Getting the balance right: A person-centred approach in Scotland’s strengthened homelessness service.

Report to Shelter Scotland.

Professor Isobel Anderson, University of Stirling

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Acknowledgements

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Summary

Introduction

The modernised Scottish homelessness framework has been regarded as an international exemplar of progressive policy on delivering effective housing rights alongside person-centre solutions. This report considers the key elements required for a modern homelessness service which fully meets legislative, policy and practice requirements and delivers a client-oriented service and positive outcomes. Its conclusions and recommendations have emerged from: a review of relevant literature; discussions with senior homelessness practitioners; and discussions with homeless service users.

The evidence review identified the emergence of a modernised Scottish framework for tackling homelessness with strategic, preventive and responsive elements to a comprehensive service. While significant progress had been made towards implementing the modernised framework, practice across local authorities remained variable. Scope for the RSL sector to work better in partnership with local authorities and to assist further in rehousing homeless households was also identified. Homelessness professionals who took part in the research considered that services had improved during the previous ten years but acknowledged that further improvements could be achieved by continuing to develop person-centred approaches to working with those at risk of homelessness.

Homelessness prevention activities should be delivered alongside the responsive legal safety net for households facing homelessness. Practitioners were confident that this could be done fairly, with a person-centred approach to best meet the housing needs of those seeking assistance.

The Scottish Social Housing Charter and revised regulatory framework moved from consultation phase to implementation during the course of this study. Practitioner participants broadly supported the retention of positive elements of the previous regulatory framework and performance standards. Although service providers welcomed a lighter touch approach to regulation, they still valued the benefits of the process and recognised the need for performance indicators to be “SMART” (Strategic, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timed). Housing performance indicators could also be directly linked to the National Performance Framework and Single Outcome Agreements. There was a strong consensus that homelessness prevention activities needed to be better integrated into monitoring frameworks.

A strategic homelessness service

The core of the strategic homelessness service is the assessment of need and planning to address that need through a local homelessness strategy, which is integral to the wider local housing strategy. This should drive service delivery, ensuring the homelessness service is integrated into wider housing services and partnership working. Evidence of poverty, housing disadvantage and structural causes of homelessness, as well as the factors which trigger homelessness or housing crises for individuals should inform the homelessness strategy and responses to homelessness. Homelessness strategies also need to plan for meeting the support needs of homeless people, including service provision, adequate resources, and joint working across relevant services. The strategic element of the homelessness service should also drive quality assurance and performance monitoring.
Strategic responses to homelessness need to be developed in the context of the wider economic and political environment, including welfare reform. However, strategies also need to maintain a focus on long term trends and solutions. Security of tenure in settled housing remains crucial to sustainable housing outcomes. Strategies need to consider an appropriate balance in provision across social and private renting, and low cost home ownership.

Homelessness prevention activities

Homelessness prevention remains an emerging area of practice and the person-centred housing options approach was broadly welcomed by staff as the key tool for local authority prevention activity. While homelessness practitioners were generally confident about managing prevention services without compromising the responsive legal safety net, there remains a need for more robust policy and statistical evidence of both the process and outcomes of the changing approach. Although service users had less knowledge of prevention services, they were receptive to the idea of earlier advice and information, indicating a need for improved sign-posting and awareness-raising with the public. Scottish service providers could also consider incorporating support to access training, education and employment as part of housing options advice.

Some progress in assisting households into private tenancies as part of housing options advice and homelessness prevention activities was evident. However, such activities remained dependent on Short Assured Tenancies with a typical initial contract of just six months (compared to the 12 months required for discharge of homelessness duty in the private sector). There is a need for more detailed research into applicants’ perceptions of this aspect of homelessness prevention, as well as for long-term monitoring of tenancy sustainability in the private sector. Scottish Government and local authorities could take more concerted action to encourage private landlords to agree to Assured Tenancies or 12 month Short Assured Tenancies for low income households seeking long-term, settled accommodation.

Homelessness practitioners largely welcomed the pilot initiative to work across local authority boundaries in Housing Options Hubs, though the model was still in a developmental phase. The initiative combined a move to a housing options approach with the development of joint working across groups of local authorities. The early phase of development appears to have had more impact in terms of joint working than on the effectiveness of housing options services for those in housing need.

Responsive Services – the statutory framework

Maintaining effective services to ensure a local authority can fulfil its statutory duties under the expanded legal safety for homeless households will remain a core dimension of the post-2012 homelessness service. Homelessness statistics indicate a positive picture in terms of abolishing priority need and reducing presentations. This may mean that fewer people are affected by the most acute manifestations of homelessness. However, where this does occur, the impact remains traumatic and damaging for each individual, emphasising the need to retain robust responsive homelessness services. Responsive services are well established in Scotland and known to be effective in resolving homelessness. A substantive evaluation of the statutory homelessness system in England in 2008 confirmed its effectiveness as a legal response to homelessness which improved
people’s quality of life, as well as providing secure housing solutions. There is no reason to believe that the same would not be the case in Scotland.

Making an application under the homelessness legislation requires that the household is aware of the legislation and the procedure to request assistance from the local authority. With the increased emphasis on homelessness prevention it is crucial that staff are fully trained in advising households on making a homelessness application, based on the legal definition of homelessness (or being threatened with homelessness within two months). Service users should also have access to independent advice.

Local authorities have made limited use of alternatives to social housing in terms of formal discharge of their section 31 duty to statutorily homeless households. This trend is in line with expressed preferences of service users, but also reflects the reluctance of private landlords to agree 12 month contracts for Short Assured Tenancies.

**Service User Priorities**

A key focus of this study has been the inclusion of the perspectives of homeless service users in considering the future shape of homelessness services in Scotland. Prior research for the Scottish Housing Regulator identified mixed experiences among service users alongside some clear preferences for service delivery. For homeless people approaching local authorities it was important that they could see someone who could help them, quickly; and that they were treated with dignity, and recognition of their individual needs, potential vulnerability and possible apprehensiveness at applying for assistance. Where applicants faced rooflessness, resolution of that crisis was a critical requirement. Service users also prioritised good communication with the local authority throughout the process of making an application, waiting for a decision and being allocated temporary and then settled accommodation. Fundamentally, homeless service users needed to secure a safe and permanent home that met their individual needs over the long term. This often included being near to family/friends, education, employment, and transport links. Many service users prioritised availability of ongoing support, if needed. Service users expressed clear preferences for secure tenancies which were considered to be affordable over the long term.

**Priorities of homeless service users**

- Being able to see someone who can help, and being able to see them quickly
- Being treated with dignity, with recognition of individual needs and acknowledgement of homeless applicants’ potential vulnerability and apprehensiveness at approaching the service
- Crisis resolution – especially if the applicant is literally roofless
- Good communication between the service and the applicant throughout the decision making and rehousing process
- Finding a safe and permanent home that meets the applicant’s individual needs. Importantly – this needs to be safe and secure, and in a location near to family/friendship networks, education, employment and transport
- Ongoing support if needed

Source: Adapted from Evans and Littlewood (2011, p1)

Among those service users who took part in the 2012 discussion group for this study a key priority was being able to contact the homelessness service when they needed to. Participants’ actual
knowledge and experience of contacting services was variable and suggestions included wider advertising of homelessness services in public places such as job centres, surgeries, and through television, radio and the police. Participants’ experiences of the homelessness application process also varied, even within one authority. Services users wanted to be assessed by friendly, understanding staff and there was a strong preference for dealing with one key worker throughout the process. 2012 service users also wished to be treated with dignity, and to receive clear explanations of requirements such as ‘evidence’ required for their application. Participants valued a prompt response to their application, especially if urgent shelter was needed. It was also important that they could get to emergency accommodation easily or that transport was provided.

Despite having experienced homelessness, participants expressed a sense of fairness in relation to acknowledgement of other types of housing needs. They wished to be treated fairly in the system but also recognised other types of applicants needed to be considered for vacancies. There was some agreement that once accepted as homeless, households should ideally not spend more than six months in temporary accommodation, but participants did accept that this would depend on individual circumstances. All participants said they valued support with settling into a new tenancy, especially help with benefits. For some participants, the requirement for support in order to get by in temporary and long term accommodation was recognised and available support was much appreciated. Homeless service users expressed a strong desire to be able to work and still afford their temporary or permanent accommodation. Factors which influenced their ability to work (location, rent and other costs, tenure, and service charges in temporary and settled housing) strongly influenced the rational preference for a council tenancy expressed by most participants.

The 2012 service users responded positively to the idea of homelessness prevention and a housing options approach, provided advice was realistic and likely to lead to a sustainable outcome. Although a minority actively wished to live in private rented accommodation, they remained resistant to sharing in the PRS (as required under the Single Room Regulation for those aged under 35 years). When asked what single change might substantially improve services for homeless people, the most emphatic answer was the provision of more affordable housing.

Service users require adequate information about services to be provided in plain English, and staff need to be sensitive to possible difficulties with literacy among service users. Service users may also require independent advice, as well as that provided by the local authority housing options or homelessness service and it is important that independent sources of advice are available across Scotland.

There was considerable continuity in the perspectives of homelessness service users, who found themselves in a disadvantaged position in the housing system largely due to factors which they could not control. They were receptive to early intervention to resolve their housing problems, but awareness of how to achieve this was limited. Service users emphasised the need for practical housing solutions, not just advice. Participants were able to articulate a rational preference for council (or RSL) housing as the most appropriate long term solution to their needs. The fact that they prioritised security of tenure is at odds with the default six month short assured tenancy in the private rented sector and further investigation of private rented solutions from the perspective of service users is required.

Conclusions
Significant progress has been made in transforming services for homeless people in Scotland since 2002. Local authorities have developed a more strategic approach to understanding homelessness through the integration of local homelessness strategies with housing strategies. Considerable progress has also been made towards developing activities to prevent homelessness, notably through housing options interviews; and towards implementation of the strengthened legal safety net for those who do face homelessness, through abolition of the test of priority need. Services could be further enhanced by integrating structures for delivering housing advice and homelessness services; by ensuring services are well-publicised so that those who need to do so can access them as soon as possible; and by implementing appropriate staff training to ensure high quality customer care which provides services which are both effective and sensitive to the needs of homeless applicants. Assessment of additional needs for support or care should be an integral component of both housing options interviews and homelessness assessments. Monitoring the effectiveness of homelessness prevention and tenancy sustainability activities needs to be given the same priority as that of action under the legislative framework.

As Scotland moves beyond the 2012 milestone, achieving a comprehensive homelessness service will essentially entail getting the right balance between proactive homelessness prevention activities and effective implementation of the statutory homelessness framework where homelessness does occur. Evidence collected for this study suggests this is an achievable outcome for Scottish local authorities. There is equally a need to ensure an appropriate balance in the supply of housing solutions in different tenures. The prevention and alleviation of homelessness will always require an adequate supply of appropriate, affordable, secure accommodation, which can be considered as ‘a home’ for the long term.
Checklist for the post-2012 homelessness service

The findings from this research suggest a number of recommendations for action by Scottish Government, the Scottish Housing Regulator and Audit Scotland, as well as a checklist of strategic and service delivery actions for local authorities.

*Recommendations for Scottish Government, Scottish Housing Regulator and Audit Scotland*

- Scottish Government should consider updating and maintaining a code of guidance for delivering a comprehensive homelessness service, including strategic, preventive and responsive dimensions of service planning and delivery.

- The positive role of secure social housing in preventing and alleviating homelessness should continue to be recognised, and investment in an adequate supply needs to be maintained alongside other tenure options.

- Monitoring of homelessness prevention and the effectiveness of person-centred approaches need to be better integrated into homelessness performance monitoring.

- Data collected around housing advice and homelessness needs to reflect the services being delivered and to accurately record outcomes for those within the statutory homeless system and those assisted by other routes. As homelessness prevention activities become more embedded, the monitoring of homelessness and housing advice services will need to become more sophisticated to reflect a more holistic service and range of housing solutions.

- There is a need for further evaluation of the impact of local authority homelessness prevention activity in terms of effectiveness, fairness in relation to the statutory homelessness framework, and the perspectives of service users.

- There is a case for retaining some elements of the previous regulatory framework, such as occasional inspections and transparent improvement processes, in the new Scottish Housing Regulator’s framework.

- The delivery of homelessness services in stock transfer authorities should be carefully monitored to ensure comparability with landlord authorities.

- Choice Based Lettings systems should be subject to equalities monitoring to ensure homeless households and other disadvantaged groups have fair opportunities to have their long term housing needs met.

- Development of the role of the private rented sector needs to take more account of the evidence that homeless service users are seeking long-term settled accommodation at a rent which does not prohibit them from taking up lower paid employment. Private landlords should be encouraged to provide Assured Tenancies or longer term Short Assured Tenancies (e.g. minimum of 12 month contract), at affordable rents for those on low incomes.


**Recommendations for Scottish Local Authorities and their partners**

**Strategic Action**

- Effective homelessness strategies should seek to deliver a balanced supply of affordable, secure, quality housing which meets the needs of low income and homeless households in the long term.

- Local authority homelessness services should be grounded in an organisational culture which is customer-oriented and focused on delivering the highest quality homelessness services.

- Homelessness services should be underpinned by a robust equalities approach which ensures that all applicants for housing are given equal and consistent advice irrespective of household type or membership of any of the nine protected groups under the Equality Act 2010.

- Homelessness services should be underpinned by a sound understanding of the costs of service provision so that appropriate budgets can be allocated, and then managed effectively with respect to both income and expenditure.

- As of January 2013, the test of priority need will no longer be part of the legal homelessness framework and local authorities need to ensure this change is fully implemented. The statutory definition of homelessness remains unchanged.

- Service development should bear in mind the possible future implementation of the remaining provisions of the Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003, including the abolition of the local connection test and changing the intentionality test from a duty to a power.

- Homelessness service quality should be robustly monitored in order to drive ongoing improvement, including effective service user engagement.

- Stock transfer housing authorities need to have especially clear procedures for homelessness and housing options advice.

- Local authorities and their partners should ensure staff are able to undertake appropriate training and education to deliver effective homelessness services.

