

# **SOCIAL INCLUSION, HOUSING AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR COMMITTEE**

Wednesday 22 November 2000  
*(Morning)*

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## SOCIAL INCLUSION, HOUSING AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR COMMITTEE

36<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2000, Session 1

### DEPUTY CONVENER

\*Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP)

### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

\*Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP)

\*Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con)

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD)

\*Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)

\*Mr John McAllion (Dundee East) (Lab)

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)

Mike Watson (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP)

\*attended

### WITNESSES

Mr Alastair Cameron (Scottish Churches Social Inclusion Network)

Sally Daghljan (Scottish Refugee Council)

Colonel John Flett (Scottish Churches Social Inclusion Network)

Mr Graham Lumb (Scottish Churches Social Inclusion Network)

Catriona Milligan (Church of Scotland)

Mohammad

### CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Lee Bridges

### SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Mary Dinsdale

### ASSISTANT CLERK

Rodger Evans

### LOCATION

Committee Room 1



## Scottish Parliament

### Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee

Wednesday 22 November 2000

(Morning)

[THE DEPUTY CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:04*]

**The Deputy Convener (Fiona Hyslop):** Good morning and welcome to the 36<sup>th</sup> meeting this year of the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee. I have received apologies from Robert Brown, Sandra White, Karen Whitefield and Keith Raffan. Johann Lamont is attending another committee meeting.

I suggest that we consider items 5, 6 and 7—further action on petitions, the drugs inquiry report and the work programme—in private. Are we agreed?

**Members indicated agreement.**

10:05

*Meeting continued in private.*

10:15

*Meeting resumed in public.*

## Housing Bill

**The Deputy Convener:** I welcome witnesses from the Scottish Churches social inclusion network. Thank you for the written evidence that you have provided. We do not have a bill in front of us, although we have seen the consultation document. In preparation for the bill, we are exploring different perspectives on housing and we are interested in hearing the Churches' views. I welcome John Flett, Alastair Cameron and Graham Lumb.

**Mr Graham Lumb (Scottish Churches Social Inclusion Network):** I work with the Church of Scotland board of social responsibility, which is the social work department of the Church. We provide hostels for homeless people in Glasgow and Edinburgh and supported accommodation for homeless people in Inverness. That is the context in which we give evidence.

One of our concerns about the legislation relates to the proposal to extend the right to buy, which we believe will further reduce the availability of affordable housing stock. Better-quality housing in the more desirable areas is likely to be the first to be sold. As a result, the housing that remains available to homeless people will be of poorer quality and is more likely to be located in peripheral housing estates, which experience problems relating to poverty, drugs and alcohol. We work with vulnerable people, many of whom experience addiction problems. If the quality of the housing in which they are likely to be placed is reduced, it is more likely that they will return to the lifestyle that we have helped them to leave behind. They are therefore more likely to become homeless again.

**Colonel John Flett (Scottish Churches Social Inclusion Network):** I am the Scotland secretary of the Salvation Army. Each day we have more than 500 places available for homeless people in 11 centres throughout Scotland. We also have three drop-in centres, which are mostly used by homeless people—about 800 people a week use that service.

We are concerned that the bill should provide for support for those who are vulnerable and homeless, particularly those who are being resettled. The Churches are concerned with the teaching of care.

Today, however, we are discussing an extreme example—inclusion is an extreme word. We want any notion of intentional or unintentional

homelessness to be removed from the bill. That is a brave step, but we all know that the prodigal son could easily have been labelled “intentionally homeless”. What he needed and got was a fast track back to restoration. We are concerned with ways in which we can remove obstacles and help people who come to their senses to be restored through a difficult transition that involves a great leap of faith. There should be adequate financial support to provide resettlement workers who would help to break the cycle of homelessness that our people at the front line face every day. The big problem is that we do not have the resources to give the support that is required. There are a number of ways in which the bill could provide for that.

**Mr Alastair Cameron (Scottish Churches Social Inclusion Network):** I am the co-ordinator of the Scottish Churches Housing Agency. We do not run services for homeless people; we bring together 11 Christian denominations and work nationally to express the Churches’ concerns about homelessness and poor housing—as we are doing today—and locally to encourage the development of responses to homelessness by Church people.

We have given a broad-brush response to the Scottish Executive’s consultation. It was never intended that we should be living with such an appalling level of homelessness in Scotland. It has come about as an unintended consequence of other policies, such as care in the community and right to buy, and the shift from subsidising bricks and mortar in housing to subsidising individuals.

Thank God for the fact that the homeless persons legislation has saved from misery many individuals and families who have become homeless. There has been a threefold increase in homelessness presentations since the early 1980s. We believe that there must be a radically different policy and legislative framework for homelessness if we are to tackle the problems and keep the numbers low.

We expressed disappointment with the Scottish Executive’s proposals because we had high expectations of what could be achieved. The Executive set a target for the eradication of rough sleeping. However, rough sleeping is only the tip of the homelessness iceberg and does not happen in isolation from the other manifestations of homelessness. We need overall objectives and targets for reducing the record number of homelessness presentations and, crucially, we need to have agreed means of achieving those targets. Introducing a right to a house would be the clearest way to assert that homeless people are included in the social justice agenda. That involves joint work between local authorities, registered social landlords, voluntary organisations

and others.

We make no apology for our impatience in wanting a more radical approach to tackling homelessness. When we are talking at the level of high policy, it is easy to forget that homelessness is about individuals and their families. The people who will become homeless in the coming months cannot afford to wait for a further round of legislation, which is what the task force on homelessness seems to be proposing. It is possible to ensure that the forthcoming legislation includes a more rigorous set of proposals. The members of this committee are in a position to make that difference.

**The Deputy Convener:** I would like to know how the Scottish Churches Housing Agency, which represents 11 different denominations, went about preparing its response. Was it agreed by all the organisations? How was any dissent dealt with? I would like to know to what extent the position has been agreed across disparate organisations.

**Mr Cameron:** We are a small organisation in terms of our staff infrastructure. After I drafted the response, it was discussed by our board, which has representatives from each of the 11 denominations. We then sent an initial draft to our friends and supporters, of whom there are about 1,100 in Scotland. They represent various denominations across the country and had the opportunity to influence the response. We held a public consultation meeting in Falkirk in September and distributed the response to those who would be preparing their denominations’ own responses, such as John Flett and Graham Lumb. We were pleased that most, if not all, of the responses from the Churches have endorsed the comments in our report as well as making their own points.

**The Deputy Convener:** On which areas was consensus most easily arrived at and on which was there most disagreement and debate?

**Mr Cameron:** There was a clear consensus on the right to buy for housing associations. We are concerned about the supply of affordable rented housing. It is no coincidence that, as that supply diminished, the number of homeless people tripled, although there might not be a direct causal link.

There was more debate about proposals to abolish intentionality. People fear that, if the screening process is removed, the bill will become a chancers charter. However, we think that the concept of intentionality can be abolished without opening the floodgates to people who are trying it on. The operation of the homelessness legislation is a process of rationing a scarce resource: affordable rented housing. We want a shift in the

mentality of the Government and those administering the system to ensure that there is a roof over the head of every Scot.

