



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Local Government and Communities Committee

Wednesday 25 October 2017

Session 5



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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE
24th Meeting 2017, Session 5

CONVENER

*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- *Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
- *Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
- *Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con)
- *Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
- *Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

- Nicky Brown (City of Edinburgh Council)
- Paul Brown (Legal Services Agency)
- Dr Adam Burley (The Access Point)
- Joe Connolly (Criminal Justice Voluntary Sector Forum)
- Nicola Dickie (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)
- Lorraine McGrath (Simon Community Scotland)
- Patrick McKay (Turning Point Scotland)
- Councillor Kelly Parry (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)
- Jamie Stewart (Scottish Refugee Council)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Jane Williams

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Local Government and Communities Committee

Wednesday 25 October 2017

*[The Convener opened the meeting in private at
08:45]*

09:41

Meeting continued in public.

Homelessness

The Convener (Bob Doris): Good morning and welcome to the 24th meeting in 2017 of the Local Government and Communities Committee. I remind everyone to turn off mobile phones. As meeting papers are provided in digital format, some members may use tablets during the meeting. We have a full house this morning; no apologies have been received from members.

Before we move to the first agenda item in public, I want first to thank all those who met the committee during our visit to Finland and shared their knowledge of the national housing first approach to tackling homelessness. The visit was hugely informative, and it was enlightening to hear about Finland's initiatives to eradicate homelessness. In particular, the committee thanks the Y-Foundation for the vital role that it played in co-ordinating the visit and enabling us to access that information. A summary of the committee's visit to Finland is available on our web page. I also thank the committee clerking team for organising and supporting the visit. I am sure that we will talk about the housing first approach at some point during this evidence session, but I wanted to put that on record first.

The first agenda item in public is item 2, on homelessness. I welcome the witnesses on the first panel: Councillor Kelly Parry, spokesperson for community wellbeing, and Nicola Dickie, policy manager, from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities; Patrick McKay, operations manager at Turning Point Scotland; Dr Adam Burley, consultant clinical psychologist at the access point; and Lorraine McGrath, chief executive of Simon Community Scotland. I thank you all for being here.

I understand that Councillor Parry would like to make an opening statement on behalf of COSLA. I have no indication of statements from any other witnesses, but I assure you all that you will have a lot of opportunities this morning to put your thoughts and views on the record.

Councillor Kelly Parry (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to provide a local government perspective on homelessness. I am a councillor in Midlothian, and I am here today representing COSLA in my role as spokesperson for community wellbeing.

Throughout my time as an elected member, the sense of responsibility that everyone in local government feels towards our communities has been clear to me. That sense of responsibility drives councils to continue to achieve the best outcomes for those who are homeless or—and this is perhaps more important—those who are at risk of becoming homeless across Scotland. Councils have a statutory responsibility and a duty in that area.

We also recognise the wide-reaching effects of homelessness on families and individuals in our communities. For councils, it is about more than seeing to our statutory obligations and providing access to good, affordable housing; it is about people having a place to call home. We know that those things lead to strong, stable and sustainable communities. Local government—certainly in my view—exists to serve all members of our communities, and that is very much what we strive to do.

In our written submission, which I hope that the committee has received, we state that

"we advocate an integrated, whole-system approach to preventing and responding to homelessness".

As I am sure that the committee is well aware, the causes of homelessness are seldom simple. There is certainly not one single cause. It is only through working together that we can support people who are in need and work to address the social inequalities that affect so many of those who find themselves homeless and have an impact on the reasons why they find themselves in that situation.

I look forward to our discussion, convener.

09:45

The Convener: Thank you for that statement, and thank you again for coming along. We move to our first question, which is from Andy Wightman.

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): We have heard a lot of talk about the housing options approach and how it has gone so far—the programme has obviously had quite a bit of success—but we have also heard that it has its challenges for more difficult groups. Do we need a programme of improvement for housing options? If so, what might that look like?

Lorraine McGrath (Simon Community Scotland): Good morning. There is absolutely such a need. Simon Community Scotland—along with Streetwork UK in Edinburgh, with which I am now involved—works with people who have intensive, extreme and complex needs. In our experience, the housing options approach works for the vast majority of people who come through the process, but it is extremely challenging and difficult for people who have complex needs. It is not easy for those people to engage with the approach—for example, they do not find it easy to keep appointments or respond. The flexibility in our current support arrangements does not necessarily allow us the significant amount of time that it would take to work through the process with someone in that situation.

In short, the answer to Andy Wightman's question is yes—I would absolutely welcome a specific approach to housing options for people who have complex needs. Such an approach should be tied closely to direct and rapid access to housing on the basis of the housing first principles.

Dr Adam Burley (The Access Point): I support what Lorraine McGrath said. As a psychologist, I believe that, from a psychological point of view, the idea of homelessness—as with many things in this area—is something of a red herring, in that it covers up what has brought somebody to the point at which they are homeless in the first place. The issue with missing out those factors is that there is a provision of absence, if you like. We try to provide housing, based on the idea that lack of housing is the problem. There is a range of difficulties that relate to housing, but for some of the people whom we are talking about, there are other difficulties too. The best way to think about it is to consider homelessness as a late-emerging symptom. We need to try to understand what has brought somebody to the point at which they cannot, or struggle to, make use of the existing housing service.

We can describe those factors and variables and we can know a fair amount about them, but we do not organise some of our housing provision based on a sound formulation or understanding of the psychological and emotional needs of the people who require that housing. In simple Legoland terms, if a person's experience of being in a house throughout their development has been coloured with huge amounts of trauma, anxiety and adversity, it would be crazy to expect them to stay in a house and exist in a very straightforward, anxiety-free way. We see that problem a lot, with people bouncing in and out of houses, but we keep on trying to understand it as a housing problem rather than as a human problem.

Councillor Parry: In general, the housing options approach works very well, but we would

like to see improvements in the housing options service. We appreciate completely the need, or certainly the desire, for a standard protocol to enable outcomes to be measured, but I reiterate what colleagues have said. From a statutory point of view, councils quite rightly focus on homelessness, but we need to look at people who are at risk of homelessness because we know that putting in place preventative measures across all areas of social policy has a real impact.

It is sometimes difficult to measure output in that respect. When preventative spend has been put into the system early on, a positive outcome is not necessarily very easy to record. We have to focus on that and find a way to approach and measure outcomes. We do that quite well in other services. Perhaps we need a shift in focus, and in language and terminology, towards those who are at risk of homelessness rather than simply dealing with people at the crisis points that we have mentioned.

The Convener: Not everyone has to answer every question. If Nicola Dickie or Patrick McKay do not want to add anything, I will bring Andy Wightman back in.

Andy Wightman: Those answers were useful. I take it from your responses that you see no particular advantage in putting housing options on a firmer statutory footing, that the approach can deliver flexibly and that improvements can be made in the system as it currently exists. For groups with very different needs, we are looking at other solutions, such as housing first, which we will address later. Have I summarised your views fairly?

Patrick McKay (Turning Point Scotland): The only group that the housing options approach fails is those who have complex needs. One of the interventions that we know work best is when we reach out to that group, so we need a much more assertive outreach component. There is nothing to stop a housing options model being used differently to provide equality of access for that group.

Councillor Parry: I very much agree with that. In principle, putting the approach on that footing would not be an issue. One thing that local authorities do very well is provide local flexibility—they know what is right for local areas. It is important that flexibility is built into the approach.

Lorraine McGrath: I agree with that. I would comment only that sometimes local flexibility leads to massive variation in how people are responded to and the way in which data on housing options is recorded in the PREVENT1 statistics. There is a major variation in how the data comes through, and we are therefore not able to use that intelligence in an informed way to plan for the future.

Nicola Dickie (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): I echo everything that everyone has said. COSLA would like the process to be standardised. At present, we do not get standardised outcomes because of the complexities that we are dealing with, so we are looking for everyone to approach housing options consistently. The difficulty with a statutory obligation, however, is that it can become a bit of a blunt instrument.

We see success in the housing options approach where there is subtlety and a local ability to respond well to those with complex needs in different circumstances. I am yet to see a bit of legislation that provides for that effectively. COSLA's approach is to use the good practice that we already have and spread it across Scotland, and to ensure that we get consistent processes and data recording so that we know that we are comparing apples with apples. We do not want to use a blunt instrument that is written into statute, as we have not seen such an approach working well in this area to date.

