



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

INFRASTRUCTURE AND CAPITAL INVESTMENT COMMITTEE

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Homelessness in Scotland

Dear Margaret

Thank you for providing evidence at the ICI Committee's meeting on 8 October 2014 as part of our follow-up review of the 2012 homelessness commitment. As you know, the Committee undertook its first inquiry on this issue in 2012 and one of the recommendations in our report was that it would "monitor the implementation of the commitment for the remainder of the parliamentary session and address any areas of concern which may emerge". Over two years on from that work the Committee considered this would be a good point to look again at the 2012 commitment and whether the abolition of priority need and the associated introduction of the housing options approach had achieved its aims.

The Committee is grateful to everyone who submitted views – either through written evidence or by appearing before the Committee – for giving both their time and their insight into how the homeless commitment is working in practice. We are particularly grateful to the representatives of the voluntary sector, social housing providers and other stakeholders who provided informal or formal evidence. The enthusiasm and commitment shown by those who are charged with supporting one of the most vulnerable groups in our society, coupled with innovative thinking on how best to deliver further improvements, was clearly evident. The full list of written and oral evidence is included in the annexes and I know you and your officials will study this closely.

Overall assessment

While I intend to cover a number of areas in which the Committee focused on during this review, I want to begin by highlighting the generally positive assessment the Committee received of how the abolition of priority need, coupled with the development of the housing options approach, is working in practice. While it was recognised that the

housing options approach was still a work in progress, it was often credited with putting a framework in place to allow improvements to be made at a local level. Indeed, we are well aware that the homelessness legislation passed by the Scottish Parliament is highly regarded internationally. That said, several areas requiring improvement were actively cited and I will address several specific issues in turn below.

Abolition of priority need and intentionally homeless decisions

Starting with the abolition of priority need at the end of 2012 it was clear from the evidence we heard that there remained universal backing for this measure. Much mention was however made by witnesses to the rise in intentionally homeless decisions by local authorities since that time and whether this increase was due to the abolition of priority need or inconsistent policies and decision making by local authorities. During your evidence, you indicated that you are investigating the reasons behind this recent rise in intentionally homeless decisions. You also assured the Committee that regardless of whether someone is deemed intentionally homeless or not, they are still able to receive support from local authorities. Nevertheless, the Committee would be very concerned if the intentionality question is being used by any local authority to avoid offering the full range of housing options to those in need. **The Committee therefore requests that you report to it as soon as possible on the reasons behind the wide variation in intentionally homeless decisions being taken by local authorities and on any action the Scottish Government intends to take to encourage a greater consistency of approach.**

Housing options approach

As mentioned above, there was a high level of positive comment regarding the housing options approach, in particular the flexibility it provides housing officers in helping to steer those using the service along the most appropriate route to help meet their individual needs. Some concern was nevertheless raised about the opportunity for local authorities to use the process as a form of gate keeping (although it was acknowledged that there were opportunities for gate keeping within the previous system) and much was said about the need for guidance to help avoid this, to which I will now turn.

Guidance

The Committee heard that when the housing options approach was initially established, the need for guidance was not immediately seen as being necessary, on the basis that it might have prevented local authorities from having the freedom to develop services appropriate to their own local circumstances. As you know, the Scottish Housing Regulator recently recommended that the Scottish Government provide guidance to provide clarity on how housing options should operate within the context of homelessness duties and obligations. There was clear agreement amongst witnesses that the timing is now right to develop such guidance, particularly to assist those local authorities who may, for whatever reason, be lagging behind. Numerous concerns were raised about the variation in the quality of approach being taken by local authorities and the Committee is of the view that this clearly needs to be addressed.

As you mentioned in your evidence, the guidance is being developed by COSLA and ALACHO, who are consulting with many of the groups from whom we have taken evidence. While the Committee appreciates that this consultation is taking place with service users, housing associations and registered social landlords (RSLs), **we would suggest that voluntary sector partners, if they have not already been approached, are also included as part of this process.** I will touch more on the role of the voluntary sector later in this letter.

The Committee is keen to ensure that those local authorities who have in the past lagged behind are providing the same high level of service seen in other areas. **It would therefore ask that you provide an update on the response to, and impact of, the guidance at an appropriate juncture following its issue.**

Registered social landlords

The Committee also heard much about the benefits of good relationships between local authorities and RSLs in helping to deliver the housing options approach. Again, the Committee welcomes these positive relationships with RSLs but also noted some concern about the challenges the new approach might bring to smaller RSLs who may not feel they have the necessary resources to fully engage with the process. You went some way in your evidence to assuage us of these concerns. However, the **Committee suggests that the guidance, if not already included, provides a detailed breakdown of the role that RSLs might play as well as how local authorities should work in partnership with them to ensure a coordinated approach in delivering the housing options approach.**