**The Deputy Convener:** You obviously have strong views on that. You talked about the scope of the bill. It has been brought to our attention that there might be only partial legislation on homelessness at this stage and that there might be a secondary tranche of legislation later.

However, quite a few of the housing proposals are based on the homelessness task force report. The proposals have been fairly comprehensive and have had wide support across parties and organisations. Are you saying that you are critical of the task force's work, which seems to be one area where, so far, people have been pleased that progress is being made? You seem to be more critical of that than our other witnesses have been.

**Mr Cameron:** I would say that we are critical, but supportive. I am certainly impatient. I understand that discussions are going on in the task force about the possibility of abolishing the intentionality rule. My feeling is that, if that is possible, it is possible now, rather than in two or three years' time, when the next round of legislation will go through. It will be another 18 months before this legislation is on the statute book and takes effect.

10:30

**The Deputy Convener:** We do not know—that is the million dollar question.

**Mr Cameron:** I am concerned that it might be another four or five years before those more radical approaches are taken. If the Executive is serious about reducing homelessness over a shorter period, it has to do more than it proposes to do in the consultation paper.

**The Deputy Convener:** It seems that the bill might concentrate more on the social rented sector than on other tenures and that it might be limited in what it does in the private sector. Do you have any views on that?

**Mr Cameron:** As a minimum, we proposed the establishment of rent deposit guarantee schemes in all local authority areas. In our practical work of advising local groups on what they can do to help homeless people, we have produced starter packs to help people to set up tenancies and we have suggested rent deposit schemes. We have been involved in setting up a rent deposit scheme—the jubilee key scheme—with a Churches group in Hamilton. The aim is give people access to private rented accommodation who would otherwise be excluded.

**The Deputy Convener:** Why would you need legislation for that? The Executive has considered

introducing a rent deposit pilot in rural areas. It is not necessarily legislation but finances that are needed to do that. The co-operation of local authorities is also required.

**Mr Cameron:** There needs to be legislation to encourage those local authorities that are not moving forward on that front.

**The Deputy Convener:** There are other ways to encourage local authorities, not least financially. We are talking about legislation. Rent deposit schemes are something that you can call for, but you do not necessarily need legislation.

**Mr Cameron:** If there were legislation, the schemes would be implemented. They are not being implemented everywhere at the moment.

**The Deputy Convener:** A right to housing is a bold statement in the context of some of the other responses that we have considered, but it is an interesting one, which we would like to explore in some detail.

**Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab):** I thank the witnesses for the briefing papers and for their opening statements this morning. You welcomed some of the Executive's proposals for dealing with homelessness, but were critical of others, although I will not pursue that.

In your response to the Executive's proposals for the bill, you suggest a right to housing, rather than the right to register on a housing list. You talk about the situation in France. Can you give us any evidence that such a right has been successful in reducing homelessness in France?

**Mr Cameron:** I cannot. This relates to what I said about creating a different approach to homeless people. Rather than keeping affordable rented housing from people who might need it—as happens under the current rationing-based system—we need to create a dynamic in the housing associations, led by a Government that is committed to inclusion. We must say that, if we can provide health services and education for all Scots, we ought to be able to provide a home for all Scots. The right to wait on a list is a pretty niggardly right. We had hoped that, in the new atmosphere in Scotland, with the explicit commitment to inclusion and social justice, the right to a home would be seen as the way forward, although a lot of work would be involved in framing legislation to support that right.

**Cathie Craigie:** It is easy to say that people have a right to a home and to put that into the legislation, but if that is merely words, it may not do anything to tackle the problem of homelessness. We do not have evidence that homelessness in France has been reduced since the right was introduced in 1989. Why do you believe that such a right would be the best way

forward?

**Mr Cameron:** I agree that words alone will not make a difference to homeless people, but we need to create a framework within which local authorities know what they are working towards. At the moment, all local authorities know is that they are trying to keep the numbers down. Of course, the measure needs to be backed up with investment. Investment in social rented housing has declined over the years. In our view, that should be reversed.

**Cathie Craigie:** If the right were introduced in Scotland, do you think that it would help to tackle the scourge of homelessness?

**Mr Cameron:** Yes.

**Cathie Craigie:** What would that right mean for the homeless person who turns up at a local authority or at John Flett's door, looking for assistance?

**Mr Cameron:** It would create a presumption in their favour.

**Cathie Craigie:** John Flett has talked about doing away with the concepts of priority need and intentionality. Given that we have a finite resource—the demand far outweighs the supply—how would you establish who was in most need of housing?

**Colonel Flett:** People will be excluded. They end up on the streets, back in the cycle from which they are trying to escape. Over the years, there has been evidence that people who have intentionally gone adrift have found their way back. All we are saying is that we should be aware that there could be obstacles and that we may have to help people who want to get back. However, we should also look for ways in which to identify the right accommodation and the right support for individuals.

I recently discovered something surprising in our drop-in centre in Edinburgh. I thought that the centre was for the homeless on the streets of Edinburgh—as it primarily is—but when I spoke to some of the people there, I discovered that they had been homeless and had been rehoused, but were in need of support. Those people were struggling and were almost on the brink of being back on the street again. They come back to the centre because they have come from a loyal, caring community on the streets and have been rehoused in a hostile community, out of town and out of reach. It is difficult for them to afford the bus fare into town. They need much more support. That is the difficulty. People keep reaching this stage and they drop back into homelessness because they are not receiving enough support.

**Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP):** One of your key recommendations is to get rid of

the concept of intentionality in relation to homelessness. How do you suggest that those who work in public sector housing deal with those people who know how to work the system? How should they deal with a person who gives up accommodation and moves into a condemned caravan in order to get into the system? That is why the rule was introduced in the first place. How do we balance the needs of those who are currently housed, but inadequately so, against the needs of those who may be going through the cycle that you describe?

**Colonel Flett:** I am not saying that the checks and balances should be removed. I am saying that we should have a long-term objective of being totally inclusive. We recognise that there are difficulties. We are saying that, currently, objectives are limited. There are elements of the process that can be improved, to ensure that people do not have to jump through certain hoops.

**The Deputy Convener:** We share your aspirations. However, the issue that we must consider is whether the proposed legislation is the appropriate tool.

**Cathie Craigie:** I appreciate the need for priority to be given to vulnerable adults in the circumstances that you describe. How do we deal with a couple who have applied to the local authority for housing under the homelessness legislation, but who have an income that would enable them to rent privately or even purchase a home? If we got rid of intentionality and priority, how would we deal with such a case? Anybody can apply under the homelessness legislation; it is the factors of intention and priority that allow local authorities to make decisions about who is in the most need. We need some help on that question.

**Colonel Flett:** I do not think that I can help. I do not have details of the day-to-day work of the local authorities in that area. We recognise that there are difficulties. The Churches are concerned that there should be an intention to address the aim that everyone should have appropriate shelter.

**Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con):** I want to go back to the cycle of homelessness. You say that people come off the streets, where there is a fairly friendly and loyal environment, and eventually move into accommodation in a peripheral scheme, where they experience hostility from other residents and lack support. What form would appropriate support take?

10:45

**Colonel Flett:** We need funding for an adequate number of resettlement officers to work alongside rehoused people and identify their support needs. Our biggest difficulty is to put enough people in our centres to help break the cycle. Where we



have put in the resources, the support works. It is a difficult process. When local authorities prepare their housing plans, as well as taking into account the needs of the disabled and others, they should include the needs arising from homelessness, so that appropriate plans are made for the future.

