

Minister for Housing and Welfare

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Jim Eadie MSP

Convenor

Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee

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In 2014 Scotland Welcomes the World



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Dear Jim

Thank you for the letter from Maureen Watt MSP, in her former role as Convenor of 6 November advising me of the findings of the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee (ICI) following evidence received as part of its follow-up review of the 2012 homelessness commitment. As previously indicated, I was pleased to be able to appear before the Committee on 8 October and I am writing to you now to respond to the findings outlined in the Committee's letter.

I contacted you on 11 November to advise that the Scottish Government will be allocating funding to the Housing Options Hubs for 2015/16. I believe this will provide an important platform from which to continue the progress made in recent years in reducing homelessness in Scotland. As the Committee's letter suggests, we can be proud of how far we have come in Scotland in addressing this issue, but clearly there is still much to do, particularly against a background of economic challenges and welfare reform.

Addressing homelessness remains a priority for the Scottish Government as part of our programme to address inequality in Scotland more broadly. As the Committee will be aware from the evidence it has received, homelessness, its causes and the approaches needed to tackle it, can touch on a number of different policy agendas. I believe the Homelessness Prevention and Strategy Group (HPSG) will continue to play an important role in ensuring these connections are made in the coming period.

For example, in October I attended a meeting of the Group addressed by representatives of NHS Health Scotland, exploring the implications of steps to address health inequalities for addressing homelessness and an invitation has been made to explore this further at a future meeting of the HPSG. I will say more on the role of this Group later in this response to the Committee.

While we have seen the establishment of strong housing rights for homeless households through the achievement of the 2012 target, progress on prevention in developing housing options and the introduction of new rights such as the Housing Support Duty, I am acutely aware of the need to continue to address the needs of all those experiencing homelessness in Scotland. This will include those individuals with the most complex needs, including some of those who may have been assessed as intentionally homeless or have experienced rough sleeping.

While the recorded numbers of such cases may be relatively small in Scotland, the Scottish Government is clear that all those at risk of or experiencing homelessness in Scotland should be able to access appropriate services when they are ready to do so.

For convenience, I have listed the findings or recommendations highlighted in the Committee's letter with my response below.

Abolition of priority need and intentionally homeless decisions

The Committee therefore requests that you report to it as soon as possible on the reasons behind the wide variation in intentionally homeless decisions being taken by local authorities and on any action the Scottish Government intends to take to encourage a greater consistency of approach.

Firstly, I think it is important to highlight that we are dealing with relatively small numbers and there will be significant fluctuations resulting from small changes in the figures.

Around one-in-twenty cases assessed as homeless go on to be assessed as intentionally homeless. This is around 400 cases per quarter. Crucially, if the local authority is satisfied that the homelessness was intentional, the applicant is still entitled to receive temporary accommodation, and advice and assistance. However, some local authorities provide more than this legal minimum. For example, during 2013-14 a social or private rented tenancy was the eventual outcome in 452 cases (around a quarter of those cases assessed as intentionally homeless).

It is also important to note that the most recent statistics show a **fall** in the proportion of cases assessed as intentionally homeless to 5.2% for April to June 2014, a 1 percentage point decrease from the same period in 2013.

Scottish Government officials approached the local authorities who showed an increase in intentionally homeless decisions following my appearance at the ICI Committee meeting of 8th October to ask for their views and to date seven have replied.

Most authorities commented that any expected increase in intentionality is due to the removal of priority need as more households are being assessed to see if they are unintentionally or intentionally homeless. However, this of course could apply to all authorities. Other than that, there is a general consensus that authorities have determined that a household is intentionally homeless when the applicant has:

- had either rent arrears and/or defaulted on payments;
- voluntarily gave up a secure tenancy; or
- through abandonment.

Aberdeen City Council said that nearly half of those who were assessed as intentionally homeless cited that their last settled accommodation was out-with the local authority area. These were people who had travelled to Aberdeen seeking work or to take up new employment. However, they were given an intentionality decision as they had given up accommodation and not made any provision for accommodation on arrival.

