

**Robert Aldridge (SCSH Director) Conference Speech
Thursday November 8th 2007**

This year has been one of uncertainties. The May elections brought not only a new Scottish Government but also change in local government across Scotland with a change in political control in many areas and almost everywhere a large influx of new councillors.

From the homelessness point of view the good news was the manifesto of the new Scottish Government which stated clearly in relation to the homelessness legislation: now is the time to deliver.

There has been a period of stock taking, but slowly now some of the uncertainties are beginning to become clearer. I am sure when she speaks to us later today that Nicola Sturgeon the Cabinet Secretary will begin to clarify a number of the questions that are still outstanding and she has indicated that she is prepared to take questions from the floor.

Just in the past week there were two important announcements – the latest homelessness statistics were published and the new Govt Green Paper on housing – ‘Firmer Foundations’.

Homelessness Statistics

Overall both the numbers presenting as homeless and those assessed as homeless were slightly down on last year – but the variation is slight. It does appear, though that homeless presentations have reached a plateau at just under 60,000 per year. Similarly those assessed as homeless is slightly down – at around 70% of presentations. However there are huge differences between local authorities, with some finding around half of presentations homeless, while others find almost all those presenting to be homeless.

There is a trend for the gap between presenting and assessed as homeless to be growing, which is an area we need to understand better.

Are people who are not homeless using the homeless route to try to get access to social rented housing? Are LAs being more strict about who they assess as homeless? Or are there other factors at play?

There was a target that by the end of 2003 no-one in Scotland would need to sleep rough. Although the official statistics show a welcome continuing reduction in numbers sleeping rough, they only show part of the picture. SCSH - from anecdotal evidence – is concerned that numbers appear to be rising. We know that the Scottish Govt is assessing LOAs from councils which should give a better idea. But we do think it is worth considering undertaking a comprehensive national count 5 years after the target date (i.e. 2008).

The stats also show in broad terms that LAs are making progress towards the 2009 milestone – though some are doing better than others – and I’ll return to that later.

As ever statistics raise questions – and we always need a reality check to understand them better.

Scottish Government Housing Consultation

The second publication was Firmer Foundations – the Green Paper on housing. Amongst its very welcome proposals are a review of the RTB and increased house building and further mention of stock transfer. SCSH's new research on Stock transfer and homelessness will be outlined by Mary Taylor immediately after me – a timely piece of research.

It also proposes a much greater role for the private rented sector in tackling homelessness. I believe it is right to consider what role it can play – and it should play a role – but there are a number of issues which need to be addressed.

Security of tenure

The fact is that Short Assured Tenancies are almost universal as the tenancy type in the PRS. The Housing Scotland Act 2001 deliberately made it clear that the limited security offered by a SAT did not constitute discharge of homelessness duty.

Of course many landlords do not exploit the insecurity. But others do. When we have developed good practice in the right to permanent housing for homeless people, we must be very careful not to dilute it. We certainly do not want the situation where we re-create a revolving door of homelessness with people losing SATs.

On the other side of the argument: if a household is happily housed in a SAT and no further work needs to be done to resolve their homelessness it is illogical that the household should continue to form part of the homelessness statistics.

I personally believe that we need a debate about the SAT. It was originally intended as the exception rather than the rule, but the reverse has happened. Given that that is the case it is perhaps time to revisit the SAT to give greater security to SAT tenants, including proper grounds for eviction (rather than the tenancy having reached its end). We should also have a debate about what minimum terms would be acceptable if homeless people are being re-housed in the PRS and how to record a case which is effectively closed but not technically discharged.

Impact of high rents and LHA, and the link with Welfare Reforms

Generally the PRS charges higher rents than the social rented sector. Indeed one of the criticisms of Private Sector leasing has been the high level of rents and the impact that can have on people who wish to work but can't afford to.

We have a series of changes being brought in by government at Westminster which will have an impact on the use of the PRS.

Turning firstly to the Welfare Reforms which are currently being considered: These are introducing quite severe benefits sanctions for those who do not take up work, once they are work ready. We need to ensure that the inter-relationship between the Welfare reforms pressurising people into work at the risk of losing benefit, do not force formerly homeless people in private rented accommodation into the impossible situation of either

Taking a job, experiencing decreased benefits and having to move out of their home because they cannot afford it – effectively becoming homeless

Or

Remaining in their home but losing benefits through sanctions and experiencing severe poverty (and possibly rent arrears, spiralling debts etc.)

Either option could lead to tenancy failure and homelessness.

The clear message from this is that the sanctions element of the welfare reforms needs to be abandoned, and SCSH will be lobbying to remove the sanctions, which could result in increased homelessness- undermining the good achievements in employability and homelessness we have taken forward in Scotland through New Futures and similar initiatives.

Employability is an area where responsibilities are split between Westminster and Holyrood. SCSH has always taken the view that helping people towards employability is an excellent focus for a sustainable pathway out of homelessness. We are pleased to host SHEN. But one thing in particular has become clear to us: the lack of integration between the Scottish Employability Framework (WorkforcePlus) and the Westminster run Departments and agencies.

Quite apart from the effect on the private rented sector we need to get buy in and integration from both so that the whole system works in a seamless and complementary fashion. There is still a lot of work to be done in this regard.

There is also the roll out of Local Housing Allowance across the country to replace housing benefit in the private rented sector.

The current proposals for very large Rental Market Areas to establish the level of LHA will probably exclude people on benefits from certain parts of our cities and from certain towns and villages in rural areas. The fact that it is based on the average rent in the rental market area means that in any case 50% of the PRS is excluded and it is likely that people reliant on benefit will (more than before) be concentrated in certain areas, contradicting the aim of creating balanced communities.

