

## Shelter Scotland Councillors' Newsletter

### Welcome!

Welcome to the third edition of Shelter Scotland's newsletter for local councillors.

In this issue we have a piece from Councillor William Hendrie from West Dunbartonshire on the council's progress towards the 2012 target, and a piece on Rural Housing Enablers by Councillor Fiona Murdoch from Moray. We also have details of Shelter Scotland's recent evidence on homelessness that was presented to the Local Government and Communities Committee.

We welcome contributions from councillors the length and breadth of Scotland. We also welcome your feedback. Please contact [alexis\\_camble@shelter.org.uk](mailto:alexis_camble@shelter.org.uk) or 0844 515 2469.

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### Progress towards 2012?

Progress towards the 2012 homelessness target varies widely between local authorities. Some councils are well on the way to meeting the target, but other councils need to pick up the pace as 2012 looms.

**Councillor William Hendrie** of West Dunbartonshire Council explains how the council has been able to get so close to meeting the 2012 target, while Shelter Scotland's committee evidence looks at the main challenges in meeting 2012.



## Ending homelessness in West Dunbartonshire

In a recent report, Shelter highlighted West Dunbartonshire as the council closest to meeting the landmark 2012 target. We asked Councillor **William Hendrie** how the council has made such progress.

It's now just over six months since we approved our new homelessness strategy and its bold and ambitious vision to end homelessness in West Dunbartonshire.

The publication of the new strategy also galvanised focus on the progress we have made to date in tackling homelessness. While we are understandably proud of our achievements, we recognise that much is still required to be done to realise our vision.

### Area of contrast

West Dunbartonshire is an area of remarkable contrast. Located north west of Glasgow it boasts some of Scotland's most breathtaking countryside and a bustling tourism trade. Yet within the three main settlement areas (Clydebank, Dumbarton, Alexandria) it suffers from significant levels of deprivation and associated social issues, including homelessness.

In 2007/08, more than one in 20 households in West Dunbartonshire experienced homelessness, a startling figure and the highest percentage rate in Scotland by some distance. On a more positive note, homeless presentations fell by around five per cent in 2007/08, and a similar drop is forecast for this year. However, this positive trend in no way dilutes the seriousness of this issue within the local authority area and beyond.

The development of the new strategy has helped reignite our commitment to meet the 2012 homelessness target in which everyone has the right to settled accommodation.

### 'Approach to assist'

In West Dunbartonshire we have had a long-standing approach to assist those households faced with homelessness.

We recognised that the most important issue affecting a household facing homelessness was not what priority group banding they belonged to, but more the urgency of the crisis facing that household.

This approach to assist understands and acts on the growing relationship between homelessness and health issues including addiction. By using the approach to assist we recognise the value of a stable housing environment for every individual regardless of whether they ticked the traditional priority need boxes. Our approach to assist is centred on ensuring the best possible outcome for the individual and household.

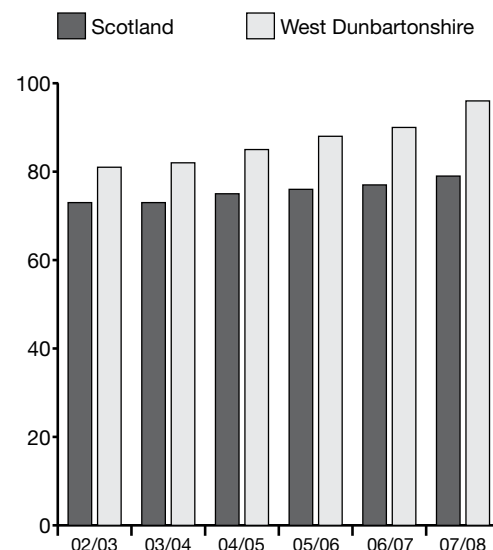
### Phased approach

To ensure that work continues towards the abolition of priority need in 2012 we have adopted a further phased approach to build on our traditional person-centred response. The next year we will increase our priority need categories to include 21- to 25-year-olds, which adds to the recent additions of displaced spouses and civil partners, and the over-55s.

