



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

INFRASTRUCTURE AND CAPITAL INVESTMENT COMMITTEE

Wednesday 8 October 2014

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INFRASTRUCTURE AND CAPITAL INVESTMENT COMMITTEE
23rd 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:

Margaret Burgess (Minister for Housing and Welfare)

Marion Gibbs (Scottish Government)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee

Wednesday 8 October 2014

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:07]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Maureen Watt): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the 23rd meeting in 2014 of the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee. I remind everybody to switch off mobile phones, as they affect the broadcasting system.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on taking items 5 and 6 in private. Item 5 is to allow the committee to consider proposals for future inquiries, and item 6 is to consider the evidence that we will hear on homelessness in Scotland. Do members agree to take those items in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Homelessness

10:07

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is evidence from the Minister for Housing and Welfare on homelessness in Scotland, as part of the committee's inquiry on the issue. I welcome the minister, Margaret Burgess, and Marion Gibbs, team leader on homelessness with the Scottish Government.

Would you like to make an opening statement, minister?

The Minister for Housing and Welfare (Margaret Burgess): Thank you, convener.

It is almost two years since we achieved the 2012 homelessness commitment, which was widely recognised as being the most progressive homelessness legislation in Europe. Since then, we have seen a culture change in the way in which homelessness services are delivered in Scotland. The development of the housing options approach by local authorities has resulted in homelessness services that focus on the individual or family and on securing the best and most sustainable housing outcome. Local authorities have attributed to that approach the continued fall in levels of homelessness in recent years and, importantly, the better outcomes for homeless people.

The Scottish Government has established five local authority-led hubs, which involve local authorities and their partners working together to develop and implement homelessness prevention approaches. The Government continues to support and facilitate the work of the housing options hubs. We are providing £150,000 of on-going support funding for 2014-15 to assist the hubs in continuing to develop strategies on homelessness prevention, including welfare reform mitigation.

We are also committed to continual improvement in the provision of housing options. We are working with our local authority partners and others to develop housing options guidance for local authorities, as recommended in a recent Scottish Housing Regulator report.

Housing support can have a crucial impact in the context of addressing homelessness and sustaining tenancies, particularly among vulnerable groups. Last week, newly revised housing support guidance was published, to assist local authorities as they implement the duty to provide housing support to homeless households, which was introduced in 2013.

More broadly, the experience of the first year of implementation of the duty does not suggest that

there has been a significant impact on the delivery of local authority services. That is because most local authorities were already providing support for homeless households. However, the guidance has developed joint working at corporate level in local authorities and between local authorities and their partners who deliver housing support.

The Scottish Government is committed not only to preventing homelessness wherever possible but to delivering at least 30,000 affordable homes during this parliamentary session, of which 20,000 will be for social rent. I am pleased that, two thirds into the five years, we have delivered 21,322 affordable homes, of which 15,088 are for social rent. That is 75 per cent of our social rent target.

The Scottish Government recognises that progress on addressing homelessness in Scotland has been made against a backdrop of difficult economic times and welfare reforms, which pose a significant threat to future progress. We are committed to working with partners to make an impact where we can do.

Early intervention is key to reducing homelessness. The Scottish Government will continue to work closely with local authorities and their partners to prevent homelessness from occurring.

The Convener: Thank you, minister. What impact have the abolition of priority need and the roll-out of the housing options approach had on homelessness services in Scotland?

Margaret Burgess: As I said, with the abolition of priority need, we have the most progressive homelessness legislation in Europe, under which all unintentionally homeless people are entitled to settled accommodation. That is an effective legal safety net for people who face homelessness. However, our approach to preventing homelessness from arising in the first instance is key to the falling number of people who present and are assessed as homeless. The housing options approach has had an impact.

Local authorities' work with partners has also had a beneficial effect. There is a joined-up approach to delivering support for homeless households. We are not completely there yet—things are not perfect—but the hub approach ensures that best practice can be shared with and delivered in other areas.

The abolition of priority need has had a significant impact.

