

Homes fit for the 21st century

Initial Briefing from Shelter Scotland on the Scottish Government's Strategy and Action Plan for Housing 2011-2020

Key message: the Scottish Government has produced a ten year strategy focused on increasing housing supply and getting the housing system to work more flexibly. Shelter Scotland believes the paper is a helpful contribution to meeting the challenges of the next decade. We particularly welcome funding suggestions on empty homes; reform of Right to Buy; streamlining regulation of private renting; commitments to security of tenure for tenants; and increasing people's awareness of their housing options. Assurances and greater detail are needed on: making housing allocations more flexible; supporting homeless people to prevent homelessness; the possible introduction of "probationary" tenancies; and improving conditions for homeless families in temporary housing.

A ten year strategy for housing

On 4 February, the Scottish Government produced a strategy for housing for the next ten years, following consultation on a discussion paper, "Fresh Thinking, New Ideas" last summer. The new strategy shows a much sharper focus than its predecessor and is focused on two key themes: improving housing supply in a time of reduced public funding; and making the housing system work more flexibly and with increased choice.

Shelter Scotland believes that the paper is a welcome contribution to future policy in a decade which is more challenging than any for a generation or more.

What's good?

We are pleased to see a commitment to developing work on **empty homes**, looking at new funding opportunities and raising the possibility of permitting councils to apply council tax at twice the standard rate to long term empty homes, with all the revenue earmarked for housing investment. There is mention of new guidance on compulsory purchase which also has the potential to tackle empty property which is blighting neighbourhoods.

The Scottish Government has raised the prospect of further **Right to Buy** reform with action to tackle the very high discounts on sales where tenants have been in the home since before 2002. This is very close to what Shelter Scotland argued for in our suggested amendments to the 2010 Housing Act.

The Scottish Government has said that it wants to give highest priority to providing **affordable homes** for people left behind by the market; and that tenants in these homes should have security of tenure. This is good and in marked contrast to the direction of housing policy in England. However, it also says that it wants to support more shared equity and intermediate rented programmes. The challenge in the latter will be to find ways of funding them which are *additional* to the funding for mainstream rented homes.

The **private rented sector** is recognised as an area in need of continuing reform with a specific commitment to make regulation more focused. It also cites Shelter Scotland's submission that greater stability for tenants would enhance the sector's reputation and potential attractiveness to long-term investors.

The section on **housing options** contains little that is new but the emphasis is on widening choice rather than simply directing people away from social housing. Related sections include a national database of accessible homes for disabled people and better use of funding for adaptations, both of which are welcome.

What needs working on?

There are some things in the paper which are undeveloped or may have negative impacts.

The Scottish Government wants landlords to have greater freedom over **allocations**. While current legislation on allocations does seem dated it is important that publicly-funded housing continues to be targeted on people in greatest housing need.

There is a reference to the possible introduction of **insecure tenancies** for new social housing tenants. In effect, this would be a probationary tenancy. Shelter Scotland believes that it is important for newly-housed people to be given security at the outset.

The paper acknowledges a new duty to provide **housing support** to people who are or at risk of homelessness but seems coy about its introduction. This new duty was passed unanimously by MSPs and it is important that the legislation is used positively to help prevent homelessness and repeat homelessness.

The strategy cites the problem of rising numbers of **families in temporary accommodation** but offers little respite for them. Shelter Scotland wants to see new standards for temporary accommodation introduced.

Finally, there is a lot on the expansion of investment options including a Social Housing Bond, a National Housing Investment Bank and Infrastructure Fund, much of which has been well-trailed. The proposals would be more compelling if it were to say what all these different options add up to and how that compares to the amount of investment needed. That would be really strategic.

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