**The Deputy Convener:** We understand that that is the intention. The current thinking is that there will be a strategy on homelessness, rather than a responsibility to tackle homelessness. That is an issue that we will explore further.

**Mr Cameron:** Homeless people are individuals and forms of support must be tailored to meet their needs. It is important to have a repertoire of support. Cathie Craigie asked about intentionality and priority. Much of our disenchantment with the present system arises from the fairly dubious practices of some local authorities in the interpretation of intentionality. Some authorities use the fact that someone is in rent arrears to blame them for becoming homeless; they put up barriers to those people entering resettlement processes. We take a different perspective from that proposed by Cathie Craigie. There are people who try to work the system. We are not trying to remove all barriers but, at the moment, the tests do not operate effectively.

**The Deputy Convener:** We want to cover other matters, but we must be clear on why you want to abolish the concept of intentionality. That is a strong position.

**Cathie Craigie:** I understand the point about someone in rent arrears being treated as intentionally homeless, but how do we deal with a couple who have an adequate income, but choose not to pay their rent? How can you say that they should be given a higher priority or treated the same as someone who has lost their home through absolutely no fault of their own? Perhaps the person in rent arrears has chosen to spend their money on the finer things in life. It worries me that such a person might not have considered the importance of having a roof over their head. I am concerned that people who can afford to find some other form of housing might be doing a really deserving person out of a house.

**Mr Cameron:** I think that housing is one of the finest things in life. We are not suggesting that we abolish the law of diligence. There are still processes through which debts can legitimately be recovered. Those do not need to be bound up with the supply of housing. The local authority can go to the court to seek restraint on the person's bank account, as my mortgage company could with me if I did not pay my mortgage.

**Cathie Craigie:** I understand that, but you are saying that if someone has rent arrears they should be deemed to be in priority need, even if

their circumstances are such that they could afford to pay the arrears.

**Mr Cameron:** I am saying that there should not be concepts of priority. It is invidious that there is homelessness that is given priority and homelessness that is not, without proper assessment. It is a rough-and-ready screening test. We want local authorities to have more options at their disposal and to assess the individual circumstances rather than to apply crude tests.

**Mr John McAllion (Dundee East) (Lab):** I share your aspiration to abolish the concept of intentionality and priority need. I am aware that the argument against that is that it might be a chancery charter, which you have recognised. Do you suggest that, in place of that legalistic approach to the homeless, we leave it to the housing management system and the discretion of homelessness officers or housing officers as long as the homeless themselves have a legal right to independent appeal against a decision that is taken to refuse them access to housing? Would that cover the problem of the chancery charter, so that it would not be upheld in a court of law that chancery could not pay their rent just because they did not want to? In genuine cases, people would have a right of appeal against poor decisions.

**Mr Cameron:** What has perhaps not come over in our submission is that we believe that many of the measures in "Better Homes for Scotland's Communities" are of value. I do not want that to be misunderstood. The objective that the task force mentioned of raising the standards of all local authorities to those of the best is laudable. It is better to create that as a baseline from which to move forward.

The proposals on the obligations about housing planning for local authorities and the inclusion of a homelessness strategy within that are very much to be commended. There has not been enough thinking at local authority level on how we deal with our homelessness problem. There has been too much firefighting and not enough strategic thinking.

**The Deputy Convener:** I would like to bring in John McAllion to ask questions about tenants agreements and other issues. As this is such a critical aspect of your response, it would be helpful if you could give us more information on intentionality and how you think that it would operate. That would be especially useful in relation to how you would deal with people with rent arrears and other matters where you think that decisions would be at the discretion of the housing management system. It would be helpful for us to understand the practice. There is general agreement in principle, but we are concerned

about the practice.

**Mr Cameron:** Would you like us to write to you?

**The Deputy Convener:** Yes. If you are happy to do so, you could write to follow up on the information that you have provided.

John McAllion will now ask questions about other issues.

**Mr McAllion:** Before I do so, do you have evidence that the French right to housing under law does not reduce homelessness either?

**Mr Cameron:** Not at all.

**Mr McAllion:** That was just to set the record straight. This committee might want to research that further.

**Mr Cameron:** There are so many factors in homelessness that it is hard to pin down one factor.

**Mr McAllion:** I will take you back to the consensus that you spoke about across the Churches in opposition to the extension of the right to buy, which will probably be contained in the housing bill. You said that you think that it will reduce the availability of affordable rented housing in Scotland. It will lead to the better stock being sold off first and to the ghettoisation of the remaining housing stock that is available to homeless people. Do you want to add anything about the likely impact of the extension of the right to buy?

**Mr Lumb:** I reiterate what I said at the beginning about our experience as a provider of services to homeless people in our hostel in Edinburgh, Cunningham House. The hostel is specifically geared towards assisting people to move back into housing. It is our experience that if the housing stock is reduced, it becomes problematic as there are fewer houses available to move people into. It is also our experience that we can often move people on, but not into the most appropriate setting for vulnerable people.

We have experience of people who, because of the stock that is left available, have moved on to housing that is less than appropriate for their needs. Without adequate support and in an environment that is less than supportive to them, they have given up their tenancies and ended up back on the streets and subsequently back into our hostel. Our experience is that it is problematic to house people from the housing stock that is available. Our anxiety is that further reducing that stock will exacerbate the existing difficulties.

**Mr McAllion:** One of the possible ways of dealing with the problem that you have highlighted is that the pressured areas should be exempt from the right to buy. You indicated that a pressured area should be any area where there is an

excessive demand for housing over supply. Who should make the decisions about pressured areas, and on what basis? Should local authorities decide or should the Scottish Executive decide in terms of the overall situation?

**Mr Lumb:** The initiative should come from local authorities.

**Mr McAllion:** So it should be left to the local authority to decide what areas are pressured.

There are indications that the Executive would prefer that designation to apply to only rural areas. Do you think that it should also apply to urban areas?

**Mr Lumb:** Yes.

**Mr Cameron:** There is a rural dimension to the right to buy. Housing supply is a bigger issue in relation to homelessness in rural areas than it is in urban Scotland. Glasgow is the most extreme example. It has the biggest homelessness problem and the largest number of empty houses. It is not a simple question of housing supply in that setting; in rural areas it is much more likely to be a housing supply issue. Rural areas therefore export much of their homelessness to towns and cities.

I believe that the opportunity should be there for towns and cities to be defined as pressured areas. I would like local authorities to have the initiative, perhaps with some system of approval by the Executive. We have not discussed that in detail.

**Mr McAllion:** The extension of the right to buy will only apply to registered social landlords. Are you saying that local authorities should be able to tell social landlords that they are not allowed to sell their houses because this is a pressured area and the homeless need access to the housing, or should it be left to the registered social landlord to apply to the council?

**Mr Cameron:** The pressure on the registered social landlord from its own tenants would make it difficult for it to be the arbiter. We are seeking a system of housing planning at the local authority level in which local authorities take the lead and others are involved in the process.

