Local Government and Communities Committee

Homelessness

Submission from Debbie McNab

This is written by someone who works for a small independent housing charity in the Dumfries and Galloway region. I am a support worker and work with people experiencing homelessness (whether sofa surfing or in hostel or other temporary accommodation) and I would like to outline some of the difficulties I witness people facing every day.

There is no homelessness prevention policy or practice from Dumfries and Galloway Council, as was highlighted in the White Star report (2016). Homelessness is generally seen as something to deal with when it occurs. Housing support organisations are advised by the local authority that they cannot work to prevent homelessness, but must step in in time of crisis and address the fallout.

Eviction notices are being placed on tenants of RSL’s in this area regularly (particularly from Dumfries and Galloway Housing Partnership (DGHP)), often for what seems like minimal rent arrears, and without the support of housing charities they could potentially be made street homeless. These arrears can be accrued through no fault of the individual; sometimes attributed to housing benefit being suspended because of lack of cooperation from ex-employers providing timeous evidence regarding income. There seems to be very little support from the RSL around any of these issues, nor easily understood information for the tenant to enable them to address this. Often they are only being referred for support at the last minute and are in complete panic as to what will happen. Many people who have ended up in this situation have mental health issues, which can impact on their ability to manage their tenancy, a factor which does not seem to be considered; being put in this position can and does exacerbate conditions of already vulnerable individuals and families.

Housing Options paperwork has amalgamated so that all RSL’s are inclusive within one form, which is helpful, rather than people having several separate forms to complete. There is a huge shortage of one bedroom properties, however, which means lengthy waiting times for many people in temporary accommodation, those sofa surfing and those on the general waiting list. There is also a shortage of available homeless accommodation. One young lady I worked with was sleeping in her car for almost two weeks until any suitable temporary homeless accommodation could be found.

Following on, it can be very unclear as to how or why housing allocations are made; there is very little consistency. One couple with a young baby who moved to this area from overseas were allocated a flat in one of the most undesirable blocks in the area. The father is working in McDonalds and they are doing their utmost to make a
life for themselves, despite drug users and anti-social behaviour occurring almost daily around them. Another service user was allocated a tenancy in a popular part of town, despite having left a number of previous tenancies in disarray and owing thousands in rent arrears. When queried, the decision making body advised that allocations were ‘computer generated’.

Another young lady and her two children (3 and 7) were facing eviction from the family home by the ex-partner as the lady’s name was not on the mortgage. An urgent Housing Options form was put in and within two weeks (before she had to leave the family home) she had been given an offer of a tenancy. Her family’s pending homelessness was obviously seen as critical and dealt with extremely efficiently. She had asked that she did not go down the homeless route (temporary accommodation) as she wanted her children to be settled into their new permanent home with as little upheaval as possible. This again was listened to and accepted. However, said property was in need of some extensive repairs and while it would not be safe for the family to move in until these were complete it has taken almost four weeks at time of writing. The family are currently sleeping on sofas and floors in various houses until they can move in. My feeling is that there should be some system whereby repairs etc. should be done as a matter of urgency when people find themselves in this type of situation, especially when children are involved.

Another issue with homeless accommodation is the cost. Many people are not working and the rental charge is therefore covered by the local authority. However, in some cases, people are working and have either had to leave their job as they cannot afford the astronomical costs (up to £182+ for a room in a hostel with shared facilities, £480 per month for a one-bedroom flat in a less than desirable area – equivalent RSL properties are around £250 - £300 and private lets around the £350 mark) or they accrue massive arrears to be repaid once in permanent accommodation. So on top of whatever personal catastrophe has caused their homelessness and any other issues which being homeless can cause, these people either become unwillingly reliant on state benefits or end up with thousands in debt. DGHP also have a policy of ‘rent first’ where people have to pay a weeks’ rent in advance of moving in. Again, this is putting already vulnerable individuals in a very difficult position. The offered tenancy must be taken, as per local authority policy on homelessness, often without even being seen by the prospective tenant. Many are then having to borrow to pay the weeks’ rent (which is not always an option), accrue arrears (if they or their support worker can negotiate later payment, which is not always an option) or end up being classed as intentionally homeless! The response to queries regarding this policy is ‘we are a business’.

Once in the tenancy, often having had to wait for weeks or even months for current tenants to move out and repairs to be complete, there have been many cases where the properties remain in an unacceptable state. Again, DGHP stand out to me as being particularly guilty of this. On numerous occasions individuals were being left without proper sanitisation; toilets not working, smells of human waste, damp (so severe one girl was forced to sleep in her living room for a year until the
‘condensation’ issue in her bedroom was addressed), spur boxes ‘forgotten’ to be put in and people left without appropriate cooking facilities, sometimes for weeks. These issues put enormous strain on people’s ability to set up and maintain a home, after already experiencing an episode of major instability in their lives. This in itself has the potential for tenancies to fail and people to become homeless (‘intentionally’) once again.

Private sector landlords in this area are not generally helpful in preventing or responding to homelessness issues. The accommodation commonly remains expensive, sub-standard and most will not consider rent deposit schemes, nor people on benefits. There seems to be a lack of understanding or compassion for the issues which face homeless people. If homeless people can get a private let, the local housing allowance does not fully cover the rental cost and there may also be bedroom tax to pay. Once again this leaves vulnerable tenants possibly accruing arrears and facing potential eviction and ultimately homelessness, where they will then be classed as intentionally homeless and therefore not eligible for accommodation from the local authority. It is a vicious cycle for some individuals whom the system does not help.