Local Government and Communities Committee

Homelessness

Submission from Rachel Gollan

Please find my written evidence and views on homelessness. I work in Edinburgh so it is this area/local authority I am writing about.

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

It isn’t working due to lack of money and resources. In Edinburgh we are trying to build on good working partnerships between agencies when dealing with homelessness. The problem is the lack of Social Housing, staffing levels, training and lack of ‘specialist housing officers who have to deal with a lot of complex needs’. I feel service users should have knowledgeable workers who understand the issues etc. they face. I think housing officers who are not trained in these areas should work in partnership with addiction, domestic abuse, criminal justice, health agencies to make sure all supports are in place. I have checked all local authorities (in Scotland) and they all have good policies when dealing with homelessness. The Scottish Government have guidelines/legislation etc. to help protect the rights of homeless people. We constantly have to refer to these when challenging decisions housing officers take. We often have to inform service users that they have been misinformed by the housing officer. In South West Edinburgh there is a ‘working group’ from different agencies including police, housing, social work and health who discuss service users (who are unsafe at home) and how they can prevent them from becoming homeless. Also the women referred to MARAC are ‘flagged up’ to all partner agencies and supports are put in place.

2) How effective is the relationship between all the relevant agencies, including the health sector, and charities working on homelessness prevention?

The relationship is generally good (in Edinburgh). The problem I face in my work is often lack of correct information given to service users. It seems as if they have been ‘fobbed off’ by the housing officer. I am often telling them to go back and challenge the housing officer. We try to accompany women to these appointments but due to lack of funding/staff this isn’t possible. Also, information sharing can be an issue especially if any of the organisations are statutory as they often ‘keep’ some information to themselves and are not keen on sharing this. I am referring to the SWIFT system the Social Work Department use. Also some housing officers will not speak to advocacy workers without a written consent form (this is becoming more of an issue recently). Some agencies don’t have the knowledge to inform clients ‘correctly’. Homelessness prevention is becoming more difficult with the benefit cap and high private rents. The amount of money it costs to get perpetrators of domestic abuse removed from tenancies/lease agreements. Some agencies have no understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse and how that can affect a woman and any children
she may have. There is not appropriate temporary accommodation in Edinburgh so a lot of women stay in abusive relationships, especially if the only option is to take their children to another area within Edinburgh (and sometimes out with Edinburgh) and stay in B & B accommodation as there is no other accommodation for them. The MARAC meetings have been successful in highlighting women at risk of physical harm and all relevant agencies are aware of what each other is doing so the duplication of work is reducing. Named workers are also identified and this helps to support women and enables them to get a support plan suited to their individual needs.

3) **What needs to happen to improve the delivery of housing options and homelessness prevention services and the outcomes achieved for service users?**

Council Houses need to be built, not just RSL (Registered Social Landlord) properties. If councils have more houses then it will generate more income for them and not just generate money for social landlords. More properties need to be sourced for women’s aid groups. More money needs to be put into staffing levels and training. Social Landlords should be made to give local authorities a bigger percentage of their properties. More money needs to be spent on tenancy sustainment/resettlement. People on low incomes (who are not entitled to welfare benefits) need more financial support at the beginning of getting their tenancies especially if coming from temp or homeless accommodation and having no belongings/furniture etc. More discretionary housing benefit payments to help with benefit cap and under 25’s should be allowed to apply for Housing benefit. Discretionary housing benefit should be given to low income families who are just under the threshold for housing benefit. Edinburgh has shut down big hostels and only replaced some of them but not the same amount of bed spaces. More women/men only accommodation should be available. Families should be allowed to have pets in temporary accommodation. Working groups and a multi-agency approach for all people including those not at risk of physical harm should be implemented to discuss all issues homeless people face. People need to be given the choice to stay in the area they come from, if they want instead of having to move out of the area and losing school placements, supports etc. already in place.

4) **What role should private sector housing providers play in preventing and responding to homelessness?**

They should have to give a bigger percentage of their properties to the local authority in their area. They could give some nominated properties to Women’s Aid groups in their area, therefore freeing up refuge accommodation for other women and accompanying children. When dealing with management transfers there should not be a need for the resident to have incident numbers from the police before considering a transfer. Most Social Landlords have this policy but at present there has to be police involvement and not all women have reported domestic abuse to the police. More should be done to exclude a perpetrator from the home if the woman wants to stay there. There should be more support for service users who have additional needs. More multi-agency work needs to be done. Social Landlords might think of employing experienced workers in
addiction etc. to help support their service user to sustain the tenancy and help to work on other issues to prevent future homelessness. They could build hostel accommodation as well, this could be either staffed by themselves or they could rent the accommodation back to the local authority to manage.

