OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Local Government and Communities Committee

Wednesday 8 March 2017

Session 5

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE
8th Meeting 2017, Session 5

CONVENER

*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con)
*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
*Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Tony Cain (Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers)
Lee Clark (Cyrenians)
Mark Kennedy (Cyrenians)
Adam Lang (Shelter Scotland)
Jan Williamson (Streetwork)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Clare Hawthorne

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Local Government and Communities Committee

Wednesday 8 March 2017

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:02]

Homelessness

The Convener (Bob Doris): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the eighth meeting of the Local Government and Communities Committee in 2017.

I remind everyone present to turn off mobile phones. As meeting papers are provided in digital format, members might use tablets during the meeting. I make this appeal at the start of every meeting. If you see us using our laptops, we are looking at our papers.

We do not have a full house today. We have apologies from Graham Simpson, but everyone else is in attendance.

Agenda item 1 concerns homelessness. In a moment, I will introduce our panel of witnesses but first I give Alexander Stewart MSP the opportunity to put on the record some comments about a recent fact-finding visit.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): On Monday, my colleague Andy Wightman and I went to Perth to meet a number of representatives from Churches Action for the Homeless. I pay tribute to that organisation and its chief executive, Brian Cowie, who gave us an hour and a half's opportunity to meet some of the senior staff and talk through their issues and concerns. They were honest and frank about where they are. We then had the opportunity to see the organisation's charity shop, and then Andy Wightman went to Scone and I went to Birnam to meet some service users and individuals who wished to have a conversation. That was also frank and fulfilling.

That event proved very beneficial. As far as I am concerned—I am sure that Andy Wightman felt the same—people went the extra mile to ensure that we were accommodated and to tell us the issues that they have. It was an excellent opportunity.

The Convener: Thank you very much, Alexander, for putting that on the record. I thank you and Andy Wightman for going.

At this stage, we should put on record our thanks to the Simon Community in Glasgow for its frank and honest discussions, particularly in relation to women who are at risk of homelessness and rough sleeping in the city, and to Streetwork in Edinburgh.

That allows me to move almost seamlessly on to introducing our witnesses. The first is Jan Williamson, who is the head of services at Streetwork. I thank her for allowing the committee to come along and see the good work that Streetwork does in Edinburgh. We appreciate that.

I thank the rest of our witnesses for coming. They are: Adam Lang, head of communications and policy at Shelter Scotland; Tony Cain, policy manager at North Lanarkshire Council, representing the Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers; Lee Clark, manager of conflict resolution services with the Cyrenians; and Mark Kennedy, manager of homelessness prevention services with the Cyrenians. Jan Williamson is at the bottom of my list and I almost introduced her twice.

There are no opening statements, so we will move straight to questions. However, before we take the first question, it is worth putting on record the fact that, although we will explore themes today—and at another evidence session in a couple of weeks—the committee is looking for themes to explore in further detail at a later date, and will almost certainly issue a Scotland-wide call for evidence as part of a substantial and robust inquiry into homelessness in Scotland. If our guests do not feel that we are digging down deep enough into some of the themes and issues that are raised today, they can rest assured that we hope to enable them, working in partnership with us, to set an agenda for a future robust inquiry. I hope that those are reasonable rules of engagement for what we will do today.

Our deputy convener, Elaine Smith, will start the questions.

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): Good morning, and thanks for coming to the committee today.

I will start by asking a general question. I note that the submission from Shelter Scotland is clear about the fact that there is a need for the Scottish Government to refocus on homelessness. It would be helpful if we could start by putting on the record some of the reasons why people become homeless.

Adam Lang (Shelter Scotland): Statistically speaking, the single biggest reason that is recorded for people becoming homeless in Scotland is relationship breakdown within the home. That is closely followed by a range of other issues that all have the same rough percentage rate, as it were. Financial arrears is a big problem, but relationship breakdown is the dominant issue. However, when people make assumptions about

the reasons why people become homeless, that is not necessarily the one that comes to mind first.

Elaine Smith: Does that issue involve single male homeless people, or does it concern women fleeing violence? Are there underlying statistics?

Adam Lang: The Scottish Government has underlying statistics, but there is a limit to them, because they do not go into a huge amount of detail. I do not have the breakdown in front of me, but I believe that single male homelessness is a big part of the official homelessness figures.

Tony Cain (Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers): I would go a little further than that. There are reasons why individual households become homeless, but I think that the question is more interesting if we ask why some households become homeless and most others do not. The rate of homelessness is astonishingly high, and there is an issue about the choices and the routes to accommodation that the housing system offers. Some people have choices and options and the capacity to exercise those options and stay in control of their journey, and others do not. That is because of the way in which the housing system works and the extent to which it offers choice, supports choice and allows folk to control their journey.

Government policy is not going to end relationship breakdown and it will not have an effect on the point at which a young person decides to leave home. The issue is whether the system offers to all those individuals the degree of choice and control that they need to make the decisions that they need to make and secure the housing that they want.

Jan Williamson (Streetwork): You might see a difference if you compare the reasons why females find themselves homeless and the reasons why males find themselves homeless. Relationship breakdown due to violence is more prevalent for females. That is a bigger underlying factor in that regard.

Lee Clark (Cyrenians): Certainly, the cause of homelessness among 18 to 24-year-olds is relationship breakdown within the family.

The Convener: Mr Kennedy, please do not feel obliged to say something, but we would love you to comment.

Mark Kennedy (Cyrenians): There are actually one or two things that I want to add. Certain things have become more evident in recent months and years. People who work in homelessness prevention services are finding that a lot more people are in danger of homelessness because of recent welfare reforms, benefit caps and issues around local housing allowance rates. People who were previously able to maintain a home have suddenly found themselves hundreds of pounds short of making the rent each month, because they have had their benefits capped. I know that 800 families in Edinburgh were affected by the recent reduction in the benefit cap.

An underlying issue that we come into contact with a lot is people who, in a broad sense, we could say suffer from mental health or emotional issues that make it difficult for them to administer and maintain the home that they have or to sustain a tenancy when they actually get one. We find that that is quite a large cause of homelessness.

Elaine Smith: Part of the issue seems to be the link between poverty and homelessness. Mark Kennedy spoke about prevention of homelessness. If we were to have an inquiry, should we look more closely at how prevention services work and how they could maybe work better to try to prevent homelessness?

The Convener: I will take Mark Kennedy first, as he was referenced in the question, and then Adam Lang.

Mark Kennedy: There is certainly an issue around how prevention services, such as the ones that we provide in the city of Edinburgh, work and are funded. We were discussing that before we came into the meeting, and there was a general feeling that the funding that we receive to provide prevention services has stipulations attached to it, on issues such as the amount of time for which we can support people.

A housing crisis does not happen one day and is then sorted six months later. There are often on-going issues that make it difficult to work with someone for a short period and resolve those issues. There needs to be a recognition that some individuals who are threatened with homelessness or who become homeless have longer-term support needs that do not quite reach the threshold for statutory services—by which I mean services such as social work—but who would find it very difficult to maintain a home over a longer period of time without some sort of support. There needs to be a form of support that is more open ended.

Adam Lang: I would welcome any further investigation of or look into issues of prevention. It is worth noting that, as has been highlighted in some of the submissions for today and in previous reports, in the previous session of Parliament, the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee highlighted in its legacy report, on the back of the Scottish Housing Regulator's inquiry in 2014 on housing options, that the housing options approach and general work on homelessness prevention would be a worthwhile area to examine further. I would definitely support that.

I will build on that briefly by saying that the housing options approach is welcome in that it engages early with people who are at risk of homelessness. However, we need to understand and unpick much more about how that is being delivered across the 32 local authorities. We need to consider the standardisation of recording of housing options approaches. There is concern that, when we combine the figures for people who apply as homeless and people from the housing options figures who have homelessness identified as an outcome, the total number is up. It is around 50,000—or just higher than that—annually. That flies somewhat in the face of the recorded decline in the official homelessness statistics. If we look at the two sets of figures together, we can see that the number of people at risk of homelessness or in housing need has remained fairly high.