The Convener: We can look at best practice, but nothing stays the same and the circumstances and number of people who present as homeless change. Two years on, what is the Government doing to review the effectiveness of the 2012 commitment?

Margaret Burgess: Before the deadline, the Government had the 2012 steering group, which comprised key partners and players in homelessness strategy and support. We kept the group—it is now the homelessness prevention and strategy group—to maintain a strategic overview of homelessness in Scotland. The group meets quarterly, and I attend twice a year.

We review the statistics that we get from our current way of recording, and we have developed a new approach to recording, the PREVENT1 return, which will be used from April and will enable us to consider how to provide the best support to homeless households and secure the best outcomes. We will be able to consider whether the preventative approach is delivering in the way that we think that it is doing.

As you said, the situation is dynamic. Things change all the time. We are subject to external issues such as welfare reform—more reforms are coming up, which undoubtedly impact on homeless households in Scotland. The homelessness prevention and strategy group is continually overseeing the situation, and the hubs discuss it regularly. The information is fed out to the regional hubs and to each local authority, and their housing options teams look at the issues, too. The information from them is then fed back and looked at strategically. That is the way that we have to continue to work.

Our work is not finished, and that was recognised when we decided to continue with the group that had expertise. All the key players are now involved in the group—the Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Scottish Government, Shelter, and Homeless Action Scotland. They work well together, with a common aim.

10:15

The Convener: How confident are you that both you and the Scottish Government have a good understanding of the levels of homelessness in Scotland, given the Scottish Housing Regulator's findings that current local authority practice may have resulted in the underreporting of homelessness?

Margaret Burgess: We are aware of the regulator's comments on that issue, and we and the group are looking at it. Together, the current statistics that we have—I cannot remember what they are called—

Marion Gibbs (Scottish Government): HL1.

Margaret Burgess: The HL1 data and the new statistical recording—PREVENT1—will give us a

good overview of what is happening in homelessness and housing support in Scotland. PREVENT1 will record the kinds of support provided and their outcomes. We have taken on board what the regulator said, and the homelessness prevention and strategy group is looking at it. The new statistical recording, which the regulator commented on, will give us a very good picture of homelessness across Scotland.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): Is there anything else you can say to update us on the work that the Scottish Government is undertaking to introduce mandatory data collection? How advanced is that process?

Margaret Burgess: As I understand it, the HL1 is mandatory data collection—those are the statistics that we currently record. PREVENT1, which is to be rolled out 1 April 2015 and will be recorded by every local authority in Scotland, is also mandatory. The group and the local authorities in COSLA have agreed that it is to be mandatory.

Alex Johnstone: Once you have that information, how do you intend to use it? You mentioned looking at the Scottish Housing Regulator's recommendations, but do you feel that you will be able to get a better understanding of, for example, the success of housing options?

Margaret Burgess: Absolutely. We will get a better understanding of the outcomes. We will know whether a family or an individual made a homelessness application, whether they were housed without going down the homeless route, and what support was provided to them—all of that will be captured in PREVENT1. We will get a much clearer picture of what is happening in homelessness and housing.

Alex Johnstone: At this stage, are you able to give any indication of the timescales that will be involved in the loop that you describe? We often we get figures that are one, three or six months or a year out of date. How quickly will the feedback loop work, and how quickly will you be able to act on information received?

Margaret Burgess: I cannot give you that information at the moment, but we can look at that question and get back to you with an answer.

Alex Johnstone: Thank you.

Moving on, the committee has heard evidence to suggest that the housing options approach has not always improved housing outcomes for young people. How can the Scottish Government help to facilitate good outcomes for young homeless people?

Margaret Burgess: The committee also heard evidence that young people are better served with housing options. My view is that young people

should be served better by the housing options approach, because it causes people to look at the individual. They look at the range of housing options available to the young person and, instead of just saying, "Yes, okay, you are homeless" and handing them a set of keys, they look at the circumstances of why that person is presenting as homeless or looking for accommodation.

