The Background
1. The 2012 Homelessness commitment was introduced in the Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003. The Act granted Scottish Ministers powers to bring forward regulations which will end the use of the ‘priority need test’ by local authorities.

2. The 2012 homelessness commitment is not about eradicating homelessness. The 2012 commitment involves increasing homeless people’s rights to housing. The aim is to remove bureaucratic distinctions between different ‘categories’ of homeless people and to acknowledge that all unintentionally homeless people require sustainable accommodation.

3. The phrase ‘2012 target’ came about when the 2003 Act set out details about the future removal of the priority need test and it was agreed that local authorities would require time to prepare for the change. In December 2005 a Ministerial statement set out interim targets for each local authority of the percentage of homeless applicants assessed as priority by March 2009. March 2009 represented the halfway point and the interim targets were based on councils’ moving in equal stages from the % assessed as priority in 2003-04 to 100% assessed as priority by 2012-13.

4. Scottish Ministers must specify the date, no later than 31 December 2012, when all local authorities must reasonably be expected to meet the target.

Action to deliver the target
5. The Scottish Government/COSLA 2012 Joint Steering Group was established in October 2009 to drive and oversee progress towards the 2012 Homelessness commitment. A high level group, which initially included the former Minister for Housing and Communities and now includes the Minister for Housing and Transport, attending along with Cllr Harry McGuigan from COSLA, its membership also includes other local authority elected members, SFHA, ALACHO and SOLACE. It has been an enthusiastic and active group which has focused on homelessness among young people and also, critically, the prevention of homelessness.

6. Four priority areas were agreed by the Group to aid progress towards achievement of the 2012 target:
   - Prevention of homelessness,
   - Investing in appropriate areas,
   - Access to Private Rented Sector (PRS) and Registered Social Landlord (RSL) stock,
   - Corporate buy-in and joint working;

Investment impacting on the target
7. Over the period 2008-11, the Scottish Government has allocated a record £1.7 billion investment in affordable housing – even more than planned at the last Spending Review – and achieved the target to approve around 21,500 new/improved affordable homes. Around £630 million will be available for Affordable Housing Supply, including around £260 million within the Local Government settlement, over the next three years. The Scottish Government aims to deliver 30,000 affordable homes over the life of the Parliament and the spending review keeps us on track to do so. At least two-thirds of the 30,000 affordable homes target will be homes for social rent and of these at least 5,000 will be council houses.

Access to settled accommodation
8. The Scottish Government has taken steps to improve access to the Private Rented Sector for homeless households. Regulations were introduced in 2010 allowing local authorities to use this sector to discharge their homelessness duty. A number of local authorities have developed Private Sector Leasing Schemes to assist access to this tenure.

Prevention
9. Prevention of homelessness has been a key theme for the Scottish Government and its partners in planning to meet the homelessness target. Prevention of Homelessness Guidance was published by the Scottish Government and COSLA in 2009 addressing the needs of particular at risk groups and indicating the benefits of a housing options approach.

Housing Options
10. The Scottish Government and COSLA held a successful seminar in June 2010 focused on prevention and to promote the Housing Options approach. The Minister announced enabling funding of around £500,000 for local authorities, working in partnership, to support this, resulting in the creation of the Housing Options Hubs.
11. Five roughly regional housing options “Hubs” have been established across Scotland covering the vast majority of local authorities to help them and their partners develop the ‘Housing Options’ approach.

12. Housing Options is a process which starts with housing advice when someone approaches a local authority with a housing problem. This approach features early intervention and explores all possible housing options, including social rented housing (both local authority and RSL), the private rented sector and whether a homelessness application needs to be made.

13. Local authorities have found that through the development of a Housing Options approach that they can prevent homelessness. As an example, Moray Council reported to its committee in 2011 that, after implementing a Housing Options service, it had experienced a 26.6% decrease in homelessness during 2010/11. This compares with the national picture which shows that homelessness in Scotland reduced by 3%.

