



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

## Official Report

# INFRASTRUCTURE AND CAPITAL INVESTMENT COMMITTEE

Wednesday 1 October 2014



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**INFRASTRUCTURE AND CAPITAL INVESTMENT COMMITTEE**  
**22<sup>nd</sup> Meeting 2014, Session 4**

**CONVENER**

\*Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*Adam Ingram (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)

\*Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)

\*Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)

\*Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)

\*Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Janine Barrett (Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers)

Councillor Jimmy Black (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

David Bookbinder (Glasgow and West of Scotland Forum of Housing Associations)

Julie Hunter (Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers)

Silke Isbrand (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Gavin Whitefield (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives)

Andy Young (Scottish Federation of Housing Associations)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Steve Farrell

**LOCATION**

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)



# Scottish Parliament

## Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee

Wednesday 1 October 2014

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:31]*

### Homelessness

**The Convener (Maureen Watt):** Good morning and welcome to the 22nd meeting in 2014 of the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee. I remind everyone to switch off their mobile phones and other electronic devices as they affect the broadcasting system.

Agenda item 1 is on homelessness in Scotland. As part of our inquiry we will hear from local authority and housing association representative groups. I note that the Equal Opportunities Committee has recently undertaken a short inquiry around youth homelessness and produced the report, "Having and Keeping a Home: steps to preventing homelessness among young people". Today, Alex Johnstone will act as rapporteur for the Equal Opportunities Committee, of which he is also a member.

I welcome to the meeting Janine Barrett, principal officer for homelessness, and Julie Hunter, housing strategy manager, from the Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers; Councillor Jimmy Black, chair of the homelessness prevention and strategy group and Silke Isbrand, both of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities; David Bookbinder, director of the Glasgow and West of Scotland Forum of Housing Associations; Andy Young, policy manager, Scottish Federation of Housing Associations; and Gavin Whitefield, portfolio holder for housing, Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers.

I will start the questions. Can you make some general, brief comments on the impact that the abolition of priority need has had on the outcomes for homeless people?

**Gavin Whitefield (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives):** It is fair to say that councils have risen to the challenge in addressing the abolition of priority need and the introduction of the housing options approach. We have seen positive outcomes as a consequence, which is referenced within both the SOLACE and ALACHO submissions, which cover a lot of common ground.

We recognise that it is early days and many challenges remain, in particular the impact of welfare reform and future funding. We need to

ensure that we clearly illustrate and demonstrate positive outcomes through the framework that was introduced as a consequence of the regulator's report earlier this year. We must also cross-reference and link positive outcomes through the preventative approach within the single outcome agreement. There is work to be done.

Moving forward, there are opportunities to build on the partnership approach, which is an excellent example of the preventative agenda as recommended by the Christie commission. There is a real commitment across all council services to address that, along with our community planning partners, and I am sure that we will see continued progress as we move forward.

**Councillor Jimmy Black (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities):** The implication of the old legislation was that it was acceptable to allow single people and childless couples to be on the street. It also meant that we had to waste time trying to assess whether someone was in priority need; instead of looking at their needs and finding out what we could do for them, we had to work out whether they were entitled to a service. An unnecessary area of complication has been removed, and we are now able to get on with helping people.

The approach seems to be working. The fact that, according to yesterday's figures, homelessness appears to be coming down shows that there has been no massive mushrooming of homelessness applications. In general, therefore, the abolition of priority need has not been a problem, and it has enabled us to focus on the real needs of individuals. Indeed, the prevention approach that Gavin Whitefield has outlined is absolutely central to housing options.

**The Convener:** If no one else wishes to comment, we will move on to specific areas of discussion. Adam Ingram has a number of questions about intentionally homeless decisions.

**Adam Ingram (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP):** Intentionally homeless applicants are not entitled to be rehoused in settled accommodation. However, even though, as Councillor Black has just pointed out, the number of homeless applications is falling, the number of people classified as intentionally homeless is rising. What is the explanation for the increase in the number of intentionally homeless people?

**Julie Hunter (Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers):** I can respond to your question to some extent.

There has been a rise in the proportion of people found to be intentionally homeless, but that is because we now apply the intentionality test to a much larger group of people who apply as homeless in the first place. When we had the

previous priority need test as a hurdle that people had to get over to access a service, people who were found to be homeless but not in priority need were not then tested for intentionality. It stands to reason, therefore, that the abolition of priority need has led to a slightly bigger proportion of people being tested and found to be intentionally homeless. I do not think that that is a surprise to people, as it had been heralded as a likely outcome of the abolition of priority need way before we ever had the 2012 homelessness target.

**Adam Ingram:** In that case, how would you respond to the Govan Law Centre's comment in its evidence? It stated:

"It is pretty clear that treating people as intentionally homeless is being used as a way not to offer a service to vulnerable people".

**Janine Barrett (Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers):** I do not think that that is accurate. I think that intentionally homeless households across all local authorities are being offered services. They are being given access to integrated support assessments and packages, and we are providing temporary accommodation up to the point of resettlement.

The homelessness statistics also show that a number of intentionally homeless households are moving into settled accommodation. Initially, we move them into short Scottish secured tenancies, but we hold on to a number of households until we can resettle them in private sector accommodation. It is no longer the case that intentionally homeless households are simply walked away from when the decision is made; local authorities are continuing to work with them to get the best housing outcome that we can get and to ensure that they have access to the appropriate support.

**Councillor Black:** I doubt that anyone would say that the intentionally homeless provisions are completely satisfactory, but the fact is that we still have fairly extensive duties to help intentionally homeless people. For example, we still have to provide them with temporary accommodation and give practical help and advice to ensure that they can find suitable accommodation.

One anomaly is that, as far as I understand it, the housing support duties that we brought in a couple of years ago do not apply to intentionally homeless people. However, I think that they still receive support from councils' agencies and registered social landlords.

It is not the case that intentionally homeless people get no service at all, but we need to look at the situation. The statistics that were published yesterday show remarkable variation between some authorities. My authority—Dundee City

Council—is down at 1.2 per cent of people being assessed as intentionally homeless, whereas another authority is up at 22 per cent. Every case would bear examination to work out why that is the position.

The figures do not necessarily mean that people are using the intentional homelessness provisions deliberately to prevent people from getting a service, but that could happen. It is important to understand the reasons for the variance. I have no doubt that we will look at that in the homelessness prevention and strategy group in the coming year.

**Adam Ingram:** The concern is out there, so we need to bottom out and sort out the issue. I was interested that you said that the situation does not mean that intentionally homeless people do not have access to services. It would be interesting to find out the outcomes for people who are classified as intentionally homeless and whether those outcomes differ from those for people who are classified as unintentionally homeless. Do you have evidence on that, or could you provide it?

**Janine Barrett:** We could probably look at the issue. If the information is recorded through the HL1 system, we will have the outcomes. We could ask the Scottish Government to take a wider look at the HL1 statistics so that we can compare the outcomes for intentionally homeless households with those for unintentionally homeless households. I think that the information is available.

**The Convener:** I say to the witnesses that they do not have to touch their microphone consoles, as the microphones are operated for them here—I know that that does not happen in councils.

**Adam Ingram:** I am sure that the committee will want to monitor the issue, so I would appreciate any feedback that the witnesses can provide.

**Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab):** I want to explore the benefits of the housing options approach and how it has developed in the past few years. What have some of its practical benefits been?

**Councillor Black:** I will begin, and my colleagues who have better technical knowledge can fill in the gaps.

The housing options approach is all about preventing homelessness—preventing the crisis. In the past, we dealt with a crisis when it arose. When people told the housing department that they were homeless and had no house or that they were to lose their house in a couple of weeks, we had a problem in solving their difficulty.

