Local Government and Communities Committee

Homelessness

Submission from Police Scotland

Police Scotland welcomes the opportunity to contribute views on this topic which is integral to the continued delivery of improved safety and wellbeing of communities, the statutory purpose of policing.

Developing Long Term Police Strategy

The timing of this call for evidence is opportune, given the work that we are currently undertaking in collaboration with the Scottish Police Authority to develop a 10 year Strategy for Policing in Scotland under the auspices of the Policing 2026 programme. Consultation on this Strategy has just closed and will assist us to shape and adapt to change over the coming decade, while maintaining the consent and trust of communities across Scotland. This will have an emphasis on addressing the changing needs and expectations of communities over the next decade and beyond. Essential to achieving this, will be an ability to identify and protect the most vulnerable across our continually evolving and increasingly diverse communities.

Our homeless communities, often associated with more urban environments, create a unique and complex challenge for policing and wider partnerships. We welcome the opportunity to present the following observations:

Housing Options and Homelessness Prevention

- How do you feel housing options and homelessness prevention is working in practice? Are there examples of good practice?

**Glasgow** – A team of officers (Safer Communities - Community Improvement Partnership) work alongside the Wheatley Group of Registered Social Landlords (WG–RSL) and are co-located with Wheatley staff and SF&R. They have forged a very positive and mutually beneficial relationship. Glasgow Housing Association, one of the WG-RSLs, supply over 1,300 Temporary Furnished Flats to Glasgow City Council (GCC) who provide emergency accommodation to those declaring themselves as homeless.

The main thrust of police involvement at present, relates to antisocial behaviour which can be associated with the allocation of these properties.

The nature of the allocation and throughput has its challenges due to the chaotic and criminal lifestyle of some individuals being placed in temporary accommodation (unknown threat and risk to those being accommodated and local communities).
- How effective is the relationship between all the relevant agencies, including the health sector, and charities working on homelessness prevention?

**Edinburgh** – Inclusive Edinburgh is a Local Authority driven project that “seeks to address the needs of those individuals who experience severe and multiple disadvantage and for whom existing models of service are not appropriate.” This is attended by Superintendent, Partnerships and PIP Inspector. NHS Lothian, Police Scotland, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and a wide range of voluntary organisations are looking at all the services they provide in areas such as housing, care, support, health, employment and protection services.

**Aberdeen** - The Welfare Reform Board and the HSOG (Homeless Strategy Operations Group) looked at the impact of welfare reform on the residents and communities within the city. This had been an evolution from the homeless group which previously operated. This saw Police Scotland meeting with partners from the Council Departments, and third sector, including Cyrenians, Shelter, Foyer, etc. The group meet on a 6 weekly basis, with attendees including the Safer Cities representative, Partnership Development officer, as well as Grampian Women’s Aid and a range of accommodation providers.

### Multiple and Complex Needs

- What more could be done to ensure that the needs of homeless people with multiple and complex needs are adequately supported? Are there examples of good practice?

**Dundee** - Local Area Commanders deal with homelessness through regular liaison with hostels and attendance at MARAC / MATAC meetings and Community Planning Partnerships should the issue be raised.

**Glasgow** - At a local level, City Centre officers through daily foot patrol, fully engage with individuals and signpost them to support agencies. Local Problem Solving officers know most of these individuals personally and have built up relationships and knowledge of them. These officers work closely with the Community Safety Glasgow Response team, Rough Sleepers and Vulnerable People (RSVP) also known as “The Street Team”, and the Glasgow City Mission alongside others.

**Aberdeen** – in Aberdeenshire, they have just initiated a new group to look at Homelessness - Housing First Meeting. The Partnership Development Officer will be attending this series of meetings, where housing issues will be considered. The group aim to reduce the levels of homelessness through reducing the requirements which have to be addressed before someone can be offered accommodation, thereby speeding up the process. In addition, creating a network of supports to assist residents to retain their tenancy. Attendance at this group again sees Council departments represented along with Turning Point Scotland, Langstane Housing, and SPS.
• What scope is there for improved joint working with all agencies and groups supporting those with multiple and complex needs, which would also include the health sector?

**Glasgow** - Community Safety Glasgow (CSG) are the main drivers for the work with homeless persons and begging. G Division are linked in with CSG with the G Division Safer Communities (Preventions and Interventions) Department being co-located in Eastgate. Although a recent addition to the CSG group we are in the process of linking in with the various CSG departments to see where they can collaborate. Greater Glasgow have also set up a Homeless Liaison Unit which coordinates and maintains links with the 60+ hostels in their area.

**Aberdeen** - Homelessness features in the Aberdeen Local Outcome Improvement Plan (LOIP). Police Scotland will work in partnership with Aberdeen City Council, NHS Grampian, Aberdeen City Health and Social Care Partnership and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, to “strengthen resilience and capacity of people who are at risk of homelessness to maintain stable living arrangements” aiming to reduce repeat homelessness within 12 months.