- In seeking to make use of private rented housing as part of their homelessness services, local authorities should seek to agree Assured Tenancies or Short Assured Tenancies of a minimum contract of 12 months.

- Local authorities should consider improved joint working to assist homeless households with legitimate needs to move between areas.

**Operational Action**

- Homelessness services should be well publicised and readily accessible to the public.

- Homeless or potentially homeless service users should be treated with respect and dignity by all staff of local authorities, RSLs, support providers and other partner organisations.
• Local authorities and their partners need to ensure a careful balance between homelessness prevention and appropriate responsive action under the strengthened legislative framework.

• All staff involved in providing housing advice should be trained in the operation of the statutory homelessness framework and organisations should have a clear decision making procedure for advising those who are homeless (or at risk of homelessness within two months) of their entitlement to make a homelessness application.

• Ownership of the idea of person-centred housing options advice needs to permeate all aspects of the housing service. Staff should have core skills in identifying where early intervention can be targeted, giving initial advice and referring customers for specialist advice.

• Housing options and homelessness rights should be clearly explained to applicants, in a non-judgemental fashion.

• Clear communication should be established at initial client contact and maintained throughout the process of applying for housing or making a homelessness application, to the point of settled housing or alternative resolution of the application.

• Where possible, service users should have a single worker who co-ordinates their application and sustains communication through the process.

• Local authorities should adhere to all guidance and recommended quality standards for temporary accommodation, and ensure this is accessible and affordable for those who need emergency access to housing.

• Where the local authority has a duty to provide permanent accommodation to a homeless household it should seek to fulfil that speedily, while taking appropriate account of support needs and reasonable housing preferences of homeless households.
Section 1: Introduction

The Scottish housing policy and practice community reaches a number of important milestones in 2012. Perhaps the most significant is full implementation of the Scottish Government’s 2012 commitment under the Homelessness, etc. (Scotland) Act 2003, to abolish the test of priority need in the statutory homelessness framework. This means that by the end of the year, local authorities will have a duty to secure settled accommodation for all non-intentionally homeless households. In addition, as of April 2012, Scotland has a new Social Housing Charter which sets out the key commitments of local authorities and Registered Social Landlords (RSL) to tenants and applicants, and an updated regulatory framework for social landlords will be introduced by the independent Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR). These factors mean that 2012 is also an opportune time to reflect on what a modern homelessness service should look like in relation to the modernised legal, policy and regulatory frameworks. Previous SHR inspection reports indicated improvements in homelessness services, albeit with scope to further enhance performance in this area of practice. In 2011, the SHR published a report on Priorities of Homeless Service Users (Evans and Littlewood, 2011) which revealed a considerable gap between homelessness service provision and the aspirations of homeless people using the services. This report appraises the most recent evidence and guidance for practice in order to suggest how homelessness services might best meet the needs of homeless households in the post-2012 era.

Aims of the study and research methods

The overall aim of the project was to consider the likely shape of local authority homelessness services from 2012 onwards, following the implementation of the modernised legislative framework set out in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and the Homelessness, etc. (Scotland) Act 2003; and the passing of the 2012 milestone in the implementation of that legislation.

This report considers the key elements required for a modern homelessness service which fully meets legislative, policy and practice requirements and delivers a client-oriented service. The main elements of the study were:

1. A review of relevant literature including performance frameworks and guidance.

2. A discussion group with senior homelessness practitioners from local authorities and voluntary sector homelessness agencies, to consider issues emerging from the review.

A discussion group with homelessness service users from a case study local authority area, to update the service user perspective in relation to changing practice.

Section two of this report reviews the relevant literature and guidance for local authorities and their partners on providing services for homeless people. Sections three and four report the perspectives

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1 While six of Scotland’s 32 local authorities are no longer landlords (due to having transferred their housing stock to RSLs), they retain their strategic responsibilities for housing and their legal responsibilities for homelessness. The term RSL is used throughout this report to refer to housing associations and other social landlords registered with the Scottish Housing Regulator.
of practitioners and service users respectively on changing practice in relation to homelessness. Section 5 presents a discussion of key issues emerging from the study and Section 6 provides a checklist of key components for the ideal homelessness service of the future.
Section 2: Scotland’s changing homelessness service – a review

Introduction

Scottish local authorities have had duties to assist households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, since the implementation of the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977, which applied to England, Scotland and Wales (later consolidated in the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 for the Scottish legal context). Where there was reason to believe that an applicant faced homelessness, local authorities had a duty to investigate the household’s circumstances.

The definition of homelessness was set out in detail in the Housing Act 1987 and is reproduced in full in Figure 1 below for two reasons. First, this remains the legal definition which determines whether a household is homeless within the Scottish statutory framework. Second, the full definition serves as a reminder of the complexity of defining homelessness and the specific nature of the legal definition in Scotland, compared to definitions which may be adopted in other countries or for other purposes. For example the widely cited ETHOS typology of homelessness developed by Edgar and Meert (2005) for the European Federation of Homelessness Agencies (FEANTSA) distinguishes between rooflessness, houselessness, insecure accommodation and inadequate accommodation. The typology further identifies more detailed categories and sub-categories for each of these housing situations and is helpful for the international comparative analysis of homelessness. In relation to such a typology, Scotland retains a relatively comprehensive definition of homelessness for legal purposes, taking account not only of the availability or lack of accommodation, but also of the ‘reasonableness’ of any available accommodation and the threat of losing accommodation within two months.

Figure 1: Housing (Scotland) Act 1987: legal definition of homelessness in Scotland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part II, Section 24: Main Definitions of homeless persons and persons threatened with homelessness (F = Post 1987 amendment, still in place at June 2012)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) A person is homeless if he has no accommodation in [F38]the United Kingdom or elsewhere.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) A person is to be treated as having no accommodation if there is no accommodation which he, together with any other person who normally resides with him as a member of his family or in circumstances in which the local authority consider it reasonable for that person to reside with him—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) is entitled to occupy by virtue of an interest in it or by virtue of an order of a court, or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) has a right or permission, or an implied right or permission to occupy, or in England and Wales has an express or implied licence to occupy, or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) occupies as a residence by virtue of any enactment or rule of law giving him the right to remain in occupation or restricting the right of any other person to recover possession.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="2A">F39</a> A person shall not be treated as having accommodation unless it is accommodation which it would be reasonable for him to continue to occupy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2B) Regard may be had, in determining whether it would be reasonable for a person to continue to occupy accommodation, to the general circumstances prevailing in relation to housing in the area of the local authority to whom he has applied for accommodation or for assistance in obtaining accommodation.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) A person is also homeless if he has accommodation but—</td>
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<tr>
<td>(a) he cannot secure entry to it, or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) it is probable that occupation of it will lead to violence from some other person residing in it or to threats of violence from some other person residing in it and likely to carry out the threats, or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="bb">F39</a> it is probable that occupation of it will lead to—</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
(i) violence; or
(ii) threats of violence which are likely to be carried out,
from some other person who previously resided with that person, whether in that accommodation or elsewhere, or]
(c) it consists of a movable structure, vehicle or vessel designed or adapted for human habitation and there is no place where he is entitled or permitted both to place it and to reside in it; or
(d) it is overcrowded within the meaning of section 135 and may endanger the health of the occupants [F40; or
(e) it is not permanent accommodation, in circumstances where, immediately before the commencement of his occupation of it, a local authority had a duty under section 31(2) in relation to him.]

(4) A person is threatened with homelessness if it is likely that he will become homeless within [F41 2 months].

(F42(5) For the purposes of subsection (3)(e), “permanent accommodation” includes accommodation—
(a) of which the person is the heritable proprietor,
(b) secured by a Scottish secure tenancy,
(c) secured by an assured tenancy that is not a short assured tenancy (d) where paragraph 1 or 2 of schedule 6 to the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 (asp 10) is satisfied in relation to the person, secured by a short Scottish secure tenancy.)

Source: Housing (Scotland) Act 1987, accessed online from National Archives, April 2012

The homelessness legislation also defined three other ‘tests’ associated with homelessness: priority need, intentional homelessness and local connection. Where a household was found to be homeless, in priority need, and had not made themselves intentionally homeless, it became the statutory duty of that authority to secure suitable housing for the applicant. If the applicant was not deemed to have a ‘local connection’ with the authority to which they applied, they could be referred to another authority (where there was a stronger local connection) for discharge of the homelessness duty. Local authorities mainly fulfilled their statutory duty to homeless households through the allocation of a secure council tenancy or by referral to a housing association or RSL. The 1987 legislation also allowed for discharge of duty through an Assured Tenancy in the private rented sector, but this route was rarely used as the default private tenancy increasingly became the Short Assured Tenancy which offered only a minimum contract of six months, and no protection from tenancy termination thereafter, other than two months notice.

The 1987 framework remained in place in Scotland until the review of the Homelessness Task Force (2000, 2002) recommended legal and policy changes to modernise Scotland’s approach to the alleviation and prevention of homelessness. Figures 2 and 3 summarise the main changes to the legislative framework and progress towards implementation and policy guidance which further supplements the legal framework is discussed later in the section. The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 also introduced the Scottish Secure Tenancy which harmonised the terms of tenancies in the council and housing association sectors in Scotland.
Figure 2: Homelessness provisions within the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001

<table>
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<th>Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 – new measures on homelessness – all implemented</th>
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Source: Anderson, 2011, p3

Figure 3: Provisions of Homelessness, etc. (Scotland) Act 2003 and stage of enactment

<table>
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<th>Provisions of Homelessness, etc. (Scotland) Act 2003</th>
<th>Enacted by June 2012</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Amendment of Section 25 of the 1987 Act to expand the definition of persons having priority need</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Abolition of priority need test by no later than 31 December 2012</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Statement on abolition of priority need test by 31 December 2005, setting out measures to achieve ‘2012 target’</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Gives local authorities discretion as to whether to investigate intentionality, rather than a duty.</td>
</tr>
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<td>5 and 6</td>
<td>Provision of a Short Scottish Secure Tenancy and appropriate support for intentionally homeless households in priority need, with a view to future conversion to a secure tenancy</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Local connection – not to be restricted by accommodation provided under Immigration and Asylum Act 1999</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Local connection – restriction of power of referral</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Suitability of accommodation for homeless persons (restricting use of bed and breakfast accommodation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Persons at risk of domestic abuse – change of terminology (from domestic violence)</td>
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\(^2\) The homelessness strategy was subsequently integrated into the local housing strategy.

\(^3\) Amended in February 2010 to extend the options for long-term rehousing of homeless households beyond Scottish secure tenancies (Scottish Government, 2010).
As part of this modernisation of homelessness services in Scotland, it is likely that many Scottish local authorities have reviewed their approach to service structures and to delivery. In addition there have been some recommended changes to practice outside of the legislative framework.

Since 2009 Scottish Government has encouraged an emphasis on homelessness prevention, including the development of a ‘housing options’ approach to assessing housing needs (Scottish Government, 2009). In 2010 the Scottish Government launched an initiative to support Housing Options Hubs where local authorities work together in regional groupings to further develop the housing options approach (Scottish Government, 2012a). As part of homelessness prevention and the housing options approach, local authorities have also been encouraged to make greater use of the private rented sector as a solution to homelessness. This was supported by the amendment of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987’s Section 32 regulations to allow discharge of the section 31 statutory homelessness duty through a private sector Short Assured Tenancy of at least a 12 month minimum period (Scottish Government, 2010).

Local authorities are required to take account of such guidance from the Scottish Government and their homelessness services are independently monitored by the Scottish Housing Regulator and the Accounts Commission.

Ten years on from the Homelessness Task Force final report, the framework for providing homelessness services is more complex, and potentially more sophisticated, that that envisaged by the Task Force. Homelessness services are now required to balance delivery of the strengthened statutory safety net alongside a strategic approach to tackling homelessness and the development of homelessness prevention activities. In addition, the economic and political context in which homelessness services are provided has also changed, as have patterns of housing tenure, the availability of social housing stock, and, most recently the social security framework (including Housing Benefit regulations).

Scottish Government (2005, 2009) has provided detailed guidance for local authorities and their partners to support them to continually improve their services to homeless households. National guidance also plays an important role in ensuring consistency in interpretation of the homelessness legislation across the country. Scottish Government has monitored the actions of local authorities in relation to homeless persons through the collection of routine statistics which are published twice yearly (most recently in Scottish Government, 2012b). These homelessness statistics provide a very detailed data set on trends in homelessness applications, assessment and outcomes over time.

The remainder of this section reviews the evidence on how Scottish homelessness services have been changing since 2002, taking account of the legislative framework, guidance for policy and practice, and available research evidence of implementation and changing outcomes. The
implications for homelessness services of the introduction of the Scottish Social Housing Charter and the Scottish Housing Regulator’s revised monitoring framework are then considered. Finally, the Scottish framework is compared with the rest of the UK and the international environment, before presenting conclusions from the evidence reviewed.

**Scotland’s changing homelessness services**

The 21st century has seen significant changes to how local authorities deliver services to homeless people. Very broadly, the framework has changed from one which was largely responsive, reacting to situations where people became homeless in a crisis (1977-2000); to add a more strategic approach of assessing need and planning to deal with homelessness across the local authority area (since 2001); and most recently to incorporate a preventive approach, seeking to resolve housing needs in advance of a homelessness crisis (from 2009). These broad trends have been driven by both the legislative framework and learning from research evidence on the reasons why people become homeless, as well as ‘what works’ in terms of resolving and preventing homelessness. The responsive, strategic and preventive approaches to homelessness are not mutually exclusive. Rather they are three critical strands of service provision, all of which are necessary for an ideal, comprehensive service. While the responsive dimension may have developed prior to the other two, in a modern homelessness service the strategic dimension would rationally come first so that a strategic assessment of homelessness and housing need, incorporated into a local housing strategy underpins the scope and delivery of the preventive and responsive aspects of direct service provision to households who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

*The strategic homelessness service*

The strategic approach to homelessness has its base in the requirement, since 2001, that local authorities produce local homelessness strategies (subsequently incorporated into their local housing strategies). Such strategies represent a potentially valuable tool to drive homelessness service delivery and monitoring of outcomes. The strategic approach to homelessness also recognises that local authority housing services increasingly work with a wide range of partners in order to meet the needs of homeless households. These include a range of local authority services under the Community Planning framework (e.g. housing, social work, planning), RSLs, private landlords, third sector agencies providing support services, and health services. Since 2001, local authorities have also been required to produce health and homelessness action plans jointly with NHS Boards/Community Health Partnerships. Even where a local authority is no longer a landlord (for example because it has transferred its stock to an RSL), it retains its strategic and responsive homelessness responsibilities under the legal and policy frameworks.