Elaine Smith: I think that we have moved into an area that you were quite keen to explore, convener.

The Convener: I am happy to pick up that baton now, if you like—it is up to you. I promise our witnesses that we do not rehearse this.

We are interested in the housing options model. At face value, and in my constituency experience, it can sometimes work very well. It can help vulnerable constituents to look at options that perhaps they had not considered before, and it can be done on a one-to-one basis, so they build up a relationship. However, that is not always the case. I am certainly keen to hear about which bits of the housing options approach have been starting to work well. If what Mr Lang said about the figures is accurate, I would want to know how many of the individuals going through housing options are getting a better service than they would have done had they gone through the alternative route of homelessness. Is it making any difference at all?

The committee is keen to grasp what is really happening with housing options and whether the quality of vulnerable constituents' experience is any better under it. Do you have any examples of where it is working well? Moreover, how should the committee monitor the situation, given Mr Lang's point that, although housing options might have some good parts, we are not really grasping what precisely is happening with it just now? I might take Mr Lang last, because he has talked about the issue before and he might well have more to say about it. What are the other witnesses' feelings about the housing options model? Do you have any experience of it?

10:15

Mark Kennedy: I feel that the housing options approach has created a very transparent system for those who are using it. Where it works as it should, it works very well and people know what they can expect from it.

However, from my experience of working in the city of Edinburgh—and going back to what Adam Lang said—I do not think that that is always the reality of the service that people receive when they present themselves at the council or make an approach to a statutory agency. The service is not consistent. Since 2012, when the priority need system was eventually got rid of, there has probably been a lag in the mindset of people who are administering the housing options approach with regard to how they view their job or how they treat people who walk in with housing issues. I think that implementation has been quite patchy across local authority areas.

The Convener: Do you want to add anything, Ms Clark?

Lee Clark: One of the main issues is consistency of training in different local authorities and how the approach is then rolled out.

The Convener: That is helpful. Again, I remind other witnesses that they should not feel that they have to answer. However, I think that Tony Cain indicated that he wanted to respond.

Tony Cain: Absolutely. As the regulator's report from a couple of years ago and the statistics that were recently published by the Scottish Government show, it is unquestionably the case that housing options is being operated differently in different authorities and across the country. What is most important about housing options is that the process is intended to focus on the individual. In other words, it is about what the individual needs. What are their particular and unique circumstances? How can we act to assist them in resolving someone's homelessness? That is the ethos behind housing options.

However, that is absolutely the antithesis of what the legislation says. As I have said in my written evidence, we are talking about 40-year-old law—people tend to assume that the homelessness legislation is not that old, but it was actually passed in 1977 and the way that it is written makes it clear that the process is done to applicants. There is no control in there. If a local authority has reason to believe that someone who has come to them for housing or housing assistance might be homeless, it is required to carry out an assessment, no matter whether the individual wants it to be done, whether they have chosen that particular route or whether they understand what the outcomes are. The law just says, "You go and do this to them and then tell them what you're going to do for them." The importance of housing options is that it is the beginning of a culture change in the way in which

local authorities respond to those who approach them for assistance. That is very important, but we still have a long way to go.

The Convener: I will come to Adam Lang now, although first I should say that we have had a chance elsewhere to talk about housing options, but it would be really helpful if we could get some of those points on the record. For example, the committee would be keen to know the substantial difference between housing options—if it is working well—and the traditional homelessness route. Tony Cain started to allude to what things might look like when it is working well, but it would be helpful, Mr Lang, if you could add anything else that might steer the committee in its further scrutiny of the issue.

Adam Lang: I will probably not do this justice but, in its simplest form, housing options is about preventing people from becoming homeless, engaging earlier and—as its name suggests—informing people of their housing options at an earlier and more preventative stage before they reach that crisis point. Inherent in that is the challenge of looking at things solely from a statistical point of view. The fact is that, if you are doing good prevention work, you should not be recording the same types of outcomes that you would be recording in the absence of good prevention work—if that makes sense.

The difference is that someone making a traditional homelessness application will go to their local authority, apply as homeless and be assessed as either unintentionally homeless or not, and, in theory, they will follow the traditional route of going into temporary accommodation before they move into permanent settled accommodation. The housing options approach is about engaging with people at an earlier stage, where possible, to prevent them from ever getting to that point. Crudely, that is the principle behind the approach.

We are fully supportive of the housing options approach—we think that it is a very positive thing—but the challenge is that, when it was rolled out, there was no formal guidance on how to implement it; that came a couple of years later. The guidance has been rolled out only relatively recently, and it is not statutory guidance. As the Scottish Housing Regulator has highlighted, that allows for different interpretations of how to implement the approach. As has been mentioned, different local authorities have different resources, structures and local priorities, and they have implemented it in different ways.

I believe that we now have two years of returns of housing options data. Looking at that data in a purely statistical way tells us something, but it does not give us the full picture on the implementation of housing options. That is why I welcome the fact that the committee has been hearing from front-line service providers about the reality on the ground, because statistics and reporting can tell us only so much.

Shelter Scotland would like to see what impact the roll-out of the guidance has on the official statistics—the PREVENT1 statistics—on housing options. There are concerns about whether, for example, housing options recording goes far enough in telling us about the outcomes that people achieve. I believe that, in the current set-up, homelessness is recorded as an outcome, but we need to know more than that; we need to know what happened next. Did the person get the support that they needed to move into permanent settled accommodation? Did they get temporary accommodation? How long did they spend in it? We need to know more. We have only a couple of years of housing options data.

The Convener: That is very helpful.

I apologise for asking a question that I should know the answer to, but who goes through the housing options process with people? In my constituency, it might be the local housing association, given that Glasgow City Council does not have council housing stock. If someone is sofa surfing or staying with a relative, a housing association might be contacted. Can housing associations carry out housing options appraisals as well as local authorities? Do housing associations have the option of recommending additional support for individuals who might struggle to maintain a tenancy? If someone who was sofa surfing and who had previously had tenancies that had broken down went down the housing options route, would the provision of wraparound support to help them to sustain a tenancy be considered part of that process? Could that happen? Does anyone have any information on that?

Mark Kennedy: In theory, anyone who is in danger of becoming homeless should be offered support to prevent that from happening. The guidelines say that the local authority or whoever carries out the homelessness assessment should make an offer of support but, when it comes to how that is implemented, we rely on the knowledge of the person who carries out the assessment and it depends on how busy they are. In a lot of cases, people are offered support, but in some cases they are not. Such support is not offered universally.

Jan Williamson: I agree. In theory, people in that position can be referred for support, but Streetwork supports people with multiple complex needs and we receive very few referrals from the housing options team in Edinburgh.

The Convener: That is interesting.

Lee Clark: As Mark Kennedy said, it depends on the training, the knowledge and the skill of the housing officer who carries out the assessment, as well as their understanding of what is available and the needs of the person who presents.

The Convener: If the housing officer does not know that there are additional options for support, they might not offer such support as part of the assessment.

Lee Clark: Yes.

The Convener: That is helpful to know.

Tony Cain: That example shows, in part, the distinction between the statutory basis for homelessness services and the entirely discretionary policy framework for housing options. The legislation requires that, when a local authority determines that somebody is homeless—and not intentionally so—it should carry out a support needs assessment. That is part of the legislation; it is not part of the housing options process, although a good process will include a conversation about support needs and what particular help is needed to deal with the issue.

The other important point is that the range of support services that are available is wholly inadequate in some areas. Responses from community mental health teams are almost completely inadequate to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged homeless folk—those who are in the system over the long term do not get a response. That is not just because of the way that the services are organised; it is because of the way that clinical practice works. It is arranged around people turning up for interviews and appointments, which is not the way to deliver services to people who are chaotic, who have drug and alcohol problems or who may be in and out of the community justice system. The mental health services are one of the major areas of failure in meeting the needs of that more chaotic client group.

