WRITTEN EVIDENCE FROM SOLACE

Background

This submission is made by Gavin Whitefield, Chief Executive of North Lanarkshire Council, in his position as portfolio holder for housing at SOLACE. Examples provided all relate to North Lanarkshire Council, unless otherwise stated.

Inquiry remit

To consider what progress has been made towards meeting the 2012 homelessness commitment across Scotland and to identify action that could be taken to assist local authorities in meeting the target.

Context

From December 2012 the distinction which currently awards priority need status to some people who are homeless, but not all, will end. From that date councils who assess people to be homeless unintentionally will require to ensure that ‘settled housing’ is provided. Councils were asked to gradually reduce the proportion of homeless applicants assessed as non-priority to assist in managing the projected increase so that by 2009 each council should have reduced the proportion by 50%. By March this year, 26 local authorities were reported to be on track to meet the commitment with only six councils still not achieving the 2009 target.

However, even in councils where the target was achieved there are likely to be difficulties in securing settled accommodation and consequently there has been an increased and more prolonged use of temporary accommodation in many areas.

Homelessness prevention activity

Local authorities have demonstrated commitment to the 2012 target and have worked hard over the last ten years to improve services by developing homelessness strategies, increasing the supply and quality of temporary accommodation and shifting the focus away from crisis response to prevention.

Prevention activity has increased and improved in recent years as councils have embraced the principles of early intervention promoted in the joint guidance issued by COSLA and the Scottish Government in 2009. Local authorities have developed a range of pro-active measures including mediation services, money advice and financial inclusion services, housing support services and links to employability services for young people all aimed towards tenancy sustainment and sustainable communities. Services are also provided in partnership with community planning partners to ensure holistic services are delivered to people with some of the most complex health and social care needs.

Authorities need to ensure that a balanced approach is taken which takes account of housing needs and tenancy sustainment issues as well as planning for the eventual removal of the priority need distinction. Consequently, progress has been made in developing a housing options approach that aims to make the most effective use of available stock when it becomes vacant and at the same time provides sustainable housing solutions for people; rather than an approach that confers housing ‘rights’ that are unable to be met. This assists in keeping periods in temporary accommodation to a minimum.

Best practice and opportunities for sharing best practice

Allocations

North Lanarkshire Council has a well functioning Common Housing Register (CHR) in partnership with 19 of our local RSL partners. In addition, seven of the key RSL providers in the area are using our revised housing allocations policy which was re-designed in 2009 to more effectively meet cumulative needs and minimise the need for households in pressing housing need to use the homelessness route.

The proportion of available permanent social rented stock allocated to homeless households by local authorities has increased from around 17% in 2001/02 to 45% in 2010/11. This has been managed during a period of reduction overall in the availability of lettings in the sector. The increased use of
CHR has ensured that partner RSLs are more likely to be contributing to the overall response to homelessness than previously and the further promotion of uniformity in allocation policies could be helpful.

Housing Options and Tenancy Sustainment - NLC
In developing the Housing Options approach several steps were taken to prepare staff and create the most advantageous conditions before implementing a major change programme which included re-structuring the housing service.

- Relocated previously separate service elements of homelessness/temporary accommodation management and housing support to local area offices
- Increased integration and earlier intervention and responsiveness
- Improved communication and reduced bureaucracy
- Created a more joined up and holistic service by improving relationships with colleagues in social work and other relevant services
- Re-designed and tendered the intensive floating support and supported accommodation services

In addition, a re-training programme for housing staff was implemented with the aim of tackling attitudes and culture and providing the key components for a confident and skilled workforce. We also now produce a comprehensive Housing Options Guide and checklist to support staff and to ensure that the most up to date turnover and lettings information is made available to people when they apply for housing.

There are many other examples of good practice in local authorities across Scotland. A number of them were described by colleagues from ALACHO and COSLA when giving evidence with SOLACE to the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee in December.

Housing Options Hubs
The Hubs appear to be functioning well 18 months on from the launch in Edinburgh. In August 2011 each of the Hubs reported progress at an event jointly hosted by COSLA and the Scottish Government. The key principles of joint working, good practice exchange and collaborative effort will continue with the Hubs providing a useful mechanism to facilitate the ongoing work in future. The next phase of Hub development work will see RSL and other partners become more integrated into the process.

North Lanarkshire Council is part of the West of Scotland Housing Options Hub. We have been an active participant from the outset and have encouraged the sharing and development of good practice in housing options approaches. The development of the regionally based hubs is encouraged by the Scottish Government and COSLA jointly through the auspices of the 2012 Steering Group. Housing Options are considered to be a natural extension of the preventative approach in dealing with homelessness. North Lanarkshire is considered to be at the forefront of the development and implementation processes within the West of Scotland Housing Options Hub due to the range of measures already adopted within the council to integrate our housing and support functions, develop and deliver training and implement the Common Housing Register and housing options services. The Hub recently developed a draft Housing Options Hub Protocol which sets out our agreed definitions of housing options, the outcomes that successful implementation should deliver and the service delivery standards and principles that will drive our future implementation planning across the region.

Persistent barriers to implementation

- Insufficient supplies of affordable, good quality housing stock of the right size, type and in the right areas to meet need will continue to present problems for local authorities. A number of councils have developed new build programmes but, notwithstanding, additional supplies are needed in all sectors.
- Welfare reforms have the potential to dramatically erode much of the progress made in the last ten years as the reforms are likely to have a disproportionate effect on young and single unemployed people who are already most vulnerable to housing crises (e.g. the extension of the single room rate to 35 and under).
- Sustaining resources at current levels are likely to be challenging given the ongoing economic pressures and particularly as new households emerge with potentially fewer options than before and overall demand may begin to rise again.
- Quality and accessibility of the Private Rented Sector continues to be an issue and the welfare reforms are unlikely to assist in this area.
- Demographic changes leading to the emergence of smaller and ageing households with increasingly complex social care and support needs.

**Action that could be taken to assist local authorities**

**Partnership working** - Pressure and encouragement should be brought to bear on our partners to continue to participate as local authorities cannot lead and deliver on homelessness themselves; partnership working must be embedded. Health has a specific role in helping to support people at risk of homelessness, and it is important that this is not squeezed out by the focus on Health & Social Care Integration, older people’s care and care for children and young people. There is a risk that health colleagues may see tackling homelessness and support to people at risk from homelessness as less important against these other major challenges.

**Tenure flexibility** - legislation in the social rented and private rented sectors must be investigated to assess the degree to which it does or does not work. How accessible the private sector is for people on lower incomes also needs investigation.

**Funding for affordable housing** – there is a need for greater certainty of forward funding; allocations rather than a bidding process. Both would help to make planned delivery of increased amounts of affordable housing more manageable.