

**Shelter seminar: Delivering on Homelessness 2006  
24 April 2006**

**Speech by Minister for Communities  
Progress towards 2012**

**Today sees the publication, as you know, of the Homelessness Monitoring Group's annual report and action plan which reports on progress towards delivery of the 59 recommendations of the Homelessness Task Force. Today is therefore about reviewing progress and about looking forward; about identifying what more needs to be done to deliver our radical, challenging agenda for homelessness in Scotland.**

**At the heart of our policy sits the commitment to abolishing priority need by 2012 – giving every unintentionally homeless person the right to permanent accommodation. This is our main objective – we remain committed to extending the rights of homeless people and to finding sustainable solutions for every homeless household.**

**This afternoon I will talk about progress towards meeting the 2012 target, and the importance of prevention in achieving it; but before I do so we should recognise how challenging and ground-breaking our policy is. Scotland's homelessness policy and legislation are world leaders; our focus on increased rights, effective prevention and quality services has won plaudits from Europe and beyond as I found when I spoke recently on the subject of our homelessness legislation at a European seminar in Dundee organised by FEANTSA. Most importantly, however, the strength of our policy is matched by our commitment to work in partnership with one another to deliver.**

**It is now 5 years since the Homelessness Task Force made its final report and stakeholders from all sectors, and the Scottish Parliament, signed up to and endorsed a new programme for tackling and preventing homelessness in Scotland. There have been great achievements in those 5 years, achievements which have only been possible because we recognise the strength of working together.**

**Locally, homelessness strategies have been developed in every part of the country, informed by dialogue and joint working between local government, the voluntary sector,**

health sector and other partners. This joint approach mirrors the holistic approach to tackling homelessness recommended by the Task Force – identifying not only the housing needs of homeless people but also the social, financial, welfare, health, education and training needs and finding a solution tailored to meet all those needs wherever possible.

At a national level we have also demonstrated a commitment to working together to shape future policy direction and deliver services through the Homelessness Monitoring Group and its subgroups.

The Statement which I made last December on abolishing priority need was a product of our strong relationships and throughout the course of the year we worked very closely with stakeholders to assess progress to date and action required to meet the 2012 target.

The Homelessness Monitoring Group was extended to reflect the vital role of local government in delivery and three subgroups were set up to take forward specific workstreams. Moreover, a local government official was seconded to the Scottish Executive to facilitate dialogue with individual authorities and a comprehensive data

**gathering exercise commenced to identify progress and challenges and meetings were held with elected members to discuss their views of local challenges.**

**The last 5 years have not only seen raised awareness of homelessness issues politically, but there has also been a change of attitude about cross-sector working and a recognition of what it can achieve. There is no doubt in my mind that, working together, we can achieve our goals. We have always known that our homelessness agenda is challenging; we have experienced some difficulties in delivery and undoubtedly we have more challenges to come, but we have strong relationships and are committed to working through the issues that arise.**

**Indeed, the partnerships which have been forged at national and local level have delivered so much already.**

**Since 2002 all homeless people have been entitled to a minimum of temporary accommodation and those in priority need are entitled to permanent accommodation. This is only the first stage in removing the artificial distinction between those in priority and those not. These rights are backed up by a duty on the local authority to provide advice and assistance to homeless people, and**

**those threatened by homelessness, hugely powerful tool in preventing homelessness.**

**A comprehensive programme has been put in place to decommission Glasgow's outdated hostels and replace them with smaller scale accommodation more appropriate to residents' needs, with three hostels already closed and another is scheduled for closure later this year.**

**Health and homelessness standards have been developed and put in place across Scotland, building on action plans which had been developed locally between local authorities, Health Boards and voluntary organisations.**

**A range of services for rough sleepers has been put in place and work is ongoing to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable and hard to reach groups are identified and addressed.**

**It is now accepted of course that homelessness is about more than bricks and mortar – and that rhetoric has been made reality through the development of furnished tenancy schemes, the development of the Scottish Homelessness and Employability Network, and the**

**appointment of a Social Networks Co-ordinator for Scotland and in other ways.**

**These national developments have been mirrored at a local level – with local authorities and partners working extremely hard to fulfil their new responsibilities and deliver improved services. We should remember that the fact that each local authority has a homelessness strategy in place is a key development in itself – as is the joint working necessary to make them work.**