It is our intention to abolish the priority need assessment on 1 April 2011, more than a year in advance of the legislative requirements.

The following graph shows that West Dunbartonshire is making faster progress towards the 2012 target than Scotland as a whole.

### Percentage of applications assessed as homeless and in priority need



Source: Operation of the Homeless Persons Legislation: 2002/03 to 2007/08

### Multi-agency approach

It goes without saying that the drive to tackle homelessness in West Dunbartonshire is very much a multi-agency approach. The committed staff within Homeless Services are ably supported by a range of internal and external partner agencies.

The new multi-agency West Dunbartonshire Homelessness Forum has approved the strategic vision to end homelessness in West Dunbartonshire through the following aims.

- **Aim 1** – To prevent homelessness occurring in West Dunbartonshire.
- **Aim 2** – To improve the range of housing options available in West Dunbartonshire and to respond effectively to households in homelessness crisis.
- **Aim 3** – To ensure a sustainable solution for those individuals who have experienced homelessness.
- **Aim 4** – To ensure a commitment to develop and improve services and tackle homelessness through a partnership approach.

Through these strategic aims West Dunbartonshire Council remains confident that we shall meet the 2012 homelessness target.

This year, 23–27 November will see the first West Dunbartonshire homelessness awareness week which aims to increase public awareness about the real nature and causes of homelessness.

Research, both nationally and locally, indicates that negative attitudes towards homeless people are widespread within communities. We recognise that these attitudes should be challenged, and how much better would that be if this was part of a Scotland-wide homelessness awareness week?



*Councillor William Hendrie is the convenor of the Housing, Environment and Economic Development Committee in West Dunbartonshire Council.*

## Homelessness target: meeting the mark?

As Scotland's internationally-acclaimed homelessness target grows closer, Shelter Scotland's evidence to the Scottish Parliament calls for a stocktake of progress to 2012.

Scotland is well on the way to meeting the internationally-acclaimed 2012 target on homelessness, but progress needs to be accelerated in many councils.

That is the main message from Shelter Scotland in evidence it presented to the Scottish Parliament's Local Government and Communities (LG&C) Committee in February. The committee heard that Scotland is currently four-fifths of the way to meeting the target to give all unintentionally homeless people the right to a home. However, the rate of progress needs to speed up for all councils to achieve this by 2012. Shelter Scotland also argued that a stocktake of progress so far is urgently needed, followed by a detailed plan for 2009–12 outlining how the target will be reached.

### Progress so far?

The homelessness target was set in 2002 and made law in 2003. It says that the current distinction that councils make between priority and non-priority cases will need to be dropped no later than the end of

2012. In future, all homeless people should be assessed on the urgency of their situation, not on which type of family unit they happen to be.

Of the 32 Scottish local authorities, seven are ahead of, or on track, to meet 2012; 18 are heading in the right direction but at too slow a pace; and seven are actually heading in the wrong direction. Shelter Scotland has published a table showing progress towards 2012 for all councils. This can be found in the written committee evidence published on our website.

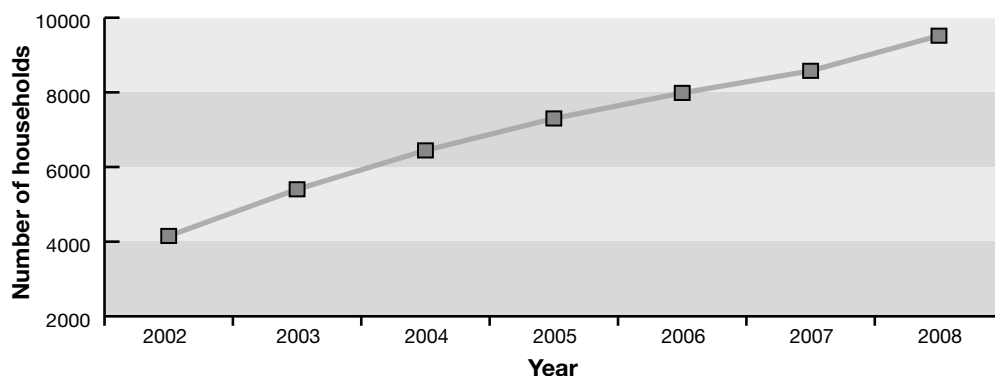
### Homelessness, 2012 and pressure on lettings

Some MSPs expressed concern that too many lettings go to homeless people. However, Shelter Scotland's evidence shows that overall, 70 per cent of social housing is let to households not classed as statutorily homeless: two lets go to people on waiting lists compared with every homeless person housed. The pressure on lettings is more the result of the fall in supply of rented homes than it is of a rise in demand from homeless people.