People with mental health needs are an important part of the client group but they are not all of it, by any means. Homelessness has a broad spread, and one statistic in my submission reinforces the point. We estimate that one in eight of the household moves in Scotland involves an element of homelessness. That is an astonishing number of people who need to move and who struggle to complete that move under their own steam. It is absolutely right to focus on the most disadvantaged of the homelessness client group and the failings in the services that are available to them, but let us not imagine that that is all there is to homelessness. Many people who are on otherwise perfectly satisfactory incomes and who are in work struggle to meet their housing needs in the current system.

The Convener: I am disciplining myself not to ask follow-up questions on what Tony Cain has said, but he has given us lots of food for thought to explore further.

Adam Lang: I do not have front-line expertise on who delivers housing options, but housing options should not be mistaken for or confused with a genuine strategic approach to homelessness prevention. Engaging early with people who might be at risk on a range of housing issues is a welcome approach, but that is not a whole-system response to homelessness. That point builds on what Tony Cain and others have said, and it is particularly true for people who have multiple complex needs or multiple exclusion homelessness.

It is important that the conversation on homelessness in Scotland is not dominated by housing options. It is a welcome approach to engaging with people—with challenges that have been highlighted—but it is not the same as a strategic response to homelessness.

The Convener: Members have supplementary questions on housing options, and there are more areas that the committee wants to focus on as the questions roll out.

Elaine Smith: Mr Cain, should the committee look at the fact that local authorities have a statutory duty in respect of homeless persons, which might cause issues in areas where there have been such things as stock transfers? Does that need further exploration?

Tony Cain: Absolutely. I think that we say that quite clearly in our written submission. The Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 was designed specifically to transfer statutory responsibility from social work to housing and, in doing so, to open up housing allocation systems. That is what the 1977 act was about, but that was 40 years ago and the world has moved on. There is no question that statutory obligations around homelessness need to be cast more widely.

In fact, I would go further and say that we need to review all our housing and related legislation, to satisfy ourselves that the whole system is properly directed at preventing homelessness and to create choice and routes into housing across the population. That approach is similar to the way in which we deal with human rights issues. Treating people with dignity and respect is essential for a civilised society, and we write our human rights legislation into every aspect of our legislation. Having a roof over our heads is also essential for life, yet we compartmentalise all the statutory duties around ensuring that that remains the case.

10:30

Alexander Stewart: We have heard comments about individuals with complex needs such as mental health problems, alcohol dependency and so on. However, such needs can also involve literacy and numeracy problems. The way in which people with those kinds of needs are communicated to by the local authority and the housing officer can sometimes put them into a state of fear or panic that leads to a crisis situation, because they are not able to manage that process. Can you share your experience of how that works?

When someone who has been identified as being homeless and has gone into temporary accommodation is going through the journey, the chain can be broken because something falls down—they do not manage to get to an appointment on time, they do not understand what the letter is telling them to do or they cannot follow the process. That is an important issue. When we went on our visits, we saw that the chain could be broken on a number of occasions, and people had to go back to the beginning of the process and be reassessed. That is an important point, and it was not the impression that I had before we went to find out more information.

Lee Clark: Quite often, there will be one presenting need but, once we have built a relationship and got to know someone, we can see that there are more needs than that. It is difficult to build a relationship through a one-hour housing options interview. You cannot begin to understand complex needs in such a short time, which is perhaps why the issue that you identify arises in such a high percentage of cases.

Adam Lang: I support the point that Lee Clark has just made. Last summer, a PhD volunteer who was working with us did a fantastic bit of research on the east housing options hub in Scotland, with particular regard to the experiences of practitioners and commissioners of services and people in their client group who had multiple and complex needs. He was trying to understand the issues that such individuals face in engaging with services and how services are commissioned. I will not be able to do justice to his range of findings today, but the key takeaway point was that we are not currently commissioning services to be delivered in a way that supports the most vulnerable group.

You cannot get a full sense of somebody in an hour. Those people need sustained engagement with a constant point of contact over a prolonged period of time so that they not only get through the paperwork but can get into secure accommodation—or whatever it is that they need—at the other end. That would address the point that you raised about their going back into the system or falling out of the system once the support is removed. We are talking about people who have multiple issues that they need help with.

Jan Williamson: We help people to get into emergency accommodation, and they have to follow that up by going along to the local authority and going through a full assessment. However, a substantial percentage of people do not make it along to that meeting with the local authority. Despite our efforts to help them to get there, they struggle with that.

For years, we have invited people from the local authority to come to our centre on the ground that, although the people who we work with might not be able to make it to the council, they can make it to our centre. We have asked councils to think about how they locate services, but there are challenges around technology and so on, so we have not been able to do that yet. Nevertheless, we continue to make the point that it is difficult for people with multiple and complex needs to keep to appointment times, which means that they end up churning through the system, repeatedly going into emergency accommodation placements and never moving on from that stage.

The Convener: That is helpful. It links to the point that Mr Lang made about the need for the housing options system to be part of a wider strategy.

Ruth Maguire will lead the next line of questioning.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I want to focus more on folk with complex needs. I understand what Tony Cain said about their not making up the whole picture, but I would like to talk about them for a little bit longer.

From the evidence that we have received and from what we have seen on our visits—I thank Streetwork for having us—it seems that the housing support needs of people with complex needs are not being met all the time. I was quite shocked when a worker told me about a young man whom she was told was too high-need for any of the supported accommodation options that were available. What types of supported accommodation work well? I assume that some do. What do we need to have available for folk like that?

Jan Williamson: Edinburgh has good examples of supported accommodation that works relatively well for people in comparison to bed and breakfast style temporary accommodation. The important issue is that the people who work in that accommodation understand the needs of the people and are able to ensure that the accommodation is a bit more flexible and tolerant than a bed and breakfast, where people have to be in by 10 o'clock at night and so on. In that sort

of arrangement, people are able to build relationships with staff, which is a big factor. If people who understand them and support them can build a relationship with them over time, that can help them to address their needs.

We have some of that accommodation in Edinburgh, but not enough, so bed and breakfast accommodation is used for the majority of our people.

The Convener: I see Lee Clark nodding her head.

Lee Clark: I agree. That is the root of the problem. There are great models and great examples, but there are not enough of them. Support for understanding and working with someone on that journey is not available either.

Jan Williamson: One size does not fit all. There must be a range of options. I visited St Mungo's in London, which has a hotel-style model that works well. The staff at St Mungo's listened to people who came to them and, when they saw that people were booking themselves into one particular bed and breakfast that was working well, they copied that model. They have a range of different options for people.

Lee Clark: The key is relationships and the way in which relationships are built and maintained, which leads to understanding.

Tony Cain: I would go a bit further on the issue of where we are in relation to temporary accommodation. The bigger cities—Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee and Aberdeen—have the opportunity to develop a wide range of quite sophisticated and specialised supported and temporary accommodation. For example, Glasgow can afford to offer and deliver a women-only hostel. However, outside the big cities, we tend to find a different picture with regard to temporary accommodation for homeless people.

The word "hostel" can be used, but that generally refers to a block of flats, all of which are used for temporary accommodation but which do not have shared facilities such as you would expect in a hostel. Those hostels are used for the whole range of clients, so you will find some quite difficult social mixes—high-risk offenders, young vulnerable adults, individuals with offending backgrounds, individuals with drug and alcohol-related issues, people with mental health problems and people with learning disabilities—all using the same front door in the same block.

I do not think that we are as well sighted as we should be about the risks in that social environment, and I do not think that we are paying enough attention to ensuring that those elements of the service that we are offering are safe. All sorts of issues could arise in those circumstances, and I do not think that we are well sighted on them even though we have improved the physical quality of the accommodation.

Big cities have done a great deal, but the situation is much more difficult outside those cities, where scale is an issue. That comes down to revenue funding. I hope that you will forgive me for repeating some of the evidence that I gave to the committee in relation to the budget, but there are real challenges around the revenue funding of the services in local government, as is the case in integration joint boards and some of the health services that we desperately need.

The Convener: It is absolutely fine to put that on the record. That is not a problem.

Ruth Maguire: My next question ties in to that. It is about the health needs of the folk who use the services. We just heard that it is challenging for some people to keep any sort of appointment. Are there opportunities around health and social care integration for the development of models that can better support homeless people and help to improve their health?

