

COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Wednesday 10 May 2006

Session 2

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COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

† 16th Meeting 2006, Session 2

CONVENER

*Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Euan Robson (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
*Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
*Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP)
*Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)
*John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab)
*Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
*Dave Petrie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green)
Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)
Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab)
Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Robert Aldridge (Scottish Council for Single Homeless)
Liz Burns (Scottish Federation of Housing Associations)
Gavin Corbett (Shelter Scotland)
Julie Hunter (North Lanarkshire Council)
Catherine Jamieson (Glasgow City Council)
Catriona Renfrew (Homelessness Monitoring Group)
Helen Ross (Highland Council)
Mark Turley (Homelessness Monitoring Group)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Katy Orr

ASSISTANT CLERK

Catherine Fergusson

LOCATION

Committee Room 5

† 15th Meeting 2006, Session 2—held in private.

Scottish Parliament

Communities Committee

Wednesday 10 May 2006

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:02*]

Item in Private

The Convener (Karen Whitefield): I open the 16th meeting in 2006 of the Communities Committee. I remind everyone present that mobile phones should be turned off.

Item 1 on today's agenda concerns item 4, which is consideration of a draft of the committee's annual report. I propose that we do not consider the item in private, as I do not believe that the draft report contains anything of a confidential nature that we will need to discuss. Is the committee content with that proposal?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Item 4 will not be taken in private.

Homelessness

10:03

The Convener: Item 2 on the agenda concerns homelessness. This morning the committee will hear from three panels of witnesses. We are to take evidence on the recent report by the homelessness monitoring group and on wider issues relating to homelessness. I welcome the members of the first panel, both of whom are members of the homelessness monitoring group. We are joined by Catriona Renfrew, the director of planning and community care at Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board, and Mark Turley, director of services for communities at the City of Edinburgh Council. I thank both of you for joining us today. Can you tell us a little about the group's remit?

Mark Turley (Homelessness Monitoring Group): The group is the successor body to the homelessness task force. As members know, the task force was set up to develop a national strategy to tackle homelessness and made a number of ambitious and far-reaching recommendations that were largely incorporated into the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003. The homelessness monitoring group was set up to ensure that those recommendations—of which there were more than 70—were seen through to implementation.

The Convener: How is the group structured? Who sits on it and how does it work?

Catriona Renfrew (Homelessness Monitoring Group): The group covers a range of interests. As Mark Turley said, it is the successor to the homelessness task force and oversees the implementation of the legislation. Its diverse nature reflects the complexity of homelessness issues and the need to join up a number of strands of policy and activity to tackle the problem.

I represent the national health service on the group and Mark Turley represents the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, rather than the City of Edinburgh Council. The group, which meets every two months, also contains representation from the voluntary sector, the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations and so on, and its secretariat is provided by Scottish Executive civil servants. There are several sub-groups which, as the committee will be aware, are explored in our report.

The Convener: You say that you have considerable work to do in implementing the more than 70 recommendations that the homelessness task force came up with. What are your key milestones in implementing those

recommendations? Have some of them been reached in the past year?

Mark Turley: The hardest hitting element of the recommendations was reform of homelessness legislation, which involved the eventual abolition of the local connection test, eventual replacement of intentionality requirements and, most important, eventual abolition of priority need requirements. If things go to plan, by 2012, everyone in Scotland who is not intentionally homeless will be entitled to housing. That is our ultimate goal and we hope that the Parliament will continue to support our efforts in that respect.

The task force's recommendations were much more wide-ranging than simply advocating legislative change, and there is good evidence that the various providers are making a lot of progress in many areas. For example, when it introduced its homelessness inspection regime, Communities Scotland carried out a review of five local authorities. Its report is very encouraging; although it does not for a moment suggest that councils are perfect, it makes it clear that the vast majority of them are willing and determined to improve services for homeless people, to develop proper strategies and so on. Since that report was published, all partners have continued to make progress.

However, the acid test of all that work will be legislative change. If we do not abolish priority need requirements by 2012, we will have failed.

Catriona Renfrew: I should also point out that, this year, research is being carried out into the important issue of intentionality, because the HMG is required to give advice on the matter to the minister to ensure that decisions can be taken in 2007. Mark Turley is right to say that some progress has been made on the matter, but it is important to highlight to the committee the scale of the social problem of homelessness and the importance of policies that continue to ensure that it is tackled by the NHS, local government, the voluntary sector and on other fronts.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): In recent years, there has been a lot of new legislation on homelessness, including the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003. How has the pattern of applications changed since those pieces of legislation were passed?

Catriona Renfrew: Mark Turley and I are not great experts on homelessness statistics—I do not think that that is what we bring to the group—but, as our report points out, there has been an increase in homeless applications. That might be an indication not only of increasing need but of success in flushing out hidden homelessness. Given that one of the group's objectives was to

make homelessness more visible, the increase in applications is not necessarily a negative factor. However, as our report makes clear, we are still concerned about the significant level of repeat homelessness. After all, one of our key objectives was to ensure that people were housed in sustainable, permanent accommodation.

The work that was done around the minister's statement on the abolition of the priority need system by 2012 highlighted a range of different issues to do with how we analyse homelessness statistics and the views of local authorities on changing patterns of homelessness and future predictability. We highlighted in our report a major sequence of work that the 2012 sub-group is doing this year to get a better handle on what is happening statistically in homelessness now and going forward to 2012, and on how we can properly assess the priority need challenge.

Patrick Harvie: Are we aware of any changes in the kind of people who make applications? I am thinking in particular of people who arrive in a city such as Glasgow from other European countries, with nothing fixed up but looking for work, perhaps with limited English language skills and potentially facing homelessness.

Catriona Renfrew: I am not particularly aware of the situation that you describe. Catherine Jamieson, from whom the committee will hear evidence later, might be better able to answer that in detail.

There is a problem of nationals from the new European Union accession states arriving in Glasgow to work and securing poor housing solutions because of their lack of entitlement to statutory benefits and other forms of state support. That is a major public health issue for us at present, but I am not sure how it manifests itself for homelessness services. It is a relatively new issue.

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I acknowledge that you said that neither of you is a statistical expert. The number of homelessness applications is rising, but you said in your report that the number of those applicants who are assessed as homeless is falling. I find the statistic surprising. Is it because local authorities are not applying the legislation fairly and are acting instead as some sort of gatekeeper?

Mark Turley: There has been only a small fall in the percentage of people who are assessed as homeless and there is not a huge amount of evidence that what you describe is a big problem. However, you are right that there is concern that if local authorities believe that they do not have an adequate amount of temporary and permanent accommodation, they might become more like a gatekeeper. Most people would accept that such a lack of resources tends to increase that risk.

One of the flaws of the homelessness legislation with which we have been working for years is that it is all about gate keeping. Even with an act and a code of guidance, there is still much scope for discretion, particularly in relation to people who may have been made homeless from friends' or relatives' homes. It would be possible for councils to tighten up in some of those areas if they felt that they could not deliver their statutory duties in respect of temporary or permanent accommodation.

That said, the pathfinder study by Communities Scotland found only a little evidence of local authorities acting as gatekeepers. My impression is that local authorities are breaking out of that role to become much more constructive in finding solutions to people's homelessness.

Tricia Marwick: Given the current pressures on local authorities—we will discuss this with others later—could a case be made for homelessness acceptance to be decided by agencies other than local authorities? Should some other agency determine whether someone is homeless and make a recommendation to the local authority on whether they should be housed under the legislation? In other words, is the local authority the right body to make the decision?

Mark Turley: It absolutely is. Apart from the fact that local authorities are responsible for the management of homes and the communities in which those homes are, they have a good track record in dealing with homelessness.

If there is a gate-keeping function, I am sure that in the vast majority of cases it is the product of the pressures on the supply of accommodation and on the availability of support that local authorities face. Handing over the assessment function to somebody else would not solve those problems. That is one of the most important points that COSLA has tried to make throughout.

When the legislation was first introduced, the Finance Committee gave everyone a hard time. They said that it was aspirational legislation that could be delivered only if the resources were in place. That remains the case to this day. The fundamental problem is the resourcing rather than who carries out the assessment.

10:15

Catriona Renfrew: I agree with Mark Turley. If we tried to remove some elements of homelessness from local authorities' responsibility, we would fail to reinforce one of the issues of which the HMG has been very aware, which is that it is important that local authorities see a corporate duty around homelessness, not just a housing duty, and that they see the social care and community planning elements as being their

responsibility too. Where Communities Scotland has identified issues in applying either the legislation or the guidance, those need to be tackled with the local authorities rather than through a fundamental change to the means of assessment.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): Have you seen any change in how homelessness is dealt with or any difficulties arise when there has been wholesale housing stock transfer by local authorities? The local authority will have responsibility for homelessness and the housing association will have responsibility for the housing supply.

Mark Turley: Catriona Renfrew will perhaps comment on what has happened in Glasgow, as that is what will be in most people's minds. There is no single model for the management of homelessness, post transfer, in the United Kingdom. Some councils have kept the responsibility for homelessness and others have handed it on to the housing association. Some have done it one way, changed and done the other, and vice versa. To be honest, the separation of landlord from assessment definitely tends to cause an issue. The right solution seems to vary from council to council. Catriona Renfrew knows the situation in Glasgow better than I do.

Catriona Renfrew: The stock transfer in Glasgow was major and the disruption that was caused by the transfer from the council to Glasgow Housing Association—which was only one of 70-odd housing associations in play—resulted in some problems. However, I would not say that there is a fundamental problem with the council operating as the statutory homeless authority and securing housing through the GHA and other housing associations. Much work is going on to ensure that that works well for people and that homeless people, along with other housing association clients who are coming off the housing waiting list, get fair offers. In Glasgow, we are reasonably persuaded, through the homelessness partnership, that the housing associations are operating in a fair and equitable way in dealing with homeless people.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): I want to pursue that theme a wee bit and talk about partnership working generally. In some authority areas, housing associations have a duty to take a percentage of homeless nominations from the local authority. Is that happening? Does the information that you have suggest that we need to be firmer about that, or are the housing associations working in partnership with the local authorities on that?

Mark Turley: The answer is a resounding yes; the housing associations are working in partnership with local authorities. The percentage

of statutorily homeless households that are housed by housing associations is increasing; therefore, housing associations are housing an increasing share of those whom we have a statutory duty to house. The other indicator is the fact that, although there are provisions in the existing legislation for an arbitration process to resolve problems, I do not think that it has ever been used. Inevitably, the extent to which the relationship works varies between council areas, but in general it is working everywhere—very well in some places and pretty well in most.

Tricia Marwick: The second section of your report states that there will be five high-level national outcomes by which success in tackling homelessness will be judged. Perhaps you would like to highlight for us what progress has been made to date on each of those five national outcomes and what more needs to be done.

Mark Turley: I will kick off. The first outcome is that no one need sleep rough. There is clear evidence from the counts that were undertaken nationally that the rough sleepers initiative had a big impact. Going back to 2003-04, it probably halved the number of people who slept rough. Over the past couple of years, we have not undertaken those national counts—as you know, they are rather crude and involve going out and doing head counts. We are trying to develop an easier and better system of counting.

However, in Edinburgh, where we used to have a significant rough sleepers problem, we have continued to do local counts. Generally speaking, the number of people who sleep rough is much smaller than it used to be, as there are almost always enough hostel bed spaces available should they wish to use them, and the length of time for which people sleep rough has reduced dramatically. Something like 70 per cent of the rough sleepers who engage with rough sleeping services go on to permanent, settled tenancies. Therefore, on that outcome, there are some really good signs of progress.

Catriona Renfrew: Along with Edinburgh, Glasgow has always made a major contribution to rough sleeping. It has been reduced, but there is still some way to go, particularly for the most challenging clients, who present us with real difficulty in finding suitable accommodation solutions, even temporarily. We are doing work on the range of street services that we offer.

The situation has improved, but it is time that there was another national count—albeit that, as Mark Turley said, it is a crude measure—to give some confidence in the assertion that the position has improved. That is one of the things that the HMG needs to debate this year. It must decide how to achieve more certainty on the number of rough sleepers, perhaps by doing another national count or some local counts to provide local figures.

Tricia Marwick: The Executive set a target of 2002 by which no one should have to sleep rough, but, in 2006, we still have people who are sleeping rough. How intractable is the problem of rough sleeping? If we cannot eradicate the need for anybody to sleep rough, we will surely fail again.

Catriona Renfrew: The duty to provide temporary accommodation has meant that people get an offer of accommodation when they present as homeless. The challenge in Glasgow has been with people who do not wish to take up offers of temporary accommodation or for whom finding appropriate temporary accommodation is a real challenge. Tackling the small number of people who are difficult for the system to deal with, such as those who have been violent towards staff or who have been barred from temporary facilities, is a relatively complex issue. In Glasgow, we are still working on how to fulfil the duty to provide temporary accommodation for such people in a way that is appropriate for them and is safe. I suspect that the general target has been achieved, in that rough sleepers are offered accommodation, but there are particular difficulties in fulfilling that duty for a certain group of people.

Tricia Marwick: With respect, you are speaking about the major cities, but rough sleeping is a fairly major problem in the smaller towns and villages in Scotland, where access to hostel and other accommodation is perhaps not quite what it would be in the cities. The range of accommodation—from wet hostels to accommodation for women or youngsters—might not be all that it should be in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen or Dundee, but how effective are local authorities and others at providing the range of accommodation that is needed for people who sleep rough in the smaller towns and villages?

Catriona Renfrew: A theme of our report is our concern about the ability of local authorities to fulfil the duty to provide temporary accommodation in a way that reflects the range of need that you have described and the range of urban and rural challenges. Personally, I think that one of our major issues for this year will be to take stock of where local authorities have got to on providing temporary accommodation. The use of bed-and-breakfast accommodation is a real concern and is highlighted in the report. We may have got women and children largely out of bed and breakfasts with the Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2004, but there is still a real issue with vulnerable single people being placed in bed-and-breakfast and other unsuitable temporary accommodation. The honest answer is that that remains a real challenge for local authorities and is one on which the HMG needs to continue to focus.

Mark Turley: Do you want me to go through all five national outcomes in huge detail?

Tricia Marwick: It might be useful if you would.

Mark Turley: The second outcome is that existing homelessness becomes more visible. You might feel that we have covered some of that, because the key indicator of that is the increase in presentations, particularly among single-person households, which were least likely to present previously because there was less in the system for them.

The figures seem to suggest that, nationally, presentations have probably peaked and the rate of growth in presentations is slowing down. In some authorities, the corner has been turned and the level of presentation is decreasing.

