

## **2012: Making it happen**

### **Stewart Maxwell MSP, Minister for Communities and Sport**

I'd like to start by thanking Shelter for inviting me to address today's conference. The Scottish Government recognises and values the hugely important work Shelter does in highlighting housing issues and helping homeless people.

I personally welcome the contribution Shelter has to make to the national debate on housing and homelessness and I hope we can work together constructively in the coming years as we embark on a new chapter in Scotland's political life.

Today's conference marks the halfway point between the passing of the Homelessness (Scotland) Act in 2003 and the 2012 target to abolish the priority need distinction and treat all unintentionally homeless people equally.

Let me be clear: the new Scottish Government is committed to this goal. But I'm sure no-one here today would underestimate the scale of the challenge facing us.

We will encourage innovative approaches to make our shared vision a reality. We need to recognise that one size does not fit all and that solutions must be responsive to local circumstances and local needs.

We will work with local authorities, with Shelter, and with other key partners represented at today's conference and more widely. The aim is to put in place affordable solutions that are practical and achievable but most of all, which put homeless people themselves at their heart.

We have set out five strategic objectives which underpin all the work of the Scottish Government. Through the skills, experience and commitment of the people of Scotland, we aim to make Scotland:

- Wealthier and fairer
- Healthier
- Safer and stronger
- Smarter; and
- Greener

These strategic objectives give clarity to everything we will do and they are relevant to combating homelessness – action which will improve the lives of people who are homeless or are at risk of becoming homeless.

My own Ministerial portfolio is Communities and Sport which lies within the wider remit of Health and Wellbeing. This structure helps us to join the dots. The environment in which people live and the prosperity that they enjoy clearly has a significant impact on their health and wellbeing. That is why we believe it important that responsibility for housing, regeneration and tackling poverty should lie alongside health in a single portfolio.

We have pledged to do more to improve health and tackle the grotesque inequalities that still scar our nation. We need a sharper focus on prevention, on anticipatory care and on supporting people to take greater responsibility for their own wellbeing. These principles apply equally in mainstream health service provision as in homelessness service provision.

Of course, as Scotland's first SNP administration, we see independence as the best route of all for guaranteeing the best public services for Scotland, and the best chance of prosperity for our nation over the long-term. We have started a conversation with the people of Scotland about independence.

Specifically, the Scottish National Party manifesto pledges to deliver on the legislation to tackle homelessness. We will work with the legislative framework agreed across the parliament and with broad support from stakeholders and the wider public. In so doing, we will look closely at the reality of what is deliverable on the ground. Tackling and preventing homelessness is extremely complex and calls for a multi-faceted response.

We will be taking forward several key sections of the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003, as well as other legislation passed in recent years.

These sections are designed to address a number of issues, specifically:

- preventing homelessness through early intervention by ensuring that landlords and creditors notify local authorities when they raise evictions;
- setting minimum terms of occupancy for people living in hostels and other forms of short-term accommodation;
- providing constructive support for those deemed to be intentionally homeless;
- and
- improving temporary accommodation for vulnerable households;

I believe increasing the supply of homes that are affordable – across all tenures - is one of the most important things we can do to prevent homelessness.

We established the Housing Supply Task Force, which will be busy over the winter months. Shelter is represented on the Task Force. The aim is simple: to tackle the problems that are preventing new homes being built and to identify practical solutions.

Tackling obstacles such as land supply and planning issues will help to push up the number of homes being built across all tenures but we realise the size of the challenge – not just for Government but for local authorities, housing providers and the construction industry.

Improving overall supply is vital if we are to realise our ambitions for housing but we also have plans that will reinvigorate the social rented sector, encourage the role of the private rented sector and support first time buyers who are struggling to afford a home of their own. We will soon begin our wide-ranging consultation on these issues and more.

With a tight Spending Review upcoming, it is clear that there won't be easy answers. No Government can simply turn on housing supply like a tap and we must operate within the constraints of our budget.

But that doesn't mean we should be pessimistic. I think there is a great deal we can do to get more for our money and build more efficiently. During my summer visits I saw many developments of new affordable homes that had been built thanks to partnership working between the Scottish Government, local authorities, housing associations and developers. With the right will, I know that it is possible to make more affordable housing a reality.

Research on preventing homelessness commissioned from Heriot Watt University was published earlier this year. The research looked at housing advice, assisted access to private tenancies and tenancy sustainment and also focussed on preventing youth homelessness. It showed that a culture change has already begun, with all local authorities actively involved in a range of prevention work.

More needs to be done, however. Many prevention activities are still small and experimental. Additionally, local authorities are aware of the need to monitor and evaluate but more needs to be done on how this should be carried out in practice.

The Scottish Government will build on the research and develop prevention guidance including advice on monitoring and evaluation. This reflects the importance we place on the prevention of homelessness.

Socially, prevention is important because homelessness causes trauma and problems for households.

Economically it is important because housing people in temporary accommodation is expensive – as are the more intensive services required when problems are allowed to escalate.

I pay tribute to the joint working which takes place across Scotland – but stress the need for even more effort to be put into working together in the best interests of individuals and households.

It is vital that local authority departments and relevant local agencies work together to prevent homelessness occurring. It is also vitally important that, where homelessness does occur and is being tackled, the factors which may cause repeat homelessness are addressed and action taken to sustain tenancies and prevent homelessness recurring.