Tony Cain: There are two areas that we need to pay particular attention to. Later this year, we will get the results of the data-matching exercise that the Scottish Government has been leading, which brings together health data and homelessness data. We already know that it will show that the health and the life expectancy of long-term homeless households are disastrous compared to those of people in the main stream. Their life expectancy is substantially worse than that in the most deprived geographic population in Scotland—the life expectancy of a male in the long-term homeless system is 47. It is appalling.

The two areas of the health service that let them down the most are general practice and mental health services. Many homeless folk have real difficulties in getting access to general practitioners. I mean no disrespect to deep-end GPs such as those at the Hunter Street practice in Glasgow, who specialise in delivering services to homeless folk. However, outside those areas, GP services are often difficult to access. Homeless folk often use accident and emergency departments as their GP service, with all that that implies for the cost and the inappropriateness of that approach.

The other issue is mental health services. As I have said, mental health services are not achieving the outcomes that we need. There are significant issues with self-harm and attempted suicide, and suicide in that population feeds into their life expectancy. A conversation needs to be had about that.

That takes me back to the point that was raised about the scope of the homelessness legislation

and where the obligations lie. If they lie only with housing services—or with local authorities, which, in effect, means housing services—it is no great surprise that other services are not stepping up. The committee will be aware that the GP contract is currently being renegotiated. I have raised questions about whether the changes to that contract can be used to reinforce the need for GPs to deliver services more flexibly to homeless people. The response has been that there is a big shortage of GPs and their workload is too high already, so the issue probably cannot be dealt with in the present contract. I am not entirely convinced that that is enough.

Adam Lang: I will add a couple of points to that. Primary healthcare can play a significant role in supporting early intervention, the provision of advice and support and signposting to specialist support, where appropriate, to prevent homelessness. That echoes the point that Tony Cain made. In addition, through the services that we provide across the country, we have been made aware of several instances of people—very vulnerable people with a high level of needs—who are using accident and emergency as a form of overnight B and B because they know that they can get a roof over their head in that way when other systems have failed them or they have fallen through the gaps in other forms of support.

Mark Kennedy: Moving away from the issue of people with complex needs, we spoke earlier about whether people are signposted for support through the housing options system and how that generally does not happen. Jan Williamson said that very few of her referrals come in that way. Through our work in Edinburgh, we have found that an awful lot of people are referred to us through various national health service services, but that has relied on our organisation going out and forming relationships with those services and making them aware of what is available to people.

Within the health and social care integration process—or within the creation of locality hubs, which is happening in Edinburgh at the moment—there must be some scope for ensuring that health services, homelessness services and other forms of social support work more closely together in a more integrated way to ensure that, when people are about to fall into a housing crisis or are suffering a housing crisis, that is identified. It is often the health professionals who identify that first. For example, we have found that health visitors and district nurses are a really good source of referrals to us because they go into people's homes, speak to people and find out about other areas in which they are in crisis—they may be financially stretched and about to lose their home. They can refer those people to us, but that has depended on our going out and forging those relationships, because there is no infrastructure to direct those people to us.

The Convener: Thank you very much. There have been a lot of responses to Ruth Maguire's question. Do you want to follow up on any of those points, Ruth?

Ruth Maguire: No, convener. I am happy just to have heard them.

Lee Clark: To go back to the original question, there is a real opportunity in the integration of health and social care, if we get that right. A key area to look at is the flexibility of the approach to how people can access services and the potential lowering of thresholds for referrals into different services.

Adam Lang: Although I absolutely agree that there is a real opportunity in the health and social care integration agenda, there is also a challenge, because integration goes hand in hand with other public service reforms that are either on-going or forthcoming.

10:45

There are a dozen or so health boards, 32 local authorities, 32 health and social care integration joint boards, one police service and 15 prisons. We have a very mismatched landscape of public service delivery in Scotland. Part of the rationale behind the call by Shelter Scotland and others for a new strategic approach to homelessness is that, in an era of less and less funding being available for all those services, they will focus on their strategic obligations and statutory duties, so there is a real risk that, in all that churn and mix, the issue of providing people who are at risk of homelessness with the support and early intervention that they need will get lost. I agree that there is a real opportunity, but that must be balanced against the challenge of ensuring that homelessness is a strategic priority in this time of significant public sector reform.

Lee Clark: I totally agree with that. That is why we need to be clear about the flexibility of the approach and the thresholds for referrals in health and social care integration.

The Convener: That is really helpful. I thought that Ruth Maguire's line of questioning on health and social care integration was absolutely spot on. When we visited the Simon Community in Glasgow, we were told that it had started a pilot project with Glasgow homelessness services whereby a couple of members of the homelessness casework team were going to be embedded with the Simon Community. I suspect that money will be saved because a better outcome for vulnerable people with multiple and

complex needs is much more likely as that relationship is built up.

I hate to use the phrase "service redesign" because that sounds like massive, whole-system change, but is it the case that there are lots of overlapping opportunities for more of that kind of work, with mental health workers being embedded in homelessness teams? Mr Cain mentioned resource issues. There may be a need for additional resources, but is it also the case that we are not using our current resources as effectively as we could?

Tony Cain: Absolutely. The best example to give is around housing, homelessness and reoffending. Around a third of the people leaving prison—whether they have been on remand or serving a sentence—are pretty much discharged straight to the nearest homelessness service. Research that was published by the Scottish Government last year demonstrated very clearly that a substantial issue when it comes to reoffending is someone losing their home and struggling to get a new home.

Reoffending costs this country £3 billion a year—that is the figure that the housing minister himself used in this building at the recent homelessness prevention and strategy group meeting, which I attended. That figure is equal to the whole five-year sum for the Scottish Government's commitment to affordable housing. That is the scale of the savings and improvements that can be achieved if we get the housing element of community justice processes and discharge from prison right, so that folk are not discharged into homelessness but get support to divert them from reoffending. There are huge opportunities to use the resources that we have better.

Adam Lang: I could not agree more strongly with that. The annual prison population in Scotland is just under 8,000, but there are about 20,000 releases from prisons in Scotland each year and, as Tony Cain said, around a third of those people do not have a home to go to on release. Also, when a homelessness assessment is made at the local authority level, there is still the issue of local connection. Councils need to be able to use greater discretion with care leavers and people coming out of prison. We know that ex-offenders are overrepresented in homelessness statistics. Around a third of those who are released from prison without a home to go to reoffend, partly because they know that prison will provide a roof over their head.

Lee Clark: Having different services sited together—for example, having mental health services sited within the housing and homelessness options team—makes a huge difference in that they can achieve better outcomes. It is a matter of integration and how we do that.

The Convener: We should be asking about such issues more widely.

Lee Clark: Yes.

Tony Cain: We are not just sitting back and ignoring the issue of discharge from prison or pointing at the prison service; an active conversation is going on at the moment between ALACHO, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, the prison service and Shelter Scotland around how we can work together better to use our resources to reduce the number of people who are homeless at that point and to provide a better options service in prisons. A very focused piece of work has been going on around that over the past year or so. We are sighted on the issue but it is a huge challenge.

The Convener: That is helpful.

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): I thank all our witnesses for coming in—the discussion is extremely helpful. I want to talk about the relationship between the statutory services and the third sector but, first, do you have any comments on the housing first model and how valuable it is? We have had some anecdotal evidence that people are getting housing too quickly—they cannot cope with it and then they are out again—but that councils feel obliged to do that.

The Convener: Our witnesses were all looking at one another, but I caught your eye first, Mr Kennedy.

Mark Kennedy: On people getting accommodation that they are perhaps not ready for, I refer to the earlier point about the need for flexibility in the support that is available for people.

For example, currently we can only work with people for six months. If someone with quite complex needs is allocated a tenancy but, two or three weeks in, the funding for our work ends, there is a very good chance that that situation will break down. For a lot of people, the housing first model is a very good route to take, but consistent support is very important in order to ensure that people settle into that tenancy, utilise it properly, make the necessary links in the local community, and get everything set up so that the tenancy will work for them. Where necessary, we need to continue, periodically, to help people to sustain that housing situation. As we said earlier, there are people who will need on-going help to do so.