Andy Wightman: I have one final question on this topic, although I will come back in later. There is quite a bit of evidence on refugees and asylum seekers in the written submissions that we have received. Does anyone have any observations on the particular priorities that we need to address in relation to the housing needs of that group?

Patrick McKay: Someone from the Scottish Refugee Council is appearing on the next panel, so they might be best placed to answer that.

The Convener: We will not push you to comment on that—we just want to ensure that we cover the range of questions that we are dealing with in our inquiry. As there are no additional comments on that topic, we will move on.

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): Good morning. COSLA's written submission refers to work being done on a "person-centred, local partnership" basis, which Councillor Parry mentioned in her opening statement.

Dr Burley's written submission states:

"If ... a person experienced high levels of trauma, abuse and neglect through the first ten years of their life, then it is highly unlikely that 18 months in a supported unit will be enough to 'change their mind'".

What is the panel's view on how the system currently deals with care-experienced young people who become homeless?

Dr Burley: It is exactly as I set out in my submission. If we were to apply the phrase "psychologically informed" properly and use it to design housing and care services for people who we know have had such experiences, we would

never come up with a time limit for supported accommodation that was just some arbitrary period, such as six or 18 months. There is absolutely no evidence base for such an approach that fits in any way with an understanding of how human psychology works or the length of time and care that might be required to modify somebody's experiences of relationships, given the sort of background that they may have come from.

My position is perhaps idealist, but we need to think about how we get to a point at which our housing and care services are informed by a solid, sound understanding of people's actual needs, rather than take a top-down approach in which we say, "Well, this person's homeless, so they need this, and these are their care needs, so we'll provide them with that", without any real articulation of how that person has found themselves in that position in the first place.

As I said, it is not that we do not know about those variables—we have a fair amount of evidence that can tell us what interventions and timescales might be required to address the underlying issues that so often underpin the symptomatic presentation of homelessness.

Patrick McKay: It is important also to acknowledge the differences between local authorities. For example, bigger local authorities such as Glasgow City Council and the City of Edinburgh Council are able to commission specific services for young people who have been looked after or accommodated. Turning Point Scotland sees that there is sometimes a difficulty in smaller local authorities that have less purchasing power, as young people who have been looked after or accommodated become part of another type of service provision. Often, those services are more for people who are affected by homelessness, and sometimes they apply to a different age range. That can be hugely problematic.

I have often thought that one answer might be greater flexibility for spot purchasing across Scotland. One of the local authorities outside Glasgow might identify a good service in Glasgow city, and we should have the flexibility to enable a young person to go to that service.

Councillor Parry: I would reiterate some of those points. For example, Nicola Sturgeon's recent announcement on council tax for young care-experienced people is certainly welcome. That shows that local authorities can make quite a big change.

It is right to highlight the point about what we do before people get to a crisis point. I say this from a COSLA perspective and as a care-experienced young person who left care. We have to have the right things in place, but it is very much about following the person rather than the system. The

committee probably found out on its recent trip to Finland that the resources should follow the person, and that what is right for one local authority will not necessarily work in another. It is easy to look at standardised frameworks and think that they will fit everywhere, but it is more important that the person is at the centre of the approach.

Jenny Gilruth: The Simon Community Scotland submission notes:

“We are beginning to see evidence of increased housing access barriers ... to RSL and Private Rented Sector accommodation. This is resulting in longer stays within temporary accommodation.”

It also states:

“we are already seeing significant deficits in funding due to the impact of welfare reform.”

Welfare reform was previously flagged up to the committee as an issue by Shelter Scotland, which stated that the Government in Scotland could only do so much to mitigate the effects. The National Audit Office has referred to the impact that welfare reforms are having on England’s homeless population. With that in mind, in the panel’s experience, what impact are welfare reforms having on homelessness more generally?

Councillor Parry: This is perhaps an obvious point, but recently COSLA has been looking quite a lot at universal credit, which has an impact not only on a person and how much trauma they experience in the system but on council budgets. We are well aware that the Scottish Government is mitigating a fair amount of the impact of welfare reforms, but so are local authorities, and that squeezes our budgets. At a time when welfare reform is having a greater impact, we need to focus and target our services more. For example, we know that, if we spend money on the front line to look at benefit uptake, that will bring in more money to our local authorities, but we are instead spending money on mitigating welfare reform, which harms local authorities’ ability to use resources to tackle the issues.

More people are getting into rent arrears and the amounts that are owed are significant in some cases. The statistics that COSLA collected recently before we wrote to David Gauke to ask him to pause universal credit were startling. That has an impact on our long-term house-building strategies, and rent increases would be the only way to mitigate that. The impact on people and on our resources is a perfect storm for local authorities at a time when we are already challenged.

10:00

The Convener: Do panel members have any other comments on welfare reform, homelessness issues or opportunities?

Patrick McKay: I will give one specific example. We sometimes see a change in behaviours in other organisations with welfare reform. One obstacle that Turning Point Scotland service managers have spoken to me about is that Glasgow City Council, as a stock-transfer local authority, relies on the registered social landlord sector. Homeless people and people who are affected by homelessness make the transition and have to pay a month in advance when they are at their poorest. That creates another obstacle to people accessing housing.

The Convener: Temporary accommodation has been mentioned. Crisis recently called on the Scottish Government and local authorities to take forward obligations on the unsuitable use of inappropriate temporary accommodation. The Parliament has passed an order to reduce that use from 14 days to seven days for pregnant women and families but not for other people. At a recent event, Crisis talked about eradicating the constant inappropriate use of a bed-and-breakfast network in which people are not allowed to stay throughout the day and there is nowhere to wash their clothes or cook food. That is hugely expensive and hugely damaging to the individuals. Crisis has made a key ask. Will Dr Burley comment on that?

Dr Burley: Clinically, it is not uncommon to hear people talk about their accommodation. If you wanted to come up with an informed way of addressing matters—I am talking about people with the most complex multiple needs—and were thinking about provision that you might want to give that might address some of the underlying issues, the very first thing on your design sheet would be not to recreate people’s histories and backgrounds of deprivation and adversity. However, the temporary accommodation that has been offered to some of the most traumatised and damaged people in our communities has often been a direct replication of the adversity that has brought them into our services in the first place.

The Convener: That information is helpful. I ask Lorraine McGrath to hold on to that thought, as I may have stepped on the toes of a member who wanted to ask about temporary accommodation.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Will the panellists give us their views on the quality of temporary accommodation? We have heard evidence that that is often sadly lacking.

Councillor Parry mentioned rent arrears. Has COSLA done any work to analyse the cause of rent arrears? There may, of course, be many

different reasons why people run them up. Has any analysis been done of what percentage of rent arrears across Scotland might be the result of welfare reform or other reasons?

The Convener: I am sorry for stopping Lorraine McGrath, who was going to come back to that issue. I was conscious that Mr Simpson wanted to explore some of those areas as well.

Lorraine McGrath: To connect those two queries, it is absolutely about the quality of temporary accommodation. The problem is that local authorities are so constrained that they are commissioning very poor-quality accommodation and it is a challenge to work with those commissioned services to improve them. A lot of work has been done in Glasgow to improve the quality of temporary accommodation. Work is also going on in Edinburgh to improve the quality of bed-and-breakfast accommodation because we have a huge reliance on it in the city. It is not so much about saying that all bed-and-breakfast accommodation is bad; as a stopgap, emergency response, bed-and-breakfast accommodation is good for some people.

One of the unintended consequences of the housing options approach is that a more concentrated population of people with complex needs is coming into homelessness. That means that the nature of the temporary and emergency accommodation that we need has to change. To pick up on the points that Adam Burley has just made, the days of people being able to cope, even in the short term, with a bed and breakfast in which they cannot even stay during the day and the quality of the environment is poor are gone. We need to think about putting people into positive, constructive environments from the first point of contact.

As a nation, we would not consider for a second putting any other population with care needs or any other care group into such accommodation. The vast majority of people in homelessness now have significant and complex needs. We would not consider placing someone who enters the health system with such mental health needs, physical health needs or long-term, enduring trauma and impacts into the type of accommodation into which we put people who are homeless. Therefore, there has to be a massive agenda around improving the quality of the accommodation, not just its nature.