**Mr McAllion:** The Executive predicts—and I suppose that this is what it would prefer—that the social rented sector will account for only 20 per cent of Scotland's housing stock by 2020, the reduction coming mainly through the right to buy. Is that a desirable objective? What impact will it have on housing choice?

**Mr Cameron:** It is not a desirable objective. Wendy Alexander has stated that 80 per cent of Scots aspire to owning their own home; however, everyone can aspire to owning something without it necessarily being socially desirable—a Ferrari, for example. The increasing residualisation of

rented housing would be damaging for social cohesion because it would lead to ghettos of housing where people live in poverty. It has always struck me as odd that, whereas we put a big emphasis on getting home ownership in areas such as Wester Hailes and Craigmillar in Edinburgh, there is no equivalent pressure to get rented housing into areas such as Barnton or Corstorphine.

**Mr McAllion:** That would be a lovely idea. Does the situation that you have described not send out the message that owner-occupation is good and the rented sector is bad?

**Mr Cameron:** That would be a damaging message.

11:00

**Mr McAllion:** On the single social tenancy, you state that the creation of two new grounds on which a landlord can end a tenancy will damage the tenants' position. What do you mean by that assertion, and what evidence do you have to support it?

**Mr Cameron:** We do not have evidence; it is a hypothesis. The grounds that have been given seem to us to be unnecessary because there are already ways of dealing with the situations that it has been suggested might arise. We do not think that making it easier to evict people is making a contribution to eradicating homelessness, which is our main concern.

**Mr McAllion:** Why do you think that the Executive wants to include—

**Mr Cameron:** I do not know.

**Mr McAllion:** I was hoping for some elucidation, because I do not know either.

On the short single tenancy, is it appropriate that there is no limit to the number of times that the proposed short single tenancy can be renewed by a landlord?

**Mr Cameron:** We have not considered that area in detail.

**The Deputy Convener:** How do you see the Church of Scotland, as a landlord, using short single tenancies? Would you feel comfortable about it? Would you regularly renew a single short tenancy as opposed to giving a more permanent tenancy agreement?

**Mr Lumb:** To be honest, we have not yet explored this issue in depth. We understand that short single tenancy would not apply directly to hostels. In principle, however, we would prefer to be able to offer longer-term tenancies rather than a continuation of short-term tenancies.

**The Deputy Convener:** I am conscious of the

time. I would like to thank the witnesses for coming. You have given us some very interesting and provocative proposals. Before the bill comes along, evidence such as yours gives us the opportunity to get a rounded view and to consider some core principles. The right to have a house is about as fundamental a principle as you can get. If you could write to us with further information on intentionality, we would be pleased to receive it.

11:03

*Meeting adjourned.*

11:07

*On resuming—*

## Petition

**The Deputy Convener:** Agenda item 4 is petition PE242 from Action of Churches Together In Scotland, Amnesty International and the Scottish Refugee Council. I welcome the witnesses who will discuss this. Sally Daghlian is the director of the Scottish Refugee Council, Catriona Milligan is a community worker with the Church of Scotland, and Mohammad is a refugee. To respect his anonymity, we have agreed that Mohammad will use only his first name and that he will not be filmed. Sally Daghlian will give a short statement in support of the petition.

**Sally Daghlian (Scottish Refugee Council):** Thank you for inviting us today. I will speak briefly on behalf of all the petitioners. My aim is to give members an overview of the key problems and issues that contribute to the social exclusion of refugees in Scotland. We hope that we can stimulate your thinking on areas that might be considered in more detail. Catriona will give evidence on the daily experience of working with asylum seekers and refugees in a community project. Mohammad will talk of his experience as an asylum seeker.

The policy of dispersing asylum seekers to Scotland under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 is likely to lead to up to 6,000 asylum seekers coming to Scotland each year. At present decision-making rates, we expect that about 50 per cent of those individuals will stay long-term in Scotland as settled refugee citizens. We will therefore see the growth of a fairly large minority community.

The petitioners think that Scotland is at a crossroads. We have the opportunity to seize and harness the positive opportunity that can be brought to Scotland by the influx of a new population with new skills, or we can preside over the growth of a marginalised and excluded group that will be living in great poverty. If we get the social policy right at this point, this immigration to Scotland can be very positive.

The key issues facing refugees are: poverty, which is exacerbated by the lack of family and community support; unemployment, which is disproportionately high among refugees despite their high skill and qualification levels; racism, prejudice and discrimination, which are a daily experience for refugees, affecting their ability to take part in community life because they are often fearful about going out, and affecting their ability to get a job; and language. Language and

interpreting are very important areas. Language is the key to integration and to accessing services. A major problem in Scotland is that we do not have the interpreting services that are required to ensure that refugees have access to even the most basic of services such as health care.

Housing is clearly an interest of this committee. We could spend all morning talking about housing issues. There are key questions to answer about choice, quality and access to housing. At the point at which an asylum seeker becomes a refugee and has only 14 days to move out of the national asylum support service accommodation that is provided by the Home Office and to find alternative accommodation and benefits, there is a particular risk of homelessness and destitution. The time scale is impossible. I think that we will see destitution and homelessness if that area is not considered.

Legal advice is a critical area. I hope that the committee will consider the Audit Commission report as evidence. Although it considered England and Wales, the problems are mirrored in Scotland. Asylum seekers need expert legal advice. They are here seeking protection under the United Nations convention on refugees and there is evidence that people's applications are being refused because they are not getting access to appropriate legal advice and support. That is the ultimate in social exclusion for refugees.

The two main factors that lead to the successful integration of refugees are employment and language. We draw the committee's attention to the Home Office document entitled "Full and Equal Citizens" and ask members to consider how the document, which sets out an integration strategy for the UK, can be progressed in a Scottish context. We also refer you to an NHS Executive report, produced by the advisory group on medical and dental education, which looks specifically at how we might harness the medical skills of refugees. Again we ask you to consider how that approach might be adopted in Scotland. Finally, we would draw your attention to the report that was published this week by the Scottish Refugee Council and the Save the Children Fund, which focuses on the experiences of refugee children in Scotland. It highlights many areas in which children face exclusion and disadvantage.

Members may also want to consider ways of feeding into the promised Executive review of the situation of asylum seekers in Scotland. We recommend the establishment of a cross-departmental group to consider some of these issues and how we can develop a positive integration strategy in Scotland that fits into the overall UK picture. We must ensure that we take advantage of refugees' coming to Scotland and support them.

11:15

**Catriona Milligan (Church of Scotland):** For nearly 10 years, I have worked among ethnic minority communities in Glasgow, running a small advice centre. Increasingly, I see asylum seekers who have arrived in Scotland under the new arrangements. I would like to share with the committee the stories of one or two people who have come through our door, and their experiences of living in Glasgow.

A man came to us who had been traumatised by what happened to him before he was housed in Arden. We know from experience that people from ethnic minorities find it very difficult to live on that estate and that they are often forced to leave the area because of harassment. When the man arrived at his accommodation, a window was already broken and blood was spattered across the wall of the flat. He had been there for two nights when a bottle was put through his window. After that, he was too frightened to sleep there any more. He kipped on a friend's floor for a couple of nights, but when he was no longer able to stay there, he came to see us.

