

## Scottish Churches Housing Action



no room for homelessness!

Kevin Stewart MSP  
Minister for Local Government & Housing  
The Scottish Government  
St. Andrew's House  
Regent Road  
Edinburgh  
EH1 3DG

Friday, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2017

Dear Minister

### **National policy on homelessness in Scotland**

At its meeting on 1 June, the Board of Scottish Churches Housing Action considered the current position in relation to tackling homelessness in Scotland. This had been prompted by the speech of the outgoing Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, Rt Rev Dr Russell Barr, on 20 May. You can see Dr Barr's speech here:

[http://stream1.churchofscotland.org.uk/about\\_us/general\\_assembly/archive/address\\_by\\_the\\_retiring\\_moderator\\_2017](http://stream1.churchofscotland.org.uk/about_us/general_assembly/archive/address_by_the_retiring_moderator_2017). (His views on homelessness start at 7.57 and continue to 11.45).

Dr Barr says, "The research (on homelessness) has been done, the causes identified, as well as the policies and processes needing to be put in place to resolve it. The one thing missing is the political will and ambition to resolve it. At best, we are managing the situation; we need to recover the ambition to resolve it... There should be no room for homelessness in 21<sup>st</sup> century Scotland."

We are grateful for the meetings we have had with yourself, with the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and with civil servants during the year of Dr Barr's tenure as Moderator. We value the personal commitment you demonstrate to the Scottish Government's target of providing 35,000 new homes for social rent within the wider target of 50,000 affordable homes overall. In this regard, perhaps you would be kind enough to provide me with an update as to the Government's progress over the last year and how you now see the achievement of this target being realised in the coming months and years.

Regrettably, we have to agree with Dr Barr's assessment of the loss of shared vision and ambition. We believe that managing homelessness is not enough; and providing much-needed affordable homes will be wasted effort if it is not matched by measures to ensure that people can sustain their tenancies. These measures include ensuring that they have the financial capacity to meet their commitments, and ensuring that where support is needed, it is in place. The housing options approach has made a significant difference, but when the options are as limited as they are for many of our more vulnerable citizens, it does not provide a complete response.

Through our recent work in establishing Aid & Abet, the Lothian-based project mentoring people on release from prison, we at SCHA have seen the reality of life for homeless people with convictions. Released with no idea of where they will stay that night, they frequently have to struggle to secure the basic legal minimum of temporary accommodation. This is a recipe for homelessness, which for some will inevitably lead to re-imprisonment, at huge personal cost to them and financial cost to local and central government.

This is just one aspect of how practice in one area promotes, rather than reduces, homelessness. We want to be clear just how the Scottish Government plans to incorporate homelessness reduction and avoidance into a range of areas of policy and practice: not just in criminal justice, but in areas such as reducing the attainment gap in education; young people leaving care; mental health and welfare strategy; drug and alcohol policy; and, not least, social security.

Bill Barron kindly spoke in your place at our event on 7 October 2016, and he said that calls for development of a national strategy on homelessness might be a diversion from the urgent question of improving matters on the ground. We recognise the potential for this, and have no wish to get in the way of better practice. However, there is a need to mesh action on homelessness with key government policies on the range of issues that contribute to the problem.

We have no wish to see an extensive strategy development process, during which practical change is put on hold. However, we would be keen to hear your views on how together we might develop a shared national vision that seeks to eradicate, rather than just to manage, Scotland's major problems of homelessness.

With best wishes.

Yours sincerely

**Rev Graeme R. Wilson**  
**Convener**