The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 19 June 2012

Session 4

Tuesday 19 June 2012

CONTENTS

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE
12th Meeting 2012, Session 4

CONVENER

*Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
*Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con)
Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
*Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Janeine Barrett (North Ayrshire Council and Ayrshire and South Housing Options Hub)
David Goldie (Highland Council and North and Islands Housing Options Hub)
Grant Mackintosh (East Dunbartonshire Council and West Housing Options Hub)
Clare Mailer (Perth and Kinross Council and Tayside, Fife and Central Housing Options Hub)
Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab) (Committee Substitute)
Michaela Smith (City of Edinburgh Council and Edinburgh, Lothians and Borders Housing Options Hub)
David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Douglas Thornton

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 19 June 2012

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 14:05*]

Having and Keeping a Home

The Convener (Mary Fee): Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the Equal Opportunities Committee's 12th meeting in 2012. I remind everyone present that all mobile devices should be completely turned off. We have received apologies from Stuart McMillan, Dennis Robertson and Siobhan McMahon. David Torrance and Jenny Marra are substituting.

To my right are the committee members and opposite me are our panel of witnesses, whom I welcome. On my left are the clerking, research and official report staff, and at the far end of the room we are supported by broadcasting and security staff. I am the committee convener. I ask the members and witnesses to introduce themselves. It would be useful if the witnesses could say briefly where they are from and what their involvement with youth homelessness is.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am an MSP for the Highlands and Islands. I am also a director of the Highland Homeless Trust.

Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con): I am an MSP for West Scotland. Despite the similarity in our names, I am no relation of the blameless Mr David Goldie.

Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am an MSP for the Highlands and Islands.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Good afternoon. I am the MSP for the Kirkcaldy constituency.

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Hello. I am an MSP for North East Scotland and the shadow minister for community safety and legal affairs.

Michaela Smith (City of Edinburgh Council and Edinburgh, Lothians and Borders Housing Options Hub): I am the housing options and access manager at the City of Edinburgh Council, which is the lead authority for the Edinburgh, Lothians and Borders housing options hub.

Clare Mailer (Perth and Kinross Council and Tayside, Fife and Central Housing Options Hub): Hello. I am the homeless service manager with Perth and Kinross Council, and I am the chair of the Tayside, Fife and central housing options hub.

Grant Mackintosh (East Dunbartonshire Council and West Housing Options Hub): Good afternoon. I am from East Dunbartonshire Council, which is based in Kirkintilloch. I am the housing manager there and I am responsible for the homelessness service, too. I am also the key contact for the west housing options hub.

David Goldie (Highland Council and North and Islands Housing Options Hub): I am the head of housing with the Highland Council. I am responsible for the council's homelessness policy and strategy, and I chair the north and islands housing options hub.

Janeine Barrett (North Ayrshire Council and Ayrshire and South Housing Options Hub): I am the principal officer for homelessness at North Ayrshire Council. I am also the chair of the Ayrshire and south housing options hub.

The Convener: Thank you very much. The committee has heard a bit of information about the hubs and how they are organised. What we hear today will inform our questioning of the Minister for Housing and Transport next week, as well as our broader inquiry report. Members have a number of questions for the witnesses.

David Torrance: Good afternoon. In my 17 years as a councillor, when we gave tenancies to young clients it was a bit of a revolving door—they lost their tenancy, returned to the top of the homeless list and were given a tenancy again—because they could not cope with running a house. What support do you give to young clients who are given a council house?

Janeine Barrett: The way in which we manage young homeless people has completely changed. The majority of local authorities focus wholly on prevention activity. Even at the point of crisis, we are still looking for opportunities to intervene. In North Ayrshire, we very much believe that young people do not belong in homeless services, because that creates risks and the impact that it has on their lives in the longer term is really negative.

We have had a prevention project in place for six or seven years. When any 16 to 25-year-old presents, we interview that young person to identify whether there are any risks to them in their family home. We look for risks of domestic abuse, major addiction issues and risks of violence to the young person. If there are no such risks, the first thing that we do on the day that the young person presents is go out to speak to their mum and dad or their carers to find out why they are threatened with homelessness. We have found that 50 per cent of the young people who present have never been threatened with homelessness—their mums

and dads are appalled that they have chapped on our door. However, families are really struggling with the other 50 per cent of the young people, because of normal teenage behaviour, because the family is in financial crisis and because of a range of reasons.

We provide family support services. Our staff act as mediators between young people and their families to try to get young people back home. In the initial stages, our success rate in getting young people back home was about 80 per cent. That has now dropped to 65 per cent, but the work has still been really successful in getting families to work together.

Even if we cannot get a young person back home, the least that we hope to do is to redevelop or re-establish the family relationship so that, when the young person is eventually resettled permanently, family support continues to follow them in their own home. We recognise the need for an on-going wider support network when a young person tries to establish their first tenancy.

I could speak about supported accommodation, but I will leave that for my colleagues to discuss.

David Goldie: I will add a couple of points to what Janeine Barrett said. There is less of a revolving-door scenario for homelessness than before, but it is certainly more of a risk for young tenants than it is for tenants in general. The published statistics are based on people who present again within one year. If the figures are tracked back for a longer period—we did that in Highland—we find that a relatively high percentage of people present again as homeless. Young people are certainly more at risk of presenting again as homeless than others are.

In Highland, we have adopted many of the approaches that North Ayrshire Council uses. We have set up a prevention team and tried to look at homelessness more holistically. We try to ensure that people are ready to move into a tenancy and that they have not just support in relation to accommodation but other services that they need. I endorse what Janeine Barrett said.

Grant Mackintosh: East Dunbartonshire Council has a joint project with Action for Children called the canal project, which is an eight-bedded facility. That has been successful and we had no such service in the past. The project provides supported accommodation and has a programme that we set up with Action for Children, ideally for about six months. The aim is that those who are accommodated will glean independent living skills and therefore be able to sustain a tenancy.

The reality is that the process takes a bit longer—it tends to take about nine months. If young people go through that successfully, the ideal option is alternative temporary accommodation. However, the problem is that East Dunbartonshire has a big shortage of one-bedroom temporary accommodation, which means that the process can take a year in total. There can be three months in which the young person has a bit of frustration because they are ready to move on but we do not have the facilities for them to do so. However, that approach is a great improvement that avoids some of the revolving-door situations that the question was about.

There are still gaps in services to provide more intensive support. The canal project provides medium support, but more complex cases that involve addiction problems or mental health issues require wraparound education, social work, health and housing services. Sometimes, there are gaps in making that support successful. If it breaks down, the revolving-door situation has more risk of happening a few years down the line or maybe six months later.

Clare Mailer: Perth and Kinross Council mirrors the approach that other local authorities take, as does the Tayside, Fife and central hub. The initial focus is very much on homelessness prevention for youths and on early intervention through working with schools and with education and children's services. Mediation is also a big factor in homelessness prevention.

When young people become homeless, we provide highly supported accommodation. Perth and Kinross has a number of provisions, including specialist accommodation for young people. One of our provisions—Wellbank—has 10 placements in highly supported accommodation that is run by education and children's services. Relatively recently, we opened a facility that provides more independent living with on-site support, although it is not 24-hour support.

We also have satellite properties, to which young people can move when they are moving on from highly supported accommodation. The young people can dip in and out of the support that we offer; we can step up or step down the support, as needed, before we move them on to more independent living. We have youth tenancy support workers and we work closely with colleagues in education and children's services to ensure that we are taking an holistic approach to the support that each individual needs.