Through the Scottish Refugee Council one-stop shop, we made contact with the national asylum support service, which said that it was unwilling to consider rehousing the man unless his life was in danger. We contacted the police, who verified his circumstances, but still NASS refused to rehouse him. NASS also threatened to withdraw his vouchers if he continued to sleep on his friend's floor. I had offered that man no support and I had to turn him away.

Another couple who came to us had been in the country for several weeks, but had received no vouchers and had been borrowing from other people. The woman was seven months pregnant, but she had received no medical care.

In the case of another family, the woman spends as much time as possible out and about, because her flat is so cold and unpleasant that she does not want to spend time there. She has been subjected to all sorts of racial harassment in shops and on the streets. On one occasion, when she had some cash to spend in a shop, the person who served her refused to take the money out of her hand and made her put it on the counter. She says that she is so miserable that, if it were not for her children, she would rather go back to her country to die than stay in Scotland.

Those are just a few of the cases that we see. We—as voluntary organisations—want to be able to support people. However, we feel that our role should be to offer additional services, such as drop-in facilities, which would allow people to have social contact with others and enable them to engage in the ordinary social activities that other

folk in Scotland enjoy. We find that we are trying to pick up the pieces of a system that has failed asylum seekers and that we carry out functions that are the responsibility of statutory agencies—we are not doing the job that we are supposed to be doing.

**The Deputy Convener:** Thank you, Catriona. Mohammad, would you like to make a statement?

**Mohammad:** Good morning.

It is very important that in any debate about asylum seekers and refugees, the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees are heard directly. We have a point of view on such matters—the committee may not be effective if it listens only to third parties. I am pleased to have been invited to appear before the committee today.

I am an asylum seeker. I am resident at a Glasgow hostel that houses about 150 asylum seekers, predominantly single men. There are also some children and women, for whom the hostel accommodation is totally unsuitable. Members will have heard the complaints that have been made through the press and media. Many of my fellow asylum seekers are very unhappy about their accommodation, particularly hostel accommodation, and they feel that their needs are being ignored because of the authorities' refusal to recognise our housing problems.

A family that includes two children lives at my hostel. Those children are living among 150 people who are predominantly single men. There are only three or four other children in the hostel and there are no play facilities. The furniture is dirty and old and we cannot use it any more—if we sit on it we get skin diseases and rashes. An advice agency approached the council's asylum support team to ask for that family to be rehoused somewhere more suitable. The asylum support team agreed to that, but a few days later the national asylum support service refused the family permission to move and suggested that the pool room—which tends to be dominated by single men—constituted adequate play facilities for the children.

There has been a lot of talk in the newspapers about asylum seekers getting £300 cash per week, new furniture packages, new carpets and fresh decoration, but that is simply not the case. I get £10 a week in cash and £18 in vouchers. When I go to the supermarket to buy goods with my vouchers, I have to carry a calculator with me, because I have to work out what things cost down to the last penny. If something costs even 10p more than the value of the vouchers, I cannot take the goods away with me. I have to pay the exact amount.

Members will be aware that the benefits that dispersed asylum seekers receive amount to less

than 30 per cent of the poverty line. Glasgow's black economy is thriving—some asylum seekers are working for as little as £1.50 an hour. A qualified doctor—who is a GP and a personal friend of mine—is working in a carry-out shop for 40 hours a week. Even those who are allowed to work because they have been here for six months know very little about basic employment rights and unscrupulous employers are more than likely to take advantage of that. Worse still, those who are qualified are labelled and excluded from the job market. That is nothing less than a grave exploitation of human rights.

As Sally Daghlán said, the most important issue is the lack of legal advice. When we are dispersed to Scotland or other places, we are given only two weeks to submit our application for asylum. When we arrive in Glasgow, we do not know anybody and we do not get money from the agencies. We are given only emergency vouchers, which we cannot use to buy bus or train tickets. Most solicitors do not know where my country is or what its problems are. Because I speak seven languages, I have assisted some asylum seekers whose applications were rejected by the Home Office simply because their applications arrived late.

We also have problems when we go to clinics or hospitals where no interpreter is available. When we talk to GPs, they tell us that they are not paid to engage an interpreter.

A few days ago, it was reported in a newspaper that the Home Office plans to build a detention centre for asylum seekers in a building that is empty and which is up for sale. If it did that, the Government would be treating asylum seekers like criminals. We ran away from our country because we were faced with certain death and torture, but when we arrive here we are faced with the problems that I have described. I hope that the committee will do something to stop such things happening.

I am in your country to seek sanctuary because of the political turmoil in my country, which has made it impossible for me to stay there without facing eventual death. However, it should be understood clearly that many of us will remain in this country. On that ground alone, we should not be excluded from this society—we should have the chance to contribute. We ask simply for our case to be heard and, most important, to be treated with the dignity that every human being deserves.

**The Deputy Convener:** Thank you very much, Mohammad. That was powerful evidence and we are grateful that you came to the committee to share it with us.

What you have described is a serious issue that

is happening in the here and now. We understand that the Government has promised a review and this committee has agreed to consider the issue in response to a petition that was submitted to Parliament. What the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee can do is limited, but the Local Government Committee will conduct a more comprehensive assessment of the matter, including the issue of legal access, which is not something that this committee could deal with.

Many members are frustrated that the Scottish Parliament does not have powers over immigration and asylum, which are reserved to Westminster. That said, many services that affect asylum seekers—such as housing, education and social work—are most definitely covered by Parliament's powers. We will take the opportunity to explore some of those issues.

The committee would like to know about your experiences of housing and accommodation, with particular reference to the position of families and children. We would also like to know about your experience of social exclusion. Your statements have touched on some of those issues and I would like to explore them in more depth. I was especially concerned to hear about the families with children who live in accommodation that also houses a large number of single men.

**Mohammad:** There are about 150 of us in that hostel, most of whom are single men, but there are also five children and seven women. I come from a country where one sees violence, fighting and brutality all the time, so it is not easy for women and children to live in a building with single men. They should be moved to a place where the children can learn—I tell you that from personal experience. When I arrived six months ago, the children seemed to be okay, but now they are getting wilder and more violent, because they do not learn anything positive from the young single men in the hostel, most of whom are very aggressive. There is a small room that could accommodate the five children, but the adult men sit in there to watch television, which can make the children scared. The women never go to the TV room, because most of them do not speak English and they are afraid of being in that kind of environment.

**The Deputy Convener:** If those families with children wanted to do something in relation to housing issues, who would they deal with?

**Mohammad:** I went with those families—because I speak their languages—to the Scottish Refugee Council. That is the only place we can go to ask that those people be rehoused elsewhere.

I have to say that, although the accommodation has pool facilities and a TV room, the TV room holds only 30 people, but there are 150 of us. We

are also isolated from other residents in the local community, such as students and professional people. When it rains, the flats leak. We do not have cooking facilities. The furniture is in such bad condition that sitting on it causes skin diseases and rashes. We have asked many times for better furniture. We do not want new furniture; it does not matter if it is old, but it must at least be clean.

**The Deputy Convener:** Have you had any contact with Glasgow City Council's housing department?

**Mohammad:** We approached a voluntary organisation, which wrote three or four times to the council on behalf of those families, but no reply was received from NASS, which says that there are no problems at all. NASS refused to meet us, although we have asked many times for a meeting. NASS refuses to meet the asylum seekers and prefers to deal only with management.