5) **What evidence is there of pressure on temporary accommodation in your area? Has this increased in recent years?**

Families are being accommodated in B & B accommodation as there are no emergency/temporary flats/houses to put them into. Some families are sent to another local area i.e. Fife, Midlothian and West Lothian to get B & B accommodation. Some families are put into premier inn rooms as well. This was not the case a few years ago but in the past 2 years this is becoming a daily occurrence. Families are being housed further away from their supports, schools etc. Some families are being housed in the other end of Edinburgh. They can therefore lose school places etc. as they no longer stay in the catchment area. They also have to change GP surgery etc. Families/homeless people are encouraged to stay with friends/family as when the council can run out of places to put them the only other option is to book more Premier Inn rooms (this is costly and not something they are keen on doing).

6) **How can homeless people’s experiences of temporary accommodation be improved? For example, how can the use of unsuitable accommodation be reduced or the length of time spent in temporary accommodation reduced?**

More social housing needs to be available for homeless people (Build more houses). When I started at my place of employment 12 years ago people in temporary accommodation in Edinburgh were only there for approx. 4 - 6 months before they were offered permanent accommodation. The lack of housing in Edinburgh is now in dire straits and people in temp accommodation are there for 12 – 18 months now. If the council built more HMO (Houses of multiple occupancy) accommodation and hostels etc. this would ease the burden but again, money and resources need to be used to allow this to happen. The types of temporary accommodation need to be looked at. In Edinburgh there are B & B spaces, hostel spaces, refuge spaces, PSL (Private Sector Leasing) and some flats/houses. The latter is sometimes a good option for people as they can use the flat etc. as their own until a permanent option becomes available. Social Landlords should maybe be pressurised into taking more homeless people on ‘their books’. But ultimately I think the council should be responsible for building more properties.

7) **Do you have any concerns about the funding of temporary accommodation? If yes, how should temporary accommodation be funded?**

Yes. Temporary accommodation is (generally) more expensive than social rented properties. There should be more accommodation available that isn’t 24 hour staffed etc. which would bring the cost down for service users. B & B accommodation is expensive although the facilities do not reflect the costs. Families do not have cooking facilities and have to share bathrooms with other
families/people. The government will have to put more money into the pot regarding homelessness. My own feeling is that taxes should be used for this. Taxes should be means tested the less you earn the less you pay, but the more you earn the more you pay. Higher tax rates should be brought down from £80,000 to around £35 – 40,000 so that more money is brought in. Not many people earn £80,000 or over. Also corporation tax should be looked at again and those who owe tax should be made to pay it. After all we, (the wee people), are hounded for taxes etc. so why not big corporate companies etc.

8) How do Social Landlord’s allocation policies prioritise applications from homeless households and how does choice based lettings work in practice?

Most Social Landlords have an agreement with their local authority to allocate some of their properties towards homeless people. The allocation policies are in line with the local authorities but they do give preference to their own tenants. They are part of the choice based lettings systems that are in place in some local authorities so they have to be seen to be doing the right thing however, not many of our service users get offered housing association properties. Choice based lettings do not work. People are expected to start bidding as soon as they are registered but they will not be offered a property until approx. 12 – 18 months later. There are issues with ‘realistic bids’, and who decides what areas are realistic. Some of the areas in Edinburgh classed as realistic should be reclassified as they are no longer the ‘best areas’. Homeless people are expected to make two realistic bids and one ‘wish list bid’. They are also expected to take high rise flats and they are expected to take the worst areas “after all they are homeless so they’ll take anything”? This is the opinion of housing officers (and their seniors) in Edinburgh. Homeless people have lost their priority as they haven’t been bidding realistically or they haven’t made any bids as they haven’t found anywhere they would want to stay. This is happening more often and once they have lost their priority they are taken off the list (so they are no longer counted as homeless – even if they haven’t found accommodation). Even though there is a choice based lettings system homeless people in our accommodation (refuge) are being overlooked and some people who are registered on the list after them are offered properties first. Edinburgh Council have their own stat’s/performance outcomes to fulfil and I have an email from a council housing officer which states that people in their temporary accommodation are to be offered PSL properties before other homeless people accommodated with other agencies?