While such processes may operate effectively within individual local authorities and partnerships, there is surprisingly little published independent research evidence on the impact of local housing and homelessness strategies across Scotland. Neither has there been any national evaluation of the effectiveness of strategic health and homelessness action plans (Anderson and Ytrehus, 2012). Since 2007, local authorities have reported to Scottish Government through Single Outcome Agreements across all of their service areas, a mechanism which could be utilised for accounting for their strategic performance in relation to homelessness.
The preventive homelessness service

Although not included in legislative change, the Homelessness Task Force (2002) recommended the development of homelessness prevention services as part of its wider review and the 2005 Code of Guidance on Homelessness (Scottish Government, 2005) contained some guidance on homelessness prevention. Early prevention activities were evaluated by Pawson et al (2007) and Sharp and Robertson (2008). These studies identified a range of homelessness prevention activities including prevention of eviction; better assisting people being discharged from institutions; family mediation; conflict resolution; and enhancing employment opportunities. They also revealed difficulties in establishing the effectiveness of homelessness prevention activities both at organisational level and in relation to the official homelessness statistics. Subsequent guidance adopted the following definition of homelessness prevention:

‘central to our definition of homelessness prevention, we consider that; following a competent and person-centred assessment of the risks of homelessness, the approaches and activities undertaken to secure the most effective, appropriate and sustainable housing outcome for the person concerned should be deemed as acceptable prevention activity’ (Scottish Government, 2009, p4).

A broad thrust of the preventive approach was that a more systematic approach to dealing with the root causes of homelessness might yield more effective results over the long term, linking prevention to a strategic approach to homelessness. Further, since responding to homelessness after a crisis could be costly in both personal and financial terms, preventing homelessness from happening was likely to be both cost effective for the state and less traumatic for the households concerned. The 2009 guidance further emphasised the need for joint working across services in order to prevent homelessness, as well as the need for proactive, early intervention, based on knowledge of the causes of homelessness. Homelessness prevention activity was expected to focus on providing sustainable housing outcomes based on person-centred assessments, but was not intended to undermine the responsive, statutory safety net for those households who did face homelessness. Indeed the 2009 guidance was clear that prevention should not be confused with ‘gatekeeping’ the statutory service (described as the practice of preventing or discouraging people from making homelessness applications as opposed to preventing homelessness from occurring) and reiterated that the strong statutory framework would be maintained.

Housing options interviews and personal housing plans were identified as key tools in developing homelessness prevention activities (Scottish Government, 2009) and since 2010 the 32 Scottish local authorities have been working jointly to implement the approach through five ‘Housing Options Hubs’ (Scottish Government, 2012a). This represented quite a challenging change in local authorities’ ways of working, with implications for associated staff training needs (Shelter Scotland, 2011). As it would take some time to see an impact on homelessness prevention there remained a need to ensure responsive legal duties continued to be met. Other early research recommendations were that Housing Options Hubs also needed to include other partners outside of local authorities; that a stronger co-ordination role from central government was needed; and that a fundamental requirement was that a range of sustainable options actually existed across Hubs, (Shelter Scotland, 2011). Such a core range of housing options included: help to stay in current accommodation; finding new rented accommodation (social or private); and help to move into home ownership.
Housing options interviews and homelessness applications needed to be integrated processes, so that clients felt they had been advised effectively, leading to a successful long-term outcome. Advisors needed to be clear about the outcomes of interviews and it would be crucial to consult service users on how the approach was working (Shelter Scotland, 2011). An independent evaluation of the Housing Options Hubs pilot concluded that the joint working approach had benefited homelessness service providers through sharing of expertise, but did not report on outcomes for service users (Ipsos MORI and Littlewood, 2012).

Some voluntary sector organisations have produced their own evaluations of the effectiveness of homelessness prevention services with encouraging results (for example, Cyrenians, 2011), but the preventive homelessness service has not yet been integrated into the national monitoring system as effectively as the responsive dimension. There remains a need for a further national-level assessment of the effectiveness of housing options approaches and other homelessness prevention activities from the perspective of those seeking solutions to housing problems.

The responsive homelessness service

The responsive dimension of the homelessness service essentially relates to the statutory framework to protect households faced with homelessness. This includes dealing with emergency homelessness and resolving homelessness where it cannot be prevented. Services typically include advising applicants on the assistance to which homeless people are entitled; making enquiries as to whether a household is statutorily homeless; where necessary, the provision of temporary accommodation pending assessment and decision, and while awaiting a settled housing outcome; and where a duty arises, assistance in securing settled accommodation. Any support needs of homeless applicants need to be taken account of during this process. Extensive guidance on interpreting the legislation is provided in the accompanying Code of Guidance (Scottish Government, 2005) and recommended standards for temporary accommodation were produced by Shelter and the Chartered Institute of Housing (2010).

Responsive homelessness services represent the longest established dimension of homelessness services and they are particularly well-monitored by the official homelessness statistics which largely evolved to record local authorities’ responsive actions under the homeless persons legislation. For example, the ten-year programme to abolish the test of priority need by the end of 2012 has been closely monitored through the official statistics with the most recent bulletin reporting that nine authorities had achieved the target of abolishing the priority need test by September 2011, with 12 reporting being 90-99% of the way to achieving it, seven in the 80-89% stage and only four recording less than 80% of those accepted as homeless as being in priority need (Scottish Government, 2012b). The statistics also indicated that local authority and RSL housing continued to provide an effective settled outcome for almost two thirds of households accepted as homeless and in priority need (Scottish Government, 2012b, p33). While there has been no recent independent evaluation of the responsive homelessness service in Scotland, a robust study in England concluded that the statutory homelessness system continued to provide an effective safety net for those facing housing crisis, which resulted in a net overall improvement in quality of life for those assisted (Please et al, 2008; Fitzpatrick and Pleace, 2012).

Homelessness and Support Services
Scottish homelessness statistics indicate that around one third of homeless households have support needs in addition to their need for housing, and a proportion of these have multiple or complex needs. Under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010, local authorities will have an additional duty to carry out an assessment of housing support needs for those accepted as statutorily homeless, and to ensure that any required support is provided (Scottish Government, 2012c). A consultation exercise on implementation of this duty, in March 2012, sought views on whether or not various matters should be prescribed nationally or left to local discretion but offered no substantive detail on actual proposals to implement the duty.

Young people (aged 16-24 years) are known to be at a high risk of homelessness and the role of supported accommodation for young people within Scottish homelessness services was reviewed by a Cross Sector Supported Accommodation Working Group (Scottish Government, 2011). The review recognised an explicit link between tackling youth homelessness and meeting the 2012 homelessness target. The working group identified models of practice, funding and employability as three key themes for the sector. A crucial question is whether the key service required by young people is ‘appropriate support’, as opposed to ‘supported accommodation’. The working group recommended that young homeless people should have the option of supported accommodation when it was required, but the option of providing a mainstream tenancy with support should equally be available as part of the range of housing solutions for young people. While the working group report argued that lack of supported accommodation provision could heighten the difficulties of sustaining tenancies at a potentially unstable and transitional period in an individual’s life, the option of providing support in ordinary housing could also alleviate such a risk. The sixteen recommendations for local authorities and their partners acknowledged the complexity of issues involved in resolving both housing and support needs for young people (Figure 4), but the report did not present any distinct evidence of service users’ views.

**Figure 4: Recommendations of the Supported Accommodation Working Group, 2011**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. There is a need for flexible, individualised provision, which goes beyond housing provision and is focused on outcomes, not processes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. There should be diversity in provision, including accommodation-based support and floating support in mainstream tenancies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Initial support assessments should include employability and financial advice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The empowerment of individuals should be central to delivering support, in line with national policies on personalisation and self directed support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Supportive relationships with staff are key and smaller scale operation appeared most beneficial in residential models.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Existing funding mechanisms should be utilised in a clear planning framework for the capital and revenue needs of services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Models should consider availability of funding to RSLs to contribute to supported accommodation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Models should optimise the leveraging in of non-government funding (e.g. through social philanthropy).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Services should pilot ‘social return on investment’ models.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Employability support should be part of core support services.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
11. There is a role for Further Education colleges in supporting young homeless people’s employability development.

12. Services should be linked to the national strategy to reduce the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training (e.g. through *More Choices, More Chances* partnerships).

13. While benefit trap issues remain for those in supported accommodation, practice from existing innovative models for the development of employability skills could be better shared.

14. The importance of adequate and appropriate welfare benefits for young people at risk needs to be continually emphasised to the UK Department of Work and Pensions.

15. Sharing of practice on supported accommodation needs to be linked to local housing strategies and community planning frameworks.

16. Drawing on national framework such as GIRFEC (Getting It Right for Every Child), the priority should be to bring housing closer to the needs of specific groups at risk of homelessness through a multi agency strategy.

Source: Summarised from Scottish Government (2011, pp3-6).

### Homeless Service User Priorities

In considering the shape of future homelessness services in Scotland, it is vital to consider whether they are effectively meeting the needs and aspirations of people affected by homelessness. A survey of staff in local authorities, RSLs and voluntary sector agencies found more than 90% support for the post-2000 changes to homelessness services, but the research also revealed that housing workers still made judgements about the relative merits of different homeless households (Jardine & Bilton, 2006). More than half of respondents in the 2006 survey felt that the abolition of local connection and non-priority need was unfair, and nearly three quarters reported that the new legislation would make it more difficult to ‘achieve balanced communities’, demonstrating the complexity of implementation compared to the more idealistic nature of the national framework.

In contrast, a key study of how homeless people viewed local authority homelessness services was conducted by Evans and Littlewood (2011) for the Scottish Housing Regulator. The main findings from the study are summarised in Figure 5 and the research is considered in more detail in section 4, alongside the views of service users who took part in a discussion group for this study.

**Figure 5: Priorities of homeless service users, 2011**

- Being able to see someone who can help, and being able to see them quickly
- Being treated with dignity, with recognition of individual needs and acknowledgement of homeless applicants’ potential vulnerability and apprehensiveness at approaching the service
- Crisis resolution – especially if the applicant is literally roofless
- Good communication between the service and the applicant throughout the decision making and rehousing process
- Finding a safe and permanent home that meets the applicant’s individual needs. Importantly – this needs to be safe and secure, and in a location near to family/friendship networks, education, employment and transport
- Ongoing support if needed

Source: Adapted from Evans and Littlewood (2011, p1)
The regulatory framework for homelessness services

Prior to the establishment of the Scottish Housing Regulator, Communities Scotland was the body responsible for the regulation and monitoring of Registered Social Landlords, and for local authority homelessness services. Performance Standards for social landlords and homelessness services were introduced in 2006 (Communities Scotland, 2006) and remained in place until the new framework of the Scottish Housing Regulator came into operation in 2012. The 2006 performance standards for access to housing and homelessness are summarised in Figure 6. These cover all three dimensions of the homelessness service (strategic, preventive and responsive).

Figure 6: Performance Standards for access to housing and homelessness (2006-2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Access to housing:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• ensure fair and open access to the housing list and fair assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• work in partnership to maximise and simplify routes into housing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lettings:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• ensure reasonable preference is afforded to groups specified in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• make best use of the housing stock, while optimising choice and sustaining communities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Homelessness:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Publish and follow a Local Homelessness Strategy (subsequently incorporated into Local Housing Strategy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Make use of partnership working to meet the needs of homeless people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ensure homeless people have full and fair access to vacancies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Work to prevent homelessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ensure the provision of free and effective information and advice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Publicise the existence of the homelessness appeals process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ensure fairness and quality in temporary and permanent accommodation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ensure contract compliance, for example with respect to how RSLs work with local authorities to tackle homelessness.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Communities Scotland (2006) *Performance Indicators.*

As well as routine performance monitoring Communities Scotland and the Scottish Housing Regulator had a role in inspecting local authorities and RSLs, and the agencies also produced thematic reports summarising their findings from inspections of local authority homelessness services (2005) and the role of RSLs in tackling homelessness (2009). These reports identified variable performance across local authorities and considerable scope for RSLs to increase their contribution to rehousing homeless households. In line with the recommendations of an independent review of public service regulation in Scotland (Crerar, 2007), a subsequent policy shift towards lighter touch regulation emerged and the regulatory framework was reviewed during 2011/12 as discussed below in relation to the introduction of the Social Housing Charter.
The Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 incorporated provisions for a new Social Housing Charter, which was duly published in 2012, following a period of consultation (Scottish Government, 2012d). The Charter sets the outcomes and standards that all social landlords across Scotland should be achieving for tenants and other customers. The purpose of the Charter is to give tenants, homeless people and other customers a clear understanding of what they should expect from a social landlord and to give landlords a clear understanding what their services should be delivering. The Charter replaces the previous performance standards for social landlords and homelessness functions under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and those set by Communities Scotland (2006). The first charter will remain in force for 5 years (1 April 2012–31 March 2017), and will then be reviewed.

The Charter does not impose new duties on social landlords; rather it describes what a good social landlord should be achieving for its tenants. The Charter may also play a part in ensuring that public investment in new social housing is allocated to those landlords assessed as performing well against its outcomes. Finally, the Charter is to be interpreted in relation to Scottish Government national-level outcomes such as delivering high quality public services, well designed sustainable communities, improved life chances and healthier living for the people of Scotland (Scottish Government, 2012d). The core of the Charter is presented as a series of ‘outcomes and standards’ across various aspects of landlord activity and homelessness services. Figure 7 shows the outcomes for access to housing and homelessness.

Figure 7: Scottish Social Housing Charter – outcomes on access to housing and homelessness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Access to Housing and Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outcomes 7, 8 and 9: Housing Options</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Social landlords work together to ensure that:
• people looking for housing get information that helps them make informed choices and decisions about the range of housing options available to them
• tenants and people on housing lists can review their housing options.
Social landlords ensure that:
• people at risk of losing their homes get advice on preventing homelessness.