I have visited a number of projects and spoken to a number of young people who have come through or started on the homeless route. One young girl got a bit of space away from her family in temporary accommodation after her relationship with her father had broken down. She moved back into the family home after a short period of time, as she was keen to move back home and was going to college, but she was planning to get a flat of her own in future with the support of her family. She recognised that she would not have been able to sustain a tenancy on her own. The housing options route can give support in such situations, for example when a bit of space may be required.

There are other examples. Housing options might look at the needs of someone who is perhaps not ready to go into accommodation of their own but who is unable to go back to their family home. Matching people in shared accommodation can give them an opportunity to meet suitable young people to share a tenancy with, because being on their own is not the right option for everyone. All of that can come out through a good housing options interview, and young people should be able to have a range of options and find the one that is most suitable for them. It is not always a question of going down the homeless route.

Alex Johnstone: I agree with the minister. We have heard some strong positives when we have talked to people about that, but we have also heard some concerns expressed. A specific concern was about the housing options route for care leavers. Is there anything that you want to say about that?

Margaret Burgess: My view is that the housing options route should be good for care leavers as part of a planned programme. I do not think that care leavers should be going through the homeless route; they should be going through housing options in a planned way prior to taking up whatever form of tenancy they take up.

We published guidance in line with the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 on housing protocols for care leavers, to ensure that those leaving care are getting appropriate housing support. Where there is good practice, that is something for the hubs to take on board, and where it is falling down we need to improve things. If good practice is not happening, it should be and we need to improve things. The hubs can work

together to identify good practice and to understand why things are not working elsewhere, and they can address the issues and get things right.

Care leavers should get a good, planned service through the housing options approach, not through the homeless route, so that they can get accommodation that is right and suitable for them.

Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP): I will ask about welfare. We have received evidence from witnesses on the impact of welfare reform on housing options. We have heard that the bedroom tax has meant that more homeless people want to wait for an offer of accommodation that is appropriate to their household size, and that the shared accommodation rate for housing benefit claimants in the private rented sector has been extended from those aged 25 and under to those aged 35 and under. Last week, we heard about the high cost of temporary accommodation and changes to the way in which that accommodation will be funded under universal credit, and concern has been raised about the affordability of temporary accommodation in the future.

What has the Scottish Government been able to do, and what will it continue to do, to help local authorities and registered social landlords mitigate the impact of welfare reform on housing options and homelessness prevention work? Has welfare reform made meeting the 2012 target more challenging?

Margaret Burgess: There is no doubt that welfare reform has a huge impact on housing and homelessness in Scotland, and that it has in some ways made it more challenging to meet the targets that we want to meet and take housing forward as we want to. Welfare reform is a standing item on the agenda of the homelessness prevention and strategy group, and it is also a standing item on the agenda of every regional hub meeting. That allows us to look at what is available, what can be done and how the task can be shared.

The Scottish Government has done what it can to mitigate the impact of welfare reform by ensuring that no one should suffer because of the bedroom tax. We have fully mitigated the effects of the bedroom tax in this financial year.

We have also given considerable resources to the Scottish Legal Aid Board for the making advice work project and to Citizens Advice Scotland. We have also provided funding that can be accessed by housing associations and local authorities so that they can give people the best advice to ensure that their income is maximised and that issues relating to rent are identified early on.

More reforms are coming. We have heard recently from the Tory Government in Westminster that it will not give housing benefit to 18 to 21-

year-olds. We cannot pretend that that will not be a significant problem in Scotland. I may say more about that later.

There is a real issue with temporary accommodation and its funding. The bulk of temporary accommodation in Scotland is provided by local authorities and registered social landlords. We are anxious that temporary accommodation should be of the best quality possible. We are aware that temporary accommodation costs more—the maintenance costs are higher because of turnover.

The homelessness prevention and strategy group did a major piece of work on the costs of reasonable, good-quality temporary accommodation. Temporary accommodation is furnished, and the work also took into account how often furniture would need to be changed, how often white goods would need to be replaced, the high cost of maintenance and the cost of any void periods. The work also examined what is available through universal credit and the difference in the cost.

