I fully support the Scottish Government being open to seeking views and opinion around the current Homelessness context in Scotland – I think this is excellent and evidences a healthy willingness to listen and learn.

I have a reasonable amount of experience working within the field of Homelessness within Scotland undertaking quite different roles and in very different settings and locations however I’m very much just one voice. As such I do not pretend to be able to comment on the full picture, only what I have experienced within the roles I’ve held and currently hold. I am writing as an individual - I currently work with the Moray Council though I should state that the following views are my own and not necessarily those of the wider Moray Council. Much of the below stems from my work within the Moray area which is markedly different to my previous working experience within the Glasgow area.

I will venture that you will probably receive a fair amount of responses from established organisations which may focus on the upstream causes of Homelessness. This is of course absolutely right and fully legitimate. These causes are wide and varied and naturally should be addressed however I wish to add a possibly slightly alternative perspective; one which at times may be possible due to me writing as an individual and so possibly free(er) from certain contextual constraints. By focussing on certain aspects or issues around the use of the system by some, I do certainly do not wish to suggest they are the predominant issues that the system faces. I do however feel the points are worthwhile contributing as part of the wider debate.

**Core points I'd wish to suggest:**

- With regard to any review of the current system within Scotland, I feel we need to ask the question as to whether we wish the Homeless system to represent a final/emergency safety net for people/households to avoid Homelessness or are we, as a society, content with a Homeless system representing more of an *option* for people, *irrespective of their scope to secure alternative housing*.
- Scope to prevent homelessness by reasonable means is different to a customer electing to use this scope.
- Homelessness can be an attractive to some households given the likely resolution of gaining Social Housing.
Where Local Authorities have tried to respond to increased approaches (and so impacting on Temporary Accommodation demands), by further increasing the quotas of Homeless allocations, they are in danger of a highly slippery slope occurring whereby the decreased prospects/increased waits for customers on the mainstream list, lower to the point that the Homeless system becomes more attractive.

I’d anticipate that the above points are more relevant to the more rural setting that I’m currently working within rather than the more urban settings I have previously worked in.

If there are indeed issues of the use of the Homeless system becoming more of an option or choice to some, rather than a necessity, and this demand impacts on those who potentially need the Homeless system the most, then potentially fundamental questions need to be asked as to whether the current system is working as we hope. Again, I do not feel this applies to most approaches though it certainly applies to some.

Housing Options and Homelessness Prevention

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

Where the Housing Options initiative has shown to reduce the demand/need for the Homeless system, then naturally I would view the Housing Options initiative as being successful. Of course, this presumes good practice in terms of Housing Options not being used as a barrier to making a presentation. Speaking from a frontline position, I can very confidently say that good outcomes are frequently being achieved by Housing Options intervention. I am aware that in some Local Authority areas, the Housing Options initiative has lost some traction of late.

Re the question around good practice, I’d suggest this is hugely subjective. Are services spending significant time and resources (potentially over many months, with multiple agency involvement), supporting customers to stabilise situations or supporting customers to secure suitable and sustainable alternative accommodation, thus removing any threat of Homelessness – all in line with the customer’s aspiration? Yes - this is happening up and down the country by Housing Options teams. If the first action of these teams was not to take a Homeless form (even if the customer was clear that they did not wish to make a Homeless presentation), then in eyes of the SHR, the above is anything but good practice.

I have a concern that the Housing Options initiative is partly threatened by the stance of the regulator who do not appear to accept the notion that it is a person’s (human) right to decline the offer/choice/duty of making a Homeless application. Some approaches occur from people (who may be in Domestic Abuse situations) who just want advice and info about their rights and options, free of any stepping into a realm they do not (yet) wish. Whilst such situations are naturally concerning, people have the right to do things/plan potential future exits/splits in a way which is right for them – this needs to be respected.
The 2016 Housing Options Guidance stresses strict adherence with the law in terms of putting the onus on the Local Authority to take a Homeless Form irrespective of what the customer wishes. This strikes me as contrary to the other much-raised value/need within Housing Options, which is to work in a person-centred manner, which in essence should value that the customer is the expert of their situation and (via provision the full information and appropriate support), is best placed to make a decision about their future. Yes, the guidance highlights the scope for the customer to “opt-out” (or twin-track their applications) thus it can be argued that by opening up the Homeless route to them, it increased their knowledge of what options are open to them, though it has to be recognised that this strict approach can undermine any preventative traction and also lessen the scope for any professional judgement occurring.

I give the following scenario to illustrate this:

An approach is made from a young man saying he’s been asked to leave the family home with one week. He had his own room in the house and is not stating any issue that would prompt the Local Authority to think that it was not a reasonable and safe place for him to reside. The issues appear to be around the fact he’s not working and not contributing to the household. “Lifestyle” issues are contributing to the request to leave also.

