The Council, along with other Scottish Local Authorities has been planning for this target for almost 10 years. The target itself is considered progressive but ambitious.

When the target was first established The Highland Council assessed around 50% of homeless applicant as Priority Need. Since 2012 we have implemented a series of policy changes aimed at moving closer to the target.

The Council relaxed the priority need category early in 2009. The result was that by March 2011 86% of homeless applicants were assessed as being in priority need.

From January 2012 the priority need category has been further relaxed and we estimate that the percentage of homeless people in priority need will reach around 95%.

We believe that we will be able to achieve the target – depending on the timing of implementation. However there are a number of consequences of doing so, and a number of risk factors.

The main constraint in meeting the 2012 target is the availability of settled accommodation for all applicants assessed as needing it.

The Highland Council is an area of intense housing pressure and we have an acute shortage of social rented housing. For example we expect to have a turnover of around 1,000 council houses a year, and on current trends will have a duty to provide housing to 1,147 homeless people if we are to meet the 2012 target.

The Council also has high demand from applicants with other housing needs, for whom the same target does not apply. On average around 50% of available houses are currently allocated to people with homeless priority across Highland. This average figure masks significant variations, with the figure over 70% in some communities. Unfortunately this can often reinforce negative stereotypes regarding homelessness and create tensions within local communities.

In practice meeting the target will result in greater numbers of people in temporary accommodation while they wait for an offer of permanent accommodation. In some areas at present single applicants can wait up to 2 years for an offer of settled accommodation. Meeting the 2012 target will place additional pressure on temporary accommodation and will almost certainly increase the average length of stay.

This is a particular problem in Highland where there is a lack of available temporary accommodation and bed and breakfast use is above the national average.

We are concerned that implementation of other aspects of homelessness legislation, notably Section 11 and Section 32A have not had any significant impact on alleviating homelessness pressure.

We are aware of the need to engage and maximise the contribution that the Private Rented Sector can make to homelessness. In Highland we have been proactive in developing a Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme and setting up a successful private sector leasing scheme that now extends to over 350 properties.

However we are concerned that there is inadequate private rented sector capacity in relation to homelessness and that changes to be introduced as a result of Welfare Reform will further undermine efforts to enable homeless applicants to access the Private Rented Sector. Welfare benefit changes will reduce the availability of the Private Rented Sector for households on benefit and impact on income levels for those still able to access the sector.
Despite these concerns there are other reasons for being more optimistic. The Council’s current homelessness strategy emphasises a preventative approach allied to effective interagency working and the delivery of targeted housing support at the most vulnerable homeless households.

We implemented a Homelessness Prevention Team in mid-201. The approach was piloted in one area of Highland for a 3 month period starting in June 2011. Statistics showed that there was a 64% reduction in the number of households making a homeless presentation during this period and 23% of cases secured a tenancy in the private rented sector.

Since the prevention team has been operating across Highland the number of homeless applications has reduced by 52% compared to the same period in the previous year.

Overall the Council believes that there are a number of significant challenges and risks associated with the 2012 target. We do not believe that the target can be achieved without a change in culture and approach to homelessness that emphasises prevention.