

Briefing

Shelter Scotland briefing paper on the Homelessness Task Force Second Report

From the Shelter policy library

March 2002

www.shelter.org.uk

© 2004 Shelter. All rights reserved. This document is only for your personal, non-commercial use. You may not copy, reproduce, republish, post, distribute, transmit or modify it in any way.

This document contains information and policies that were correct at the time of publication.

Shelter

This briefing outlines Shelter's initial views on the way forward for the second and final report of the Homelessness Task Force. The report was issued on 27 February 2002. A more detailed briefing will be produced when the implications of the report become clearer, and some political debate has taken place.

The Homelessness Task Force was set up in August 1999 to take a fundamental look at policy and practice which affects homeless people in Scotland. Its first report, published in early 2000 made recommendations which formed the basis of Part 1 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. The second, and final, report makes further and more wide-ranging recommendations for change.

Hailed as a model for co-operation, the Homelessness Task Force report has the potential to kick-start the most significant programme of action for homeless people in Scotland in a quarter of a century. Shelter fully supports the work of the Homelessness Task Force but we are also aware that it is only now that the real work needs to begin.

The Task Force Report at a glance

- The report recommends changing the law to: end the priority need test for homeless applicants over a period of ten years; suspend the local connection test; make sure that some form of accommodation and support is available for intentionally homeless people.
- Improved support is proposed for young people leaving care and for ex-offenders, ex-armed forces employees and refugees.
- Emphasis is placed on the importance of preventing homelessness in the first place; looking at reducing evictions in the social rented sector and improving communication about potential evictions in the private sector.
- The report recommends a shared responsibility towards homelessness provision within a service culture which minimises 'gate-keeping' and emphasises support. There is a particularly strong emphasis on health care, but also on the role of information and advice and resettlement services.
- Some increases in the availability of affordable accommodation are recommended, in order to meet shortfalls in certain areas and in certain types of accommodation.
- The report examines aspects of the social security system which impact on homeless people, and recommends ending some of the anomalies, and investigating new ways to support homeless people through work and training.
- The Task Force recommends the establishment of a 'monitoring group' to comment and advise on implementation of the report's proposals.

The report's approach to tackling homelessness

Everyone in Scotland should have dry, warm, affordable and secure housing, and the report rightly recognises the link between housing and health, child development and employability.

It is encouraging to see that the report recommends a shared responsibility for housing across public departments and other agencies and recommends innovative new ways to tackle homelessness through work on the benefits system, health care and others.

However, it is curious that a report on homelessness says so little about the provision of homes. The absolute shortfalls in some areas of Scotland and the mismatch between housing supply and socio-demographic trends are not really addressed. Too little attention is paid to the growing obsolescence of the post-war social housing stock.

Improving homeless legislation

The proposals for changing homelessness legislation are probably where most of the attention will be focused. It would be a pity if this were the sole focus since the recommendations in the rest of the report will determine what the impact of legislative change will be. Priority need will be phased out in various stages and the timescale might be different throughout the country. It is important that practitioners do not feel overwhelmed by these further changes, on top of the many changes being introduced in 2002 from the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. A national training and development module on homelessness would help. The report's new legislative and policy changes could deliver on the ambitious aim of breaking down the barriers which divide the rights which some homeless people have from those of others.

A strategy for tackling homelessness

A lot of emphasis is placed on the central role of local homelessness strategies in driving future provision. But local strategies need to be backed by a coherent national strategy on homelessness, and the report suffers from its absence in the recommendations. Crucial to the success of the report will be how well it distils recommendations into an action plan. While the report could form the basis of a ten year plan, it fails to outline a strategy, which links different recommendations. It is hard to gauge what the overall impact of the report might be. This could limit the potential of the work which has been done.

Improving housing support

There is an important emphasis placed on increased availability and housing support in the report. But unless there are specific mechanisms for ensuring this happens, for example, legal or financial levers, then there is a risk that this is simply wishful thinking.

Where to from here?

Although the work of the Homelessness Task Force now formally draws to a close, it is important that there are ways of monitoring progress and adjusting to changes in the environment. Shelter supports a monitoring group in principle, but the report has failed adequately to outline the make-up and role of this group, and its relationship to other key stakeholders. This is particularly marked by the absence

of an action plan. Such a monitoring group should work closely with service providers and with people who have experienced homelessness to develop a thorough and workable implementation plan for the recommendations contained in the report.

At the launch of the report, Minister for Social Justice Iain Gray announced £11 million over two years and the recommended new legislation in this term of parliament, i.e. 2002-2003, for the implementation of the report. This presents new and exciting challenges for all those whose work will be affected by the report, as the momentum generated must continue for the ten-year plan to achieve its aims. The passing of new legislation is dependent on political will, and the proposed legislation should be supported by all political parties, as it improves on the gains for homeless people by the 2001 Act. Political parties should be drawing on the Task Force Report for their 2003 manifestos.

Conclusion

The Homelessness Task Force should be commended for its ambitious plans for significantly improving the lives of homeless people. Unfortunately, delivering these positive differences may be hampered by the absence, as yet, of a coherent implementation strategy. Insufficient attention has been paid to what the recommendations will cost. In particular, phased withdrawal of priority need status will place increasing pressures on providers of public housing, in addition to the pressures added by the Housing Act.

There is work still to do on changing the perspective through which homelessness is seen. Tackling homelessness is a social as well as a state responsibility. Homelessness as an issue needs the kind of culture shift that the Scottish Executive is attempting to build on, in relation to domestic abuse. Such a culture shift would embrace community organisations as well as local government and corporate Scotland as well as the role of government. As the Scottish Parliament attempts to push ahead with a social justice agenda there is a counter trend of declining public sympathy for some of the most marginal groups. We all have a role in challenging and reversing that.

In the months ahead, there will be a lively debate about the details of the Homelessness Task Force's agenda for change. New ideas will emerge and should be embraced while existing recommendations may prove unproductive. The emphasis placed on a shared agenda for tackling homelessness is the key theme of the report. If implemented in this spirit, the report will have a genuine and positive impact on the lives of homeless people. It is for this reason that the Homelessness Task Report should receive a warm welcome from anyone who cares about homelessness in Scotland.

For more information on this briefing, contact Grainia Long, Parliamentary and Policy Officer, Shelter Scotland on 0131 473 7194 or by email grainia_long@shelter.org.uk.