Local Government and Communities Committee

Homelessness

Submission from Aberdeen City Council

I refer to your request made on Wednesday 3 May 2017, asking for written evidence on homelessness, the reasons why people can find themselves homeless or threatened with homelessness and what can be done to tackle this effectively. Please find below the views of Aberdeen City Council on this matter.

Housing Options and Homelessness Prevention

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dispute within household / relationship breakdown: non-violent</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asked to leave</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispute within household: violent or abusive</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Termination of tenancy / mortgage due to rent arrears / default on payments</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>122</td>
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<tr>
<td>All other reasons for homelessness including Termination of tenancy; Applicant terminated secure accommodation; Loss of service / tied accommodation; Discharge from prison / hospital / care / other institution; Emergency; Forced division and sale of matrimonial home; Other reason for loss of accommodation; Fleeing non-domestic violence; Harassment; and Overcrowding.</td>
<td>624</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>434</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>1517</td>
<td>1285</td>
<td>1375</td>
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As per the table above, the main reasons for homelessness within Aberdeen have been consistent over the last three years. HL1 data is used to measure homelessness numbers in a particular area.

Everybody who applies for housing with Aberdeen City Council is contacted by an officer to discuss their housing options. This allows us the earliest possible opportunity to identify any issues and also provide customers with sufficient information to make informed decisions about their housing circumstances. Overall trends have seen an increase in the use of our rent deposit scheme and referrals to our Financial Inclusion Team. This in turn increases referrals to related services and partner agencies are intervening and becoming involved prior to these housing or support issues reaching crisis levels.

We continue to develop our working relationships both internally with other departments and services (social work for example) and also with external agencies such as Shelter where we have developed holistic joined up working. We have several third sector agencies working in house, within our teams, offering services to customers. We will continue to develop the links with social care so that
homelessness and housing support services can intervene earlier ensuring that our customers with complex needs are assisted before they are in crisis.

Often homelessness legislation is relied on to address relationship breakdowns within dysfunctional households, with members being broken up across multiple tenancies rather than addressing the fundamental problems within the households. However there is a serious lack of alternatives to remedy the main causes of homelessness, relationship breakdown and asked to leave cases. Greater powers to intervene, with more housing options such as mediation and counselling to sustain families and relationships would significantly reduce homelessness and allow services to address these fundamental issues.

There is a need to link housing support to housing options more. For example, if we were better able to provide a guarantee to private landlords that support will be provided if the tenant is difficult to manage, this would help make private tenancies the norm for households as opposed to social housing being perceived as the only viable solution. More resources are required to provide both housing options and housing outcomes. Removing the direct link between homelessness and social housing would provide greater flexibility and more positive outcomes. It would also remove the uncertainty and associated distress and multiple disadvantage experienced when individuals and families have to access temporary accommodation – a limited resource with long waiting periods.

However, the private sector needs to be a more realistic option in order for it to be effective – this could potentially be more likely with the new tenancy type which affords tenants greater rights. Private sector housing provision is reliant on income and the unstable income/rental income created by housing benefit and the general benefits system makes the homeless/potentially homeless customer very unappealing when landlords have alternatives available to them. Support for tenants can alleviate some of this risk in terms of tenancy sustainment but does not provide the financial comfort and confidence that the private sector requires.

A further problem with this option is that although there is legislation in place to regulate the private rented sector, there is a lack of resource and/or will to take any meaningful action within appropriate timescales. Too often police officers on the ground are reluctant to deal with unlawful evictions, their understanding of them as civil, not criminal matters, despite many campaigns explicitly advising to the contrary. Similarly, local authority actions require lengthy, expensive legal processes which don’t address the immediate needs of those threatened with losing their home. Faced with this uncertainty, it is not surprising that once illegally evicted, the vast majority of tenants would prefer to exercise their right to make a homelessness application than return to a tenancy where their landlord’s behaviour has been found wanting, and their future uncertain.

**Temporary Accommodation**

B&Bs and hotels are used when there is pressure on temporary accommodation. Our reliance on the purchase of additional accommodation has been a significant financial cost to the Council over the last 4 years. While it is not anticipated that future spend will reach similar levels there will always be a need to have additional
accommodation available, such as the use of B&Bs and hotels in order to meet demand and our statutory obligations. For example, historically there is a marked increase in homelessness after the festive period and our use of B&Bs and hotels often peaks at this point.