The Scottish Government and COSLA jointly wrote to the United Kingdom Government to point out that there is a real issue: people need temporary accommodation; there is a cost; and there is a shortfall that is partly of the UK Government's making.

We have considered several other areas. As the committee will be aware, we have looked at the standard of temporary accommodation to ensure that any accommodation that is not wind and watertight will be deemed unsuitable. We have clarified that point following representations from Jim Eadie in relation to the Housing (Scotland) Act 2014.

We are doing what we can as a Government, but we recognise that welfare reform will present challenges for local authorities and the Scottish Government that are still to come. The homelessness prevention and strategy group is well aware of the issue—it is an important item on the agenda at every meeting. However, at this moment, we cannot say that we can mitigate the effects of all the reforms coming from Westminster. We will have to wait and see—it might depend on what happens with the Smith commission—whether there will be any leeway or ability for us to do more.

Jim Eadie: I put on record my appreciation of the minister's action and leadership in responding to the concerns that I raised on behalf of Shelter Scotland in relation to making temporary accommodation wind and watertight and the legislation that will be introduced to address that.

I want to ask about the mitigation of the effect of the bedroom tax. At the time of the budget, the

Scottish Government, with the support of the parties in the Parliament, was able to commit funding to fully mitigate the impact of the bedroom tax, but that was only because we managed to persuade the UK Government to raise the cap on discretionary housing payments. Will the Scottish Government be in a position to fully fund the mitigation of the impact of the bedroom tax in the financial year 2015-16?

Margaret Burgess: As the committee will be aware, the budget announcement will be made tomorrow.

In general, the Scottish Government works out its allocations to local authorities to address the bedroom tax on the basis of the Department for Work and Pensions allocations to each local authority area. We do not normally get that information until later in the year or the beginning of the next financial year.

However, the budget will be announced tomorrow and not today, so I cannot answer further.

10:30

Jim Eadie: You mentioned the situation that faces 18 to 21-year-olds, given the proposals from other parties that may or may not be in government after the next election. Has the Scottish Government assessed the impact on homelessness levels of removing housing benefit from 18 to 21-year-olds? I am old enough to remember that a previous UK Government removed 16 and 17-year-olds' entitlement to social security benefits, which led to 16 and 17-year-olds sleeping rough on the streets. Have you done an impact assessment of the likely consequences of removing housing benefit from 18 to 21-year-olds?

Margaret Burgess: The information that we have from the UK Government about who the proposals will have an impact on has been sketchy. It has said that there will be some exceptions such as care leavers, single parents and some vulnerable people, but we do not know quite what that means. The position is unclear, but the proposals could cost up to 12,500 people in Scotland an average of £360 a month, and it could affect children in Scotland.

What is crucial is that the proposals could affect young people who are working and who receive housing benefit without which they could not sustain their tenancy. We are looking at the proposals—the announcement was made only recently—and doing some modelling of their impact. There could be an impact on care leavers, but we hope that all care leavers will be exempt.

There are a lot of imponderables, but we are looking at the impact on people, on homelessness

levels and particularly on young people who are in work and who receive housing benefit to sustain their tenancies. They might not work where they originally lived; they might have moved somewhere else. If their housing benefit is stopped and they are not in a high income bracket, that will add to the in-work poverty that is becoming more of a problem. We are aware of the issue.

Jim Eadie: During our inquiry, some smaller housing associations have highlighted issues with their ability to find the resources that are required to undertake the housing options approach. The concern has been expressed that the additional resources that are required are not as easy for smaller housing associations to access as they are for other registered social landlords. Are you aware of that problem?

Margaret Burgess: I am aware that the issue was raised with the committee as a problem, but many housing associations, including small ones, are very involved in the preventative approach. Many of them run employability projects, some of which are funded by the Scottish Government through the people and communities fund, for example, and housing associations have money advice teams and welfare officers. That might not be seen or recorded as preventative work, but it is part of the work to sustain people in tenancies. In the long run, prevention is cheaper for housing associations.

