

Speech by Archie Stoddart to the Shelter “Halfway to 2012 Conference”, 1 October 2007

SLIDE 1: Name and title

I have been asked to give my thoughts about how we meet the challenge of 2012.

Let me start by saying that I believe that tackling homelessness is and remains one of THE big challenges faced by Scotland since devolution. Not just in housing policy but in ANY policy area. Our homelessness legislation has been described as the most progressive in Europe. In fact, you would be hard-pressed to find anything like it in the developed world.

And I believe that this says a lot about the growing confidence that there's been in Scotland since the 1997 devolution referendum. For once Scotland decided it wanted to LEAD the world. To SET trends rather than follow them. And the trend that was started by the Homelessness Task Force has been continued by other initiatives like the ban on smoking in public places, which I know the minister has a personal interest in. But it was our approach to HOMELESSNESS which set the ball rolling.

This has not gone un-noticed. At the start of the year I spent a lot of time talking to TV stations and print journalists. Not from Scotland or even elsewhere in the UK. But from France.

SLIDE 2: TV screen

Fuelled by interest in Scotland's unique approach to homelessness from right at the top of the French political ladder and central to the French presidential election.

Where Scotland leads the French will follow.

I don't need to tell this audience about the challenge. But I hope that occasions like today are a chance for us all to remind ourselves just what an important journey it is we are embarked on. You are part of something very big.

As part of the lead up to today's event Shelter carried out a poll of homelessness staff in local authorities. I am sure that some of you here took part in that poll and I'll refer to some of your observations as I go on. But just to say that, overall, there is mixed opinion about the achievability of 2012. As we will hear later, Angus Council seem to be sufficiently confident to want to abolish the priority need test now, 5 years ahead of schedule. That confidence is shared by other councils. Some are less optimistic. But very few of you are sounding notes of doom just yet.

Over the last few months I have been aiming to listen to views from across Scotland. After the May elections, Shelter wrote to all twelve hundred or so councillors and asked them for an expression of support for the 2012 target. We have been following that up in the last couple of weeks with events in both Glasgow and Angus with local politicians, with more to follow, we hope, in other areas.

SLIDE 3: councillors in Glasgow

And from these I know that there is political appetite for the challenge.

This is true nationally too as I'll go on to show.

So you are not alone.

But this is the crux. This year, more than any other, is about converting political support into practical action.

Back in 2002, when the Homelessness Task Force report was published, I believe we all signed up to a deal. Many of you recognised the power of the Task Force's central conclusion: the long-standing distinction between people in priority need and not in priority need; between families with children and others; was simply wrong. The distinction said nothing about the urgency of the crisis facing the homeless applicant. It recognised the importance of stable housing for one set of homeless applicants, but left the others largely to fend for themselves. You are no less homeless because you don't fall into a priority need group.

That wrong had to be righted. But, of course, there are practical consequences. More homeless people need more homes! So the deal was this. The housing sector would get on with meeting that challenge. In return, the politicians would recognise the case for more investment; for more affordable housing.

That deal remains in place, in my view. After decades of declining investment, the housing sector had its best ever card to play in the battle for public money. A statutory target, with cross party support and international acclaim. Quite apart from being the right **policy** it is also the right **strategy**.

Now I think the housing sector has delivered on its side of the bargain. There is no doubt in my mind that homelessness services have been transformed in the last 10 years.

The imagination and commitment to improvement has been unparalleled. I am not pretending that things are perfect but I don't think we would have seen that level of change without the statutory target to drive the process.

So now it is time for delivery on the political side. Within the next month the Scottish Government will unveil its strategic spending review, the most eagerly anticipated spending review in a decade.

This is the test of the political commitment to 2012.

As a result, much of Shelter's time over the last year has been focused on that spending review. Over a year ago now we sat down with the many of the main housing organisations to spell out the detailed case for affordable homes to submit to the spending review, the first time that we had done so on this scale.

Our submission, which we made in January and then again following the change in administration in May, makes the detailed case for 30,000 affordable rented homes to be provided in the three years, from 2008 to 2011.

I do not want to go through the submission in detail – a summary is in your packs today and the full submission is on our website.

But in brief

SLIDE 4: SSR ask

Our case for 30,000 affordable rented homes over three years is based on additional analysis of housing needs which was commissioned by the Scottish Executive – in itself the most detailed analysis of needs ever carried out in Scotland.

I believe 30,000 homes is the right balance between a programme that is deliverable over three years and one which will ensure that social housing can meet the needs of BOTH homeless applications and house waiting lists.