9) 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?

There is no quick fix for this. People with complex needs will need more support and longer time to help deal with the variety of issues they face. Maybe more halfway houses need to be available so they move on slowly before being expected to copy independently. Housing officers should be experienced in the issues that affect some people with complex needs. More staff and resources need to be made available. Some people with complex needs need supported
accommodation, this needs to be funded as well and spaces need to be available for this. Our 24 hour refuge works long term with women/families as they will have complex needs including addiction and mental health as well as experiencing domestic abuse. This takes time to support women as there is often a lot of historical abuse women have experienced as well. We (Edinburgh Women’s Aid) only have 8 flats in the whole of Edinburgh for women/families with complex needs???

10) 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?

The MARAC meetings work well. These are for women who are at risk of physical harm from their partner or ex-partner. I feel this could be rolled out to all homeless people. There would need to be regular meetings (possibly daily) so the workers would all have to be in the same place or available for conference calls etc. Workers from other agencies could be based in local hubs and that is where homeless people could attend for appointments etc. Locally based council offices could be utilised for this purpose. I feel locality based support is probably the best way forward so homeless people have easy access to any supports they require in the area they are staying in. Health professionals would also be involved in trying to help homeless people get the services they require especially mental health services. Addiction workers could be present as well as housing, Social Work/Safer families/Criminal Justice, Domestic Abuse workers, police and health.

11) How can access to general health services, including preventative health services, be improved for homeless people?

More local GP surgeries should take temporary patients. Some areas in Edinburgh will not take new patients and people have to access the homeless practice. This can be off putting for people who do not have additional needs such as addictions etc. When people are in temp accommodation (if they want) they should be allowed to keep the GP etc. they are already registered with especially if they would like to stay in or move back to the area. Identification can be an issue for people and if they don’t have a certain type of identification they can’t be registered (in some surgeries). Different GP surgeries/medial centres in Edinburgh seem to have different procedures for temporary patients and different ‘rules’ for registering with them.

12) What role could the ‘housing first’ model play in improving outcomes for homeless people with multiple complex needs?

I am not aware of the ‘housing first’ model? I have never heard of it. I looked online and found information from Shelter, England and what I found is that it is based on a model from New York which states that chronic street homeless people’s first option should be housing not treatment. My understanding of this would mean that they would go straight into a property with no supports in place? This assumes that chronic street homeless people have addictions etc. and in my experience (when I worked for a homeless charity in Edinburgh from 2002 –
addictions are not the issue for them it is mainly mental health. Homeless people who are classed as ‘chronic rough sleepers’ have mental health issues and feel safer on the streets, they don’t think they can sustain a property so treatment (for mental health) would have to go in hand with housing otherwise (in my opinion) it wouldn’t work. Housing should coincide with treatment to enable a positive outcome.

13) How has the pattern of rough sleeping changed in your area? For example, is the number of rough sleepers increasing or have the characteristics of rough sleepers changed? What are the reasons for this?

When I worked for the homeless charity in 2002 I worked in a night shelter. Initially there were around 40 people per night but by the time I left in 2005 the numbers were capped at 80 per night and we ended up having to turn people away. There are also a lot of EU nationals who sleep rough. The reason is again the council have not built any accommodation they have relied on social landlords however they are now at near capacity as well and there are not enough properties to give to homeless people. I no longer work there so am not sure of the numbers etc. of rough sleepers now. The night shelter is no longer open so that option is no longer available.

14) What type of accommodation is offered to rough sleepers?

Temp/emergency accommodation, hostels and B & B’s – If they have any vacancies. There are church night shelters in Edinburgh from Nov – March. They are held in a different church each night and a list is available from housing offices. Other than that they could stay with friends/family or sleep on the streets. PSL (Private Sector Lease) properties. These are owned by private landlords but the local authority manage these. They are generally fully furnished (although some are not fit for purpose).

15) What type of approaches can contribute to the reduction of rough sleeping and achievement or sustainable housing solutions for rough sleepers?

There is no quick fix. We should change our judgements/expectations of homeless people and look at the person holistically instead of as a number/statistic. Work from a person centred approach with multi-agency involvement (where applicable) so that all support needs are being dealt with.

16) What are the reasons behind why people become homeless?