I would like to look a bit more at why some housing associations feel that they cannot participate in preventative work. All the housing associations that I have visited—and I have visited many, including many small ones—are embedded in their communities and involved in what is going on there. They run projects that contribute to the preventative agenda and sustain people in tenancies.

Jim Eadie: Are you saying that the housing options work is cost neutral and has no financial or resource implications?

Margaret Burgess: I am not saying that the work is always cost neutral, but those who are doing it may not see it as being part of the housing options and homelessness prevention work. Their work involves ensuring that people get assistance with their rent—if they are struggling with their rent—or with other issues. Many housing associations have changed the responsibilities of housing officers, whose work is now much more people focused. That work is all part of the preventative and housing options approach that is ensuring that people maintain their tenancies. I would like to hear more about where housing associations feel that costs are involved, but I think that perhaps we do not always recognise just

what housing associations are doing in relation to the homelessness agenda.

Jim Eadie: So your door is open in relation to any concerns that RSLs have.

Margaret Burgess: Absolutely. My door is always open to RSLs' concerns. We will hear about any concerns when we produce our guidance, on which we will consult housing associations.

Jim Eadie: Thank you.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I have a question about the guidance. In its report, the Scottish Housing Regulator flagged up that not all people who were involved with housing options were offered a homeless assessment when such an assessment would have been appropriate under the homelessness legislation. The regulator recommended that guidance should be produced, and I know that your department has been drafting it. Will you make sure that the approach is consistent across the country following the publication of the guidance?

Margaret Burgess: The guidance is not being produced by my department or my officials, although we are involved in it; the guidance is being produced with ALACHO and COSLA. The process started in June, and a further two meetings have been held since then, with six local authorities in Scotland preparing the first draft in September. That draft is being looked at and redrafted. It will then go out for consultation—as I said, it is important that we involve everybody before the final guidance is produced. Service users, housing associations and RSLs will be consulted so that we get their views and ensure that the guidance will do what we want it to do. We also want to ensure that everyone is aware of it so that it can be consistently applied across Scotland. That is how we intend to proceed with the guidance.

Mark Griffin: Do you have a timescale for completion?

Marion Gibbs: We are currently working on a second draft, on which we will have a meeting towards the end of October, and then we will go out to consultation—the minister just referred to that. We thought that it was quite important not to move to a finalised document before we got the committee's report on homelessness so that we could reflect any recommendations from the committee in the guidance itself. That skews the timetable a little bit, but we think that ensuring that your recommendations are incorporated in the guidance is an important part of the process.

Mark Griffin: Once the guidance is complete and issued to authorities and RSLs, how will you monitor its implementation to ensure that

consistency of approach? Are you also making sure that the guidance will take into account the wider health and social care integration agenda?

Margaret Burgess: The guidance will certainly be required to take into account the wider health and social care agenda. I think that the parties that are involved in producing the guidance are also involved in the health and social care agenda co-ordinating group, so they could pull those elements together. Also, all the other guidance that we have talked about—our care leavers guidance, for example—has to be consistent across the board. It takes time to ensure that consistency but we want to be absolutely sure that the new guidance is consistent with any other guidance that is published.

The homelessness prevention and strategy group will have the overall strategic role of looking at the guidance and giving us—and, if necessary, the committee—feedback on how it is working and operating. When we publish guidance, I always anticipate that other agencies will inform us if they feel that it is not being adhered to. It is important that we get feedback on how guidance is working, not just from those who use it but from those who look at it from further afield.

If organisations that deal with homeless groups—including those in the voluntary sector—feel that the guidance is not working, it is important that we know that. That will be done, however, through the homelessness prevention and strategy group, which has the overall strategic view on homelessness in Scotland.

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning, minister. I want to ask you a couple of questions about intentionally homeless decisions. The latest statistical analysis of local authority intentional homelessness shows that, between April and June this year, there were 391 intentionality decisions, which was a decrease on the previously recorded figure of 479. The statistics also indicate, however, that 10 local authorities have higher rates of intentionality than might be expected. What are the reasons for that, and what work is being done with those local authorities to lower that figure?