The housing options approach is not just for homeless people; it is for anyone who needs housing advice and assistance. It means that people can be caught early and plugged much

earlier into other council services or other services that they require, to prevent a crisis from happening. Homelessness is a crisis and people should not get to that stage.

I hope that the housing options approach will develop to include all council services, and perhaps the integration of health and social care will help with that. The figures show that people often cite their mental health or physical health as a problem that led to their homelessness, as well as other factors. If other council services intervened earlier, they could prevent a crisis from happening.

The housing options approach is crucial. It enables people who might have little understanding of the local housing market to get expert advice about the options. In some rural areas, the options might be few and far between; urban areas might have housing associations and councils, a number of options within them, and the private rented sector. It is important that housing options providers have good knowledge of the local housing market so that they can plug people into something that will prevent them from ever getting near becoming homeless.

10:45

**Janine Barrett:** The approach has completely changed the way that local authorities think and the way that we respond to our customers. We have gone from being process driven and driving people down a homelessness route to being far more holistic when we consider people's needs.

The housing options approach is far more person centred, and it empowers people to make choices. Because people are invested in the choices that are made, the opportunity for sustainability of accommodation is far greater. We are therefore reducing the risk of repeat homelessness and repeat crisis in the future.

**Gavin Whitefield:** It is recognised that authorities are at different stages in addressing the matter. The introduction and development of the regional hubs is very welcome. They will share best practice and ensure that we are all operating to the highest standards and that we look not just at narrow housing solutions but at solutions that involve other council services and, indeed, partner services, including the voluntary sector and the health sector.

**David Bookbinder (Glasgow and West of Scotland Forum of Housing Associations):** The culture change on housing options that colleagues have talked about is steadily happening within the housing association sector, as well.

Historically, the process has been pretty automatic—Janine Barrett referred to it, and

automatic is a good word to use. Essentially, somebody would apply and they would have a legal right to go on a housing association's housing list. That is what happened: there could be as little as a 10 or 15-minute interview to check circumstances.

The housing options approach is really making a difference. In Glasgow, for example, the approach is being rolled out to pushing on 50 housing associations. That will happen steadily over the next couple of years, and it is making a difference for people. They do not fester on a housing list when they have no real chance of housing; instead, their current circumstances are looked at. They may well end up registering on the list, the common housing register or whatever, but there is not a blind approach that says, "Never mind your current circumstances; you can go on the list."

The approach has really changed, and the difference is probably in the casework. Instead of giving someone advice on a current housing problem, the housing officer in the housing association may well take a casework approach and try to sort out the problem. There could be a housing benefit problem, a problem in the private rented sector, or a family issue. The approach is really changing how associations deal with applications, too.

**Mary Fee:** I think that the point was made that the integration of health and social care could perhaps be beneficial. I suppose that that could be expanded on as you progress, as it is more likely to pick up more vulnerable groups, whether they are people who are suffering from drug or alcohol abuse, people who are leaving hospital or young care leavers. I would be interested in your thoughts on how that work could be progressed to support people who are leaving prison. Could you see the approach being developed to work with partner organisations such as the Scottish Prison Service?

**Julie Hunter:** Yes. In the west of Scotland hub, which I am a member of, there is certainly a bit of dedicated work now—[*Interruption.*]

**The Convener:** We will have to suspend the meeting for a few minutes, as there seems to be a problem with the sound.

10:48

*Meeting suspended.*

11:16

*On resuming—*

**The Convener:** I reconvene the meeting after that unfortunate suspension. Everything should be

working and we do not need to press any buttons for the sound to work. Is that right? *[Laughter.]* We all have our fingers and toes crossed. Mary Fee was asking about the housing options approach.

**Mary Fee:** Yes, we were talking about support for people who are leaving prison.

**Julie Hunter:** Yes, and I was about to say that a good example of what is done in the hubs is that we look at what happens when people come out of prison. Beyond that, in our hub we are looking at what happens when people go into prison. We are taking a close look at how we can be more effective at supporting and advising people as they go into the prison estate in order to prevent homelessness when they leave it. That is one of the themes that we are looking at in the west hub and it is tied into a bit of work that is being done at a national level. One of our colleagues in that hub is representing us on the national group.

I had a bit of a chat with Janine Barrett during the suspension, and the issue that probably taxes us the most is the number of people who are in homelessness and staying in temporary accommodation who then go back into prison, usually for short-term sentences—they go in for a few weeks and then come back out and present again. We need to find much better ways of supporting those individuals and work on the best means of doing that as they go through that process.

It is quite clear that, for people who are in prison for the long term, the services that wrap around those individuals when they come out of prison are generally of a pretty high standard. There is an issue around people who are in prison for very short stretches of time, who lose the momentum that they might have gained. We might have done a lot of work with someone to resettle them and, through support, to get them ready to move into the community, only for them to get sentenced again and go back to prison.

You are absolutely right—it is an area that we need to focus on more effectively. However, the opportunity that we have been given through the hub arrangement is enabling us to focus on that area in a way that we could not have done before.

**Mary Fee:** Could that work be rolled out across all the hubs?

**Julie Hunter:** Yes. Periodically all the hubs come together in a single meeting, which provides a really good opportunity to share the practice that is developing.

**Mary Fee:** That is very interesting. Does anyone else want to comment on that specific issue?

**Andy Young (Scottish Federation of Housing Associations):** I can give the committee some information on the national project that was

referred to—it is the ministerial group on offender reintegration. The project is looking at a whole range of services for prisoners, one of which is housing. I believe that Perth prison is being used in the pilot for it and that will involve colleagues from the Perth and Kinross hub.

**Mary Fee:** That is interesting. Thank you for that.

I want to talk a bit more about young people. This committee and the Equal Opportunities Committee have heard evidence to suggest that the housing options approach is not always the best way to deal with young people. It does not always produce the best outcome for them. What problems do local authorities and RSLs face in dealing with young people, who quite often have complex needs when they become homeless or get into circumstances in which they need support? Young people leave home for a number of reasons, such as family breakdown or drug or alcohol misuse, or it might be that they have left care.

I would also be interested in your thoughts on the definition of intentionality and the effect of intentionality on supporting young people who are homeless.

**Councillor Black:** One of the things that has gone wrong today is that the people from the housing options hubs did not turn up for the committee's informal briefing session earlier this morning. I am sorry about that, because it would have helped to give the committee a really good understanding of how the housing options hubs work. I think that there are five of them, and they are all a bit different—their practice is different. They bring together the practice in the 32 local authorities, and some of them are further ahead than others.

In the hub in Tayside, there is a focus on helping young people—there are people who are expert in that role. By going to the housing options service, a person should get plugged into the other services that they need. A young person who turns up for a housing options interview should be directed to the social work service, the community work service or whoever it is that they require to help them and provide the support that they need. There is the housing support duty as well, which is written into legislation.

It is probably not right to say that housing options is not the best approach for helping young people. It is one way into the services. If a young person is leaving care, they should be under the corporate parent of the local authority. The local authority should therefore be providing support, and there should probably be someone with the young person when they seek advice about housing. In fact, arguably, if they are leaving care,



they should not be anywhere near the homelessness system, because they are not homeless; they are simply moving into the next stage of their lives. If they are getting into the homelessness system, something has gone wrong. I know that some local authorities do it that way, but it is not a particularly good way to do it.

As with any other group in society, the housing options approach ought to fit young people. Janine Barrett could probably provide more information about the way in which housing options hubs work, which might replace some of what the committee would have heard this morning had the people from the hubs turned up.