These outcomes cover landlords’ duties to provide information to people looking for housing and advice for those at risk of becoming homeless. These duties include helping tenants and people on housing lists to review their options to move within the social housing sector or to another sector.

**Outcome 10: Access to social housing**
Social landlords ensure that:
• people looking for housing find it easy to apply for the widest choice of social housing available and get the information they need on how the landlord allocates homes and their prospects of being housed.

This outcome covers what social landlords can do to make it easy for people to apply for the widest choice of social housing that is available and suitable and that meets their needs. It includes actions that social landlords can take on their own and in partnership with others, for example through Common Housing Registers or mutual exchange schemes, or through local information and advice schemes.
**Outcome 11: Tenancy sustainment**
Social landlords ensure that:

- tenants get the information they need on how to obtain support to remain in their home; and ensure suitable support is available, including services provided directly by the landlord and by other organisations.

This outcome covers how landlords can help tenants who may need support to maintain their tenancy. This includes tenants who may be at risk of falling into arrears with their rent, and tenants who may need their home adapted to cope with age, disability, or caring responsibilities.

**Outcome 12: Homeless People**
Local councils perform their duties on homelessness so that:

- homeless people get prompt and easy access to help and advice; are provided with suitable, good-quality temporary or emergency accommodation when this is needed; and are offered continuing support to help them get and keep the home they are entitled to.

This outcome describes what councils should achieve by meeting their statutory duties to homeless people.


While the Charter sets broad outcomes which follow logically from the legislative framework and research evidence base, there is no outcome which explicitly refers to robustly implementing the legal framework. Further, the outcomes are not explicitly framed in terms which are measurable in a way which would readily facilitate performance monitoring. Rather, monitoring of performance against the Charter falls to the Scottish Housing Regulator which subsequently published a revised framework for the regulation of social housing in Scotland (Scottish Housing Regulator, 2012a).

Throughout the framework, the SHR specifically recognises people who are homeless as core service users for local authority and RSL housing and homelessness services. Engaging with service users is seen as key to effective regulation and accountability, although further consideration may be needed regarding the precise mechanisms for this service user engagement.

SHR has a legal duty to consult with the Accounts Commission in relation to regulation of local authority landlord and homelessness functions. Such scrutiny is directed through a joint framework and shared risk assessment (Audit Scotland, 2010). Partners in the joint code of practice on scrutiny of local government services include the Accounts Commission, Audit Scotland, the Social Work Inspectorate, the Care Commission, NHS Quality Improvement Scotland, HM Inspectorate of Education, and HM Inspectorate of Scottish Constabulary as well as the Scottish Housing Regulator. The joint framework follows the Crerar (2007) principles and operates on the basis of local area networks (for each authority), shared risk assessment, joint scrutiny planning, and single corporate assessment of performance.

SHR also works within the provisions of the Equality Act 2010 and is explicitly committed to mainstreaming equality and diversity issues. Protecting the interests of homeless people is part of the purpose of SHR’s regulatory function. This involves ensuring good outcomes are secured for homeless people, tenants and other service users. Regulation is, however, to be risk-based and proportionate. This means that the degree of scrutiny reflects the level of recent performance of each landlord or homelessness service. For example, risk could be identified through poor recorded
performance of a homelessness service or allocations policy with respect to outcomes for homeless applicants.

The 2012 framework indicates that the regulator will draw on a range of information to assess risk and performance of RSLs and local authorities:

- Information available on landlords’ progress towards the Scottish Social Housing Charter
- Financial information (jointly with Accounts Commission for local authorities).
- Service quality information from: business plans; recent inspections and follow-up improvement work; thematic work; service user feedback; information published on websites; and complaints, whistleblowing and other indicators of performance issues.

Once risk is assessed for RSLs, the required level of engagement will be classified as low, medium or high and regulatory resources will be focused on those in the medium and high categories, where an individual regulation plan will be developed (setting out required action). For councils, Assurance and Improvement Plans will be developed in partnership under the agreed Local Government Scrutiny Joint Code of Practice.

It is an explicit role of the Regulator to monitor and report on local authority and RSL performance in meeting the Scottish Social Housing Charter, and this will be based on their performance information and assessment of their own performance as illustrated in Figure 8 (Scottish Housing Regulator, 2012a).

**Figure 8: Framework for monitoring performance against Scottish Social Housing Charter**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Each year ending on 31 March Landlords should:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Measure and assess their performance in progressing towards or achieving the Charter outcomes and standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provide the SHR with some key performance information on their achievement of the outcomes and standards; and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Report their performance to tenants and other service users who use their services.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Each year the Regulator will:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Publish a range of accessible information to allow service users and other stakeholders to understand and compare landlords performance in achieving the Charter outcomes and standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use this information for regulatory risk assessment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Scottish Housing Regulator (2012a) Regulation of social housing in Scotland: Our Framework.

From April 2013 all social landlords will be required to collect and provide key information on performance in achieving the Charter outcomes and standards to the SHR, through an Annual Return on the Charter (ARC). This ARC will be used to report publicly on progress. This will replace Annual Performance Statistical Return (APSR), Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS) return and statutory performance data previously collected by Audit Scotland (previous systems will continue to be used for 2012/13). The first ARC return will be May 2014, with data published by August 2014, following the process illustrated on Figure 9.
While the Regulator’s framework states that rather than prescribing the form of performance reporting, landlords should decide this in discussion with service users, monitoring is expected to include: assessment of performance across each relevant Charter outcome and standard; comparisons across time and with other landlords; and plans to for improvement. Assessment of performance should be a continuous process which is objective, evidence based and transparent. The framework requires the involvement of service users, including those who are not tenants.

On 1st June 2012, the SHR launched a consultation exercise on specific indicators to monitor social landlords’ achievement of Charter outcomes, with responses due by 24 Aug 2012 (Scottish Housing Regulator, 2012b). The Regulator proposes to publish an annual Charter Report for tenants and other service users which will indicate whether services are improving, not changing much, or becoming poorer – and will rank landlords in the top, second, third or bottom quarter of all organisations within the comparison, as illustrated on Figure 10. While the consultation paper proposes some key indicators, there is no indicator of satisfaction with the application process or for households who do not access either temporary or permanent accommodation.

**Figure 9: Process for delivering Annual Return on the Charter**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When</th>
<th>Who</th>
<th>What</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Throughout year</td>
<td>Landlord</td>
<td>Assesses performance against the Charter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>Landlord</td>
<td>Completes and submits the Annual Return on the Charter (ARC) to SHR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>SHR</td>
<td>Publishes on the SHR website a report about each landlord with key data from its ARC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>Landlord</td>
<td>Reports its performance to all tenants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By March</td>
<td>SHR</td>
<td>Publishes regulation plans for RSLs and contributes to Assurance and Improvement Plans for councils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By March</td>
<td>SHR</td>
<td>Publishes a report on the analysis of the sector’s performance in achieving the Charter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Scottish Housing Regulator (2012a) Regulation of social housing in Scotland: Our Framework.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Change</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of homeless applications to the council</td>
<td>Number of applications received</td>
<td>Improving, not much change or poorer</td>
<td>Top, second, third or bottom quarter of organisations within the comparison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of time taken to get permanent accommodation</td>
<td>Average number of weeks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless people satisfied with the quality of temporary or emergency accommodation</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average time spent in temporary or emergency accommodation</td>
<td>Average number of days</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offers of temporary or emergency accommodation Refused</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A more detailed set of indicators and context data are proposed in order to monitor landlords’ achievement of Charter outcomes and standards (Figures 11 and 12) and it is anticipated that these will mainly be collected through the ARC. In addition, SHR also proposes to utilise the homelessness data that local authorities send to the Scottish Government to inform scrutiny of the Charter. The ARC might also consider how homelessness prevention might be monitored, as well as continuing to monitor lettings to statutorily homeless households and satisfaction with settled accommodation.

**Figure 11: Proposed ARC performance indicators for homelessness, access to housing and support**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charter Outcome</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall satisfaction</td>
<td>Percentage of tenants and other customers satisfied with the overall service provided by social landlords</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7, 8, 9 &amp; 10 Housing Options and Access to Social Housing</td>
<td>No single indicator is proposed for these outcomes. SHR will use the indicators below along with those relating to outcomes 11 (Tenancy sustainment) and 12 (Homelessness) to assess performance. SHR will also assess ‘context data’ on the management of waiting lists supplied to support the Annual Return on the Charter (Figure 12). 9.1 For RSLs, the total number of section 11 referrals made to local authorities during the last year. 9.2 For local authorities, the percentage of section 11 referrals received from landlords or creditors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Tenancy Sustainment</td>
<td>11.1 Percentage of new tenancies sustained for more than a year, by source of let. 11.2 Turnover of lettable stock in the last year. 11.3 Number of applicants on waiting list for medical adaptations, the number carried out and average waiting time. 11.4 Number of cases during the year in which: Notices of Proceedings issued; court actions initiated; and orders for recovery of possession granted. 11.5 Number of and reason for evictions in the last year. 11.6 Number of properties abandoned in the last year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Homeless people</td>
<td>12.1 Average length of time in temporary or emergency accommodation by type. 12.2 Percentage of temporary or emergency accommodation offers refused in the last year. 12.3 Percentage of homeless households satisfied with the quality of temporary or emergency accommodation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Scottish Housing Regulator (2012b) *Consultation on Scottish Social Housing Charter Indicators.*

**Figure 12: Context data on housing management to be collected through ARC**

1. Number of lets
2. Source of lets
3. Breakdown of LA statutory homeless lets
4. Breakdown of types of tenancies granted for lets during year
5. Type of housing lists
As this study drew to a close, the homelessness dimensions of the new Scottish Social Housing Charter, and associated new monitoring requirements of the regulatory framework were beginning to emerge for consultation and practice. Detailed analysis of the proposed contextual data (Figure 12) could contribute significantly to monitoring the effectiveness of homelessness services. Further challenges can be identified in relation to the overall complexity of the modernised homelessness service; the effective monitoring of the full range of strategic, preventive and responsive activities; and the detailed mechanisms for engaging with service users. The proposals can be further informed by aspects of the data from practitioners and service users reported in Sections 3 and 4 and then discussed in Section 5.

**Changing homelessness services: the UK and international contexts**

In the post-devolution period, approaches to homelessness represent a key area of policy where divergence across the UK’s four jurisdictions can be identified and Scotland’s neighbours have taken different approaches to tackling the problem. In 2003 the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE, an international Human Rights NGO) awarded the Housing Rights Protector Award to the Scottish Executive for its homelessness legislation, in recognition of its contribution to protecting human rights and safeguarding human dignity. In 2007, France implemented a legal right to housing and in 2009, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recommended that the Scottish homelessness framework be adopted throughout the UK (Anderson, 2012).

Intense policy activity on homelessness across the UK was identified in a comparative study by Wilcox et al (2010). However, approaches had varied and the legislative framework had diverged significantly. Only Scotland had implemented the more extensive statutory safety net, while homelessness prevention activity had a major (and controversial) impact in England and Wales (less so Northern Ireland). Levels of statutory homelessness rose in all four UK countries in the early period after devolution, but later declined sharply in England and Wales following the introduction of the prevention agenda. The research identified an emphasis on increased use of the private rented sector to discharge the homelessness duty in all four countries, but this had a limited impact up to 2010, though use of the private rented sector as a preventative tool had progressed further, especially in England. Overall, the 2010 comparative research across the UK concluded that the ideal homelessness system would combine the vigour of the English and Welsh preventative measures with the strong statutory safety net of the Scottish system.

The concept of ‘enhanced’ housing options, which included advice on access to work, as well as housing, has been piloted and evaluated in England (DCLG, 2011). Four key objectives included: meeting housing need through a wider range of solutions; making more effective use of stock; tackling worklessness; and improving customer service. Most commonly, services for tenants and housing applicants were enhanced through adding on support for job seeking, education and
training. The evaluation found that housing problems and homelessness tended to be addressed early on in clients’ contact with services or not at all, and a high proportion of accommodation moves were not actually attributed to enhanced housing options services (DCLG, 2011, p8). Success in tackling worklessness was affected by the national economic climate, although there was some increase in the proportion of those in full or part-time work after six months, helping people into work took time. Overall, clients were positive about Enhanced Housing Options, especially about receiving individual help with work and training. In relation to housing, reliance on a limited supply of social housing made it more difficult to meet clients’ expectations than incorporating help with accessing private rented housing. The evaluation concluded that long term savings to welfare budgets resulted from getting people into settled accommodation and into some form of employment (DCLG, 2011, p10).

As part of its ten year homelessness plan, the Welsh Government also embarked on a review of its approach to homelessness during 2011-12 (Welsh Government, 2011). In doing so it was looking at any possible benefits from adopting the Scottish approach. The Welsh Government was considering how to use its law-making powers to ensure that legislation on homelessness remained suitable to the needs of people in Wales, and continued to help meet long term objectives on homelessness. The Minister for Housing made a statement to the Welsh Assembly Government on 1 May 2012 on immediate action to support the ten year homelessness plan and advising that a White Paper setting out proposals for new legislation would be published subsequently (BBC, 2012).

In parallel with developments in the UK, many other countries have adopted national strategies or legislative frameworks to substantially reduce homelessness, including France, Australia, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Portugal. Alongside these policy developments, the modernised Scottish framework for homelessness has been held up as a particular exemplar for other countries. Such a strong legal framework remains relatively rare, but France has implemented an enforceable right to housing from 2012. Alongside consideration of legal rights to housing, international research has identified common trends towards homelessness prevention, ‘housing first’ (as opposed to transitional accommodation), service user involvement and encouraging a commitment to ending homelessness (Busch-Geertsema et al, 2010).