Welfare Reform

We heard evidence on the impact of the UK Government's welfare reform agenda on housing options, including the size of available accommodation, the increase in age for those to be considered under the shared accommodation rate, as well as the way in which the move to universal credit will alter the way temporary accommodation is funded. In giving evidence, you indicated that the Scottish Government had so far been successful in mitigating much of the financial impact of the bedroom tax and it is noted that £81.22 million is allocated in the Draft Budget 2015-16 for overall welfare reform mitigation. However, you also pointed out that there was uncertainty about how any future changes might be managed. **The Committee would therefore welcome an update from you on any potential impact to the housing options approach if there are any further changes under the welfare reform agenda.**

Temporary accommodation

Much was said in evidence of the need for better quality and appropriate temporary accommodation. As well as highlighting a general lack of temporary accommodation stock, witnesses also told us of the changing needs of clients and emphasised the importance of placing individuals into the right premises with the right level of support. Also, because of a lack of affordable housing stock at the next level, we heard that individuals are staying in temporary accommodation for longer periods due to the difficulty in finding a more permanent home.

The Committee notes your acknowledgement of the need for the best possible quality of temporary accommodation to be made available and welcomes the recent change to the minimum standard of housing provided to those who are pregnant or have children. This is nevertheless clearly a major area of concern amongst stakeholders - indeed it was described to us as an urgent need. **The Committee would welcome an update on how the Scottish Government is supporting local authorities in alleviating the pressure placed on temporary accommodation.**

Young people

The Committee is aware of the follow-up work being carried out by the Equal Opportunities Committee into its inquiry *Having and Keeping a Home: steps to preventing homelessness among young people*. While the Committee was careful not to duplicate this scrutiny, we heard a range of concerns including a lack of suitable temporary accommodation for homeless young people; a need for better preventative

services to help mediate between young people and their families; and that which official figures suggest that the number of young people assessed as homeless had fallen, this may not be born out in reality.

The Committee also heard that there were examples of good practice within the voluntary sector in helping young people to find housing solutions before they become homeless as well as some simply being turned away by local authorities. The Committee **will therefore be keen to see how the new guidance will take into account the particularly needs of young people and how they might best be supported when accessing housing options.**

Housing Options Hubs

Given that the five Housing Options Hubs were created to help promote a “housing options” approach to homelessness and to share best practice across all of Scotland’s local authorities, the Committee was keen to learn how they were working in practice. In a similar way to the varied levels of approach among local authorities, we heard of different approaches among the five Hubs. It was suggested that Hubs need to be more outwardly focussed and could benefit from a higher level of involvement and integration with the voluntary and health sectors. However, there was broad agreement that the Hubs approach is working well and should be developed further.

Whilst the Committee acknowledges the previous Scottish Government support for the Hubs, it also notes the suggestion made by some councils that continued Scottish Government assistance was required. It is noted from your evidence that you provided £150,000 of funding to assist the Hubs in 2014-15, but it remains unclear as to the level of funding in 2015-16. As the Committee will be taking evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities on the Draft Budget 2015-16 on 12 November, we will take the opportunity to raise this with her then. **Alternatively, if you were able to send the Committee an update on the agreed level of funding in advance of this session, it would be helpful if you could do so.**

Voluntary sector

As I mentioned above, the Committee was very impressed by the work being done by the many charities and voluntary groups who are actively involved in assisting those who find themselves homeless – both in trying to provide temporary respite and aiding long term homelessness prevention. The Committee was particularly struck by the desire of many of these groups to become more directly involved in assisting the in the provision of support to homeless people, often those who were unwilling to approach local authorities or unaware of the support which might be available to them. We were therefore surprised to learn that there are not as yet any formal links with local authorities via the Housing Options Hubs. It would be helpful, therefore if you could **advise the Committee on what is being done to best utilise the range of assistance that might be provided by the voluntary sector.**

Levels of homelessness

In order to allow a full understanding of the levels of homelessness and the success of any mitigation measures, it is important to have available reliable and accurate data on which to base the evidence. During the Committee’s work in 2012, it highlighted the need to ensure that any reduction in homelessness applications as a consequence of the housing options approach was a genuine sign of improvement, rather than simply a result of people being turned away from or denied access to their rights in order that homelessness application figures might be kept low. While recent homelessness statistics highlight what would seem to be a welcome downward trend, we heard that

there are some concerns that there may be an underreporting of homelessness and that it is difficult to measure the success of homelessness prevention work across local authorities.

You mentioned in evidence that there will soon be a statistical recording method – PREVENT1 – which you hope will give a more detailed understanding of the impact of housing options work across Scotland. You indicated during evidence that you will provide further details on how quickly the Scottish Government will be able to act on the information received by the new system. The Committee is grateful for your interim response you provided on 23 October which gave an update on progress and we **look forward to receiving a further response towards the end of this year.**

Reviewing effectiveness

In your response to questioning on what the Government is doing to review the effectiveness of the 2012 commitment, you said that the continued operation of the homelessness prevention and strategy group, in tandem with housing options hubs and local authorities, is continually monitoring the situation. In answer to a question on Shelter's suggestion that the Government needs to prepare an action plan for homelessness for the next 10 years, you responded that homelessness prevention must sit within the Government's overall approach to housing.