**Mary Fee:** I suppose that my concern is that the reality is not what you have said should happen. We have heard that young people who leave care end up homeless—they should not, but they do. There is not a continuum, in which they leave care, move into their own house and all the support is there. Although there may be areas in which there is best practice and young people are plugged into all the support, the evidence that we have heard is that the system is too fragmented. Improvements need to be made so that support is automatic. It should not be the case that if a young person is in one local authority area, they get it, and if they are in another, they do not. Young people are falling through the safety net.

**Janine Barrett:** The housing options approach is about far more than housing options. As I said previously, it is about taking a holistic look at the needs of an individual. It probably serves young people better than it serves anyone else because of the access to services that it gives them, regardless of whether they have come through care or from the family home.

One of the first things that we consider is the best interim arrangement for the young person. Local authorities now recognise that the last thing that we want for young people is for them to be in homeless accommodation, as that makes them more vulnerable than they already are. Even prior to being approached by young people, we are trying to do quite a lot of work to get the message out to them about the realities of homelessness and how to access housing services. We are also considering the issues that a young person presents with at the point of approach. First, we determine whether or not they would be best placed back in the family home. If that is the case, we look at using mediation services and family support services to ensure that we can keep them at home, prevent them from becoming more vulnerable and get them on to the appropriate housing waiting lists.

In addition, we recognise that, in cases in which young people cannot stay at home—there are a number of young people who just cannot do so

because of the circumstances in the family home—we need to consider different models of accommodation for them. We need to speed up the processes as soon as possible, so that their lives are not unsettled.

That is where the housing options approach comes in. It ensures that we take into account factors such as employability and not just a young person's financial resources but their social resources, the equity that is available for them, where they have their support networks and how they are linked in with extended family members or friends who can provide the assistance that they require and who can help them continue to develop in their lives rather than stand still. That is what housing options does. It allows for a far wider assessment than was ever carried out before, and it links people in with services.

I note the point about care leavers and the fact that practice varies across the country. For a number of years now in the local authority for which I work, young care leavers have not gone down the homelessness route. That is because we are working with young people while they are in care, and we are doing the housing options work at that point.

We recognise that, even though some young people are in care, they still have an element of social equity in certain communities. We are trying to link them in with housing in those communities so that we can ensure that they are not vulnerable and that they can be successful as they go into their adult lives.

**Julie Hunter:** It is absolutely right to allude to the additional challenges for young people. There are a range of new challenges, some of which have come about through the welfare reforms, which affect the options that might be available to young people. We should not shy away from that. Those challenges have created additional difficulties.

Within the hub networks and through the sharing of good practice, we are talking to one another about what has been tried in different areas that has worked, whether it can be replicated and whether we might consider something similar in our own areas—withstanding the fact that it is not possible simply to translate something that has worked in one place and ensure that it will work everywhere.

For instance, we are considering flat-sharing options, as long as they are supported. There is a good level of recognition that one of the reasons why many tenancies fail for young people is just how isolated they feel. We are therefore considering different types of tailored support. In North Lanarkshire, Barnardo's delivers housing support to young people when they move on, and

it delivers pre-work with young people in our children's houses. Such services are available.

However, we cannot overlook the fact that, even having gone through the process, some young people will fail. The difference now is that they can come back into services. They can come back to us and tell us that things did not work out, for whatever reason, and we can go on providing them with services until things work out. That has been a real change over the past 10 or so years in how local authorities and their partners respond to young people.

There are huge challenges for young people, which may increase. Some of the options that we might offer adults cannot be offered to young people because they will not be suitable for them, and the shape of the stock that might be available in an area might not necessarily suit them.

We need to do more to support young people to sustain a home. It does not need to be a local authority home; it could be in the private rented sector. The issue is to ensure that there is a bit of support for young people to go along with whatever offer of accommodation they get.

11:30

**Councillor Black:** We clearly have a big challenge coming up. We are hearing from the Conservative Party conference that there might be a proposal to stop housing benefit for 18 to 21-year-olds. I urge the Conservatives to think that proposal through very carefully, as it could have some difficult unintended consequences for people who are in the situation that we have been describing and for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

It is worth pointing out that young people who have had no contact with the social work department and who fall out with their families in one way or another are hard to help, because the department and the council have no background on them and do not know much about them and because the young people might not know much about the services that the council can provide.

The homelessness prevention and strategy group had a presentation from Shelter's safe and sound project, which happens to be based in Dundee but which Shelter hopes to roll out more widely. That project seems good at plugging young people into the services that are available.

The work at housing options hubs is skilled. I know that the committee has heard from the Scottish Housing Regulator, which has pointed out that not all hubs are as effective as each other. It is still early days, everyone is still learning and best practice is still being shared.

I imagine that, if I was a young person who went to the council and I heard Janine Barrett say, "We'd like to get you back to your family," I might panic and not want to go back to the family where I had been abused or whom I had just completely fallen out with. A young person might go away and say to all their friends, "All they want me to do is go back home—they're no use." That would be a complete misconception because, as Janine Barrett said, the intention is that we will provide a range of services and try to find a solution for the young person. How we communicate with the people who use our services—whether they are young, middle aged or old—is important.

The homelessness and housing situation is complicated—it involves understanding a new market. In any city or other part of the country, the housing market is complicated. Unless someone has been exposed to it before, they will not necessarily understand it easily.

When people go to the doctor, they forget half of what they are told and, when they go to any council service, the risk is that they will also forget half of what they are told and go away with a misconception. People might go away without realising that they are entitled to temporary accommodation and that, if they are entitled to it, there is usually a way of paying for it.

How we communicate with the people who come to our service is hugely important. I would write things down, so that people can look at the points later and remember what they have been told. Those are simple, basic things. We must spread the good practice. The national guidelines that are coming on housing options will help, and we support their introduction.

That was a bit of a ramble. To get back to young people, I think that it is important to get things right. If committee members are aware of examples of poor practice, it would be helpful to draw those to the attention of the relevant local authorities, which would want to respond.

**Mary Fee:** Will the continued sharing of good practice and the national guidelines be enough to improve practice? Could something else be done practically to make the situation better for young people?

**Councillor Black:** We need to survey our customers and do the market research. We need to find out from people who have used our services how they found the experience. Janine Barrett has something to say about how we are involving service users in quality control.

Organisations such as Shelter also have a role to play. Years and years ago, I worked for Shelter. We used to force local authorities to do their job by threatening to take them to court or taking them to court. I hope that those days are over, because

local authorities now have a much better attitude to homelessness. It is accepted in local authorities that providing a good homelessness service is part of the culture and part of our duties. I am not aware of any local authority that is kicking against that.

However, it is good to have external scrutiny because, if somebody tells Shelter that they had a bad experience and if Shelter shares that with us and helps us to work through it, we can improve things. We need to understand our customers' experience, but a wee bit of external prodding from agencies such as Shelter and citizens advice bureaux does us no harm.

**Janine Barrett:** Within the hubs, we are examining the issue of service user involvement consultation. In the west hub, which I represent, we have developed a service user involvement empowerment framework. It involves a move away from the old system of having someone fill in a questionnaire to find out what they think about our services. Instead, it means that we ensure that our customers are integrated into how our services are developing. That means that we are trying to collect the customer voice throughout the journey and are taking that a stage further by developing them into a group that can be consulted when we are developing policy, procedure and strategy.

Within the west hub, we have recently undertaken our first peer review of another local authority. That was really interesting, because it involves developing and sharing good practice. We used that service user group to undertake the mystery shopping element of the exercise. The learning that came from that was probably the most powerful part of the peer review.