**The Deputy Convener:** You have come to this country from a very distressing situation in your own country and have been sent to Glasgow. Are voluntary organisations your only means of contacting people who can address your housing problems?

**Mohammad:** We can make contact only through the Scottish Refugee Council.

11:30

**Sally Daghliah:** Glasgow City Council has an asylum support project team. The specific difficulty with the housing system is that it is somebody in Croydon who determines where every individual will live. According to the terms of its contract, Glasgow City Council cannot move people around, although it has supported some people's requests to move. Somebody in Croydon decides where people are placed, which leads to problems in building up community support in specific areas of Glasgow. For example, the city council might know that several Kosovan families live in a certain area, and that it would make sense to house newly arrived Kosovans in the same area. However, the person in Croydon would not have that information and would not make a decision on that basis. A person could be placed at the opposite end of the city, where there are no other members of their community.

The national asylum support service is the controller of the system. NASS has one regional representative in Scotland, who does not appear to have a great deal of control—if any—or influence over the system. Glasgow City Council's project team should support people who are dispersed to Glasgow.

**The Deputy Convener:** What has that support

been in practice? How supportive have people found it?

**Mohammad:** We tried many times to get help for families—especially those that had children—but everybody we went to told us that the only thing that they could do was write to NASS. However, when they wrote to NASS, its reply was, "No". People must take whatever is given to them, otherwise they must look—on £10 a week—for their own place.

**Mr McAllion:** I am the convener of the Public Petitions Committee, which received the petition first. Before we referred it to this committee, we wrote to the former Deputy Minister for Community Care, asking him to respond to the concerns of the petitioners. He replied to the committee in a fairly detailed letter that made several claims based on what he had been told when he made inquiries. He wrote:

"NASS contract with accommodation providers . . . to provide a suitable accommodation for individuals and families."

That is what the minister was told. Are you telling us that that is not true?

**Sally Daghliah:** I do not think that it is appropriate that there are women and children in accommodation that is predominantly occupied by single men. Although that accommodation comprises self-furnished flats, rather than a hostel, it is shared accommodation. Mohammad is right to say that, when that number of young single men are put together, a specific dynamic develops. There are problems in managing the accommodation and in ensuring that vulnerable individuals—not only women and children, but vulnerable men—have adequate support.

Throughout the UK, accommodation providers do not provide the support that they should and they do not link people into statutory services as they should. Our sister organisation in Liverpool recently had to close its office. Last week, we had to close our office because we could not meet the demands that were being made of us. Each week, 250 people present themselves at our Glasgow office in need of basic assistance to deal with voucher issues. Often, they do not have vouchers or money and they have not been linked into health services. They have a huge number of questions and anxieties and they might need lawyers. The voluntary sector is being overwhelmed by what should be statutory functions. As Catriona Milligan said, we should provide add-ons and extra support, but we are largely trying to sort out the mess in a system that does not work.

**Cathie Craigie:** I assumed that one of the local housing providers would have tried to find a person accommodation outwith the hostels when

that person came to Glasgow and was put in hostel accommodation. The letter that John McAllion received from the minister says that NASS contracts that function out to somebody else. Are you telling the committee that you have to contact NASS if you want to move anywhere?

**Mohammad:** The problem is the idea of putting so many people in one building. If someone leaves that building and is missing from that building for five days, their name is given to the Home Office. People have to come down and sign every morning. There is a lot of tension and people have their own problems in their heads. It is not a good idea to put in one building a large number of different kinds of people, who have seen a lot of violence. There is a lot of stress and pressure. It would be a better idea to disperse people to different areas of Glasgow.

**Cathie Craigie:** For how long are you expected to sign in every morning?

**Mohammad:** We must do that until we are told by the Home Office that we will stay or that we should go elsewhere—then we can move out of that place.

**Cathie Craigie:** How long does that process take on average?

**Mohammad:** That depends on the Home Office. When somebody receives a positive answer, or if a friend or relative provides accommodation, they can move. Otherwise, they have no chance of leaving and must stay.

**Brian Adam:** I was intrigued by your evidence that NASS turned down proposals that would allow you to take accommodation from the local authority. Were you given reasons why NASS regarded that accommodation as unsuitable?

**Catriona Milligan:** That is because the current accommodation has been allocated and NASS does not want to shift people. We were unable to speak directly to NASS, but we were told that the current accommodation is what is on a person's papers and that that is where they have to stay. No real reason was given.

**Sally Daghlia:** The system was set up as a no-choice system. Asylum seekers are not in any sense allowed to influence where they might live. For instance, it might make sense for a person to live in Liverpool if they have a family connection there, but NASS will take no account of that. The system was set up deliberately to be harsh. It takes no account of the real human needs that people have for support, or of their experiences. Even Glasgow City Council, which has a large contract, is unable to move an asylum seeker between the flats that it allocates to NASS; it cannot move somebody from Arden, for example, to another part of Glasgow. People are allowed to

live only where NASS says that they should.

**The Deputy Convener:** Does NASS or the council determine what is suitable accommodation?

**Sally Daghlia:** NASS decides.

**The Deputy Convener:** Has NASS inspected the conditions? How does it know whether the accommodation is suitable?

**Sally Daghlia:** NASS was setting up a contract team to consider whether the terms of the contract were being fulfilled. We could certainly find out about that.

**The Deputy Convener:** I cannot see how NASS could find out whether accommodation was suitable if it had not visited the premises.

**Mr McAllion:** In the letter that the Deputy Minister for Community Care sent to the Public Petitions Committee—he was working from information that had been provided to him—he said that he had been assured that

“NASS has recently opened a Scottish office to provide local support and advice, and to assist in ensuring that dispersal arrangements successfully bed down.”

All the evidence that we have heard this morning contradicts that absolutely. Mohammad was unable to see NASS in its Scottish local office because it refused to see him.

**Sally Daghlia:** NASS employs one person who covers Scotland. It is not clear what remit or powers that person has. They have certainly not been able to resolve issues that we have raised with them.

**The Deputy Convener:** You had to close your office because 250 people a week were coming to see you and NASS had one person in the whole of Scotland.

**Mohammad:** I do not know where the office is. I told Alison Miller—NASS's regional manager—that we would like to meet her, but we did not meet her. About 100 people gathered where we stay to meet NASS people. In the end, although NASS people were in the building and they met the management, they refused to meet us.

**Mr McAllion:** The letter from the deputy minister is crucial, because it presents the official version as far as the Government is concerned. However, that version of events seems to have been contradicted by your evidence this morning.

In his letter, the minister also says that, through contracts with local authorities, NASS is ensuring that

“asylum seekers are able to access a variety of services including health, education, interpreting and legal representation”.



What is your response to that statement?

**Sally Daghlia:** On legal advice, all agencies that work with asylum seekers have found that they are not able to access the advice and support that people need. Given the numbers of asylum seekers who are coming to Scotland, and their urgent need for legal advice—they are all here for protection under the 1951 United Nations convention on refugees—even if every solicitor in Glasgow started to work on asylum law, there would not be enough practitioners to provide the support that people need. That is a major concern. Indeed, I am surprised by the minister's claim, because we are not aware of any research that has been or is being undertaken on the situation in Scotland.

