

## EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

### HAVING AND KEEPING A HOME: STEPS TO PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

#### CORRESPONDENCE FROM MARGARET BURGESS MSP, MINISTER FOR HOUSING AND WELFARE

I am writing to you to welcome the publication of the Equal Opportunities Committee report on preventing homelessness amongst young people on 7 October and to provide the Scottish Government's response. I know my predecessor, Keith Brown, provided evidence to the Committee on 26 June and later wrote to the Committee to provide responses to specific questions on a variety of issues posed during that evidence session.

As you will be aware, the Scottish Government's commitment to tackling and preventing homelessness has been underpinned by the commitment to achieve the 2012 target that all those assessed as unintentionally homeless by local authorities in Scotland will be entitled to settled accommodation. With the legislation now changed, we are clear that a number of steps undertaken in recent years to help achieve the target can help us move to prevent homelessness and improve outcomes for young people facing homelessness in Scotland in the future.

At an early stage, the Scottish Government/COSLA 2012 Joint Steering Group, established in 2009, identified prevention of homelessness as a priority and highlighted the specific needs of young people in addressing this. Your report makes reference to the work taken forward by the five local authority led housing options hubs since 2010 and we believe that the adoption of this approach is having a significant impact in reducing homelessness in Scotland, including amongst young people. However, we are not complacent and recognise the particular risks to homelessness faced by young people. We also agree with the Committee's report that these are risks, which can only be exacerbated by the UK Government's welfare reform agenda. We are working with stakeholders across Scotland to consider the best ways to mitigate the worst affects of this for the most vulnerable.

#### **Committee Recommendations**

For convenience, I have included the Scottish Government's response below the appropriate Committee recommendation.

#### **Prevention**

*36. Mediation, respite and education are all vital elements of prevention and we recognise the extensive mediation work already being undertaken. We note that, whilst the value of respite was recognised by some, we heard much less about it. We believe that respite should be integrated into the mediation approach, as an option where mediation alone is unsuccessful.*

The Housing Options approach has embraced mediation in many parts of Scotland and I believe the Hubs will have a particular interest in this recommendation.

The Supported Accommodation Implementation Group (SAIG) issued its final report at the end of November and this has now been published on the Scottish Government website. I met the Chair of the Group, Ken Milroy, Chief Executive of Aberdeen Foyer on 22 November and I made clear my intention to give consideration to the best way to implement the Group's cross sector proposals with our partners. The Group highlighted the potential benefits of respite accommodation in its report and, more broadly, has asked for its proposals to be considered in the context of helping take forward the recommendations of the Equal Opportunities Committee report.

## **Skills**

*37. As with the other elements of prevention, we note that local authorities are on a broad basis doing good work on in-school preventative activity. We also note, however, that levels of such activity may be inconsistent – for example, taking place in some schools and not in others. Whilst variations may be valid – for instance, there may be more need for preventative activity in schools where there are more apparent risk factors – we note comments in the evidence suggesting that other obstacles are at play. That would seem contrary to the principles of the Getting it Right for Every Child approach.*

*We recommend, therefore, that the Scottish Government work with local authorities on—*

- *collecting data on which schools young homeless people attended;*
- *identifying what preventative work is undertaken in those schools;*
- *in any schools where no such work is carried out, establishing the reasons why; and*
- *taking steps to remove any obstacles identified.*

*59. We were particularly struck by the evidence disclosing the profound disadvantage to young people of not possessing essential life skills. We note with interest the information supplied by the Scottish Government on resources available for teachers to support teaching of skills and the changes underway following the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence.*

*Providing access to resources, however, is not the same as ensuring that they are used and used effectively. How are the outcomes measured? We ask the Scottish Government to investigate and report back.*

In line with Curriculum for Excellence, Education Scotland publishes a range of financial education teaching support materials. Some of these have been formally evaluated to help determine their impact. For example, "On the Money" is a financial education teaching resource comprising a collection of four short stories aimed at upper primary school children. A recent evaluation found that it continues to remain relevant and engaging for young people and can easily be integrated within Curriculum for Excellence.

