

**Nicola Sturgeon's address to the Scottish Council for Single Homeless Conference  
Apex International Hotel, Edinburgh, November 8th 2007**

Good afternoon. I am very pleased to have this opportunity to address the annual conference of the Scottish Council for Single Homeless for the first time as Cabinet Secretary for Health & Wellbeing.

I would like to thank Robert Aldridge and SCSH for inviting me along to speak to such an expert audience of practitioners from a range of agencies and sectors, different disciplines and backgrounds. This important conference provides a great opportunity for you all to get together to share experience and exchange ideas in taking forward our joint agenda on homelessness.

There is also the chance, on this occasion at least, to hear what others are doing in other places. I very much welcome the inclusion in the programme of guest speakers from Wales and the Republic of Ireland, giving a distinctly Celtic flavour to the event – of which, you will not be surprised to hear, I heartily approve.

This is a significant time to focus on such a vital concern, particularly in the context of a new Government bringing a fresh approach to tackling complex social issues. Homelessness is not just about housing, essential as that is.

**An Integrated Approach**

This new Scottish Government is focused on addressing the underlying causes of homelessness. These combine in complex ways that call for a multi-disciplinary response.

Poverty or family breakdown; lack of choice or poor housing conditions; vulnerability or low educational attainment; lack of skills or loss of employment are just some of the mix of causes which led to over 40,000 households being assessed as homeless last year.

If not resolved quickly, Homelessness can have far reaching and long term damaging consequences not only for homeless people themselves, particularly children and young people, but for us all. Having good quality, safe and secure accommodation for everyone is essential to our individual as well as our social well-being.

That is why homelessness, as part of housing and regeneration, falls within my remit. Many of the cross-cutting issues which characterise homelessness have been brought within a single portfolio. A smaller, more focused, Cabinet allows the other aspects such as employment, Education or Justice to be more effectively joined up.

We will ensure that across government we will better identify where, when and how previously separate departments must work out common solutions.

We want to see this integrated, corporate approach to government replicated at local levels so that services which need to work together are working with each other to address commonly agreed priorities and objectives.

Where this is already happening, homelessness services can be amongst the most active promoters of this process.

**The 2012 Target**

As I underlined again to Parliament last week, I am pleased to re-state our commitment to the 2012 target to abolish priority need.

We realise the target is an ambitious one. But the destructive impact homelessness has on our communities makes it the right one.

The Scottish Government will continue to assess capacity across Scotland to deliver it. Under Stewart Maxwell, the minister leading on housing, a refocused Homelessness Monitoring Group will assess progress towards 2012 and the levels of improved outcomes for homeless people.

He will receive a report later this year, drawing on recently published homelessness statistics and local authorities' outcome agreements and progress reports.

Late last year the ALACHO Project was established to liaise with councils to identify local barriers to meeting their homelessness objectives.

This is a joint initiative between ALACHO, CoSLA and the Scottish Government carried out by two local government secondees with strategic and operational experience of homelessness issues.

All 32 councils have participated in the project and a report on the findings will be available later this year. We will continue to work together to ensure we fully explore the measures necessary to address the concerns raised.

The increase in positive outcomes for people who have been homeless – and many more for whom it has been prevented - testifies to the high level of commitment and determination on the part of homelessness teams and their strategic partners in responding to the needs of homeless people. It is important to reflect on these achievements so far – and be encouraged by them.

We do not under-estimate the scale of challenges still to be faced but it is clear that a great deal has been done, and is being done better, to get people out of crisis and access to the services they require.

Of course the role of other agencies, particularly Health, along with the voluntary sector and Housing Associations is crucial.

Councils could not have done this on their own, nor should they, but they have led the process through their coordination of partnership working at the local level.

### **The Wider Housing Context**

Homelessness is a factor of the wider housing context in Scotland, including the role of other housing providers such as Housing Associations and the Private Rented Sector.

Last week we launched 'Firm Foundations', our housing policy consultation paper.

These proposals represent a radical break with the past to address every element of the housing system in Scotland.

The current system is clearly failing to meet the needs of the country, particularly for those who are unable, or choose not, to buy their own home.

Social housing, for too long regarded as the housing of last resort, must once again be restored to its role as a valued public asset for the benefit of current and future generations.

The paper acknowledges the role of all the sectors in meeting the needs and aspirations of the population. It proposes measures which will result in a housing system in which the component parts complement each other rather than pull in different, socially divisive, directions.

### **Housing Associations**

Housing Associations already accommodate considerable numbers of homeless and potentially homeless people.

There are many examples of good partnership working between councils and Associations in tackling homelessness throughout Scotland.

However I am aware of tensions relating to balancing local shortages of supply and the demand for housing from everyone who has a housing need.

These concerns are addressed in research on Allocations, published recently. Its purpose was to gather the views of social landlords on the clarity of current legislation and identify where further guidance would be helpful.