Although the Audit Commission's report, "Another Country: Implementing dispersal under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999"—which I recommend for the committee's consideration—covers only England and Wales, it highlights the fact that asylum is hugely problematic. Throughout England and Wales, dispersed asylum seekers are not getting access to legal advice or appropriate interpreting and translation facilities—that lack of access impedes access to other statutory services.

**Mr McAllion:** The committee has received a number of e-mails and letters in support of your petition. In particular, correspondence from the Refugee Survival Trust in Scotland drew the committee's attention to the fact that that organisation has had recently to make payments to pregnant women and families with newborn children, because asylum seekers who are in receipt of vouchers get no additional help for those extra costs. Has that been your experience?

**Sally Daghlia:** That is correct. All the refugee agencies have, since the system was first set up, been lobbying the Home Office to make some provision for pregnant women, because asylum seekers have absolutely no access to any means of help such as the social fund.

Furthermore, although the Home Office agreed to make available the equivalent of a maternity grant—or £200—we have yet to hear about anybody receiving that money. We have made numerous applications, but have had no success in accessing the grant.

**Mr McAllion:** In his letter, the minister makes it clear that the Scottish Executive intends to review by October 2001 the operation of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Is that sufficient, or must action be taken earlier?

**Sally Daghlia:** Action needs to be taken now to gather evidence of how the system works and where its failings are. We ask the minister to consider now how to establish such a process.

**Mr McAllion:** I imagine that you would ask parliamentary committees to do the same.

**Sally Daghlia:** We certainly would—I was just about to say that.

**The Deputy Convener:** We are particularly interested in the experience of families with children and whether they are getting access to the wide range of services that they need.

**Cathie Craigie:** We are all concerned about Mohammad's evidence on the lack of facilities for families and young people in the hostel where he lives. Have children—particularly the under school-age kids—any access to child care, such as nurseries?

**Mohammad:** No. Some six or seven-year-old children go to school. However, they must stay in their flats when they come back from school because of attacks in our area.

**Cathie Craigie:** You and Sally Daghlia have said that most people who come here as refugees will settle in here and that the more that young people are encouraged to become involved in the community, the better that will be for the community and the young people. Are any voluntary groups involved in that in your area?

**Mohammad:** People from voluntary organisations are helping the children, especially newborn babies, by bringing milk and clothes. Sometimes other people deliver food and clothing, such as shoes or whatever is needed.

11:45

**Cathie Craigie:** What is the young people's experience of school or playgroup?

**Mohammad:** Some of them complain that they have been attacked at school. One guy was beaten and had bruises on his hand.

**Cathie Craigie:** How do you deal with that when it happens?

**Mohammad:** It is not only the children who are attacked, but young guys. In the place where we stay, someone came in and broke the hall windows. He appeared in court, but I do not know what happened after that. There are attacks on children and on big guys. We call the police, who come and take a statement; we do not know what happens after that.

**Cathie Craigie:** How could the young people be better integrated into the community? What should change?

**Mohammad:** It would help if we had links with the local community and if there was someone who could tell the local people that we are human, like them, and that we have feelings and emotions. We do not interact with the locals at all—that is the

main problem we face. If we did, we would know about their culture and their way of life. There would be no attacks or other problems. We are totally deprived of interaction with the local community. We have been put in a place where there are only asylum seekers. We do not interact with anybody and we do not go out.

**Cathie Craigie:** Catriona, you said that what you should be doing is providing social inclusion activities, rather than providing core services. You work for the Church of Scotland.

**Catriona Milligan:** Yes. A number of Churches in Glasgow, including the Church of Scotland, have got together to try to provide some add-on activities for asylum seekers. St Rollox church, near the Red Road flats, started out with a drop-in centre. It already had a second-hand clothes shop for people in the parish. It found itself completely overwhelmed by the demand for clothes.

The local community education service withdrew English language classes for asylum seekers. It used to run one small class, but dozens of people were turning up, looking for English language tuition, which it is not resourced to provide. Even people of good will find themselves under a lot of pressure and unable to focus on the activities that might allow asylum seekers to be better integrated into the local community.

**Sally Daghlian:** Language is key to long-term inclusion. Under the new system, there is no provision for the education of people aged 16 and over, which is especially important. Young refugees have often had disrupted education. There is no provision for under-fives. It is critical that the committee and the Scottish Executive address how we support the education of young refugees. I would recommend that the committee consider the new report produced by Save the Children and the Scottish Refugee Council.

**Cathie Craigie:** Adult learning is important. Language skills will open many doors. If somebody wants to travel, say from the Red Road flats to one of the further education colleges in Glasgow, how do they finance the transport costs?

**Sally Daghlian:** That is difficult—it is one of the things that prevents some refugees from attending classes. People cannot spend all of their £10 a week on bus fares—for most people, that would not cover the cost of getting to the colleges. In some cases, the Refugee Survival Trust has provided grants to enable people to go to college, but the trust was set up at a time when Scotland had about 300 refugees—it was an add-on to supplement people's needs. Given the scale of the issue, we need statutory provision.

**The Deputy Convener:** The system provides accommodation—although we have concerns about its standard—and vouchers, but little else.

The individual is then left in limbo. However, for anybody who comes to this country in the same circumstances as Mohammad and other asylum seekers, there are issues to do with education and translation. The fact that 50 per cent of asylum seekers settle in this country long term suggests that we should invest in their long-term security. It is a matter of concern if that number of people are left in limbo without support and facilities.

**Bill Aitken:** I am far from happy that young children have to live in an environment with 150 young men. Is the hostel what we would think of as a hostel, or is it made up of self-contained flats with a communal area?

**Sally Daghlian:** The building is a multi-storey block of flats, which, I believe, was previously operated as a hotel. It provides accommodation in self-contained, shared flats, with communal facilities such as television rooms.

**Mohammad:** There is a television room and a pool room, which has only two or three toys for the children to share. The parents do not allow the children to go there. As I said, we do not have any proper furniture and we do not have kitchen facilities. Things are quite old. We face a lot of problems. The other day, I saw a family who had run out of electricity. When I went down, I was told that they had overspent their electricity. Power cards are issued every Wednesday. If they are finished before Wednesday, the family must buy its own. There should be a notice or a ruling in all languages to tell people that they have been allocated money for electricity from the Home Office or NASS or whoever pays for it. People need to be told that, if they spend more than that, they cannot have electricity. However, there is no notice and people do not know about that. A lot of people run out of electricity. People from hot countries find it cold here.

**Bill Aitken:** Not only people from hot countries, I assure you.

The problem of isolation is acute. There seems to be an indiscriminate approach in Croydon to who goes where. I assume that the Scottish Refugee Council would say that all asylum seekers who come from the same ethnic background and speak the same language should be allocated to the same city—Glasgow, for instance. Have representations been made in that regard?

**Sally Daghlian:** Glasgow City Council and NASS have agreed that 10 nationalities would go to the Glasgow area. Some effort is made to cluster individuals. The issue is complex because the last thing that some asylum seekers want is to be housed with people from the same country; they may be concerned that reports will be made back to their home country. People from Iraq, for

example, are worried about meeting other Iraqis and about what information might be reported back to the regime at home.