In addition, a recent evaluation of the Skint resource (for 16 to 24 year olds) by the Scottish Book Trust found that the most significant financial education outcome for young adults was a change in attitudes towards saving. Skint was developed in partnership between Education Scotland and the Scottish Book Trust to support young people with keeping track of their finances, choosing financial products and keeping informed about financial matters. Also, in 2009 the Scottish Government commissioned research into the effectiveness of Financial Education in the curriculum. The research concluded that while there was a wide range of resources for teachers providing information and support, a key to improving the effectiveness of financial education is better overall co-ordination of these materials.

More broadly, and as the Committee will be aware, Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) is a multi-agency approach that the Scottish Government and COSLA are encouraging Community Planning Partnerships to implement across Scotland. The approach puts the child and young person and their well-being at the centre of all the design, planning and delivery of support and help for them, identifying and addressing any concerns about a child or young person's wellbeing early.

Homelessness, or the risk of homelessness, would be factors leading to concern about well-being for a child or young person. In such circumstances the child's Named Person within the school would be in the best position to identify need and initiate intervention to provide direct support, or draw in more specialist support from other agencies where necessary with a lead professional taking over coordination of the provision of services where more than one agency is involved.

Specifically in relation to preventative work, within the GIRFEC approach we would expect education services to be alert to issues in the young person's life that may lead to homelessness and appropriately share that information with social work, if they are already involved, and to work with other relevant agencies to understand the impact of homelessness on the well-being of the young person.

I am aware, as indicated by the Committee, that there is good work already being taken forward by local authorities and their partners across Scotland in relation to addressing housing education in schools. I am keen that this practice be shared and the Scottish Government will give early consideration to the best way to achieve this with our cross sector partners.

## **Leaving Care**

*46. We are encouraged to hear that some councils' care-leaver protocols engage with looked-after children a year in advance of their leaving care. We are greatly concerned, however, by evidence to us indicating that looked-after children were still being —routinely discharged through the homeless route.*

*47. We recommend that the Scottish Government establish which local authorities do not operate effective care-leaver protocols appropriate to the young person and that it take action as necessary to address the situation.*

The provision of suitable accommodation can make an enormous difference to the outcomes of a young person leaving care. We are pleased the Committee

recognises the good work being done by some councils, but we need to ensure that reliable and accessible support is in place for all care leavers.

Following consultation on the Children and Young People Bill, we are now considering how best to strengthen legislation around Throughcare and Aftercare to ensure this vulnerable group are prepared and supported to make the transition to adult living.

## **Experience of taking a tenancy**

### *Community care grant (CCGs)*

*87. We note the Minister's comments on the importance of financial education to young people's preparedness to take on a tenancy. However, we believe that no matter how prepared a person is, a time lag of weeks – or, as we heard in evidence, months – in paying CCGs can be insurmountable. We welcome the Minister's commitment to look in detail at whether the Scottish Government could ensure that CCGs are paid on the same day that young people get the keys to their new tenancies and await a further response. We recognise that, as a result of the UK Welfare Reform Act 2012, the Scottish Government will be responsible for the delivery of CCGs from April 2013 and that it is currently considering how successor arrangements could best be delivered. We view this as an important opportunity to improve on the current timescales and await a further response.*

The draft guidance for the Scottish Welfare Fund, which will support people who would have previously applied for Community Care Grants from April 2013, gives a longer lead-in time for applications, to allow time for processing the award and then ordering furniture.

It will be possible to make an application eight weeks before taking up a tenancy rather than six weeks before under the DWP's current Social Fund rules. The target time for a Local Authority to process an application is three weeks. It will also be possible for Local Authorities to make a decision in principle on a community care grant application, before a tenancy has been agreed, allowing for better planning. This approach seeks to balance the needs of the prospective tenant with the needs of the Local Authority to manage spend, knowing that tenancies can fall through at short notice.

We believe that the move to provision through Local Authorities will also result in a more joined up service to applicants and better communication with organisations providing support to applicants. Draft guidance on the Scottish Welfare Fund encourages a more holistic approach to provision, considering the wider needs of the applicant. Local Authorities are considering how best to meet the needs of applicants while maximising the impact of the available money, including possibilities such as furniture re-use projects and bulk procurement of white goods.

