Impact of 2012 on homeless people, local authorities and RSLs.

Most of the impact of the 2012 commitment has already been felt by all three groups. The most significant change in duties was the duty introduced in the 2001 Act to give all homeless applicants, at the very least, access to temporary accommodation. In general local authorities are making good progress towards meeting the 2012 commitment with the percentage of homeless people found in priority need already over 90% on average and in some areas already at 100%.

The change in culture towards single homeless people has been the biggest improvement for homeless people as we have moved from rationing many out of the system to a system which seeks solutions for everyone.

There has been a significant effect on local authorities whose homelessness role has changed fundamentally and who are now letting high proportions of their stock to homeless people. RSLs are facing similar pressures, though to a slightly lesser extent.

Persistent Barriers to implementation

In addition to the significant issue of social rented housing supply which has been highlighted consistently throughout the process leading to 2012, there are a number of other barriers to the effective implementation of the 2012 commitment.

Welfare and Housing Benefit Reforms

Significant changes are being implemented, some of which will make the achievement and maintenance of the 2012 commitment more difficult and more expensive for local authorities. Unlike the rest of the UK, Scottish local authorities have a legal duty to provide temporary accommodation for homeless applicants. Changes to the funding of temporary accommodation included in the reforms will result in significant additional costs for local authorities in Scotland.

Housing Benefit penalties for those under-occupying social rented housing will make implementation more difficult. The profile of social rented housing stock in Scotland is typically around 75% (or more) accommodation comprising 2 or 3 bedrooms. It was built as family housing and to be used flexibly. Households at risk of homelessness, or presenting as homeless are primarily single person households. There is clearly a mismatch between housing benefit policy and the requirements of the homelessness legislation. Sharing accommodation may be possible in some circumstances, but there are many circumstances where it will be wholly inappropriate and require significant additional expenditure on housing management and support. It may also require changes to legislation concerning the Scottish Secure Tenancy (unless one of the sharing tenants sub-lets from the other).

The role which the private rented sector (prs) is expected to play.

It is understood and accepted that the private rented sector has an important role to play in helping to house people who are at risk of, or experiencing homelessness. However, it must be recognised that the prs varies considerably across Scotland and that, according to Scottish Government analysis cannot play a significant role in up to 9 of the 32 Scottish local authority areas.

It is increasingly being expected to fill a broad range of gaps in the housing market. Below is a graph compiled by Dr Peter Mackie of Cardiff University which demonstrates in UK terms, the dramatic increase in dependence on the prs by young people by 2020 as their access to the social rented sector and owner occupation decreases. It will also have to play a role for low to medium income families unable to access owner occupation. The sector itself is mixed with many ‘reluctant landlords’ who are currently only letting because they can’t sell the house. The question for 2012 is have we put too much reliance on the prs?
Leaving institutions/throughcare
In many areas there is still not sufficient joint working and co-ordinated planning to prevent people leaving institutional settings from becoming homeless.

**Looked after young people** remain at high risk of homelessness. The Scottish Government has produced Throughcare and Aftercare Guidelines and we know what ought to be happening. Implementation is at best patchy, with many young people who have been looked after becoming homeless. Very often an arrangement is made shortly before their 16th birthday, which breaks down very quickly. Action needs to be taken nationally to ensure that the good practice which has already been identified, is implemented consistently across Scotland.

**Leaving prison** and the young offenders Institution. There is insufficient co-ordination between the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) and local authorities to plan for the release of prisoners or young offenders. Our members report that very often, for operational reasons, such as overcrowding, prisoners are released on a different day from the planned date and may appear at the local authority before accommodation is ready or before appropriate support has been put in place. In a situation where there is literally a captive client group there is a need for SPS, with its throughcare responsibilities, to ensure proper co-ordination with local authorities and other stakeholders concerning release of prisoners in order to prevent unnecessary homelessness.

There are still people who **leave hospital** to homelessness. Care needs to be taken especially with short stay patients in either psychiatric or general hospitals to ensure that they are not released to homelessness.

**Effective homelessness prevention activity**

It is much more difficult to prove the effectiveness of prevention measures which are undertaken far away from the point of crisis. It is important that in homeless prevention activity we do not become too focused on measuring. Otherwise services will move towards interventions which can be measured rather than interventions which are effective.

As the pioneer of **Leaving Home and Housing Education** in schools and youth settings, SCSH believes that giving young people a good understanding of what is involved in leaving home and what to do if things go wrong, should be an essential part of the curriculum for all young people. This should however be linked with some education for teachers as part of their CPD, in particular to identify children who might be at risk of becoming homeless to enable early intervention.
SCSH has produced a ‘parents’ guide’ for foster carers to help them prepare their foster children for living independently, and more should be done by local authorities as ‘corporate parents’ of looked after young people to prepare them for the complexities of managing a home.

**Young runaways** (aged under 16) are often simply children who have become homeless and who may be at risk of becoming homeless as young adults. However there needs to be far better co-ordination between police, schools, social work and others to identify those at risk and through the GIRFEC approach prevent their problems turning into homelessness later on.

With Innovation Funding from the Scottish Government East Dunbartonshire Council developed some ‘at risk’ triggers which enabled people from a range of disciplines to alert other professionals as a means of preventing homelessness. This is an initiative which could have widespread benefits.

There will be increasing problems with **rent arrears** as the impact of housing benefit reforms become a reality. It will be important for social landlords to prepare now to ensure that their policies towards rent arrears do not create unnecessary homelessness. This should include making best use of Discretionary Housing Payments.

There are many opportunities for sharing practice. The recently created housing options hubs can form a basis. However in addition there are a number of networks, such as the Homelessness Strategy Officers’ network (co-ordinated by SCSH), the Scottish Homelessness and Employability Network based at SCSH, a new Health and Homelessness lead officers network being developed by NHS Health Scotland and three on-line ‘communities of practice’: ‘Homelessness - policy, practice and prevention: Scotland,’ ‘Scottish Housing Options Hubs’ and Housing Management and Efficiencies Learning Network.’ The opportunities for sharing practice exist. However the constraints on time, financial and staffing resources are having an effect.

**Action to assist in meeting target and sustain it**

**Leaving Home and Housing Education in Schools**

Better linking in of Alcohol and Drug Partnerships with local authority strategies to tackle homelessness (some are good, but very patchy).

Ensure that implementing the Health and Homelessness Standards remains a priority, and that health boards play a full and integrated role in strategies to prevent and tackle homelessness.

Encourage mortgage lenders to be more flexible with mortgage holidays, extended mortgage repayment periods, interest only deals etc to prevent the expense and upheaval of households becoming homeless.

Enable local authorities to carry out some of the more imaginative prevention activities which have been used south of the border, for example, paying off part of all of some debts to enable a household in trouble to start afresh.

Encourage maintenance of low level housing support programmes which help people sustain tenancies and prevent problems becoming crises as part of Guidance on the new duty to provide housing support to homeless households.

Review the tenancy regime in the private rented sector. The Short Assured Tenancy has become the standard tenancy by default and affords the least protection to tenants of virtually any tenancy regime in Western Europe. If the prs is to be used more, and to house more vulnerable people, there is a need to establish a new more balanced regime of rights and responsibilities for tenants and landlords as the standard prs tenancy.