Strictly, the first action in such circumstances should be for the Local Authority to take a Homeless form. Presuming a twin-track model, the Housing Options would likely seek to explore as to whether, via actions such as exploring the issues, undertaking mediation and a look at wider factors such as finances or employability support, could all be explored in a bid to improve the situation at home. Info and advice could be given to support a stabilisation / continuation and hopefully a more planned exit at a later date. Again, if following the strict model, the Homeless case would also be assessed during this time. In these circumstances, the likelihood of duty being accepted is very high. As such, if/when he and the family become aware of the fact that if they were to maintain the current stance that he’s not welcome in the home, it will result in him having to be given his own permanent accommodation, then they are likely to do exactly that as this outcome is naturally very attractive to both the young man and his family. Hence, the efforts of the Housing Options team to try and stabilise the situation might not be as effective as hoped.

It is an irony of the Housing Options/prevention initiative that it’s put more focus on strict adherence than potentially existed before and in some circumstances can undermine scope for positive professional intervention to seek stabilisation.

Similar parallels can be drawn to households who receive a Notice to Quit for their Private Rented Sector property. If the reasons for the landlord wishing the return of their property is nothing to do with the tenants themselves, the tenants only have to do nothing (in terms of using their 2 month notice period to secure alternative housing), in order that the Local Authority is compelled to offer them permanent accommodation. I do not sit in judgement of such people/household as wider factors may well apply, though I can say on clear and certain terms that for some of those who elect to present as Homeless, the scope to have secured alternative housing can be very high.
• How effective is the relationship between all the relevant agencies, including the health sector, and charities working on homelessness prevention?

In my experience, this is variable. With time investment, relevant and effective protocols, education (of these services) of what they can do to assist preventative aims, highly positive relationships can be nurtured so that all are working to the same core aims. Naturally, wider services have their own pressures which housing services need to be educated of and appreciate also.

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

As suggested above, changes are needed (& potentially via a change in the law) is required, to clarify the role and purpose of such work. Currently, very dedicated staff who wish to work in this area are feeling that their role is undermined by the strict stance of the Scottish Housing Regulator.

Efforts need to be increased to maximise the scope for those presenting to secure/maintain alternative mainstream housing. The changes to the Private Rented Sector are a very welcome start though it remains to be seen as to what degree this increases security of tenure as well as the general the attractiveness of the sector. The attainment of affordable housing is a huge factor in this area.

• What role should private sector housing providers play in preventing and responding to homelessness?

I think everyone should behave reasonably, compassionately and in a manner which recognises that housing is hugely important to people and families... however, getting into the realms of what the Private Rented Sector should do is a different debate as to what legislators feel they can compel them to do. Generally, from my experience, one gets the best results from landlords within the Private Rented Sector when we respect and understand their core motivation but at the same time seeking to understand and appreciate they are people too and can display compassion, patience and open-mindedness. Within this, at the current time at least, lies the highest chance of positive joint-working in this area.

Temporary Accommodation

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

Since the inception of the Housing Options initiative, pressure has dropped significantly though mainly in terms of the length of time spent in Temporary Accommodation. There is still pressure and the use of B&B accommodation at certain times of the year is evidence of this.
• 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?

In some senses the question around experiences is an easy answer – better quality accommodation and shorter stays. As to how to achieve this, more investment in better quality Temporary Accommodation is required. Reduction of time spent can be achieved via seeking to achieve less demand on the Homeless system in the first place – please see my other comments re this. I feel we avoid any issue of improvements potentially fostering an increase in the attractiveness of Homelessness by reviewing the core Homeless criteria/tests. The ability for the type of temporary accommodation to meet the (potentially complex) needs of the client is of high importance.

• Do you have concerns about the funding of temporary accommodation? If yes, how should temporary accommodation be funded?

I am not particularly well positioned to comment on this however I am very aware of the concerns that benefits reform poses to this area.

On a related note, the general inability for those in Temporary Accommodation to undertake employment is a concern and one which needs to be looked at.

Permanent Accommodation

• How do social landlord’s allocation policies prioritise applications from homeless households and how does choice based lettings work in practice?

I am not particularly well positioned to comment on this.

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?

We need to stoically work on both the issues which cause people to have such issues and also increase resources for dealing with these issues. Real change takes time as this territory can relate to some very fundamental issues within our society.

In the meantime, changes need to be made to the Homeless system to ensure it’s there for those who need it the most. I’m not necessarily arguing for a return of the priority need test though I’ll suggest that post abolition of this test, the system is being used by some who it could be argued, have attainable other housing options available to them.

• 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?
I’d suggest there has been an increased acknowledgement and appreciation of the role of (maintaining) housing within the these sectors, for this client group, potentially due to the whole Housing Options initiative, though improvements can definitely still be made. Positive joint working on such cases is absolutely crucial in my view. Often joint working is fostered as well by teams/agencies meeting each other to discuss their work and pressures, as much as the necessary defining of protocols and referral agreements etc.