Jan Williamson: We support bringing the housing first model to Scotland. Worldwide research shows that it is an effective model, with high success rates for people who experience multiple-exclusion homelessness. However, we

have to stay true to the model, which means that people have to be offered support, but they do not have to take it in order to keep the tenancy. It is an option that we should be exploring in Scotland.

Adam Lang: I agree with that. The housing first model is geared more around a housing system rather than a homelessness system. Ideologically, that is an important distinction and one that shifts the provision of support. I agree that all the evidence internationally and from pilot cases definitely backs it up as a valid and worthwhile approach, but I echo the point that the model needs to be embraced fully and not tokenistically. The model needs to have flexibility in relation to support and, crucially, different housing options, which would be a challenge at the moment in Scotland. We need a greater supply of housing, including social rented housing. We are currently way off where we need to be with not only the targets for supply but the percentage share of the housing stock that is available for social rent. We need those things in place in order to have an effective housing first model, because we need both flexibility and options, which are the two challenges at the moment.

Tony Cain: I echo that. Particularly in local government, our concept of settled accommodation is too narrow. I am caricaturing but, essentially, there is temporary accommodation and then there is a council flat or house. In the local government housing world, that is how outcomes are seen. We need a much more flexible approach to what settled accommodation is, how it works and the extent to which individuals are required to manage that accommodation actively—particularly those who require high levels of support and who are building up to taking more control over their lives and coming out of a chaotic period.

We also have to acknowledge that there are risks associated with housing first as a model that takes somebody who is highly chaotic and struggling to manage their life, who is an offender and has drug and alcohol issues, and simply places them in a flat in a mainstream community, with the expectation that support services around them will prevent any difficulties from arising.

We need to acknowledge that communities themselves can be extremely concerned about such individuals appearing in the flats next to them, worried about the extent to which support will actually be available, and angry when that support is not available and their behaviour becomes very destructive. I suspect that, as MSPs, you will all have had constituency cases where a homeless person has been placed but support has not been provided, their behaviour has been hugely problematic and lives around them have been damaged.

Can housing first offer us something? Absolutely—but its success is entirely dependent on appropriate accommodation and support services. At the moment, I do not think that we are geared to deliver those, so we need to think before we bring in that model.

Jan Williamson: At the moment, we are placing people in communities, in bed-and-breakfast accommodation, without support. Therefore, we advocate the housing first model as a viable alternative for people with multiple complex needs who are churning through a temporary accommodation system that they cannot get out of into settled accommodation.

Andy Wightman: Thank you very much. That is useful and we will explore it further. In our visits, we have talked about how the statutory services interact with third sector services, such as those that some of the witnesses represent. It is clear that the third sector provides good services. Some of the funding is a little bit vulnerable to year-on-year budgeting and some of the relationships seem to be good but not as formalised as they should be. I have been getting a sense that the whole system is a bit vulnerable to revenue changes in the future. Is the situation partly due to the fact that, as Tony Cain said, the statutory framework is rather outdated and, therefore, the third sector has come in to fill in some of the gaps? Is there any merit in improving the statutory framework to formalise the basis on which organisations such as those that the witnesses represent provide such services?

Jan Williamson: There is a benefit to our services not being statutory. Many of the people whom we support mistrust statutory services because of their life experiences and, therefore, more readily engage with third sector organisations. However, it is true that there are challenges in the relationships between third sector organisations and local authorities because of the commissioning climate that we are in. In Edinburgh, the housing department is doing its best to develop positive relationships but it is highly dependent on the people who are in post, and those people change. Moreover, the budgeting is short term. We might have a contract that will last for three years but the local authority cannot guarantee the level of income in that contract for the next three years; it could reduce year on year. That is challenging and it means that the third sector organisations cannot easily forecast and plan for the long term.

Mark Kennedy: With all the analytical tools that are available, it must be possible to work out what the continuing need will be for support services for people who are vulnerably housed, for example. As it should be possible to work out that level of need, it must also be possible to work out what

level of funding will be required to service that need. Following on from that, it should be possible to commission people to service that need over the long term.

Every day, I work with a team of people who have been doing homelessness prevention work in Edinburgh since 2009. Many of the team have been there for that length of time and have built up huge expertise in all sorts of different areas, depending on the needs of clients. However, I do not know whether we are funded beyond the end of June this year. If we are not funded, that team could disperse, the expertise could be lost and we could be back to square one, building it up again when there is an emergency and people decide that such a team is needed.

There needs to be a focus on establishing what the need is and considering what can be done to fund services over a longer period. That is the only way that people who have continuing need will be supported to get the best outcomes. The services are a bit stop-start at the moment.

On the point about relationships and how the non-statutory services should work with local authorities, I echo what Jan Williamson said. We have our own ethos and our own way of working. It is important that we maintain a certain distance because people regard us as services that advocate on their behalf rather than as statutory or Government services.

11:00

Tony Cain: I echo that from a local authority perspective. The voluntary sector has brought huge diversity, real power, strength, innovation, flexibility and quality to some of the responses around homelessness. Some of what it does simply could not be replicated in the public sector. The obvious example of that is Women's Aid. We could not replace Women's Aid and the work that it does with a statutory service; it just would not work in the same way.

We need to be better at procurement and offer up more certainty and we need to measure outcomes in a more sophisticated way so that we are not measuring the wrong thing. Longer-term funding and contracts would be enormously helpful. I do not think that Mr Wightman is suggesting absorbing the voluntary sector into the statutory sector, and I do not know how we would cast legislation that required a particular set of relationships without risking some of the innovation, flexibility and independence that the third sector brings. However, the third sector would benefit from being more certain about its role and its long-term funding.

Adam Lang: I support a lot of that. We operate services out of four community hubs in the main cities in Scotland—Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen—as well as a number of bespoke housing support services in areas across Scotland. In the past six to 10 years, the funding mix for those services has changed drastically. There has been a huge reduction in statutory funding for the services that we deliver and the support that we provide, and there is now a much more varied mix of grants, trusts, lottery funding and our own voluntary-raised income going into support services for which statutory funding is not available.

The consequence for us—I echo a point made by others, because I know that we are not alone in this—is that we have moved to year-on-year cycles, so we do not have any confidence in being able to retain good staff or the relationships that we have built up. That links back to other points that have been made, particularly on the increasing amount of work that we are all doing with people with multiple and complex needs. We need to give those people a sense of—a guarantee of—sustained engagement with them. Currently, we are not tendering or designing services that are commissioned in a way that allows third sector organisations and others to provide that meaningful support. That is a big operational challenge for our charity just now.

Andy Wightman: That is extremely useful. As Tony Cain said, I am not advocating the absorption of those services into the public sector. My question about formalising things in this area was a response to the fact that a lot of those services are marketised now. We are talking about commissioning and about short-term timescales, yet those services are an integral part of prevention. Therefore, it seems to me that, for esteem if nothing else, there should be greater parity—perhaps some sort of formalisation of the role of the third sector, probably embedded in statute. We need to think about the people who depend on those services, but the services that are being delivered by the third sector seem to be on a bit of a shoogly peg, in two main instances.

The Convener: I am not sure whether there was a question in that, but I see nodding heads. Kenneth Gibson wants to explore the matter further.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): We have just heard about how the third sector delivers innovation, flexibility and expertise. I also think that it delivers compassion to service users; that came through very strongly when I visited the Simon Community last week.

I was interested and quite surprised to learn that in Glasgow 70 organisations provide homelessness services. Although there is a high level of expertise, I asked service users which were the best and worst organisations. The

Glasgow City Mission and the Simon Community came top and the Bellgrove hotel—which you cannot really call third sector, in my view—was at the bottom of the heap. There was some confusion among service users about who does what, because there are so many organisations. In earlier evidence there was a mention of gaps and duplication. Is there an argument for the consolidation of some services, in order to provide more effective delivery? Obviously, that might mean that they would have to work in partnership more closely—although I am sure that many third sector organisations work closely together already.

