

SCOTTISH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION 2011 - SHELTER SCOTLAND'S ASSESSMENT OF THE PARTY MANIFESTOS

Shelter Scotland believes that everyone should have a home where they can thrive. We campaign for decent housing for all. To ensure that people in housing need can access and keep a home, we believe that:

- Sufficient affordable housing must be provided for those most in need in places where people can thrive;
- There is a continuing need to help homeless people and seek to prevent homelessness, for example, by providing support to vulnerable people;
- Investment is needed in the existing housing stock to tackle problems of substandard housing, major disrepair and fuel poverty.

Shelter Scotland has undertaken an assessment of the party manifestos from this perspective and our observations are set out below. We focused on the manifestos of the Scottish parties which were represented in the last parliament from 2007 to 2011.

1. Providing more affordable housing for those most in need

Shelter Scotland campaigns for more social rented housing to house those most in need, including homeless people.

The Scottish Conservative Party plans to use receipts from the Right to Buy and stock transfers and “institutional investment” to fund the construction of new social rented housing but it is far from clear how much funding might be obtained in this way or how many homes they plan to build.

Similarly, the Scottish Liberal Democrats plan to investigate new and more flexible sources of funding for the social rented sector, including use of the National Housing Trust developed by the current Scottish Government, but give little detail beyond that. The party also mentions the role of community land trusts in developing rural housing.

The Scottish Labour Party underlines the urgency of delivering homes that are affordable but also talks about exploring alternative sources of funding and the establishment of a new task force to establish the changing needs and challenges we face in relation to housing supply.

The Scottish National Party manifesto contains more specific commitments to 6,000 new social rented houses per year including 5,000 new council houses over the next 4 years but plans to fund these ambitious commitments are relatively unspecific. The National Housing Trust is mentioned as is a Scottish Housing Bond. There is a plan to place a levy on long term empty housing which is only likely to provide a small proportion of the funding.

The Scottish Green Party commits to reversing the cuts to the housing budget and to investing in social housing to help address what is described as the desperate need for more affordable

housing. It outlines £940 million of additional investment over the parliamentary session, but it does not set out the shape of the programme.

If increasing affordable housing supply is the litmus test of a party's commitment to housing, the evidence is, at best, mixed. Some parties are stronger on this than others but none is really moving beyond the scale of programmes that we have seen in recent years, during which time house waiting lists have continued to grow. Based on thorough academic research, Shelter Scotland believes 10,000 affordable homes for rent are needed each year to meet basic housing need. No party is promising that.

2. Making best use of the existing housing stock to meet the need for affordable housing

Shelter Scotland has actively campaigned for action to restrict sales of existing social rented housing through changes to the Right to Buy (RTB) policy and for initiatives to make use of empty homes.

In relation to the RTB, the Conservatives plan to reverse some of limitations on the right to buy introduced in recent legislation.

Other parties are largely silent on the RTB except for the Greens who commit to further restrictions.

In relation to tackling empty homes, there is more discussion among all parties except for the Conservatives. The Liberal Democrats plan to offer £10,000 grants to owners that bring empty homes back into use provided that they allow a housing association to rent them out for at least 10 years. They also mention use of stamp duty and the scope to convert agricultural buildings. Labour recognises the need for a credible strategy for bringing empty homes back into use and promises to continue funding for the Shelter-led Scottish Empty Homes Partnership beyond 2012 and to using the housing budget to bring empty homes back into use. The SNP has a similar commitment to the Shelter-led Partnership and refers to the proposed levy on empty homes although the funding from this is to be channelled into new council building. The Greens refer to bringing more empty homes back into use through a mixture of grants, loans and strengthened legal powers for councils and social landlords.

Empty homes have emerged as an area of new policy consensus or near-consensus; Right to Buy less so.

3. Tackling Homelessness

Apart from increasing the supply of good quality, affordable housing Shelter Scotland has campaigned for full implementation of pioneering Scottish legislation which extends the duties of local authorities to a wider range of homeless persons. In particular, it seeks to ensure delivery of the 2012 target which guarantees delivery of a permanent home to all homeless people. Shelter Scotland also considers that there is a pressing need to

implement recently-passed laws to ensure that all homeless persons and those under threat of homelessness are given the support they require to sustain their tenancies.