It is too early to draw a conclusion but, at the headline level, it seems that many of the hidden homeless are coming through. There is a concern that hidden homelessness is a particular issue among black and minority ethnic groups. That is flagged up in the report as an area that the monitoring group might need to consider further.

Tricia Marwick: How confident are you that things are on track in ensuring that fewer people become homeless in the first place?

Catriona Renfrew: One thing that was highlighted as a result of the work with local authorities on the 2012 target was that there is still a lot of progress to be made on prevention. A number of issues relating to prisoners and members of the armed forces were highlighted in the report. As with many of the challenges that we set ourselves in the task force, much progress has been made but there is still much to do to ensure that our work on prevention has an impact on homeless presentations.

A lot of work is going on in the HMG and the support groups to try to up the ante in relation to prevention and to ensure that local authorities can do more through their homelessness strategies. At our next meeting, when we digest the review reports that were due in at the end of April, we will get a better sense of the progress that is being made on prevention. Personally, I believe that it remains a challenge.

Mark Turley: The single biggest reason why people become homeless is that they are required to leave friends' and relatives' homes. Such people account for around 60 per cent or 70 per cent of presentations; by and large it is not people with special needs who are leaving an institution, who are the people who Catriona Renfrew has in mind. It is true to say that there has been some progress in relation to them. However, the only way in which young people who cannot stay with their relatives or friends can be prevented from becoming homeless is by having an adequate housing supply. That is one of the key issues that we face. The people who, in previous years, would

have put their name on a waiting list and so would have been able to enter a house when they needed one, often do not have that option, so they present through the homelessness route.

Cathie Craigie: I accept that rough sleeping affects cities and rural areas differently. However, I would like to know more about the numbers of places that are available across Scotland for people who are sleeping rough. Do we have enough beds and other options? If performing a count by having people go out at night and search all the nooks where people might be sleeping is not good enough, when will new methods of performing a count be found? Will they be found in time for us to get an accurate picture of the situation some time this year?

If spaces are available but there are people who have many problems and who are difficult to work with, do we need to make changes? Do professionals in the housing field need legislation to be passed to address the issue?

Catriona Renfrew: I do not think that legislation would solve the problem of clients who are challenging. Largely, it can be solved by better joint working by health, social care and housing and by the development of various solutions using supporting people resources. A more joined-up approach needs to be taken to those individuals.

We have highlighted repeatedly the challenge that local authorities face in providing temporary accommodation. Although the problem is particularly evident outwith urban areas, Edinburgh has certain problems as well, which shows that there is not a simple urban/rural split.

I do not think that the national count is inaccurate, but it is resource intensive and gives only a snapshot. It does not give a regular update on the problem, which would be helpful.

10:30

Mark Turley: Local authorities already use what they call the common monitoring system. The Scottish Executive is making some adjustments to that, which it thinks will help to improve the recording of rough sleeper statistics. It is due to consult councils on those changes in the next couple of months. That is not far away but, as Catriona Renfrew said, there might be a case for doing another national count anyway.

On your first question, one could argue that the number of people who sleep rough is broadly equivalent to the average number of available hostel bed spaces. However, the situation is a bit deceptive because, as Catriona Renfrew said, some people are barred from temporary accommodation, which means that they cannot just walk in and take up a hostel bed space. There

might be the odd night when there are more people than there are beds, but sometimes it will be the other way around. If we achieve the objective of no one needing to sleep rough, we will probably have done it only by the skin of our teeth. There is no margin of comfort.

Cathie Craigie: Are there statistics for the number of people who are barred? Could you direct me to them?

Mark Turley: I do not have that information with me, but I can get it for you.

Dave Petrie (Highlands and Islands (Con): How robust is your monitoring of work towards the final two outcomes in the second section of the report, which are fewer people becoming homeless and the duration of homelessness being reduced? How do you monitor those statistics and how auditable they are?

Mark Turley: The statistic for the duration of homelessness is reasonably robust and it has shown a significant reduction, having fallen by five weeks between 2003-04 and 2004-05. There is a statistical monitoring form called an HL1, which local authorities have to fill in every quarter and which includes a whole heap of detailed statistics. Every presentation, the details of the case and the outcome are recorded. The Scottish Executive has done a lot of work to tighten that up, which means that those statistics are becoming pretty reliable.

Dave Petrie: Is the duration of homelessness monitored in the same way?

Mark Turley: It is. There are two aspects to it: the speed of assessment—how long it takes a council to come to a decision; and the bigger question of how long it takes to find a suitable housing outcome.

Christine Grahame: You remarked on the supporting people fund. In the Shelter Scotland briefing, we are told that that was cut by 12 per cent in 2005-06. Shelter was also concerned that the deprivation calculation can mask pockets of deprivation in affluent areas. Can you comment on that? I will put that to Shelter too, as it is in its evidence.

Catriona Renfrew: In Glasgow, the supporting people resources have made a huge difference to our ability to provide sustainable, supported accommodation solutions for homeless people. A huge part of the hostel closure programme is financed through supporting people. I would not debate the 12 per cent—that is perhaps a question for the Executive and for Shelter. However, on the extent to which supporting people funding has made a difference to homeless people in Glasgow, we could not deliver the hostel closure programme without it.

Christine Grahame: What about the comment in the Shelter briefing that the way in which

deprivation is calculated means that there can be losers? There are parts of Edinburgh in which affluent areas and very poor areas are juxtaposed.

Catriona Renfrew: That would be different from all other local authority funding, which, from the perspective of the west of Scotland, is not weighted enough for deprivation. Maybe supporting people makes up some of the gap. I will let Mark Turley answer that.

Mark Turley: It is getting a bit parochial, but if the national cut is 12 per cent, Edinburgh's is 20 per cent. Our budget has been reduced from more than £40 million to £32 million over a three-year period. However, what Catriona Renfrew is saying is that there has to be a starting point. We are providing services now that we were not providing years ago. Although the position is umpteen times better than it used to be, over the current three-year period there has been a huge reduction in Edinburgh. One of the reasons for that is that Edinburgh did very well in the creation of the supporting people budget. We got a lot of service growth. The formula was introduced afterwards, which led to a period of budget reductions. It feels to people in Edinburgh as if services are being cut significantly, but they are still much better than they used to be.

Christine Grahame: That is very straight but very dry. You say that services are being cut. Will you give me examples of things that can no longer be done to support people who are vulnerable in accommodation?

Mark Turley: Our approach to managing the budget reduction has been to compare all the different providers and to identify those that can provide the lowest unit cost, while still providing a good-quality service. There is a huge variation in the cost per person per week of different care packages. In effect, we have focused resources on the most efficient providers—that is a genuine efficiency improvement. After that, we have had to say to people that we are able to purchase a lower number of support packages than previously, because of the budget reduction. Fewer packages are available, especially for services such as floating support. We have tried to avoid closing down buildings such as hostels and other places that provide support. However, floating support, which involves offering people X number of hours of support per week, has taken a big hit.

Catriona Renfrew: It is important to emphasise Mark Turley's core point. Originally, supporting people funding was distributed on the basis of the efficacy with which local authorities made claims. For various reasons, some local authorities were very poor at making claims. There will never be a perfect formula, but the shift to having some orientation towards need is appropriate. That is better than having the allocation fixed on the basis

that some local authorities were good at making claims in the original distribution.

Christine Grahame: I understand that point and took it on board. Nevertheless, in his original answer, Mark Turley admitted that, after the council has made all the necessary efficiencies, gone through all the bidding and got the best deals, at a practical level some people are receiving less support than they received previously.

Mark Turley: In Edinburgh, we have not reduced support for or taken support away from any existing user. We have said to service providers that their ability to provide support has been reduced, which means that the number of new cases that they can take on has been reduced.

Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): I return to the issue of the 2012 target. Do you have any interim evidence from local authorities of their capacity to meet that target? What are the key challenges that they will face in getting there?

Mark Turley: There are two broad categories of councils. Some councils are concerned about the quality of the housing that is available. Although, statistically, they might be able by 2012 to achieve the rehousing of everyone who has a statutory right to be rehoused, they would have to put those people into poor-standard housing or housing in neighbourhoods that the people would not find acceptable. Other authorities believe that, statistically, they will not have enough housing to meet their statutory duties in 2012. I hate to be so parochial, but Edinburgh is the best example of that. At the moment, the number of people whom we accept as statutorily homeless exceeds the number of council lettings. The only reason why we are keeping our head above water is that, increasingly, housing associations are housing people who are statutorily homeless. Edinburgh is an extreme example, but our projection is that in 2012 we will be doing even fewer lettings, because our turnover is slowing down and our stock is reducing. We expect that the level of presentations will be at least what it is now, and arguably a bit higher. There is a quality issue and an overall supply issue.

Scott Barrie: You say that there are two broad categories of local authority. Can you say approximately how the 32 local authorities are split? Is the split between urban and rural authorities and between large and small authorities, or is there a mixture of all kinds of authority in both categories?

Mark Turley: There is a mixture. I cannot give you hard stats, although some research has been done on the issue. Professor Bramley's research is also designed to inform that debate. Statistically,

the majority of councils face the quality issue. A smaller number face the supply issue. However, where they do, it is a serious problem.

Catriona Renfrew: We highlighted in our report that a particular focus of our work this year is the capacity issue in 2012. The information that councils provided as part of the survey was very variable in quality and depth and needs a lot more work. That is perhaps not surprising, as it was the first time that authorities had been asked that set of questions. However, some of the trajectories for the growth in homelessness that councils were reporting were entirely out of proportion with any historical growth in homelessness. Issues such as that will have to be unpicked. Having done a first survey, we now have a better basis on which to do more detailed work with local authorities this year. We would use indicators such as length of stay in temporary accommodation, for which we have some certainty about the current pattern of activity on which to base future projections.

Scott Barrie: Is it one of the key tasks of the homelessness monitoring group to come up with a reliable methodology to ensure that you have adequate statistics and can plan for 2012 and can arrive at that date without finding that some authorities are way behind others?

Catriona Renfrew: We have a 2012 planning sub-group, which will be supplemented this year by two full-time officers working with that group and the Executive to ensure that we have a much better handle on the data relating to 2012. As you suggest, we do not want 2012 to arrive without there having been proper planning.

Cathie Craigie: The homelessness monitoring group notes that the issue of the allocation of social housing to homeless people came up consistently during the consultation on the ministerial statement. The issue was raised by MSPs, local authorities and the general public. How can we achieve an appropriate balance between the needs of homeless households and the needs of people on housing transfer lists or waiting lists?

Mark Turley: The starting point would be a better understanding of the fact that people who are homeless are not a different group of people from those who are registered on the transfer list or the normal waiting list. In some parts of Scotland, the debate has become very heated and homeless people have been caricatured as trouble and people on the transfer list and the normal waiting list have been caricatured as good. Neither of those caricatures is necessarily true. A small number of people who come through the homelessness route are trouble, and a small number of people who come through the other routes are trouble. Those people will not spontaneously combust or disappear from our

planet if we do not house them. If we are serious about solving the problems that those people present, giving them decent housing would be the starting point. We cannot engage with them or give them support to solve the problem if they do not have reasonable housing in the first place.

I made a particular point earlier and I gathered that one or two of you recognised it. If we get the balance of the allocations wrong and we offer no prospects to people on the waiting list and the transfer list, they will come through the homelessness route. It is difficult to judge. It is almost as if putting pressure on one side will make the other side pop up, and vice versa. That reinforces the point I made a moment ago: we should regard all those people as a single group who are in housing need, even if that need manifests itself in different ways.

In some ways, we have beaten each other up—blaming homeless people, blaming councils for not getting their allocation policies right, or blaming people on the waiting lists—when the real problem is that there are just not enough houses. It is a rationing problem. Instead of solving the root problem, which is the lack of social housing, we beat each other up for being biased for or against particular groups.

Cathie Craigie: I take those points very seriously. However, in my experience, demand for the housing resource has always been greater than the supply. That is a challenge that Government and local authorities have to face in order to meet housing need.

Earlier, you said that 60 per cent of homeless applications are from people who can no longer stay with friends or family. That is what people in communities are seeing: they see someone who seems to be in a better position than they are being offered a four-bedroom cottage-type house when they are sitting in an overcrowded, two-bedroom, four-in-the-block flat. They regard the way in which local authorities manage the stock as making the problems even more difficult. Is further guidance from the Executive needed, or do COSLA and the professional housing bodies need to do further work on the management of stock, to avoid people forming the view that you described of two different groups, when everyone is the same?

10:45

Mark Turley: That work needs to be done. It will not solve the problem, but it will increase everyone's understanding of the issues. For example, transfers are a slight diversion. In any rehousing system, it is healthy to maximise the number of transfers, because lettings are not lost. A need can be met by transferring someone,

which creates a vacancy that it is hoped will meet someone else's need. Some councils are probably better at that than others are. Some work to achieve best practice on that would help.

There is no magic figure such as a 40:60 split or a 50:50 split. However, variation among councils is significant and it is hard to understand why such a range is right, so some work to achieve a better understanding would help.

At the risk of boring the committee, I will say that I worry that the more we discuss the matter, the more we are in danger of distracting ourselves from the real issue, which is the lack of affordable housing. If we do not start to put money into providing the supply now, the required houses will not be built by 2012. We should do research and achieve best practice, but there is no doubt that supply is an issue, at least in some council areas. Unless we bite the bullet in the next year or two, those houses will not be ready in 2012.

Cathie Craigie: You said that some councils do not have the right balance, but I understand that many councils are striving to meet the targets that have been set. You mentioned that Communities Scotland has reported that progress has been made. Some local authorities have told me that it is difficult to strike the balance, because if they use their allocation management policies, they are in danger of being criticised by Communities Scotland for not reaching the targets that it has set for allocations to homeless people as a percentage of stock allocation.

Catriona Renfrew: As Mark Turley said, councils' practices vary so much that it is necessary to set some benchmarks for a reasonable point of equilibrium between allocations to applications from the homelessness route and allocations to applications from other routes. It is right to challenge councils about that and to debate the matter, provided that we understand all the factors that are in play and the lack of affordable housing stock in some local authority areas, as Mark Turley said. Those matters need to have the light shone on them by Communities Scotland and others, so that the appropriate balance of allocation through different routes can be seen in each local authority area.

John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): The problem is acute in some areas. I recognise what Mr Turley talked about. Two weeks ago, a councillor in my patch said that the only way to obtain a council house allocation in my constituency is to be a knife-wielding drug dealer or a pregnant teenager. That was a thoroughly irresponsible comment, but it represents a perception that is around.