14:15

I think that the national rate of repeat homelessness across all homeless groups is about 5.5 per cent—it has been coming down during the past few years. In Perth and Kinross last year, the repeat homelessness rate was only 2.5 per cent—that is the rate across the board rather than just for youth homelessness. We have

high levels of tenancy sustainability; about 96 per cent of tenants sustain their tenancies after moving in.

In recognition of young people's particular need for extra support prior to moving to independent living, we recently set up a tenancy course, along with colleagues in Perth College, to give young people independent living skills. The young people learn budgeting skills, and they learn about what it means to be a good tenant and neighbour and how to integrate in the community. The early indications suggest that the approach is working well. A lot of work is going on.

Michaela Smith: The two key issues are prevention and sustainability, as my colleagues said. When we consider why a young person has become homeless, there is rarely just one cause, so it is unlikely that tackling one issue will solve the problem. As Janeine Barrett said, it is often about not just supporting the young person but taking a step back and supporting the family, either before the young person leaves the home or afterwards, to rebuild relationships so that there is a support network for the young person as they move on.

When that is not possible, we try to build up community networks for the young person, so that they have a stake in the area into which they are moving and have built up relationships and confidence. It is not about just doing things for the young person; it is about enabling them to do as much as possible for themselves, including setting up the tenancy. The idea is to give them something in which they can take pride and to connect them with employment and other opportunities in the community, which will make it easier for them to settle into new accommodation or a new area.

The Convener: Jenny Marra has a supplementary question on that point.

Jenny Marra: I have other questions, convener, so I can wait until you are ready to move on.

The Convener: I will ask a question before I bring in Annabel Goldie—please forgive me, Annabel, if this is what you were going to say. Committee members visited various projects, and Annabel Goldie and I visited the Quarriers project in Saltcoats. Janeine Barrett gave us compelling evidence about North Ayrshire Council's support and mediation service. Can you say more about that, Janeine? Is there an upper or lower age limit for eligibility for the service? How quickly do you engage with the young person, and how long does the engagement last?

Janeine Barrett: The project was initially a pilot and was designed for 16 and 17-year-olds, but it was so successful in the first six months—we had a 92 per cent success rate in getting young people back home—that we quickly extended it to cover 16 to 25-year-olds. We engage services at the point of presentation, that is, as soon as someone tells us that they are homeless or at risk of homelessness. First, we must ensure that the young person is not at risk at home, because we do not want a young person to return home if that is not suitable for them.

The key success of the project is the officers whom we selected to do the work. We picked officers who are used to working with young people, such as people who have teenage children of their own and are used to teenagers' behaviour. We picked people who could build a rapport with families when they went into the family home.

A rule that we have given our staff is that they must speak to the parents on the day when the young person presents. We have been down south to look at the work of some of the beacon authorities, who told us clearly that there is a very small window of opportunity to get involved and get the young person back home, because as soon as the young person is out of the family home, either the family say that they do not want them back or the young person says that they do not want to go back.

We try vigorously to access parents. For example, we go out chapping on doors; if people are not in, we try mobile telephone numbers or the extended family. We try people's work, to see whether we can come and speak to them in their workplace. In the majority of cases, we are successful in speaking to young people's parents.

The first question that we ask is what is going on; we ask people to tell us what the issues are. We find that some families are genuinely struggling, and that many parents are really upset and have reached a crisis point at which they cannot see a way out other than to ask the young person to leave. For example, the young person may just lie in bed all day because they have stayed up all night; they think that they are an adult so they do not have to follow the normal behaviour and routine of the family.

We sit down and work with the young person to try to determine what the parents' needs are, then we do that in reverse for the parents. That approach is successful, first, because we do not just walk away. We put in whatever support services are necessary for the family to continue to function and we do the wider housing options work. We look at the young person's longer-term housing needs and get them on to waiting lists. We speak to them about the areas in which they need or want to stay, or where their support networks are, and about access to work or training.

We do that work with the young person, and the point of disengagement depends on them. We have determined that we will not disengage until the young person is resettled and has a final housing outcome. For some people, that could take a couple of years and we could work with them until they come to the top of the waiting list and are allocated housing. That ensures that we put in the right outreach support services at the point of resettlement to ensure that people do not become homeless again in the future.

The Convener: Do any of the other witnesses want to comment, or to tell us a bit about services in their area that are similar to those in North Ayrshire?

Clare Mailer: I can report back from Angus. The local authority has recently established a young persons' housing options service. Yesterday, I spoke to a colleague from Angus who indicated that they had received 140 referrals during the first month, half of which were for young persons who were threatened with homelessness or were homeless. Of those who were threatened with homelessness, only three have been accommodated. Within the first month of the housing options service's operation, there has been a 75 per cent reduction in homeless presentations.

Again, it is very much about the approach, which involves close liaison with support and training agencies, intensive mediation and the provision of accommodation. The new team has four dedicated officers and a team leader. Dundee took a similar approach for a project in which the approach is very much focused on conflict resolution. Ten staff have been trained, and the team has instigated a four-week programme that has had some good outcomes. We can see that a lot of good work is going on.

Michaela Smith: Edinburgh is a big authority, so we work with a wide range of accommodation and support agencies. The key issue is that those agencies are wide ranging and different and can meet the needs of different young people. Of all the client groups that we deal with, young people are the most likely to change and the quickest to change, so we ensure that our facilities and services are flexible enough to allow people to dip in and out for what they need. We do that rather than providing a linear service that people move through in one direction, with no opportunity to go back, even if at times they need more or less support or a different kind of input.

Another key issue is age limits, particularly the lower age limit. At the moment, we and most of the agencies that we deal with can work with an individual only when they are 16, whereas a lot of the valuable work that can be done to prevent future problems needs to be done before the young person reaches that age. It is about linking some of the children's services with some of the mainstream services for the 16-plus age group.

Grant Mackintosh: I have some information from the west housing options hub on supported accommodation. West Dunbartonshire is similar to East Dunbartonshire in that it has a young persons' supported accommodation project that is also run by Action for Children. These projects tend to be specifically for young people from the ages of 16 to 21, whereas another project in East Dunbartonshire is more for the 18-plus age group. However, the reality for both the East Dunbartonshire and the West Dunbartonshire projects is that 16, 17 and 18-year-olds tend to go there.

East Renfrewshire has a supported accommodation project with 11 independent flats and comprehensive outreach support that is available to young people across the area, regardless of the type of tenancy they have. There are also strong links with the education department to ensure that all young people who are still at school can maintain their education while living in supported accommodation.

David Goldie: Perhaps I can highlight some of the rural issues in supported accommodation. I believe that at last week's meeting the committee heard about our supported accommodation service at Planefield house in Inverness, which is run by the Highland Homeless Trust specifically for former looked-after children. We do not have any other specialist supported accommodation for young people because, for many, that would mean having to leave their communities for a more urban part of the Highlands. That said, we are adopting an approach that is similar—although perhaps not as assertive or as outreach in nature—to that described by Janeine Barrett, which involves family mediation Highland in mediating in disputes that might be emerging in households. Simply enabling family members to step back, have some respite and talk things out among themselves can prevent our having to take a more formal approach with the use of temporary accommodation and everything else that goes with that.

Annabel Goldie: On a point of clarification, are the young people whom Janeine Barrett was talking about aged 16 and over?

Janeine Barrett: Yes.

Annabel Goldie: I was very struck not only by what you said, but by Clare Mailer's point about support for simple things such as budgeting, running a tenancy, keeping a house clean and getting into a routine, domestic or otherwise.