Dr Burley: My comments are a coda to what Lorraine McGrath described.

It is problematic that we have health and social care integration but housing is not part of that, so we do not start off by thinking about housing as a health intervention. We put somebody in housing with some idea that it is separate from their health needs and that they are meant to go somewhere

else to get their health needs addressed, as if we could somehow split those off. Some of the people about whom we are talking really struggle to use mainstream services for reasons that we can elaborate, so the fundamental healthcare is often provided by housing. However, the housing is often not in any way engineered, geared, organised, designed or funded as a healthcare intervention, although it is fundamentally where many of the people about whom we are talking spend a good deal of their time.

We need to think about how we can integrate health, social care and housing for that most vulnerable population. We need to understand that their needs are not discrete and do not happen in silos but that we are talking about whole people.

The Convener: That got a reaction around the table, Dr Burley. That is a good thing. Wrapped around that is the theme of the quality of temporary accommodation. Bear that in mind. We will consider complex needs further.

Patrick McKay: We need to be precise about what we mean by "temporary accommodation". Some people speak about "temporary accommodation" and "supported accommodation" interchangeably. We should look at the whole system.

Some of the supported accommodation to which people are referred is very good, but there is still a failure within that system for individuals who have the most complex needs. Ironically, the people who have the greatest need often finish up in bed and breakfasts. There is a specific reason for that, which is that bed and breakfasts offer a notion of something that is high threshold and low tolerance. Within that, it is about the ability to stay alongside people. We might come on to this, but the key to that is putting the people with the most complex needs not into supported accommodation but, instead, into a housing first model with an appropriate level of support. That is a much better outcome.

The Convener: I promise you that we will explore that further in a few moments.

Patrick McKay: Fantastic.

Councillor Parry: I urge caution about the temporary accommodation statistics. For some people, moving into temporary accommodation can be the right thing to do. It is important to focus on what happens afterwards. If temporary accommodation leads to a stable tenancy, for example, and thus a stable period in someone's life, it may be the best thing for that person. The approach to temporary accommodation has to be outcome focused. It is also right to focus on the standards of the accommodation.

COSLA has collected statistics on rent arrears, which we would be happy to share with the committee. They are limited in that they focus on universal credit. They compare rent arrears for people on the older housing benefit system and rent arrears for those on the newer universal credit system. The statistics give a useful insight into the impact of the new system on Scotland.

We have discussed what needs to be done reactively, but planning and forward thinking are also needed. Universal credit is likely to be rolled out across Scotland, although COSLA would like the roll-out to be at a much slower pace because of the issues that the committee has discussed. We can do work to plan the roll-out.

People who now struggle with in-work poverty are the other group that needs to be considered. Because of their circumstances, they are not likely to come into contact with organisations or local authorities that could identify that they are at risk of homelessness. It is clear from today's discussion that we must focus on those at such risk. However, it is very difficult to identify those in in-work poverty. They tend to come forward only once they have exhausted all other options, including help from family and friends.

Nicola Dickie: It is important to be clear about what is meant by "temporary accommodation". As other panel members have said, "temporary accommodation" tends to be used interchangeably with "unsuitable accommodation". COSLA wants a proportionate response and, to achieve that, there has to be evidence of what "unsuitable accommodation" is and where it is. Some local authorities in Scotland do not have any "unsuitable accommodation", but others do. Many local authorities are on a journey, and we have to consider how to help them to move forward, get people out of unsuitable accommodation and minimise the numbers in it.

It would be helpful to have a definitive evidence base to work from. At present, people use the terms "supported accommodation", "B and B accommodation" and "temporary accommodation" interchangeably. Some people in temporary accommodation are in what is effectively a scatter flat, which looks exactly like the mainstream flat next door. We have to be cautious about whether there is an evidence base and how to use evidence in a helpful way.

Lorraine McGrath: I add a caution about who deems accommodation to be unsuitable. The people with the experience of living in the accommodation are best placed to say whether it is suitable for their needs and to describe the impact that it has had on their health and wellbeing and their hopes for the future.

The Convener: The deputy convener wants to ask a supplementary question, but does Graham Simpson want to follow up on that first?

Graham Simpson: It would be very useful if COSLA could provide the committee with its statistics. I remember that, when I was a councillor in South Lanarkshire, we were regularly given such figures and they were sometimes surprising. It might have been expected that a large proportion of rent arrears was the result of welfare reform, but often that was not the case. It would be useful to have the facts.

Nicola Dickie: The evidence that COSLA gathered was specifically about universal credit. We looked at the percentage of rent arrears for people on the old system, for people who were not claiming any benefit and for people on universal credit. The idea was to track whether, under the universal credit programme, arrears went up but then went down as people received their first payment.

We also have evidence about how much more the Scottish welfare fund is being used in the roll-out areas. That provides information on the human cost as well as the housing cost.

The Convener: The committee would appreciate that information.

Nicola Dickie: We will forward it to the committee.

Elaine Smith: I want to ask COSLA about the point that Lorraine McGrath made. If the temporary accommodation that a family were in was a so-called scatter flat but it was suitable for them and they were accessing local services such as schools, would it make more sense to turn that flat into permanent accommodation and to find other temporary accommodation to replace it? Patrick McKay is nodding.

10:15

Patrick McKay: I am from Turning Point Scotland, not COSLA, but my answer to your question is yes, absolutely. Adam Burley talked about attachment and about children attending school for long periods. We have to be specific. We are talking about temporary furnished flats that people can be in for more than a year. It seems like the most simple thing in the world to convert such arrangements into proper secure tenancies, so why can we not do that? I suppose that that is a symptom.

Nicola Dickie: Some local authorities do that to a greater or lesser extent. The problem is that we do not have pre-made, furnished temporary accommodation units to replace that accommodation.

That brings me back to the point that Councillor Parry made about the affordable housing supply programmes. Turning those flats into permanent accommodation is the most natural thing in the world to do and it sounds quite simple—and some local authorities do it—but it really depends on the housing market and the needs that present in an area. We are not saying that it is a bad idea; it is just that, although it sounds quite simple, we would need to explore how it would work in practice. We cannot direct it to happen nationally; local authorities have to look at their own housing market and what accommodation is available to them.

Elaine Smith: Could COSLA take an overview interest in that to find out which local authorities are doing it and whether and how they are doing it successfully, in order to share good practice? Could you share such information with the committee?

Nicola Dickie: We can certainly take that question away. I suspect that the Association of Local Authority Housing Officers might be best placed to tell you where that is effectively standard practice, but we will come back to you with whatever information we have.

The Convener: Thanks for that. I apologise to the deputy convener, because when she asked her question I started to answer it. It is my job to ask the questions, not to answer them. However, I think that Turning Point is based in my constituency of Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn—it has an office there—and I know from my case work that a lot of vulnerable people enter temporary tenancies and that sometimes they make it work and sometimes they do not. It seems crazy that, when they make it work—when they build up a network of friends and are not acting up but are being good neighbours—they get moved on and other vulnerable individuals or families come in who might or might not make a success of that temporary tenancy.

There would be less of a burden on communities and more community cohesion if those temporary furnished flats were flipped into secure tenancies for individuals and families. That is certainly my experience of what happens in my constituency. I apologise for indulging myself in saying all that.

I mentioned vulnerable people, and I know that Alexander Stewart wants to explore that issue.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I want to explore the multi-agency approach, which has been very successful in some areas. How does it work in practice? Do we need to think about restructuring how we budget for and commission services to ensure that such an approach is taken? I seek the panel's views.

The Convener: A flurry of hands have gone up. We will hear from Lorraine McGrath first.

Lorraine McGrath: In my written evidence I submitted details of the city ambition network initiative in Glasgow, which Simon Community Scotland and Turning Point Scotland joined quite recently. We have been operating the initiative along with other partners in the city for nearly three years now. It is specifically targeted at doing better with what we have, rather than thinking about what more we need. We have come together to work cohesively and collaboratively to target the most extreme needs and the people who have been in the system for a long time and for whom no solution has been found.