And the cost of this programme is modest. The ADDITIONAL money we seek is less than 1% of the entire Scottish budget. It would also yield benefits such as private finance and in areas such as education, training, health, community cohesion and environmental sustainability.

But it is one thing to make the case intellectually; it is another to try to make it stick. In Shelter we've tried to be imaginative in engaging the public and politicians in making the case for 30,000 homes a priority.

SLIDE 5: 30,000 cards stunt

A couple of weeks ago we delivered 35,000 postcards signed by members of the public to John Swinney, the Cabinet Secretary who oversees the Spending Review. I know from discussions between Mr Swinney and MSPs that he is very aware of the case for affordable housing that is being made.

SLIDE 6: Colin and Justin

The 30,000 homes call has been backed by various public figures from the worlds of TV, music and sport.

I mentioned earlier that almost half of all MSPs responded to our invitation to add a brick to the wall of support for affordable homes.

SLIDE 7; SLIDE 8; SLIDE 9; SLIDE 10: MSPs at wall

At a parliamentary reception we assembled a coalition of 24 leading Scottish organisations to make the case for more homes. As well as our familiar bed-fellows we were also joined by organisations as diverse as trade unions, environmental campaigners, business groups and organisations representing doctors and nurses.

And prior to the election, a motion seeking MSPs' support for the case for 30,000 homes was signed by a quarter of MSPs, including, I am delighted to say, the man here beside me today.

What does all this show? Shelter drove hard for the equalisation of rights for homeless people. No apologies for that. But. Having pressed for the 2012 target I want to assure you that Shelter has ALSO been straining every sinew to ensure that the means of delivering that target – more affordable homes – is a priority. I cannot think of a single campaign in Shelter's history where we have made such sustained and concerted effort.

I am convinced the Scottish Government recognises the force of this case. The First Minister, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing and Stewart, as our minister, have all given their unequivocal support for the 2012 target. I know that they are acutely aware of the burden of expectation now building up to deliver.

I believe they will. But the answer is not ONLY about 30,000 affordable homes. We need to focus on prevention too: to put a fence at the top of the cliff; not just an ambulance at the foot.

I don't have the time to go into prevention in detail. I think we all recognise the importance of information and advice; good tenancy support; housing management practices that don't run counter to homelessness prevention.

However, I do want to look at one issue around how we manage homelessness. Throughout its 30 year history, homelessness legislation has intermittently attracted the criticism that it gives immediate access to housing to some people who are not really homeless. There is nothing new in this. Go right back to the debates in the House of Commons in 1977 around queue jumpers for evidence. It has always been around.

The path we are following in Scotland amplifies that discussion. The priority need test is going. The local connection test is going, albeit with an escape clause for areas which experience increased pressure. The intentionality test is changing beyond recognition, in effect, to ensure that a duty to house remains.

All this means, of course, that the remaining test – the question “are you homeless” will be the hub from which decisions about access to services are made. We need to be watchful here.

I recognise that the legal definition of homelessness – like all legal definitions – is not one which easily admits shades of grey; does not easily recognise that there may be degrees of urgency between different kinds of homelessness situations. This is a difficult area for practice. In the past it mattered less because the subsequent tests, particularly the priority need test, acted as a means to filter access to housing. As I have already argued that was a filter that had little real legitimacy; and was simply a means to ration a scarce resource.

Might the changes underway in Scotland see greater pressure placed on homelessness assessments? Might there be a temptation to tighten up on who is assessed as homeless? Even at the risk of excluding some applicants who might be in desperate need?

It depends. Let me make clear that I see no problem with services exploring the range of housing options available to applicants. This is entirely consistent with my earlier argument that we may need to look at a wider range of options in providing accommodation to homeless people. The key is to do so in a constructive way. Where looking at a full range of options with someone is done in a way which is about identifying the best solution, this can only be good. If it is done with the intention to deflect people away from a service it will undermine so much progress on homelessness in recent years and will be open to challenge and scrutiny.

I have already said that the supply of new affordable rented homes is the lynchpin to meet 2012. But it is not the only tool in the box.

We could start with looking again at Right to Buy, the single biggest reason for the decline in social housing numbers these last 25 years. The Scottish Government has signalled that it wants to make Right to Buy more responsive to local needs and I would welcome an early discussion about the ways in which that could be done.

Planning is another area where there is much more mileage to be gained. In our poll of practitioners in the run up to today it emerges as a priority too.