There are many more issues relating to the introduction of LHA and SCSH will be holding a one day event in January to explore the issues facing local authorities and homelessness services in preparing for the new system.

Who will be housed in the PRS?

It is unlikely to be young people. We are all aware that most rent deposit guarantee schemes will not take on under 25s, because the Single Room Rent (max HB payable for under 25s) is not sufficient to be sustainable for them in most areas of Scotland. A similar scheme will be in operation for the LHA. This means that the role of the PRS in meeting homelessness targets will be limited. It may exclude under 25s (who comprise around 35% of homeless applicants and for whom the PRS is more likely to be the preferred option).

Will landlords be prepared to take 'the risk' of people with support needs, or a poor credit history – or will the PRS option be for 'cherry picked' homeless people.

We need to go into the debate with our eyes open however. We need to be clear about the role we expect of the PRS and be able to measure whether it is meeting our expectations.

Lack of knowledge of PRS

We also know that we don't really know enough about the PRS in Scotland. It has different characteristics in different parts of the country. In some areas linked to large estates and landowners; in others highly stratified into a student sector, a professional sector, a holiday sector and a benefits sector. There are some larger businesses, but also a significant number of small landlords with one or two properties only. If we are to understand the potential of the PRS in relation to homelessness, we must also understand it better.

I think we know the areas which could pose problems quite well. They have been well rehearsed. We need the debate to find out if and how they might be overcome.

So I'm glad the debate is starting. SCSH will certainly be making comments on the Green Paper and in particular on the potential of the PRS.

Firmer Foundations also makes a welcome reference to increased house building. We are all aware that in most areas of Scotland there is a shortage of decent quality affordable rented housing. The announcement of an intention to build 35,000 homes per year as opposed to 25,000 at present is very welcome. What was missing from the announcement was how many affordable rented homes are in that additional 10,000 homes per year.

SCSH together with the other main housing and homelessness organisations in Scotland has consistently called for the building of 10,000 affordable rented homes per year for the next three years in order to meet the 2012 target. While the Green Paper makes welcome mention of councils building more homes, we all know that simply using the prudential borrowing route will not provide sufficient homes, especially when councils are also having to borrow to meet the SHQS.

The announcement next week of the Strategic Spending Review will give a clearer indication of how achievable those 10,000 affordable rented homes per annum are.

It will also give an indication of the level of spend on supporting people – which is at least as important as the supply of houses in tackling homelessness effectively.

Supply and Support are two of the fundamentals to making the homelessness framework work successfully.

The third element is the effectiveness of the homelessness strategy.

2012 is rushing towards us like an express train. The interim milestone of getting half way there by 2009 is imminent.

SCSH is very aware of the huge amounts of effort going into making strategies and action plans work effectively. The pressure is high and in most parts of Scotland real major progress is being made.

We do have some concerns, however, that the move away from ring fencing homelessness resources and the more hands off approach to local authorities increases the risk of less emphasis being put on homelessness.

We know that local outcome agreements are submitted to civil servants. We are nervous, however, at how robust the monitoring and reporting of progress will be. Time is very short. At Scottish level we really need to know if there are serious problems in any LA area, which might need additional support. If some LAs are not going to meet their 2009 target we need to know sooner rather than later and action needs to be taken at Scottish level to get back on track.

SCSH with our unique range of networks and members will continue to provide a reality check. More than ever our range of contacts working with homeless people can identify new obstacles which are emerging and which need to be addressed either at local or national level. And we will continue to use our varied communications tools to pass on the latest developments, nationally and locally and encourage the exchange of effective practice.

Similarly with Health and Homelessness. SCSH was pleased to run a health and homelessness conference in September with Ministerial attendance. We trust that has helped to reinvigorate an area where our members and contacts were telling us that excellent progress was being made in some areas, while others were struggling.

I said at that conference and I will repeat it here – that I believe we still need a dedicated post within the Health Department identifying weaknesses and offering support to those areas which need it so that the health element of the framework is working well for 2012. Overall I believe we need a very practical approach to 2012.

So what are some of the other challenges for the coming year?

Prevention

Delighted that Chris Price from Wales will give us an insight into how Wales is tackling homelessness prevention. SCSH will continue with its Leaving Home Education work in schools, youth settings, helping young tenants and now with the new Parents Guide helping parents manage far better how their children leave home.

Mainstreaming

One of the keys is the corporate approach. Not leaving everything to the homelessness section! Without mainstream social work services, health services, employment services, housing management etc playing their part the whole 2012 agenda will be hard to achieve.

That involves Partnership across disciplines and across sectors. Some of you may have been at the Health and Homelessness Conference when Tom Wood defined partnership as ‘The suppression of mutual loathing in order to attract funding.’ There is clearly an element of truth in that – but effective partnerships are vital to making the homelessness framework function.

Which brings me to the Contract Culture. The voluntary sector has a vital role and it must be allowed to do what it does best: innovate, evolve practice, use learning from service to campaign for change. We need to ensure that contracts leave space for that vital element – and for investment in staff training, support and qualifications – or we lose expertise and services are in danger of stagnating.

In Conclusion

At this conference we are getting down to practicalities with a very busy agenda. A couple of years ago I asked the question: ‘Are we nearly there yet?’

The answer is we’re much closer than we’ve ever been. There’s a lot of work still to be done of course. But quite clearly and tangibly the position for homeless people is improving steadily.

They – people affected by homelessness must always be at the centre of what we do. With the right resources, the right policies and practices and your continued enthusiasm to make it work – we really can make Scotland’s homelessness policy the envy of the rest of the world.