The private sector market in Aberdeen has not been conducive to preventing homelessness. Time spent in temporary accommodation and overall homeless journey times have therefore been lengthy and housing options very limited, adding further pressures on our accommodation resources. We are actively working to reduce and mitigate the impact of pressures on temporary accommodation and our service plans reflect the interdependencies of housing, homelessness, health, social care and support within our communities. There has already been great progress made, with protocols around hospital and prison discharge having an immediate positive impact on the experience of homeless people and the facilitation of one move from institution to tenancy, bypassing temporary accommodation wherever feasibly possible. However, there needs to be recognition from the Scottish Government that B&B and Hotel use will be required for short term fluctuations in demand for accommodation so that Councils can fulfil statutory duties.

Accommodation could be more appropriate to customers’ needs. There can be occasions where a 24/7 manned accommodation unit has been used to accommodate a customer with no support needs. This can be attributed to pressures previously outlined and because running a variety of different temporary accommodation models is becoming increasingly less viable. This is going to be increasingly hard to do as the financial pressure increases on temporary accommodation and it is more important for us not to carry void properties.

Significant cost is also incurred to households who are working and living in temporary accommodation. Our Tullos Lodge project was born as a result - Tullos Lodge is a converted janitor’s building where we are able to offer low rents and afford working households the opportunity to save up for a deposit. This has been especially helpful for intentionally homeless households in the past. We have extended this accommodation model and now use several HMO properties to address the specific needs of working households.

The unsuitable accommodation order should not be a major concern. We would caution that the reduction to a 7 day period may have unintended consequences - additional pressure to provide alternative accommodation for someone who is pregnant may result in double moves, causing more disruption and distress.

We have major concerns regarding the funding of homelessness – there is an urgent need for the relaxation of the rules around supported accommodation in order to allow local authorities to continue to offer this kind of accommodation model. Since the new lower benefit cap was introduced by the UK Government in November, 46 households across our temporary accommodation have been affected. The total amount of their arrears is £86,147.52. Since April the £60 per week management fee that people in our private sector leased properties were eligible to claim was removed resulting in the scheme now operating at a £339,954 annual loss. We therefore anticipate substantial loss of income and associated pressure on budgets as a direct result of welfare and housing benefit reform.
Universal Credit (UC) is going to also add pressure – this is the same for all housing tenures but particularly in temporary accommodation due to the qualifying period and the fact that people will change tenancies quicker. For example, as of April 2017, the arrears for the 12 households who were in our temporary accommodation and in receipt of UC stood at £31,813.67. We therefore support the recommendation that temporary accommodation should have the UC payment sent directly to landlord by default.

For Aberdeen, we also need to consider whether temporary accommodation should be a separate entity on its own. One of our current considerations for example is whether we should make our temporary accommodation part of HRA/RSL stock which is managed by housing officers. This would normalise homelessness and also provide further accommodation/support which would more accurately reflect what customers are due to receive in the future. This would allow for budget to be prioritised for spend on specialist types of short term accommodation for example, on supported flats and small hostel type units.

**Permanent Accommodation**

Aberdeen City Council's Housing Allocations Policy gives priority to applicants who are assessed as statutory homeless. They are placed on the Urgent Rehousing List which is the first list that is considered when making offers of accommodation. Statutory homeless applicants are considered for the appropriate size of property in all areas of the City and all house types. This is to increase the chances of a suitable offer of accommodation being made in a reasonable timescale. If applicants are not able to live in a certain area of the City due to exceptional circumstances, for example, harassment, then that area would be removed from their application.

Aberdeen City Council also take account of any medical or functional needs which can affect the type of accommodation that an applicant can be offered. For example, an applicant may have a need for ground floor accommodation. We currently use a Choice Based Letting system to allocate 2 bedroom tenement flats in one area of the City. This is done in partnership with Homehunt NES. Statutory Homeless applicants are encouraged to bid for properties that are advertised on Homehunt NES. Case Officers working with Statutory Homeless applicants can bid on their behalf if they have difficulty doing so.

