider view of progress in that programme with the aim of developing a focused action plan to cover the remaining years.

At a time when there is increased attention on enhancing Scotland's reputation abroad² it is worth noting that Scotland's approach to homelessness has been studied by the USA, Canada, Australia, the Basque Country and France, to name only a few. Commentators from Scandinavia, normally a benchmark for social progress, are watching what happens here with interest. Campaigners in France have cited Scotland as an inspiration in their own programme to establish an "enforceable right to housing".

2. Why a stock-take?

In general, we believe that it is sensible for any major and long-term public policy programme to reflect on progress along the way. Indeed, this is the justification which ministers, quite legitimately, have used for reviewing the fuel poverty programme.

There are a number of significant changes to the policy and financial landscape for homelessness which, at least, merit fuller consideration and may give some concern as to the continued priority attached to homelessness:

- The ending of specific earmarked funds for homelessness and housing support
- The ending of the requirement on local authorities to produce homelessness strategies
- The slow progress on commencing parts of the Homelessness Act 2003

While there might be good reasons for each of these developments, taken together they may imply a loss of momentum on the homelessness programme.

² As, for example, demonstrated by the national indicator in the "Scotland Performs" framework

Further, the external environment itself has been changing. For example, the impact of the credit crunch; new approaches to drug policy; changes in policy on employability and addressing poverty; and developments in economic migration: all of these change the context in which the Homelessness Task Force was making recommendations in 2002. To date, the Homelessness Monitoring Group process has struggled to reflect on the impact of these wider changes.

3. What about current monitoring arrangements?

One of the unusual features of the homelessness programme is that there *are* institutional arrangements in place to track progress. The national Homelessness Monitoring Group (HMG) was set up in 2003 to ensure that the 59 recommendations of the Homelessness Task Force were being implemented. In recent years the HMG has moved away from overseeing all 59 recommendations and has focused on five important outcomes. It publishes annual reports detailing action against these outcomes as well as overall progress to 2012.

As a result of a new concordat with local government the focus of monitoring progress on homelessness (as many other aspects of public policy) will be on the national performance framework and, locally, single outcome agreements. However, the tracking of progress on homelessness in these frameworks will inevitably be at quite a high level.

On the face of it the HMG is a powerful tool to ensure that progress on homelessness is on track. However, the Scottish Budget review, published by the incoming government in May 2007, expressed scepticism as to how well progress was being made: suggesting:

“A thorough review should be carried out to create an implementation plan properly sized and costed with related performance measures for the homelessness strategy.”

There is a difficult tension to be managed between a strong policy commitment to the homelessness programme which the Scottish Government has clearly made and the role of critically appraising the extent to which it is happening in detail. In successive Homelessness Monitoring Group reports there has been an understandable tendency to dwell on the progress and less so on what has not happened.

A robust assessment of the evidence base could be used as a starting point for a more focused implementation plan from 2009-12.

So, although the Homelessness Monitoring Group is an important aide to us understanding what is happening, it does not preclude a complementary one-off exercise which takes a broader view. The current timing is ideal in that it is both far enough along the road for there to be evidence to reflect upon but also far enough from the end point for there to be scope for remedial action.

4. How could a “stock-take” be organised?

We have deliberately used the term “stock-take” as we think there are a number of options as to how it could be carried out.

- a) The Committee itself, as part of its post-legislative scrutiny role, could initiate an inquiry into progress on homelessness. This would certainly give the assessment weight although we do appreciate the many calls on Committee time and capacity.
- b) The Committee could also press the Minister to carry out an evaluation of progress so far, using internal resources, and report back to the Committee. This would build on internal expertise. The downside might be a diversion of capacity away from delivery into evaluation.
- c) Finally, the Committee could urge the Minister to commission an external assessment of progress, perhaps via the Homelessness Monitoring Group.

There may be other options too, including the possibility of seeking non-statutory funding to commission independent evaluation of such a high profile programme. At this stage, we think it is more important to get the principle of a stock-take established rather than, necessarily, the method by which it could be carried out.

5. What would it produce?

It is important to see the homelessness programme as more than just the 2012 target. A big emphasis in 2002 was on the need to tackle homelessness across areas such as health and employment. A stock-take could evaluate the extent to which individual recommendations were being progressed and whether the framework of top-line outcomes and the data systems which inform these adequately reflect what is happening on homelessness.

Of course, a stock-take itself is only useful if it results in more focused actions. Once the stock-take had been completed, the HMG would then have responsibility to produce an outline action plan for the remaining years,³ including likely funding requirements. This when need to be approved or adopted by the Minister.

6. How would it be done?

The overall method would then need to be worked through but is likely to include some familiar elements such as analysis and modelling of homelessness data; and greater interrogation of homelessness service inspection reports. At the outset we believe the process should be based on setting some broad questions, which together define whether we understand whether progress on homelessness is happening or not. Examples of questions could include (these are illustrative rather than comprehensive):

- To what extent are individual Task Force recommendations being progressed and how does this vary across the country?
- What barriers have emerged in progressing recommendations; specifically, how has the availability of funding affected progress?

³ Although the Homelessness Task Force 2002 was described as an action plan it largely focused on policy prescriptions. The intention of this exercise is not to revisit the recommendations (except to the extent that they may have been overtaken by events); rather, it is to try to pin down what implementation means in relation to timescales; capacity and tools needed.

- What changes in the external environment might have changed the context in which the Task Force made recommendations?
- What is the current and projected need for additional lets by 2012 and to what extent can all sources of lets meet that demand?
- What are the quantifiable benefits of a greater emphasis on prevention of homelessness?
- What can we learn from other countries' approach to homelessness⁴?
- What needs to be done – and, critically, to what extent – to get from where we are now to where we need to be by 2012?
- What are the costs associated with moving forward?

7. Timescale

We believe that the assessment must be carried out to leave enough time for any remedial action to be put in place. Some aspects of housing policy take time to implement and be put in place. That means that the assessment should be carried out during 2008-09 and report no later than March 2009. This leaves three to three-and-a-half years for any deficits to be addressed. It would also feed into the next Scottish spending review, in the autumn of 2009.

This appendix has been prepared by Shelter Scotland, Scottish Council for Single Homeless, Edinburgh Cyrenians, Glasgow Simon Community, Glasgow Homelessness Network and Aberdeen Cyrenians.

⁴ Arguable, one of the downsides of leading the way on homelessness in recent years, has been less reflection on what is happening elsewhere in the UK and in other developed countries.