Margaret Burgess: We are certainly considering the matter. It is important to note that, overall, only a very small proportion of applications are assessed as intentionally homeless. That figure is reducing. In particular areas, there is perhaps an increase. Aberdeen City Council thought that the reason for the increase may have been people moving there with the anticipation of taking up work but without having dealt with their housing situation before arriving there. I am not complacent about the matter, and we will certainly be looking at it.

Whether someone is assessed as intentionally homeless or as unintentionally homeless, they are still entitled to get the housing options approach, to get the support and options that are available to them and to be rehoused, whether in settled accommodation or in temporary accommodation, until some other plan is worked out for them.

It is not true to say that people who are intentionally homeless get no support from the local authority or from housing options; it is simply that they get different kinds of advice and support. That is appropriate—nobody should be turned away. Local authorities still have obligations for children and young people—they have a number of obligations that they must meet in any case, whether somebody is intentionally homeless or unintentionally homeless.

Mary Fee: Has any additional work been undertaken to reduce that figure in the 10 areas where there are higher rates of intentionality?

Margaret Burgess: The idea of reducing the figure suggests that the people who are being assessed as intentionally homeless should not be getting assessed as intentionally homeless. We would need to have evidence to suggest that that is the case. There is no evidence—at least, I have not seen any evidence—that people are being assessed as intentionally homeless when they are not. We are monitoring the situation closely.

Overall, we should be clear that the number of assessments of intentionally homeless is falling. We hope that that will continue to be the case, and we will certainly look into the matter but, as I say, no evidence has been presented to me to say that people are being assessed as intentionally homeless when they are not.

Mary Fee: Is there any difference between the housing outcomes for applicants in those 10 areas and those of applicants in other local authority areas?

Margaret Burgess: In terms of how the situations of homeless people are addressed?

Mary Fee: Yes—and in relation to the outcome of being given or offered settled accommodation.

Margaret Burgess: The indications are that people in those areas are still offered the housing options—they are given options and temporary accommodation. Sometimes they are offered a short Scottish secure tenancy, or other options are made available to them. The new PREVENT1 tool will be able to capture the outcomes of applications and the advice that is given in a much better way. It is an advantage of PREVENT1 that we will be able to get much better information in that regard.

Mary Fee: Do you expect that the guidance that will be given to local authorities will help to reduce the rates of intentionality?

Margaret Burgess: The guidance on intentionality will remain much the same. However, the homelessness prevention and strategy group will consider that point, and I can highlight it as something that the committee has raised. If there is a view that there is some sort of inconsistency in the way in which local authorities determine intentionality, I am certainly happy to consider that and to ensure that that point is fed into any guidance, so that there is consistency among local authorities and so that they are clear about how to assess intentionality.

Mary Fee: That would be helpful.

A provision in the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003 could be used to change local authorities' duty to assess for intentionality to a power to assess for intentionality. Would there be a benefit in commencing that provision, and what difference would it make?

10:45

Margaret Burgess: I am not sure that it would make any difference. The power would certainly introduce flexibility, and some local authorities could assess more people as intentionally homeless using that. It is important that we have the priority need test, which is the safety net for people who present as homeless, and that we are absolutely clear that, if somebody is assessed as intentionally homeless—which they have the right to appeal—support and advice are offered to them. So we have two things. We have the safety net that prevents any abuse whatsoever of the system and we have the support for people who are homeless for whatever reason. I am not persuaded that changing the duty to a power would help. The issue is about getting it right and getting the consistency that Mary Fee talked about earlier—that is the best way forward.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): The minister talked about the problems associated with the funding of temporary accommodation. Last week, we heard a suggestion by ALACHO that there could be a shortfall of as much as £25 million. We also heard that, even if there is no money to pay for temporary accommodation, there is still a duty to provide it. What is the Government doing to address that potential huge problem that we face?