We heard earlier about training needs in local authorities, so there must be differences in the training that is provided in each organisation. Can you touch on some of those issues?

Jan Williamson: Much of the funding that third sector organisations receive has to be directed to front-line service delivery. Not many funders are interested in funding big percentages outside of that. Funders should consider that there is value in investing in organisations outside of front-line delivery, so that more training can be provided and organisations can upskill their workforces.

There is an opportunity to share training across the sector and there are good examples of that happening in Edinburgh already. We need more funding for aspects of our service that are not just direct service delivery.

Adam Lang: I sit on the policy committee for the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations and I know that a lot of charities are very small. They set themselves up to respond to local need in their communities. In that regard there is sometimes a lack of broader strategic awareness of other offerings in their area and, on occasion, a lack of joined-up working. However, charities are very good at working together. Often the funding that comes from statutory sources, trusts, lotteries and others requires charities to work in partnership with other organisations. There is a good culture and mentality about that in the third sector.

However, some of what you refer to is the reality that charities respond to need. If there are 70 organisations in Glasgow that respond to homelessness, that tells us something serious about the local authority's provision of support for homeless people. The two do not always go hand in hand. Charities, especially smaller community-based charities and initiatives, are set up to respond to a need. If the need is there, what does that say about how the service that the local authority delivers is supporting the people whom it should be supporting? There are a number of interlinked points that feed into that.

Kenneth Gibson: I do not disagree, but is there an argument for consolidating some services? If you have one organisation that is small, but highly innovative in delivering for the people whom it was set up to serve, perhaps other organisations could benefit from sharing its expertise. Each organisation has its own structure and management and so on, and if there were less of that—perhaps if an organisation was based in Maryhill, but spread out across the north of the city, for example—organisations might be able to deliver a better service. Although some organisations focus on very specific groups, duplication and gaps must be inevitable—even if they are geographic gaps, because a service is delivered only in Drumchapel, Castlemilk or Pollok. That is what I am trying to get at.

That is especially important at a time when revenue funding is tight. I understand that Glasgow City Council is going to cut its revenue for homelessness from £24 million to £20 million a year, which is a significant reduction in one year. Is my suggestion a way in which organisations could continue to deliver their expertise and avoid the increased pain that is likely to come their way?

Mark Kennedy: In Edinburgh, we use a model in which the Cyrenians deliver homelessness prevention services as the lead partner in a consortium of five agencies, all of which operated independently before we came together. That approach was initiated to try to address some of the issues that you raise. The idea behind the consortium is to have a range of expertise that one organisation would have difficulty in providing by itself. It also means that there is less confusion—not only about where people can reach the services that they need, but for the people who commission and refer people to services. It has worked very well. Prior to the system being set up, all the organisations that are working under the model were being funded independently to do the same work. In a way, we were in competition with one another. We started up the consortium in October 2014. It has taken a bit of time, but we are at the point where we work well together and complement one another.

I will explain how it works. The lead partner takes responsibility for the budget, distributes it among the others, and co-ordinates how the work takes place and what expertise is best deployed in each situation. The consortium is certainly a way to address some of the issues that you raise.

Kenneth Gibson: Does that help in budgeting terms? If one organisation is not as successful but has good-quality staff, a staff member would not be lost to the service, if you like, because they could move on to work with one of the other organisations in the consortium. Does it work in that regard?

Mark Kennedy: The consortium works very well in the sense that not every organisation needs to

be administratively strong; only the lead partner provides the administrative back-up because we do not need five finance or five human resource departments in the service. As the lead partner, Cyrenians has taken on the finance function for the whole consortium, including distributing the budget. There is probably a reduction in work duplication, but the key point is that, of the five organisations that work together, one specialises in people with substance misuse issues and two specialise in people with mental health issues, and we have worked on homelessness prevention, welfare rights and so on.

When people are referred to us, we can assess what support they are likely to need and, in theory, get them to the organisation that can best provide the support. Previously, we would have taken someone who came to our door because funding was attached to that person, if you see what I mean, rather than send them to the guy down the road who was probably better placed to support them.

Kenneth Gibson: Each organisation retains its identity.

Mark Kennedy: Yes, of course it does.

Kenneth Gibson: Tony Cain mentioned offenders going out into the community, which is a huge issue. He talked about flexibility in local connection points. I am an MSP in North Ayrshire, and previously I was a councillor and MSP in Glasgow for 11 years. How would that flexibility be delivered? What if a huge proportion of former offenders decided to move to Glasgow, Edinburgh or the other cities, for example? How would you enable the flexibility to work while not having a huge increase in the number of people who might go to one area or another?

Tony Cain: To be clear, I was not suggesting that the local authority that hosts a particular prison should be expected to house and deliver services to everyone who is discharged from that prison; I was pointing more to the fact that it is difficult for local authorities that are likely to have residents in all 15 of Scotland's prisons to ensure that, at the point of release, any one of their residents gets the support and service that they need.

A conversation needs to take place across the 32 local authorities to ensure that, in every prison, there is a properly connected service between the individual and their home local authority or the area that they want to move to.

There are issues to do with offenders—just like everyone else—having a right to choose where they want to live. On some occasions, offenders might not want to return to their home community. However, I was not suggesting that the matter is all about what happens when they move out and that they should be housed by the local authority; rather, it is about local authorities working together with the prison service and others to make sure that, at the point of their liberation, they are properly connected back to the homelessness or housing service that they will then approach.

11:15

I would like to respond to one of your earlier points, Mr Gibson. You said something about the level of compassion that you see in the services that are delivered in the voluntary sector. I would not suggest for one second that that is not the case, but I would say that you will see similar levels of passion and commitment in many of the people in local government who work in the long term with the same client groups and commit strongly to doing their best to deliver good outcomes. That is a feature of everyone who is involved in the system.

I would like to deal with one or two other issues that have come up. I do not think that it is for a local authority to look at the range of charities in its area and start telling them to merge or to do one thing or another. However, I think that a local authority can use its commissioning and procurement framework—I appreciate that the language can be uncomfortable—to direct, assist and support the provider framework in a particular way. Furthermore, in most local authority areas there are homelessness partnerships in which the council can sit down with third sector organisations and talk about the way in which services are being delivered, the direction of the services, the needs that exist and the gaps that exist, and discuss with those organisations ways in which they can work together. The sector itself has a good track record in innovation. You see that in the way that it is responding to what is going on by developing joint-working arrangements to better support the client groups that organisations deal with.

Diversity in provision is hardwired into our housing system. There are 68 social housing providers in Glasgow, never mind the 70 organisations supporting homeless people. That is part of the geography of the world that we work in, and I think that it is a strength more than anything else.

Kenneth Gibson: I acknowledge what Tony Cain said about people in local government having compassion. Anyone who works in the sector has to have compassion—I think that that is more or less taken as read. The selflessness of people who work in the sector was highlighted to committee members on our visits.

The Convener: We are almost at the end of this evidence session. I want to give committee members a heads-up that we have not yet

explored the line of questioning on temporary accommodation. Any member who wants to ask questions on that subject should catch my eye, or else they will have to listen to me asking them.

I will let Adam Lang finish exploring the issues that we are currently discussing, but I would also like him to pick up something else from Mr Gibson's line of questioning.

In Glasgow, there was talk about third sector organisations bidding to become part of a consortium as part of a service redesign or service development in the city. It was not clear whether that would involve a procurement or tendering process. I hate to use all the various buzz words, but I remember that, in relation to the Scottish Prison Service, people were talking about a public service partnership, and we always hear about the idea of co-production and of mapping service providers in a way that enables people, in difficult financial circumstances, to say to good-quality service providers, "Here is the money that we have. How would you use that to design a service that would provide the best outcomes?" Should that be going on through the integration joint boards?

I note that statutory duties are used in relation to older people's services, but is it possible for us to take a more systematic view across Scotland via third sector interfaces, the voluntary sector, integration joint boards and what is happening on the ground? I am not trying to open up a new line of questioning; I am trying to follow on from Mr Gibson's line of questioning to see whether this is something that we should explore further when we put out our formal call for evidence.