**Arrested persons who present themselves as homeless**

From a policing perspective, when persons who are homeless (no fixed abode) are arrested and come into a custody suite, due to them having no permanent address and dependent on the severity of the crime they can be kept custody to appear at court the next lawful day. When they do appear at court and can provide an actual address (normally of a family member or friend) they will be released, however it will normally be the case that this individual will not reside at this address and still remain homeless. At this early stage of engagement (when the person comes into custody) there is an opportunity to refer the person to appropriate support agencies, including housing and addiction services (as is the case in some locations), which can be followed up when they are in custody or when the individual attends court. Alternatively the Local Authority could provide a type of “Aide Memoir” for distribution by the police which would ‘signpost’ that individual to support agencies, including housing. There doesn't appear to be any consistent approach in respect of this matter being taken throughout the country. That said, it is fully understood that the individual may not take advantage of this opportunity.

**Hostels**

Hostels can contain residents from all different types of backgrounds and residents often come to the attention of police either through their vulnerability or offending. It has been suggested that areas around such accommodation can have higher rates of criminality in respect of ASB, drug dealing, theft, so it could be inferred that both perpetrator’s and victims of crime maybe resident at these types of establishments.

It is accepted that individuals are placed in hostels mainly for the short term, however there is an opportunity for partners, including police, through Information Sharing Protocols, to have a closer links / relationships where proportionate / confidential information is shared in order to support the needs of the individuals.
(residents & staff) and the wider community. This type of approach is aimed at 'protecting those at risk of harm' and reduce the vulnerability of all parties e.g. prevent self-harm, reduce opportunities for exploitation and victimisation. There are cases where individuals with a convictions / on bail for "drug dealing" are placed in establishments were individuals with drug addiction issues are in recovery. Another example was where a Regd. Sex Offender was ‘housed’ in temporary accommodation adjacent to families with a number of children.

Rough Sleeping

From a Greater Glasgow perspective, there is a sense that the number of homeless people in the city centre area have increased over the last year - the underlying reasons for this are unclear. The Christian Mission recently reported, that there were 78 people sleeping rough in Glasgow City centre and surrounding area.

Within Glasgow City it is reported that the major contributory factors for this is drug and alcohol dependency issues and mental health. There are ‘beggars’ who purport to be homeless but manage to sleep in a hostel or with friends i.e. they are ‘sofa surfing’. It is not uncommon for people who are rough sleeping to refuse to engage with support services and there is much discussion across the support agencies as to whether a more enforced intervention is required. In simple terms it can be considered that people rough sleeping are putting themselves at risk and provision of food, clothing etc. only supports this lifestyle and in fact the responsible approach would be to a strategy that demands that such persons take up the support offered (See Report - First Wave Findings: Homelessness May 2016).

A more specific issue for Glasgow City is the frustration and annoyance from part of the community that persons are permitted to sleep rough on the streets of Glasgow in public areas such as doorways. There is a public perception that it is a police responsibility to 'move on' and prevent people sleeping rough on the street. Although we can and do work to discourage people sleeping rough it is not an offence and thus we have limited capability to do so. The increased number of persons or increased visibility of persons sleeping rough has resulted in a lack of confidence in Police Scotland by parts of the community (retailers). This has been acknowledged and addressed through engagement at senior level and routinely from Local Problem Solving Teams.

Whilst the following is not from a policing perspective it is assessed that Public Health have a big part to play, however many people who are sleeping rough or living in temporary accommodation e.g. hostels, can experience barriers accessing health and social care. Information provides that the lack of the necessary identification or permanent address means it is difficult to register with a GP or their constant moving from place to place makes this impracticable to be registered and / or maintain regular contact with a GP and thereafter provide the opportunity to access other hospital / welfare services. Individuals may lack the motivation and social skills necessary to engage with health care or other support services as they might not view this as their priority, therefore there is a challenge for partners to engage and fully support those individuals (Source – Northern Ireland Assembly ‘Research and Information Service Briefing Paper’ dated 16 June 2016).
Missing Persons

On occasions individuals have assessed that the temporary accommodation is either inappropriate or unappealing, was has led to a person being reported as missing as they disengage with the housing process without notifying the relevant authorities. To some extent this a procedural issue for partners’ and thereafter PS i.e. some partners have policies in place meaning a person must be reported missing after a set time not in their temporary accommodation. It may also be the case that, while a small issue, people in those circumstances may not be at any greater risk by being missing as that is just as administrative description while they are living their normal life in their homelessness situation.

A review of the 2016/17 data and missing from homeless accommodation does not at this stage appear to be a prevalent issue. The number of missing person investigations last year in which the home address is listed as NFA or homeless was 103 (0.47%).