Mr Turley, you acknowledged that people who are homeless can have no more or no less an urgent need for housing than people who are on

the waiting list, whether they are elderly people in upstairs flats, overcrowded families or whatever. Do you suggest that we should remove the distinction between the two groups of people and that we should think about adopting a new policy that encompasses everybody who needs affordable rented housing?

Mark Turley: It could be said that that is what the 2012 target is all about. If we achieve that, we will be saying that we do not distinguish between single people or vulnerable people and families who are homeless. That is the solution. The legislation that was passed 20 or 30 years ago was introduced for the right reasons but, from the outset, people said that it would lead to the scenario that you described, in which bad people abuse the system and queue-jump, for example—I am not saying that that happens, but that is some people's perception. The reality is that everyone who is homeless should be given a home—that is a laudable objective—but the elderly person who lives in an upstairs flat also has an acute housing need and deserves to be rehoused. We have beaten ourselves up and set one group of people in housing need against another, because there are not enough houses to go round.

John Home Robertson: The approach can work only when there is sufficient appropriate housing stock in every local authority area—and ideally every community—in Scotland.

Mark Turley: Yes, but we do not have to achieve perfection; progress would help us to get closer to achieving our objectives.

John Home Robertson: We are nowhere near doing so, are we?

Mark Turley: I agree with you.

Dave Petrie: Do councils have a uniform approach to assessment of priority need? Councils of which I have experience operate a points system whereby people are placed near the top or the bottom of the list.

Mark Turley: The law requires councils to take account of need in setting their allocation policies, but the way in which councils do that varies hugely.

Dave Petrie: Are there 32 different allocations policies?

Mark Turley: That is basically correct, but some policies are similar. A major factor is the extent to which councils take account of the time spent on the waiting list as opposed to true need. Most councils give some weight to the length of time that a person has spent on the list as well as to the degree of need, but the balance between waiting times and different measures of need varies across the 32 authorities.

Dave Petrie: Do you monitor what councils do, so that you can ascertain whether assessment is consistent across rural or urban areas or whether the approach in some councils needs to change?

Mark Turley: Policies are subject to inspection by Communities Scotland.

Tricia Marwick: I am grateful to Mark Turley for allowing us to get to the nub of the problem, which is the lack of affordable social housing. You said that we need to build more houses, but is the Scottish Executive putting sufficient resources into affordable housing? If not, can the 2012 target be met? What needs to be done?

Mark Turley: Development funding is the funding for housing associations to build new homes, so that is the process whereby new supply is provided. The formula through which development funding is allocated to different local authority areas is under review and Communities Scotland is consulting on its future shape. It is well recognised that the current formula pays no heed to supply problems but is almost entirely allocated on the basis of deprivation. Some people think that that is the right approach. It is unsurprising that, under the current formula, Glasgow gets the lion's share of the development funding budget, which it uses to tackle housing that is of appalling quality—there is nothing wrong with doing that. However, areas where the issue is more about supply than it is about quality perhaps do not receive significant levels of development funding. I hope that the balance between deprivation indicators and supply indicators will change.

The problem is that the review of the formula is about how we divvy up the cake and not about the size of the cake in the first place. I do not want to criticise colleagues in the Executive, who do a fantastic job to support work in many ways, but I have no confidence that the resources for supply will be in place to enable us to achieve the 2012 target.

Dave Petrie: As members of the homelessness monitoring group, do the witnesses want to make final comments?

Mark Turley: I have been involved in the homelessness monitoring group since it was set up and I was involved in the homelessness task force that preceded it. The Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003 is one of the most important acts that the Parliament has passed and during the bill's passage there was a sense that the Parliament would be bold and ambitious. Everyone approached the matter with their eyes open and knew that the goals could be achieved only if resources were put in place. There were many discussions explicitly about that.

I urge the committee to retain the commitment to seeing this through to a conclusion. If we can

make an impact on homelessness, the impact for Scotland as a whole will be huge. I hope that people's concerns can be addressed. The fact that people have been representing different constituencies has created infighting, when the real issue is that the cake is not big enough. I want us to focus on the fact that the cake is not big enough, which should unite everyone. I hope that we do not waste what is a tremendous opportunity.

Catriona Renfrew: While focusing on the size of the cake, we must not lose our focus on the social, health and economic costs of homelessness. If the debate turns into an argument simply about affordable housing, we will have lost part of the point of the homelessness task force and the legislation that it generated, which is that, despite the ability to characterise some homeless people in the way in which John Home Robertson did—

John Home Robertson: I did not.

Catriona Renfrew: Sorry—you quoted somebody.

John Home Robertson: It was a nationalist councillor.

Christine Grahame: That is most unfair, as he is not here to speak for himself.

Catriona Renfrew: Sorry. Most homeless people need housing, social care and support. If we deal with their needs, we will generate the social gain that is the point of the legislation and the HMG. Homelessness is one of the most insidious problems of Scottish social policy and should not get lost in a debate about affordable housing, although that is critical, too.

Christine Grahame: You have moved on to the issue that I was going to ask about. Has an estimate been made of the cost to the health service—let us say to Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board—of poor housing conditions? We often think about housing problems in a little isolated cubicle, but they have huge ramifications for educational development and health. Such information might assist in having money moved from one budget to another to build the houses that we require.

Catriona Renfrew: I am sure that I could source that information for you. I am sure that my public health colleagues have done work on the impact on health of poor housing, not only in Glasgow but Scotland-wide. We have certainly done work on the impact that homelessness has on health and work on the health needs of homeless people. One difficulty in Glasgow is that homeless people are quite cheap for the health service, as they do not tend to access the services that they need. In particular, people who live in hostels are out of the

main stream and out of the view of many services. It is always more expensive to provide proper care and access for people than it is to warehouse them in hostels. Two issues arise. I suspect that work has been done on the public health cost of poor housing, which of course will be wider than the cost to the health service. I will happily try to source that for you.

Christine Grahame: That would be useful.

Dave Petrie: Do you have any other issues to raise from your organisations' perspectives? You may have covered everything.

Catriona Renfrew: One is so rarely asked such questions that one has nothing prepared. I will not make a pitch on behalf of Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board, although Mark Turley might wish to do so on behalf of the City of Edinburgh Council.

Mark Turley: I have covered the important points.

The Convener: That concludes our questioning. I thank the witnesses for attending. I will suspend the meeting temporarily to allow for the changeover of witnesses.

10:58

Meeting suspended.

11:01

On resuming—

The Convener: The members of the second panel represent voluntary organisations that work in the homelessness field. We are joined by Robert Aldridge, the director of the Scottish Council for Single Homeless; Liz Burns, the policy and practice officer of the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations; and Gavin Corbett, the policy manager of Shelter Scotland. I thank the panel members for joining us today.

I will start by asking about the minister's priority need statement. How achievable is the interim administrative target of reducing by 50 per cent the proportion of homeless households assessed as non-priority by March 2009? Can that be done?

Robert Aldridge (Scottish Council for Single Homeless): I think that it can be done, but the situation will be different for different local authorities. Some authorities already find that a high proportion of homeless people are in priority need. Those authorities have a shorter distance to travel than authorities that find that something like just over half of the people whom they have assessed as homeless are in priority need. One of the most important points for us as a monitoring group is to be aware early on of local authorities

that are having difficulties so that appropriate interventions can take place to help them to achieve the target. The interim target is an important milestone and it is important that we keep the momentum going as we head towards 2012. The 2009 milestone will be really important in helping to keep the pressure on, so that people understand that we are clearly moving towards achieving the target that has been set for 2012.

Gavin Corbett (Shelter Scotland): I fully support those comments. It is important that local authorities take ownership of their own situation and are able to plot their own path towards 2009 and then 2012. That is what COSLA asked for and it is important that that factor is recognised.

Communities Scotland also has an important role to play. As has been mentioned already, it has a monitoring role in homelessness services. It has recently consulted on its inspection role and has raised the possibility that rather than just inspect councils as part of a cyclical process—as it currently does—it could go to a local authority earlier if it discovered that there were problems. If one or two authorities are likely to have problems meeting the 2009 target, early action can be taken, rather than wait until 2009 to take action. In many ways, by then it will be too late to do anything.

The Convener: It is clear that there is a need for flexibility for local authorities, because what is right for one authority might not be right for another. Could anything be done to support local authorities overall in achieving the 2009 target, irrespective of what their unique needs might be?

Liz Burns (Scottish Federation of Housing Associations): I do not want to sound like a scratched record, but, on local authorities' ability to meet the 2012 target—towards achieving which the 2009 target is an important milestone—supply commitments will be crucial in allowing them to plan better to meet needs.

The Convener: We have already heard about the challenge of meeting the 2012 target and ensuring the provision of affordable housing. Do you think that that is the key challenge? Will other things influence whether the 2012 target can be met?

Liz Burns: Absolutely. Meeting the target is like doing a jigsaw. A lot of the issues involved were touched on earlier. The first key part of achieving the 2012 target is having a sufficient supply of affordable and appropriate housing. That is not a numbers game; as was said earlier, there is a lot of poor stock and although work is being done to make improvements, there is still a supply issue. Alongside that, a key first step is ensuring that people have an appropriate tenancy. We also have to address issues of health, support and

employability. All those things make up a jigsaw, which, when pieced together, will meet the aspirations of the legislation.

Gavin Corbett: Although meeting the 2012 target is a big challenge, we should not see it as an impossible one. As Mark Turley said, because local authorities have been taking such big strides to respond to homelessness and improve their services for homeless people, we are already three quarters of the way there. We are already assessing 75 per cent of people as being in priority need. Achieving the 2012 target will not be like bridging an impossible gap.

The Convener: I am sure that you are aware of the minister's statement on priority need, which he made in Parliament in December last year. Did he fail to cover any issues in that statement that you would have liked to be included?

Gavin Corbett: We would have liked the minister—and the Chancellor of the Exchequer—to address the most pressing concern, which is whether the spending review will release money for new social housing in 2007. That measure is still awaited. As Mark Turley said, we cannot just switch on supply instantly. Next year's spending review will be the test of whether new affordable homes will be made available. That is the gap that most practitioners who speak to me identified.

Liz Burns: Absolutely. The current Executive target is for 7,100 new builds to be made available in the next year. We think that the next spending review has to address supply issues. In the ministerial statement, we wanted not only an acceptance that supply was important but a firm commitment to delivering it.

Robert Aldridge: Another issue is how the agenda here relates to the Westminster agenda on welfare reform and potential changes to housing benefit. It is important that we ensure that both areas of reform move in parallel and that one does not undermine the other.

John Home Robertson: The year 2009 is not very far away. We heard from the previous panel that some local authorities will find the 2009 target very challenging indeed because of a shortage of stock. If they do not have access to suitable stock that they can let to people who have an urgent need for housing, local authorities and housing associations will still need to use temporary or interim solutions from time to time. Do members of the panel have any comments about the continuing use of temporary or interim housing for people who have been homeless?

Robert Aldridge: That is a big issue. Clearly, there is a problem with temporary accommodation becoming silted up because people are being required to stay in such accommodation for longer periods of time. Again, as was mentioned by the

previous panel, the problem comes down to the supply of affordable rented housing, which is the key issue that we need to tackle.

In some situations, however, interim accommodation rather than temporary accommodation might be felt appropriate if the person needs a form of halfway housing to help them to gain the necessary skills before they take on a permanent tenancy. It is important that we differentiate between people who are in temporary accommodation because of a lack of availability of permanent accommodation and people who are in interim accommodation as part of a plan to allow them to develop skills that will enable them to live successfully in permanent accommodation. We need investment in supported interim accommodation in particular if we are to enable people to move successfully into permanent accommodation.

John Home Robertson: A related point, on which I seek the panel's comments, is that interim or temporary accommodation can sometimes involve a higher level of rent than local authority or housing association properties. Therefore, tenants can find themselves in a situation in which they can afford to stay in the accommodation only as long as they are on benefit. If such tenants find a job, they are in trouble.

Liz Burns: That is a huge issue that needs to be addressed. A pilot project in London is considering whether lowering rents for temporary accommodation to affordable levels can provide people with more routes out of homelessness. In the coming year, the homelessness monitoring group will consider the applicability of that pilot to Scotland and whether such a move could be put in place here.

The figures show that, across the country, people spend different lengths of time in temporary accommodation, but I reiterate that we are not talking about a numbers game. Particular types of household can face longer waiting times in temporary accommodation. For example, permanent accommodation is often not available for larger families. That situation disproportionately affects black and minority ethnic households, which tend to be larger. A related issue is that people might not even present as homeless because they know that no long-term solution is available for them. I appreciate that that might be slightly off the point about temporary accommodation, but there is evidence to suggest increased hidden homelessness among black and minority ethnic households.

In areas such as Glasgow, a number of large families have been held in temporary accommodation for long periods of time simply because accommodation has not been available to allow them to move into sustainable tenancies.

Therefore, the issue is about not just the amount of accommodation but its appropriateness and how we develop a strategy to move people out of temporary accommodation.

Gavin Corbett: We need to consider how we can provide temporary accommodation without simply displacing permanent stock by turning it into temporary stock. The private sector leasing scheme in Edinburgh, which is the first significant scheme of its kind in Scotland, is an important way forward. We can provide further information on that, if the committee requests it. The scheme adds to the stock of temporary accommodation without taking away from the stock of permanent accommodation.

Tricia Marwick: Audit Scotland published a report covering 2004-05 that shows that the average time that homeless people had to wait for their application to be dealt with was 15 weeks, with variations across local authorities from two weeks to 56 weeks. Is any work being done on that issue? Are some local authorities simply treating the time taken to process applications as waiting time, if you like, that people spend in temporary accommodation?

11:15

Robert Aldridge: I do not know the details, but we certainly need to keep a close eye on the matter. The temptation is to be stricter about rationing at the one filter point in the system, when people are assessed as homeless. We must ensure that that does not happen. After all, as the previous panel pointed out, we must have a culture of solving the problem of people in housing need, whether or not they are homeless, rather than a culture of gate keeping, warehousing or whatever the practice is called.

Gavin Corbett: It is important to get behind what is causing the problem. I would be surprised and worried—indeed, I would be a bit shocked—if people were spending a long time in temporary accommodation because the assessment system was not working. I realise that a comprehensive assessment can take time. If people are having to stay in temporary accommodation because there is not enough permanent accommodation, we must find out how to provide more permanent accommodation. However, if people are staying in temporary accommodation because of the system itself—which, after all, costs not only the family or person involved but the taxpayer an enormous amount of money—that is a failure.

Tricia Marwick: Should Communities Scotland monitor the situation? Do the other witnesses agree with Gavin Corbett that instead of carrying out cyclical monitoring of local authorities Communities Scotland should move in when a

problem arises—for example, when a local authority takes up to 56 weeks to assess a homelessness application?

