1. **Introduction**

Angus Council welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Scottish Parliament inquiry into the 2012 homelessness commitment.

Angus Council shares the Scottish Parliament’s concerns that the 2012 commitment may be difficult in some situations to meet, and is committed to working together with other Authorities to explore all options to identify effective solutions. We are therefore pleased that the Scottish Parliament is taking a pro-active role.

2. **To identify the impact of the commitment on homeless people, local authorities and registered social landlords;**

The impact in Angus on homeless families and on vulnerable single people has been minimal – nothing changed in their entitlement.

Single non-vulnerable unintentionally homeless people, however, have benefited greatly in that they are now entitled to temporary and permanent accommodation. However, some have found themselves in temporary accommodation for long periods of time due to vulnerable households having greater assessed priority for housing and greater demands on single person accommodation – historically the focus of supply of social housing has tended to be on family-sized accommodation.

As an early adopter of the removal of priority need, Angus saw a surge of people previously un-entitled to permanent accommodation coming forward, aided by Shelter’s publicity campaign in particular. Presentations have appeared to have levelled out in recent years.

RSLs have become more important providers of accommodation to homeless people as their stock tends to have higher proportion of single person accommodation.

With regard to the impact on Angus Council, there has been an increase in the number of presentations and use of the homelessness system as the fast track approach to securing housing. As an authority that housed significant proportions of available lets to priority homelessness cases, we have experience of rising arrears (now under control), and increases in Anti Social Behaviour complaints, mostly tied to noise and lifestyle issues, and a small but high impact number of tenancies ending in lost rent and rechargeable repairs.

We have also faced concerns form both tenants and the tenants movement regarding our focus on homelessness and a perception that the system may be rewarding poor behaviour and lack of responsibility demonstrated by the minority, and does not help those with housing needs but less vulnerability as defined by the Homelessness Code of Guidance.

As a result of the need to strike a better balance, the housing system in Angus is being re-designed using the nationally adopted and promoted housing options model as the springboard to attempt to meet the housing needs of more client groups and also harnessing the use of Community Based Lettings Plans to strike that better balance.

3. **To identify any persistent barriers to implementation;**

The more homeless people there are, the more difficult it is to meet the need for housing. Therefore the biggest barrier is the lack of provision of timely housing support services to prevent homelessness in the first place, so working with people to sustain existing accommodation and support networks is essential.

Angus Council is implementing a Young Persons Housing Options pilot, which will work with people at an earlier stage to prevent homelessness and refer them to appropriate support services. Strengthening links with the private rented sector will be a key aspect of this work.

Welfare Reform is likely to increase the numbers of people presenting as homeless due to them being no longer able to afford to pay their rent because of reducing Housing Benefit entitlement. We have seen no evidence to date of landlords being prepared to reduce their rents to help young single people in this
situation. If those who present are made homeless through no fault of their own, the Council will have a duty to secure accommodation for them.

Welfare reform will also create an additional need for more one and two bedroomed properties. Angus Council is re-adjusting the new-build housing programme accordingly to provide more of this house type. In addition the switch from RPI to CPI for the up-rating of welfare reform benefit levels may well have an impact both locally and nationally on the business models of landlords which are generally base on RPI plus one as the annual uplift in rents.

Finally we believe the link to the single room rate exemption (through residing in a hostel for 3 months) is a dis-incentive to modernisation of homelessness services and methods of accommodation provision.

4 To highlight best practice and opportunities for sharing best practice;

The Scottish Housing Options hubs have been useful for the sharing of best practice and information from local authorities who are further down the road of Housing Options implementation.

The development of Common Housing Registers and Common Allocations Policies is helping access to a wider choice of social housing, but more can be done in this area nationally and locally.

The work of the Scottish Housing Best Value Network has also contributed greatly, not just to the sharing of benchmarking information, but also the sharing of best practice between local authorities and participating RSLs on a national basis.

5 To determine effective homelessness prevention activity;

It is widely believed in Scotland that adopting a “Housing Options” approach to housing information and advice is a key step to reducing homelessness. This approach has been adopted in Angus through the Housing Options team. Housing Officers carry out an holistic assessment of housing need to those requiring assessment and provide advice and assistance on the various housing choices available to people. This approach will be developed further through the Young Persons Housing Options pilot and, depending on outcomes, could be adopted as a way of preventing homelessness in all ages.

The current consultation on Housing Support (released publicly on the 23rd January) will set a new challenge in terms of prioritising resources against the prevention agenda, and also meeting the totality of needs, including new needs, at a time when budgets are reducing.

6 To identify action that could be taken to assist local authorities in meeting the target.

Allowing Councils to discharge homelessness duties through short tenancies in the private sector would assist, particularly if better links can be made with landlords.

At present, housing support needs must be assessed by authorities, but there is no requirement for tenants to make use of the support. Where it is assessed as being needed, the failure to engage heightens the chance that the tenancy may fail. As a result there should be a statutory link between the assessed need and the tenancy.

The never-ending duty to provide housing is something which concerns tenants, especially where there is a track record of housing-related debt, and/or anti-social behaviour. Our tenants have specifically asked that this is issue be raised through the committee process as one which causes them concern. In their opinion it sends out the wrong message regarding who social housing is for, and how people can behave once in a socially rented home.

As the move towards housing options becomes more and more prevalent, the purpose of housing assessment and the housing options team needs to have more certainty. The purpose should not only be about these teams securing a house with the Council or a Housing Association, but more about securing a valid housing option, which doesn’t necessarily mean a socially rented home. Given the reduced funding available for social housing, a more realistic approach to discharging duty is required.
Finally, local authorities are simply too mono-tenure. The only housing options directly open to local authorities are temporary accommodation and secure accommodation. It is time there was more tenure choice for local government. This could include 6 month tenancies or the creation of a new socially responsibly (i.e. not fully commercial) one year tenure. This would assist with meeting the needs of a wider group of housing applicants, and generate different business models. It would allow the discharging duty to be extended to the private rented sector which is often seen as too insecure based on 6 month short assured tenancies.

7 Conclusion

The current housing system is one which is now some 15 years old in its creation and operation. If we are effectively to be able to meet the needs or indeed, just manage the expectations, of those on our housing lists, we must have greater control over the system locally, and an ability to effectively manage as envisaged by the Scottish Social Housing Charter and as demanded by our tenants.

Housing in Scotland has come a long way since the creation of the Scottish Parliament, and the Parliamentary Committee system is in a good position to exercise more scrutiny on this crucial area of legislation. Much can be done to refine and modernise the housing system if a safe environment can be created for new approaches. There is scope for these to be more closely matched to the current economic situation and also to match the system up with customer expectations, which are key to where all landlords are taking their services.