Michaela Smith made an extremely helpful point when she suggested that there was a need for

intervention before the age of 16, and I think that she has touched on something that interests not only me but the rest of the committee. Should we be doing more in schools to help young people understand what they might have to do if they end up needing assistance and help with a tenancy because of their home circumstances? Of course, it might not only be their home circumstances; one young lady to whom I and the convener spoke said that, in all honesty, she had no idea what it was like to be homeless and that the image in her mind was very different from the reality.

I am not asking all of you to bind your local authorities or indeed the Scottish Government into a commitment to change education policy, but I would be grateful if you could give us your thoughts on whether we can do more in school and for the pre-16s.

Michaela Smith: Such an approach would, without a doubt, be invaluable. We have a couple of examples of agencies that go into schools and do the kind of work that you have suggested; however, it is more of an add-on and covers quite specific areas when it should probably link in with other life issues that young people need to learn about. After all, these things are interlinked and if you do not get one of them right it will have an impact that might result in someone becoming homeless.

Of course, this is all about educating not just the young person, but professionals such as teachers or health workers who will come into contact with them and might well be able to identify some of the triggers that we need to be doing something about at that stage. Given how much we talk about managing young people's expectations and aspirations and how they can be fed by those whom they speak to or deal with, we need to get that information to a much wider range of people to ensure that we are managing the expectations of communities rather than individuals.

David Goldie: I strongly believe that we should be involved more at the education stage of people's lives. In an exciting project that will start in August next year, we will establish services in three schools in order to talk to pupils in secondary 4 and above about some of the issues that they will face. That sort of dialogue should form an essential part of preparing pupils for leaving school; after all, the evidence suggests that people often do not have their eyes open when they leave school or when they look for housing and we should certainly do more to prepare them in that respect.

We have engaged education colleagues in our homelessness partnership work. We have had some useful discussions with them about activity agreements and how we make housing a feature of people's activity agreements as well. Things like that are important, because sometimes by the time that people present as homeless or present to us with housing problems it is too late. We should have been helping them earlier.

14:30

Janeine Barrett: We have had an education programme in North Ayrshire for the past seven years. We deliver it to all S4, S5 and S6 students across all nine secondary schools in North Ayrshire. We know that our prevention activity work is invaluable—the young people tell us that and so do the teachers. It is quite difficult, however, for us to provide evidence in terms of what impact our work has on preventing homelessness.

When we started that work it was not about preventing homelessness, but about letting young people know what their options were and trying to disperse some of the myths around homelessness and running their own tenancy. We picked a project to undertake the work for us that was made up of young people who had the energy and the ability to engage well with other young people.

We intend to carry that work forward in some way to see how that translates into homeless presentations. We are in the process of developing a new information technology system that will allow us to ask young people—16 to 18-year-olds—when they come to us what school they came from. That will allow us to tackle certain pieces of work within certain schools where there are higher levels of homeless presentations.

What is probably invaluable for us is to go back into schools and ask young people what they need to hear from us. It was really interesting when committee members came to North Ayrshire and spoke to a young person who said, "Do you know what, I got that education in school, but nothing would have stopped me from becoming homeless, because I was out of control". However, he agreed with what we had been trying to say to him. We need to ask young people, "If you had the chance to go back to before you were homeless, what message would you want to give to yourself?". We need to harness that knowledge. We need to work with the young people who are presenting and try to work out how we can prevent more young people from becoming homeless in the future.

David Goldie spoke about education. Another piece of work that we did was twilight sessions with specific guidance teachers; we explained the impact of homelessness to teachers and what they could expect if young people were experiencing homelessness. We were mainly thinking about young people who were homeless because their whole family was homeless. Perhaps teachers were starting to see schoolwork falling behind,

changes in appearance, or changes in behaviours—we set in place a service that allowed teachers to flag that up to us. That ensured that we put in the right housing support, so that young people were not negatively affected by the impact of their parents' homelessness. That has been particularly successful.

Clare Mailer: I agree that education is important. Four of the six local authorities involved in our hub—Fife, Argyll and Bute, Perth and Kinross, and Dundee City—all operate, or are in the process of operating, homeless prevention programmes in schools to greater or lesser degrees.

Dundee City Council goes in to talk to all S4 pupils. There is quite a detailed programme in Perth and Kinross—we go into schools and meet the fourth year pupils to discuss homelessness, risks to homelessness and all the interrelated factors that can trigger and cause homelessness. Speaking with colleagues from the hub, what came across very strongly was that the roll-out of those school initiatives has proven to be very successful. We need more of them across Scotland—there is no doubt about that—and they should become the norm. The language and the format of the sessions should be interactive and relaxed. We need to express to school pupils the different triggers for homelessness, what the reality is of becoming homeless, and practical information such as budgeting, the cost of housing and the cost of food.

As some of the other panel members said, training and awareness for teachers are also critical. Teachers need to have a clear understanding of the triggers of homelessness—truancy from school, possibly involvement in drugs and alcohol or criminal activities at a young age—and link with homeless services to ensure that we can get in there early, intervene and provide whatever support we can.

In Perth and Kinross we always have pre-Christmas sessions for school leavers. We go into some of the high schools and hold sessions, because we know that some of the early school leavers are likely to be at risk of homelessness. We link up with education colleagues in that respect.

More schools initiatives have proven to reduce the number of young 16-year-olds coming out of school and becoming homeless immediately. That is certainly the way forward.

Michaela Smith: Janeine Barrett suggested that we ask young people what they would have wanted to know; another key point is who young people want to hear that from. The evidence suggests to an extent that some young people will listen to family members more than teachers or role models. The key often involves peer education and young people listening to their peers. That is the big area that we must tap into.

The Convener: That issue was raised when we visited the unit in Saltcoats.

Annabel Goldie: That is the very point that I wanted to clarify. All of what you have been describing is extremely encouraging. Is peer involvement a feature of that? I see that you are all nodding.

Grant Mackintosh: The answer to the question that was raised earlier is yes, there should be stronger links with education. However, the big issue is whether there will be room in the timetable under curriculum for excellence. There is not a shadow of doubt that secondary headteachers have a big say in that. In the responses that I have had, the vast majority of members of our hub say that they go into schools but that that is pretty much dictated by whether a headteacher views it as a priority in their school. Sometimes it will be done in the odd secondary school; in certain council areas all schools will do it; and in other areas it will be done in one or two schools, or half of them. There is not a comprehensive arrangement that covers all the schools, which is pretty much because of the power that headteachers have in certain local authorities. It may be critical to take that issue forward through curriculum for excellence.

My other point relates to the need for a soft environment and how we put information across. In East Dunbartonshire, we have project 101, which is a youth housing project. The building has a softer feel. It is not like a council building, so young people feel much more at ease going in there, and it is on a main street so they can just walk in and get advice. That is the approach that we use for giving advice to schools, too. However, we still encounter the fact that it is down to secondary heads whether we get into a particular school. We tend to see fifth and sixth-year pupils because they have a timetable that enables us to do that.

It involves a wee bit of knocking on doors. We have to keep on going back constantly, and it is quite difficult to do. However, we have had success. We get into common rooms and put information out in that way, and we put up boards in the schools.

John Finnie: Annabel Goldie mentioned the topic to which I was going to refer, so perhaps I can expand on it.

As a local authority councillor from 2007 until this year, I am delighted at the evident progress that has been made. However, although it is very positive, much of what I am hearing does not reflect my personal experience, previously in one

authority and now over a broader range of authorities. There is improvement, and we want to hear about the good stuff, but equally we need to hear whether there are any pitfalls so that we can do what we can to assist.