**Gavin Whitefield:** The national monitoring network, which is currently developing, will also have a role to play in identifying trends and authorities that are outliers for parts of their performance. Also relevant is the developing agenda on benchmarking, which will enable us to focus on where there are differences in performance that should be reviewed with a view to improvement. That should support the spread of best practice.

**Silke Isbrand (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities):** In addition, there is a formal structure for the sharing of best practice in the form of the annual conference that brings together the hubs. That has been regular and on-going. It is always an intensive day, with strong commitment from everyone, including those on the political side. Further, the homelessness prevention and strategy group brings together COSLA and all the organisations that are represented at this table. It has dealt with individual cases around which there have been concerns, and those cases have been quickly taken up to COSLA's executive group,

which brings together elected members from the 32 authorities.

There is a structure that ensures that any concerns are moved up quite rapidly, and there is a formal structure for the sharing of good practice.

**Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP):** I want to ask about the effects of welfare reform on the duty to provide settled accommodation for all unintentionally homeless households. Reading through the written evidence, I was struck by a statement in ALACHO's submission. It described that duty as

"A difficult task at the best of times, made all the more challenging by the worst recession since the thirties, and some of the most regressive welfare reforms ever enacted."

How has the diversion of resources to mitigate welfare reform impacted your ability to implement the homeless legislation?

**Councillor Black:** Getting the settled accommodation is not quite as hard as getting the temporary accommodation. Perhaps Julie Hunter would like to say more about that.

**Julie Hunter:** There is a correlation between the two issues. There are people who are staying longer in temporary accommodation because they are telling us that they cannot accept an offer of accommodation that has an extra bedroom. That might be the only permanent accommodation that is on offer in that area, and people would previously have taken it, but now they are deciding to stay in temporary accommodation. The issue affects not only those who are currently unemployed but those who lack security in employment and fear that, in the future, they might not be in a position to pay for that extra bedroom.

The recent change with the Scottish Government's offer of full mitigation has assisted. However, that is guaranteed only for this financial year. Although we hope that there will be a guarantee in the future, people are reluctant to count on that.

**Gordon MacDonald:** Is the supply of temporary accommodation growing or reducing? Is there enough temporary accommodation to cope with the fact that people are staying in it for a longer time?

**Julie Hunter:** There are a couple of difficulties with temporary accommodation. Some areas, such as mine, did not divest themselves of available stock for temporary accommodation. They recognised that we needed to keep it because, although there were fewer numbers presenting, there was a higher number of people presenting who were taking up the offer of temporary accommodation. About 85 per cent of all those who present to us need that temporary

accommodation and they need it for longer, so those areas held on to their supplies.

The next difficulty is how we will fund temporary accommodation given the caps, the thresholds and the changes to funding as universal credit is rolled out. ALACHO did a piece of work in conjunction with the homeless prevention strategy group to look at the impact on councils' revenue. Through a very detailed process of building up the evidence on what it costs to provide temporary accommodation, we concluded that there will be a minimum funding shortfall of about £25 million.

Local authorities around the country are trying to plan for that potential conflict. It has been difficult to do that. How are we going to balance the books, especially with the continued drive for good-quality temporary accommodation that has all the facilities that people require and, at the same time, the on-going issues relating to making efficiencies and the squeeze that is likely to come as a consequence of welfare reforms?

**Gordon MacDonald:** You talked about a £25 million funding shortfall for temporary accommodation. If the proposal to remove housing benefit for 18 to 21-year-olds comes about, which Councillor Black mentioned, what impact will that have, especially on young families?

**Julie Hunter:** The impact of that does not bear thinking about. We need only look at the shift in the profile and the characteristics of homeless people, especially those who are staying in temporary accommodation. Increasingly, those people are younger and from working-age households. A lot of them are under 35, including many under 25. There is a huge potential for homelessness to be created in a way that we have not seen for a number of years. There is a limit to how much local authorities and their partners can support individuals who do not have any income. A good example of that has been the rise in recent months of people who have been sanctioned, particularly young and vulnerable people, which has an impact on their ability to retain their status in their family. A lot of families are fragmenting not because they do not want to pull together but because, frankly, the impact of the reductions in income on family households creates additional strains and some families are struggling to cope with that.

The announcement was made only a couple of days ago and we do not have any details. One would want to assume that there would be safeguards for young people under the age of 25 who have children or who have come out of care for example, but until we see the details, it is difficult to know. If it is blanket policy that anyone in that age group is not entitled to housing benefit, that will have a hugely significant impact, because it will potentially affect people who are in settled

homes in their communities. Without the detail it is difficult to work out, but it sounds as though the impact will be devastating.

**Andy Young:** The number of housing benefit claimants aged between 18 and 21 without children is nearly 7,000.

**David Bookbinder:** I presume that a decent proportion of those would be in low-paid work. We do not always hear about that, as there is a sense that people are in work or out of work. However, I do not know about younger people, but I think that the figure nationally is that almost 50 per cent of people who are on housing benefit are in work.

11:45

**The Convener:** We have kind of moved on to temporary accommodation. Mark Griffin has some questions on that, so we will take them now.

**Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab):** How has local authorities' use of temporary accommodation changed, if it has changed at all, since the abolition of priority need and the expansion of the housing options approach?

**Janine Barrett:** As Julie Hunter said, the stock profile has stayed the same for the majority of local authorities, but what is being discussed in hubs and what seems to be happening is that local authorities are recognising that we need to change how we deliver temporary accommodation and the support mechanisms that go with it. That is because we are responding to a different client group from the one that we had 10 years ago. Our clients are far more complex now than they ever were before. They have far higher levels of addiction and mental health issues and they have high-level support needs, but some of the models of accommodation that we have do not necessarily meet their needs.

We have to balance that with the available resources and, obviously, the impact that welfare reform will have. A high proportion of local authorities are considering models of temporary accommodation.

**Gavin Whitefield:** A linked issue is that one means of relieving the pressure on temporary accommodation is, obviously, to increase the supply of good-quality affordable housing for rent. Councils are doing their utmost, working with housing associations, to increase that supply. My authority has a plan to build 1,150 new homes by 2020, and that programme is making good progress. That is an important factor that will link in with the development of temporary accommodation and will relieve the pressure on that. As we have heard, people are staying longer in temporary accommodation because of the impact of welfare reform and the limited choices,

but another reason is the limited supply of good-quality affordable housing.

**Julie Hunter:** I will touch on the remodelling. Mark Griffin is absolutely right to allude to that. As Janine Barrett touched on, there is a sense that, because the client group has changed, the profile of people who are staying in accommodation has changed. We need to guard against a rush to create large-scale hostels again. In Scotland, we have been successful in getting rid of those, certainly in Glasgow and even in my area. We took steps to remove large-scale concentrations. Especially for people with very complex needs, a return to that is the last thing that we want. However, the welfare reforms that are coming down the line appear to be pushing us in that direction again.

Given the balance between having to provide services and the huge constraints and pressures on the available resources, it would be tempting for some councils to just go back to having those big hostel environments and somehow find a way to manage them financially. However, that would be extremely damaging. In Scotland, we must resist any pressure to do that and we must find other more innovative ways of managing with the stock and resources that we have.

**Councillor Black:** Somebody will correct me if I am wrong, but I think that, even if there is no money to pay for temporary accommodation, we still have a duty to provide it. We have to provide accommodation that is practical for someone to live in. That will give local authorities a big dilemma in future. If we are faced with homeless people who have no income and no way of paying for the service that we are going to give them, how do we pay for it?

A second point is that a lot of the money that we bring in through the rents that we charge for temporary accommodation goes on staff. For example, we have a unit in a tenement in Dundee where there is 24-hour supervision and support, because the people there have fairly high support needs. It is difficult to pay for that kind of thing if the amount of money available to pay for the temporary accommodation decreases, but that brings other problems, because you may not be able to put those people into that accommodation, and then what do you do with them?