Conclusions

The review in this section has set out the modernised Scottish framework for tackling homelessness, identifying strategic, preventive and responsive elements to a comprehensive service. It also raised questions about the shape of the homelessness service of the future. Ten years after the Homelessness Task Force called for a ‘step change’ in approaches to working with homeless people - had such a paradigm shift actually occurred? Beyond the evidence of the official homelessness statistics, what has been the impact of the 2001 and 2003 legislative changes? Evidence reported in this Section suggests that while significant progress has been made, practice across local authorities remains variable and the RSL sector could be more actively engaged with the homelessness agenda and work better in partnership with local authorities to assist in rehousing homeless households. Since 2009 the strategic and responsive approaches have been complimented by a drive towards prevention of homelessness, including joint working in Housing Options Hubs to develop shared practice on person-centred approaches to advising those in housing need on the full range of
housing options available to them. Throughout, the modernised Scottish framework has been regarded as an international exemplar of progressive policy on delivering effective housing rights alongside person-centre solutions. The evidence is less clear on how service users viewed the changes in practice and whether outcomes for homeless people matched the policy goals. How were local authorities delivering on the latest changes in practice? Was practice better addressing the perspectives of homeless service users? These issues were explored with practitioners and service users and their responses are reported in sections 3 and 4 respectively.
Section 3: Views of homelessness practitioners

In order to gain a deeper insight into questions and issues emerging from the review of research literature and practice guidance, a group of senior homelessness practitioners were invited to take part in a research discussion in January 2012. Participants were invited from across the five Housing Options Hubs and the group of respondents included six senior representatives, from five local authorities across four of the hubs. The group also included two senior representatives from voluntary sector homelessness agencies.

The session began with an overview of the emerging findings from the evidence review, which led into a discussion of key questions for the study. Participants were invited to envisage a modern homelessness service scenario, or a blueprint for redesign to take account of legislative and practice change. The focus of discussion was on ‘concrete’ elements of service provision to meet legislative duties, requirements, and rights of service users; as well as ‘quality improvement elements’ such as changing organisational culture, customer service approaches and staff training. Participants gave their views on the key questions emerging as reported below.

How can local authorities further improve the quality of services to homeless and potentially homeless clients?

Participant 1 felt that a key change had been moving away from strict interpretation of the legal framework to a process which started with the needs of the person seeking assistance. In this authority the focus was now on the circumstances of the applicant, rather than how they fitted the Council’s service. Improvements had also been made in encouraging other services to assist. Service users readily understood the Council as the place to access to social housing or a crisis homelessness service. However, it was reported that people did not yet see it as a place to go for wider housing advice and so perhaps this was an area where better communication with the public was still needed.

I think we have got better at making the person the starting point and providing a joined up response. What are the factors that will change someone’s life? Rather than starting with the policy (Participant 1).

Participant 2 thought their local authority had seen a huge change in ten years. Quality in temporary accommodation had improved. Previously, homelessness services were poor, poorly resourced, and not a priority for the Council. It was considered that this had ‘completely turned on its head’ and that attitudes towards homelessness were totally different. In particular, the emphasis on quality of service had increased dramatically, with a shift away from homeless people ‘just taking what is on offer ‘to an approach of putting the homelessness issue to the forefront of service delivery. Planning and partnership working were identified as two areas of significant improvement over the ten year period. While in the first two or three years of implementation it had proven very difficult to develop larger partnership groups (with other local authority services and outside of the council), this had now completely changed. Wider partnerships had developed with a sense that responsibility for homelessness extended beyond the housing service to the wider group of services, through greater
awareness of the homelessness service across a range of service providers (e.g. health services, social work and third sector service providers).

Support provision

Housing support was considered a key element of the homelessness service. Although housing support was not currently a statutory service, it would become so when the Housing (Scotland) Act 2012 was fully implemented (Participant 1). It was acknowledged that housing support had a huge role to play in the future homelessness service.

Participant 2 reported that the provision of support for small groups of people with very complex needs was a key issue for the future homelessness service. Further work was required to determine how services could better meet their needs and ensure they did not ‘get left behind’. This was not considered to be a numerically large group of service users, but responding to their needs could absorb a disproportionate amount of time and resources. Participant 6 agreed that while overall joint working had improved, with some complex cases other services still tended to ‘retreat into silos’, using the argument that it was mainly a housing problem and so not their responsibility. Working with complex cases could be particularly challenging in smaller towns and in rural areas where there were fewer specialist support services, or they were not accessible to those in remote locations. It was thought that as homelessness services built up expertise, they should become more confident in approaching other services to play their part.

Participant 3 added that some groups were still becoming homeless, where prevention should already be effective. This included young people who had been looked after by the state and those leaving prison and hospital. These groups also tended to have support needs which could sometimes be complex and it was important that resources were effectively used to support smooth transitions into settled housing without having to present as homeless. While it was envisaged that statutory support needs assessments would be linked to homelessness assessments, they might actually be more effective if conducted at an earlier stage as part of housing options advice (Participant 1).

What are the challenges in managing homelessness prevention alongside full and fair implementation of the existing legislation?

Participants discussed the process of introducing the housing options approach, possible structures for service delivery, and the importance of staff training. On the whole they were also confident in the capacity of local authorities to sustain an effective responsive homelessness service alongside person-centre prevention activities.

Introducing housing options

Participant 6 felt that homeless people were getting a better service as a result of the introduction of housing options. For example, a higher proportion of decisions were being made within 28 days. The housing options approach seemed to relieve some pressure on the statutory homelessness system
which allowed homeless cases to be better managed, ‘rather than just fire-fighting’. Participant 5 also thought that the housing options approach had improved performance, for example in relation to tenancy sustainability and reducing evictions.

**Issues in structuring new services**

Participant 2’s authority had reorganised their entire homelessness service around housing options and prevention with a view to better integrating what were previously separate sections in the service and improving communication to avoid people ‘falling through the cracks’. The integrated approach was thought to be working well for this Council, where a single manager ran the whole team (housing options, homelessness, temporary accommodation, and allocations).

*It’s amazing how that impacts on housing allocations – if you are also responsible for the temporary accommodation. The stock is freed up to meet the demand* (Participant 2).

Other participants then indicated whether their authorities were developing similarly integrated services and how housing allocations linked to homelessness assessments as illustrated in Figure 13.

**Figure 13: Evolving homelessness service structures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant 1</th>
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<tr>
<td>In this authority, housing advice was linked to homelessness services in local areas, although the authority was still evaluating whether the roles should remain separate. Rents and lettings teams also gave housing options advice where this was appropriate (for example for existing tenants).</td>
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<tr>
<th>Participant 4</th>
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<td>Although not directly representing the council, participant 4 was able to comment that in one stock transfer authority, the housing options approach was being developed by the main housing association in the district, in partnership with the Council. One idea was that the service could provide a gateway to all housing options, including the private rented sector.</td>
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<th>Participant 5</th>
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<td>The housing advice centre delivered all homelessness assessments and was the first point of contact for applicants in this authority. The housing allocations and private rented sector teams were located in the same building as housing advice, but managed separately, although this might be reviewed. However, the housing options service was based in the neighbourhood services team and some homelessness services were also delivered from neighbourhood offices. Overall it was considered that there was effective ‘ownership’ of homelessness and housing options from local offices as well as in central allocations. Essentially all frontline staff could be delivering housing options advice, though the authority was considering whether the function should be transferred to a central team. The next step was to integrate RSLs and other partners into the housing options approach.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Participant 6</th>
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<tr>
<td>The merits of centralised or decentralised approaches to service delivery were still being considered. Allocations, homelessness assessment, housing support, and homelessness prevention were all centralised. Prevention services sat within the in-house housing support team, but the authority also had a central team of homelessness officers and allocations officers. These were not yet integrated with area housing management teams.</td>
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The authority had merged homelessness case worker and housing options roles so that clients could liaise with one worker all the way through their application. The authority retained a central allocations team but was discussing merging the housing options case work and allocations roles. Housing options advisors undertook homelessness assessments, as well as prevention activities, and worked with homeless households through to tenancy allocation.

Source: Practitioner discussion group, January 2012.

The importance of staff training

Participants recognised there were significant implications for staff training from introducing housing options, and local authorities were probably at different stages in assessing training needs and delivering appropriate programmes. At least one hub was undertaking a training analysis to understand those needs. For some authorities there was still a lack of understanding of the precise training requirements associated with housing options were - what did staff need to know? The skill of the person carrying out a housing options assessment would become increasingly important in ensuring fairness for all applicants.

Participants 2 and 5 commented that their authorities had been active in delivering training and support for staff. Participant 5 explained how training needs were being further examined as part of their hub’s activities, as a wider group of staff were becoming involved in giving housing options advice. Participant 2’s authority had produced a comprehensive housing options guide for housing advisers to use for interviews and to assist people to make choices (e.g. about property availability in different areas). Managers were still clarifying the overall skills/knowledge deficit and looking at issues such as staff attitudes to homelessness. For example, if a broader group of staff were to undertake housing options advice, but felt they had previously been trained to ration a scarce resource, new training requirements would emerge. It was considered important to understand staff attitudes to such change, including their core motivations for their work and their understanding of the need for change.

Sustaining the legal homelessness safety net

Participant 5 thought that sustaining the homelessness safety net was already working well on the ground in their authority, which had adopted a housing options approach. It was reported that some local authorities remained concerned about whether the Regulator would view housing options as gate-keeping of the statutory homelessness service. This meant it was important to evidence the effectiveness of prevention, but this was still proving difficult although discussions on monitoring were ongoing in the relevant hub.

When asked about the risk of losing a core homelessness service which provided clear information on the statutory homelessness safety net for applicants, participants appeared confident that this would not be a major issue.

Provided people are asking the right questions during interviews, the assessment will happen. It won’t go away (Participant 6).

There was however, a sense that assessment would shift from a straight-forward test of legal eligibility, to a more sophisticated consideration of realistic options to meet an applicant’s needs and circumstances. The breadth and depth of skills and knowledge of housing options workers would be
critical to the future homelessness service in a much more enhanced role than simply assessing the remaining ‘tests’ to determine a statutory homelessness duty. Housing options advisers would need to be able to provide comprehensive information in a balanced way. Participant 4 emphasised that the local authority homelessness service needed to retain a crisis response, including an out of hours service.

For Participant 5, one early outcome of service review had been that homelessness presentations increased because staff were more aware of the legislation, and because of concerns about avoiding any gate-keeping of the statutory service. The authority worked with the housing regulator to allay these concerns. Drawing on the homelessness prevention guidance, the housing options approach was now being delivered in parallel with the homelessness service, adopting a person-centred approach, focusing on what was best for the individual applicant. It was considered that it was possible to give appropriate housing advice and ensure awareness of the right to present as homeless.

**What is the potential impact of the Social Housing Charter and revised SHR regulatory framework on services for homeless people?**

Although the discussion took place before publication of the new Social Housing Charter, participants were aware of the initial draft and likely results of the consultation process. The Charter was seen as a set of key principles which underpinned social housing, with the role of providing more detailed guidance on monitoring falling to the Scottish Housing Regulator.

Participant 1 reported that monitoring of outcomes had improved in their local authority since 2001. The authority had more detailed information on the range of needs of homeless households as well as improved quantitative data. Mechanisms to capture monitoring data had improved significantly, and this allowed the authority to improve its planning for homelessness service provision.

Participant 3 commented on the need to develop measures of homelessness prevention. Others agreed that monitoring homelessness prevention remained extremely difficult, although it was reported that Scottish Government were working to develop suitable measures. A specific challenge lay in trying to measure the counterfactual question of whether a person would have become homeless if a particular intervention had not taken place? For example, positive prevention programmes were identified around housing and citizenship in schools, but it was very difficult to prove precisely how much difference they made in preventing homelessness.

One of the voluntary sector homelessness agencies wished to see the continuation of thematic inspections. The comparison was made with the process of self-assessment by NHS Boards in relation to health and homelessness standards, where the process was not transparent to outside agencies and no national overview of performance was available for partner service providers or service users. It was hoped that some form of inspections would continue, even if in a different way from previously.

Participant 2 was able to reflect on the process of completing local authority self-assessment for a post-inspection improvement plan, in relation to progress towards meeting the 2012 target. This involved a process of dialogue and explanation of local circumstances and processes of change.
While participant 2 agreed with concerns about moving away from inspections, because they could be healthy for an organisation in terms of encouraging improved performance; it was also considered that the previous regime had been somewhat overbearing. The example was given of having to respond to reviews by different agencies at the same time and the heavy demands on staff time to prepare for inspection visits.

*But I do think there is a real benefit in some kind of inspection regime that can come in quickly and look at quality* (Participant 2).

Participant 5 added that the SHR inspection reports gave staff leverage for allocation of resources for the homelessness service.

*It was horrendous at the time but the outcome from our poor inspection was more resources and it has completely turned the homeless service around* (Participant 5).

There was agreement across most of the group that the Regulator’s activities needed to be outcome-focussed, rather than process driven. There was some discussion about the introduction of an enquiry process, which the new Regulator would be able to instigate. The voluntary sector agencies raised the question as to whether there was a role for homeless people or ‘whistle blowers’ within service providing organisations to raise concerns. Participants also agreed there needed to be clear mechanisms for the views of tenants, applicants and homeless people to feed in to the regulator’s work. Participant 7 added that with the shift to a housing options approach, the HL1 form (which monitors action under the homelessness legislation) should change to reflect this and the regulator’s model should reflect the person-centred approach to working with applicants.

Time spent in temporary accommodation was raised as a possible performance indicator but participants had some reservations about this. Participant 7 considered that sometimes a longer time was the right option in order to achieve the correct, sustainable, permanent outcome for the applicant. So there couldn’t be an arbitrary maximum time period if authorities were moving to a more sophisticated service. Participant 5 agreed, giving the example of a rural case where temporary housing may become the settled accommodation, for example if children settle into schools and social networks. This was part of the person-centred process of seeking the best housing solutions. Participant 8 also made the case for looking at extenuating circumstances for long periods in temporary accommodation where this related to support needs, including where applicants were not receptive to support services.