But policies which seek to deliver affordable homes as part of bigger private developments – quota policies in other words – are still falling short of targets. That is one reason why the Housing Supply Task Force has such a focus on land and planning issues. Last Friday Shelter hosted an event with the Centre for Scottish Public Policy where we drew together planners and developers and others to discuss what more can be done through the planning system. We aim to submit our findings to the Housing Supply Task Force.

And it is not just planning. Public land could be better use. Only a week ago the Ministry of Defence announced that it is selling 10 acres of surplus land in northern Scotland to the highest bidder, to be used for housing. That is land that is going to be out of the reach of social housing providers. One part of the public sector acting in a way which is contrary to other public interests.

And, of course, homelessness is no longer just about council housing. Since the introduction of the current HAG regime in 1989 £5 billion of public money has been channelled through RSLs in Scotland.

Over the next three years I believe the housing association movement will come under scrutiny as never before. As someone who worked with housing associations for many years, I think associations should welcome this as sign that they are now big players. Already we are at the point where RSLs let almost as many homes as councils do.

But with that mainstreaming comes new responsibility. Some RSLs have fully embraced the homelessness challenge. Others, to be frank, have not. Only thirteen and a half per cent of RSL lets in 2005-06 went to homeless applicants referred by councils – section 5 referrals to use the jargon term. Only thirteen and a half per cent of RSL lets. Put another way, of all the homeless households judged to be in priority need only one in eight were housed by RSLs. This is not good enough.

In the poll we found many local authority practitioners taking the view that RSLs could and should do more to address homelessness.

Now the new ministerial team has made no secret that it wants to look at how better value can be achieved for the public purse in providing new homes. Some of that can be done within the RSL movement: looking at procurement, for example. But, RSLs do not have a monopoly on new housing supply. Later we will hear from Midlothian Council about its decision to restart a new build programme of council housing. While I think there are challenges in councils taking on that role again we cannot ignore the arithmetic. Another senior official in a local authority has told me that he could build council homes for the equivalent of 25% HAG, way below the average HAG rate for RSLs currently. If that estimate is robust we would be foolish to bet against a renaissance in council housing.

The landscape for delivery of affordable housing might get even more complex in years to come, with existing models like community land trusts seeking a role and new types of not-for-profit providers waiting in the wing.

I think this is good for Scotland. Diversity is a strength and while I envisage RSLs continuing to be the main way in which new housing is provided, I think it will happen following increased understanding of alternative models.

I want now to turn to the private rented sector. This is the sector which contains some of the best, most professionally managed homes in the country and also, some of the worst. Over the last year, Shelter has had a special project engaging with private landlords and tenants in this time of unique change in the sector.

It is fair to say that the process of landlord registration has been far from smooth; but with new repair standards and arbitration having gone live; and a national accreditation scheme and tenancy deposit protection on the horizon, we should be creating a climate where responsible private landlords can flourish.

The sheer scale of the take-up of the private leasing scheme in Edinburgh, about which you will hear more later, shows that there is a role that private landlords CAN play in providing accommodation for homeless people. Not the most vulnerable people, certainly, but a role all the same.

I know a number of councils have been raising the question as to whether we can take the next step and envisage a role for private landlords, not just in temporary accommodation, but providing the final destination for homeless people. Currently this is possible but only if an assured tenancy is granted and these are few and far between.

I think there is a legitimate discussion to be had here. In some places – close to city centres, for example, but equally in remote rural areas, the supply of private rented housing far outstrips that of social housing. If we are genuine about offering homeless people real choice over where they can settle then I think we need to look at the private rented sector with an open mind.

What we need to avoid, of course, is homeless people landing up in poor quality badly-managed accommodation from which a further episode of homelessness results. Some far-reaching discussion about tenancy regime would be needed, for example. I don't think any of use would see a six month tenancy as a stable solution to homelessness. But there is a debate to be had. Let's not be shy of debate.

I started by saying that homelessness was one of THE big challenges facing Scotland. I have also argued that the specific target of 2012 has been absolutely critical in giving us a focus, acting as a driver of a transformation of services.

But we stand on today on a cusp for policy and political priorities. Stewart might feel that he has arrived into high office at a rather awkward time: having demands placed on him that are really the bequest of ministers of a different hue.

But no-one said this was going to be easy. People who are homeless or badly housed have high but legitimate expectations of Government. This is the chance to show that Scotland can lead the world; not just on aspiration but in achievement. For a minister, what better legacy to leave?

Thank you.