Liz Burns: I believe that Communities Scotland intends to carry out a baseline study on this risk-based issue. However, because not all the local authorities have been inspected, there is no baseline and, at the moment, only a consultation document has been issued.

I also believe that other work needs to be undertaken, because we cannot get to grips with the statistics simply by carrying out cyclical or even priority-based assessments of local authorities. Some of the work of the HMG's 2012 planning subgroup and the work on the HL1 data that Mark Turley mentioned are aimed at securing a more robust statistical assessment of why the situation is occurring. After all, 56 weeks is more than a year, which seems a ludicrous amount of time to take to carry out a homeless assessment. However, certain issues that arose in some local authorities affected the assessments, and work on the HL1 data should perhaps concentrate less on the fact that some local authorities take two weeks and others take 56 weeks to process applications and more on the average time for undertaking assessments. Of course, we would like all applications to be assessed within two weeks, rather than 56 weeks, which is an excessive amount of time. However, the HL1 data also need to show the figures in between.

Tricia Marwick: The Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2004 sets out the types of temporary accommodation that are unsuitable for households, particularly those with children or pregnant women. Do your organisations have any evidence that local authorities are placing people in unsuitable accommodation?

Robert Aldridge: Our evidence suggests that almost every local authority is doing its best to comply with the order. However, there are problems with supply in certain areas. Moreover, because suitable temporary accommodation can be far away, particularly in rural areas, some people prefer the bed-and-breakfast option for a short period. The issues are not so clear-cut.

Ideally, the order should be extended, but only when local authorities are able to deal with the issue. For example, the consequence of the quite correct decision not to place children in bed and breakfasts is that many more vulnerable and young people are being put into that accommodation, which is not suitable for them either. That said, we have to be practical about what the system can stand.

Liz Burns: I totally agree with Robert Aldridge's comments on bed-and-breakfast accommodation.

There is a concern about temporary accommodation and its increasing use, and we need to get to the point at which we are creating sufficient sustainable tenancies so that the use of temporary accommodation becomes less of a problem. That would immediately take pressure off local authorities in relation to their need to use bed-and-breakfast accommodation.

Part of the problem is a failure to move people through the system. We talked about the time that people spend in temporary accommodation. Bed-and-breakfast accommodation is generally a response to a lack of movement through temporary accommodation. Homelessness in itself is not a route to accommodation; it is the solution to homelessness that matters, and that means creating sustainable tenancies and movement, which will immediately reduce the use of bed-and-breakfast accommodation.

Dave Petrie: I have a question about properties throughout Scotland that are used as holiday lets. Such properties are available for significant amounts of time in the winter, but not in the summer. In Edinburgh, such accommodation might be available outwith the festival. Is that a sector that you think could be used for either temporary accommodation or to buffer the load that we have just now?

Liz Burns: It is inevitable that we will have to consider more partnership work with the private sector; that is what you are talking about. In Edinburgh, a private leasing scheme has been initiated. I do not know whether that will involve holiday lets or not. More work needs to be done to consider all sorts of solutions.

Dave Petrie: My understanding is that some properties in Scotland lie empty for a significant amount of time when there is no demand for them for holiday lets or whatever. I just wondered whether they could be utilised.

Robert Aldridge: I am sure that the idea should be looked at, as long as the properties are of the appropriate quality and in the appropriate place. However, there is always the problem of what happens when the holiday season begins.

Dave Petrie: Yes, I appreciate that.

Gavin Corbett: I used to work for Argyll and Bute Council as a homelessness officer. April was our busiest month for exactly that reason: all the tenancies in holiday-let properties came to an end and people had nowhere else to go. It is a patchy solution, but if I owned property that I could use for holiday lets, with high management costs and a high turnover, or that I could let for five years through a private sector leasing scheme that would give me a guaranteed income for five years, I know what I would do.

Patrick Harvie: I have a few questions about prevention. The ministerial statement clearly had some focus on prevention issues. I am aware that Shelter Scotland has raised some concerns about those issues, which I will talk about in a moment or two.

How should we monitor the effectiveness of prevention work? Should we be looking at the statistics on applications or assessments or at the reasons why people apply, or is there some other way of deciding how effective existing work has been? What are the witnesses' views of existing work and how effective it has been?

Robert Aldridge: The picture is complex. Some prevention work is done more or less just before the time of crisis. At that point, it is quite easy to test whether it has been effective or not. Has a person who has been threatened with immediate eviction avoided that eviction? That can be measured very simply.

Much further up the line is the preventive work that involves, for example, educating young people in schools about leaving home in a planned way. It is very difficult to find a clear evaluation that shows that a particular lesson on a particular day led to a person not becoming homeless. Different frameworks are needed for different types of preventive activity. There is a continuum, from the work done at the time of crisis, which is very easy to measure, to preventive activity that is further upstream, which is much more difficult to evaluate.

Liz Burns: We have to be clear about what we mean by prevention. As Robert Aldridge said, prevention can mean someone knowing their rights and not getting into a mess in the first place. It can also mean people being able to remain in their accommodation because, for example, welfare rights and money advice services have been put in place. It can mean people moving in a managed way, without the crisis of homelessness, into housing association or local authority stock or property in the private rented sector. It can also mean crisis prevention, which Robert also talked about. We need a much wider definition of prevention.

Measuring prevention will be difficult, but the first thing we have to do is define it and its different stages. Prevention does not necessarily mean that someone will stay where they are.

Patrick Harvie: What about what is happening at the moment? I accept that it is difficult to come out with a simplistic score, but how satisfactory is the current work and how will it develop?

Liz Burns: The focus has been very much on crisis intervention and prevention. A lot of good work is being done in different communities by different agencies, but that good work is not being

captured because we do not have a means of measuring it and because it might not necessarily be defined as activity to prevent homelessness; it may be defined simply as good tenancy management or good advice services.

I understand why the focus in the coming year will be on work with local authorities. Funding is in place for local authorities to produce innovative prevention schemes. That will help us to get a flavour of what preventive activity exists and what can be replicated in other parts of the country. We are at an early stage and we have to push on quickly. It will take time to replicate practice from one area in other areas.

It is of note that only one local authority said that preventive work would reduce homelessness figures. That is why it is urgent to look into such work. We need to give local authorities good information and good schemes that have been seen to prevent homelessness.

Robert Aldridge: A point was made during the discussion with the first panel about reductions in supporting people funding and about how it is likely that floating support will be hit harder than crisis-intervention support. We need to ensure that low-intensity support—the follow-up services for people who have just got new tenancies—is not lost in supporting people funding. That low-intensity support can offer some of the least expensive and most effective ways of preventing people from falling into housing crisis and homelessness.

Patrick Harvie: I turn now to Shelter Scotland's recent document, "Homelessness prevention in Scotland", which seems to say that, yes, the prevention agenda should be supported because it can make a positive difference, but that the difference might be quite modest. The document also draws some comparisons with what is happening in England and expresses concerns about the way things are going there. It also talks about two councils in Scotland whose staff were "actively deterring people" from applying, and suggests that an increased focus on prevention might act as an incentive simply to get the figures down. Would Gavin Corbett like to add to any of those points?

11:30

Gavin Corbett: Mark Turley touched on some of those points earlier. He said that, when there is extreme pressure on supply, it is understandable, if not very enlightened, that some staff respond by trying to ration in other ways.

The points that Mr Harvie mentioned come from Communities Scotland reports, which pick out examples of people being filtered out before they were able to make the homeless application that they were entitled to make.

The analogy with England is instructive. In England, there is an impression of heavy pressure on local authorities to drive down the number of applications for homeless status, rather than the number of homeless people. The pressure comes partly from the target to cut in half the amount of temporary accommodation that is used in England. That is one reason why I am pleased that we have not adopted such a crude target in Scotland. It is almost an invitation to try to stop people coming into the system. If there is a target to reduce the amount of temporary accommodation by half, the easiest way of meeting that is to stop people entering the system in the first place. Quite rightly, we in Scotland have said that, to some extent, the rise in the amount of temporary accommodation is a consequence of people having more rights and is a development to be welcomed, rather than criticised. That is part of the truth.

The issue of how successful prevention can be in tackling the causes of homelessness has already been touched on a few times today. Many people become homeless as a result of fairly fundamental issues in society—relationships between men and women, and partners generally, and between young people and adults. We must accept that there have been fundamental and far-reaching social changes. It is difficult for the state or public policy to intervene in such situations, but that means that we should intervene all the more in situations about which we can do something. For example, each year 5,000 people lose accommodation in the private rented sector and apply as homeless; people still lose council and housing association tenancies more than is warranted; and people continue to become homeless after coming out of hospitals, prisons or the armed forces. Those are relatively modest causes of homelessness, but we have all the more reason to do something about them, because something can be done about them.

Patrick Harvie: You have identified some differences between the ways in which the issue is being tackled north and south of the border. How confident are you that we are heading in the right direction and that prevention work will continue to address housing need, rather than contribute towards producing better statistics?

Gavin Corbett: Among the local authority staff to whom I speak, there is a real appetite to engage with the prevention agenda. Historically, homelessness was a junior function of local authorities. Homelessness strategies were unheard of and the idea was that homeless persons officers would subject people to four tests to test their eligibility. As a result of the changes that have been made in the past five years, we now have staff who see it as their job to help people and to engage with a wider agenda. They

want to look at issues such as the causes of homelessness and how it can be headed off. I am confident that the kind of staff whom local authorities are now employing are able to engage with such issues in a way that their predecessors could not.

Christine Grahame: I return to the issue of supporting people funding. A previous witness said that there are winners and losers in the applications process and gave reasons for that, but according to Shelter's briefing the budget for 2005-06 has been cut by 12 per cent overall. Floating support has been mentioned. You spoke about low-level support. Can you tell me in simple terms—for example, by citing a case study—what that involves for an individual and whether people have lost such support? It is a straightforward question.

Robert Aldridge: I will describe the kind of low-level support that we are talking about. If a young person has their first tenancy, someone may visit them infrequently to ensure that everything is okay and to offer them support to ensure that the bills are dealt with, for example. Such support may be required on only two or three occasions, to ensure that the person is sorted out, to check whether there are problems with neighbours and to nip any such problems in the bud. The support can then float off to someone else.

Christine Grahame: What do you mean by that?

Robert Aldridge: Once a person no longer needs support—if the worker has visited on two or three occasions and is quite satisfied—it can go to someone else. Low-level support involves a very light touch and not much time being spent with a person, but if it is not provided and things start to go wrong, someone can quickly move into a housing crisis or abandon a tenancy. As Mark Turley said, it is unlikely that a supporting people service will be cut if that support is linked to a particular building. It is much easier to cut low intensity support that is not linked to the functioning of a particular building.

Christine Grahame: Has that happened and, if so, to what extent?

Robert Aldridge: There is anecdotal evidence that it is happening, but I do not have the statistics.

Gavin Corbett: The anecdotal evidence that Shelter Scotland has heard suggests that the short-term effects of the 12 per cent real-terms cut for 2005-06 have not yet come through. A lot of voluntary organisations have been able to absorb some of those cuts, but that is not sustainable in the long term. You cannot cut funding and expect voluntary organisations simply to make up the difference in the short term.

Mark Turley talked about efficiencies, which is reasonable from the point of view of the public, but we must be careful about how we define efficiencies. It might mean that high-turnover, high-number services are funded, whereas the high-quality, intensive services—such as hostels, which deal with precisely the kind of people Catriona Renfrew mentioned—suffer. I hope that it is not too cynical to say that, when push comes to shove, homeless people are not always the most popular client group for public funding. There is no evidence of that yet, but I fear for the future if the trend for cuts continues.

Liz Burns: What our members are reporting in relation to supporting people is as other witnesses have described. My fear is that although it is acknowledged that there is still a lot of work to do to reach the 2012 targets, there do not appear to be any opportunities to get new supporting people funding in place.

If we identify future needs for preventing homelessness and ways of working with people to prevent homelessness or to assist people in sustaining tenancies after homelessness, I fear that the funding to put such schemes in place will not be available because money is allocated to maintaining existing services—or services will be cut. There is absolutely no discussion about the need to make provision for new services in the future.

Christine Grahame: Is there no discussion with the Government about that?

Liz Burns: There may be discussion, but the review of supporting people is not about how we fund new and emerging needs. However, I reiterate Mark Turley's comment that the situation is certainly better than it was—I do not want to be negative about supporting people.

Christine Grahame: You are not; it is important to be straightforward about this. For example, in my constituency, a girl came out of foster care and needed someone to teach her how to gate-keep her flat. She had become a target for local guys who would come in for a party and the situation would quickly spiral out of control. She simply needed someone to help her manage independence.

In fairness to the Government, it put money into services, but how was the effectiveness of supporting people funding measured at the level of the individuals involved? How do we measure the efficacy of that funding in cases such as the one I described? If people had come in and helped that girl earlier, they might have managed to prevent the situation from spiralling out of control. They did intervene eventually, but she could have done with support earlier. How do you measure such provision and say that the needs are proven and that you need more money, not less?

Robert Aldridge: On a simple level, we can measure the number of abandonments or the number of people evicted. Those are simple measures, although individual situations are always a little more complicated.

Liz Burns: We can also measure the number of repeat homelessness applications.

Christine Grahame: That would tell us.

Liz Burns: You are also right to say that, if resources are restricted, it is easy to target the crisis-level services, which means that people are targeted after they become homeless to deal with issues that have emerged because of their homelessness. What get lost are the issues that led to their homelessness, which might perhaps have been avoided if support had been provided. As Robert Aldridge said, those support services can be among the cheapest that are provided, so it is a matter of getting priorities right.

We can look at how people are managing their tenancies and count the number of people who are getting into rent arrears as opposed to the number who are managing to keep on track. That is another way of measuring such things.

Euan Robson (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD): I would like to ask about the group of young people who are described as NEET—not in employment, education or training. What evidence do we have about how large a component of single homeless people the NEET group of young people is? Is it significant? Has it grown or shrunk in recent years? A lot of work is being done on various interventions to assist the NEET group of young people.

We surely must be able to identify them through their passing through the education system and, perhaps, into further education. We are trying to manage transitions better, but one element in the whole picture is housing, which leads to stability. Is sufficient work being done on links between housing associations or others in housing and education and health services to ensure that such young people get into permanent accommodation?