Michaela Smith mentioned the pre-16 issue, and Clare Mailer spoke about a holistic approach. The Highland Council submission refers to

"Clients with Multiple/Complex Needs"

and states:

"We have introduced an assessment matrix linked to a multi-agency protocol, based on the principles of 'Getting it right for every child'".

If we are intent on addressing the pre-16 issue, the principles of getting it right for every child should apply in any case.

There is a danger in any organisation that the lead authority is isolated—for example, the housing service is responsible for homelessness, which is not seen as being anything to do with education. I have dealt with cases in which the most glaring reason for the child's bad behaviour concerned domestic circumstances involving cramped conditions and three generations of a family living together.

I would like to hear about your engagement, not only through initiatives in schools but with other local authority services such as education and social work and, in particular, with health, because there are health implications in that regard. I dealt with instances in which three generations of a family were living together and any combination of complications, such as a serious illness in an older person or a young woman expecting a child, could result in homelessness for one of the three generations.

Janeine Barrett: Most local authorities are, as part of the integrated children's services planning framework, working jointly around the needs of homeless children and children at risk of homelessness, which includes close working with social services.

In North Ayrshire Council and another couple of councils in our hub, we have care leaver protocols for young people who are leaving care. We start to work with them through the planning discharge process a year prior to their leaving care. That is done with a view to ensuring that young people do not become homeless at the point of leaving care. We look at their support needs, independent living skills, where they want to live, and what support they have in the area that they want to stay in, and we determine at the point of leaving care whether they are suitable for mainstream housing or whether they need to go into supported housing. That is done in conjunction with the young person and with their agreement about what their skills are at the point of moving on from care.

At the local level across Ayrshire, we have very good joint relationships with health workers for homeless children as part of a wider family to ensure that their health needs are considered at the point of homelessness, and health and housing services in the three Ayrshire authorities jointly fund a public health nurse post specifically for homeless people. There is a lot of joint working to ensure that homeless people are registered with general practitioners, have access to dental healthcare and public health services, and are integrated into the mainstream services. I genuinely believe that local authorities have come a long distance on joint working in a short period of time, especially on the homelessness agenda.

John Finnie: May I clarify that? If I were to phone the director of education in North Ayrshire Council or Perth and Kinross Council, will the first thing that they do not be to direct me to their counterpart? Will they see a role for themselves that is connected with homelessness?

Janeine Barrett: In education, they will clearly understand their role in the piece of work that we do in all secondary schools, as that is part of the integrated children's services planning framework to which we have all signed up. However, if you went on to ask about a specific housing issue, the issue would be referred back to us.

Clare Mailer: I think that you discussed Perth and Kinross Council's city base service in Scott Street in your previous meeting and that its good practice was mentioned. It is a drop-in facility for all young people in Perth and Kinross that is run by education and children's services. It is based in Perth town centre, so we obviously have rural issues there. There is multi-agency provision. Housing, health, throughcare, aftercare and youth services are all on site. The homeless service delivers three half-day surgeries at city base in Scott Street. The young person therefore does not have to be referred on from youth services or the throughcare and aftercare team to homelessness or housing services.

Like the other local authorities, we have joint working protocols. That approach is mirrored by some of the other local authorities in the hub. There are joint working protocols so that we avoid homeless presentations, particularly by young persons who are leaving care. The allocations policies very much prioritise care leavers so that they do not have to go through the homeless route.

The Convener: I have a question that follows on from what John Finnie asked about. How do the hubs work logistically? I will put on my cynic's hat. If five or six local authorities all work together

to meet one aim, how do you ensure that one local authority does not get a bigger share of the cake or does not push forward its agenda more than another local authority does? What reviews to determine whether the joint working actually works do you have? How often are there reviews to ensure that you do not need to make changes? Are the arrangements flexible enough for you to be able to change services as you go along?

14:45

Janeine Barrett: The hubs operate differently across Scotland. Each hub is based on its own set of circumstances. Some hubs have stock transfer local authorities in them and some do not. We all operate slightly differently. The Scottish Government very much left it up to us how we would set up, co-ordinate and manage our hub.

All the hubs have an action plan that we agree to. Agendas will move at a different pace in different local authorities, depending on the priorities of each local authority, but we had our key priorities at the start. Bear in mind that the hubs have been in place for only two years. The initial drive was around the abolition of priority need and signing up to the housing options agenda. We have all got there and done that. The majority of local authorities will meet the 2012 target, and we are now looking to housing options as the way to prevent homelessness. Those were our two key priorities, and they have been addressed successfully.

The majority of us meet every six to eight weeks, and we report back to the Government quarterly on what we are doing. Over and above that, the five hubs meet the Government quarterly, and on an annual basis we have a more open meeting to which we invite all the partners. The purpose of that meeting is to share good practice, to highlight what is working well in the west and south hubs and to consider areas for development or areas in which we need the Government to give us clearer guidance. As we were developing our housing options approach, it became apparent that we needed the Government to give a direction about how it wanted us to monitor and record housing options activity and demonstrate that we are not gatekeeping—that we are genuinely preventing homelessness.

There is a two-way flow of information. We report to the Government, but we also ask the Government to take direct actions to assist local authorities.

Grant Mackintosh: I agree with everything that Janeine Barrett has said about how the hubs operate, although we operate in slightly different ways. We have met regularly from an early stage on a monthly basis, building up relationships in that way. Although we cover a big geographic area, that has worked quite well for us. As you can imagine, Glasgow, the Lanarkshires and the Renfrewshires are big political beasts, and your question about how we control what happens is a valid one. We put in place a protocol and we have a six-page document that outlines what we interpret housing options to be. To begin with, a lot of the hubs would have had discussions about differences in how they interpreted housing options. We have defined housing options and we have highlighted our key things to take forward, such as training, information technology development and a wee bit of research. Those are all in the protocol, and the idea is to use that to get head of service, strategic director and political buy-in. We hope that, at some point this year, there will be a signing-off ceremony for the protocol, to get the buy-in of those partners and to spread it wider. Although we have been meeting as local authorities, we need to bring in the housing associations and the third sector as well.

The Convener: Does anyone else want to come in on that specific point?

David Goldie: The north and islands hub has probably operated a bit differently from the others because of the geography of our area. We have tended to meet less frequently than the other hubs and our meetings have been more about sharing experience and building confidence in the housing options approach than about sharing practice, although we have jointly commissioned staff training, which has been very useful for staff. We accepted at a fairly early stage that there were different solutions for the different local authorities in the north and islands hub, and everyone has moved forward on that basis.

Clare Mailer: The Tayside, Fife and central hub operates similarly to what Janeine Barrett described. It is very much about benchmarking, sharing good practice and learning from each other's mistakes. We are all at different stages in the implementation of housing options, and those of us who are further ahead than others have been able to say what works and what does not. That has been very valuable for some of the partners, who have been able to avoid unnecessary work.

We have spent a lot of time undertaking training needs analysis and have recently secured Government funding for welfare reform mitigation activities. We are currently rolling out 20 day training sessions for staff across the six local authorities on the universal credit and the pressures and challenges that we are going to face in the future. We had a very successful conference event at Perth concert hall on Friday, which brought together staff from all six local authority areas and the Scottish Government to look at welfare reform mitigation and to share

areas of good practice in the delivery of housing options.