Relationship breakdown, loss of job, addiction, incarceration, family arguments, overcrowding, under occupancy, eviction by private landlord, other eviction issues, rent arrears, gambling, mental health issues, young people not able to sustain tenancies or not able to get housing benefit if under 25 years old, No Recourse to Public Funds/other immigration issues etc.
17) What data is used to measure homelessness numbers in a particular area?

I would assume local authorities would have the numbers of people applying for housing, including those where social landlords are accommodating homeless people. In Edinburgh not all hostels are run by the local authority. There are other sources but I am not sure if they are collated and added to the local authority figures. Homeless organisations and charities accommodate people classed as homeless and again I am not sure if all figures are collated.

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

In Edinburgh we recently had a consultation on service redesign of domestic abuse services and all agencies and individuals were asked to participate. This was well received and a lot of feedback was given. There are now groups taking place where ‘we’ are looking at service delivery etc. I mentioned a group in Q 1 in the South West of Edinburgh, this group came about because of the service redesign consultation. There are also groups in other local areas who are looking into how services respond to domestic abuse (in a multi-agency approach). I am involved in the Domestic Abuse Service Redesign Housing Working Group where we are looking at improving women and children’s experiences of homelessness and are looking at ways of trying to prevent it from happening. I am keen on all local authorities to have a domestic abuse policy in a housing context. This would enable women and children to be treated with some dignity and respect and would take into account that the majority of them have left ‘nice houses in some are in nice areas’ and they would not be expected to move somewhere out with ‘their wish list’. If women were able to have the perpetrator removed the majority of them would probably stay in their own homes. I am aware that the perpetrator would need to be rehoused but surely rehousing one person is better than a whole family. Women and children are not to blame for being abused it is the perpetrator who should pay/suffer not them.

19) Are there any problems with people accessing their housing and homelessness rights? If yes, how can access be improved?

If someone is accessing homelessness services after hours there is nowhere they can go in person. They have to phone for accommodation and not all people have a phone or are able to access one. Housing officers are under pressure and they often do not give the proper information to service users and often send them away without telling them their full housing options/rights. We find this happens a lot in cases of domestic abuse. A lot of women are asked for proof and evidence before they can get homelessness priority. We know this is wrong and have to tell women to re-present and challenge this. Not all people have internet access or even know how to use it. Library staff could be trained in how to do this and be there to help people. Most housing officers ask people to bid online and some people can’t do that, again this could be done in the library/local housing office. People may not have the funds etc. to go to housing offices and often go to another agency to try to get housing advice although some agencies won’t have that information. Maybe housing officers could do more
outreach appointments and meet clients when they are getting support from another agencies etc.

20) **What are the barriers to providing homeless people with sustainable housing solutions and how can these barriers be addressed?**

Money and more resources including staffing and building more properties. Better resettlement support so they can sustain the tenancy and not feel unsupported as soon as they move in. Better access to helping get furniture etc. when moving into a new property especially if not on benefits and on a low income. Look at the person holistically instead of as a number/statistic. Look at person centred support and work in a multi-agency approach so that all supports needs are being dealt with especially mental health. Possibly look at befrienders or mentors to support people to attend appointments etc.

21) **Are there any other issues relating to homelessness which you wish to bring to the attention of the committee?**

I feel the Scottish government should put pressure on Social Landlords to give more properties for social housing to help ease homelessness and waiting times in temp accommodation. More priority should be given to people who are fleeing their homes because of domestic abuse or other hate crimes. A clause could be added to the Housing Scotland Act to make it easier to evict perpetrators from tenancies so that women and children do not find themselves in a homeless situation (unless they choose to leave). Choice based lettings need to be looked at as it doesn’t work. The Scottish government could put pressure (legislation) on all LA’s to work more in line with each other. Each LA has their own way of working/allocating properties. More resources need to be put in place to help people get the support they need which should be individualised to ‘their’ needs. Give funding to reopen the Cowgate Centre night shelter. When this was open it eased the pressure on rough sleepers by giving them somewhere safe and dry to sleep. The accommodation was very basic and they slept on mats on the floor but they said it was better than sleeping on the streets. Pressurise local authorities into giving tenants Management Transfers as not all of them do and to change the eligibility for this. Look at changing the rules on No Recourse to Public Funds so that it can be opened up to women who are not on a spousal visa. Some women assume they are here on spousal visas as they are married to the abuser but the abuser has applied for a different type without their knowledge. Give financial help to women who are suffering domestic abuse and are from EEA as at present they have no recourse to benefits for the first 3 months.

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