The other issue is the quality of temporary accommodation. We have worked hard to bring the quality of temporary accommodation up to a high standard, but if you take away the income that pays for it—through welfare reform or any other means—it is more difficult to maintain that high standard of temporary accommodation.

However, there are things that we can do to move forward and be a bit more imaginative. In

some authorities, the temporary accommodation is one size fits all. It may all be furnished rented accommodation, but that does not always suit people who have some furniture or who cannot afford to pay the higher rent that furnished accommodation attracts. We need to be flexible about the kind of accommodation that we provide, so that it fits the families.

We must also look at the length of time that people are spending in temporary accommodation—six months is not untypical, and a year is, sadly, quite common as well—and ask ourselves whether that makes sense and whether there is a better way of doing it. I do not have the better way but, as a politician, I get to ask the questions and my colleagues get to provide the answers.

**Mark Griffin:** We have spoken about the stock profile of local authorities remaining the same, but the Scottish Housing Regulator's report found that some local authorities had reduced the provision of their own properties for temporary accommodation. How widespread is that practice among the 32 local authorities, and how will it impact on their ability to provide temporary emergency accommodation?

**Janine Barrett:** It will differ across the 32 local authorities, depending on the reducing levels of homelessness. North Ayrshire Council was one of the first local authorities to start reducing homelessness, because we were one of the first authorities to embrace housing options, so we went from 1,800 homeless presentations a year down to 700-and-something presentations a year, but we reduced our temporary accommodation units by only 40. We ensured that we had left enough leeway within our temporary accommodation, first because we did not know whether things would switch back and we would need that accommodation again or whether the reducing levels were an onward trend that would continue. We were glad that we had taken that decision because of the impacts that Julie Hunter has mentioned, because we now need that accommodation for more clients who will be there for a slightly longer period of time.

**Mark Griffin:** You have touched on different models of temporary accommodation. Are there any alternative models that could work, and would Scotland benefit from their introduction?

**Julie Hunter:** Around the country there will be a range of accommodation at local level to meet different types of needs, and that is as it should be. Housing markets vary around the country, so that is what we would expect.

Over the past few years we have developed environments that are more conducive to young, vulnerable people. Most local authority areas have

one or more smaller supported accommodation places for young people. We have also moved away from putting people in a concentrated place and towards having more floating support services, so a lot of us commission floating support services from expert specialists in the field to support young people when they are accommodated in their own communities.

There is a good mix of approaches, and there will be varying degrees of success with each of them, depending on local circumstances. There is a definite push for more intensively supported accommodation, which we need in small environments rather than large-scale environments, and that is something that we have not quite managed to achieve.

We usually have a selection of different accommodation environments; some types are more suited than others to young people, and we need more of them. Our local authority has a temporary accommodation strategy, which we refresh annually, looking at all the different factors that affect it. We are just about to renew the strategy once again because the client group has changed and so has the complexity of need that many people bring when they make a homelessness application. The question of how we will fund all that remains a perennial challenge for us.

**Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP):** Good morning, and thank you for your patience. I have a question for SOLACE, although I would welcome contributions from other witnesses.

SOLACE's submission acknowledges the Scottish Housing Regulator's position that all potentially homeless households receiving housing options should also make a homeless application. However, it states:

"many local authorities suggest taking homeless applications from people who do not need them is neither a cost effective use of local resources, nor is it necessarily in the best interests of households who neither want nor need to be identified as homeless or potentially homeless".

What was the thinking behind that statement? Are you looking at changes to the reporting system for homelessness applications, or do you think that we should measure the risk and incidence of homelessness in other ways?

**Gavin Whitefield:** The rationale behind that statement is that such a position would involve reverting back to a mechanistic approach to the statutory process of assessing and determining homelessness, rather than looking at each case on its merits and, through the housing options approach, providing a full range of preventative measures in support. We would be reverting back to a system that everyone recognised was not working as well as it could be.

Having said that, I believe that it is important that there is an effective system of monitoring and reporting on outcomes and the introduction of the framework following the regulator's report. That is a positive step towards providing the type of information that should assure councils, partners and service users that the system is working and is producing better outcomes, rather than going through the mechanistic approach of simply recording applications for the sake of it.

**Jim Eadie:** Are you against the recording of applications per se, or simply saying that it should not be the be-all and end-all?

**Gavin Whitefield:** We are stating that not every case requires a homelessness application. If someone comes looking for assistance and support, the first priority is to provide that rather than go down the route of an application.

**Jim Eadie:** Is there not a danger that you would end up underreporting the incidence of risk of homelessness?

**Gavin Whitefield:** As I mentioned, that should be covered through the framework and the information that will be produced from it; I understand that the first reports should be available in the not-too-distant future. That information should, as I said, assure councils, service users and partners that the system is working and delivering better outcomes. We are not in the business of trying to suppress demand or to present figures that are not accurate.

**Jim Eadie:** Is that view shared by all the witnesses?

**Councillor Black:** I send to housing options interviews people who come to my surgery who are not homeless and are nowhere near being so. Their current housing arrangements are not suitable, but they are not homeless by any stretch of the imagination.

If a homelessness assessment was completed for those people, it would completely skew the figures. It would also mean that we would be able to send only people who were homeless or threatened with homelessness for a housing options interview.

The housing options approach is meant to be preventative, so we have to get in before people become homeless or threatened with homelessness. There is a danger that such an approach would distort the whole system.

I believe that anyone who comes in and says that they want to apply as homeless, even if the person on the other side of the desk does not think they are, should have the right to fill out a form and be assessed. However, we would change the nature of the housing options approach if we insisted that everybody who went to a housing

options interview had to fill out a homelessness form. That would be absurd.

12:00

**Jim Eadie:** Do we have a consensus about that across the panel? All the witnesses are nodding.

**Janine Barrett:** Homelessness is considered as part of housing options, and it has to be presented to every person who approaches us for housing options advice. People clearly understand that they have the right to make a homeless presentation. However, people choose not to. That is not about local authorities deliberately steering people away from homelessness. There is no concern about taking a homeless presentation if that is what the customer chooses.

**Julie Hunter:** I do not see why there needs to be any conflict. The regulator alluded to the prevention of homelessness guidance that was jointly produced by COSLA and the Scottish Government in 2009, which clearly said that there does not need to be a conflict. A housing options interview is an advice service that is complementary to the homelessness system, if you like.

The homelessness system has not gone away; it is still sitting there, and the services are still provided. The housing options approach is a much broader, more diagnostic approach to dealing with whatever issues an individual might present to us, and it includes the option of going through the formalised process of completing a homelessness application. It does not need to be one thing or the other: it can be both.

We would wish to reinforce that fact in the developing guidance, making it clear for any authorities that have made an assumption about that—I do not know that any of them have—that the two things are complementary, and they are not in conflict.

**Jim Eadie:** Your point is well made. The reason why we are even having a discussion about it—rather than simply accepting what is a commonsense, flexible approach—is the position of the Scottish Housing Regulator. Am I right in saying that? Do we all agree that guidance is the best way of providing the clarity that we need on the issue?

**Julie Hunter:** We have reached the point in the development of housing options where guidance would be the right thing. We initially embarked on the process around 2010, and I remember the very first event, held in Edinburgh, which brought together all the different partners to talk about housing options. It was clearly expressed at that event that the last thing that local authorities needed was more guidance, more regulation and

more prescription about how they do their business. It came over loud and clear that authorities want the freedom and the space to develop the services.

We should bear it in mind that the homelessness services were in place and that they are still intact. That has not changed. We are now developing an improved process that sits around the homelessness service.