Michaela Smith: When we started, our hub was based mainly on specific project activity. As it has developed, it has become more of a network for sharing best practice and experiences. We are at the stage of re-evaluating what the hub is there for and how we can make it a long-term, rather than specifically project-based, entity. If you look across Scotland as the 2012 target approaches, you see that there has been much activity across all the local authorities. We need to tap into all of that and see what is out there. The hubs are a valuable way of, first, finding that out, and, secondly, looking at ways to jointly develop the activities.

Jean Urquhart: We have recently taken some evidence from young people who are, or who have been, homeless. It is clear that there is a vicious circle, as I am sure that you recognise: not having a job can lead to problems at home, which can lead to homelessness, and being homeless makes it really difficult to get a job or to get into training. Do you have a working relationship with organisations in the third sector that are involved in helping young people, homeless or otherwise, to find training places or employment?

Grant Mackintosh: That is true. In the past, the connection between, in particular, young homeless people and the ability to get out and get alternative accommodation through employment was greatly overlooked. I mentioned the canal project, whose referral meetings I chaired in the past. Quite often, someone would be identified who was coming in who would have rent to pay for staying at the canal project. Action for Children administered that for us and was responsible for collecting the rent, so quite often there would be links built up. A key question was to get young people into training or employment. The training often came through organisations such as the Prince's Trust. Indeed, I regularly saw the Prince's Trust's name come up as an organisation that was used as a stepping stone for people to get further employment experience. It is absolutely the case that the third sector and some of the care providers assist in getting people into training and employment.

To divert from the west hub, I will mention the Aberdeen Foyer, which has a strong link with education and employment. At one point, it had a project that linked to training young people to drive, which is a big issue in rural areas. It was felt that that helped young people no end in getting employment and getting access to a wider availability of accommodation in rural areas. Those are the matters that I think are relevant to the question.

Janeine Barrett: It is fair to say that it is difficult to get young people into employment. In North Ayrshire, which has one of the highest rates of unemployment in the country, we find that our young homeless people are some of the furthest from the employment market. They do not have the right skills or knowledge, so we must look at access to training for them. However, at the point of crisis, we are initially trying to respond to that crisis. For the young people whom we cannot resettle back home, the initial stages are very much about crisis management. We fund organisations, such as Quarriers, where young people stay to develop their skills. We also link with wider agencies, and we are linked with employability agencies.

In North Ayrshire, we recognise that we must respond to the crisis and look at the issue of employability further down the line. We must ensure that we have sorted out the key issues, such as health and housing, before we start to consider longer-term aspirations. David Goldie's report specifically refers to the complex needs of our homeless young people. In Ayrshire, we are certainly seeing a far more complex group than we ever had previously—we are seeing higher levels of young people with addictions issues, mental health problems, and serious behavioural issues. We need to resolve those issues—or work towards resolving those issues—before we start to consider training and employment.

David Goldie: The third sector is essential. We have a couple of very good examples in the Highland Council area of third sector organisations that are making a difference to people's lives. In particular, the Calman Trust and New Start Highland spring to mind.

I echo what Janeine Barrett says. A lot of young people have quite a long way to go before they are ready for employment. We could do more to make links between young people who approach our services and the employment services that are available for them. We sometimes deal with people who are in crisis and we need to move those people through that crisis on to a more stable future footing.

I have read evidence from young people that suggests that they have to overcome a number of obstacles themselves. Their confidence can be very fragile and we need to work hard not to shatter their ambitions but allow them to aim high and take a structured approach to developing the skills that will enable them to move to a fuller sense of citizenship beyond just getting a solution to their housing problems, for example. We need to move them to solutions to different aspects of their lives.

Jean Urquhart: I had a thought as you were speaking. In my experience as a councillor, I found that a lot of homelessness is also about people who do not have extreme needs and who are not

addicts, or whatever. What happens to them? There is a real need for a link to looking for work.

Related to that is the fact that the number of applications for housing is being reduced. Is that because of a success in there somewhere? How do you account for that?

Janeine Barrett: Far more people are approaching the council for assistance. At our peak, we had 1,800 homeless presentations, but that has gone down to 710. However, we are now getting 4,000 approaches for advice and information, although only about 700 of those go on to make a homeless application. We are still seeing higher numbers of people, but we are able to redirect the clients who have less complex issues to alternative housing, whether that be social rented housing, the private rented sector or, in some cases, owner-occupation. We use our knowledge of the housing market to access housing for such people within their own timescales.

In about 65 per cent of all cases, we are left with some of the more complex clients; 35 per cent of our clients just go through our homeless service quickly. We also have targets for linking people with training and employment opportunities, and we are achieving that for those less complex clients.

Michaela Smith: Two keys to the situation are having a good assessment process, so that we know exactly what people need, and making sure that the process is flexible and on-going, so that if people's needs change, we can reassess them. The last thing that we want to do with someone who has quite a small number of specific needs is put them into a service that will compound their problems rather than resolve them. We need to do a comprehensive assessment and we need to have the range of services at our disposal so that we can tailor what we provide to the individual.

Once we have that range of services and flexibility, that allows us to make the person the starting point rather than fitting them around the existing service. That picks up the person who might have just one issue to address right up to those who have complex needs, and everyone in between. It also gives the opportunity for people's needs to change over time.

Grant Mackintosh: East Dunbartonshire's housing option approach is similar to those of a number in the west that have carried out pilots. We recently carried out a pilot using the homelessness team from December to the end of January and compared the situation with those of the past three years. We saw a 13 per cent reduction during that period, purely because we went to the housing options approach. That shows that results are coming from that approach. As Janeine Barrett said, we will end up interviewing more people, so there is a manpower issue. There might be 100 homeless cases, but we might have to interview 120 people, a number of whom will be diverted through the housing options approach. That is for the very reason that the member raises—that people have routinely come through the homelessness route in the past, whereas if we had had other services in place, we would probably have prevented that because it was not necessary.

15:00

The approach is to be more person centred rather than process driven. In the past, we have been process driven. We pushed individuals in the direction of the homelessness route. We are now starting to consider the proper options for individuals, which is having success, although it is early days. We will monitor until the end of June, which is the first main phase of the pilot, and submit a report to our committee setting out whether we should expand the approach further. At present, from the results that I am seeing, the signs are encouraging, but we will not know until the end of June whether we are just delaying things. There is always a danger that we get short-term success but then a bulge down the line. Janeine Barrett has been at it a bit longer, and it is encouraging that the figures have been continually driven down in her area. We are hopeful that the same will apply to us.

David Goldie: The fact that there are fewer homeless presentations does not mean that less work is going on with people. In a sense, the issue is because of the way in which we report figures—the formal statistics are on homeless presentation. In future statistics, we will report more on prevention activity, which will give a useful context. Fewer homeless presentations does not equal fewer people coming to our door and looking for assistance.

On the measures of success, my personal view is that, for the vast majority of people, if we can avoid a formal homeless presentation and a placement in temporary accommodation, and if we can provide a better alternative for that person, that is a success.

Clare Mailer: I mirror my colleagues' comments. In Perth and Kinross, we met the 2012 target ahead of schedule, in October last year. We refocused the resources of our homeless assessment team so that, rather than reacting to a homeless presentation and assessing whether the application is priority need, we accept that all are priority need, but we have refocused the resources in the team, through the housing options approach, on early intervention and homelessness prevention. We have significantly increased

access to the private sector in Perth and Kinross and we had a 13 per cent reduction in homeless presentations last year. To mirror Grant Mackintosh's point, we are not necessarily dealing with fewer people; we are shifting our resource and applying it much earlier in the process so that we can do proper preventative work.

Jenny Marra: Convener, I have two questions. Is there time for both, or do you want me to choose one?