What makes that initiative work is attitude, culture and flexibility. Front-line staff have the freedom to engage and act because power is devolved to them. The principal thing that makes it work is the fact that people are empowered and not constrained by targets of working for four hours per week or seeing X people per week. There is flexibility in the system and flexibility to work across professional boundaries in the interests of the individual. It is a person-centred approach at its most extreme—it is about what works for the person, and it includes a housing response. People with extreme needs are asked what accommodation will suit them best right now and the team works to make that accommodation option available.

That does not happen in any other homelessness system; generally, because of pressures in the system, it is just about what is available for an individual. Invariably, for people with the most extreme and complex needs, the system will break down repeatedly. However, what we have seen in our system is increasing stability over time for people who were entrenched rough sleepers, consistently offending and bouncing in and out of the system, hospital and prison. We have been able to achieve cohesion in front-line service delivery around the key workers and professionals, who are engaged and come together to work in a collaborative way.

Do we need to change the way in which we commission services? Absolutely. In Glasgow, homelessness is subject to the devolved powers of the health and social care partnership, which is critical. Delivery of the service will be much more challenging in other areas, where that is not the case. That is certainly my experience of areas where homelessness is more part of the housing agenda than the health and social care agenda, as has been mentioned.

The other thing that we are doing in Glasgow, building on the principles of the CAN, is moving to an alliance contracting position for all commissioning of homelessness services. If we

get that right, it should empower the type of working whereby organisations come together to look at who is best placed to do what around a grouping of people or an individual in order to get the best possible response. That is personalisation at its most extreme, and there are options around the commissioning of services that would allow that and would bring statutory services, third sector services and, if needed, independent sector services around the table together to empower that flexibility and opportunity.

Councillor Parry: There are two points to make about that. The first is about how we work together before somebody reaches the point of homelessness, and the second is about how agencies can work together at that point to ensure that people have stable tenancies and lives and do not become recurrently homeless persons, which is incredibly common and often leads to rough sleeping. We know that preventative measures work very well, and we are now seeing integration joint boards and local authorities beginning to work incredibly well with housing services. It will take some time to see data about the results of that approach, but anecdotal evidence tells us that it is working. There is also the work that the Scottish Prison Service is doing, along with community justice partnerships and local authorities, which is already achieving incredible results. We know that preventative measures definitely work.

There are some barriers to agencies working together. Perhaps they do not have the resources for preventative spend, even though it will have an impact on their service further down the line. There are also sometimes legislative barriers to agencies working better together. Once a person reaches the point of being homeless and a local authority steps in and houses them, we cannot just leave them to it. They are likely to have experienced a level of trauma and crisis up to that point. When we speak to people who have become homeless, we often find that they have a story about going through five, six or seven different agencies. We must stop thinking about homelessness as a housing issue and start thinking about it as a whole society issue, and we must talk to a range of different sectors about the part that they can play in the lead-up to that.

Dr Burley: I echo a lot of that. Interagency work—interanything work—begins with a shared understanding, but fundamentally we do not have that understanding. I was brought up in the health service—professionally, at least—which still runs fundamentally on the institutionally autistic idea that everybody can make use of care in a completely anxiety-free way. We set up our clinics and services on the basis that people can come along and get into a relationship with care completely ordinarily. Most of us can do that without even noticing, but we know that the

relationship with care of people who have had very adverse experiences is fundamentally compromised by those experiences. Their trust in being able to get into a relationship with another is massively disturbed by the experiences that they have had.

Typically, the way in which we respond to that in the health service is by discharging people who do not turn up, without becoming interested in whether the fact that someone has not turned up tells us something about their bigger health problem, which is that they do not trust care. Such things underpin the inverse care law: the people who can make good use of care get all the care and can deal with fragmented, siloed services because they can easily navigate the relationships between them.

In that respect, the population that I work with articulates the need for a fundamental shared understanding about the relationship with care. The relationships that anyone has in their capacity to trust and make use of other human beings are the fundamental rate-determining step in all health, whether the relationship is with housing, health or third sector services. If everyone had that shared understanding, it would be obvious that we all have to work together on the basis of that principle and we would not set up services that required people to engage in relationships in certain ways. We would know that we might have to adapt the ways in which we relate to others in order to provide care to people.

Alexander Stewart: Person-centred care packages are what we should be aspiring to, and some areas are providing those extremely well. However, we have taken evidence from individuals who have told us that agencies sometimes work against what they are trying to achieve and that, if they do not get what they want from one agency, they end up having to go somewhere else. The whole multi-agency process does not work for them because they have to identify for themselves where they might get support.

We have touched on how local authorities can manage that situation, and it is true that many local authorities consider the housing process to be the solution whereas, in reality, that is not the solution for the individual, who just wants less process. Some areas have changed, but other people are quite resistant to change. How can we explain how they need to change and make that change happen to ensure that there is a multi-faceted approach?

Patrick McKay: An example of good practice that we hear about in some local authorities now is talk about vulnerable adults rather than the use of multiple labels that encourage us to think about people in terms of their mental health separately from their criminal justice status or their

homelessness. When we harmonise that with commissioning processes, we can start to achieve some of the things that were identified way back in the Christie report and help people to stop thinking in silos. If such an approach is to be truly implementable, we must not just prevent silo thinking but fund things differently and move moneys in a different way.

Dr Burley: There is a lot to say on the issue of specialism. We can get very invested in the business of doing something specialist and our services can drift towards that. In mental health services, for example, there are alcohol services, eating disorder services, depression services and so on—as if those are different, discrete elements. As I said, the people who can navigate those splits and manage the different relationships do quite well in the health service and everything works fine. The main reason that the people whom I work with have not been able to make use of care is the relationships that are involved. There is plenty of care out there—I noticed that when I first started to work in the homeless sector. There are plenty of goodies on the table, but there is a problem in the relationship between the people who need that care and the people who provide it.

All the people who come through our practice have a history of trauma. In the 15 years that I have been working at the access point, how many of them do you think we have managed to get into the specialist NHS trauma centre at Morningside? It is very few—it does not happen. The reason for that is that, for someone to access the trauma service, they must first get an appointment letter and then go up there and sit in a waiting room before going into a room with someone and talking about themselves. They then have to go away and come back for the next week's appointment and so on for a period of 14 weeks. That is what someone has to do in order to get treatment. If they do not do that, they are discharged because they were “not engaging”; there is no understanding that they were engaging in an ambivalent way because of the adversity that they had experienced.

We do not operate on the basis of that understanding. We assume that everyone can make use of care and that, if someone does not make use of care, it is because they do not want it, because they are not engaging or because of some other thing that is located in them rather than in us and how we set up our services.

Alexander Stewart: Thank you.

10:30

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): That is fascinating stuff, and I have a

supplementary on that issue. The COSLA submission states that

“partnership working between agencies at an area-based level is the best way to deliver improved outcomes”

and that

“local authorities are clear that they wish to encourage partnership working at all levels.”

We have heard about that, and I think that everyone would agree with that statement. Is there anywhere where that does not happen? Where are the gaps—if there are gaps—in partnership working across Scotland? Are the third sector and the private sector both fully involved in partnership working across Scotland?

Councillor Parry: If there were no gaps, there would not be an issue. Of course, there are things that we need to learn. Particularly in relation to people with multiple and complex needs, we know that interventions need to combine different approaches, especially around anti-poverty measures. For example, although the biggest cause of homelessness is relationship breakdown, different factors contribute to that. Anti-poverty measures, mental health support and money advice all need to work better together.

I know that the committee is going to come on to the housing first model, which a few councils have viewed very positively. That model would be really helpful in relation to the last two questions. There is obviously a resource implication that councils are aware of, but they are keen to look at that model.

The Convener: There is method to our approach. I promise you that the very next question will be about the housing first model.

Councillor Parry: That is excellent. Psychologically informed environments can help to achieve positive outcomes as well.

It is right to say that there are a few gaps. If there were not, the system would be working and we would not have homeless people. I think that we know where the gaps are; the issue is sometimes about the need to take a leap of faith, go forward with approaches and fund them.

Kenneth Gibson: Can you tell us what they are?