Robert Aldridge: There is always room for improvement, although work is going on and an employability framework is due out in due course. One of the key issues in the homelessness task force's thinking was the need to create much better links between education, health and housing. We have come a long way—there is a lot more dialogue between the right people; each knows what the other does and the limits of the information that can be passed over—but there is still a long way to go before we have a seamless service, the right alerts are sounded at the right point and the family of services comes in when we see someone who might be at risk in a number of ways.

Liz Burns: There is an education issue, which Robert Aldridge has talked about, but there is also an issue with rationing for young people. As we have heard today, any allocations policy is a rationing system. Some of those who have suffered in that rationing system are young people with natural aspirations to live independently of parents or whatever other arrangement they are in. The lack of appropriate affordable housing in areas where people want to live has meant that young people are almost trapped in an inability to realise natural aspirations, which can lead to their making poor choices about accommodation.

There is an issue with links and a problem of young people in many areas being unable to access independent tenancies. The aim of the homelessness legislation is not to push people down the homelessness route, but we need alternatives to enable people to realise their natural aspirations without becoming homeless.

Euan Robson: Can we quantify any of this? Can we quantify how big a part of the single homelessness problem the NEET group of young people might be? Is any work going on to isolate that group of people and identify how big a component of the problem they are?

Liz Burns: The homelessness statistical returns will give you those figures. I do not know them offhand, but I know that that group is one of the biggest groups of single people.

Gavin Corbett: Young single people generally are one of the biggest groups; the statistics will not necessarily get into the detail. We need to think about disconnection with other services as well. I suspect that what you ask is a new research task, ironic though that might seem, as there has been no shortage of research on homelessness in recent years. I do not think that there is an answer to your question.

Euan Robson: Part of getting a job is having a stable home—somewhere to live. There are no longitudinal studies on how people transfer from school education into a period of homelessness and being in the NEET group and then on into accommodation. In other words, we cannot say that one element or another is the key to resolving a problem for the NEET group; there is no evidence yet that finding a home is probably the most important element in obtaining a job and coming out of the NEET category.

Robert Aldridge: We have found that a combination of factors must come together for someone to escape homelessness. Getting four walls and a door key is fundamental to having the necessary stability, but the connection to employment and training is also important, as are having some kind of informal social support network of people who can help and having a

connection to health and other services. It is not necessarily the case that housing has to come first; we need to deal with all the issues together if we are to help people to escape homelessness.

11:45

Euan Robson: But there is nothing that helps us to understand better the different weights of the variables.

Gavin Corbett: My recollection is that the feasibility of conducting a longitudinal study on homelessness was examined a few years ago. I would have to look at that again. One of the difficulties is that it is not always easy to identify the trigger points at which people went down one path rather than another and a longitudinal study might not address that. We could ask the Executive to look that work out and to pass it on to the committee.

Cathie Craigie: I am sure that we all agree that effective partnership working can result in positive outcomes, regardless of the field that it is engaged in. How effective has partnership working between local authorities and the voluntary sector been in implementing the changes in the homelessness legislation?

Liz Burns: I am extremely positive about the way in which relationships and partnerships have developed between housing associations, local authorities and voluntary organisations that provide support services on homelessness. The legislation has meant that local authorities cannot deliver the solutions on their own, which has acted as an impetus for the development of partnerships. I am not saying that the partnerships are perfect in every way, in every case, but although there is still work to be done, robust and strong partnerships in the delivery of housing and support services to homeless people are developing in many local authority areas.

Robert Aldridge: Since local authorities began developing homelessness strategies, the experience has been extremely positive and, in general, the voluntary sector has been involved in good partnership working on the development and implementation of those strategies. I retain some concerns—which, to some extent, were reflected in the ministerial statement—about the slightly patchy involvement of health boards. Although health boards are actively involved in partnerships in some areas, in others their involvement is less enthusiastic.

Another issue is how directly involved some drug and alcohol action teams are in the homelessness strategy. Again, the pattern is patchy. The DAATs, which are directly accountable to the minister, are heavily involved in the strategy in some areas, but less involved in

others. It is important that the work of all the DAATs is fully integrated with the homelessness strategy.

Gavin Corbett: I want to pick out the relationship between local authorities and housing associations, especially on referrals. As Liz Burns mentioned, that is an area in which there have been some excellent examples of joint working. When partnerships work well, they work really well, but coverage is still patchy. Two thirds of all the possible mixtures of local authorities and housing associations have not yet signed protocols. Although that is changing, there is still some work to do.

Cathie Craigie: What was the percentage that you mentioned?

Gavin Corbett: Two thirds. Because local authorities and housing associations do not have exactly the same boundaries, there are all sorts of different combinations of associations and authorities. In an ideal world, all local authorities would have signed a protocol about referrals with all the housing associations in their areas, but that has happened in only a third of cases—according to the information that was available a few years ago. The situation is improving, but there is still some way to go. Referrals are an area of the homelessness programme on which local authorities cannot deliver without the active involvement of housing associations. It is just a question of ensuring that the example that is set by the best housing associations is followed by all of them.

Cathie Craigie: I wanted to move on to that issue, which Shelter has raised. Perhaps Liz Burns would like to comment on it. The SFHA supported the approach that was taken in the Housing (Scotland) Bill, but I do not know whether it had the support of its entire membership in doing so.

Liz Burns: Section 5 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 was initially a response to stock transfer, because we needed a mechanism whereby local authorities, which retained their functions in relation to homelessness, could ensure that they could discharge their duty to provide accommodation. As a result of stock transfer, accommodation would have to be found through housing associations. Section 5 has an additional purpose in that it extends choice to homeless applicants by increasing the number of landlords who can provide solutions, so that a homelessness service can consider the best solution for the applicant.

Nomination agreements with local authorities have existed for many years and have been used to enable housing associations to house homeless people. Local authorities have differed in their

approach to section 5: some authorities use it; some use a combination of section 5 referrals and nomination agreements; and some use only nominations. If we consider only section 5 referrals we will probably not have a complete picture of the contribution that housing associations make.

I agree with Gavin Corbett that joint working is still patchy. Local authorities and housing associations must get to grips with section 5 referrals. However, section 5 referrals are increasingly a means for housing associations to become involved in housing statutorily homeless people.

This is a little plug for my sector. Almost all new refuge provision in the past few years has come about through partnership working between housing associations and women's aid organisations. Much work is being done by housing associations. It is important that we consider homelessness in the widest sense and do not just consider the people who present to the local authority. We need to make more use of housing associations as community organisations that can provide advice and assistance and do preventive work. We can become more engaged in that agenda.

The Convener: Christine Grahame wants to ask a question. I must ask you to keep your question brief, because one of the witnesses has to leave by 12 o'clock.

Christine Grahame: I will be as brief as I can be without being curt.

First, Gavin Corbett said that two thirds of potential protocols between local authorities and housing associations have not been signed, but that that information might be out of date. How can we ascertain which local authorities have not made such arrangements?

Gavin Corbett: Communities Scotland has the information.

Christine Grahame: Is it on the Communities Scotland website?

Gavin Corbett: Probably not, but Communities Scotland's regulation and inspection team can provide the information.

Christine Grahame: Secondly, I am interested in joint working between health boards, DAATs, housing associations and local authorities. Are there protocols or partnership models in that context? If so, how can we access them? I appreciate that local authorities and health boards do not all have coterminous boundaries, but how can we access information on good and bad practice and find out which organisations need a bit of a kick?

Robert Aldridge: The Executive conducted a survey of health boards to ascertain how boards

are complying with the health and homelessness standards. The results will be analysed and should be available towards the end of the summer, so I hope information that gives a good indication of the situation will be made available to the public.

Liz Burns: The issue is to do with getting information out. Robert Aldridge talked about formal partnerships. In terms of preventive activity, you will also need to take account of some of the less formal partnerships between voluntary sector agencies, local authorities and housing providers and start collecting information about what works and what does not work.

Christine Grahame: When will that information be available for us to start collecting it? Who is producing it?

Liz Burns: One of the tasks of the homelessness monitoring group this year is to come up with a framework for preventive activity. That will provide a means by which some of that information can be captured.

Dave Petrie: Are there any other issues that you would like to raise about the implementation of legislative change arising from the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003?

Robert Aldridge: The first issue that I want to raise relates to what Euan Robson was talking about. We are concerned that the mood music in relation to the welfare reform agenda and the employability framework seems to concern those who are close to the labour market rather than those who are far from it.

Through the new futures fund, some excellent work involving people with addictions, homeless people and ex-offenders has been done in Scotland. That work has had soft outcomes rather than hard outcomes and has recognised that, rather than moving straight into a full-time job, people will take a long time to get into a position in which they are employable. I am concerned that we should not lose the good work that has been done and that we remain as fixed on those who are far from the labour market as we are on those who are easy to place.

The second issue that I want to raise is that of stock transfer. Homelessness is an afterthought in the stock transfer negotiations. Before any stock transfer goes ahead, I would like the Executive to satisfy itself that proper arrangements have been made to ensure that the 2012 agenda can be achieved when a stock transfer goes ahead.

Tricia Marwick: Can I ask a brief question?

The Convener: I am afraid not.

Liz Burns: I want to stress the fact that we should not lose sight of the supply issues, which

are overwhelming and are of great concern to our members and local authorities across the country in relation to their ability to meet the 2012 target.

We should not be distracted by the fact that there might well be sufficient properties to meet the number of homeless people who might be presenting in 2012. We do not want the homelessness route to be the only way by which people can secure affordable social housing. We need to maintain other means of access to such housing and not be distracted by the homelessness figures. We need to look beyond them.

In that context, applying the right to buy to housing associations is a way of decreasing, not increasing, the supply of social housing. In the context of the 2012 target, it seems a contradictory policy.

Gavin Corbett: Mark Turley made quite an impassioned plea about not placing one group of needy people against another group of needy people. Given that he is the housing director of a highly pressured local authority, that is significant. He asked for the support of the committee and the Parliament in relation to the 2012 ambition and I would support that call.

Although the number of applications from homeless people is increasing and an increasing number of homeless people are being housed, the latest information that we have is that, for every homeless person who is housed, three people are housed from waiting lists or transfer lists. We are not yet at the stage at which homelessness is the only route to social housing. We are a long way from that. Different areas have different pressures but, in relation to Scotland as a whole, it is important to keep that statistic in mind.

The Convener: That concludes our questions. The committee will suspend briefly to allow our witnesses to change over.

11:59

Meeting suspended.

12:01

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome our third and final panel. We are joined by Julie Hunter, the senior strategy officer of North Lanarkshire Council; Catherine Jamieson, head of the homelessness partnership at Glasgow City Council; and Helen Ross, head of housing strategy at Highland Council. Thank you for joining us.

I begin with a general question. Now that the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003 have had

time to bed in, have they had any effect on the pattern of homelessness seen by local authorities?

Julie Hunter (North Lanarkshire Council): In North Lanarkshire, we have seen a doubling of homelessness presentations since 2001-02. Increasingly, more single people—and, in that group, younger people—are presenting as homeless. Because a number of elements of the 2003 act have not yet been implemented, it is difficult to say whether it has had an impact. However, the 2001 act has certainly had a major impact, partly around the raising of awareness of people's rights and partly around the introduction of the duty to provide temporary accommodation for everyone. That, in turn, has allowed us to carry out much more thorough assessments of people's needs. Those aspects of the 2001 act have had an impact for us.

Catherine Jamieson (Glasgow City Council): In Glasgow, life is a little bit different. Because of the work of the homelessness partnership and the greater emphasis on homelessness we have, over the past three years, seen a reduction in the number of homeless applications that we have received—until this year. Unfortunately, this year we have had a slight increase in the number of applications from single people. There has been a reduction in the number of applications in all the other categories of homeless people, except single people. Significantly, a lot of young, single people in the city are making homeless applications. For me, that raises concerns about access to housing and the ability of parents, friends and families to accommodate young people who are in crisis.

I echo much of what Julie Hunter said about the 2003 act. We are desperately awaiting the implementation of some sections of the act, especially section 11 on landlords' and financial institutions' notification of local authorities of their intention to take action to recover possession of accommodation. That will help us to do more up-front work on the prevention of homelessness, by allowing us to intervene at much earlier stages to help households to maintain their tenancy or accommodation rather than lose it.

Helen Ross (Highland Council): I echo a lot of what Julie Hunter said. We found that the 2001 act had a significant effect. Our level of homelessness increased by 40 per cent, then by 48 per cent. It is still increasing, although it is tailing off, to some degree: in the year just gone, the increase was about 6 per cent. Homeless applications have come from across the board but, significantly, most have come from single people.

As the other witnesses have said, the 2003 act has had less of an impact, simply because some of its elements have not come into force yet. For us—and, I am sure, for many others—the

provisions on priority need that have been commenced reflect policy that we had in place, so they had a less significant impact. However, the impact of the 2001 act has been significant.

The Convener: You mentioned an increased number of homelessness presentations. Is the reality that such people were always homeless, but that the legislation made it easier for them to express their needs and that it gave them an entitlement that they had not had, the lack of which had been a disincentive to their coming forward and saying that they needed accommodation?

Julie Hunter: The issue is too complex to allow us to say that. A range of factors drives people to present as homeless. The degree of awareness raising that several councils undertook drove people to apply who previously were living in difficult housing circumstances but who felt that they would never benefit from the legislation. That has had a bearing on the situation, but other influences are at work.

Evidence is increasing of family breakdown in some communities and of other ways in which family life no longer supports young people in particular. A host of influences are brought to bear on the situation; it is difficult to narrow them down to one thing or another. The cause of the increase is probably a combination of many things. However, awareness raising and the improvement in people's rights have had a huge bearing on their approach to whether they make an application.

Catherine Jamieson: In Glasgow, we have always accepted homeless people and provided temporary accommodation, so the requirement under the 2001 act to provide temporary accommodation to everybody who makes a homeless application and who needs temporary accommodation was not new to us. We have increasingly seen changes in the reasons for homelessness, which relate to family breakdown, to drug and alcohol issues in families and communities, and to offenders leaving prison—particularly offenders who have served long sentences and who have not maintained accommodation during their sentences.

The Convener: I move to the priority need statement. How easy will it be for local authorities to meet the interim administrative target of reducing by 50 per cent the number of homeless households that are assessed as non-priority by March 2009?

Julie Hunter: In North Lanarkshire, a high proportion of people who are found to be homeless are in priority need. In the past year, 81 per cent of all people who were found to be homeless were given priority need status. Perhaps we do not have as far to go as some local authorities.

We have opted not to have a knee-jerk reaction and immediately define a group as having priority need, but to consider variations in the local authority's area so that we have a better indication of the impact of defining a group on distinct communities. We have an 81 per cent finding of priority need, but there are distinctive variations in parts of the community. We want to examine that in more detail, which I suspect will take us a few months. We will have wide-ranging discussions with stakeholders and our partners when we do that.