Preventing homelessness can also help to prevent additional problems – in terms of poor health, loss of employment, and losing contacts with family, friends and support networks.

I was delighted last week – together with the First Minister – to host a reception to honour the Scotland team which won the Homeless World Cup in August. Scotland's victory in Copenhagen and the boost that the experience gave the team vividly demonstrates the importance of sport in building self-esteem and self-confidence. I'm interested in looking at how we can enable more homeless people to benefit from taking part in sport.

Allocating resources to prevent homelessness is spending to save by reducing pressure on health, housing, social work, employment and justice services in the longer term and it is important that all agencies are involved in this.

As I have said, there has been a culture change among local authorities in terms of understanding of the importance of prevention. In combating homelessness, we also need to understand how homelessness is viewed by people in Scotland.

A survey commissioned into public attitudes to homelessness is due to be published before the end of this year. The results of the survey will be examined so that future strategies, including prevention, can be informed by a clear understanding of how homelessness is viewed.

We will also look to the lessons to be drawn from the projects which received funding under the Innovation Fund and are currently being evaluated. The projects demonstrate novel ways of making progress towards delivering the 2012 target through preventing homelessness occurring in the first place.

We are working towards delivering through a range of other initiatives as well. These include health – where the Homelessness and Homelessness Standards have now been established for a few years; and employment, where the Scottish Homeless and Employability Network has been set up.

So, as you can see there is a lot being done to work towards the 2012 target. Of course, we plan to discuss the overall phasing and timetabling of implementation of the legislation with CoSLA.

Crucially, the legislation commits Scottish Ministers to assess the capacity to deliver before implementing the 2012 target in full. We in government take this responsibility very seriously and will work with stakeholders to assess the current situation and gain perspective on capacity for future progress.

As some of you will know, I have been considering a new approach to delivery in recognition of the very challenging agenda – in which the scale of the challenge requires an approach tightly focused on outcomes.

I have asked my officials to work closely with a range of stakeholders on detailed elements of policy and delivery. New stakeholder working groups are being set up. I hope that many organisations represented here will take part.

I also plan to involve stakeholders in a strategic assessment of progress each year. This will look at progress with top-level homelessness outcomes, as well as the 2012 target and future capacity to manage ongoing change. A small Group - reflecting current policy delivery structures and broader sector reform– is being asked to participate in an annual review. It is important, for example, that Community Planning and Community Health Partnerships are involved in taking this overview forward given their strategic role in local delivery. And, of course, we must hear the voice of homeless people and will build this in.

Since coming to power in May, this new government has taken a fresh approach based on setting a clear direction, but recognising that as a minority government it is vital that we work in partnership and build consensus. In government, we will only succeed if we

take people with us, if we use people's experience and expertise and if we maximise the contribution of people who know what it is like on the ground.

Looking forward, of course, local government cannot achieve the 2012 target alone and that is why I would like again to emphasise the importance of continuing to work in partnership.

The contribution of practitioners – many of you here today – is valued, and crucial. As I have touched on throughout, preventing and tackling is about more than just housing supply. Supply of affordable housing is certainly necessary but it is not the whole solution by any means. Providing accommodation is not going to solve the problem – we also need to ensure that those people who need it are given support to sustain that accommodation and fulfil their potential. This could be basic support – like providing furniture – or more intensive. It is important to look at the unique circumstances of each household and tailor an appropriate response. This could involve healthcare, assistance in developing skills and finding employment or support to strengthen existing family relationships and social networks or develop new ones. It is obvious that for people who require this type of support, agencies must work together to achieve positive outcomes.

An example of working closely with local authorities is the 2012 ALACHO Homelessness Support project.

Two homelessness Strategy Officers, who will be running a workshop later today, are currently on secondment to the Scottish Government, working under the joint direction of the Scottish Government, the Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers – ALACHO – and CoSLA in order to provide dedicated support to local authorities in addressing issues relating to the 2012 target.

So far, these officers have visited thirty-one out of the thirty-two local authorities. I know that Councils have welcomed the opportunity to directly feed back to the Scottish Government their views on the 2012 target. The involvement of the Government in the project shows that we want to listen and to take on board concerns and views.

Several messages are emerging from these meetings. I recognise that there is a concern about the supply of appropriate and affordable housing. The Scottish Government cannot commit to future subsidised programmes in advance of the spending review later this year and will shortly be consulting on its wider plans for housing.

Other issues to emerge from the meetings chime with much of what I have said today – not least the importance of the prevention of homelessness, wider forms of support and monitoring arrangements.

The project officers will present a final report to ALACHO, CoSLA and Scottish Government officials following full analysis of the information collected from all the visits. The aim will then be to work together to address the issues raised.

The voluntary sector also has a very important part to play. Shelter in particular is a key player in the delivery of our homelessness legislation and it is reassuring for me to know that a charity with such a wealth of experience and dedication is part of this process.

Once again, I'd like to thank you for having me here today and to express my sincere wish that we will continue to work together in the years ahead to make sure that we all do everything in our power to meet the 2012 target which has rightly been the focus of much attention and debate throughout Scotland but also internationally.

I wish you a stimulating, thought provoking and constructive conference. Thank you.