**What are the implications of working in regional Housing Options Hubs for the homelessness service?**

Practitioners in the discussion group were generally positive about the development of homelessness prevention activities through housing options hubs. Participant 3 commented that if housing options approaches were to be core to future homelessness services then resources needed to be directed to measuring prevention, and whether activities were successful or not for any given service. Participant 4 commented on the need for a clear definition of being at risk of homelessness so that within the housing options model, staff could work with households at an early stage in their experience of housing problems. Participant 8 thought that some form of support from Scottish
Government for the regional housing options hubs should continue. Participant 5 agreed that the hubs were valuable for moving practice forward and needed to continue. The group agreed that local authorities would need some continuing funding in order to sustain the joint working.

**Conclusions**

Although only a small group of professionals took part in the discussion, they represented four of the five housing options hubs and two independent homelessness agencies. All participants considered that homelessness services had improved during the previous ten years but acknowledged that further improvements could be achieved by continuing to develop person-centred approaches to working with those at risk of homelessness. The participants reported that local authorities had embraced the prevention agenda and the housing options approach and there was agreement that monitoring procedures also had to take account of this. Most local authority participants had experienced some review of homelessness services in their organisations which had resulted in wider ownership of the homelessness prevention agenda across staff teams, as well as requirements for staff training and revisions to joint working practices. Participants were confident about managing homelessness prevention services without compromising the responsive legal safety net. While it was too early to comment on detail on the impact of the Social Housing Charter and revised regulatory framework, there was some consensus that homelessness prevention and housing options needed to be integrated into any revised monitoring and regulatory procedures. Participants also reported valuing the learning from the prior inspection regime and the independent role of the regulator was also viewed positively. Working across local authorities in regional hubs was still a relatively new activity, but was positively received, although it was thought that continuing funding for the initiative would be required in order for it to be sustained.
Section 4: Views of homeless service users

This section examines how homeless people experience the process of applying for assistance and their perspectives on the services provided. It draws on the detailed study of the priorities of homeless service users, commissioned by the Scottish Housing Regulator (Evans and Littlewood, 2011), and supplements these findings with those of a 2012 discussion group with homeless people conducted for this study.

The aim of the Evans and Littlewood (2011) study was to provide an overview of service users’ perspectives on homelessness services and to identify what was important to service users in terms of service quality. The findings were also to inform design of the new monitoring framework following the introduction of the Social Housing Charter. The researchers conducted one to one interviews with 81 homeless households in four Scottish local authorities, asking them about aspects of the homelessness service. They also undertook 14 interviews with support organisations in the same four areas.

For this 2012 study, a discussion group was held in one local authority area, in which eight homeless or formerly homeless service users participated. The discussion was introduced to participants as an opportunity to think about how local authorities could best respond to the needs of people who have a crisis in their housing situation or face homelessness. Participants were reassured that they did not need to talk about their personal experiences, though they drew on these to think about what worked well for them and what could have been done better. A constraint of the study brief was that all of the discussants were service users in one local authority area, so their experiences are illustrative rather than representative. Nevertheless, they were encouraged to discuss the delivery of homelessness services from a general point of view as possible. All of those who took part self-identified as having been homeless and having made use of local authority homelessness services. Participants were at varying stages of assessment, placement in temporary accommodation and having been recently rehoused into settled accommodation. Most were single but one woman had applied with a partner and children. Participants were recruited with the help of one local authority which has an active homelessness service users’ participation group.

In the rest of this section, the findings from the Evans and Littlewood (2011) study (referred to as the 2011 SHR study) are blended thematically with the responses from the discussion group conducted for this research (referred to as the 2012 discussion group) in order to present as robust a summary of service users perspectives as possible.

Homelessness presentations and the assessment process

For service users in the 2011 study, a basic requirement was that the homelessness service was easy to find and generally this was the case. Applicants’ first contact tended to be by telephone or sometimes an enquiry for social housing led to referral to the homelessness team. Others accessed the homelessness service through other agencies, such as advice agencies. Participants reported that accessing homelessness services was more difficult in rural areas than urban areas. Service users tended to be anxious about approaching services but in practice they often found them reasonably welcoming. Homeless people expected to receive equal treatment to any other customer...
using council services. Only a minority (but a significant minority) had negative experiences at council office receptions and initial interviews. In terms of initial interviews, many applicants in the 2011 SHR study preferred to be offered an appointment rather than be kept waiting for a long time in a council office without a definite time for an interview. However participants reported the need to ensure basic facilities were available in offices, such as having public toilets and private interview facilities.

With respect to the relationship with homelessness staff, participants in the 2011 SHR study valued having one key adviser to work with them throughout their application. Where negative experiences were reported this often related to having to undergo different interviews, repeat information to different staff, and sometimes being given conflicting advice. Few respondents had used out of hours services but their experiences were generally positive. However, in some cases service users were not fully aware of out of hours services and had slept rough because of this. Some participants approached homelessness services because they were facing eviction and expressed frustration at being advised to wait until closer to the eviction date. They would have preferred a more planned approach, especially where they needed to maintain arrangements for child care and schooling. In one example, a family with four children had to move six times in ten years in the private rented sector. For them, a planned move to secure social housing, prior to eviction was the desired outcome.

Overall, most interviewees in the 2011 SHR study had a good experience of the homelessness assessment process. Around three to four weeks for a formal decision on the application was generally thought to be reasonable, provided a quick and suitable decision was made on temporary accommodation. In particular, service users valued receiving a clear explanation of the process and communication being maintained through the various stages up to settled rehousing. This helped applicants manage their expectations about outcomes. The SHR study found some instances of poor practice in relation to domestic abuse, and while there were only three examples of the appeal process being used, the report cited two case studies of negative experiences of the assessment and appeal processes (Evans and Littlewood, 2011, pp15-16). The 2011 SHR study concluded that the application process could be made easier for applicants through the provision of clear information and communication about waiting times for interviews and temporary accommodation and about the type of temporary and crisis accommodation available. Applicants needed to understand how the system worked and the reasons why they might have to wait for permanent housing. Information on available support was also valued and participants particularly valued being kept up to date about their application.

In the 2012 discussion group for this study, participants were asked how people knew where to get help if they might be homeless. Some participants referred to coming to the office where the discussion was being held and some mentioned having been given an information pack. Others said it wasn’t easy to know and they had been ‘sent around the houses’. When asked what was the best way for the public to know how they could get help, respondents suggested advertising in job centres and other public offices, as well as on television and radio. Other suggestions were that information should be available in doctors’ surgeries, adult learning centres and community projects. A few participants had received advice about homelessness services via contact with the police. Participants also reported that many people knew about services by word of mouth.
The 2012 discussants were asked what type of service was needed on arrival at the Council’s offices to discuss their housing/homelessness problem. Privacy for discussions was a high priority as was having a dedicated key worker from as early a stage as possible, and this key worker remaining the main contact throughout the application and rehousing process. The particular benefits of this were emphasised several times by one participant. This related to the fact that having to tell a worker absolutely everything about themselves could feel degrading and they did not want to have to repeat such testimonies if it could be avoided. Participants felt there should always be someone they could talk to and somewhere they could go if they were literally roofless. One person suggested there should be a designated ‘Roofless Officer’.

In terms of the help offered, participants’ responses reflected the homelessness priority need categories (which were gradually being abolished) with comments such as ‘if you have no issues...they can’t help you’. This led to some discussion about having to produce evidence to support their case for acceptance as homeless and in priority need. The need to provide evidence of medical conditions, etc. was considered very demanding of applicants’ time and some felt that they could never provide enough. Others seemed to have a sense that where applicants had some knowledge of the system they could feel pressurised to say the sorts of things which they thought would help their case for housing, while those who were completely honest may not get the assistance they needed – ‘do you need to lie to get help’?

_‘I was just out of hospital with my bags in the car – how much more evidence do you need?’_ (Participant A).

_‘You wouldn’t go if you weren’t homeless.’_ (Participant B).

Participants accepted that staff required sufficient information to be able to make decisions about individual cases. They also acknowledged that it was possible that some people may make an application and not be homeless or be intentionally homeless - some saw such activities as ‘spoiling it for others’.

Some participants talked about their need for support during the application process, in one case this was support with substance addiction and the person felt they had been ‘left to their own devices’. It seemed that participants could readily develop the impression that other individuals or groups were receiving more help or higher priority than them. A number of participants thought that those in younger age groups received more help. Others talked about their experiences of being referred between two or more local authorities. The homelessness system did not seem to work well for those who wanted to live in another area, even when they considered they had very good reasons for this choice (for example relating to work or family). Some felt they had been ‘left in limbo’. Others felt they knew that there were more housing opportunities in other areas but they did not know how to access these.

The 2012 discussants appeared more able to specify an ideal service for those who were literally homeless than for those who were, say, potentially homeless or in acute housing need, although they agreed that advice and information should certainly be provided for people in these circumstances. After further discussion there was more of a consensus around the benefits of helping people in advance of becoming literally rooflessness.
**Temporary Accommodation**

In the 2011 SHR study, homeless service users were concerned about quality, security and affordability in temporary accommodation. For working households, rent levels in temporary accommodation were reported to be very high with the perception that it was ‘designed for people on housing benefit’. The study found that temporary accommodation was often provided on the day of application when needed, though some participants had to check back daily until temporary accommodation became available. The main problems mentioned by participants were being offered temporary accommodation in another local authority area, and fear of the poor reputation of some known temporary accommodation. A lack of emergency accommodation was reported in rural areas, as well as long distances to travel to temporary housing. Safety and security in temporary accommodation was very important to service users. In particular some wished to avoid gang or drug cultures. Some had refused temporary accommodation they did not find acceptable and continued to stay with friends or family (often in overcrowded circumstances).

Participants’ comments about Bed and Breakfast accommodation (B&B) in the 2011 SHR study were variable and seemed to depend on the quality of their specific experience, and whether this had been for a short duration. However, the lack of cooking facilities was reported as particularly problematic in B&B. Hostels were considered expensive and again views varied according to participants’ experience of cost, quality, standard of management and sense of security. Some had particularly challenging experiences around drug use and avoiding this in hostels. Where dispersed temporary accommodation in ordinary housing was provided, this was generally thought to be of a good standard.

The location of temporary accommodation was particularly crucial to 2011 service users in terms of fitting with the rest of their life needs. Some participants reported problems with poor conditions in temporary accommodation and poor accessibility for disabled people. Inadequate and costly heating was quite often a problem in temporary accommodation. Affordability problems were reported for working households in temporary accommodation, especially in relation to service charges. Being able to receive support in temporary accommodation was seen as vital by participants. While experiences were overall positive, the SHR study also found some cases of poor practice, for example a pregnant woman offered temporary accommodation 60 miles from maternity services and one case study revealed someone having spent eight months in temporary accommodation. It was important to service users that staff in temporary accommodation (as well as in other aspects of service provision) were not judgemental about homeless people’s circumstances.

In the 2012 discussion group, some participants had been offered temporary accommodation straight-away when they first applied. Others had not and they felt their situation had deteriorated (in one case to a point of having a ‘total breakdown’) before help was offered. Participants’ expectations of temporary accommodation were modest – ‘you should at least get a B&B’. One person talked about their prior experience of transport being provided to emergency accommodation at all hours, as needed. The need for easily accessible emergency shelter emerged as a priority across the group.

*You need a bed, a room, a wash and a meal* (Participant C).
Participants in the 2012 group had experienced temporary accommodation in both a ‘homeless unit’ and ordinary council properties. One participant though that more help and support was available in a homeless unit, compared to being in a house or flat on an estate. This was because of concerns about a lack of provision of information to applicants who were temporarily housed in ordinary accommodation. Most agreed that the location of temporary accommodation was a very important factor, especially where applicants needed to be near to family or other commitments such as work or schools. In terms of time spent in temporary accommodation, around two months was broadly considered a reasonable wait in temporary accommodation, and there was a sense that beyond six months – ‘it didn’t feel temporary any more’. There was some agreement that people began to get somewhat disheartened after six months or longer and some participants said they had been ‘in the system’ for a year at the time of the discussion group.

**Settled Accommodation**

The majority of interviewees in the 2011 SHR study preferred a social rented home as their settled outcome and this was associated with security of tenure and affordability. Applicants were looking for a home which would meet their needs over the long term in terms of size, location, etc. A minority of respondents in the study were willing to explore private rented housing, for example if it allowed them to live in a specific location or meant quicker rehousing. The research also found that a high proportion of respondents had absolutely no furniture, white goods, soft furnishings or kitchenware when they were allocated a tenancy. Tenure choice and affordability were especially important for those in low paid work and people tended to have a strong desire to keep working or to be able to seek work. Social landlord services were also valued by service users. Rent deposit schemes for private tenancies were considered positively by only a minority in the SHR study, and some participants had experienced problems with landlords not accepting the local authority scheme.

Based on the four local authority areas involved in the 2011 SHR research, the range of waiting times for permanent social rented accommodation varied hugely, from a few weeks to 18-24 months; and was not necessarily longer in rural areas, compared to urban areas. Sometimes respondents chose to wait longer for a property which fitted their long term needs. The research indicated that generally people thought it was reasonable to have only one or two offers of housing as long as the policy was the same as applied for people on the general waiting list. Refusals and appeals usually related to the location of permanent housing, which was absolutely critical to respondents. Sometimes they received help from advocates or support workers to challenge the location of offers of permanent housing. Some participants had compromised their area of choice for speedier housing and tried to make the best of it.

Perhaps surprisingly, in the 2011 SHR study, standards in permanent accommodation were reported as less good than for some temporary accommodation, though in some cases planned improvement programmes may have been pending. Inadequate or expensive heating was a common concern and accessible accommodation was crucial for wheelchair users or those with other mobility needs. New tenants often had limited means to improve their homes. Nearly all participants needed basic furniture and fittings for their settled home and according to landlords and support providers the proportion of service users entering new tenancies with absolutely nothing was increasing. New
tenants can receive help for key items through Community Care grants but it was reported that these took 6-12 weeks to secure and the increasing trend was for loans rather than grants. Even with the emergence of local authority furniture schemes there remained significant unmet need. Some authorities were discussing the option of providing furnished tenancies or at least starter packs (e.g. with a microwave, kettle, toaster and bedding).

