Inquiry Call for Views on the Homelessness 2012 Commitment

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.

Objectives
1. To identify the impact of the commitment on homeless people, local authorities and registered social landlords

Impact of Commitment on Local Authorities

It is anticipated that a range of issues will impact Local Authorities.

a) Temporary Accommodation
Nationally, there has been a marked and consistent increase in the number of households in temporary accommodation from around 4,000 as at 31.03.02 to 11,019 as at 31.03.11. In 10/11, however, West Lothian saw a 4% increase in numbers of households living in temporary accommodation as at 31.03.10, compared with the same date in 2009. This is a result of the increase in applicants assessed as homeless in 10/11 to whom we have a duty to accommodate.

In West Lothian, our capacity plan model predicts a sharp increase in the shortfall of permanent accommodation in 13/14 to around 600 properties per year, as a result of the abolition of the priority need test. This would indicate that greater pressure will be placed on Temporary Accommodation to meet the short term housing needs of Homeless People, until a permanent outcome can be secured.

In order to address this shortfall, prevention activity will need to produce positive outcomes for over 50% of people who would currently be assessed as homeless. In West Lothian we are at too early a stage to state whether this is achievable.

b) Welfare Reforms
The changes as a result of the Welfare Reforms present major challenges for councils. In effect, it will have a negative impact on the work Local Authorities have been undertaking to prevent homelessness, improve access to housing and increase housing options.

c) Sustainable Communities
In West Lothian, making a homeless presentation is often seen as the only way to secure affordable social housing. Increasing the percentage of social housing lets to homeless people exacerbates this, making prevention options less desirable to applicants and undermining the sustainability of communities. Perceptions and culture must change if we are to break this cycle. It is hoped that this can be achieved through the promotion of Housing Options and the attractiveness and sustainability of different housing solutions such as the private sector. In addition it is anticipated that the review of the existing Allocations policy will produce an approach focussed on choice which will target needs in such a way to promote balanced and sustainable communities. This in turn will encourage people that their housing needs may be met in another way and reinforce the message that making a homeless presentation is not the only solution.
RSL Sector

The RSL sector plays a very important role in assisting Local Authorities working towards delivering the 2012 target. Within West Lothian, we work with 15 other Housing Providers. Performance has been consistent over the last two financial years, with 17% of applicants securing a housing association tenancy as the final outcome of their application. The performance of RSLs, locally and nationally, demonstrates a continued increase in lets to homeless households, however work is required to ensure this progress continues. In West Lothian, we are meeting with our larger RSLs to review and agree targets.

Over the last couple of years, the increase in the housing supply due to new build both within the council and the RSL programme, has contributed to the increase in numbers securing settled accommodation locally. However this is likely to be adversely impacted as a result of reduced funding.

Homeless People

The combination of a range of factors e.g Welfare Reform, reduction in availability and access to affordable housing, will have a major impact on the choices for individuals and families and the ability to secure permanent / settled accommodation.

2. To identify any persistent barriers to implementation

As already stated, the changes as a result of the Welfare Reforms will present major challenge for councils. In effect it will have a negative impact on the work Local Authorities have been undertaking to prevent homelessness, improve access to housing and increase housing options.

At 46%, West Lothian Council has a higher percentage of presentations being made by the under 25's (+7%) than the national average.

This group of people will be severely impacted as a result of the Welfare Reforms, which will in effect limit their options and choices and the Council's ability to meet homeless duty and secure settled, sustainable options. This will be a picture that is repeated across Scotland, with an expected impact on the overall availability and access to affordable housing.

It is anticipated that there may also be a further impact on those households already in Social Housing who, after 2013, will be faced with reduction in benefit and may be forced to give up tenancies as a result of financial difficulties.

Universal benefit may in turn lead to increased rent arrears and increased evictions.

Councils will be faced with how best they can utilise their housing stock for future allocation, which in turn may impact on the percentage of lets to homeless applicants.

West Lothian Council is continuing with its new build programme and will have delivered 800 new homes by June 2014. However as a result of a reduction in the Scottish Governments Housing budget with RSLs now expected to build on a reduced subsidy level, it is anticipated that this may lead to fewer new units for rent and thus an overall reduction in the numbers of affordable social housing units becoming available for letting each year.

The anticipated shortfall in the number of properties available for letting as permanent accommodation may then result in Temporary Accommodation being used for extended periods in order to meet the 2012 target. The impact of this has already been identified with greater shortfalls forecast as we move beyond 2012.

As stated earlier, nationally, there has been a marked and consistent increase in the number of households in temporary accommodation from around 4,000 as at 31.03.02 to 11,019 as at 31.03.11.

In 10/11, West Lothian saw a 4% increase in numbers of households living in temporary accommodation as at 31.03.10, compared with the same date in 2009. This is a result of the
increase in applicants assessed as homeless in 10/11, to whom we have a duty to accommodate, outstripping the rate at which settled accommodation becomes available to let.

Despite a high percentage, (70%) of social housing lets going to homeless households, through our capacity plan modelling in West Lothian we are predicting a sharp increase in the shortfall of permanent accommodation in 13/14 to around 600 properties per year, as a result of the abolition of the priority need test. This would indicate that greater pressure will be placed on Temporary Accommodation to meet the short term housing needs of Homeless People until a permanent outcome can be achieved. An adequate supply of affordable social housing to provide permanent outcomes for homeless households continues to represent a persistent challenge to implementation.

3. To highlight best practice and opportunities for sharing best practice

Opportunities for sharing best practice are available through a range of forums including the Homeless Officers Forum, SHBVN, Homeless and Housing Sub Group and Housing Options Hubs. However impact and results achieved from these forums can be varied.

For example, the progress and impact of the Housing Options Hubs is varied across all 5 Hub Areas. Some Hubs are meeting regularly and taking a very proactive, joint partnership approach in tackling homelessness.

4. To determine effective homelessness prevention activity

A range of prevention activities are being implemented across Scotland ranging from direct prevention intervention activity such as mediation and working with voluntary organisations and through work with the private sector in providing alternative housing options for people, with the aim of preventing homelessness.

Local Authorities work with the private sector ranges from Authority to Authority including Private Sector Leasing Schemes, Social Letting Agencies, work with the Voluntary Sector and other individual approaches such as West Lothian Home Choice.

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

There is potential for further work to be done with Private Sector Tenancies in order to make them a more attractive settled option for people. This would require changes to terms of tenancy agreements from Short Assured leases to Assured Leases.

A review of subsidy cuts, which have been imposed on RSL’s for new build which in turn has reduced their ability to build new homes at the same rate as before, would assist local authorities by ensuring continued increase in the housing supply from the RSL sector and in the numbers of households securing settled accommodation.

Improving the guidance regarding prevention activity would help clarify the scope for local authorities to promote planned approaches to meeting housing need without the Scottish Housing Regulator considering potential gate keeping issues.