Mr Lang—you can let my comment wither on the vine, or respond to it as you talk about the other points that you wish to come in on.

Adam Lang: I want to follow up on what Tony Cain said in response to Mr Gibson's question. There is currently no universal provision of housing advice for prisoners in Scotland. That is a problem. In the past, we and others have run such services in some prisons; there is an abundance of evidence to show that that sort of service helps to tackle in a meaningful and cost-effective way the problems that we are discussing.

As I said earlier, the geography of our prison network, with 15 prisons, does not neatly match our local authority network and other public services. That could be considered further; I hope that the new community justice body will focus on that issue when it comes online.

With regard to the comment that the convener made, I say that the third sector has mixed experiences of how seriously it is taken by some integration joint boards, community planning partnerships and the other vehicles that are established to allow a range of voices to be heard. From the point of view of the third sector in general, and not necessarily that of Shelter Scotland, it seems that when the crunch comes on funding, people focus on the statutory and essential things that they have to do. It is not always the case that the various forums, that in theory exist to give people an equal voice, do what they are supposed to do. I know that that is the experience of people in youth work, healthcare, planning, housing and the whole range of third sector activity.

Tony Cain: The geography of service provision around homelessness is now extremely complicated. In 1977, the legislation was about what happens when you go to the housing department. Now, you will find homelessness services in housing departments in some areas, in integration joint boards in other areas and in social care services in other areas. The way in which people access services is not consistent now, and understanding where services are can be quite a challenge.

It is also fair to say that even IJBs that operate services to do with homelessness have not focused particularly on that area, and neither has most of the process around improving the engagement between housing and health and social care integration. Most of the work of the Improvement Service around housing and health and social care integration has been in relation to older people and, to a lesser extent, people with disabilities. We have been pushing to start a conversation about services for homeless folk, but we are not there yet in terms of the focus of the work that IJBs are doing and their thinking about their responsibilities to that group and developing and improving services.

The Convener: That would give the third sector an opportunity to co-produce services rather than tendering for prescribed services.

Tony Cain: There would undoubtedly be a place for that. However, given the way that procurement rules work in the public sector, there would be few opportunities for local authorities to fund third sector organisations without that being subject to a formal procurement process, because that is what the law requires.

Elaine Smith: We want to move the discussion on to temporary accommodation. There is temporary accommodation and there is temporary accommodation. In Glasgow, we heard about accommodation that was meant to be short-term but ended up being long-term. I think that the convener wants to explore such issues, but I want to ask about rough sleepers.

Having been a member of this Parliament since 1999, I am aware that a guarantee was given at

that point that there would be no rough sleepers by 2003—if I did not know that already, the Shelter Scotland submission would have told me of it. However, there is now anecdotal evidence to suggest that the number of rough sleepers is increasing.

It seems to me that there are several issues—I do not want to speak about all of them because we are considering what we want to explore. First, in the big cities, it seems that it is the churches and Christian charities that are providing overnight accommodation—I think that Jan Williamson would know about that. Secondly, we have done away with the big hostels—perhaps in the hope that we would have ended rough sleeping. However, it seems that we might have been kidding ourselves about that and that there might still be a need for large hostels where people who are sleeping rough can get overnight shelter. Do we now need to think more about the issues around rough sleeping and the solutions?

Adam Lang: It is important to recognise a couple of key points. There is no formal count of rough sleeping in Scotland. I am not necessarily saying that there should be one, but I think that everyone around this table—including members, after their visits—would agree that the level of rough sleeping is rising. Rough sleeping is the most tragic form of homelessness, but it is important to note that it is the tip of the iceberg in homelessness—it is the most visible form of homelessness, but it is a symptom of a much bigger underlying problem. It is important to recognise the structural and systemic problems that lead to rough sleeping.

I argue that part of the reason for the rise in rough sleeping is the fact that we have lost a bit of strategic focus on homelessness since the 2002 task force and the 2012 commitment. The joined-up strategic focus, with real cross-party leadership behind it, has been lost.

The level of rough sleeping is rising; that is linked to all the points that have been made today, and closely linked to the availability and supply of temporary accommodation. I am wary about advocating a return to the use of hostels. Initiatives have floated about in recent months using various modern models of hostel-type accommodation. All the evidence shows that there are significant challenges and risks for the individuals who go there. That said, the question is understandable because of the rise in rough sleeping, but there is a system failure that is linked closely to the significant shortage of temporary accommodation and settled permanent accommodation.

Elaine Smith: I appreciate those points, but it seems that the void is being filled by churches, for example—particularly in Edinburgh and Glasgow. In Coatbridge, where I live, there was an initiative by women who wanted to open a church hall to deal with rough sleeping. There is a problem; how we deal with it is something that we might want to explore further.

When the committee visited a legal service—which I have experience of, in particular with people being released from prison—we heard that a person who is sleeping on the street has to get a lawyer's letter and brandish it at the local authority in order to get temporary accommodation and the roof over their head that they are due. Even then, they may not be dealt with and so must fall back on 19th century charitable provision. That cannot be right.

Tony Cain: That situation is absolutely not right. Just to make it clear, I say that when a person presents at a local authority and says that they have nowhere to sleep that night, the statutory obligation is for it to make secure accommodation available. That is what should happen, although I acknowledge that it does not always happen.

We should not doubt for a moment that the process that shut the Great Eastern hotel was right. The facilities were dangerous and difficult; they were inappropriate and should not have existed at the start of the 21st century. No mistake was made in the work that was done—through the homelessness task force and through the work on rough sleepers that was done early doors by the Parliament—to shut those institutions and provide alternatives.

There has been growth in rough sleeping, particularly in the cities. I do not see rough sleeping where I stay—I do not stay in Edinburgh or Glasgow—but it has increased in the past year or 18 months in those cities. We do not understand why it has happened. I have two concerns, which were picked up in the evidence that I gave the committee on the budget. The first is that some individuals are choosing to walk away from statutory services; they have opted to sleep rough because it is better and safer for them. They feel more in control than they do if they go to the council—local authorities working with the third sector need to ask themselves about that serious matter. There is a risk that that is a factor in the increase; we need to be open to that suggestion. The other concern—I do not know the extent to which this is true—is that some rough sleepers are economic migrants whose immigration status means that they have no access to public funds. Even although those people are destitute, local authority assistance would be unlawful because of the way that the legislation works. Some local authorities house individuals who are in such circumstances because officers refuse to put them out on the street: that is not why those officers got into housing.

My worry is that those two elements are significant and difficult to deal with, as part of dealing with rough sleeping, but we do not know enough about the problem. We need to spend time looking at it in more detail. Rough sleeping is not the same as it was 15 years ago; something has changed, and serious effort needs to go into responding to the rise.

The Convener: We have time constraints, so we might after the next contribution have to move on briefly to the question of temporary accommodation. We will then need to close, although the committee will return to the subject.

Jan Williamson: Streetwork agrees that rough sleeping is rising in Edinburgh. There is not just one reason. People migrate to the city who do not have recourse to support from the local authority, and a lot of people feel unsafe in temporary accommodation and do not want to be there. It is a sad state of affairs that sleeping on a church hall floor overnight with 40 people is a better option.

There are also people who cannot get into temporary accommodation. In Edinburgh, if a person does not have benefits in place, they are not put into temporary or emergency accommodation. That should not be the case: they should get accommodation while an assessment is undertaken to include such issues as intentionality and local connection.

The Convener: Okay. That is very helpful. I will break my rule if Lee Clark wants to add to that. Do you?

Lee Clark: No.

The Convener: Excellent. That brings us nicely on to temporary accommodation, on which we have a number of questions. Jan Williamson has put on the record that there is an issue in some parts of the country in that a person must have all their benefits in place before they qualify for temporary accommodation. As part of our inquiry, we will certainly ask more about that.

