

Scottish Churches Housing Action



no room for homelessness!

BRIEFING 01/06

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Homelessness in Scotland – progress towards 2012

1 Introduction

With the publication of the final report of the Task Force on Homelessness in February 2002, the Scottish Executive established a target: that **by 2012, all households assessed by local authorities as unintentionally homeless will be entitled to permanent accommodation.** Communities Minister Malcolm Chisholm made a statement in Parliament on *Abolition of Priority Need* in December 2005. This briefing explains the background to this statement, outlines the process envisaged by the Scottish Executive by which the target for 2012 is to be reached, and comments on some key issues.

2 Background

The Task Force on Homelessness was set up soon after the establishment of the first Scottish Executive in 1999, under the leadership of the then Minister for Communities, Wendy Alexander. It published an interim report in 2000, and a final report in 2002. The interim report made proposals for legislative change which were included in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. The final report made some 59 recommendations, which ranged widely: they included further legislative change, which was enacted in the Homelessness (Scotland) Act 2003; but also many policy and practice recommendations.

Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 The homelessness provisions of the Housing Act include:

- ❖ Each council must prepare a homelessness strategy for their area
- ❖ Free advice and assistance on homelessness must be available in each council area
- ❖ Every homeless applicant must be given temporary accommodation while their case is investigated
- ❖ Housing associations have a duty to allocate to homeless people referred by councils
- ❖ Basic rights for hostel dwellers.

Homelessness (Scotland) Act 2003 The Homelessness Act paves the way for the 2012 target. To do this it dismantled the ‘hurdles’ established by the 1979 homelessness legislation. These measures are to be phased in over a period of years.

- ❖ ‘Priority need’ is to be extended in stages, so that by 2012 there will be no distinction between different priority groups of homeless people
- ❖ People who make themselves ‘intentionally homeless’ will get temporary accommodation and help with their problems
- ❖ Ministers may suspend the ‘local connection’ rules, thus preventing councils referring homeless applicants to another area

The Dec 2005 statement focussed on the first of these, working towards the abolition of priority need, but ranged more widely.

3 Minister’s statement

The Minister starts by reiterating his commitment to the 2012 target: “This is a very challenging target and we remain committed to it.”

The statement covers: sources of evidence about what is happening in homelessness; affordable housing supply; preventing homelessness; different forms of support; legislative change and guidance; and

monitoring the process. He notes the role of the Executive in making available the resources that will be needed if the target is to be met. He sets an interim target, that by 2009, the proportion of applicants being assessed as 'non-priority homeless' by half. He says "the supply of appropriate and affordable housing is key," and emphasises the importance of preventing homelessness.

The statement sets out a number of interim objectives on the route to 2012. Many of these involve completing evaluations or seeking reports from various quarters. Others include:

- ❖ The Executive will take account of the local impacts of the 2012 target in their strategic investment decisions, and the forthcoming spending review
- ❖ Work will start in March 2006 to produce guidance on preventing homelessness
- ❖ An innovation fund will be established to support prevention measures: £250K has been made available to local authorities, with applications due by the end of May 2006
- ❖ A national conference on the social networks of homeless people will be held (now arranged for 16 May 2006)
- ❖ Councils will consider how to reach the interim target for 2009 on non-priority assessments
- ❖ Changes to the local connection rules will be implemented during 2006
- ❖ The new regime for intentionally homeless households will be implemented during 2007.

4 Issues for homeless people and projects

The Minister's statement is welcome, mainly for its wholehearted re-statement of the Executive's commitment to the 2012 target, and the recognition that both housing supply and support for homeless people are key components to its success.

There remain concerns, however. Will it be possible to put in place the volume of affordable housing that the commitment requires? Does a better deal for homeless people create an incentive to apply through that route? Will the demand from homeless people swamp the traditional applications to councils and housing associations from the waiting list? How can we provide the support that is needed when Supporting People budgets are being cut?

Supply of affordable housing For Scottish Churches Housing Action, this is the most critical. We are strongly supportive of the Executive in setting and working towards the 2012 target, but have consistently said that it is little more than wishful thinking unless it is accompanied by a major increase in volume of new building for affordable rent. The increased investment allocation in 2005-08 has been encouraging: it means there is a plan to work towards 8,000 new affordable homes a year (though not all for rent) by 2007-08. However, more will be needed, and we look towards the next comprehensive spending review for this.

Rising levels of homelessness applications On the face of it, the new legislation has increased homelessness, which was not the intention: applications rose from 45,000 in 2000-01, to 57,000 in 2004-05. At least in part, however, this is because homelessness that was previously not counted has become uncovered: people who might have made their own arrangements are now applying to councils because they will get at least temporary accommodation. This presents an opportunity to offer help to a group that was previously excluded, and provide sustainable routes out of homelessness. However, preventative measures need to be truly effective if these figures are to be reduced.

Competition with waiting list applicants Rented housing now represents less than 1/3 of Scotland's total stock of homes – 25 years ago, it was 2/3. With this limited supply, there is inevitable competition between people with different levels of need. There is a danger that homelessness becomes the only, or at least the major, route to social housing. The Minister's statement recognises this, and says it must be avoided, but the measures to achieve this are aspirational rather than concrete.

Supporting People Supporting People has become the major funding stream for measures to provide personal support to individuals experiencing or sustaining routes out of homelessness. There is major concern among providers about recent cuts in the overall budget, which are hitting some local authorities particularly hard. The interim objectives outlined in the statement do not address this basic issue of resources, which will be of particular significance in any drive to prevent homelessness.

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