Participants in the 2012 discussion group had modest expectations of a settled home. Most just wanted ‘a house’ and to be settled. A few suggested that there were properties available which they considered were going to waste (possibly long term vacancies). For those with children, they wanted settled accommodation near to current schools. However, participants were aware that they may have to wait some time for housing in their preferred locality and they were able to discuss the pros and cons of widening area choice to be housed more quickly, or waiting longer for their ideal area.

The 2012 discussants expressed a strong and rational preference for a council tenancy as their settled accommodation, mainly based on considerations of security of tenure, affordability and their local knowledge. This was a distinct preference for council housing over an RSL tenancy and some participants were not fully aware of what Housing Associations or RSLs were. Once this was explained to them most agreed they could at least consider this option and one person had a positive prior experience of living in a housing association tenancy. However, some still thought that council housing was ‘better’ and cheaper. Across the group however, people simply wanted to have their own home and to furnish it and make it their own place. Participants also talked about wanting good services from their landlord, for example in relation to repairs and maintenance and efficient heating systems. Participants raised many concerns about the complexities of the benefits system (including Incapacity Benefit) and how this impacted on moving into settled accommodation.

Some participants would have welcomed more advice on the process of being allocated their settled accommodation. Again, it was suggested that a key worker could explain the different options and what each meant for the service user in the long term. At least one participant felt they had not been given enough information about settled accommodation choices. It was also emphasised that as well as information – there needed to be concrete housing outcomes. The local authority where the participants were recruited provided an information pack for homeless applicants but some felt it was rather overwhelming. Others needed help with reading and writing and assistance with this was viewed as another potential role for a key worker. A few said they needed help to understand jargon used in housing information and procedures.

Most 2012 discussion group participants were resistant to a private sector tenancy as long term settled accommodation. One contributing factor here was the perceived risk of ‘losing their place on the council waiting list’ – i.e. losing their opportunity to be allocated a secure council (or RSL) tenancy. The one person who proactively sought accommodation in the private rented sector wanted to live in another local authority area and felt that they were not being helped to achieve that through the statutory homelessness system. No one agreed with the Single Room Rent regulation that those aged less than 35 years could only receive Housing Benefit for shared accommodation in the private rented sector. There was strong agreement that people needed to have their own space and should not be pressurised into sharing with people they did not know, against their wishes. These factors tended to reinforce participants’ existing rational preference for council housing as a settled outcome.
Meeting support needs

Many service users in the 2011 SHR study acknowledged that they had support needs and expressed a preference for flexible approaches to meeting those needs. This included health care and emotional needs, as well as independent living skills for sustaining a home, and occasional guidance for those with fewer support needs. One respondent explained how mis-assessment of their needs had resulted in inappropriate housing, indicating the importance of knowledge of the homelessness systems for service users. About half of respondents in the SHR study received support and welcomed that support. They were mostly younger households or people with addiction or mental health problems. Participants’ support needs varied in terms of both intensity of requirements and the time for which support was needed. Support needs could change as a person became more settled. The SHR report discussed a range of support issues from, basic to more intensive, and considered who should provide support.

In the 2012 discussion group, some participants recognised a positive role for a social worker in helping them through the experience of homelessness. Others talked about needing help with more serious psychiatric problems, or with addictions, and suggested a key worker could assist (for example with co-ordinating support and links with other professionals). Participants also welcomed more basic support with moving in, sorting out gas and electricity and organising bill payments. One person who was already a tenant explained how the Council’s resettlement team had helped them with these tasks. Others said that they would need practical help with obtaining furniture and white goods for a settled tenancy. Across the group, people had to deal with a lot of different matters and agencies at the same time – especially when they were just moving into a tenancy – and there was a lack of clarity or clear explanations on how best to approach this. Nevertheless, discussants were generally full of praise for support workers and for help they received with new tenancies and in dealing with relationships with neighbours.

Participants felt that the benefits system was very complicated and could be quite daunting at times of change. One person suggested that Britain should look at what other governments do to see if they had better systems in place. There was less discussion about health care and support needs but this would be expected in a group scenario where it was not so appropriate to talk about personal issues. Although there was limited detailed comment on support with training, education and employment, participants did allude to a general desire to be able to work throughout the discussion.

Homelessness prevention and housing options advice

While local authorities and partners had been seeking to implement preventive approaches to homelessness since 2009, the 2011 SHR research found that homeless respondents lacked awareness of such preventative and wider housing advice services. The vast majority of service users interviewed had approached homeless services at or very near the point of crisis, but said they would have appreciated advice earlier if they had known it was available. Some participants also lacked awareness of the benefit system, notably in-work benefits for those who were recently
unemployed or had a history of work. Most participants were seeking a social tenancy, though a proportion did appreciate that other options existed. Advice often gave them a more positive perspective on their possibilities for housing. It was felt that this worked best when a person was not in an acute housing crisis. Rent deposit schemes were viewed positively by the minority who were realistically interested in the PRS. Some interviewees had been discharged from custody and they valued advice they had received pre-discharge.

Participants in the 2012 discussion group also discussed homelessness prevention and the option of privately rented housing. Almost all emphasised the importance of being able to work, so accommodation had to be affordable in this respect, as well as in a suitable location. There was a sense across the group that negotiating the homelessness system was harder for people who were working than for those who were in receipt of benefits (though there was no substantial discussion of in-work benefits). Participants raised issues of high rents and service charges in temporary accommodation as a barrier to being able to work. One person talked about their experience of applying on the housing waiting list. They agreed to accept a referral to a private let and (as they interpreted the process) ‘were taken off the list’. This was felt to be unfairly penalising someone for working and paying rent. This participant said they later became homeless and had to reapply. The requirement for housing advice to include helping people to move between local authority areas was mentioned several times in the 2012 discussion group.

The 2012 participants were asked if they thought homelessness could be prevented, and how – with differing views emerging on the answers. For example, one person had become homeless because of relationship breakdown and did not think this could have been prevented. In contrast, another had knowledge of housing education programmes in schools and had been invited to speak to young people about their experience of homelessness as part of a prevention programme. One person thought that providing temporary/emergency accommodation was preventing homelessness. Others discussed how they had spent periods in insecure housing situations (including ‘sofa surfing’) and felt there was really no choice or alternative than to approach the local authority as homeless. One participant knew of people who had died on the streets.

*If you have no family, it can’t be prevented* (Participant D).

Given the time available for discussion and the range of topics covered, it was quite challenging for participants to envisage ‘ideal’ advice and prevention services. There was certainly some common agreement that ‘advice was just words’ and that what people needed was practical help. Participants again emphasised that their housing situation may well be completely outwith their control, for example because of financial constraints, health issues or relationship breakdown. Nevertheless, most participants were receptive to the broad idea of gaining advice at an early stage when a housing difficulty occurred, and some were aware that legal advice might be appropriate (for example, for both family and tenancy matters). One participant pointed out that someone facing homelessness needed to have a certain amount of confidence to be able to ask the right questions of the right people, and that the advice received might be complex and challenging to take in. This could result in people sometimes avoiding confronting housing problems.

Few 2012 discussants had heard of a housing options service but most were receptive to the idea. Again, however, they reiterated the importance of the actual outcome, rather than just the existence of an advisory service. Some participants had prior experience of bidding for properties in
a choice based lettings system and had found this particularly challenging. One person said they spent three years waiting in this type of system and thought that help through a housing options service could have been valuable in that situation. This led to a further discussion about the significance of applicants’ choice of areas in terms of their chances of being rehoused (and how quickly). This was seen as another area where housing options advice could assist, though choices were also often closely bound up with family situations.

**Conclusions**

Some key conclusions from the 2011 SHR study were that homelessness services could be better promoted and marketed so people knew about them. This needed to include active promotion of housing advice, housing options and homelessness prevention services. In terms of service delivery, a key area for improvement was ongoing communication with applicants throughout the process of assessment and rehousing. There was support for the provision of self-contained temporary accommodation provided this was affordable. The report concluded that there should be no place for poor quality temporary accommodation in a modern homelessness service and it was crucial to have an adequate supply to deal with emergency homelessness (Evans and Littlewood, 2011). Offers of settled accommodation needed to be sustainable over the long term for the tenant. Local authorities should continue to develop access schemes for the PRS and rent deposit schemes, even if they were only for a minority of applicants. Services needed to be aware of homeless applicants’ needs for furniture and for personal support. Even where applicants refused housing support initially, they may later accept it and services should be able to identify and respond to such changes as part of the resettlement process.

When the 2012 discussion group participants were asked to name a key change which would improve local authority homelessness services they cited: more affordable one bedroom housing; friendly and understanding staff; better advertised, more accessible services; and having one key worker throughout the process of assessment and rehousing. When asked to identify the things which were already working well they mentioned housing support and having someone to help with their benefit applications.

There was considerable continuity in the perspectives of homelessness service users in 2011 and 2012. Participants found themselves in a disadvantaged position in the housing system, largely due to factors which they could not control. They were receptive to early intervention to resolve their housing problems, but awareness of how to achieve this was limited. Both groups emphasised the need for practical housing solutions, not just advice. Participants in both groups were able to articulate a rational preference for council (or RSL) housing as the most appropriate long term solution to their needs. The fact that they prioritised security of tenure is somewhat at odds with local authority reports that the default six month short assured tenancy in the private rented sector would not necessarily prevent homeless households from accepting this option. This is a core issue for the future homelessness service which requires more detailed investigation from the perspective of service users.
Section 5: Towards a comprehensive homelessness service

This section draws on the published evidence and new qualitative data presented earlier in the report to consider what Scotland should be looking to provide in its 21st century homelessness services. The evidence review identified strategic, preventive and responsive elements of the homelessness service which are complementary in a comprehensive approach to tackling homelessness.

The strategic service

The core of the strategic homelessness service is the assessment of need and planning to address that need through a local homelessness strategy, which is integral to the wider local housing strategy. This should drive service delivery, ensuring the homelessness service is integrated into wider housing services and partnership working.

Evidence of poverty, housing disadvantage and structural causes of homelessness, as well as the factors which trigger homelessness or housing crises for individuals should inform the homelessness strategy and responses to homelessness. Homelessness strategies also need to plan for meeting the support needs of homeless people, including service provision, adequate resources, and joint working across relevant services. Security of tenure remains crucial to sustainable housing outcomes and strategies need to consider the need for an appropriate balance in provision across social and private renting, and low cost home ownership. Strategies need to maintain a focus on long term trends and solutions. While the private rented sector has expanded recently, and has a useful role to play in meeting housing need; it also has limitations. It is not evident that the sector can be relied upon for long term solutions in terms of either supply (which can be vulnerable to changes in the housing market); individual tenancy terms (due to the over-reliance on short assured tenancies) or cost (again a function of the market, and vulnerable to changes in housing benefit policy).

The ten year period of implementation of the expanded legal safety net, together with other associated policy and practice changes, has in some cases already resulted in transformation of homelessness services, compared to the late 20th century. This has been achieved despite a continuing decline in levels of social housing vacancies since 2001/2. Strategic responses to homelessness need to be developed in the context of the wider economic and political environment, such as current reform of Housing Benefit and other aspects of welfare support which will constrain flexibility in social housing allocations and access to the private sector.

The strategic element of the homelessness service should drive quality assurance and performance monitoring. In an era where local authorities, RSLs and voluntary sector service providers have embraced a culture of accountability and performance monitoring, the goal of continuous improvement in service quality is broadly accepted. The Scottish Social Housing Charter and revised regulatory frameworks moved from consultation phase to implementation during the course of this study. Practitioner participants broadly supported the retention of positive elements of the previous regulatory framework and performance standards. Although service providers welcomed a lighter touch approach to regulation, they still valued the benefits of the process and recognised the need
for performance indicators to be ‘SMART’ (Strategic, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timed). Housing performance indicators could also be directly linked to the National Performance Framework and Single Outcome Agreements. There was agreement that prevention activities needed to be better integrated into monitoring frameworks.

Preventive Services

Homelessness prevention remains an emerging area of practice and a key focus for current local authority activity. The need for ‘ownership’ of prevention and housing options approaches throughout local authorities and their partner organisations emerged from the study. While practitioners appeared highly focused on the preventive dimension of the homelessness services, their customers were much less aware of the introduction of new approaches such as housing options interviews. There is a need for service providers to communicate better with potential service users about their prevention services and to find out what works for those at risk of homelessness in terms of early intervention. Person-centred approaches to assessment of housing needs were welcomed by staff and service users. Although service users had less knowledge of prevention services, they were receptive to the idea of earlier advice and information, indicating a need for improved sign-posting and awareness-raising with the public.

The evidence suggests some progress has been made in assisting households into private tenancies as part of housing options advice and homelessness prevention activities. However, such activities remained dependent on Short Assured Tenancies with a typical initial contract of just six months (compared to the 12 months required for discharge of homelessness duty in the private sector). Although local authorities report that this arrangement is acceptable to some households who might otherwise be at risk of homelessness, there is a need for more detailed research into applicants’ perceptions of this aspect of homelessness prevention, as well as for long-term monitoring of tenancy sustainability in the private sector. Scottish Government and local authorities could take more concerted action to encourage private landlords to agree to 12 month Short Assured Tenancies for low income households seeking long-term, settled accommodation. This does not seem a particularly onerous change for landlords to make, but it could significantly enhance the opportunities for local authorities to utilise the private rented sector and for prospective tenants to have at least 12 months stability in their housing situation.

Official homelessness statistics indicate a decline in homelessness applications during 2011-12, which may well be associated with effective prevention activities. While trends will continue to be monitored, homelessness prevention activities need to be delivered alongside the responsive legal safety net for households facing homelessness. Practitioners who took part in the study indicated a degree of confidence that this could be done fairly, with a person-centred approach to best meeting the housing needs of those seeking assistance. Scottish service providers could also consider incorporating support to access training, education and employment as part of housing options advice.

Homelessness practitioners largely welcomed the pilot initiative to work across local authority boundaries in Housing Options Hubs, though the model was still in a developmental phase. The initiative combines two policy changes: a move to a housing options approach to working with
individual applicants; and a move to joint working across groups of local authorities. The independent evaluation of the pilot hubs focused more on joint working than on the effectiveness of housing options services (Ipsos MORI and Littlewood, 2012). Evidence from staff discussions for this study and from the enhanced housing options pilot in England, suggests that identified sources of funding are necessary to sustain these services.