Councillor Parry: We know that we need to look at the “housing first” option. It goes back to the point about welfare reform: we knew that these things were coming, but we perhaps did not plan for them well enough. It is about resources and being able to do joined-up thinking whereby people can take the time to work through the issues in a multi-agency approach. Community planning partnerships are doing that very well in local authorities. The model is well integrated

across Scotland and is continuously being built on, so we are now seeing integration joint boards working with housing, mental health and the Scottish Prison Service. Nevertheless, more people need to come round the table.

We are talking about welfare reform, but we have not really talked about the role of the Department for Work and Pensions in that reform and how it is working with local authorities. I am hopeful and feel reassured that, in the future, when some of those issues are devolved to Scotland, we might see a different, more positive relationship that involves local working. However, at the moment, we still have a long way to go to make sure that we can keep the system running until we are able to do something different.

Lorraine McGrath: There are definitely gaps across the country. One of the challenges that I see all the time in being able to respond is that a lot of local authorities retrace to their statutory duties. That is not enabling; it is disabling, particularly for people with the most extreme needs.

A really good examination is needed of how local authorities could better manage their statutory duties and work with front-line service partners—third sector commissioned partners—to deliver their statutory duties instead of our having to pass a service user to the local authority in order for it to discharge its statutory duties and, in effect, pass them back to us. It is about the service user being able to have direct access at the first point of contact, which will generally be a third sector organisation—a crisis intervention will generally involve a third sector organisation, but we then have to go through a process.

As has been mentioned, we take people in the most extreme circumstances of their lives and make it the most difficult for them to access services. For example, to engage with a health response, they might have to visit a building at a defined point in time, and, if they cannot do that, they are regarded as not complying. Or they may have to be in a particular state in order to be assessed for a particular thing, and, if they cannot be in that state, their situation is just rolled on. They also have to be able to engage with an online system for much of the housing access that we have throughout the country. If they have no experience of online systems or no skill in using them, if they cannot concentrate for a short period let alone the amount of time that the online system takes, and if they cannot, at that time, engage with the statutory sector's homelessness access arrangements, they will not get the response that they require. All those things make the process difficult for people who are at the worst point in their lives.

A person's point of contact in any of the cities might be a street outreach support worker or a day centre worker. If that worker's organisation could do the work with the individual there and then, to get them access to the services that they needed without their having to jump through a whole load of hoops, that would be a powerful approach. We need to examine how we support local authorities to devolve their responsibility rather than retreat behind it and require people to go through a certain process so that they can discharge their statutory duty. That would be really helpful.

Dr Burley: I have a slightly more abstract idea about gaps, and I will echo what I said earlier. The issue is the need for integration and an understanding of what we are trying to do. We integrate horizontally and forget about the vertical integration of some of our understandings about, for example, adverse childhood experience—we have good data from Heriot-Watt University on that as well as a lot of other material—and how it relates to some of the symptomatic presentations that we are trying to deal with.

Our interventions often become very disconnected from an actual understanding of how a situation has developed. The question is how we can integrate across the board, vertically and horizontally, so that anyone who works in this business has an understanding that can get them past the diagnostic overshadowing that tends to happen when someone presents with a big symptom such as "I'm homeless" or "I use heroin". We can all get very involved with the symptom and become slightly amnesic about the fact that the person has come from somewhere.

Kenneth Gibson: Colleagues are going to ask about "housing first", so I will not ask a question about that. I will just say that, in Dr Burley's written submission, he said of the approach:

"It should be commissioned without delay".

Simon Community Scotland said:

"the principles of 'housing first' provide the best sustainable outcomes".

Turning Point Scotland said:

"HF should be the default model for those who ... have multiple complex needs".

COSLA said:

"Housing First is an exciting model with a lot of potential."

So I think that we are about to have an interesting discussion.

The Convener: Absolutely. I will start the conversation about the housing first approach and then bring in other members. As we said, committee members had a visit to Helsinki to look at the Finnish housing first model. We met a

variety of agencies and people, including Mayor Vapaavuori, the mayor of Helsinki, who is a former housing minister. He takes the view that what is needed is to get a nameplate on a door, give someone a permanent tenancy and give them all the support that they need at the first instance, rather than make them jump through lots of hoops.

The mayor told us that, previously, someone who appeared as a rough sleeper in Helsinki or another city might get into an emergency hostel on a take-your-chance-nightly basis. They might then get a more stable hostel place. After that, they might get some form of temporary accommodation and then some form of long-term temporary accommodation. They might then get a permanent tenancy. Of course, individuals never really jumped through all those hoops.

Housing first is about ensuring that, at the first opportunity, when someone presents—even if they have multiple and complex needs to do with, for example, recovery from alcohol or other substance addiction, significant and complex mental health issues or offending behaviour—they get a permanent tenancy, with wraparound support. The statistics in Finland show that the housing first approach generates a dramatic increase in individuals' health and wellbeing and in tenancy retentions. There is a significant financial investment.

I am conscious that we have with us Patrick McKay from Turning Point Scotland, which has been modelling such work on a small scale and for one section of the homeless and vulnerable community. We are keen to hear about that experience.

A key question for all the witnesses is whether they understand the model to be about not just housing first but housing and everything else first. In Finland, more than 300 additional support workers with health or social work backgrounds or cross-cutting expertise were employed to support individuals.

It is not a magic bullet—we will look at some of the issues with housing first in a moment—but that is what the committee discovered in Finland, which sets the scene for our discussion. We are keen to hear initial comments from Patrick McKay on Turning Point Scotland's experience and how it has managed housing first, and then from the other witnesses.

Patrick McKay: That is interesting, because I have also been to Helsinki and looked at the housing first model there. It is certainly interesting, and it reflects a lot of what we have learned and what we have been doing in our first and most mature housing first service, which has been operating in Glasgow since 2011.

However, we must say first that the housing first model is about understanding the system. Everything that we have already said relates to a staircase model in which people have to demonstrate that they can live independently and that they are housing ready. I have worked in homelessness for nearly 30 years, and I know that there is a whole group of individuals whom we may describe as having multiple complex needs, and whom the system fails. The housing first approach involves taking such people—some of them are not in recovery and are still intravenously using—and giving them a house, and that is what we have done. The key part of that approach is that we wrap the right level of support around them.

Specific components are needed within that support to make it work. First, there must be regular contact, and it has to be assertive. We have touched on issues such as how rough sleepers engage with a choice-based letting housing initiative. They cannot do so, as it is too difficult. We must go out and meet people where they are—whether they are on begging sites, sofa surfing or picking up their methadone prescription—and take them through the whole housing journey.

Another key element that works for us is the use of a peer support worker. There is some research that says that the housing first approach still works without that element. However, we employ as support workers people who have lived experience—that is overt in their job title. They bring a different level of authenticity and authority to the relationship, which can be genuinely transformative for people. There can be a contagion of hope around recovery.

Heriot-Watt University carried out research into our Glasgow housing first service, which showed that, even though we are not telling people to give up substances, the very fact that we give them a house means that they give up. A quarter of the people in the cohort that the university looked at suddenly went into recovery and stopped using. When people have a house, they can achieve basic things such as having a registered address. That means that they can have a general practitioner for the first time, which gives them access to all kinds of other services.

The magic figure of 80:20 is often used. Turning Point Scotland believes that 80 per cent of provision should be based on housing first, but in 20 per cent of cases we will always need some sort of person-centred response to deal with people who have complex needs. We therefore need direct-access supported accommodation that is emergency based and psychologically informed. If we have fewer services that include supported

accommodation, we spend more money to make them better.

The Convener: Before I bring in Dr Burley, I ask Mr McKay to describe, for the public record, the specific client group that Turning Point deals with.

Patrick McKay: If we look at housing first across the world, we see that the model is often used for a client group of people who have complex mental health issues. Our client group consists of people who have substance misuse issues but, bearing in mind everything that we have said, I think that those client groups are the same. The guys with whom we are working all have complex trauma, and many of them have been diagnosed with personality disorder—I hate that label, but it is the one that is given. The groups are very similar.

One challenge for us was the specific issues that arose in Glasgow because it is a stock-transfer local authority. We had to go to RSLs and say, “Listen, we have individuals who are intravenous drug users—gonnae give us houses for them?” As you might imagine, that can be a hard sell. However, some RSLs came on board with us, and I give a particular nod to Glasgow Housing Association, Thenue Housing Association and Queens Cross Housing Association, which ran a pilot with us. Once the success of that pilot became demonstrable, it allowed other RSLs to buy into the approach.