We are also commissioning research into how RSLs and local authorities are using the section in working together to provide solutions for homeless people. This work will contribute to the evidence base on homelessness. It will also provide a basis for future good practice guidance in this area.

Earlier today SCSH launched its own research examining the implications for stock transfer on the delivery of homelessness services which touches on the wider aspects of the role of Housing Associations. This should be a valuable contribution to the discussion.

### **The Private Rented Sector**

There is potentially a much greater role for the private rented sector to meet the needs of homeless people. There have been great changes in the sector over the last few years and, in many areas, a greater willingness to work with councils.

There are of course issues over affordability and security. But it would be irresponsible, in situations where options are limited, to ignore the contribution this sector might make for some homeless people in terms of the flexibility, choice and convenience it can offer.

We propose giving councils more flexibility through amendments to existing homelessness regulations that will enable them to make wider use of the sector in meeting the needs of homeless people.

Tomorrow you will have the opportunity to hear what is being done in Ireland in working with the sector there. I am sure there will be insights which will be useful to us here.

### **Key Themes: Housing Supply; Prevention; Sustainable Solutions**

I wish to stress three themes which are key to our efforts to combat homelessness:

- housing supply
- prevention
- sustainable solutions.

### **Housing Supply**

The new Scottish Government has recognized that there are simply not enough new houses being built.

In 'Firm Foundations' we have proposed that there should be a national house-building target that will push up the number of new homes being built to 35,000 per year by the middle of the next decade.

That will be challenging, not just for Government but for local authorities and the construction industry. After all, houses – even wooden ones – don't grow on trees.

That is why we set up the Housing Supply Task Force in June – to tackle the impediments that are hampering the delivery of more housing.

The Task Force is also challenging the way things are done currently – looking at obstacles such as land supply and planning issues that are preventing developments going ahead.

### **Prevention**

We Health Ministers like to talk about "prevention being better than cure". It is certainly a principle that applies to homelessness. Homelessness – even short term homelessness – damages people and disrupts lives.

There are already many examples of good practice in preventing homelessness and most homelessness teams have built prevention into their strategies. Other service providers must follow this example.

It is still, unacceptably, the case that too many people have to be in crisis before they get help. Help they would not have needed if the crisis had been averted in the first place.

The recent discussions with local authorities on barriers to progress suggests an urgent need for key services and agencies to adopt a more strategic approach and put prevention first. The failure not to do so is proving a serious barrier to effective corporate and partnership working in many areas.

I look forward to receiving the evaluation of the Government funded innovation projects dealing with prevention, two of which are represented here at the conference. I am sure the lessons from these will be very useful in convincing us of the benefits to be derived from taking a preventative approach.

I was very interested to hear Chris Price speaking on prevention services in Wales and I know my officials met with Chris and his colleagues recently and found that very helpful.

Exchanging information, sharing experiences and best practice with others in this way is invaluable.

### **Sustainable Solutions to Homelessness**

Many councils are reviewing their strategies to consider the longer term measures to prevent homelessness recurring.

As I said earlier, resolving homelessness is not just about houses. It is also about sustainable resettlement of people into their communities; enhanced housing, or more specialized, support where required; and rebuilding or creating new social networks and access to training and employment.

I know that 'Scottish Social Networks' has taken the opportunity at today's conference to launch its Social Networks "toolkit" to assist agencies in their resettlement of homeless people.

The Scottish Homelessness and Employability Network is also here as the national body for organisations and individuals working to improve opportunities through engagement with education, training and employment.

These two projects, funded by the Scottish Government, consider in practical terms how people's lives can be stabilized, their place in society made more secure.

Understandably a lot of attention is focused on managing homelessness, getting people out of crisis, but the longer term must be planned for as well to ensure cycles of homelessness are broken.

### **Resources**

As you will be very aware, Scotland's Spending Review will be published later this month.

The spending outcome for Scotland from the UK Governments Comprehensive Spending Review is one of the lowest in the past twenty years.

This translates into a very serious squeeze on Scotland's finances and considerable constraints on our budget.

However there is still a great deal that can be done in using the resources we have more efficiently to realise our housing policy objectives and we are considering very carefully the options open to us.

It makes all the more important the emphasis we all put into building effective partnerships across sectors so that resources are best used to achieve our aims.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This is an exciting, albeit challenging, time to be involved in housing and homelessness issues.

Many of you here today are involved at the sharp end of developing strategies or delivering services. Others will be concerned with the more "behind the scenes" planning or strategic roles. Some of you will be, or represent, users of homelessness services.

By working together a great deal can and is being achieved. The positive results of what you do is already evident.

I am pleased to see reduced numbers of homelessness applications, increases in the numbers of people being rehoused and more people being prevented from becoming homeless.

These are clear demonstrations of progress and demonstrates that the work you are all engaged in is making a difference.

Enjoy the rest of your conference, and take my thanks back to your colleagues who haven't managed along today. Thank you.