The Convener: There is time.

Jenny Marra: My first question comes on the back of the evidence that we took last week from young homeless people. I was particularly struck by one young guy's comments about how he felt once he was in his tenancy. He had gone through the process of being homeless and getting support and he had got a tenancy on his own, but he missed the support that he had when he was in care. When I was looking through the summary of evidence from last week's meeting, I was struck by the fact that the apex of the process is to get somebody into a flat or other accommodation on their own and living independently. I appreciate that there is no one answer, that we are dealing with human beings who have many different needs and that no one situation will suit them all. I understand that the landscape is complex. However, for young people of the age that we are talking about, is a lone tenancy the ideal answer?

Janeine Barrett: Interestingly, towards the end of last year, we had consultation work done with young people in which we asked specifically about what they look for in housing, and the majority said that they wanted to live on their own. Perhaps they want to live on their own but, when they get there, they think that they would rather share with a friend. It does not matter to the council whether someone decides that they want to be a joint tenant or a single tenant. If friends approached us who said that they would prefer to stay together, we could consider that.

When young people go into a tenancy, we try to provide an outreach support service to follow them into that tenancy. East Ayrshire Council has quite a good programme, whereby it has procured befriending services that follow young people into tenancies. The befrienders work with young people while they are homeless and continue to work with them when they are resettled into tenancies, so there is a sense of continuity. The service helps them to integrate into the area that they are staying in and goes on to help them to develop their skills. The befrienders have been there—they have been through the service, which has been successful for them. In East Ayrshire, peer befrienders are being picked for young people.

I want to pick up on the revolving-door syndrome that was mentioned earlier, whereby a young person takes up a tenancy, the tenancy fails and they come back through the system again. My experience over the past four or five years is that that is not the reality. If we can get young people as far as having a tenancy, that tenancy will be maintained. The majority of repeat homeless cases involve young people who are not finishing the homeless process. They might be in temporary or supported accommodation that breaks down, after which they go back home and subsequently come back in again. That is what creates the repeat homelessness statistics. What that means for local authorities is that we need to go back and look at our support and accommodation services, because if they are not meeting young people's needs and young people never get as far as having a tenancy, we are creating that revolving-door effect. We have found that tenancy sustainment is not such a big issue for us.

David Goldie: Social networks are terribly important for people who take up a tenancy for the first time. The risk of tenancy failure must increase if people lack social and other community networks. We have not tried shared tenancies, although people can apply to be joint tenants. There is certainly some scope for trying that, because it might just give people the little bit of support that they need.

Another reason for trying shared tenancies relates to welfare reform. There is a shortage of supply of one-bedroom properties, but if a single person goes into a two-bedroom property, they will lose benefit. That is another incentive for us to think about shared tenancies, although they will not work in all cases—there are all sorts of issues to do with matching people and so on.

Grant Mackintosh: Shared-tenancy situations tend to arise only when we have two young people who have come through the care system and we join them up. We have not tended to use shared tenancies routinely with unrelated individuals. Because of welfare reform, looking at shared tenancies will be on our agenda to an increasing extent. Such tenancies require considerable planning and preparation. Unless the tenancy is already up and running, a lot of thinking will need to be put into getting it right, because it could go badly wrong. However, shared tenancies are certainly worth considering for the reason that David Goldie gave—there is a shortage of one-bedroom accommodation in most areas.

Befriending is critical. It was reported back to us that a lot of young people often feel lonely and isolated. Jenny Marra was correct to ask her question. When young people go into a tenancy, it appears that, for a number of services, that is the

end of the situation—they think that housing will move things forward effectively. We have housing support workers and we follow up on the young person for about six months, although it might be for a longer period or for a shorter period, depending on the needs involved. That gives them a degree of support, but my sense from other services is that wraparound support that should be continued tends to get stopped, perhaps for financial reasons, at that point. When it comes to saying whether there is a big success story, the picture is mixed.

An awful lot of that is to do with young people telling us about their experience and trying to break down community issues—there can be quite a lot of opposition to a young person going to live in a close or a particular area. Denny Ford, who is a corporate officer with Who Cares? Scotland, came through to East Dunbartonshire Council to speak to tenants at one of our tenant events. That was the first time that he had come to a housing organisation, and the event was extremely successful. It is probably necessary for us to do education in that area to get the support that is required and to start breaking down some of the opposition that we get to young people taking up tenancies. Problems such as neighbour disputes can occasionally occur and, unfortunately, we must face the fact that things will sometimes fail and that we will have to try again.

Clare Mailer: Perth and Kinross Council is in the very early stages of developing a flatmate scheme. In fact, a University of Stirling student started with us just last week, and one of the world cafe stalls at our hub conference on Friday focused on such schemes. We are considering it simply because of affordability issues in relation to private sector accommodation and the need to mitigate the impacts of welfare reform. We are certainly looking to take forward such a scheme over the next few months.

Michaela Smith: However much you advise a young person about all the available options, if they know that they have the right to a secure tenancy, sometimes nothing will persuade them otherwise. The need, then, is to mitigate the risks. I suppose that that is where flexibility comes in; instead of saying, “You’ve got your tenancy, so that’s it”, we have to allow them to move backwards and forwards between different levels of support. For example, we should let people who have moved out of the care system know that if they feel that they need to go back into a care place for, say, a night—or, indeed, longer—they can change their mind or do things differently, and that, once they have made the decision, that is not the end of the matter. As I have said, things tend to change a lot more quickly for young people than for most of the rest of us and we need to allow that kind of flexibility and to support them through the process. If they are already in a tenancy, we must ensure that support is available to pick up on what might be not an absolute failure but a stumble that, with the right support in place, can be overcome.

Jenny Marra: I was recently informed of young people who have become homeless as a result of their being sent to prison on remand and finding, on their return, that their homes have been repossessed by the local authority because of abandonment. They then go back into the homelessness system, which I understand costs local authorities £23,000 per person per year. There is not only a cost element to this, but a sustainability element with regard to the young person’s tenancy. I believe that in some councils practical steps have been taken; the prison sends a list of young tenants that it has received back to the local authority, which then sends a homeless link person to the prison to get the person on remand to sign off the necessary form. However, my understanding is that such an approach has not been taken in all local authorities. Clare Mailer might be able to help, because I believe that Perth and Kinross Council is very good at that approach. I understand that Fife Council, too, is good at it but that Dundee City Council is not so good. Can you give me a steer on the matter? Obviously, such a situation is not good for any young person and it is better for those coming out of the justice system to go back to their own property rather than into a homeless hostel. Is the approach that I described happening elsewhere in the country?

Clare Mailer: I was heavily involved in pulling together the Tayside-wide prison discharge and homeless prevention protocol, which covers Dundee, Angus, Perth and Kinross and, more recently, Fife, and which is very much about getting into the prison early on and having a dialogue about prison leavers to ensure that we know who is being discharged and when, and to allow us to plan accommodation for them. All four authorities hold fairly regular surgeries with prisoners to plan accommodation, to consider some of the issues that you highlighted and either to arrange for mediation or reopen negotiations with their families—if that is where they are returning to—or, for those with tenancies, to liaise with colleagues in neighbourhood or tenancy management services to ensure that we can sustain and maintain those tenancies for the duration of the sentence.

From our point of view, the prison protocol has been working exceptionally well. I do not have very up-to-date figures, but I think that in one year we had 72 emergency homeless presentations from Perth prison. Prisoners who had been released were arriving on our doorstep and all that we could do was respond with emergency accommodation. The following year, we had three

such presentations, which represented a significant reduction.