It is recognised that, two or three years in, as we have begun to develop things, it is probably the right time now to develop guidance. We have some coherent guidance that we can put together, and we have also developed something of a national training framework. That would not have happened without the freedom in the early period of the development of housing options. Now is the right time to bring forth guidance to support some authorities that have perhaps lagged behind a wee bit.

**Jim Eadie:** Your organisation and COSLA are both working to develop the guidance through the working group. Could you give us a brief summation of where that work is at?

**Julie Hunter:** The progress has been very encouraging. A detailed draft has already been prepared, and we have a further meeting later in October when it is hoped to finalise the draft. The intention is certainly to present the work in draft to the next meeting of the homelessness prevention and strategy group, and there will be an opportunity for a number of other stakeholders who have an interest to comment on it. In fact, there will be an opportunity prior to that for some of those other stakeholders to comment.

The draft is quite firm and we are pleased with it. There has been a lot of consensus about how we have built it. I am confident that it will meet all the requirements that the regulator set out and more. It will be a valuable resource for local authorities.

**Councillor Black:** When the homelessness prevention and strategy group assesses the guidance, the test that I will apply will concern when people know whether they have done their job. If the guidance says that they have done their job when they have ticked a number of boxes, that will not do. We want it to say that they have done their job when somebody finds settled accommodation. That is about outcomes, and that is how Julie Hunter and her colleagues have written the guidance.

**Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):** We have covered some of the subjects that I wanted to cover, but when we spoke about housing options we skirted over gate keeping. Without mentioning any names, a number of stakeholders have blamed some local authorities

for using the housing options process as an opportunity to do a bit of gate keeping. Are there examples of that? What is your response?

**Councillor Black:** When I first heard about the housing options approach in Dundee, I was not in administration there, and I was extremely suspicious and cynical about it. I thought that it sounded like a way of avoiding our duties to homeless people. I am now completely convinced that I was wrong, partly because we are in administration, which provides a different perspective.

The approach is good, innovative and imaginative, but it could be used for gate keeping. In some local authority offices, that might have happened, but we need to ensure that it does not happen. That is what all the good practice stuff, the guidelines and the work that our group and our colleagues have done is aimed at preventing. It is also why we need people to scrutinise the approach locally. If a local MSP who dealt with somebody at a surgery did not get satisfaction from a local authority on that case, I would be interested in hearing about that, as I am sure my colleagues would be.

**Alex Johnstone:** Have we dodged the bullet, or have we not dodged it yet?

**Councillor Black:** Bullets are always flying around. Gate keeping could easily happen because, given that local authorities are under pressure to meet targets and so on, it is always tempting to find an excuse to put somebody in a marginal case one way instead of another.

It is important that we have the good practice guidelines and follow them. We have our job to do, which is laid down in statute. I am keen for us to fulfil our responsibilities and obligations. I think that my colleagues would all agree that, if anyone is gate keeping, we must stop that, one way or another.

**Julie Hunter:** Absolutely—I agree wholeheartedly. Before the housing options approach was adopted, gate keeping happened in some instances and some places. Despite intensive support and training for people, there will always be somebody who does not quite understand the instruction that they are given.

It is certainly not any local authority's intention to gate-keep. The prevention guidance that I mentioned contains the clear statement that our intention is to develop preventative services that do not gate-keep. Our west of Scotland hub has developed a joint protocol that sets out our ethos. The protocol states clearly that the housing options approach is about not gate keeping for services but focusing on the individual and getting the best outcome for them. Instances of gate keeping will probably still occur but, through the

hubs, the regional joint work that is being done, the sharing of good practice and the development of the comprehensive training toolkit, at least we have the opportunity to get to as many people as we can who deliver services.

The lead must come from the top in local authorities. We must ensure that senior managers understand the approach and that that filters down through the organisation. Nobody would suggest that gate keeping has never happened, but it is nothing new that has been brought about by housing options; gate keeping has always been a feature of the system that people have encountered.

**David Bookbinder:** Another element of the scepticism about the housing options approach two or three years back was the question: how can we have a housing options approach when most people do not have many options? We were preoccupied with thinking about people moving and did not appreciate the extent to which a proportion of people—by no means everyone—could stay where they were with the right support. We all thought about what options there were for people to move—the private rented sector and not much else in some cases—and we underestimated the extent to which it was possible to support people to stay where they were.

**Alex Johnstone:** What role do RSLs have in the delivery of the housing options approach at the moment, and could they do more to participate in it?

**David Bookbinder:** The approach began with homelessness prevention and, therefore, was embedded in local authority practice. I can speak only for Glasgow and the west of Scotland, where real steps are being taken to roll out the approach so that anyone who applies for a house from a housing association—indeed, anyone applying for a transfer, in some cases—can have the benefit of it.

It really is a case of doing something differently. A year or two ago, you might have heard one or two of our members or the SFHA's members saying, "Well, we kind of do it already," but our members have realised that it is quite a different way of doing things. The notion is spending up to an hour with somebody—or more, if need be—rather than 10 or 15 minutes, to examine their current situation and consider the options. That really is happening.

At its best, that happens when there is a really well co-ordinated approach that, ultimately, takes the lead from the local authority, with all its experience of starting the process a number of years back. A significant amount of training is usually needed for housing officers and lettings



staff within associations, but the benefits are significant.

There are challenges. For a small association suddenly to be spending that long with people who it would previously have spent only a few minutes with requires some realignment of services. Quite apart from the benefits for the individual, many associations will probably start finding that they do not get the same applicants coming back every month asking about their applications—which, to be frank, are probably not going far in many cases—because they have been dealt with properly at the outset.

It really is a win-win situation, but we should not underestimate some of the challenges for smaller landlords.

**Alex Johnstone:** Is it possible to assess the landscape throughout Scotland and say whether that is the experience or whether there are specific problems in some geographical areas?

**Andy Young:** The feedback that we get from both sides is, without exception, positive. When we speak to local authority colleagues, we hear that the relationships on the ground are fabulous throughout Scotland.

The other assistance that RSLs can give relates to the fact that they provide not only social rented properties but mid-market rent and full market rent, too, so they can get involved in all sorts of different ways. In Glasgow, they have talked about setting up a local lettings agency through the housing options approach.

There are many ways in which RSLs can get involved, but they have fully embraced the housing options concept.

**Councillor Black:** RSLs are now diverse. They might be involved in a local lettings initiative, but, with what they used to call a wider role, they could also be involved in an employability project or any number of different kinds of voluntary activities.

People become homeless for many reasons, not only to do with the lack of a house. Therefore, it may be that, by involving RSLs, we can plug people into services that would otherwise not be available. There is a project in Dundee called making money work, which helps people to get through the early stages of employment when they have not yet been paid and do not have any of the clothes they need. It does financial inclusion and budgeting work. It may be that RSLs bring more to the table than just their houses.

In the early stages, there was a certain level of grumpiness between RSLs and local authorities. An authority would refer someone to an RSL as homeless but it would say, "Oh, we don't have any houses this week; take them back." That is still going to happen because the housing market is

complicated and there are all these different providers, but the system seems to be working much better. RSLs are co-operating well with local authorities, and local authorities seem to have a better understanding of what RSLs are able to provide. Yes, things are much better than they were.

**Alex Johnstone:** Thank you.

12:15

**Gordon MacDonald:** In evidence to another committee, the Legal Services Agency raised a concern about a crisis in provision of temporary accommodation in Glasgow. It says that it has been advised that that is because the council is unable to obtain permanent accommodation from RSLs. It goes on to say:

"whilst the local authority may have a duty, they do not have the wherewithal to meet the duty."