### A temporary solution?

As shown in the graph below, the increasing use of temporary accommodation by Scottish local authorities also highlights current pressure on social housing stock.

**Scotland: Households in temporary accommodation on 31st March each year**



The number of households in temporary accommodation has risen by around 76 per cent since 2003, suggesting that as the priority need category is expanding, there is an increasing shortage of permanent homes for people to move into. This trend again emphasises the urgent need to address the shortage of affordable rented housing in Scotland.

## Demand, but limited supply

If local authorities step up the pace in order to meet the 2012 target we can expect some increase in pressure within the housing system. Unfortunately, current new build rates have not been keeping pace with social housing sales through Right to Buy (RTB) and Shelter Scotland supports the use of pressured area status by many councils. The Scottish Government's intention to reform RTB will provide help in the medium to long term. However, action is urgently needed to address the immediate problem of social housing supply. 10,000 affordable rented homes a year are needed to ensure that 2012 can be achieved without further increasing pressure locally.

## Prevention of eviction, prevention of homelessness

Research by Shelter Scotland shows that social tenants in arrears are at greater risk of losing their home than homeowners struggling to pay their mortgage. **Alexis Camble** argues that this is unnecessary.



Recent research shows that social landlords are twice as likely to take legal action against tenants than lenders are against homeowners. Despite the media focus on the need to help struggling homeowners, thousands of social tenants lose their homes each year because of legal action taken by councils and housing associations.

## The national picture

Shelter Scotland's recent report, *Evictions by Social Landlords in Scotland*, shows that the vast majority of evictions were for rent arrears, with antisocial behaviour accounting for less than three per cent of cases. In 2007/08 more than 20,000 tenants were taken to court, with 3,573 losing their homes. This figure includes actual evictions and abandonments after a decree to evict has been granted. Of these households, 2,089 were council tenants and 1,484 lost a housing association let. This level of action against tenants compares unfavourably with that against homeowners. Lenders obtained decrees against 6.8 households per 1,000 mortgaged properties. For social landlords, the equivalent figure is 13.1.

## Last resort?

Eviction should be used as a last resort, particularly as the 2012 target approaches and homelessness prevention is one of four joint Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA)–Scottish Government priorities for meeting this target. Eviction practice varies between councils, but in 2007/08 on average 41 per cent of decrees granted resulted in an eviction. Practice also varies widely amongst housing associations who account for 43 per cent of social rented stock and also have a responsibility to prevent homelessness through avoidable eviction.

## Evictions by social landlords in Scotland in 2007/08

	Councils	RSLs	Total
Taken to court	13,382	6,657	20,039
Decree granted	5,063	2,903	7,966
Eviction occurred	2,089	1,484	3,573
Additional evictions in which the tenant was rehoused immediately after	N/A	510	510

How many of the more than 20,000 cases brought to court by social landlords in 2007/08 were truly a last resort after the full range of alternative courses of action had been explored? How many of these evictions could have been prevented?

## Alternatives to eviction

The majority of these evictions were for rent arrears. At a time when struggling homeowners are being offered assistance, social tenants should not be penalised, particularly in cases where housing benefit administration errors have caused the arrears. Eviction is not an effective way to recover arrears and increases pressure on already overstretched homelessness services.

Social tenants threatened with eviction deserve the same attention as homeowners at risk of losing their home. The taxpayers' money that funds eviction court cases should be better spent. Alternative ways to recover lost rent that do not result in homelessness include benefit deductions, earnings arrestment, or small claims actions. Rent arrears policies should include earlier intervention to help tenants address their debt problems and a less punitive attitude to rent arrears.