The prison discharge protocol is also useful, in that it enables us to return people to the local authority that they have come from. If a prisoner from Dundee is released, the Dundee staff come in and we can reconnect the person with accommodation in the city.

15:15

Perth prison has been good at rolling out a community-interface schools programme. Officers from the prison go out to schools to deliver a programme that is similar to the one about homelessness that we just talked about. They try to demonstrate the futility of a life of crime and to distinguish fact from fiction in relation to prison life, so that young people get an insight into the daily operation of prisons. Perth prison has also been good at bringing classes into the prison to have a look round, and the prison has delivered sessions to some of our young homeless customers, which have been successful. A lot of good work with the prison is going on.

Michaela Smith: In Edinburgh, we commission a service to deliver advice in prisons—the service is based in the prison. There are links with the local authority, and in the run-up to a prisoner being liberated a housing officer will meet the person regularly.

When we were setting up protocols with our community justice authority, we found that such services are not necessarily cost effective for some local authorities, given the number of people who come back to their area. We might be able to pursue the issue through the hubs and consider how we can pick up on advice more collectively across local authority areas.

Jenny Marra: Are council homelessness officers taking the list into Perth prison and getting people to sign a declaration that they have not abandoned their property but are on remand? Clare Mailer said that presentations reduced from 72 to three in a single year. How did that happen?

Clare Mailer: There were 72 emergency homeless presentations in one year—I do not have the figures in front of me but 72 is the number that is in my head. People were being released from prison and just turning up on our doorstep. We now operate surgeries. A member of my team goes into the prison for one afternoon a week, and Fife Council, Dundee City Council and Angus Council take the same approach, so there is active engagement and we are aware of what is going on.

There are still presentations, but we have a planned approach rather than a reactive, emergency approach. We know that a prisoner is going to be released on a particular day and we can plan our response in advance of their release. Often, our response is about homelessness prevention. In the past, we did not have the list and there was no dialogue with the prison, so we did not know who was being released and when. Now we have the information and we go into prisons regularly.

Jenny Marra: Are all the councils using the list and managing to prevent tenancies from being abandoned?

Clare Mailer: I think that a far greater proportion of the prisoners who leave Perth prison are dealt with by Dundee City Council than are dealt with by my council and Angus Council, but I think that the answer is yes. We work closely with other councils—there is a meeting on Friday to consider some current issues.

Grant Mackintosh: The brand-new Low Moss prison, in Bishopbriggs, has just opened, which is an issue for some of the west housing options hub members and East Dunbartonshire Council, in particular. I have had involvement that is similar to what other panel members have described—I have probably pinched some of the protocols used by Fife Council and Perth and Kinross Council. We have established a new protocol, which is very much about the communication flow from Low Moss prison.

I am not aware that Barlinnie prison or Greenock prison supplies East Dunbartonshire Council with a list, but we have low numbers. There might well be inconsistency across the country.

Janeine Barrett: We have two lists—

Jenny Marra: Yes.

Janeine Barrett: I think that the list that Jenny Marra refers to comes from Saughton prison. It shows everybody who is held on remand or who has received a custodial sentence on that day. The following day, the list hits benefit teams, so that all benefits stop. That list hits the Department for Work and Pensions and its purpose is to ensure that people who are incarcerated are not paid benefits.

We have access to the list. North Ayrshire Council, East Ayrshire Council and South Ayrshire Council pay for a housing advice post in Kilmarnock prison. When the list is released to the prison and the DWP every day, we automatically pick up who is in prison from North Ayrshire, South Ayrshire and East Ayrshire. We look at whether people have council or private sector tenancies, at how long they are in for and at whether we can prevent them from having to give up their tenancy.

First, we speak to prisoners about their intentions for their tenancy—we ask whether they want to hold on to it. If they can do so, we assist them to do that. That is not an issue for someone who is in prison for fewer than 13 weeks, because they will be paid housing benefit. We liaise with benefit teams to let them know that someone is in prison, so that people do not come out to rent arrears.

If a prisoner is serving a sentence of more than 13 weeks, we look at whether we can sublet their property for them. We ask whether they have anybody to sublet the property to or whether they are happy for us to try to find somebody to sublet it to, so that they can still have it when they are discharged from prison. If we can sublet a property, that is fine.

Some people say that they do not want to return to a tenancy or that they have nobody to sublet a house to, because it is not in an area where it can be sublet. In such cases, we will say that the prisoner should end their tenancy so that they do not accrue arrears, because they will not want to come out of prison and be in rent arrears. Instead, we will pick them up before they are discharged—as other authorities do—and run their homelessness application so that they know where they will go when they are discharged and what temporary accommodation they are to go into. They will have another housing option at the end of that.

Did I talk about the list that you meant?

Jenny Marra: Yes.

Annabel Goldie: I have three short questions. One aspect that concerns me is that, if I were 16 or 17, I think that I would find it pretty bleak to be referred to as homeless, which has a negative connotation. Should we adopt a more positive description, such as "home seekers", albeit that people might go down various routes before achieving their objective? Should we do more for young people in how we categorise them? I am not implying that all the witnesses should be made redundant—heaven help us; the future would be even bleaker if that happened—but I feel that we are not getting the ethos and the culture right.

I know that, in emergencies, sometimes young people must be put in mainstream hostels. Is that a good or bad thing?

We have heard evidence from young people that they feel that stigma attaches to them because of the position in which they find themselves and the way in which they are classified. Can we do more on that front? Janeine Barrett described a very interesting example of befrienders for young people who are now in accommodation. Do we need to think imaginatively about adult fosterers or something—I do not know—to help young people in the difficult transitional stage? At the moment, young people go from care and a reasonably stable environment into what can be the wide unknown. Some of them might benefit from a more personal relationship.

Janeine Barrett: Some local authorities are doing adult fostering. I know about South Ayrshire Council's perspective on that, but my local authority does not have experience of it. Does anybody have direct experience of that?

Michaela Smith: We are looking into the idea.

Janeine Barrett: South Ayrshire Council has piloted adult fostering not just for young people who come out of care but for very young people who present as homeless for the first time. The council has managed to get a group of carers who are willing to live with young people and mentor them through the homelessness process—I do not know how it has managed to do that, because we struggle to get foster carers. The approach has been successful and has produced good long-term outcomes, although it has operated for only a couple of years. I do not know enough about the project; I have a wee paragraph about it that I will give to the committee, but I can get more information from South Ayrshire Council about it.

The Convener: Thanks for that. Does anyone want to comment on those points?

Grant Mackintosh: I agree that we want to prevent 16 and 17-year-olds from both becoming categorised as homeless and becoming homeless. That is certainly the way to go, particularly if we regard ourselves as corporate parents. With our protocol in East Dunbartonshire we try to ensure that a looked-after and accommodated 16 or 17-year-old does not go down the homelessness route. Although that occurs occasionally, by and large we prevent it. It would be a good idea to expand such approaches.

Another approach is that of having young people's champions, whereby senior managers, heads of service or even strategic directors take responsibility for individuals. Perhaps because of the numbers, the approach may have to start with looked-after and accommodated children, but there is no reason why it could not expand in the fullness of time to cover all 16 and 17-year-olds. The thinking behind the approach is that, in effect, the young person should get a bossy parent—they are like one of our own children. That is the way to go in this area. For throughcare in particular, if a young person gets a bossy parent involved who is one of the heads of service, they should find that things happen. There is always the danger of obstacles and things not happening as quickly if the bossy parent is somebody lower down who does not have the responsibility or clout. As I said,

I believe that the idea of the young people's champion could be expanded.