I heard what Councillor Black just said about the relationship between councils and RSLs, but how well are they working together to ensure that permanent accommodation is available for homeless households, especially in places such as Glasgow, where the council has no housing stock? On a practical basis, how could that working relationship be improved?

**Councillor Black:** The council's duty is to provide settled accommodation; it has never been to provide settled accommodation in a council house, but there has been a level of misunderstanding about that over the years. There are people here from Glasgow who can give you the exact answer to your question.

**David Bookbinder:** I do not see that there is a problem with the relationship at all. There is a willingness on the part of the housing association sector in Glasgow to make its contribution. However, Gordon MacDonald is right that stock transfer made things much more complicated. We have one larger association and 40 to 50 smaller ones, and the process needs quite intensive management and co-ordination. We do not want to get into a situation in which a referral goes to an association that might have 15 or 20 lets a year. We have to have the right marriage, if you like, between a referral, the stock, the turnover and the rate of turnover of a particular association. That needs a lot of co-ordination.

What we have seen in Glasgow in the past year or two is excellent co-ordination of the housing options approach. As long as we can get a similar input of co-ordination, which has a resource implication, to harness the stock of associations, we will see fine tuning of the system that is probably needed to make sure that stock can be maximised.

If you think about it, the situation is complex. An association that has 15 lets a year might want, if there is a void, to be able to offer it. The initial impetus would then come from the housing association, which would be able to say that it has an available property. The system could be a void-led system and a demand-led system that would react to demand from the council.

Those are complex issues and a little bit of ironing-out is needed, but I certainly do not have any sense that there are problems with the relationship in Glasgow. I am sure, however, that some fine tuning is needed.

**Julie Hunter:** North Lanarkshire has largely got around some of the technical difficulties because we have a common housing register. We also now have a common allocation policy with our RSL partners. To put that into context, of the 46,000 social rented houses in the area, 80 per cent are owned by the council and 20 per cent are owned by RSLs.

We would never expect our RSL colleagues to pick up an undue share of people requiring housing. However, because we have commonality of approach, we have been able to ensure that we are prioritising people consistently. That means that whoever has a vacancy when a person needs a house offers that vacancy. That has been a beneficial outcome of developing the CHR for the clients. They need to go to only one office to apply and to speak to someone about their options, rather than having to go around perhaps 15 different places.

**Janine Barrett:** North Ayrshire has a common housing register and a common allocation policy. We have set the same targets for homelessness across all social rented housing, which means that if we need to increase the target, the RSLs will increase their target at the same rate, and if we decrease it, they decrease theirs at the same rate. This arrangement works well for homelessness.

The arrangement also works well from a housing options perspective. We have a lot of good examples of joint working between the RSLs and the local authorities to find outcomes for specific individuals who may be threatened with homelessness within two or three months, without their having to reach a crisis.

**Adam Ingram:** I want to talk about housing support duty and regulations. I understand that revised guidance has been published recently. What impact has the housing support duty had on the provision of support for homeless households, and is there any scope for improved practice?

**Janine Barrett:** The majority of local authorities were providing housing support before the duty was even discussed. The majority of local authorities are probably providing far higher levels

of support than the duty directs us to provide, not only because we provide support to intentionally homeless households, but because we go far above and beyond the support needs that the guidelines deal with.

There is room for improvement. There are challenges that we have already discussed around budgets, welfare reform and how we continue to resource our services. However, we recognise that the integration of health and social care may present opportunities to ensure integrated access to wider support provision.

**Adam Ingram:** Councillor Black mentioned that at the outset of the meeting. Do you want to add to that, councillor?

**Councillor Black:** The housing support duty does not appear to have dropped a bomb into the whole system as some people predicted it would. I remember some fairly unexpected predictions that whole teams of new staff would have to be taken on, but that was always a misapprehension. The duty has made us understand our obligations to homeless people better. It has ensured that other parts of the council and other voluntary organisations that provide services locally get involved in a way that they might not have before. Housing support is not just the housing department's job anymore—it belongs to everyone. That change is absolutely crucial. For example, there is a doctors' surgery in Dundee that is able to provide an advice session at the citizens advice bureau for its patients. At times someone has to prescribe something that the housing department may not be able to provide.

A lot of practical things need to be done. It is fine to give somebody a house, but if there is no furniture in the house, and they have no way of getting any, it is no use to them. Such practices have gone on and they may still go on. We have to try to make sure that the furniture, the electricity and the help that they need to actually live in a house and sustain a tenancy are available to people. That support might be social or it might be practical. It might be welfare benefits advice, or it might be a mentor who can help the person get through a specific situation.

People are different, everyone is an individual, and that is why the support duty is good. Having to assess people's individual needs is good because there is more chance that we will provide the service that they require.

These are still early days. The new guidance will help, and the guidelines are going to develop. It is all very much bound up with the integration of health and social care. If we get this right, it will make a huge difference. If we get it wrong, it will just be depressing.

**Adam Ingram:** I take it that it is all part of the personalisation agenda, as well. Janine Barrett mentioned earlier that housing options is a person-centred approach. Do you detect a difference between how people are supported going through the housing options route as opposed to the homelessness route?

**Janine Barrett:** I think that the assessment is slightly different because there is not a statutory responsibility to do it, but it is still being done because that is part of the housing options approach. The housing options approach is about looking at more than what the housing support duty says; it involves asking what the person requires and what their needs—not just their housing needs, but their needs as a whole—are. If someone requires assistance with budgeting, money management or debt issues, referrals will be made to the relevant agencies. If it is recognised that someone will require housing support on resettlement, that will be organised. The issue is not just the housing outcome, but sustaining the housing outcome to ensure that people do not become homeless again in the future.

The assessment is being carried out and services are being provided. We intend to pick that up in the guidance, to ensure that the same approach to carrying out the assessment is adopted across the country.

**Gavin Whitefield:** It has been mentioned that in many cases the housing support duty regulations are being exceeded, but I emphasise that the challenge is the funding pressures that local government and public services generally face and their ability to sustain the services. Everyone is absolutely committed to the personalisation agenda. We recognise that it is a case not of finding narrow housing solutions but of providing the full range of services that cover all aspects of the support that individuals and families require. Given the financial outlook and the requirement to make savings, it will be a challenge to sustain and protect those services, but if that does not happen, the cost—in both human and financial terms—will be much greater in the years to come.

**The Convener:** Mention has been made of keeping temporary accommodation stock, but the pressures on the housing stock in general still exist. David Bookbinder said that it is extremely important that we have a more person-centred approach and that we do not just park people on waiting lists. However, in an ideal world, a person-centred approach would mean that people did not stay on waiting lists for so long and waiting lists came down. The pressure on the housing stock means that you are not really making an impact on the waiting lists.

**David Bookbinder:** It will be interesting to see whether the roll-out across housing lists of the housing options approach, which began in the homelessness system, has an impact. If lists in some places are full of people who, realistically, do not have a great chance of getting housing, we would like to think that a more proactive approach to looking at what they can do about their housing situation might well take them off that list and lead to their having their problem solved elsewhere.

As national housing representative bodies, we all have a reservation about using waiting list figures, because we are all conscious that the extent to which they are a true representation of acute housing need varies from one case to another. Therefore, although we use those figures, we do so nervously.

In theory, the housing options approach should have an impact on the waiting lists in that it will mean that they will be a truer representation of people who are in real housing need. I think that the shortfall will still be there for all to see, but if we can reduce it by assisting people who must have an option somewhere else or in their current situation, that will help.