**I acknowledge that each area has its own challenges in relation to homelessness and that, for some, dealing with increased duties has presented problems but we are committed to working closely with those authorities, providing guidance and support where needed. Communities Scotland is currently consulting on its future inspection regime and it will be important to ensure that whatever changes are put in place reflect the need to target assistance towards those who need it most.**

**Inspections give us good information on how local authorities and RSLs are responding to the increased duties placed on them. Additional work is also underway to improve our evidence gathering with changes to the HL1**

**data recording system. The changes are designed to give us more accurate information on discharge of duties, to inform future policy development on issues like local connection and to ensure that we are monitoring closely the progress to 2012 and identifying the challenges correctly.**

**Inspections also highlight examples of best practice which can be disseminated so that others can see examples of what works. Communities Scotland published a themed report on homelessness last June. This report contained a number of examples of best practice, and more have emerged from last year's inspection programme.**

**In this context I cannot let today go past without congratulating City of Edinburgh Council on receiving an 'A' grade from Communities Scotland in the inspection of their homelessness service. It is the first 'A' to be awarded and I am certain there are models of best practice there which can be emulated.**

**We are also taking forward a massive amount of wider work on housing and regeneration which is assisting delivery of our homelessness agenda. I will not go into all that has been achieved over the last 5 years but it is**

**important to remember that radical changes such as the development of the Scottish Secure Tenancy and stock transfer in Glasgow have taken place in only the recent past.**

**We have been working, and continue to work, together to improve the lives of homeless people and to increase their legal rights. However we cannot deal with these issues in isolation and that is why we are also focussing on the supply and quality of housing, the regeneration of communities and improving the prospects of the most vulnerable when it comes to employment and training.**

***Homes for Scotland's People*, our Housing Policy Statement published last year, affirms our commitment to ensuring that Scotland's housing system as a whole delivers the homes that our population needs. The statement sets an ambitious set of housing objectives and how we intend to achieve them - and the 2012 target is integral to this programme of action.**

**We have expanded our investment in affordable housing over the current 3 year period to provide over 16,500 affordable rented homes and nearly 5,000 low cost home ownership units; and will ensure that everyone living in the**

**social rented sector lives in a home which meets the Scottish Housing Quality Standard by 2015.**

**We are steering a planning bill through Parliament at the moment which will modernise the planning system, making it more proactive in releasing land through the development plan process and faster in the handling of applications for housing development. We have provided Planning Advice which sets a benchmark for 25% of new private housing developments to be affordable homes, and we are investing in strategic water and sewerage infrastructure to meet the capacity requirements for all estimated new housing developments.**

**Earlier this year we published a statement setting out a new approach to regeneration. We want to create stronger, safer, sustainable communities – with employment opportunities, business opportunities, good public services and a sense of community engagement and participation.**

**Our agenda is both broad and challenging but we are determined to pursue it with energy if the ambitions we have set for ourselves are to be realised.**

**In order to move forward to 2012, the time is now right and the pieces are in place to move on to the next stage of delivery. We must continue to shift our focus – from managing the crisis of rough sleeping and hidden homelessness to taking a proactive approach to preventing homelessness and tackling it effectively where it occurs.**

**As well as looking back over progress, the Homelessness Monitoring Group’s annual report sets out its priorities for the coming year. Most of these are associated with action set out in the Statement on the abolition of priority need, which I published last December. The statement sets out the action which has been, is being, and will be taken by central and local government to meet the 2012 target. It is our roadmap for 2012 and I am pleased to say is a roadmap which has been welcomed by our partners.**

**As I have already made clear - action is needed in a number of areas in order to meet the 2012 target. Supply of appropriate and affordable housing is fundamental and presents its own challenges – particularly in pressured areas. There are also particular issues around the provision of temporary accommodation which the**

**Monitoring Group has highlighted and I am keen that we address these in the most effective way possible.**

**We will take account of the importance of supply to meeting the 2012 target in finalising the Strategic Housing Investment Framework and in the next Spending Review. We must also recognise that we need to respond to societal changes in planning houses for the future – we need to be aware of the ageing population, the shift to single-person households, and the increasing desire to own your own home for example – and ensure that we take account of these in the decisions we make about Scotland’s housing and meeting the needs of homeless people.**

**The tensions that can arise in some communities over allocations policies were also highlighted during the consultation we carried out last year. We are currently carrying out wider research on allocations policy. We also acknowledge that further guidance is needed on achieving the right balance in allocation policies and are in discussions with stakeholders on this issue.**