11:30

The bulk of my constituency casework in relation to homelessness is about families who might not have multiple and complex needs but who are just in small temporary-accommodation flats—in my constituency they are quite often tenement flats—with two bedrooms and four children, in very cramped conditions in properties that are in hard-to-let areas. Families are looking for larger houses but get trapped in temporary accommodation for quite significant amounts of time. Quite often, they eventually get out of it if there is sensible housing allocation policy by social landlords that can partially meet their housing needs by offering a slightly larger property until the ideal property becomes available. However, in my experience, too many families are trapped in very small, cramped accommodation for quite a long period.

That is anecdotal and is maybe specific to constituencies of the same type as Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn, which I represent. I suppose that the question that I am asking is this: across the country, what types of people—individuals or families—are in temporary accommodation for too long? What are the barriers to their getting permanent accommodation? If our witnesses were members of our committee, what questions would they ask in their call for evidence? I hope that that contextualises the type of questions that we want to ask on temporary accommodation.

Adam Lang: In January of this year, Shelter Scotland published the third annual report that we have done based on freedom of information requests to all local authorities, trying to analyse and understand the time people spend in temporary accommodation and to answer exactly the questions that the convener asked. I will share a couple of the key findings.

The average time that a household spent in temporary accommodation last year was 24 weeks. The average time that a household with children spent in temporary accommodation has increased for the last two years and now stands at 20.2 weeks. The number of people in temporary accommodation is just over 10,500. The number of children in temporary accommodation is more than 5,700—that figure has gone up in our last three consecutive snapshots. Last year and the year before children in Scotland cumulatively spent more than a million days in temporary accommodation. Those are some of the top-level numbers around temporary accommodation as we understand it just now.

At the heart of that issue is the chronic—we might call it generational—lack of affordable housing supply and, crucially, of housing supply that is made available for social rent. To repeat what has been said by all of us today, local authorities have to have options in what they can offer people because—as you rightly said, convener—assumptions that are made about what is needed do not always match what is actually needed. A lot of our casework involves trying to get housing for families who have two or three children. There is a general lack of supply of temporary and social accommodation and there is a really huge lack of supply of family homes in some areas. That leads to the challenges that we face with regard to mixed implementation of some of the work. Some local authorities are doing slightly better than others as regards supply and service delivery. You mentioned Glasgow,

convener—we know that the situation there is quite challenging, in some ways. However, Glasgow is not alone, and there are other local authority areas in Scotland that face real challenges in that regard.

The Convener: Does any other witness have anything that they would like to add? You can take this as an opportunity to put on record anything that you would like to say in relation to temporary accommodation, because we are going to have to close the evidence session soon.

Jan Williamson: We should extend the laws about unsuitable temporary accommodation to cover everybody. It is not acceptable for anyone to stay in unsuitable temporary accommodation for an extended period.

Mark Kennedy: In our experience, being in temporary accommodation—unsuitable or otherwise—is disruptive for people, especially families. They cannot move on, get jobs or decide what schools their children should go to.

We have found that for a lot of people the support that is available to help them to move into more permanent accommodation is key. The housing allocations system and the housing options system in most cities are byzantine, so people need someone with a little bit of expertise to help them to negotiate their way through the pathway. The key to minimising the time that people spend in temporary accommodation is to ensure that they have help to get out of it.

The Convener: I am aware through my constituency case work that some social landlords operate a choice-based lettings system. They accept the obligation to house, but they will have a group of allocations for homeless people. I have constituents who make bids time and again but are not getting secure accommodation. However, with the traditional route, despite all its faults, a section 5 referral meant that a housing association or local authority had to accept the obligation to house a person suitably within a set time.

I apologise for bringing up the issue fairly late on in the day—it just popped into my head and I thought that it would be remiss of me not to mention it when we are talking about people who are homeless and in temporary accommodation.

Tony Cain: It is difficult to respond to all those issues, given their range. In a world of shortage, we should ration social housing; it is as simple as that. Allocations policies, whether they are choice based or not, are rationing systems. One of the biggest difficulties with such systems is demonstrating that they are fair and transparent. That is not easy to do. A wide range of people have a claim on social housing, and they all want to be treated fairly and to be seen to be treated fairly.

It is a binary outcome: if you come second, you do not get a house, and coming second does not mean that you will come first the next time. Indeed, you could come second for ever. The situation is very contested; it is driven by shortage, and part of the answer would be to end the shortage.

That is the advert for the final part of my evidence. Rather than committing to a particular number of social rented houses over a period, we need to commit to grow the proportion of the stock in social renting, particularly in areas that are under the highest pressure—Edinburgh, Glasgow, bits of Fife, Midlothian, East Lothian, Perth and Aberdeen. Those areas need most of the investment. Dealing with shortage is a critical issue.

On the other temporary accommodation issues, lengths of stay have risen and the percentage of lets that are being made to homeless households has fallen over the past three years. Although that is the case in local authorities and in housing associations, there is a gulf between the two. Local authorities are making 38 to 40 per cent of their lets in that area, with some letting significantly more than that. Housing associations, on average, are making about 22 or 24 per cent of their lets in that area, with some letting significantly more than that while some let none.

There are issues about how the access system works, for example in integrating the homelessness route into mainstream access, so that folk do not have to go into temporary accommodation at all. Many folk who present to local authorities could just be given a house, and finding a better way to manage the access arrangements so that that is what happens is one of the tasks that we need to take on.

The Convener: Do witnesses have any final comments before we close this evidence session?

Adam Lang: There is no Government guidance on standards on temporary accommodation. We have campaigned and argued for a long time that there needs to be.

The other important issue to raise, which is addressed in the submissions from Shelter Scotland and ALACHO, is the looming funding crisis for temporary accommodation. A massive shortfall is projected in how we fund that, to the tune of between £40 million and £60 million annually. We need to start to address that right now, otherwise it will become an enormous problem. Temporary accommodation is the bedrock of our homelessness support system and housing safety net. We must do something about the huge shortfall that we know is coming.

The Convener: Alexander Stewart wants to sneak in a little comment before the other

witnesses get a chance to make their final comment.

Alexander Stewart: We have talked a lot about temporary accommodation—and rightly so. It is a major crisis in rural Scotland. We understand that problems continue to increase in the cities, but having temporary accommodation in rural locations is vital. People end up leaving a rural location and moving to the city because there is nothing in between.

You are right to identify that problem, but I want to hear about what we can try to do to tackle the rural aspect. The funding for that, and the whole process of trying to keep people in the community, are vital issues. If we do not manage the situation, we will continue to see a migration to the centre.

The Convener: It is my fault that we have not closed the evidence session yet, Mr Stewart, because I threw in an extra question, too. Time constraints mean that the witnesses might have to write to us if they have anything specific to say on that issue. If the panellists want to comment now, that would be great, but I promised them a final comment before we close the evidence session. We will start with Mr Cain.

Tony Cain: I echo that point. It is important to understand that homelessness is not the same in East Ayrshire as it is in Glasgow, Moray, Angus or the Highlands. It requires a bespoke and locally designed response. At the issue's core is access to housing and choice. Our legislation is too narrowly cast to support a housing system that delivers control over people's housing outcomes in a way that would make a difference.

The Convener: Does Lee Clark want to comment? You do not have to, but this is your final opportunity to do so.

Lee Clark: The key point is to ensure consistency in the approaches that are taken by local authorities.

The Convener: Mark Kennedy?

Mark Kennedy: We have covered everything.

The Convener: Jan?

Jan Williamson: We would welcome further investigation into rough sleeping to improve our understanding of it and the reasons behind it, as well as an exploration of services for people with multiple complex needs.

The Convener: That is really helpful. Mr Lang, do you have anything to add?

Adam Lang: I simply echo our call: we need action and leadership on homelessness now, otherwise we will see the numbers, which have been declining for a while, go back up. We need to act on the challenges and to take a whole-systems strategic approach to support people who are at risk of homelessness.

The Convener: I thank all our witnesses. It has been an excellent and incredibly helpful evidence session, and it will inform our inquiry. We are determined that, when we issue our call for evidence at the start of our full inquiry, we are well sighted on the questions that we have to ask, because there is no point in starting an inquiry and asking the wrong questions.

11:42

Meeting continued in private until 12:05.

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