There is no mention of the 2012 target in the manifestos of the Conservatives and SNP¹. The Liberal Democrats explicitly recommit to the 2012 target and also refer to supporting “early intervention services” to help in the prevention of homelessness. Labour commits to working to meet the 2012 target and to providing guidance on the interpretation of homelessness and housing legislation. It outlines a Scottish Housing Advisory Service, while the Conservatives say they want to extend private sector leasing schemes. The Greens commit to providing the resources and support required to honour the 2012 homelessness commitment and to implement all parts of the 2003 Homelessness Act.

It is helpful that homelessness and the 2012 commitment are mentioned as issues in most manifestos but there is little by way of practical policies to achieve that internationally-acclaimed legal commitment.

4. Investing to improve the condition of the existing housing stock

Shelter Scotland campaigns for measures to improve the condition of the housing stock to ensure that there is decent housing for all. In particular, we support the need for action to tackle fuel poverty and promote energy efficiency, to ensure all social rented housing meets the Scottish Housing Quality Standard and for action to tackle slum landlords in the private rented sector.

The Conservative manifesto does not contain any commitment in relation to fuel poverty and only has policies on domestic energy efficiency in a separate section of its manifesto. Labour recognises the 2016 target to end fuel poverty but offers little detail as to how it will get there. The Scottish Liberal Democrats propose to invest £250m to accelerate the insulation of homes (and other buildings) and to ensure that advice and affordable finance is available to all. Their plans include a new universal home improvement scheme run by local authorities in partnership with other bodies, to require new homes to be “zero carbon” by 2016 and to encourage the use of renewable technologies in domestic buildings. The SNP pledges £50m to fund a Warm Homes Fund to deliver energy efficiency and renewable energy in communities worst affected by fuel poverty. It also refers to a single universal home insulation scheme funded on a “pay as you save” basis. The Scottish Green Party has, as one of its three key pledges, a £100 million per year universal home insulation scheme and commits to a programme of investment in flats and tenements supported with small grants and equity release loans to support energy efficiency works and micro renewable projects alongside other communal projects.

There is much less in the various manifestos about other forms of action to improve the condition of the existing stock. Labour commits to meeting the Scottish Housing Quality Standard for social rented housing (target date of 2015) and, in the private rented sector, to tightening up the landlord registration scheme and rooting out rogue landlords although without giving many specific details.

¹ Since this document was published the SNP have reaffirmed their commitment to the 2012 commitment

The SNP also refers to working with the Private Rented Sector Strategy group (set up by the current Government) to both expand and improve the privately rented sector.

Energy efficiency aside, there is a much more piecemeal approach to tackling problems of existing stock quality.

5. Other proposals

A number of manifestos mention additional measures to help first time buyers. The Liberal Democrats refer to expanding the shared equity programmes established by previous administrations to help first time purchasers and to underwriting responsible mortgage lending to first time buyers. The Labour Party refers explicitly to the introduction of a new mortgage indemnity guarantee scheme to reduce the level of deposits required by first time buyers to 5 to 10%.

Shelter Scotland considers that there needs to be careful consideration of the cost of such schemes and their impact on the housing market. They should be in addition to rather than instead of programmes to help those on the lowest incomes.

A number of manifestos also mention changes to the management of social rented housing, particularly changes to allocations and tenancies. The Conservative and Labour Parties refer to giving greater priority to local people in allocation policies and the Liberal Democrats commit to minimising the legislative constraints on allocation policies.

Shelter Scotland's view is that these proposals need to be thought about very carefully. At present, allocations by social landlords can take account of the position of local residents within a framework of housing need. Shelter Scotland would be opposed to any proposals which removed the duty on social landlords to establish allocation policies based on a person's housing need.

6. Conclusions

There are a number of different proposals from the different parties, some more far-reaching than others. None really addresses the long-standing shortfall in affordable housing; even the most ambitious of the plans only takes us back to where we have been recently in the period 2008-11 rather than to where we need to be to meet the aspirations of 160,000 people on house waiting lists and over 10,000 people stuck in temporary accommodation.

There's a near-consensus on giving empty homes a higher priority. Energy efficiency is raised as an issue but other aspects of poor housing quality are given less attention.

Do the manifestos suggest that, overall, political parties understand the scale of the housing challenge and have policies to address it? Some are closer than others but all fall some way short of where Shelter Scotland thinks we need to be.

Analysis carried out by Richard Grant, Policy Adviser, Shelter Scotland, April 2011