We might end up with the introduction of another small group that would be given priority need—a couple of ideas are floating around about how we would do that. However, more than that, the exercise is about making the assessment process more robust and uniform in all our first-stop shops that serve the communities that we administer.

Catherine Jamieson: In Glasgow, about 11 per cent of our homeless applications are determined as being not priority need, so the target is reasonable for us. However, although we can provide temporary accommodation, our greatest difficulty—which we might explore later—is in securing permanent accommodation for people. Our greatest effort goes on trying to provide routes into permanent accommodation for homeless households in as short a time as possible.

We are disappointed that guidance was not issued to local authorities on how to change the definitions around priority need. Our concern is that the definitions will differ among local authorities, which might influence where people make their homeless applications. Forward-thinking authorities that interpret the legislation in the way the Executive wants might have to deal with additional applications because of the various interpretations of the legislation.

Helen Ross: Our experience in Highland is different. At present, we have a high number of non-priority need decisions—about 46 per cent—so we have a bigger challenge, which reflects the profile of homelessness in our area. We are committed to doing our best to meet the target. Our decisions reflect not the fact that we are not on board with the proposals, but the profile of our applicants. Our biggest challenge is the supply of housing. We have completed the 2012 pro-forma exercise, as other councils will have done. Highland-wide, about 75 per cent of all lets will be needed in 2012, which is not too bad. For the 2009 target, the pattern is similar.

Our biggest concern is that we have a huge geographical area within which the picture is varied. Julie Hunter made a similar point. Our areas vary from ones that will need more than 200 per cent of the lets that will be available to meet the target to others for which meeting the target is

definitely doable. Our concern is that if we try to use the stock Highland-wide, we might have to place people many miles away from their communities—perhaps two hours' journey away. That is unlikely to be acceptable to the households, because they would be away from their support, and it is probably not good for sustainable communities. We are anxious to consider the issue more locally. That will be challenging, but the only realistic approach is to consider sustainable outcomes that are good for the people who are involved.

The Convener: What key challenges will local authorities face in abolishing the priority need system by 2012? Did the Minister for Communities miss anything in his statement in December? Was there a glaring omission of something that would have assisted local authorities?

Julie Hunter: I do not think that there were any glaring omissions. To an extent, the statement covered every issue that we have discussed—in some cases frequently—in the past couple of years. I suspect that we might need a shift in the balance, from increasing the amount of affordable housing through initiatives such as homestake and other low-cost home ownership initiatives to increasing the supply of social rented stock.

To make a similar point to the one that Helen Ross made, North Lanarkshire is a big area with self-contained housing markets. For the pro-forma exercise for 2012, a crude supply approach was taken that predicted that we will have a surplus of supply and that, by 2012, we will need about 58 per cent of all our social rented stock for homeless households. However, that approach took no account whatever of local self-containment and distinct communities. There is real pressure in parts of North Lanarkshire, particularly around Cumbernauld, Moodiesburn and parts of Bellshill. The suggestion was that we will somehow house the huge number of homeless people in Cumbernauld in either Wishaw or Shotts.

The Convener: You are not sending them to Shotts.

Julie Hunter: That was the suggestion in the pro-forma exercise, which was a crude approach. We have discussed and debated that, and we recognise that a more refined approach will be taken.

Containment within housing markets is not just found in social housing. People who live in the owner-occupier sector rarely want to move into the social sector: they live in the private sector for a reason. There is not much transfer between sectors. Lumping together all the available stock in an area and saying that the area will be able to meet the 2012 target takes no account of demographic and aspirational changes or of the

condition of the stock. Even though North Lanarkshire's stock condition is good, there are still issues about the type and size of stock that will meet the demands of emerging households.

12:15

The Convener: The real issue is not about sending people to wherever a house is; it is the support that families have, especially if they need housing at a time of crisis, such as family breakdown. They might need other support to help them through that difficult time. Even if you can offer a family a particularly good house in Shotts, it will not help them if it means ripping them out of their community and taking away their support and other networks.

Julie Hunter: You are absolutely right. That is a real issue for us. Concerns are also increasing about the impact of homelessness on children, especially because the time that people have to spend in temporary accommodation is lengthening in some areas. That has an impact on children's health and on families' recovery from homelessness; there is increasing evidence of long-term damaging effects on family life.

Catherine Jamieson: You might be interested to know that Glasgow City Council said that preventing homelessness would assist it in meeting the priority need target in 2012. We believe that we can meet that target in Glasgow, but we have put some riders on that claim. One is that there has to be continued access to supporting people funding, particularly in relation to floating support services. That rider was identified because of concerns about cuts to the supporting people budget. We continue to identify gaps in service, and we reconfigure services to meet needs.

We are fortunate in that, because of the hostel reprovisioning programme, we have an increase in supporting people funding. We recognise that we have that flexibility. However, in the long term, we would be concerned if the supporting people budget were reduced significantly. That would take away from the support that we can give to individuals in individual tenancies, which is the main thrust of the homelessness strategy in the city.

Another rider is that there will need to be improved access to permanent accommodation for homeless households. In addition, there will have to be much broader ownership of homelessness prevention in the wider community of Glasgow. It should not just be seen as the role of the local authority and the homelessness partnership.

One of the challenges that we face is to increase access from 25 per cent to 50 per cent of all social lets in Glasgow. We have to emphasise

individuals' ability to sustain their tenancies. We have been doing a piece of research jointly with Glasgow Housing Association on tenancy sustainment, which is due out at the end of the month. It shows that something like 30 per cent of GHA tenancies fail in the first year and it considers the reasons for that, as well as suggesting a number of ways to move forward. Some of that is about more proactive housing management for vulnerable people.

You might be aware that Glasgow has moved to a network of community health and care partnerships. I have met all the directors of those partnerships to emphasise that the homelessness agenda is a local agenda and that they need to increase awareness to prevent homelessness. They need to know about the things the partnerships can do to help sustain vulnerable households in the community and not to bring people into homelessness.

Gavin Corbett alluded to another issue that I want to bring up. In this day and age, it should be difficult for someone to lose a secure tenancy. I have emphasised to community health and care directors that they have to cultivate relationships with housing associations because they provide the greatest asset in their areas. I have asked them to consider how they will respond to requests for support when tenancies get into difficulty and how they will convince their partner organisations to work with them to deliver mainstream services to local communities.

Helen Ross: Our biggest challenge is supply—it is the most critical factor of all. For us, the problem is having supply in the right place, which harks back to something that an earlier panel spoke about. We place great importance on prevention because, as was said earlier, prevention sometimes manages a need better and avoids a crisis. That is important, because it means a better outcome—it is cheaper for the local authority and better for the family—but we cannot do anything without the supply.

Supporting people funding was referred to a couple of times. We are one of the authorities that suffered a significant cut—our budget has been cut by about 15 per cent. We have put in place a robust process to try to make those cuts, which means being effective and focused. It is difficult in that context to build up new services. We need geographically targeted support—it is no use having support in Inverness if you live on the west coast. That is a problem for us. Communities Scotland is doing some research on supporting people in rural areas.

We are increasing rights for homeless people in rural areas. We have changed our allocation policy to do that and we continue to measure its impact. We have big concerns about the growing stigma

that attaches to people who are seen as jumping the queue. In fact, they are not jumping the queue, because our policy manages the situation in order to meet the big needs. However, such a stigma is not good for those households. We are clear that the allocation policy is only a tool, albeit an important one, that manages a scarce resource. That brings us back once more to supply, as well as support problems.

John Home Robertson: The homelessness monitoring group expressed concern about the increasing use of temporary accommodation. Has each of your authorities had to make use of temporary accommodation? If so, why did that happen and what difficulties did you and your partners have in reducing dependence on it? Let us start with North Lanarkshire Council.

Julie Hunter: We have increased our use of temporary accommodation in line with the general increase in presentations, and we have done so using different methods.

We had a reasonable supply of temporary accommodation to start with, but we built on that by procuring some of our temporary dispersed flats through the private rented sector, particularly in Cumbernauld and the northern part of the district. We had no choice but to do that, because the supply of temporary accommodation tends to come from outwith the council's stock. We are reducing the availability of permanent housing when we take it out of our own stock, but there is a genuine need to do that in some areas to prevent us from having to use, for example, bed and breakfast accommodation.

We had to use bed and breakfast in Glasgow because we could not secure any other accommodation within our local boundary area. However, some proprietors of B and Bs establishments did not want to give homeless people access to their accommodation, and we had to use bed and breakfasts in different parts of Glasgow.

We were able to comply with the Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2004 because we were already planning to cease use of B and Bs overall, not just for women and children, because it has been our view for a long time that we should not use it for anybody. North Lanarkshire has now set a target to cease using B and B accommodation by December. We were able to comply with the order because we had already begun to build alternative local resources. It has been quite difficult. At a time when there was increasing demand for temporary accommodation, some of our stock was stigmatised and institutional in its size and shape and in the facilities that were available.

We want to ensure that accommodation is spread across the whole local authority area and

that, to all intents and purposes, it looks like ordinary housing. We still have some big block-type—for want of a better term—hostel-type accommodation units. Alongside the drive to increase supply, we have been reconfiguring, improving and refurbishing that accommodation to make it much more suitable for use in the 21st century. We want to move away from the institutional feel of some of those facilities. We have been partly successful, but we have some way to go. The crucial point that we must remember is that when people are in temporary accommodation it is taken out of the pot that is available for permanent housing. There is a difficult balancing act sometimes. It is incumbent on us all to ensure that people are in temporary accommodation for as short a time as possible and that we move them on to permanent solutions.

John Home Robertson: That is helpful. Can we have a brief answer to the same question from the other two witnesses?

Catherine Jamieson: Glasgow has been changing its temporary accommodation. It had relied on hostel accommodation, particularly for single people, but that accommodation has been closed as a result of the hostel reprovisioning programme. We have increased our supply of temporary furnished accommodation throughout the city, predominantly through the use of Glasgow Housing Association unfurnished lets, which we furnish and manage. A number of registered social landlords are making temporary accommodation available to us on the same basis. We have had some reliance on bed and breakfast accommodation to address need while the temporary accommodation supply has been developed. We have reduced by more than half our use of bed and breakfast accommodation over the past 12 months and we intend to eliminate its use.

John Home Robertson: Thank you. I imagine that the situation in the Highlands is rather different.

Helen Ross: As usual, yes. We have increased the use of temporary accommodation, so we have that in common. Historically, we have tended to use either our own stock or housing association stock. We have tried to move away from that—not to get rid of what we have, but to build on it more in the private sector. Obviously, we do not want to use potentially permanent move-on accommodation as temporary accommodation, although we still have some in our own stock.

We have not always managed to comply with the Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2004. At the end of March, five households were not covered by an exception. I suspect that we would comply if we offered people—for example people from

Inverness—something in the very north. That is not a realistic option, so we have not done it. It would not be moving forward in any way. However, we have vastly increased the amount of temporary accommodation in Inverness—a mixture of temporary properties that are the same as all the rest of our stock and some bed and breakfast. We are trying to work more with bed and breakfast landlords to get them to put in better facilities so that the accommodation is improved for the single people who use it. At any one time, we have about 200 people a night in temporary accommodation in Inverness. We need to put that in the context of fewer than 300 lets in the whole of last year for that area. It is very pressured.

John Home Robertson: Thank you. That has covered the temporary accommodation issue.

Following your last comment, would the witnesses like to say anything more general about housing supply and the impact on homelessness? You may have heard the earlier discussions that we had about the overlap between homeless applications and people on the waiting list who, by any objective analysis, should be regarded as virtually homeless because they have unsatisfactory accommodation. From this side of the table, we all have constituency cases to look after. You and your staff have to face the situation day in, day out. Do you have any wider comments on supply issues?

Julie Hunter: In our area, the percentage of lets that have gone to people who are categorised as homeless has increased. Last year, 42 per cent of all of our available lets went to people who were classified as homeless. As was alluded to earlier, those people are not aliens from outer space; they are people who live in the communities and they are part of the communities. They may in some cases have opted to use the homelessness route. We suspect that in some respects our allocation policy has encouraged that, so we are reviewing it to try to ensure that we can meet a balance of needs across different communities. However, my biggest concern is that homeless people are becoming scapegoats for a supply issue that is not of their making. Basically, people are scrabbling for a resource that in some areas is very scarce. Supply is the heart of the issue. We should not scapegoat individual clients who are given access to housing.

12:30

John Home Robertson: Is that experience reflected elsewhere?

Catherine Jamieson: Glasgow City Council is of the view that we have sufficient social rented accommodation to meet the needs of homeless people and other people on our waiting lists. We

have done a lot of work on local housing demand studies, for which we continue to refine the information that is available.

The big issue for us is that Glasgow is like a series of villages. A homeless person in Drumchapel does not want to be rehoused in Easterhouse, so we have issues similar to those that confront large rural authorities, but we face them in a city environment. As well as location, we need to consider the quality of the accommodation and whether it can be sustained by vulnerable households. My staff act as advocates for homeless households and consider whether any offer of accommodation for a homeless person is a permanent, sustainable solution. Real issues can arise in that regard.

Another issue that we face is the lack of housing in the social rented sector for large families, especially three, four, five and six-bedroom accommodation. As the majority of that housing has been sold off, such accommodation is difficult to find. In addition, our supply of temporary accommodation includes only four five-apartment flats and about 20 four-apartment flats, within which we need to manage a significant number of large families. We also have an issue with ground-floor accommodation that is suitable for people in wheelchairs. We consistently have significant numbers of homeless people who require such accommodation.

We have addressed those issues through the local housing strategy by setting quotas for the development of social rented housing for large families and people in wheelchairs. However, I have an issue with the fact that the development of such accommodation is not tied into lets to homeless people.

John Home Robertson: Finally, what is the experience in Highland Council?

Helen Ross: I have already talked quite a bit about supply, so I shall say no more about it.

As a large proportion of our homeless people are single, we need to ensure that we obtain supply that meets their needs. However, Communities Scotland has a presumption in favour of two-bedroom houses and supply that meets varying needs. When we are in a pressured situation, it can be quite hard to give preference to a single applicant over a family applicant. However, in certain cases, we need to start providing one-bedroom accommodation to meet the needs of our single homeless people.

John Home Robertson: Lastly, will the panel comment on the invidious position of extended families that are in situations of overcrowding? Some grandparents would never dream of putting their children out, but others find that making their children homeless is the only way in which their

children have any hope of being given young-family accommodation of their own. I imagine that all the witnesses have experience of that.