I agree that we should not put young people into mainstream hostels, but I regret to say that, because of the shortage of resources, it still happens, often when there is a crisis. We could try to prevent it through pathway plans, by ensuring that when the need arises housing is at the table at an early stage. However, we can never eliminate crisis. If a crisis occurs, the only type of accommodation may be, regrettably, a mainstream hostel, based on vacancies arising, rather than more suitable accommodation with support. However, we will move the young person in such situations as quickly as we can.

There is no question but that stigmatising of young people occurs. The position is improving in that regard, but it is still very much in the early stages. I referred earlier to what Denny Ford from Who Cares? Scotland did, which is a good example of how we try to educate tenants. I think that quite a lot of tenants would be affected if they saw young people from their own area on television explaining how they were lonely and isolated, and how they were making noise because they were away from their friends. Also, educating young people who get tenancies about what a tenancy entails has an impact, even in relation to simple things such as how to turn on the boiler.

Young people are sometimes ready to become a tenant, but I would say that the vast majority of 16 and 17-year-olds are too young for a tenancy. It tends to be 18-year-olds who are ready to be a tenant, assuming that we put in the right support, which must be comprehensive.

I hope that that has answered some of Annabel Goldie's questions.

The Convener: Do any of the other witnesses want to comment?

David Goldie: I agree that "homelessness" is a loaded term that has a lot of stigma, assumptions and prejudices attached to it. Assumptions are often made about young people as well, so I suppose if you put the two things together you have a double set of assumptions around youth homelessness. Unfortunately, I cannot think of a different term to use, but there are issues about how we use the term "homelessness".

Michaela Smith: I have a couple of examples. We are looking at options to extend foster care placements into adult support placements, where that would be suitable for the young person. We have also just set up supported lodging and are looking at how we can make payments to kinship carers to enable families to keep that contact. Again, it is about looking at different options.

The City of Edinburgh Council has a corporate parenting leadership group that promotes corporate parenting for young people coming out of care and the idea that it is the responsibility of all of us to do something with them. The members of the group are at a very senior level, but it is about feeding the message down to all levels of staff. The important point is that corporate parenting perhaps needs to go beyond care leavers and apply in general to all the young people who come to us. By "us", I mean all the services that we work with, not just housing services. It is the responsibility of all of us to ensure that young people are okay. In most circumstances, that is what we would do if we encountered a young person—or anybody else—who needed help.

Certainly, I think that the point about the term "homeless" is very important. The term is not helpful for anybody, but it is particularly unhelpful at an age when someone is just setting out in life, because of the message that it sends to them about where they go from there. It takes a hell of a lot of confidence building to pull someone back from that. The point is really important.

15:30

Clare Mailer: I agree with the points that have been made. In terms of youth homelessness, "young home seeker" is a much more friendly and acceptable term. There is stigmatisation with homelessness, particularly for young persons who have been through the care route.

Annabel Goldie also asked about placing young homeless people in hostels. Unfortunately, that happens in emergency situations. Mixed provision hostels are absolutely not the place where we want 16 and 17-year-olds to be accommodated—even if it is for just one or two nights—because they are very vulnerable, and certainly very vulnerable to the influences of other residents within that type of provision. That needs to be avoided wherever possible.

John Finnie: Last week, we heard from a number of young people. A young gentleman, Matthew Friess, drew our attention to the fact that being a recipient of disability living allowance prevented him from having throughcare support. The committee has received information from the Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum on the importance of support at such times. That individual case will be dealt with, but will the panel comment on the importance of support and the wider implications of the benefits attack that is taking place?

The Convener: Would Janeine Barrett like to kick off on that?

Janeine Barrett: I have never heard about DLA preventing access to services before. I have not heard of it happening in North Ayrshire or East Ayrshire, where I worked previously.

Welfare reform is terrifying because of the impact that it will have on young people's lives—because, in short, it will not be possible for young people to access the private rented sector. There are huge issues about underoccupation and about non-dependant allowances, which could lead to more homelessness. It is worrying that the first place where cuts will be applied to people who are above thresholds is housing benefit, which means that temporary accommodation may no longer be an affordable option. We need to look at how we cut the provision that we are delivering in local authorities, which means that we will no longer be able to deliver some of the projects that have been really successful.

There are very few positives on the horizon, when it comes to welfare reform. The one positive—which I picked up on in a report—is around the transfer of the community care grant and the social fund to a localised system. That could have a really beneficial effect for our young people—our most vulnerable people—who are moving into tenancies for the first time, because we will have a better local understanding of what people's needs are and how money can be best utilised. At the moment the system is very arm's length, and we do not know who is applying for funding or who is getting funding and at what levels. We will be able to direct funding locally, to where we think it is needed most. I cannot see any other positives coming out of welfare reform.

David Goldie: I cannot add anything to what has been said.

Grant Mackintosh: I have not heard about the DLA issue being a problem in the west; it has not been raised with me. I have not come across cases where support has not been provided. Ordinarily, support is provided, so I cannot answer that question.

As has been said, there are very few positives around welfare reform in general. Councils have a big focus on welfare reform. It is clearly exercising our minds, from chief executive level all the way down. Anything that can be done will be done, but it is clear that individuals' income is being reduced and that there is, in effect, a one-bedroom penalty if accommodation is underoccupied. Our stock is predominately two bedrooms and above. Builders do not tend to build a lot of one-bedroom accommodation, so we are not even at the bricks-and-mortar stage of putting in the foundations so that one-bedroom accommodation can quickly come on the horizon. There are a lot of worries about that, in particular for young people, as that tends to be the accommodation that they require. Hence, we may be forced to look at shared accommodation, which has its own issues.

Clare Mailer: I have not heard about the DLA issue. I echo the comments that have been made on welfare reform. We are all concerned about the impacts of welfare reform on accommodation, particularly for young people. A lot of good work is going on in most local authorities in terms of welfare reform mitigation activities.

Perth and Kinross Council has a list of around just under 500 single people waiting for one-bedroom accommodation, of which there is a severe shortage. With welfare reform, access to the private sector is going to be further hindered. That is why we are considering measures such as flatshare schemes. We have real concerns about the provision of that size of accommodation.

Michaela Smith: There are two issues around welfare reform. One is that it is giving us more contributory factors that might result in homelessness; the other is that it is taking away some of the options that we can provide people with that can help them to resolve some of those problems. Those, coupled with the current economic climate and the restrictions in benefit, compounds the problems. Some of what are deemed to be the softer sides of the service—some of the advice, early intervention and support work—are the ones that are under threat, even though they are the ones that can make the biggest difference with the smallest amount of funding or input. Those factors pose a serious risk to the progress that has been made in terms of housing options, housing advice and homelessness over the past decade.

The Convener: I thank our witnesses for coming along and giving us their evidence.

15:36

Meeting continued in private until 15:45.

Members who would like a printed copy of the *Official Report* to be forwarded to them should give notice to SPICe.

Available in e-format only. Printed Scottish Parliament documentation is published in Edinburgh by APS Group Scotland.

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.scottish.parliament.uk

For details of documents available to
order in hard copy format, please contact:
APS Scottish Parliament Publications on 0131 629 9941.

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000
Textphone: 0800 092 7100
Email: sp.info@scottish.parliament.uk

e-format first available
ISBN 978-1-4061-9145-5

Revised e-format available
ISBN 978-1-4061-9162-2

Printed in Scotland by APS Group Scotland