

## **SHELTER CONFERENCE: FOUR YEARS AND COUNTING**

### **23 JUNE 2008**

Good morning. Many thanks to Alan for that introduction and to Shelter for inviting me to speak here today. I welcome this opportunity to discuss current priorities for homelessness and to set out my thoughts on the key next steps.

Since coming into Government last year we have been very clear about our commitment to the homelessness 2012 target. We have also clearly stated our ambitions for more housing generally. We have recognised the housing supply problem that exists in parts of Scotland and set out our radical and ambitious vision contained within Firm Foundations. A vision of more houses of all tenures, built to higher environmental and design standards and contributing to the creation of sustainable communities. Nicola Sturgeon, Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing, will make a statement to Parliament later this week on the way ahead – turning this vision into a reality.

In confirming our commitment to the 2012 we have also recognised that it is a very ambitious and challenging target. We have incorporated the target in the National Performance

Framework – which indicates the priority both national and local government attach to achieving it.

However we are aware of the difficulties faced by some local authorities, particularly where there are wider housing shortages.

The Scottish approach to homelessness is one of which we can be proud – and which is routinely praised by other countries, many of whom are looking to emulate what has been done here. However there remains much we can learn from elsewhere and I'm sure Sarah Cumberland's session on aspects of the English experience will be very interesting in that regard.

We are all working in an ever-changing landscape. That is one of the reasons why I re-convened the Homelessness Monitoring Group last year with a slightly different membership which reflected this environment. I asked the Group to take a view on the current situation and on the capacity for future progress. At the same time all local authorities participated in the Towards 2012 Homelessness Support Project and gave valuable insights as to the barriers they face locally.

Through the Monitoring Group and the Support Project we have had a twin-track process which has resulted in linked reports published in March – bringing together the available evidence and with clear messages about what needs to be done now in order to make 2012 happen.

There are very clear messages about housing supply. It stands to reason that we cannot tackle homelessness effectively if we do not have enough houses. We are working with the Housing Supply Task Force to bring problems which are blocking development into the open and to try and find solutions. We are supporting a new generation of council house building and have proposed that our country's goal should be to build 35,000 houses a year by the middle of the next decade. We need to ensure that we are building the right houses in the right places to support economic growth and to meet demonstrated need.

We also need to ensure that all sectors are working together to meet the needs of the most vulnerable within our communities. The 2012 target is about sustainable solutions for all those who find themselves homeless – without distinguishing, as we do currently, between different categories. It is an acknowledgement that everyone who is unintentionally homeless needs a settled home.

A home which can be a base for themselves and their family and from which they can contribute effectively to their community and to the wider economy.

This is not just about council housing. In particular, the two reports tell us that there could be a greater contribution in some areas from the private rented sector and from registered social landlords.

There has been a significant volume of work going on in Scotland in the last few years to transform the private rented sector. We can see that increased regulation brought about through initiatives like Landlord Registration, HMO licensing and the new Repairing Standard are helping to drive up standards in the physical condition and management of private rented property. The recently launched new Landlord Accreditation Scheme will further increase standards by promoting best practice in tenancy management through the provision of training, advice and guidance.

These initiatives have also helped local authorities become more accustomed to working closely with private landlords and agents in order to meet local housing need. The increase in landlord forums and other approaches to engage with the sector over the last few years has been considerable and we want to see this work continue.

There are many benefits of private rented housing which we would like to see extended to homeless people. The fact that it can open up housing options in areas where there is little social housing and offer a choice of smaller or larger accommodation to suit individual needs where that is not available in the social sector. The greater sense of freedom and flexibility which can be particularly attractive for younger households. And greater mobility for those looking to move for work for example. We need to build on what the sector has to offer and recognise the key role the sector has to play in providing much needed housing.

Of course, use of the private rented sector to meet local housing need is not a new idea, and local authorities can already house homeless people in the sector through use of an assured tenancy. However, we need to make sure that our policies keep track with the changing nature of the sector, finding solutions that work for landlords and tenants alike.

We know that some local authorities have been exploring the use of private rented stock as temporary accommodation and, in some cases, working with managing agents to develop leasing schemes. There is also a history over the last 15 years of using rent deposit guarantee schemes as a successful way of placing homeless households into more settled private tenancies.

There are currently 28 schemes in operation in Scotland, assisting around 1500 households a year and providing valuable advice and assistance to the tenant, landlord and local authorities. A good practice guide for schemes was published last year and further developments on the model are emerging – for instance the Flatmates scheme run by Edinburgh Cyrenians which was highlighted in Firm Foundations and offers support to single people looking for a flatshare.

I understand this afternoon's speakers will offer some perspectives on the use of the private rented sector in practice. I hope I have set out some of the reasons why we believe greater flexibility to house homeless people in the private rented sector will lead to benefits for local authorities and landlords and better outcomes for those homeless households suited to this type of accommodation.

Today, I am pleased to be able to launch our consultation on giving local authorities this greater flexibility. I won't go into technicalities here but two officials from the Homelessness Team will be presenting a workshop this afternoon which looks at what is proposed in more detail.

In general terms, the consultation focuses around changing secondary legislation to allow local authorities to discharge their duty to homeless households by ensuring provision of a short assured tenancy. This is subject to certain conditions to support sustainability of the tenancy. The conditions we are proposing are:

- The tenancy should be for a minimum of 1 year;
- That the solution must be affordable for the household;
- That support is in place if required; and
- That the applicant has received advice on their options and has given their written consent to proceed in this way.