Margaret Burgess: We absolutely recognise that there is a problem. I have raised the issue with the Westminster Government in every meeting that I have had with it. As I said, we cannot mitigate every single impact of welfare reform, but we are working closely with the

homelessness prevention and strategy group, which is absolutely aware that there is going to be a shortfall and that we cannot magic money out of the air. We need to work with the group to develop a solution so that we can meet the shortfall. We have not yet developed a solution, but we recognise that there will be a shortfall and we are working with the key players to try to get a solution.

That is only one issue—other things are going to come. As soon as we get a solution to one thing, another issue arises. We mitigated the bedroom tax but, as soon as we did that, we had the temporary accommodation issue. We might come to some kind of arrangement on that, but we will then have the issue of housing benefit for 18 to 21-year-olds. We constantly have to deal with the fact that we are not in control or do not have the powers to deal with all the aspects. The powers that we can get to the Parliament through the Smith commission, which I mentioned, can perhaps help. However, we need to ensure that what we do will assist people and will not make the situation worse.

Gordon MacDonald: On trying to save costs, one of the witnesses last week highlighted that it is not unusual for people to spend a minimum of six months in temporary accommodation, and that it can be up to a year. Is the Government doing anything to address the situation and reduce the amount of time that people spend in temporary accommodation?

Margaret Burgess: As I said, we have the target to increase housing supply. We are doing everything that we can within our budget to increase the supply of social housing—that remains an absolute priority for the Government. We are also looking at other ways of providing affordable housing. People can perhaps move from social housing into low-cost home ownership. Access to other forms of housing can release a social house. We are stopping the right to buy, to keep houses in the social rented sector, so we are doing what we can to increase the supply of housing and to make more houses available for those in temporary accommodation. We are looking at every way we can to reduce the lists and get people out of temporary accommodation.

Gordon MacDonald: I also wanted to ask about housing options hubs, of which there are five in Scotland. The Scottish Housing Regulator has pointed out that not all hubs are effective, that they are still in their early days, that everyone is still learning and that best practice needs to be shared. What support will the Scottish Government give to the development of the hubs in future?

Margaret Burgess: The Scottish Government continues to support the hubs, both financially and

with officials who attend all the meetings of the hubs. There is an annual event where all the hubs get together, and we are sharing best practice. It is incumbent on the Government to ensure that best practice is passed on to the other hubs. From my point of view, the hubs are working well and are working together. As I said, the system is not perfect yet and some hubs are more advanced than others, as some were set up earlier than others, but there is some great practice going on out there in the hubs and it needs to be taken out to all the hubs. We will continue to do that with financial support and by using Scottish Government officials as well.

Adam Ingram (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Minister, you mentioned in your opening remarks that you had issued revised housing support duty guidance recently—it might even have been just last week.

Margaret Burgess: It was fairly recently.

Adam Ingram: What was the purpose of that? The original guidance was not very old at all, so what was the reason for the revisions?

Margaret Burgess: I think that it was to review what we previously had. It is now also a statutory obligation, and the guidance is split into policy and procedures. As was mentioned by another member, there is a need to take into account the policy background and the wider implications of welfare reform and the integration of social care, to ensure that the guidance is always in context. The support offered has not changed a great deal, although it will be reviewed again.

There has been no significant change since the previous guidance and we do not anticipate significant change with this guidance either because, as part of the preventative approach, most local authorities were providing the kind of housing support that we have now put on to a statutory footing. It is important to have it on a statutory footing, but it was recognised some time ago by local authorities and by their partners that the preventative approach should provide as much support as possible to help people to sustain a tenancy or to keep them in a current tenancy.

Like any guidance, it will be reviewed constantly in light of the feedback that we get from those who have received support and through the hubs. No doubt it will be changed again in 12 months' time, but it is important that guidance does not just sit there for ever. We need to change it.

Adam Ingram: How is it monitored? What is the process?

Margaret Burgess: That will come out in the PREVENT1 data on the support that is provided to people. Some of that information is gathered in existing statistics, but not to the level that we

would want. Most of the support data will come out in PREVENT1, showing whether somebody got money advice, whether it was a benefits issue, whether they needed employability support or whether they were referred to external agencies for addiction services. That will give us a much clearer picture of the kind of support that is being provided and, more important, the outcomes after that support is provided.