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

I’m not best placed to comment on this question.

- What role could the “housing first” model play in improving outcomes for homeless people with multiple and complex needs?

Whilst I fully see the worth and logic in such initiatives and I’ve no issue re them further explored, not least to assess results, care has to be taken as increased priority for housing would essentially be given to those with such issues. Whilst I do not necessarily argue with the notion that many in this group are victims of societal and environment exclusions and influences, the perspective of those with a defined housing need but whom are not necessarily viewed has falling into the above category, need to be appreciated also. It’s the potential effect on this other group which any evidence of “what works” struggles to reflect.

I will also raise a perspective I gave to Turning Point staff (who were/are involved in such a trial), that some clients in the Temporary Accommodation that I worked within, in the East end of Glasgow, used the gaining of independent accommodation as a driver for their recovery. I welcomed the fact that this point was acknowledged by Turning Point staff – I agreed with their view that the assessment as to whom the Housing First model could/would be applicable to, is really important to get right.

**Rough Sleeping**

- 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?

Rough sleeping is thankfully quite low in my current area to the point that the public often call in if and when they see someone rough sleeping – this can support active outreach actions. My understanding is that these low numbers have remained fairly constant through the years.

Re the characteristics of rough sleepers, it naturally ranges. There are unfortunately some appear to wish to maintain a roving, insecure, improvised lifestyle by choice, irrespective of any and all efforts to assist them (by not just Housing/Homeless services). Some rough sleeping stems also from a lack of entitlement to public funds. This doesn’t necessarily mean that conventional services close doors, though it certainly restricts what they can do.
- What type of accommodation is offered to rough sleepers?

Temporary accommodation, offered as part of the Homeless system is there for rough sleepers. In this area, there are no hostels which operate outwith the conventional Homeless system.

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

As above, sometimes rough sleepers can represent those whom require a nurturing and development of trust so that a Homeless approach and service can be provided. Please note that such work can be undertaken by Housing Options/Homeless Prevention teams. Those working within positive Housing Options services will/should recognise that supporting certain customers to make a Homeless approach can be of equal reward as supporting those who wish to avoid use of Homeless services.

The wider and more standard answer is to ensure full access to the relevant wider services is strengthened – addiction services, mental & physical health services etc.

As an ex-employee of the Parkhead project in Glasgow which (at the time) represented one of the few supported accommodations where clients could bring pets, I wish to raise the importance that many rough sleepers put on their pets to the point that they will elect to continue to rough sleep if they can't take their pet with them into Temporary Accommodation.

Other

- What are the reasons behind why people become homeless?

Rather than list causal factors which are largely already known, I will say that Homelessness will and always continue. It is simply not realistic to seek to end it. This is on the basis that Homelessness technically can occur when (reasonable) accommodation ends, which will continue to be the case as long as relationships breakdown or landlords wish their own properties back for their own use. Seeking to end Homelessness in the sense of avoid anyone’s need to rough sleep or maintain unreasonable living circumstances is an entirely different (and far more appropriate, in my view) aspiration.

Of course, issues with not having access to reasonable, long-term and safe accommodation take us into a huge array other potentially political areas and causal issues – lack affordable housing, lack of Social Housing, benefits reform, availability of relevant support services to respond to related issues/factors.

I see no mystery in this area – time and effort has to be devoted to dealing with all these individual issues to both ensure there is sufficient attainable, affordable housing for all as well as working to support societal resilience when adversity does arise.

- What data is used to measure homelessness numbers in a particular area?
I assume HL1 and PREVENT1 DATE is utilised for such purposes.

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

I’m not best placed to comment on this question.

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

I can confidently state that in my current area, the right to make a Homeless application is made very clear (whatever the circumstances) and barriers are not put in the way of this. Where a customer states something on their Housing application which suggests a threat to their accommodation, they are referred to the Housing Options Team and are invited in. I would however not wish to suggest that screening or gatekeeping never occurs within Scotland.

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

The same issues that cause original homelessness are relevant here. This is in terms of availability of (and readiness to engage with) associated supports for related issues (addictions, MH issues etc), employability, avoiding social isolation etc. A key barrier to sustainability is some people not having the independent living skills to manage a property fully – this can be more applicable to younger people. Housing Support/Tenancy Sustainment services can assist in such circumstances though this again requires engagement on behalf of the individual/household. Positive intervention by RSLs as well as positive engagement to associated systems such as Section 11s are important to at least try to intervene before tenancies are past the point of no return.

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

I hope some of the above points can be taken into account as one perspective within the wider debate. I am quite happy to provide further detail to any aspect of the above is desired.

Ruaridh Dean