Catherine Jamieson: Increasingly, we need to accommodate large families in two temporary accommodation units because we cannot meet their requirements. The impact of the national asylum support service in Glasgow has meant that we have a large number of asylum-seeker families who are refugees. We have a number of large families who have been waiting for three, four or five years to access large, permanent family-type accommodation. That has distorted our figures significantly.

John Home Robertson: That is an important point, but my question was about extended families in which the grandparents who are tenants have their children and grandchildren living in the same house in overcrowded conditions. In some cases, the grandparents would never dream of putting their children out, but others find that that is the only way in which their children can hope to be given an allocation. Is that type of thing becoming more common?

Catherine Jamieson: In Glasgow, the amount of such cases is growing but the numbers are still in double, rather than triple, figures. The numbers are small, but there has been an increase.

Julie Hunter: We probably have fewer families like that nowadays. Traditionally, emerging new households might have lived with their in-laws or relatives for a time while they waited their turn for a house. However, young families are no longer prepared to wait. They want a house when they need it. We may still have some families who live like that for very short periods, but people's tolerance levels are perhaps lower than they used to be.

In talking about the competing demands of homeless households—of whatever shape or form—and transfer applicants, we must remember that a large proportion of the applications on the transfer waiting list are aspirational applications from people who live in housing that meets their needs, but who would prefer to live in a different type of house, in a nicer house or in a nicer community. We have a difficult role in trying to balance people's stark housing needs and other people's aspirational needs.

Tricia Marwick: Catherine Jamieson said that 30 per cent of all GHA housing lets failed in a year. That is a huge number. How much support is routinely given to people when they make homeless applications? Is any assessment made at that stage of their housing need and other needs? Should that work be developed further?

Catherine Jamieson: In Glasgow, that is done routinely at the point of application. All homeless

households that enter temporary accommodation are offered housing support services, which can follow them into permanent accommodation either for short periods of time or for longer periods if that is required. Households that have more complex needs usually have a care plan, which follows them from temporary accommodation into permanent accommodation. The landlord is advised who the key workers are in those situations so that, if the landlord is aware of the household getting into difficulties, they can contact the support provider to work with the individual or household to resolve those issues much earlier.

Julie Hunter: Similarly, in North Lanarkshire, as part of the overall assessment, a support needs assessment is done at the outset. When people present, we assess not only whether they are homeless but whether they have additional support needs. We have a significant pool of tenancy support workers to fit the model that Robert Aldridge talked about—low-level floating support workers—who can move around with people when they get resettled into housing or if there is evidence that people are beginning to face difficulties in managing their tenancy. Several such schemes are probably available now in most local authority areas.

Dave Petrie: I declare an interest as a former employee of Scottish Water. I note the claim that is made in the Highland Council submission, although I am sure that it covers other areas as well. I am interested to know the response that you—or whoever asked—got from Scottish Water. What did Scottish Water say? Is the problem the state of the infrastructure? Is it just lack of resources to extend the infrastructure?

Helen Ross: It is obviously an issue about resources. We work closely with Scottish Water—our head of development has a lot of meetings with Scottish Water—and we are not suggesting that it is deliberately blocking or ignoring us. However, development constraint is a big issue for us. We have a robust development programme that is terribly important to us, so it is frustrating that we cannot build although we have the money to meet the need.

Dave Petrie: The point was whether Scottish Water was claiming lack of capacity within the existing infrastructure or whether the issue was lack of capital resources for extending the infrastructure. My understanding is that the infrastructure throughout Scotland is poor. We have leaking water pipes and combined sewers with too much surface water in them. I wondered whether that is the line that Scottish Water is taking, or whether there is a lack of capital funding to extend the system to the developments that you want to create.

Helen Ross: I am not an expert on that, but I can get more information to bring back to you. My

understanding is that it is an issue of the capacity of the existing infrastructure and of the capital costs of providing improvement and any extension.

Cathie Craigie: I suppose that my question goes over ground that has been covered this morning, on the balance between allocations to homeless applicants and allocations to other housing applicants. However, the issue is important.

The HMG report notes that the allocation of social housing to homeless applicants was an issue throughout the consultation on the ministerial statement. It is also a big issue for MSPs and local elected members, which is no surprise given how often it arises in casework. How can a balance be achieved? As Mark Turley said earlier, we are all in the same boat. How have we reached the us-and-them situation that we appear to be in and how can we satisfy the reasonable aspirations of people who have been sitting in a flat for 20 years and think that it is their turn to get a cottage-type house?

Julie Hunter: I will answer first, because I know that much of that concern has come through from elected members in North Lanarkshire Council. We debate and discuss the matter frequently in the council.

Cathie Craigie: It is not only North Lanarkshire Council.

Julie Hunter: I am aware of that, but we debate the issue fairly frequently there.

Balance is an aspirational thing, and I do not know whether we can ever achieve it. People have different ideas of what a balanced community looks like. Some people have the view that a balanced community contains only people over the age of 65 and others have the view that a balanced community should have a mixture of different household types and different types of economic activity. Such balance is difficult to achieve.

I suspect that we already have balanced communities, but we do not like them. People live in communities of all different shapes and forms. Sometimes they rub one another up the wrong way and sometimes things do not go the way that the majority in an area would like. The reality is probably that we already have balanced communities and that we are chasing a dream if we think that we can come up with some sort of formula to ensure that we achieve balance.

However, there is certainly an issue with the mismatch of stock against emerging new demand. More and more single-member households are emerging and we do not have enough one-bedroomed stock. In many areas, we still have the

traditional sizes and types of stock, which do not address that emerging new demand.

A range of different things needs to be done in each community and we probably need to have a master plan for each of them. I suspect that that is beginning to be built by the development of local housing strategies, which are beginning to identify much more succinctly where the competing priorities and pressures are and what will emerge to add to that mix over the next few years.

The other difficulty that we face is that the type of people who sit on our waiting lists and the type of people who make homelessness applications are not that different, but a view that is often expressed demonises people who make homelessness applications, as though they are a different type of person. There is evidence that some of them are, but some of the people who are on our ordinary waiting lists fit that profile closely too.

It should not be a matter of rearranging deckchairs on the Titanic; it is about the supply of housing. If we get that right, all the other issues can be addressed much more competently within local communities.

The Convener: I am conscious that time is marching on. I ask for short questions and that the answers be as short as possible. I do not want to limit what the witnesses say to us, but I ask that their answers be as short as possible.

Cathie Craigie: I ask Julie Hunter to reply to my next question and the other witnesses to take it on board.

When you gather all the statistical information and the figures that you need to send to Communities Scotland, do you record whether a homelessness application has been taken from a person who is already on the transfer list? There is a suspicion, which has been expressed today—John Home Robertson made the point—that people are presenting as homeless who are not really homeless because they could quite easily stay wherever they are. They do not have homes of their own, but they could stay in their family homes.

Julie Hunter: We do not collate that information and send it to the Scottish Executive through the HL1 returns, but we did a wee bit of work on the matter last year, when Communities Scotland carried out an inspection in North Lanarkshire. I do not have the figures with me, but we found that a very small proportion of people who made homelessness applications were on one of our other waiting lists or had been on a list.

12:45

Cathie Craigie: People's perceptions of what is happening are not reflected in your experience.

Julie Hunter: I am not saying that people do not present as homeless in such circumstances; I suspect that sometimes and in some places they do. However, the information that we collected showed, by and large, that different need is being expressed.

Catherine Jamieson: I could turn Cathie Craigie's question round and ask why we get so many homeless applications in Glasgow, given that the allocations policies of housing associations in the city should take account of the priority needs of homeless households. Glasgow Housing Association has an allocations policy and 65 other RSLs have different allocations policies, which is quite amazing. No two policies are the same. Homeless people and people who want to go on waiting lists have to make several applications, sometimes even to access accommodation of the same type in the same street. We hope that the development of the common housing register will make the registration of waiting list applicants in Glasgow much more straightforward, so that someone who wants to live in a street in which three housing providers operate need make only one application. Much faith rests on the common housing register's ability to streamline the process.

The second piece of work that is needed is the streamlining of applications policies across RSLs in similar areas. It is extremely confusing for people to be told, "Yes, you have X points from this housing association, but if you apply for the house further along the street you will get Y points." Young people in particular might make homeless applications because their families can no longer bear the frustration of keeping them at home and the disappointment of chasing housing applications. RSLs will argue that they need to be independent and set their own allocations policies, but the system is confusing for users.

Helen Ross: The development of the common housing register is important and we have had positive discussions about allocations policies that use the legislative definition of homelessness, which should help access. We hope that more funding will be available to enable us to carry on that work, because the funding has run out. The work is positive, but hard to do.

Patrick Harvie: I was encouraged to hear Catherine Jamieson talk about positive preventive work in Glasgow. In the context of the wider picture and particularly given changes to the supporting people budget, I asked previous witnesses how we ascertain the effectiveness of preventive work. We discussed the balance between short-term interventions, which might be easier to assess, and longer-term work. Will the witnesses comment on that and talk about the picture in their areas of the country?

Helen Ross: Preventive work is good. I agree with Robert Aldridge that a wide range of work is being undertaken. Sometimes when we discuss prevention we are not clear what work we are talking about. It is best to sustain a tenancy, long before the tenant reaches a stage at which short-term intervention is needed, but it is difficult to assess the impact of such work. The goal might be not the prevention of homelessness, but good management that leads to another tenancy. I do not know how we measure such work, but we need to consider what is going on at every stage and to ensure that good advice and information services are available when someone takes on a tenancy.

Money advice is critical in some sectors. We also need to ensure that there is a successful approach in prisons. We are trialling an advice phone line in Highland, because it is difficult to get good access to information in a wide geographical area such as the one in which our clients live. We must ensure that we have all those different types of services.

It is difficult to justify a service when its impact on prevention cannot be measured, but the nature of the service means that that will always be difficult for us. We are working with some young people on information that they would like to be sent out to schools about what it really means when someone leaves home at 16. That work is useful, but I doubt that we will be able to measure its impact and prove the outcome.

Catherine Jamieson: In Glasgow we have carried out a number of initiatives, particularly with our Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 money, to fund new housing information and advice services on the back of the housing information and advice strategy. I caretake that strategy, although it is a corporate strategy for the council. We have been able, jointly with other providers of information and advice, to get services into parts of the city where there were previously no services. That is true in particular in the north of the city, which has experienced a huge influx of refugees and has a lot of the temporary furnished accommodation.

Through working with other parts of the council and other voluntary organisations, we have been able to increase the network. We have done that through the strategic planning group for money and legal advice, which now incorporates housing information and advice. We have standardised the service level agreements with all the organisations involved. We have also standardised the software that those organisations use for their casework, so we can record information and get feedback on their activities on housing information advice, legal advice and money advice, which begin to prevent homelessness. The key driver is to get other organisations that provide the same type of

service on to the same system. There must be a drive throughout the council to reorganise the provision of information advice services throughout the city and to use common service standards and a common database to monitor and record outputs.

There must be a much louder and clearer message about the ownership of prevention of homelessness. It is incumbent on everyone who works in communities to have a role. I do not understand why housing associations have not embraced the national standards for housing information and advice. The majority of local authorities have signed up with HomePoint to train their staff in the different national standards at levels 1, 2 and 3. However, very few housing associations see themselves as having that role and very few sign up to the delivery of those standards.

Glasgow City Council's revenue and benefits staff have all been trained to signpost the services, because they receive a significant number of inquiries as a first point of contact. All the homelessness staff across the service are signed up to the standards at level 1 and level 2, but there seems to be a gap as other landlords do not see themselves as having any responsibility for the prevention of homelessness.

The other issue is how we identify vulnerable households collectively and get support to them. That is not about labelling their situation as homelessness, but about providing mainstream services. I do not want the homeless label to be attached to people. In Glasgow, people have had that label for 20 or 30 years and it will be with them until they die. That is exceedingly unfortunate. Mainstream services must respond at a much earlier stage to vulnerability and to issues that mean that someone may lose their accommodation. The problem is easier to fix at that stage than it is if we wait until somebody loses or is about to lose their accommodation.

Julie Hunter: I echo all those comments. I will be very brief as I am conscious of the time.

We carried out an exercise to examine the financial costs of a single homeless episode in North Lanarkshire. The SCSH reported on the exercise in its recent newsletter. Our aim was to demonstrate that prevention work can be effective if it is done by a range of agencies. That is what is required; it is not just a case of the council—and certainly not just the housing department—doing the work. If the work is done properly, we can save thousands of pounds for each individual case of homelessness. The case of one man, who was evicted in the Cumbernauld area because of £125 of rent arrears, ended up costing the system £26,000. We were able to chart that real case and cost it on the basis of all the services that had to be provided.

Rational and expedient financial considerations should drive the prevention agenda. I mirror Catherine Jamieson's view that we should do a range of new things, but there are also things that agencies should be doing now to prevent homelessness in the future.

Patrick Harvie: Concerns have been expressed that the emphasis on prevention might lead to what is called gate keeping. Highland Council says in its submission that it is concerned that staff might become

“overly robust in their assessments”.

Shelter Scotland has drawn attention to the Communities Scotland inspection that found that, in some councils, staff were actively deterring people from making applications. How can the committee be confident that that is the exception rather than the norm? How can we be sure that it will not become more of an issue in future?

Helen Ross: The targets have to be introduced in a way that we can manage. I would hate to think that our staff are gate keeping and I do not want them to become “overly robust”. However, when someone has to phone more than 30 places to get one room, it is difficult to manage.

We will certainly not be training staff to be gatekeepers; I want to be clear on that. However, there is a concern that if someone does not know what to do with the next person, there will be a temptation to be a little bit too literal. We have tried not to do that, because we are moving much more to a situation in which the object is to find a solution to a person's need, through whatever route. The route has to be positive—it must also be cheaper and more effective—but that can be very difficult and we need to be clear that targets are set that we can manage. For us, that means addressing the housing supply.

Catherine Jamieson: I echo those comments. The situation is very difficult, but I do not see my role in 2012 as being the gatekeeper to social rented housing. If I thought that that was happening, I would be sounding some very serious alarm bells, or I would be getting the council to sound those bells. However, I would not rule it out because it is difficult to access permanent accommodation.

The Convener: Christine Grahame is next. Your question must be short.

Christine Grahame: It is brief and it requires the briefest of answers.

The Convener: Spit it out then.

Christine Grahame: When I was convener of the Justice 1 Committee, we visited many prisons. Your remark on prisons in your submission. What is in place in prisons such as Barlinnie and in our

young offenders institutions to help discharged prisoners to find housing and support, rather than allow them to go back in through the revolving door of crime? As in the case that Julie Hunter mentioned, I am sure that helping them to get housing is much less expensive than allowing them to go back to prison.