The Convener: Who gets the tenancy in those situations?

Patrick McKay: The Scottish secure tenancy is given to the tenant. A key principle of housing first is to separate housing from support, so our support continues even if a person loses their tenancy. In five years, we have had one eviction in a very complex group. We have supported three people to give up their tenancies because that was a better option for them than going into rent arrears because things were failing. The rest of the individuals have sustained tenancies or moved on successfully, perhaps because they have met someone and need a bigger house. The failure rate is very low—I am sorry, I hate the word “failure”.

10:45

The Convener: I understand.

Dr Burley: It is worth reminding ourselves that housing first was developed from a moral and ideological perspective, rather than a theoretical one. By merry happenchance, the reason that it works is that it is very sound theoretically and makes a lot of sense. By accident, perhaps, it is psychologically informed.

In the 1950s, Winnicott came up with the profound idea that

“Home is where we start from”,

and there is plenty of evidence to suggest that that is the case. We know—with a reasonably capital K—that the start in life for the population that we are talking about was not good. As Patrick McKay said, people present with a range of symptoms, such as homelessness, drug use and mental health problems. We keep trying to address those symptoms without addressing the fundamental ailment that has led the person to develop them in the first place, which is often where the person started from. Housing first aims to provide not a restart but something that has been absent: a secure base that they do not have to worry about.

The approach that is often taken in homelessness services is like bringing up your children at home and saying to them every day, “You know that this will not last for ever?”, and then expecting them to do well at school and focus on friendships and develop and grow. We expect homeless people to address high-end things such as drug use and mental health problems while saying to them, “You know that the ground beneath your feet is not going to be there tomorrow or the next day or in a month’s time,” as opposed to, “Here is a secure base that you can attach to and that will not go away—something that you can be confident will be around.” Even when people engage in an ambivalent way and are in and out, we should not give up; we should hold the line and say, “Here is something that you can rely on.” In time, once that becomes internalised, the person may be able to address other bits and bobs.

My belief in housing first is because the evidence base shows that it is very good and because it is incredibly sound from a theoretical point of view—that is probably why it works.

Lorraine McGrath: I am sure that the committee’s experience in Helsinki endorses the value of the model.

In Scotland, we need to be mindful of that 20 per cent of people, who in our view do not have to be excluded from housing first. It is about the model of housing first that we apply to the context of Scotland. We have a lot of good-quality supported accommodation buildings and environments, so why cannot that be permanent housing? Why do we not recognise that a homeless person has a long-term support need in the way that we do for people with mental health needs, physical disabilities or learning disabilities or people who are older?

We do not consider people in those care groups who are long-term supported in their homes as homeless, so why do we not apply the same

methodology to people who have come through the homelessness route? They, too, have complex needs and should be seen in that context; they require long-term support and may not be able to cope with living alone in a flat, regardless of the support around them, at that stage of their lives—or they may not want to. Why can they not have a permanent home and be regarded as being in a supported environment rather than as homeless? That is exactly what they have done in Helsinki. They have flipped the models from supported hostels to permanent tenancies within a supported environment.

The Convener: I will tease out that issue a little more, and then Andy Wightman has other issues to raise.

The Helsinki model was an eye-opener for the committee. This is just general chat—we have no considered opinion on the issue yet—but the idea of adapting former hostels into 80 studio flats in the one place for community living sat a little bit uncomfortably with the committee. We were not sure whether such a model would work in Scotland. Would it just re-entrench a hostel system? There seemed to be much more limited use of scattered housing in Finland. If someone goes for a studio apartment, how do they move on from that? What is their pathway into another permanent tenancy elsewhere in the city or in the country, if that is what they want? That irked us a little, and we were not sure whether it would be appropriate for Scotland.

Lorraine, I am interested to hear whether you think that community living of that sort might have a value.

Lorraine McGrath: That would not be of value for the majority of people, for whom we would always seek to support their aspiration to have a home in the community on their own. However, taking a personalised approach again, for those who do not feel able or do not want to take that step, there has to be an alternative, because the only other thing that happens to that person is that they remain stuck in the homelessness system, bouncing around various emergency models, rather than having a permanent place. I refer to the idea that Adam Burley described about people thinking, “This is my home. I am safe and secure here.” There is no need for people to talk to that person on a daily basis about their moving-on plan or their forward plan, or about housing. Someone might feel that they are in their home and they are comfortable there. They know what they want, and they know that they are supported effectively. They are in a peer group.

It is not necessarily about congregate living. Thankfully, we do not have many hostels of that size in Scotland—we are talking about places on a much smaller scale, for eight, 10 or 15 people.

There is a an opportunity to meet a need for some of that 20 per cent of people who will not sustain a traditional housing first model in a flat in a community on their own.

The Convener: It is really interesting. The examples that we saw in Helsinki appeared to work, and we are trying to work out whether those would transpose to Scotland. The people there told us to use our housing first model, which is suitable for our circumstances, rather than lift and shift. That was the message that we got.

Patrick McKay: This is an interesting and contentious area. Many people who work in housing first have different views, on issues such as whether we should congregate or disperse, which is sometimes described as the pathway model. Just to confuse you, there is also housing first lite.

The point about Helsinki is interesting. I also went to see a model that was described as housing first. There are very good housing first models in Helsinki. However, we started to tease it out. We met some service users—interestingly, they were still service users—and we were taken in to look at people’s rooms. I never went, because I am not terribly comfortable doing that, but there was something temporary about it. There was an expectation that some of them would move on.

Lorraine McGrath is perhaps making a different point—I do not disagree with it—that there can be smaller models of congregate living, where people have greater security of tenure. Interestingly, Sam Tsemberis, the architect of housing first, would agree with that.

For me, the default model must always be that people are given a house. Even if it is not housing first, it should be housing led. There is a group of individuals who, when there is a perception of support, are always put into a staircase model, in which they have to demonstrate various things. We have to stop doing that.

Councillor Parry: To pick up on some of those points from a local authority point of view, I certainly agree with Mr McKay about the importance of having not just the physical housing but wraparound support, too.

At the local authority level, we know that we need to take a multi-agency approach, but that does not mean that representatives of every single agency have to go and visit each person. Sometimes, that has a detrimental effect. It is about finding the right people to work with people to get the right outcomes, but not in a way that creates duplication. We know that that has a resource impact and an impact on the person.

From the pragmatic point of view as regards housing options, we have not talked much about housing supply, but it is an issue, and we need to have a real debate about what new houses look like. Local authorities are changing the way in which they build houses. The recent local authority SHIPs are looking at more houses being built for single people and at what supported accommodation for elderly residents means, but we need to have a real debate about the types of properties that we have available for homeless housing. What is the shape of that, and what do the materials look like? We need to have a pragmatic conversation about that, and we must build flexibility into the funding. At the moment, local authorities have very prescriptive funding for the type of housing that they build. The committee might want to explore that.

The Convener: By “SHIPs”, you mean strategic housing investment plans. Not everyone who is watching would have known what you were referring to.

Thanks for your patience, Dr Burley.

Dr Burley: That is fine. I will make two quick points on the theme of understanding.

You have talked about some of the resistances to potential approaches. In relation to the population that I am referring to, people still labour under an idea about choice. They think that we have good housing and mental health systems and that there is a group of people who choose not to engage or to do X, Y and Z. However, that is simply not true. The point is articulated far better by Suzanne Fitzpatrick in a recent paper. We know what the variables are. The people who we are talking about did not choose their childhoods or their development—they did not choose where they were born or how their minds were formed—any more than they choose what degree of repertoire they have to engage with the current systems. That needs to be borne in mind, because there is still a cultural idea that the person who sits begging on South Bridge in some way chooses to do that instead of engaging with the proliferation of services that we have made available.