Responsive Services – the statutory framework

Maintaining effective services to ensure a local authority can fulfil its statutory duties under the expanded legal safety for homeless households will remain a core dimension of the post-2012 homelessness service. Homelessness statistics indicate a positive picture in terms of abolishing priority need and reducing presentations. This may mean that fewer people are affected by the most acute manifestations of homelessness. However, where this does occur, the impact remains traumatic and damaging for each individual, emphasising the need to retain robust responsive homelessness services. Responsive services are well established in Scotland and known to be effective in resolving homelessness. A substantive evaluation of the statutory homelessness system in England confirmed its effectiveness as a safety net which improved quality of life for those assisted.

Triggering an application under the homelessness legislation requires that the household has some awareness of the legislation and their right or requirement to ‘present’ as homeless or request assistance from the local authority. As and when they do this will be influenced by their knowledge of law and practice, and any advice they receive from the local authority or an independent party. Front-line staff in local authorities can be considered as ‘street level bureaucrats’ who have some discretion in terms of advising applicants to make a formal homelessness presentation or not. With the increased emphasis on housing options and homelessness prevention it is crucial that full advice is given to all housing applicants, including advice on making a homelessness application, based on the legal definition of homelessness in Figure 1, Section 2 of this report.

So far, local authorities have made limited use of alternatives to social housing in terms of formal discharge of their section 31 duty to statutorily homeless households. This trend is in line with expressed preferences of service users. As noted above (preventive services), there is a need to challenge the reluctance of private landlords to consider issuing Assured Tenancies or at least 12 month contracts for Short Assured Tenancies.

Service User Priorities

A key focus of this study has been the inclusion of the perspectives of homeless service users in any consideration of the shape of those services in the future. Prior research for the Scottish Housing Regulator identified mixed experiences among service users alongside some clear preferences for service delivery. For homeless people approaching local authorities it was important that they could see someone who could help them, quickly; and that they were treated with dignity, and recognition of their individual needs, potential vulnerability and possible apprehensiveness at applying for assistance. Where applicants faced rooflessness, resolution of that crisis was a critical requirement.
Service users also prioritised good communication with the local authority throughout the process of making an application, waiting for a decision and being allocated temporary and then settled accommodation. Fundamentally, homeless service users needed to secure a safe and permanent home that met their individual needs over the long term. This often included being near to family/friends, education, employment, and transport links. Many service users prioritised availability of ongoing support, if needed. Service users in the SHR study expressed clear preferences for secure tenancies which were considered to be affordable over the long term.

Among those service users who took part in the 2012 discussion group for this study, priorities included being able to contact the homelessness service when they needed to. Participants’ actual knowledge and experience of contacting services was variable. Suggestions included wider advertising of homelessness services in public places such as job centres, surgeries, and through television, radio and the police. Participants’ experiences of the homelessness application process also varied, even within one authority. Services users wanted to be assessed by friendly, understanding staff and there was a strong preference for dealing with one key worker throughout the process. 2012 service users also wished to be treated with dignity, and to receive clear explanations of requirements such as ‘evidence’ required for their application. Participants valued a prompt response to their application, especially if urgent shelter was needed. It was also important that they could get to emergency accommodation easily or that transport was provided.

In the 2012 discussion group, participants expressed a very strong desire to be able to work and still afford their temporary or permanent accommodation. Factors influencing their ability to work included; location, rent and other costs, tenure, and service charges in temporary and settled housing. These factors strongly influenced the rational preference for a council tenancy as secure accommodation expressed by most participants. Despite having experienced homelessness, participants expressed a sense of fairness in relation to acknowledgement of other types of housing needs. They wished to be treated fairly in the system but also recognised other types of applicants needed to be considered for vacancies. There was some agreement that once accepted as homeless, households should ideally not spend more than six months in temporary accommodation, but participants did accept that this would depend on individual circumstances. All participants said they valued support with settling into a new tenancy, especially help with benefits. For some participants, the requirement for support in order to get by in temporary and long term accommodation was recognised and available support was much appreciated.

The 2012 service users responded positively to the idea of homelessness prevention and a housing options approach, provided advice was realistic and likely to lead to a sustainable outcome. Although they welcomed information about different housing options (including RSLs), some did not want to be ‘overloaded’ at their initial enquiry stage. Although a minority actively wished to live in private rented accommodation, there was fairly unanimous resistance to sharing in the PRS (as required under the Single Room Regulation for those aged under 35 years). When asked what single change might substantially improve services for homeless people, the most emphatic answer was the provision of more affordable housing.

The perspectives of homeless service users were fairly clear in the SHR report of July 2011, based on a reasonably large sample for qualitative interviews. It seems unlikely that the broad views of service users would have changed dramatically in a matter of months and similar findings emerged from the
discussions with service users in February 2012 for this research. In both cases service users reported a strong, and rational, preference for a secure, affordable home which met their needs over the long term and for most people this was best achieved through a secure social tenancy.

Young people remain at a disproportionately high risk of homelessness compared to older groups and it is recognised that supported accommodation can be a positive experience for some as part of a pathway out of homelessness. However, there should not be a presumption that support can only be provided in some kind of institutional accommodation. There are models of effective provision of support in mainstream tenancies and young people themselves should be empowered in the decision making process in terms of housing solutions.

Service users require adequate in information about services to be provided in plain English, and staff need to be sensitive to possible difficulties with literacy among service users. Service users may also require independent advice, as well as that provided by the local authority housing options or homelessness service and it is important that independent sources of advice are available across Scotland.

Conclusion

The review of Scotland’s changing homelessness services and the new findings from research with practitioners and service users indicate considerable consensus that significant progress has been made in transforming services for homeless people in Scotland since 2002. Local authorities have developed a more strategic approach to understanding homelessness through the integration of local homelessness strategies with housing strategies. Considerable progress has also been made towards developing activities to prevent homelessness, notably through housing options interviews; and towards implementation of the strengthened legal safety net for those who do face homelessness, through abolition of the test of priority need. Services could be further enhanced by integrating structures for delivering housing advice and homelessness services; by ensuring services are well-publicised so that those who need to do so can access them as soon as possible; and by implementing appropriate staff training to ensure high quality customer care which provides services which are both effective and sensitive to the needs of homeless applicants. Assessment of additional needs for support or care should be an integral component of both housing options interviews and homelessness assessments. Monitoring the effectiveness of homelessness prevention and tenancy sustainability activities needs to be given the same priority as that of action under the legislative framework.

As Scotland moves beyond the 2012 milestone, achieving a comprehensive homelessness service will essentially entail getting the right balance between proactive homelessness prevention activities and effective implementation of the statutory homelessness framework where homelessness does occur. Evidence collected for this study suggests this is an achievable outcome for Scottish local authorities. There is equally a need to ensure an appropriate balance in the supply of housing solutions in different tenures. A comprehensive homelessness service needs to be underpinned by effective Scottish Government policy as well as sound local housing and homelessness strategies. The prevention and alleviation of homelessness will always require an adequate supply of appropriate, affordable, secure accommodation, which can be considered as ‘a home’ for the long term. Scottish Government, Local authorities, RSLs, private landlords and house-builders can all help
to achieve this by working together to optimise supply, quality, security and value for money across all tenures. However, the evidence also indicates that secure social tenancies allocated through the statutory homelessness system have provided the most sustainable solution to homelessness over the long term and that many households faced with homelessness continue to express a rational preference for this outcome.
Section 6: Getting the balance right – a checklist for the post-2012 homelessness service

Effective policy implementation and service delivery depends on the combined activities of Scottish Government, Scottish local authorities, and their other partners in service delivery. The findings from this research suggest a number of recommendations for action by Scottish Government, the Scottish Housing Regulator and Audit Scotland, as well as a checklist of strategic and service delivery actions by local authorities.

Recommendations for Scottish Government, Scottish Housing Regulator and Audit Scotland

- Scottish Government should consider updating and maintaining a code of guidance for delivering a comprehensive homelessness service, including strategic, preventive and responsive dimensions of service planning and delivery.

- The positive role of secure social housing in preventing and alleviating homelessness should continue to be recognised, and investment in an adequate supply needs to be maintained alongside other tenure options.

- Monitoring of homelessness prevention and the effectiveness of person-centred approaches need to be better integrated into homelessness performance monitoring.

- Data collected around housing advice and homelessness needs to reflect the services being delivered and to accurately record outcomes for those within the statutory homelessness framework and those assisted by other routes. As homelessness prevention activities become more embedded, the monitoring of homelessness and housing advice services will need to become more sophisticated to reflect a more holistic service and range of housing solutions.

- There is a need for further evaluation of the impact of local authority homelessness prevention activity: in terms of its effectiveness in achieving sustainable housing outcomes; to ensure it is being implemented fairly in relation to the statutory homelessness framework; and to gain a more detailed evidence base on how service users view prevention and housing options services.

- There is a case for retaining some elements of the previous regulatory inspection and improvement processes in the new regulatory framework.

- The delivery of homelessness services in stock transfer authorities should be carefully monitored and there is scope for specific research on how homelessness services are delivered in stock transfer areas in the post-2012 era.

- Choice Based Lettings systems should be subject to robust equalities monitoring to ensure homeless households and other disadvantaged groups have fair opportunities to have their long term housing needs met.
In continuing to develop the role of the private rented sector in meeting the needs of homeless people there is a need to take more account of the evidence that most homeless service users are seeking long-term settled accommodation at a rent does not prohibit them from taking up lower paid employment. Private landlords should be encouraged to provide Assured Tenancies or longer term Short Assured Tenancies (e.g. minimum of 12 month contract), at affordable rents for those on low incomes.

Recommendations for Scottish Local Authorities and their partners

Strategic Action

- Local housing strategies are concerned with overall supply of housing to meet a wide range of needs. Effective homelessness strategies will at least in part depend on an adequate supply of affordable, secure, quality housing which meets the needs of low income and homeless households in the long term.

- Local authority homelessness services should be grounded in an organisational culture which is customer-oriented and focused on delivering the highest quality homelessness services in line with the local housing and homelessness strategy and the national legislative and policy framework.

- All services, including homelessness services should be underpinned by a robust equalities approach to implementation which ensures that all applicants for housing are given equal and consistent advice irrespective of household type or membership of any of the nine protected groups under the Equality Act 2010.

- Homelessness services should be underpinned by a sound understanding of the costs of service provision so that appropriate budgets can be allocated, and then managed effectively with respect to both income and expenditure.

- As of January 2013, the test of priority need will no longer be part of the legal framework and local authorities need to ensure this change is fully implemented. The statutory definition of homelessness remains unchanged.

- At the time of writing, no timetable is in place for implementation of the outstanding provisions of the Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003, but their future implementation should be borne in mind as part of homelessness service development.

- Homelessness service quality should be robustly monitored in order to drive ongoing improvement. Monitoring should include service user feedback as part of service evaluation, as well as reporting requirements for Scottish Government and the Scottish Housing Regulator.

- Stock transfer housing authorities need to have especially clear procedures for homelessness and housing options advice. This may be done in house, in partnership, or by another agency.

- Local authorities and their partners should ensure staff are able to undertake appropriate training and education to perform effectively in their jobs. Employers and education/training
providers need to liaise effectively to ensure development, delivery and uptake of appropriate programmes.

- In seeking to make use of private rented housing as part of their homelessness services, local authorities should seek to agree Assured Tenancies or Short Assured Tenancies of a minimum contract of 12 months.
- Local authorities should consider improved joint working to assist homeless households with legitimate needs to move between areas.

**Operational Action**

- In the post-2012 era the expanded legal framework remains in place and necessitates a statutory homelessness service which is well publicised and readily accessible to the public.
- All staff involved in providing housing advice should have robust training in the operation of the statutory homelessness framework and organisations should have a clear decision making procedure for advising those who are homeless (or at risk of homelessness within two months) of their entitlement to make a homelessness application. Local authorities and their partners need to ensure a careful balance between homelessness prevention and appropriate responsive action under the strengthened legislative framework.
- Ownership of the idea of person-centred housing options advice needs to permeate all aspects of the housing service, and appropriate staff training needs to be provided. There may be roles for specialist advisers, but all staff should have basic skills in identifying where early intervention can be targeted and giving core advice or referring customers for specialist advice. This could include working with tenants to sustain tenancies, and working with different members of tenant households (e.g. lodgers, separating partners, adult children seeking to form their own household etc.).
- Homeless or potentially homeless service users should be treated with respect and dignity by all staff of local authorities, RSLs, support providers and other partner organisations.
- Housing options and homelessness rights should be clearly explained to applicants, in a non-judgemental fashion.
- Clear communication should be established at initial contact and maintained throughout the process of applying for housing or making a homelessness application, to the point of settled housing or alternative resolution of the application.
- Where possible, service users should have a single worker who co-ordinates their application and sustains communication through the process.
- In the absence of full implementation of abolition of the test of local connection in the statutory homelessness framework, homelessness practitioners should give consideration to the legitimate needs of some homeless applicants to move across local authority boundaries and facilitate this where appropriate.
• Notwithstanding progress in homelessness prevention, provision of temporary and settled accommodation will remain core to local authority homelessness services. Local authorities should adhere to all guidance and recommended quality standards for temporary accommodation, and ensure this is accessible and affordable for those who need emergency access to housing.

• Where the local authority has a Section 31 duty to a homeless household it should seek to fulfil that speedily, while taking appropriate account of support needs and reasonable housing preferences of homeless households.
References


Scottish Housing Regulator (2012b) *Consultation on Scottish Social Housing Charter Indicators.* Glasgow: Scottish Housing Regulator.  


[http://wales.gov.uk/topics/housingandcommunity/housing/homelessness/review/;jsessionid=tmwG TWpTxFTpvy962KkIlB14pFnF9hqVdCt0SFJwyhVP9hRFH9T11599012692?lang=en](http://wales.gov.uk/topics/housingandcommunity/housing/homelessness/review/;jsessionid=tmwG TWpTxFTpvy962KkIlB14pFnF9hqVdCt0SFJwyhVP9hRFH9T11599012692?lang=en)