A number of authorities say that if applicants engage with them they may have their original intentionality decision overturned on appeal. Crucially, it would appear that some authorities are not retrospectively changing their initial recorded assessment decision after a successful appeal, even though there is the facility in the HL1 system to do this. These authorities may therefore be reporting erroneously high levels of intentionality to the Scottish Government.

Consequently, this is an issue which was addressed at the Homelessness Statistics Users Group held on 7 November 2014. An action point from that meeting asks that local authorities ensure cases are recorded in the appropriate manner in the future to avoid a misleading picture being drawn.

Housing options approach

As you mentioned in your evidence, the guidance is being developed by COSLA and ALACHO, who are consulting with many of the groups from whom we have taken evidence. While the Committee appreciates that this consultation is taking place with service users, housing associations and registered social landlords (RSLs), we would suggest that voluntary sector partners, if they have not already been approached, are also included as part of this process.

The Homelessness Prevention and Strategy Group, which includes Shelter and Homeless Action Scotland, was presented with the draft Guidance on 29 October. They were then given an opportunity to comment on it and to distribute it to their stakeholders and members. We have supplemented this by providing the draft to other voluntary sector partners such as Glasgow Homelessness Network and Citizens Advice Scotland; and have asked local authorities to share it with their voluntary sector partners.

The Committee is keen to ensure that those local authorities who have in the past lagged behind are providing the same high level of service seen in other areas. It would therefore ask that you provide an update on the response to, and impact of, the guidance at an appropriate juncture following its issue.

It is intended that following publication the Guidance is reviewed initially on an annual basis. This will ensure that the Guidance will reflect any developments impacting on housing options and the prevention of homelessness such as Health and Social Care Integration and the opportunities this provides.

Apart from the intended annual review, the Committee will be aware that we will also be collecting data on the outcomes of housing options through the mandatory PREVENT1 system, introduced in April 2014. The Scottish Government have been working with stakeholders to identify the most appropriate way to record the outcomes of housing options in recent years as the approach has developed. This will enable us to track outcomes and understand the impact of housing options on an on-going basis. As outlined later in this response, the PREVENT1 statistics will be published and the first publication will be in January 2015.

Registered social landlords

The Committee suggests that the guidance, if not already included, provides a detailed breakdown of the role that RSLs might play as well as how local authorities should work in partnership with them to ensure a coordinated approach in delivering the housing options approach.

The Homelessness Prevention and Strategy Group includes the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations and we have been in discussion with it and the Glasgow West of Scotland Forum of Housing Associations to identify how best to consult with RSLs. In the first stage of consultation we have received a response from the Wheatley Group. The draft Guidance already has a section on the role of RSLs and we would expect this to be expanded following the consultation.

Welfare Reform

The Committee would therefore welcome an update from you on any potential impact to the housing options approach if there are any further changes under the welfare reform agenda.

Through the Homelessness Prevention and Strategy Group and the Temporary Accommodation and Supported Accommodation sub-group, a survey of local authorities was undertaken to understand better the impact of the proposed changes to the funding of temporary and supported accommodation. This has developed a model which shows a reasonable cost and quality of temporary accommodation and indicates how the introduction of Universal Credit will negatively impact on funding this form of provision. The Scottish Government and COSLA have written to Lord Freud sharing the model and Lord Freud has agreed that DWP officials will be in contact to set up a meeting to discuss this further.

The Housing Options Hubs have been very active in working to mitigate the impacts of welfare reform and the Scottish Government has provided funding to them to facilitate this. The hubs share their experiences in this area and have also shared best practice and learning. The housing options approach being developed by local authorities in Scotland provides opportunities for joint working between housing and other services to support those affected by the implications of welfare reform.

Temporary Accommodation

The Committee would welcome an update on how the Scottish Government is supporting local authorities in alleviating the pressure placed on temporary accommodation.