**Multiple and Complex Needs**

We have a holistic multi-agency framework in place to coordinate resources and address the needs of homeless clients with multiple and complex needs. Housing First evidences some good practice to address such needs, however, there is still a gap for a small number of homeless clients – those who do not want to be housed and which do not easily fit into our existing accommodation and support frameworks.

There is always scope for greater and improved joint working with all agencies and groups supporting those with multiple and complex needs. There is further improvement sought around the working between H&SCP and homelessness – currently this is working really well once housing support duties have been
transferred but further work is underway to make sure the same applies throughout the homelessness journey. This is understandable, taking into consideration the organisational change these services are going through. However there is good multiagency working at the local operation level.

The Marywell Health Practice is a good local example of innovative working. It is currently being reviewed but delivers an excellent nurse-led service to many homeless clients throughout the city who would otherwise struggle to access GP services.

“Pure” Housing First – the provision of immediate housing without any requirement to show capacity to be able to live independently - has a place but currently only about 20 to 30 clients in Aberdeen would meet the criteria for this approach (high and complex medical needs, extensive, inappropriate use of emergency and other services or high rates of contact with the criminal justice service). Pure Housing First would only be cost-effective for this group. This figure represents our best estimation of chronic homeless/rough sleeping clients following from a comprehensive piece of work done to analyse reasons for homelessness, and repeat homelessness presentations. We are currently reviewing our homelessness strategy and examining how we can use the same principles to create a housing led approach (Housing First “Lite”) for all people who are experiencing homelessness as this is where the most impact and positive outcomes could be achieved.

A small number of individuals still prove to be exceptionally difficult to place due to the risks they present to staff, neighbours and the wider public. Staffed accommodation units are not always a viable option due to difficult interactions with others and when placed in a tenancy, the result is often extreme levels of antisocial behaviour that makes life unbearable for neighbours. Unfortunately, nearly all of our housing stock is in high density areas. At the same time, these are often very vulnerable people who are at high risk of harm themselves if a service is withdrawn. It would be worth exploring other types of accommodation that might better meet the needs of this group, for example, the Skaeve Huse project in Denmark.

**Rough Sleeping**

Rough sleeping figures are captured in our HL1. The overall trend is that there is less rough sleeping recorded from homelessness presentations. The number of individuals sleeping rough within the last 3 months of presentation has come down from 174 in 2014/15 to only 122 in 16/17. Individuals recorded as having slept rough the preceding night to presenting as homeless has come down from 102 in 14/15 to 69 in 16/17.

Temporary Accommodation for homeless people should meet the needs of the customers, so this is no different for rough sleepers. It would be preferable if rough sleepers used the statutory homeless route, at the same time it will be useful for us to explore other options, as we do work with people who become ineligible for assistance and/or with no recourse to public funds. We are interested to see how Brexit and leaving the EU will impact on rough sleeping in the city and whether it will increase the number of rough sleepers.
Housing First and assertive outreach work are by far the best approaches to help reduce the numbers of rough sleepers and sustain housing solutions for them. Good provision of drop in services should underpin all such approaches.

Other –

We previously identified a problem with customers accessing appeal rights when negative s.184 decisions were made. They were either asking for appeals out of time or engaged advocacy services with insufficient time or capacity to deal with the matter for them. We now complete a direct referral to these services on the client’s behalf when the decision is made to ensure that they are accessing all help available and are able to effectively exercise their rights.

There are several barriers to providing homeless people with sustainable housing solutions but they are mostly cultural issues around the treatment first model and apprehension from housing providers around accommodating homeless people, and making better efforts to engage tenants and sustain good tenancy practice. We are making great strides to address some of these concerns and shift the perception of homeless households but there is still work to be done to address such stigma.

Legislation is strong about giving people rights to housing, but further guidance and instruction to allow people to be housed, with appropriate support, may reduce some of the barriers that are encountered along the way. We are also aware that we need to engage local communities better, where there is already a lot of resilience and support, in order to further prevent homelessness and tackle the root causes of homelessness.

At the moment options are limited to housing a homeless person in our temporary accommodation or discharging into a SSST/SST. Some of our customers are not interested in these housing options and we would like to be able to offer alternative long term options which are more appropriate to what they would like. It is these same customers that use up huge resources, funding and time, all for homelessness services and housing options that they do not want.

Yours sincerely

Neil Carnegie
Communities and Housing Area Manager