My second point is slightly pedantic but important. My profession is interested in coming up with discrete models and inhabiting them for quite long periods of time, but there is nothing like a discrete model for excluding people. There is a risk that something like housing first can become a brand and a model with a manual telling us how to do it, which can then be toured around the country in order for us to make money out of it. The broader definition of what is required would be something like our being psychologically informed, of which the housing first approach is only one example. There are many examples of approaches that have been based on sound

evidence of what has happened, which has informed our understanding and our ability to develop a service. In some cases, those approaches might have looked like housing first as it was originally described; in other cases, they might have looked very different. In Edinburgh, we have run pilot cases that might have been seen as modified versions of housing first, and those have been incredibly effective and money saving as well as human misery saving.

Andy Wightman: That has covered a bit of the ground. In Finland, the estimated cost of the action plan for 2016-17 was €78 million, which was broken down into €54 million of investment and €24 million of service development. For a country of 5 million people, those are not big numbers. I think that I am correct in saying that, when the Scottish Government announced its short-life working group on rough sleeping, it talked about providing a budget of £50 million over the remaining lifetime of the Parliament. Those sums of money are very much in the same ball park and are not huge relative to what we spend on other things.

We also heard about—although we have yet to receive and read it—some work that had been done in Tampere, in Finland, on the cost benefit analysis of spending that money to save substantial sums of money in public services that are designed around the traditional approaches. Can you give us a sense of your understanding of the cost implications and cost benefit analysis of taking a housing first approach to substantially eliminating homelessness in Scotland?

Patrick McKay: The group that we are talking about in relation to housing first are often the people who use services for a long time anyway, so it is important that they do not have the support only for a finite time—it must be on-going. I know that that can make commissioners nervous, but the cost of that support would have to be picked up in some other way by some other silo of funding. We must be open to that.

A basic saving is one such as the example that I gave of people being registered with a general practitioner. Neil Hamlet, who is a public health doctor, often talks about a graph showing who uses acute services. It is people who are older and people who have complex needs. I am not saying that, if we just register somebody with a doctor, they will never use acute services, but their use of them will diminish. That will definitely provide a saving.

Sometimes, the people who commission the service are not the ones who feel the saving. With cost benefit analysis, that becomes a challenge in your argument. However, it goes back to the Christie commission. We need to return to the idea that we should stop being so siloed and accept

that the saving will be to the public purse, not to one silo within it.

11:00

Dr Burley: It is as Patrick McKay said. In two of the pilot studies that we did, the people did not register with a GP but the accommodation provided basic security. In our formulation, aspects of how the person used services—for example, regularly calling the Scottish Ambulance Service and attending accident and emergency in ways that those services would call inappropriate and were high cost or regularly using the criminal justice service—were ways of getting involved with people in an ambivalent relationship. The intervention that we provided seemed to address that to the extent that hospital admissions, ambulance call-outs, accident and emergency attendance and days in hospital, court and prison all dropped.

That is before we even get into the human cost. The number of days that one person was rough sleeping dropped to almost zero. His longest period in accommodation had been six to eight weeks and, suddenly, we were able to house him for 34 months. In those 34 months, everything dropped.

That individual is still drinking and still has lots of problems. It is not as if he is all better and has become a taxpaying individual, but he is certainly secure and, if we had done the intervention for long enough, things might have changed. Ultimately, it came to an end because it was a pilot project. However, it at least carries the potential for some kind of psychological development, because we have in place the fundamentals of a secure base from which other things could grow. It also diminishes the risk that he will be found dead in a graveyard. If he is going to die, at least he will die in a place where someone will find him the next morning and he is safe and warm.

Andy Wightman: That is helpful. Do the other witnesses wish to comment?

Nicola Dickie: To pick up on the point about the Christie commission, everyone is all about breaking down silos, but when we start to talk about preventative spend and budgets, we do not necessarily see the same willingness. Everyone is all for breaking down the silos until they are asked for some of their budget to move into preventative spend. I say that as a representative of local government, which is just as bad at that as anyone else.

We have to be aware that there is not an awful lot of money sloshing about in the system to move into preventative spend. We will see the benefits eventually, but we have to be aware that we do not have stuff that we can lift off the shelf to do

what we are talking about. It would be interesting to examine the Helsinki model and how much the authorities put in at the start to stimulate it so that we could start to get into preventative spend.

Dr Burley: That is one of the arguments that we hear. The Scottish Ambulance Service is not giving the housing departments the money that it has saved on even just the two individuals that I mentioned.

Andy Wightman: I affirm that Nicola Dickie makes an important point about preventative spending. In the Parliament, we have not grappled properly with the issue and come up with a solution for how we do the accounting or how the savings that, for example, the police might make help the health service, which can in turn help local authorities. That is a vital part of all this.

We will have to make some recommendations on the housing first model. One school of thought is that it might be useful and that we could do a few pilots; Patrick McKay has been doing what might be described as a pilot. The other school of thought is the Finnish one in which we have firm political leadership. The man who is now the mayor of Helsinki was the housing minister, and he embraced the approach. He faced considerable political challenges, but he brought key constituencies along and said, “We are going to commit to this whole-heartedly because we believe that we could make big strides forward through it.”

What is your sense of the role of housing first in substantially eliminating homelessness in Scotland? Is it something that the committee should recommend that the Government considers, or should we recommend that the Government whole-heartedly adopts it with very few caveats?

Councillor Parry: I would agree with the support for housing first. As a vehicle, the committee could look at community planning partnerships. The benefit would be that such partnerships are already in existence and recognised. They also provide the local democratic layer that is a key element of what is happening in Helsinki. From COSLA’s point of view, it is important to provide local flexibility and the ability to feed in local demographics and issues, while having a consistent model.

Patrick McKay: Scotland is recognised as having some of the most robust homelessness legislation in the world. Where we have fallen down a wee bit is in advancing housing first. Of course, we have to be mindful that such a scheme does not dominate everything, as there are other options. For it to be fully successful, there has to be a Scottish Government commitment to creating

the mechanisms to allow local authorities to scale up housing first to a significant level.

Dr Burley: It seems to make sense theoretically, economically and on the evidence when it has been tried elsewhere. My question is what the resistance to it is. It seems to be ideology about why we might not want to try to provide that level of care for that group of people.

My only caveat is about the restriction of the discrete idea that housing first must look a particular way and have particular elements, and that, if a scheme does not, it is not true to the model. Talking about theoretical, evidence-based, informed interventions—of which housing first happens to be an example—is a much better way of describing what needs to be done. We want to commit to commissioning and providing services that have an evidence base and that are theoretically sound. Housing first is a very good example of such a service, as it addresses some of the fundamentals of what it is to develop as a human being. For particular individuals, the model might need to be tweaked. What is needed is a commitment to the fundamentals, and freedom for services to tweak round the edges for particular individuals.

Lorraine McGrath: I echo those comments. Housing first needs to be something that Scotland embraces strongly on the basis of its principles, not of a defined model. We need to look at it in the Scottish context, in the local context of each local authority and for the individual person. We should marry the principles of housing first with the national policy agenda on personalisation and self-directed support.

The adoption of a model is not just about what the evidence base tells us—although that is really important—but about what that person needs, what will work best for that person and how we create the network of responses to allow provision for every person who is in those extreme circumstances.

The Convener: Before I bring in Dr Burley, I want to give a time check. We have other witnesses waiting for the next session, and I am hoping to finish this session at about quarter past 11. I apologise to those who are waiting.

We have a couple of questions to mop up. The final question will then be from Elaine Smith about what is happening here and now in Scotland on homelessness.

Dr Burley: I want to articulate clearly why the point that I made is important. One of the things that are problematic for the population that I work with is exclusion. They are repeatedly excluded from places. One of the reasons is the discretion of intervention and service—all the boundaries that we put in place. The risk of adopting housing

first is that, as soon as we set boundaries, people start to be excluded. That is the fundamental thing that gets in the way of the people I work with getting care.

The Convener: It is worth putting on the record that Finland developed a housing first model in isolation from New York, which developed a very different housing first model. It is therefore about the underlying principle rather than the efficacy of a particular lift-and-shift model. The point has come through very strongly from witnesses that the model, with its underlying principle, should be set in a Scottish context. The Scottish Government has started a short-life expert group, and there are some budget lines around that: a £10 million a year budget line for ending homelessness together and a £20 million a year alcohol and drug services budget line, with alcohol and drugs being among the underlying drivers of homelessness and rough sleeping.