In October 2012, the Deputy First Minister announced an £9.2 million increase in the funding for the Scottish Welfare Fund's first year which means that it will have the capacity to award an additional 5,600 Community Care Grants, and over 100,000 Crisis Grants.

## *Accommodation quality*

*88. We are very troubled to learn that young people are sufficiently concerned about substandard accommodation to produce a charter to aspire to minimum standards and the most basic human needs. It is of course utterly unacceptable for anyone to be offered such housing. We ask the Scottish Government to confirm what steps are being taken to ensure that minimum statutory standards are met in all cases.*

The Scottish Government's aim is that all people live in good quality, sustainable homes. Slightly different standards apply to the social and private rented sectors, but housing in all tenures must meet the tolerable standard, which consists of a set of criteria covering the elements of house, which are fundamental to its functioning as a home. This includes things such as it being substantially free from rising or penetrating damp, having a satisfactory supply of hot and cold water, and having suitable toilet facilities. All housing must meet these criteria to be acceptable as living accommodation. Local authorities have a statutory duty and specific powers to deal with houses that fall below the tolerable standard.

In addition to the tolerable standard, all social landlords are committed to ensuring that housing provided for social rents meets the Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS), which includes additional criteria such as it being healthy, safe and secure, and having modern facilities and services. Although some houses do not yet meet this standard, all social landlords must have a programme of works in place to ensure that all homes they let meet SHQS by April 2015. The new independent Scottish Housing Regulator is responsible for monitoring the progress of landlords towards achieving the standards set out in the Social Housing Charter, which includes achieving the SHQS.

Tenants in privately rented accommodation can expect that their properties meet the repairing standard. This includes that the structure of the house is in a reasonable state of repair and that the heating system and any appliances provided by the landlord are in proper working order. The Private Rented Housing Panel can help private tenants to ensure that landlords undertake any necessary work to ensure that the property meets the repairing standard.

More widely, from spring 2013, all private sector landlords will have a duty to provide new tenants with a tenant information pack. This pack will improve the accessibility of information available to tenants and ensure that they are more informed and are able to use the knowledge and information available to them to make appropriate decisions, to challenge bad practice and to avoid difficult experiences in the first place. Furthermore, in 2013, the Scottish Government will also publish a strategy for the private rented sector. A key aim of this strategy will be to support people and families in the sector. This will include ensuring that the sector meets the needs of people and families, supporting those that are most vulnerable and encouraging consumer driven improvements.

## *Isolation*

*89. We note the Minister's undertaking to examine whether adult fosterers could play a role in supporting some young people through the early stages of independent living. We also note the efforts made by housing options teams to create support networks and use befriending strategies to cultivate similar support. We heard in evidence that, because of limited housing options in the context of welfare reform, shared tenancies are being considered for social tenants in receipt of housing benefit from April 2013. We recognise that, to address isolation specifically, shared tenancies might be supportive for some young people, but only with their agreement. We recommend that social housing providers consider them, with due caution and appropriate risk assessment.*

*90. We recognise that the Scottish Government and local authorities are working hard to prevent youth homelessness and we have heard many examples of good practice. However, problems persist and, given welfare reforms, we are aware that the landscape is changing and that preventing youth homelessness may become more challenging. We therefore recommend that the Scottish Government take an overview of all of the different strategies currently being used in different local authority areas, ascertain the effectiveness of each and identify any localities where performance needs to be improved. We ask that the Scottish Government report the overview back to us.*

I will ask for these and other EOC recommendations to be given early consideration at the Scottish Government/ COSLA 2012 Joint Steering Group.

## **Conclusion**

The Scottish Government welcomes the Committee's report on this vital subject and will work with our stakeholders to find the most appropriate ways to take forward the Committee's recommendations. I believe the report can make an important contribution to preventing homelessness amongst young people in Scotland in the years to come, an issue that is vital not just the individuals concerned, but for all our futures and the type of country we aspire to be.

Margaret Burgess MSP  
Minister for Housing and Welfare  
29 November 2012