It was said more than once during evidence that the introduction of progressive homelessness legislation in Scotland was highly regarded across the world. **Whilst acknowledging the ongoing work of the homelessness prevention and strategy group, the Committee is of the view that a key task of this group should be to identify steps to ensure that the clear progress made in Scotland on homelessness prevention is built upon and continues to be developed.** As mentioned above, the changing needs of clients and the management of resources means that methods used need to be continually questioned and if necessary, adapted, to meet these challenges.

While the Committee also agrees that homelessness and housing in general must not be considered in isolation, it sees the importance of both the Parliament and outside groups being able to properly examine the Government's and local authorities' progress in preventing homelessness. We would therefore ask the Scottish Government **to provide a yearly update to the Committee on its progress in addressing homelessness** so, in conjunction with PREVENT1 statistics, we might examine whether its objectives are being met.

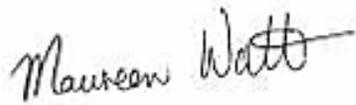
Conclusion

The Committee is under no illusion that, despite the progress being made, the prevention of homelessness in Scotland still represents a significant ongoing challenge. We acknowledge the desire of the Scottish Government and all stakeholders and partners to succeed in this area and welcome the tangible improvements that are being delivered as a result of the move to the housing options approach.

It is clear that the guidance being prepared is now a necessity to ensure consistency of approach across the country. The Committee is also keen to ensure that Housing Options Hubs are fully utilised to share best practice amongst local authorities and housing providers so that no areas can be said to 'lag behind'. We would therefore highlight the importance of the availability of continued funding in this area.

Again, can I thank you for your help in the Committee's work and we look forward to your response on all the points we have raised as well as the details of any outcomes from the forthcoming homelessness event on 18 November 2014.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Maureen Watt". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

**MAUREEN WATT MSP
CONVENER**

ANNEXE A:

Oral Evidence

18th Meeting 2014(Session 4), Wednesday 11 June

The Committee took evidence from—

- Michael Cameron, Chief Executive, and Christine MacLeod, Director of Regulation, Governance and Performance, the Scottish Housing Regulator.

Link to Official Report:

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=9245&mode=pdf>

20th Meeting 2014 (Session 4), Wednesday 13 August

The Committee took evidence from—

- Robert Aldridge, Chief Executive, Homeless Action Scotland;
- Rosemary Brotchie, Policy & Research Manager, Shelter Scotland;
- Garry Burns, Prevention of Homelessness Caseworker, Govan Law Centre; and
- Rob Gowans, Policy Officer, Citizens Advice Scotland.

Link to Official Report:

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=9463&mode=pdf>

Informal evidence session on Wednesday 20 August 2014

The Committee took evidence from—

- Turning Point Scotland;
- Glasgow Homelessness Network;
- Edinburgh Cyrenians;
- The Salvation Army, and;
- The Rock Trust.

22nd Meeting 2014 (Session 4), Wednesday 1 October

The Committee took evidence from—

- Janine Barrett, Principal Officer for Homelessness, and Julie Hunter, Housing Strategy Manager, Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers;
- Cllr Jimmy Black, Chair of Homelessness Prevention Strategy Group and Silke Isbrand, Policy Manager, Community Resourcing Team, Housing, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities;
- David Bookbinder, Director, Glasgow and West of Scotland Forum of Housing Associations;
- Andy Young, Policy Manager, Scottish Federation of Housing Associations; and

- Gavin Whitefield, Portfolio Holder for Housing, Society of Local Authority Chief Executives;

Link to Official Report:

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=9548#.VC7PP6KyBhY>

23rd Meeting, 2014 (Session 4) Wednesday 8 October 2014

Homelessness in Scotland: The Committee took evidence from—

- Margaret Burgess, Minister for Housing and Welfare, and Marion Gibbs, Team Leader, Homelessness, Scottish Government.

Link to Official Report:

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=9572>

ANNEXE B:

Written evidence

- [Aberdeenshire Council \(68KB pdf\)](#)
- [ALACHO \(163KB pdf\)](#)
- [Citizens Advice Scotland \(266KB pdf\)](#)
- [East Dunbartonshire Council \(78KB pdf\)](#)
- [Edinburgh Cyrenians \(156KB pdf\)](#)
- [Glasgow City Council Social Work Services \(126KB pdf\)](#)
- [Glasgow and West of Scotland Forum of Housing Associations \(161KB pdf\)](#)
- [Homeless Action Scotland \(183KB pdf\)](#)
- [Legal Services Agency Ltd \(86KB pdf\)](#)
- [North Ayrshire Council \(111KB pdf\)](#)
- [North Lanarkshire Council \(210KB pdf\)](#)
- [Scottish Federation of Housing Associations \(89KB pdf\)](#)
- [Shelter Scotland \(278KB pdf\)](#)
- [Shelter Scotland \(Supplementary Evidence\) \(71KB pdf\)](#)
- [SOLACE \(Scotland\) \(104KB pdf\)](#)
- [South Lanarkshire Council \(130KB pdf\)](#)
- [Turning Point Scotland \(383KB pdf\)](#)
- [West Dunbartonshire Council \(155KB pdf\)](#)