We think that the accommodation providers should have the power to determine where in the city people are dispersed to. That would enable local control of clustering. NASS needs proper regional representation to deal with local issues. The current system is unworkable. We must set up a new system in order to find accommodation for up to 70,000 individuals a year. The system has been set up in such a way as to be unable to take account of people's special needs.

I understand that, under the terms of the Glasgow contract, no asylum seekers with special needs are supposed to be dispersed to Glasgow. However, there is no proper assessment of needs before people are dispersed. The situation down south is chaotic. People are staying in emergency accommodation far longer than they should. We find that some people who have been dispersed have serious health problems, physical disabilities and mental health problems—often related to experiences of torture and so on. There is a huge problem in accessing statutory services and appropriate accommodation. The local authorities and the Home Office say that they are not responsible; meanwhile, vulnerable individuals are not receiving the support and care that they need.

**Bill Aitken:** I know that the Churches have been involved in integration. Has the voluntary sector had any input into addressing the problems in Glasgow? Has anyone approached the voluntary sector agencies to ask whether they would be prepared to operate drop-in centres or to run education schemes for women and children, albeit in a limited capacity?

**Catriona Milligan:** The organisations that support ethnic minority communities are simply expected to extend their services to accommodate asylum seekers. That may or may not be appropriate; it certainly puts a squeeze on the services that are available to the settled ethnic minority community. A wider constituency than just asylum seekers is affected.

**Sally Daghlain:** The voluntary sector is chronically under-resourced. In particular, it has suffered since local government reorganisation in Scotland. As our resources decrease, there is an expectation that we will do more and more. The Government and accommodation providers embarked on a major exercise without appropriate planning and co-ordination. There has been no co-ordination between the Government and the lead players, such as Glasgow City Council and the voluntary sector.

We are struggling to cope on a daily basis. We know that there is a huge amount of

developmental work to be done. If an agency is considering offering support for children, as members know, they would have to go through police checks for all the volunteers. It takes time and resources to set up the many services that are needed. We have been hit with a huge demand without any time to prepare and without an increase in resources.

**Brian Adam:** I would like to take that further. Was there any consultation with the voluntary sector before the huge demand arose? Were you given any idea of the impact that that demand would have on you and what support you would be expected to provide? Local organisations have had to grow and seem to have been overwhelmed. Perhaps Mohammad can tell us how refugees feel about the voluntary services that are available to them in the community.

**Sally Daghlain:** As a national refugee organisation, the Scottish Refugee Council was involved in consultation with the Home Office during the development and implementation of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. All the refugee agencies repeatedly raised the issues that we knew would be important, such as interpreting and translation facilities, access to legal advice and the need for community development and infrastructure. In most of the dispersal regions, no infrastructure for supporting refugees has existed. The Home Office said that it would fund a one-stop shop. We run one to develop and provide community and voluntary support. We have six advisers, who are supposed to assist up to 6,000 asylum seekers a year across central Scotland. We have found that that is not realistic. We cannot do the developmental work that we need to do because we are spending so much time dealing with the basic problems of the NASS bureaucracy, sorting out vouchers, lack of food and lack of access to health care. We are doing sticking-plaster work, not developmental work.

12:00

**The Deputy Convener:** I want to ask Mohammad about the help and support that he gets not from the authorities, but from voluntary organisations such as the Churches. How easy is it for people to access that support? If 150 people are in the one place, does everyone have equal access to what is on offer?

**Mohammad:** We put whatever the voluntary organisations bring in a common place so that anyone can take it. However, the management tell us that we cannot do that. If a voluntary organisation gives us something, we must take it to our house or flat. We cannot use the common area, because the management say that that causes problems. Deliveries of frozen food are not allowed because they are said not to be hygienic.

If you visit our building, you will see what real hygiene is.

**The Deputy Convener:** You talked about the lack of cooking facilities. What food can you spend your vouchers on? Food must be more expensive if you cannot cook from basic staples.

**Mohammad:** Only some supermarkets accept the vouchers. We must go to them and calculate what we can buy. We take whatever we buy home and share it with whoever is staying in the house with us. The lack of proper facilities in the kitchen is another problem. When we buy food in the supermarket, we must queue up; if the cost is 1p more than the value of the vouchers, we must go back and leave the queue. People queue behind you. The cashier will refuse 1p in cash and will say that only the exact amount of the voucher is acceptable. If the voucher is worth more than the cost of the food, the cashier will not give change. If, for example, I bought a bottle of water for £1 and I gave the shop a voucher for £4, I would not receive change.

**The Deputy Convener:** If you have poor cooking facilities, the quality of the food that you can buy will be affected.

**Mohammad:** Voluntary organisations bring food and clothing, but particularly food. However, we do not have the facilities for cooking it.

**Cathie Craigie:** Does each flat have cooking facilities, or is there a common kitchen?

**Mohammad:** There is a kitchen in each flat, but it does not have good cooking facilities.

**Mr McAllion:** If you could decide on the main recommendations that the committee should make, what would they be?

**Sally Daghlain:** The committee should set in progress evidence gathering and monitoring to feed into the review that has been promised for 18 months' time. It should make representations to the Westminster Government on the voucher system, because a voucher review is under way, and on the matters over which the Scottish Executive has no control.

It is key that the Executive establishes a mechanism for examining refugee integration, including health, employment and language issues. We must put in place policies and strategies to ensure that refugees are enabled to play a positive role in the new society. That is what they want to do. A new national health service report discusses how we can capitalise on the skills of refugee doctors, dentists and nurses. We have problems staffing our health services in Scotland, so we should seize on what is a positive opportunity both to develop ways of supporting and welcoming refugees and to challenge the system that has been set up for asylum seekers.

**The Deputy Convener:** When the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 came into force, it affected five pieces of Scottish legislation, one of which covered housing. A housing bill will shortly be introduced, and one of the requests of petition PE242 was to

"Initiate amendments to Scottish housing legislation to restore the entitlement of asylum seekers to local authority accommodation and services".

With reference to the problems that have been cited in Glasgow in particular, the council does not necessarily have the latitude to dispense housing as it sees fit; it is instructed from Croydon. That is particular to this committee's remit and, given the forthcoming housing bill, timeous. Would you like us to take the matter forward?

**Sally Daghlain:** Yes.

**The Deputy Convener:** I am conscious that it is now time to consider how the committee proceeds. Do you have any final comments for the committee, Mohammad?

**Mohammad:** I just want to ask you to treat us like any other human beings. We are just here because of whatever problems we have had back home. If the Government is talking about equal rights and equal opportunities, the best thing is to do away with the vouchers. They are a trademark on our heads. Wherever we go, people can see them; when they look at us they think—not all, but some—that we are troublesome people, for whatever reason we are here. They do not treat us in a good way. We ask only for a little, not a lot—just to be treated like any other human beings.

**The Deputy Convener:** Thank you, Mohammad. This committee will certainly do what it can within its powers to take this issue forward. I thank Sally Daghlain and Catriona Milligan for coming to give evidence. Mohammad, please pass on our best wishes to the asylum seekers with whom you live and make sure that they know that the Scottish Parliament has listened and that this committee has listened carefully to the evidence that you have presented.

12:06

*Meeting continued in private until 12:38.*

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