Adam Ingram: Finally, how would you respond to Shelter's suggestion that the Government needs to prepare an action plan for homelessness for the next 10 years?

Margaret Burgess: I do not see homelessness sitting in isolation from housing in general. Our work on homelessness has to fit in with everything that is happening in housing. We constantly review how to make progress on housing, both from the point of view of housing supply and homelessness and in the context of what is happening to benefits and developments in the private sector. Our approach to homelessness must sit within our approach to the housing system as a whole.

As the committee might be aware, we are to hold a major housing event in November. We have been working with stakeholders and stakeholder groups for a considerable time to determine what issues need to be looked at. The event will be about how we take forward housing over the next five years, what the issues and challenges are, and how we can address them. We have already had discussions with more than 70 stakeholders in preparing for the event, and we anticipate that more than 300 stakeholders will be present at it. The work to address homelessness will be very much at the core of that, because it is part of the housing system. Shelter will be involved in the event, as will every other stakeholder.

As I said, in my view homelessness is not a separate issue; it must be dealt with as part of the whole housing system, and that includes prevention. It is all one.

Adam Ingram: We look forward to the outcomes of that event with interest.

Margaret Burgess: It will take place on 18 November.

The Convener: You might want to come back to the committee to report on that event. Yesterday, we had an informal briefing from the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors on its recent report. You might also want to say what you think about that report. It would tie in neatly for us to hear from you on those later in the year.

No one has any further questions. Is there anything that you wish to add, minister?

Margaret Burgess: I do not think so, other than to highlight the event in November, the outcome of

which I know that the committee will be interested in.

The Convener: I thank Margaret Burgess and Marion Gibbs for their evidence, which has been very helpful.

10:57

Meeting suspended.

11:00

On resuming—

Deregulation Bill

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is consideration of a supplementary legislative consent memorandum on the Deregulation Bill, which is United Kingdom Parliament legislation. Amendments have been made to the bill to include a provision to enable the investigation of tramway accidents in Scotland by the Rail Accident Investigation Branch and, separately, provisions that will enable the Scottish ministers to introduce a regime that would permit motorsports on public roads.

Because the Deregulation Bill alters the executive competence of the Scottish ministers, legislative consent is required. Paper ICI/S4/14/23/3 includes the SLCM and provides details of the procedure for dealing with it. The committee is invited to consider whether to report that it is content with the SLCM and with the Scottish Government's view that it is in the best interests of the Scottish people and good governance that the relevant provisions of the bill should be considered by the UK Parliament, or to defer consideration of the SLCM to a future meeting and take further evidence on it. Do members have any comments?

Is the committee content for the relevant provisions in the bill to be considered by the UK Parliament?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Subordinate Legislation

Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2014 (SSI 2014/243)

11:01

The Convener: Agenda item 4 is consideration of a negative instrument on unsuitable accommodation for homeless persons, and it follows on neatly from the minister's evidence. The order relates to what constitutes suitable temporary accommodation for certain categories of homeless persons, and the committee is invited to consider any issues that it wishes to raise in reporting to the Parliament on it. Members should note that no motions to annul have been received.

Does anyone have any comments to make?

Jim Eadie: This is a very welcome development, which came about as a result of the consideration by the committee and the Parliament of the recent Housing (Scotland) Bill. The issue that the order deals with is one on which I lodged an amendment, with support from Alex Rowley MSP. I am delighted that the Government has listened to the representations that it received and has decided to introduce this piece of subordinate legislation, which extends the existing legislation to include the provision that accommodation is unsuitable if it is not wind and watertight. We need to remember that our role as members of the Scottish Parliament and as legislators is to improve the lives of the people of Scotland, and I think that the order will absolutely do that for vulnerable families and children who are affected by homelessness.

The Convener: Does the committee agree that it does not wish to make any recommendation in relation to the order?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: That concludes the committee's business in public. We now move into private session, as previously agreed.

11:03

Meeting continued in private until 11:16.

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