We very much welcome your thoughts and those of your colleagues and partners on what is suggested here. The closing date for the consultation is 19 September and copies are available here today, online or from the Homelessness Team.

As you will see, we recognise that there is an important balance to be struck between flexibility and safeguarding tenure and also that cost and support issues need to be addressed. I hope we can have a constructive dialogue around these issues so that the final position is one which achieves a workable solution for all concerned, but most importantly for homeless households.

You will be aware that we are currently carrying out a review of the private rented sector more generally – to take stock of current trends in the sector; look at landlords' and tenants' views, experiences and aspirations for the future; and ensure that it is capable of delivering the right types of housing in the right places to help meet need.

This could mean meeting demand for any type of accommodation, such as for students, migrant workers or housing in rural areas.

But, in particular, we want to look at how we can use the sector more to help house homeless people and low-income households. We are currently taking forward a number of strands of work as part of the review, and will want to talk to local authorities, landlords and other organisations as we move forward.

The legislative changes we are consulting on from today will enable greater flexibility in using the sector – one product of the broader review will be sharing practice and new ideas about how best to engage private landlords in this agenda. This will no doubt build on the rent deposit schemes, landlord forums and the like already in existence.

Turning now to the role of Registered Social Landlords, I am glad to see that one of the workshop sessions this morning is focussing on their role in dealing with homelessness. I also welcome the SFHA's endorsement of GHA's tenancy sustainment strategy and their commitment to encourage all housing associations in Scotland to use that as a model.

We are of course aware of the work that some associations already do to prevent homelessness amongst their tenants and of the positive relationships that have been built up in some areas between local authorities and housing associations when it comes to rehousing homeless people.

However we have commissioned research to explore the extent to which that positive relationship exists throughout the country and also to consider ways in which the situation can be improved if necessary. We will look to address any concerns in tandem with our wider review of allocations policy and legislation which is also currently ongoing.

As I have already said, it is vital that local authorities, housing associations and the private sector are all seen as having an important part to play in housing homeless households and bringing us closer to achieving 2012.

However, we are all obviously aware that the provision of accommodation – whilst crucial – is not all that is required. I hope we are all also agreed that we should be acting early to prevent homelessness from occurring in the first place, where and whenever that is possible.

These two themes – of joining up services for better outcomes and of prevention – were very clear throughout both the reports I referred to earlier. They are also very much in line with our general position as a Government.

We have slimmed down Government in order to facilitate better joint working across different policy areas – removing the silos of Departments and being clear about the Government's overall purpose and the objectives we are aiming to achieve for Scotland.

The removal of ring-fencing at a local level also allows local authorities to work more flexibly and consistently towards agreed outcomes. And as Single Outcome Agreements are rolled out across the Community Planning Partnerships they will act as a catalyst for even broader joining up. Perhaps most significantly of all, the concordat agreed between national and local government demonstrates our commitment to joint working and accountability.

We and COSLA have also set out our joint principles of early intervention in March this year. Principles which can apply across a wide range of policies. Of course we can't simply stop dealing with the problems that already face us but we must do more to identify and address risks before they manifest in crisis. In terms of preventing homelessness there is a lot that can be done – and a lot which comes back to joining up better, both with local authorities and between them and partners.

We are currently developing guidance on preventing homelessness which will set out key principles, some practice examples from throughout Scotland and possibly elsewhere; and will discuss monitoring and evaluating the impact of prevention activity. This is being taken forward by a secondee from local government but will draw on lessons learned from a broad range of sources, including the Innovation Fund projects local authorities and partners have been taking forward in the last couple of years.

Some aspects of joining up to prevent homelessness are fairly obvious – acting early to prevent homelessness amongst care leavers for example – which doesn't mean to say they are straightforward to achieve!

However the Innovation Fund has shown us that there are a broad range of activities which might help to prevent homelessness – projects that were considering services ranging from anger management to sporting opportunities – so there is always room for a creative approach.

What is vital though is a joint and corporate understanding of the outcomes that are being sought for local communities and for homeless people within these communities.

If we look to the concordat between national and local government, preventing and tackling homelessness is essential in order to achieve our commonly agreed objectives for children having the best start in life; people living longer healthier lives and living in well-designed sustainable places; and tackling significant inequalities. I could go on – but the point is that it is difficult to see how these outcomes can be achieved without positive joint action to prevent homelessness where possible and to provide sustainable solutions where and when it does occur.

As well as taking forward the specific action I have referred to – increasing housing supply in the right places; maximising the contribution of all sectors and working together to prevent

homelessness – it is crucial that we collectively continue to give homelessness a high profile.

As we get nearer to 2012 we must all step up our efforts and keep the needs of all homeless people to the forefront. I am pleased to say that the COSLA Community Wellbeing and Safety Executive Group has endorsed the joint priorities I have set out today at its most recent meeting last week. And we are currently working with COSLA to explore what more we can do to get these messages across to local decision makers.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today and for listening. I'm sorry that I won't be able to stay for the rest of the day as it sounds like an interesting programme, but I've asked officials to give me feedback on the sessions and issues being raised and I hope you all find it an interesting and useful event.

Thanks again