Social landlords have to collect rent to fund services for tenants, but are there better ways to deal with non-payment of rent than eviction? At least one major social landlord has recently shown that it can be possible to dramatically reduce the number of tenants taken to court and also reduce arrears. As the 2012 target approaches preventing avoidable eviction needs to become a priority for landlords.

**Alexis Camble is a Policy Officer for Shelter Scotland.**

## Uncovering Moray's housing need

A report to the Scottish Government in December concluded that 'Rural Housing Enablers' were an effective tool in tackling rural housing problems; but what are they and how do they work? Councillor **Fiona Murdoch** explains.

When Moray Council was faced with the challenge of identifying housing need in rural areas, it turned for assistance to the Rural Housing Service.

Under a one-year pilot project, a Rural Housing Enabler has been employed to research into rural communities and find out more about their often-hidden housing needs.

Moray as a whole is desperately short of affordable housing and what new opportunities exist tend to be in the more built-up areas where developers of larger projects contribute a percentage of their housing to the affordable pot.

## Understanding rural demand

While statistics relating to housing need work well in the towns, numbers in the rural communities are so small that they do not give useful information.

Even council house waiting lists are not good indicators of need – because areas without council housing obviously have no waiting lists.

To make gauging the demand more difficult, people in rural areas tend to be very aware of what housing is available around them and who else is looking for accommodation.

This can lead to them not coming forward to indicate their housing need, holding back because they know of others who will be given priority over them, or applying for waiting lists in the towns.

The result is that we do not know accurately what the demand is, what sort of housing is needed and in which of our rural communities. This is the information the Rural Housing Enabler has been tasked to uncover.



*Cabinet Secretary, Richard Lochhead, launches the Moray Rural Housing Enabler project*

## Range of solutions needed

The other factor which makes the rural areas difficult is that there could be a number of different solutions to housing problems – and demand is likely to be for a mixture of these solutions rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

The answer may be newly built affordable homes to rent or buy; it may be a shared home ownership scheme; it may be an assisted self-build; it may be in identifying and helping estate owners to bring derelict properties back into use.

Not all the solutions can be provided by the council, and the Rural Housing Enabler has the advantage of being able to provide information and assistance to bring in other bodies and sources of funding.

## Identifying the right projects

Perhaps the hardest part of the pilot so far has been in identifying projects that are viable. Both the Moray Council and our local housing associations have a shortage of land available for development and other sources can be costly.

In addition, we need to be sure we are providing the right kind of properties in the right areas – there is no point in building three-bed family homes if the need is really for single-bed accommodation to rent.

## Community engagement and partnership working

Extensive work is being carried out with the communities involved, including talking to local groups to spread the word and undertaking community surveys to gather information on needs both now and in the future.

The response has been patchy – some communities have expressed little interest while others have engaged enthusiastically with the process.

So far, it is becoming obvious that the council is unlikely to be able to provide rural housing opportunities on its own and the cooperation of housing associations and local landowners is essential.

In order to make sure that we have vibrant rural communities for the future we, as a council, must facilitate this cooperation – and using a Rural Housing Enabler to carry out this work is proving very effective.



*Councillor Fiona Murdoch is the vice-chair of Moray Council's Communities Committee.*

## About Shelter

Shelter is the UK's leading housing and homelessness charity. We help people find and keep a home as well as campaigning for decent housing for all. Shelter Scotland has been active for 40 years and provides a range of services and projects to help homeless and badly housed people.

Shelter Scotland operates a network of direct services to people across the country. Our services are free and confidential, and available to anyone experiencing housing issues, not just homelessness. Often our work is based around problems like disrepair, rent arrears, housing benefit, illegal evictions or disputes between landlords and tenants. Our website offers advice on a range of housing and homelessness issues.

## Contacts

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### For help with constituents' housing problems:

Shelter Scotland's free housing advice helpline – 0808 800 4444  
Open 9am – 5pm, Monday – Friday

Access our web based advice service at: [shelter.org.uk/getadvice](https://shelter.org.uk/getadvice)