Julie Hunter: A lot of liaison work is done by local authority and prison social work staff. We are also developing protocols. A range of activities is under way to ensure that there is a planned process for people who are coming out of prison. More could be done, I suspect, but there has been a huge change since 2001 in terms of liaison and work that is done jointly.

Catherine Jamieson: There is still more work to be done. The casework service that is provided in prisons is very patchy. For example, my staff cover five prisons. Lots of people who are in Barlinnie come from outwith Glasgow and there are issues about local authorities taking ownership of cases long before prisoners are discharged when those people are from outwith Glasgow. There is a tendency for people who have been in Barlinnie but who do not come from Glasgow to make housing applications in Glasgow. At the end of the day, prison governors can decide on the areas into which people are released. There are all sorts of issues around prisons, which have not been resolved properly.

A special report that we did on the outcomes for ex-offenders in terms of their homelessness found that their access to permanent accommodation is the poorest that we have measured for any group of people. We need to get to grips with that priority.

Christine Grahame: Can the committee see that report?

Catherine Jamieson: If I am told how to do it, I can make a copy available. However, it identifies the outcomes but not the issues. I am aware that the Executive has been holding discussions about prison services, but I certainly have not been involved in them. I provide a casework service, so I have some issues with that.

Christine Grahame: I am glad that you have got that on the record. Perhaps someone is listening to you, especially as there are five prisons on your patch.

Helen Ross: We have a protocol in place. We need to do more training. There have been improvements, but there is still work to be done.

Catherine Jamieson: Some responsibility lies with the Scottish Prison Service and how it allows prisoners to access accommodation before discharge. The national accommodation strategy for sex offenders, which is going out to

consultation very soon, will begin to flush out some of the issues, but that concerns a very small group of people compared with the number of offenders who come out of prison generally.

The Convener: We will certainly pursue some of those issues with the Minister for Communities. If Catherine Jamieson is happy to supply a copy of her work to the clerks, I am sure that the committee would appreciate it. I call Scott Barrie.

13:00

Scott Barrie: Thank you, convener—I know that time is wearing on.

Do the witnesses want to add anything on partnership working among local authorities, the voluntary sector and others to implement changes in homelessness legislation? Are section 5 referrals working?

Julie Hunter: In my area, we have incrementally improved partnership work on homelessness. We work closely with the health board and with a range of other stakeholders and partners in the community. We have an improving picture on working with local RSLs. The situation is by no means perfect, but we continue to address issues and the picture is improving. That will take time.

Catherine Jamieson: Given my job, I cannot say anything but that without the homelessness partnership, we genuinely could not have delivered the change that we have in Glasgow city in the past three years. The homelessness partnership involves the Executive, Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board and Glasgow Homelessness Network, which represents about 120 voluntary organisations.

The job is not easy, because providing services and campaigning—and balancing those matters—present many challenges. I manage the homeless health service in the city, which is a bit of a nightmare because of the bureaucracy in health services. However, that means that the services are much more accountable for what they deliver to homeless people and are following through how homeless people who have been resettled into communities access mainstream services. We are beginning to do research on how particularly vulnerable groups are beginning to access services.

The job is not easy, because we are trying to satisfy many masters all the time. Section 5 is my big bugbear. I normally carry a picture of a bath with me. The tap represents all the households to which we have a statutory duty to provide accommodation; the bath represents temporary accommodation; and the drain hole represents access to permanent accommodation. We struggle to get people into permanent

accommodation. We have a statutory duty to about 7,000 households every year. We accommodate just over 2,000 in permanent lets and about 1,400 in interim accommodation—that is moved into before permanent accommodation—but we hold in temporary accommodation a significant number of people.

We have a protocol with the GHA and with RSLs, which we have reviewed because it is bureaucratic and involves staff developing personal relationships rather than business relationships with organisations. Difficulties arise because we do not have a common information technology system. We can challenge the GHA now, because it shares its management information with us every month, so we know the number of lets that it makes, by each local housing organisation, to homeless people, to people who are on the waiting list and to people who want to transfer. However, we do not have the same robust information from RSLs. Such information is collected from them only annually by Communities Scotland, so it is up to date only at the end of a financial year. Given that, it is difficult to challenge some of the responses that we receive to the section 5 referral process.

We are implementing a revised protocol that is more robust and requires RSLs to take more collective responsibility locally for housing homeless households, so that we are not in the same position of having to make three separate applications to three RSLs on one street to try to access permanent accommodation. We have a long way to go to streamline the process and make it more effective.

Helen Ross: We made a positive start with section 5 referrals. We got a protocol going quickly and we undertook joint training with all the local RSLs—that was done with me. We certainly use RSLs, but we could use them better. It would help to have regularly some of the monitoring information to which Catherine Jamieson referred, as that would make it clear that we are using RSLs in the way that we should. RSLs are a useful tool.

On partnership working, we have representatives from the Scottish Prison Service and from the health service on our homelessness strategy group. It is important to have people in the same room. We are sometimes serving different masters, so the arrangement is kind of cumbersome, clumsy and slow, but it is definitely improving. Partnership working is the only positive way to work.

To return to RSLs, if a common housing register underlay some of the tasks and if we shared information and had much more understanding, that would help. That needs to be pushed forward.

Scott Barrie: Sorry, I did not catch the last point.

Helen Ross: I said that we need to push through the common housing register.

The Convener: Cathie Craigie has a final question, but I advise that she must keep it short.

Cathie Craigie: I will be quick.

I could hear Catherine Jamieson's frustration when we discussed section 5 referrals. Was that frustration because there is a need for a change in the legislation or because of the relationships between Glasgow City Council and the other housing associations involved?

Catherine Jamieson: Some housing associations are exemplary in the way that they work with us to accommodate homeless households, but other RSLs are not. Not all housing associations seem to accept that they have a duty on homelessness or to understand their statutory responsibilities. Every year, I write to the directors of housing associations with a report on outcomes from section 5 referrals—which I always think is so controversial that it will turn up on the front page of *The Herald* or *The Scotsman*—but I never get a peep out of the housing associations. I ask the directors to send the report to their management committees, but a number of the management committee members to whom I have spoken seem not to have seen the report at all.

At the moment, we are doing some work with the SFHA on increasing awareness among RSL committee members about the statutory duty that RSLs have to assist the local authority in tackling homelessness. We are trying to get that much more on their agenda. However, we deal with such a wide variety of housing associations in the city that that is a phenomenal task to undertake.

Another issue is that Communities Scotland's inspection process does not include an awful lot on the duties of RSLs on homelessness. I know that Communities Scotland is currently consulting on the way forward, but it is frustrating that little of the information that we provide on the activities of individual RSLs features in the inspection reports that we read.

Cathie Craigie: I do not think that that has been the experience of Communities Scotland in North Lanarkshire—

The Convener: Does Cathie Craigie have another question?

Cathie Craigie: No, I am just saying—

The Convener: Well, there is no need to pass further comment. Dave Petrie has a final question.

Dave Petrie: Before we conclude, are there any other issues that the witnesses want to raise about the implementation of legislative change arising from the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003?

Julie Hunter: I hate to harp on about this, but the answer is supply. We need sustained resources to tackle homelessness through the supporting people and the rough sleepers initiatives and the strategy funds. If there was some method to ensure that the availability of such funding was sustained, we could plan more easily and we would have more scope to plan better for 2012.

Catherine Jamieson: I will briefly mention three things. First, it is difficult for us to discharge our duty by suggesting to people that they pursue, or by securing for them, accommodation in the private rented sector because such accommodation as is available in that sector is predominantly offered under a short Scottish secure tenancy, which does not fit with the appropriate discharge of duty under the current guidance and legislation. We would use the private rented sector more if we could access more secure types of tenancies for homeless households.

Secondly, a continual problem in Glasgow is that neighbouring authorities place homeless people in bed-and-breakfast accommodation in the city. We have raised that issue with the minister but, 18 months on, despite the fact that we have halved our use of such accommodation, bed-and-breakfast accommodation in Glasgow for homeless households is still full. It is not full of people from Glasgow. Increasingly, I am involved with discussions with the antisocial behaviour unit about antisocial behaviour around units that are used not by us, but by other authorities. The unsuitable accommodation order reduced the use of such accommodation for families but it did not reduce its use for other vulnerable households. Many of the city's councillors will confirm that the issue is significant. In those areas, we are actually prevented from establishing other projects that would be properly managed and staffed because of the issues that have arisen around those units.

Thirdly, we need a more robust review of the section 5 referral process. In particular, information from housing associations that is managed centrally needs to be made available to local authorities on more than just an annual basis.

Dave Petrie: Could I ask you one question—

The Convener: Excuse me, Mr Petrie, you cannot ask another question.

Dave Petrie: It was just a supplementary to that point.

The Convener: I am sorry, but the committee runs by the convener allowing people to speak.

I invite Helen Ross to respond.

Helen Ross: Supply is the biggest issue for Highland Council. I have already mentioned that

we need the right number of houses in the right places. Also, if we cannot support people who take on tenancies, they will not be able to sustain them because of their background. That will not work.

I back what Catherine Jamieson said about the private rented sector. For us, it will never be a huge solution, as we do not have many potential lets in that sector but, for some people, it will be the best answer. We cannot count such tenancies as outcomes, so we tend not to pursue them, which means that we lose some opportunities. I would be grateful if the approach was reconsidered and private sector tenancies could be regarded as acceptable outcomes if they involved sufficient security.

The other issue is the homelessness resources. We are hugely appreciative of the resources that we have, because time is freed up if staff are not gate keeping. Working with people to pursue a solution, although it is positive and cheaper than not dealing with the problem and having them come back again, is still extremely resource intensive. Therefore, we are anxious that those resources should continue; we would not manage without them.

The Convener: That concludes the committee's questioning of the witnesses. I thank them for attending and for sitting through the previous evidence. The committee will consider the evidence that has been given today and will question the Minister for Communities on the Scottish Executive's progress on homelessness when he appears before us on 24 May.

The committee will be suspended momentarily to allow the witnesses to leave.

13:11

Meeting suspended.

13:11

On resuming—

Subordinate Legislation

Registered Social Landlords (Purposes or Objects) (Scotland) Order 2006 (SSI 2006/211)

The Convener: The order amends section 58 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 to add the provision of shared equity housing to registered social landlords' permissible purposes or objects. Shared equity, as it will operate with the assistance of Executive funding, will provide that an owner has full title to a property but shares the equity on it with a grant-funded body.

The introduction of a shared equity scheme follows the 2004 affordable housing review. A formal consultation on the policy of shared equity was published in November 2004 and the responses showed general support for shared equity schemes to meet identified housing needs.

The Subordinate Legislation Committee raised a question with the Executive and considered the Executive's response at its meeting on Tuesday 9 May. The Subordinate Legislation Committee agreed to draw the order to the attention of this committee on the ground of defective drafting in that a definition of shared equity terms should have been included in the order.

Do members have any comments to make on the order?

Tricia Marwick: What do we do about the defective drafting?

The Convener: My understanding is that the Subordinate Legislation Committee has advised the Executive of its dissatisfaction at the inadequacy of the drafting. It will be for the Executive to reflect on that.

Christine Grahame: It is not the first time.

The Convener: As Christine Grahame points out, it is not the first time; the same kind of situation has arisen before.

Having noted the point that the Subordinate Legislation Committee raised, is the committee content with the order?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Therefore, the committee will make no recommendation on the order in its report to the Parliament. I ask committee members to agree that we report to the Parliament on our decision. Are we agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Annual Report 2005-06

13:14

The Convener: Agenda item 4 is consideration of the committee's draft annual report for the parliamentary year from 7 May 2005 to 6 May 2006. Do committee members have any comments to make on the report?

Scott Barrie: Rather than conclude the report with details about how often and for how many hours we met, we should say that all that we have done this year—like other years—is to consider legislation. We need to highlight that at the beginning of the report, because the purpose of committees is not just to consider legislation but to carry out inquiries. Paragraph 1 says:

"The Committee's main focus during this period has been the consideration of Scottish Executive bills",

but consideration of bills has been our only focus.

The Convener: Perhaps we should change "main" in paragraph 1 to "only". The committee must comply with a stylistic model for annual reports, so we have little flexibility, unfortunately. The Conveners Group is considering whether the form of annual reports should be changed.

Christine Grahame: I am glad that Scott Barrie made that point. I do not know where in the report we can say this, but the committee has considered only legislation and the balance has been wrong. A happy, healthy committee not only considers legislation but has the privilege of initiating its own work—the committee has undertaken good investigations in the past. Conveners are given stuff to deal with, which is hard for them, but I hope that we can say in our annual report that the committee is operating like a standing committee and has had no opportunity to conduct even tiny inquiries.

The Convener: We have been working on a tiny inquiry today, which will be described in next year's annual report.

Scott Barrie and Christine Grahame made valid points, but I am not sure that the annual report is the appropriate place to address the matter. In our legacy paper we can say that the committee's work programme has been very much dictated by the Executive's priorities and legislation.

We can change the emphasis in paragraph 1, which might redress the balance, but we do not have the flexibility to go into the matter in great detail in the annual report.

Christine Grahame: Where is the protocol that says what can go into an annual report?

Cathie Craigie: I understand that a protocol was agreed between the Conveners Group and the

clerks, but there is nothing in standing orders that requires us to comply with it. As the convener said, the Conveners Group is reconsidering the matter.

The Convener: We have to produce an annual report and some members of the Conveners Group have asked whether annual reports serve a useful purpose.

Christine Grahame: They do not, if we are not allowed to write about the things that matter. Why can we not put in what we want?

The Convener: Is the committee happy to add a line to paragraph 1 to say that the committee regrets that it has not had time to engage in the inquiry work that it might have liked to do?

Members: Yes.

Patrick Harvie: Yes, for the third year running.

Christine Grahame: Yes; the problem has not arisen just this year. Good for Scott Barrie for raising the matter.

The Convener: We will amend the draft report to reflect members' concerns.

Under the heading, "Bills", we list the bills that the committee considered, the majority of which are Executive bills, but we mention Sandra White's proposed member's bill on third-party planning rights of appeal in paragraph 10. Should we have separate headings for Executive bills and members' bills? The current structure is slightly confusing and the comments on Sandra White's proposal are rather lost after the paragraphs on the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill. We could use the heading "Other Bills". Are members happy to do that?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Thank you. The clerks will make those changes and circulate a draft report by e-mail for final approval.

Meeting closed at 13:20.

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