I recognise the challenges faced by local authorities in the provision of temporary accommodation, but the Scottish Government is taking a number of steps to provide support. There are three aspects, closely related, to this issue that we are taking steps to address: numbers of households; quality; and the length of time spent in temporary accommodation.

On numbers, latest statistics indicate a decrease in households in temporary accommodation on the previous year including, crucially, a 10% decrease in households with children and an 8% decrease in numbers of children.

Housing supply is an important element of this. Our five-year target is still to deliver at least 30,000 additional affordable homes, 20,000 of which will be for social rent, including at least 5,000 council homes. To the end of September 2014, we have already delivered 22,762 additional homes, 15,903 of these are for social rent, including 3,821 council homes delivered across Scotland.

We are making best use of our existing housing stock by abolishing the Right to Buy and working with Shelter to address empty homes through funding the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership and part funding Empty Homes Officers. In 2014-15, sixteen councils have access to a dedicated Empty Homes Officer and these officers have indicated that over 500 long-term empty homes will be brought back into use in 2014-15.

On quality, the ICI Committee letter makes reference to the steps we have recently taken to strengthen the Unsuitable Accommodation Order to ensure accommodation for households with children and pregnant women is 'wind and watertight'. It is important to note that the vast majority of children in temporary accommodation will be in good quality, well managed social housing, not unsuitable bed and breakfast accommodation and will be waiting to move to settled accommodation. As part of its inspection activities, the Scottish Housing Regulator keeps an eye on breaches of the Order and inspects the quality of temporary accommodation used by Local Authorities.

We are clear on the importance of ensuring good standards are met more broadly. As outlined in my response to the Committee's point on welfare reform above, Scottish local authorities have been surveyed to identify a reasonable standard and cost for temporary accommodation. This piece of work has been reviewed by the HPSG and will help inform the approach of local authorities in the future.

On length of time spent in temporary accommodation we are taking steps, through the Homelessness Statistics Users Group, to improve the quality of information held in this regard. We will shortly begin consultation with Chief Housing Officers on this.

Young people

The Committee will therefore be keen to see how the new guidance will take into account the particular needs of young people and how they might best be supported when accessing housing options.

I am aware of the particular risks to homelessness faced by young people in Scotland and I look forward to giving evidence to the Equal Opportunities Committee on this issue on 5th February 2015.

We have seen a fall in applications to local authorities from 16-24 year olds from around 15,000 per year between 2003/4 and 2010/11, to under 9,000 per year during 2013/14, 16% lower than a year earlier. This correlates with the timescale for the focus on prevention and the development of Housing Options and clearly many opportunities exist to make further progress in this regard.

I know that a number of local authorities engaged in housing options have highlighted the potential benefits to young people and we have seen the development of innovative approaches, such as the use of mediation services. Relationship breakdown with family and friends remains the key factor in young people becoming homeless, which is why the Scottish Government has funded the Scottish Centre for Conflict Resolution over the last year to highlight this issue at a national level.

I know from feedback provided by the Housing Options Guidance Group to the Homelessness Prevention and Strategy Group that addressing the needs of young people will be an important part of the Guidance and has been included in the draft for consultation.

Housing Options Hubs

If you were able to send the Committee an update on the agreed level of funding in advance of this session, it would be helpful if you could do so.

As indicated above, I have written to the Committee to confirm allocation of £150,000 for 2015/16 for the Housing Options Hubs.

Voluntary sector

It would be helpful, therefore if you could advise the Committee on what is being done to best utilise the range of assistance that might be provided by the voluntary sector.

Each hub has developed its approach to involving the voluntary sector in different ways. Some hubs have voluntary sector representatives involved in the meetings; others have held separate stakeholder seminars in order to promote the opportunities around housing options. It has been a feature of the funding for the hubs that they should identify the most appropriate way to engage with wider partners on housing options in order to maximise impact around prevention.

In order to assist in developing greater awareness of the role that the voluntary sector can play, the quarterly hub meetings usually invite a voluntary sector agency along to promote the work that they can contribute to. This has meant that representatives of the hubs have heard from, among others, SAY Women, Scottish Centre for Conflict Resolution, Crisis, Scottish Refugee Council, the Rock Trust and Scottish Homelessness Involvement and Empowerment Network (SHIEN).