Other – Vulnerabilities

- What are the reasons behind why people become homeless?

We are aware of research commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation which found that the root of many people’s experiences of Multiple Exclusion Homelessness (MEH) in adulthood lay within traumatic childhood experiences, e.g. physical, mental and/or sexual abuse, bullying, witnessing alcohol or substance misuse and domestic violence in the home.

We understand that if these circumstances are identified as happening to an individual at an early stage a positive multi agency approach/intervention can be taken to support that person through their current circumstances at that time and into later life, that’s not to say that through the choices they make they will not become homeless, but support at an early stage will hopefully prevent, where possible, that individual becoming homeless.

Through personal interaction with officers, it is found that there are recurring themes of vulnerability within the homeless community ranging from ill-health to misuse of drugs and alcohol, which can be ‘flagged’ up through ‘Concern Hubs’ and Multi-Agency approach.

Ability to support, can be hampered by limited engagement by those affected, with treatment services, repeated interventions by (and sporadic engagement with) Criminal Justice services (particularly Drug Treatment and Testing Orders), a variety of stop / start interventions by workers and a high incidence of exclusions from services (generally linked to aggressive or violent behaviour).

Meeting the needs of these vulnerable people requires a step change in the way assistance is provided, the way in which efforts are co-coordinated and in the approach taken to identify and meet those needs.
Asylum Seekers and Those of Insecure Immigration Status

It is well understood within Law Enforcement circles that criminality (at all levels) preys on people who find themselves in vulnerable or destitute positions in life, often when there are no legitimate alternatives available to them. Destitution, in all its forms, undoubtedly increases an individual’s vulnerability to exploitation by criminals. Following consultation with a number of key departments within Police Scotland including Public Protection, Human Trafficking, Domestic Abuse, National Intelligence, Serious Organised Crime and Local Policing, there is a consensus that those who face destitution, asylum and insecure immigration status are at risk of being channelled into areas of exploitation such as prostitution, domestic servitude or forced labour. The following are extracted from their responses:

- There is a high risk that those in such destitution may be attractive for exploitation by criminal gangs;
- Those made vulnerable in this way will always be open to risk if they are coming into contact with unscrupulous employers or criminal elements; and
- If society is not engaging with such individuals, criminality will.

It is apparent that the professional judgement of officers is that destitute asylum seekers and those of insecure immigration status are at risk from organised crime. Recognition must also be given to destitute, asylum seekers and those of insecure immigration status, who, with no housing or money turn to crime themselves in order to function. Partner agencies classify this as ‘survival crime’. Police systems, including the Vulnerable Persons Database and Custody recording processes at this time do not define such individuals who enter the criminal justice system; therefore researching of numbers detained or arrested is problematic.

There is anecdotal evidence from operational experience, that refugees and asylum seekers across Scotland can experience issues with mental health, in common with wider society. By definition, an individual designated as destitute or with insecure immigration status could potentially experience exacerbation of existing mental health issues. Such complex needs may increase the challenges to local policing and partners, in dealing appropriately with an individual in crisis.

- Can you give examples of best practice of effective strategic coordination of services to ensure there are no gaps or overlaps in homelessness services?


Locality team are considering featuring the homeless community specifically when identifying small areas and deprived communities to focus work in this regard.

Glasgow - Work has further developed with “Routes out of Begging,” led by Councillor Jim Coleman and the City Council. A disused retail premises has been identified, with plans for an information hub focussing on homelessness and
begging, highlighting ongoing work by the council and 3rd Sector. It is anticipated the Christian Mission will take the lead, with partnership support for an initial 4 week trial.

**Aberdeen** - The City Centre Community Policing Teams attends a ‘Street Begging Forum’ managed and led by Safer Aberdeen on a quarterly basis. This comprises membership from Third Sector i.e. Cyrenians, Local Authority, Police, Immigration and Safer Aberdeen. The focus of this group has been to establish an outreach worker employed by the Cyrenians.

- **Are there any other issues relating to homelessness which you wish to bring to the attention of the Committee?**

The act of begging can be inextricably linked to homelessness, but this is not consistently the case. There can be a lack of tolerance for this group of vulnerable people, leading to an unrealistic expectation from the public on police to “deal with” begging. There is limited understanding that the act of begging is not a crime or offence. Where there is aggressive behaviour, the threshold of criminality may be reached and appropriate action will be taken. Police Scotland will always seek to address the wellbeing of the individual concerned as a priority, regardless of the presence of criminality. Historically there has been intelligence to suggest that in some areas there is involvement of SAOC groups who exploit this as a method of securing finance.

These are only some of the issues identified, however it is generally agreed that the issue of homelessness and begging is one that requires a multi-agency approach with an acknowledgement that the Local Authorities should be the lead agency with the police providing support as one of the partners.