**The Convener:** When might we be in a situation to assess how the housing options approach is working?

**David Bookbinder:** In Glasgow, for example, the roll-out programme for the housing options approach will take a good two years. It would be nice to think that, during that period, we might get a better sense of the impact on housing lists, but that does not mean to say that we should take our eyes off the ball when it comes to making as much new provision—in both the social rented sector and in other intermediate tenures—as possible. We know that we must still do that.

I would like to think that we might, in two to three years, get a more realistic impression of levels of need among people on the housing lists. The same goes for local authorities.

**The Convener:** I take it that all local authorities and RSLs are now covered by a housing options hub even though, obviously, they are at different stages and you are going to try to roll out best practice.

**Julie Hunter:** Yes.

**The Convener:** What kind of timescale are we talking about before, as we hope, everybody is working to the best standard?

12:30

**Julie Hunter:** As I have mentioned, we as a group feel that we are probably at the best stage to develop guidance, because everybody has at

least jumped on the train; some are still way at the back, and the guidance will help to bring them forward. It is difficult to cover all 32 local authorities but when I go to hub leads meetings and when we meet in our regional groups, I get a really strong sense of commitment and a strong enthusiasm for the approach. I sense that people are saying that their job has improved because they can assist people, when previously they felt that they were just turning people away and saying no all the time.

All of those things as well as the development of training and support for people who deliver services are moving us along and we are starting to see improvements on the ground. In North Lanarkshire, for example, we feel that we are already starting to see improvements. That is illustrated in our waiting lists, which have come down by about 2,000 over the period that we have been promoting housing options and servicing people in that way.

However, it is early days, and we would not want to say that the housing options approach has had a definite impact, but there are signs that, if it is implemented properly and people are supported to deliver it, it will have an impact. At the same time as our general waiting lists have reduced, we have had a continuous reduction in homeless presentations. The sense that that is because of gatekeeping and because people are getting lost somewhere is not really borne out because, if that was the case, they would pop up somewhere on the waiting list. It is early days and we would not want to make claims that we cannot substantiate, but I definitely think that we are on the way.

**The Convener:** You are on the right trajectory, which is positive.

Jim, is there anything that we have not covered?

**Jim Eadie:** We have pretty much covered everything, convener, but I have one more question. Do the witnesses feel that we are getting value for money from the Scottish Government's investment of just under £1 million in the housing options hubs? Do you agree with the suggestion that the hubs should be widened to include housing associations and voluntary sector organisations?

**Janine Barrett:** The hubs are absolutely value for money, and we are achieving considerable economies of scale through the joint working. We now work not only at local hub level but at integrated hub level, and we are not only considering pooling resources for four or five local authorities but looking at how three hubs together can, say, procure training programmes or produce materials to promote services. I would therefore say that the hubs are value for money.

As for RSLs being more involved in the hubs, I think that that journey has already begun. I will let Julie Hunter talk about the west of Scotland hub, because it is hers, but I simply point out that Glasgow Housing Association is one of its partners. I would say that RSLs have become more involved in the past year. We have consistently ensured that RSLs have been kept abreast of what is happening in the hubs, but we now guarantee that we will have at least one annual event that RSLs will be part of. At those events, we identify key streams that RSLs want to be involved in. For example, if we are developing a core competency framework on training, we ensure that RSL partners have access to it; alternatively, if we are developing policies and procedures on housing options, we do that in tandem with RSLs. We carry out key focused pieces of work in tandem with RSLs at local and national level.

The hub that I sit on has two stock transfer authorities, which was a bit of a challenge for us because it was difficult to determine which RSLs would be best to sit round the table with us. We just invited everybody, and the RSLs that wanted to be involved have become involved.

**Councillor Black:** I want to add something about the composition of the homelessness prevention strategy group, which includes the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, Shelter Scotland and HAS—I am trying to remember what that stands for.

**Julie Hunter:** Homeless Action Scotland.

**Councillor Black:** Thank you. It used to be called the Scottish Council for Single Homeless, which is what I always knew it as, but it is now Homeless Action Scotland. HAS provides the strategy group with a consumer viewpoint; the group also gets a producer viewpoint from the SFHA, and it includes the Minister for Housing and Welfare.

All the things that we have talked about today are important to the group and we are trying to drive forward good practice. When we get reports of poor practice, we try to deal with them not on an individual basis—we have not been set up as a casework agency—but by establishing what is going wrong and trying to sort it. It has been good to work together; although we do not all represent the same interests, we all want to achieve the same result, so it has been fine.

We will always try to spread good practice. Indeed, I do not think that we will ever reach a point where we will stop doing so, because good practice is something that you have to keep topping up and because we will always be learning. Housing options in Mr Johnstone's constituency will be different from housing options

in Mr MacDonald's, because the territory—and the available options and landlords—will be different.

We need to be imaginative about how we increase supply, by both building new houses and matching people with the right houses. One of the good things that a housing options adviser can do is to help someone be more realistic about housing choices. People come to me in my surgery and will say, "I must have a semi-detached house with a garden." When I tell them that we have few such houses in Dundee but that we have lots of two-bedroom flats, they say, "No, we can't possibly have one of those. It won't work for us."

We then have to have a discussion about why it will not work, and that is where housing options can come in. Someone with expertise who really knows the housing market and knows what is available in a city can say, "There's no point in holding out for that house with a garden and a gas cooker. You need to think about what you can find in a different area of the city or about a different type of house that might do the same job for you, and you might be housed in six months instead of five years."

That is what housing options can do. It can prevent people from getting to the point of crisis and it can help them understand the market in which they are operating, if you want to put it like that. I do not know whether my colleagues will back me up on that, but I hope that they will.

**Julie Hunter:** I would always support what Councillor Black has to say on this matter, but I would also like to say in response to your query—

**Jim Eadie:** I am sorry, but could I just ask Councillor Black a specific question about the hubs?

**Julie Hunter:** Yes, of course.

**Jim Eadie:** What impact and difference are the hubs making?

**Councillor Black:** You asked whether they are value for money. If you look at the cost of somebody becoming homeless and then having to be taken through all the processes and procedures to be rehoused, you will see that it is phenomenally expensive. It does not take long to get your money back in the hubs, because people are not sitting in their own local authority or district offices. I am familiar with Mr Johnstone's constituency and area of operation, because I used to work for Nigel Don, and I know that different offices have different practices. People can be isolated and things can be done the way they have aye been, but the hubs bring people together and spread good practice at Scottish and regional level to ensure that it gets out to all the local offices.

That is what the hubs are for, and it is important to have that network of distribution of ideas, information and good practice. If we simply discuss things at the homelessness prevention strategy group and then make a proclamation, it will never reach the front desk where people are being interviewed. I think that the hubs are good value for money, and I support them 100 per cent.

**Jim Eadie:** Miss Hunter, I think that you had a point to make.

**Julie Hunter:** I simply wanted to respond to your question about voluntary organisations. Although RSLs are becoming more closely linked to the hubs as part of the development process, voluntary organisations are still a wee bit further down the line. That is not to say that at local level we do not have partnerships that involve voluntary organisations, but they are at the end of the queue for getting plugged into the housing options process.

**The Convener:** Do other members wish to make any points, or do any of the witnesses want to say something? This is your last chance.

**Councillor Black:** Thank you very much for listening to us. It is always a pleasure to talk about housing. People do not always want to talk about it in the pub because it is not the most exciting subject, but it is important and we appreciate the committee's taking the time to hear us today.

**The Convener:** Your evidence will be very useful in our inquiry. At next week's meeting, we will hear from the Minister for Housing and Welfare, and we will take the opportunity to discuss with her many of the issues that have been raised today.

I apologise again for the interruption, which made the meeting a bit bitty, but I hope that we have covered everything. Thank you very much.

*Meeting closed at 12:40.*



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