The annual seminar that is held by the Homelessness Prevention and Strategy Group (and its predecessor, the Scottish Government/COSLA Joint 2012 Steering Group) has workshops led by voluntary sector partners to enable their work to be shared and for partnerships to be developed.

Levels of homelessness

The Committee is grateful for your interim response you provided on 23 October which gave an update on progress and we look forward to receiving a further response towards the end of this year.

As indicated to the Committee in separate updates, Housing Options (PREVENT1) Statistics in Scotland will be released on Tuesday 27 January 2015. In addition, the Housing Options (PREVENT1) Statistics for 2014/15 will be published on Tuesday 30 June 2015.

Reviewing effectiveness

Whilst acknowledging the on-going work of the homelessness prevention and strategy group, the Committee is of the view that a key task of this group should be to identify steps to ensure that the clear progress made in Scotland on homelessness prevention is built upon and continues to be developed.

The Homelessness Prevention and Strategy Group continues to meet and recently expanded its membership to include Shelter and Homeless Action Scotland. This was agreed in order to move from the delivery of the 2012 homelessness target and more broadly consider the prevention of homelessness in all areas.

The Group's workplan is under review in order that it identifies the changing landscape and responds appropriately. The workplan for the HPSG will provide an effective monitoring and reporting mechanism to identify and address the key issues affecting homelessness. This will be discussed at the first HPSG meeting in 2015 and help to ensure monitoring and evaluation of progress throughout the year.

We would therefore ask the Scottish Government to provide a yearly update to the Committee on its progress in addressing homelessness so, in conjunction with PREVENT1 statistics, we might examine whether its objectives are being met.

The Scottish Government will provide a yearly update to the Committee on progress in addressing homelessness. I would suggest that in the first instance this may provide the most useful information if provided by 31 December 2015. This is likely to follow the annual homelessness event, held under the auspices of the HPSG, involving the housing options hubs and a range of stakeholders, which usually takes place in early December.

Conclusion

We look forward to your response on all the points we have raised as well as the details of any outcomes from the forthcoming homelessness event on 18 November 2014.

The Scottish Housing Event on 18 November brought together stakeholders from the public, private and third sectors to help identify the actions that we can take together and individually to deliver the Scottish Government's existing housing strategies and our vision that all people in Scotland live in high quality homes that they can afford and that meet their needs.

The workgroup discussions focussed on identifying actions in eight areas that feed into the three broad themes of Homes, Support and Place:

- tenures and the housing journey;
- sustainability and fuel poverty: behavioural change and long term investment;
- step change for investment in housing (how do we achieve this?);
- resources and how we value investment – prevention agenda and social benefits;
- planning, land, infrastructure and development;
- linking need and demand to communities (how do we deliver the homes and places Scotland needs?);
- town centres, leadership and regeneration; and
- housing and the integration of health and social care

The background papers and outputs from the day are all available on the Scottish Government website:

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/Housing/reform/housing-event>

The next step is to bring all of that together into a draft five-year Joint Delivery Plan for Housing in Scotland. Over the next few months the Scottish Government will continue to work closely with the sector and members of the Housing Policy Advisory Group to develop the Joint Delivery Plan for publication in Spring 2015. I will be happy to provide the Committee with more information on the Plan at that time.

I want to conclude by thanking the ICI Committee again for its follow up inquiry into this important issue. I believe we have the opportunity to continue to make progress in improving outcomes for those experiencing homelessness in Scotland. We have strong foundations on which to build, based on the important safety net of legislative rights, to promote innovation and continual improvement in the delivery of services.

Homelessness is damaging to individuals and to communities, to their health and wellbeing as well as their hopes and aspirations, and I want to take this opportunity to re-state the Scottish Government's continued commitment to addressing its impact on the lives of the people of Scotland.

Kind regards

Margaret Burgess

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