**This balance is crucial in providing sustainable, mixed communities. However the bottom line is that housing**

**solutions found for homeless households are sustainable in order to prevent the damage which repeat homelessness causes, and authorities are encouraged to tailor solutions to individual cases.**

**In many cases a local authority let is not the most appropriate outcome, and we are keen to ensure that alternative sources of accommodation, such as RSL and private lets are fully utilised. Registered Social Landlords have a key role to play in providing housing outcomes for homeless households, and later this year we will commence a review of the operation of referrals made under section 5 of the 2001 Housing Act to evaluate their effectiveness and determine whether further guidance is required.**

**We will also continue to address the wider issues which contribute to the complexity of homelessness and make it so difficult to overcome. This includes ensuring that action we have already put in train is having the desired effect. For example we are currently surveying NHS Boards to gauge progress against the Health and Homelessness Standards and to inform future arrangements for monitoring.**

**We are also publishing an Employability Framework for Scotland which will reflect the need for local services to work together to assist homeless people – and other disadvantaged groups – to move into work and to stay in work. There are also some interesting pilots being carried out by the Department for Work and Pensions around Housing Benefit flexibility – hopefully the lessons learned from these will also be used to help homeless people into work.**

**Work is also underway on implementation of the legislation to amend local connection rules, set out occupancy rights for people living in hostels and to introduce new measures to deal with intentionally homeless households. Like the policy developments which have gone before them these changes will be taken forward in full consultation with all partners.**

**We do not currently plan any legislative change to the definition of priority need – instead we have set an interim target for reducing the proportion of non-priority assessment by 50% by 2009. This will allow local authorities to take an approach which best suits local circumstances – and problems with achieving the interim**

**target will help identify issues which need to be addressed in order to make 2012 a reality.**

**It is important that we keep up the momentum – and retain the consensus that tackling homelessness is a priority for a wide range of statutory and voluntary organisations. It is also vitally important that as a society we focus on the prevention of homelessness.**

**Prevention of homelessness is crucial – both socially and economically – and we must continue to work in partnership across all sectors to ensure we do all we can to prevent people becoming homeless in the first place. Socially, becoming homeless is a damaging and traumatic experience – causing isolation and can lead to a wealth of associated problems.**

**Moreover, economically, it makes good sense to act early to avoid the financial burden of picking up the pieces after a household has reached housing crisis. Housing people in temporary accommodation can cost local authorities more than providing permanent accommodation, particularly if a household experiences repeat homelessness. There are also other potential costs – associated with health problems, or loss of employment**

**for example – which are more likely to be passed on to local services when someone is in a vulnerable housing situation. Preventing homelessness therefore makes more sense in all ways than dealing with the problem once it arises.**

**The importance of prevention is clearly recognised in the statement made last year and we know that many organisations are carrying out a wide range of prevention activities. These range from mainstream advice and information services to dedicated, intensive support to a household under threat of homelessness. Prevention work takes many forms and may not always be immediately recognised as relating to housing: enforcement of antisocial behaviour orders; family mediation services; debt and financial advice. All these services help individuals manage their lives more effectively and promote community values.**

**The next step is to identify and focus on what works and to share that practice with others. We have commissioned research into the impact of prevention activities being undertaken by local authorities and their partners agencies – how they are monitored and evaluated – and in particular what works best for ‘at risk’ groups. The research will be**

**used to develop good practice guidance on the efficacy of different approaches.**

**We are also keen to encourage new and innovative approaches to prevention and have set up a dedicated fund to which local authorities can apply. It is expected that around 5 demonstration projects will be supported through the fund, each providing a unique intervention which would not normally form part of the local homelessness strategy. Findings and relevant good practice from the project evaluations will be disseminated afterwards. Applications should be submitted by the end of May and I encourage all local partners to work together to develop bids.**

**We have set out our course on delivering the right quality and quantity of housing needed for Scotland's people. But we must look wider.**

**Every person should have a home, and that home should form part of a sustainable, safe community. For too long homeless people were seen as being apart from the community rather than a part of it. We will not accept this discrimination. Our wider policies - on regeneration, employment, on young people – are based on the belief**

**that every person, regardless of their circumstances, should have the opportunity to realise their full potential, to become an active member and contributor to their community. Homeless people are a central part of that vision.**