**What the Hubs have been doing?**

14. In the first year of operation, the Hubs have completed a range of activities to support the development of Housing Options. This has included training needs analysis and subsequent training programmes being implemented; development of good practice models; sharing delivery lessons for the overall benefit of the Hubs; along with job shadowing and information exchange. The Hubs have been able to jointly procure services including training and IT which have provided cost efficiencies.

15. The Housing Options Hubs model and its implementation are subject to an independent evaluation being carried out by Ipsos MORI. This is scheduled to report at the end of March 2012.

**Housing Benefit Mitigation activity**

16. The Hubs have proved themselves to be well placed to implement Housing Benefit mitigation activity. The Scottish Government recently announced additional money to assist with this and funding has been made available for the CIH, COSLA and the Housing Options Hubs. Current and proposed activity within the Hubs includes the identification of those affected by the changes, targeted responses which cover publicity, home visits, and landlord/tenant discussions. Innovative thinking includes proposals to develop a ‘sub-hub’ which will bring all relevant local authority departments together to co-ordinate responses to the changes.

**Progress to 2012**

17. The statistics for 2010/11 indicate that 88% of those assessed by local authorities were assessed as being in priority need. This is a 2% increase in the proportion assessed as in priority need in the same period in 2009/10. This represents continued progress towards the 2012 homelessness target.

18. In the quarter ending 31 March 2011, 6 local authorities assessed 100% of homeless households as being in priority need. These authorities were Angus, Dundee, Orkney, Renfrewshire, Stirling and West Dunbartonshire – this means that these councils are meeting the target.

19. In another 10 council areas more than 90% of homeless households were regarded as being in priority need which shows progress towards meeting the target.

20. The percentage of homelessness assessments identified as repeat cases has fallen from 9.8% in 2002/03 to 5.5% in 2010/11. Although it is very early in the development of Housing Options, the reductions in repeat homelessness figures could be attributed to increased prevention activity resulting in more sustainable outcomes for people and households who find themselves homeless.

21. The next Homelessness statistics publication will be on the 14 February 2012. This will provide further evidence on local authorities’ readiness to meet the target.

22. RSLs have an important role to play in achieving the 2012 target. We recognise that much is already being done by a number of RSLs across Scotland in housing homeless households, with over 7,800 lets to homeless households in 2010/11 (28% of all lets). RSLs also have an important role in preventing homelessness occurring wherever possible.

**National Co-ordinators**

23. The Scottish Government funds national co-ordinators to establish evidence of good practice and to exchange and disseminate information on policy and practice around the themes of employability, service
user involvement, social networks, furniture re-use and rent deposit schemes in the context of homelessness prevention. The Co-ordinators are currently engaging with the Hubs to progress the 2012 Target

**Potential Risks to Implementation**

24. When the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003 was introduced, and the Ministerial statement made in 2005, two developments could not have been anticipated in terms of assessing risk to achievement of the 2012 target:

- The recession and the spending review have had an impact on resources available for investment in affordable housing, and lending for housing associations and households more generally; and
- The changes to Housing Benefit and the wider welfare benefit reforms, both those currently implemented and those that are proposed to come into effect over the next 2 – 3 years.

25. These new risks are a potential threat to local authorities meeting the target. Regardless however of the recession it would not have been feasible to focus only on investment to meet the target, hence the strong drive to develop homelessness prevention services with a refocusing towards Housing Options.

26. We have completed an Impact Assessment of Housing Benefit changes but as the impact will depend on claimant and landlord behaviour, it is difficult to be clear on outcomes at this stage. As stated above, additional resources have been made available to mitigate the impacts of reforms to Housing Benefit.

**Conclusion**

27. There is strong support amongst stakeholders for the 2012 commitment. Scottish homelessness legislation is widely regarded as amongst the most progressive in Europe. The promotion of the Housing Options approach, and the development of the Hubs, has been taken forward nationally within the context of meeting the 2012 Homelessness Target, but it is now becoming evident that the impact of this approach, and the energy and commitment of those involved, is establishing a foundation for responses to homelessness beyond the 2012 target, with a clear focus on prevention and partnership work.