I want to finish with the deputy convener talking about the here and now of homelessness but, given that the short-life expert group is currently meeting, are there any comments on that? As well as the budget lines that I mentioned, there is the affordable housing budget line generally and how that is used. We will finish off with that as a final line of questioning. Are there any thoughts in relation to the working group or budgets? The witnesses do not have to comment, but they have the opportunity to do so.

Lorraine McGrath: As the only member of the working group here, I suppose that I should comment. The challenges that we face are the same ones that we have been talking about around this table. The question is how we integrate a response into a system that is designed for the general population rather than the discrete needs of people who are caught up in homelessness in Scotland just now. We are already bumping against those issues. Although there are additional resources, that does not necessarily address the system change that is required. That is one of the big challenges and is where the cut-across to those other programme for government priorities will prove to be important.

The Convener: That is helpful. The witnesses should not feel that they have to respond to my question, but they have the opportunity to do so if they want.

Nicola Dickie: COSLA recognises that the interventions that have been made around the action group are of a time, because we are coming into winter and there are specific things that the group has been set up to do in that regard. Fundamentally, we recognise that, but we are looking for strategic interventions. The action group does what it does, but we must ensure that the required conversations are being taken

forward and that we continue to feed in that sort of stuff. We recognise that the action group is doing something specific, but in the longer term we are looking for those strategic discussions continuing around the governance structures that we already have.

The Convener: That is very helpful.

Elaine Smith: Rather than being about the here and now of homelessness, my question is specifically about the type of homelessness that is rough sleeping. I have a specific question for the Simon Community. Can Lorraine McGrath add more detail about the reasons that she gives in her written submission for why rough sleeping is more visible now?

Lorraine McGrath: In Glasgow in particular?

Elaine Smith: If that is what you are referring to in your written submission.

Lorraine McGrath: Predominantly in Glasgow there is a perception among the public of an increase in rough sleeping, but there is also the reality that the people who are predominantly on the streets have all been known to services for a long time. There is a range of indicators that tell us what that rough sleeping is about; a lot of it is about those people's personal safety, but a big part of it is about public generosity and compassionate responses from charitable groups. People are able to find themselves sustaining a lifestyle that is not uncomfortable for them; it is not necessarily a choice but something that results from saying to themselves "This is what I do. This is where I am at." Public giving is supporting that to a degree for some, and that will preclude people moving on, particularly if they are heavily entrenched in addiction and that is driving their behaviours. They will choose that opportunity to receive public giving over accessing services.

Elaine Smith: So what you are talking about is people who are rough sleeping and have begging pitches, as you said in your written response. Not all people who beg are homeless, as has been noted elsewhere.

Lorraine McGrath: No. We do an audit of the street-begging population in Glasgow every three months, so we have a good level of intelligence on who the street beggars are and what their circumstances are. Only about a third of them are actively in the most extreme homelessness circumstances. The majority are there for other desperate reasons that vary across the board. For that third, who are also rough sleepers, a big part of what keeps many of them in that situation is that opportunity. Many of them will not have an active benefit claim or active engagement with statutory services, but they will have an active addiction that drives their daily behaviours. That is a difficult thing to break when the opportunity is there.

11:15

Yesterday we heard about a young girl who we have managed to move into temporary accommodation. However, doing a benefit claim for her took hours because of the complexity of her situation. While she was sitting there, she would say to the member of staff, "I can see my pound coins walking past." She could see her regular givers walking past. She would say that she needed that money because she was starting to feel a desperate need to feed her addiction. That is the challenge that the staff face and one of the difficulties that we have with navigating the system for people. It is difficult for that young girl to quickly transition from sitting and receiving money from the public so that she can feed her addiction to a situation where her benefits are in place, she has a settled place to call home, and she has access to the health and addiction services that she needs. The journey that she has to take to get from here to there is so problematic that it is much easier for her to stay where she is and talk to her regular givers every day.

Elaine Smith: Could you share that audit information with the committee?

Lorraine McGrath: Yes.

Elaine Smith: Thank you.

I have another specific question that is based on the submissions of Lorraine McGrath and Dr Burley. Lorraine said earlier that public and charitable initiatives are enabling people to sustain life on the streets, but Dr Burley notes in his submission that, in providing night shelters in Edinburgh and Glasgow, churches

"show a good model of ... housing ... for ... the most entrenched homeless."

What are your views on the support that is available for rough sleepers? Is there a need for more temporary accommodation? I know that we have moved away from that sort of model, but is there now a need to look at some of the unintended consequences of past policy decisions?

Lorraine McGrath: I will use the example of the people we have been working with through the CAN initiative. The young woman I just referred to has been in and out of temporary accommodation for many years, and she has also slept rough for long periods of time. Emergency temporary accommodation never worked for her. It failed or broke down very quickly. She is now in a temporary furnished flat. It is still temporary accommodation, but she sees it as a home. That is not an ordinary thing. We do not ordinarily transition people from sleeping rough straight into a temporary furnished flat; there are usually a few steps in between. If anything, that endorses the idea of a housing first approach.

She is living with her partner and they are now much more settled. She is engaging with the health service, as is her partner. There have been some wobbles, but this is the first time that she has been able to go straight into a flat without staircasing in and out of emergency and temporary accommodation. It is still temporary accommodation—it is a temporary furnished flat in Glasgow—but it is a home rather than just a room somewhere.

Do we need more temporary accommodation right this very second? We probably do, purely from the point of view of quantity, but is that the solution for people like the young woman I have been talking about? I do not think that it is. We need to be able to transition people like her to somewhere that they can call home, whatever home looks like for them, as quickly as possible, and get the support in place for them.

In relation to the winter night shelters that are operated in Edinburgh and Glasgow, it is not just about the shelter; it is about what goes with that shelter. Having someone come into a winter night shelter from sleeping rough is a real opportunity, and we have worked really hard in Glasgow in the past few years to build up the service response that goes with the opportunity for people to have a place of safety overnight. We want to provide services that are in-reaching. We want to be there every night and every morning to ensure that as many people as possible are transitioned out of the need for a winter night shelter as quickly as possible.

That approach has proven really successful, and the action group has been looking at whether winter night shelter provision needs to be ramped up this year, but in the context of ensuring that a massive service response is also in place. After all, this is not just about giving people a place of safety overnight; it is about taking the opportunity to effect change in that person's life.

Elaine Smith: I want to ask Dr Burley about that, given that he refers in his submission to the provision of

“good basic, low threshold shelter for those that need it.”

What do you mean by that?

Dr Burley: Again, from a psychological point of view, I think that, as far as service providers are concerned, one of the things that ambivalence leads to is oxymorons such as the provision of “permanent temporary accommodation”. We need to provide something that addresses and understands the psychological and emotional needs of the population that we are trying to serve. What so-called night shelters can do is allow people who are deeply ambivalent about attachment to be in and out at the same time; in other words, they can have a place that they can

be in but which they know that they can leave very quickly. It is therefore not permanent, which might evoke a very claustrophobic response, but it is also not completely absent, which might evoke a quite agoraphobic response. After all, we are talking about people who have very big agoraphobic/claustrophobic crises; when they are attached to or detached from people, they feel very distressed. As a result, what night shelters or that sort of accommodation can do is provide a step on the developmental pathway towards what, I guess, we might understand as healthy attachment, in which we can form relationships with people, houses and jobs in a way that is anxiety-free and secure and which allows us to develop as human beings.

I would therefore understand the provision of such shelter as being part of the broad spectrum that we have talked about as falling into the “psychologically informed” category. I would still call it a housing first type of approach, whereby we say to an individual, “What we’re going to provide is accommodation that you can make use of and which is sympathetic to or is at least based on our discussed understanding of where you are developmentally and what your psychological needs are.”

That is not to say that such provision should just become a dumping ground, because as Lorraine McGrath has articulated, the issue is how we position ourselves in relation to people. It is a real skill that care staff have; they are very good at looking at people out of the corner of their eye and not scaring them off by saying, “Right! Let’s do lots of work on addressing your issues!”—which can make them run for the hills—and at the same time not just saying, “They’re just no-hopers; there’s no point in doing anything with them,” and giving up on them. We need to find some balance that allows us to exist in the ambivalence and remain interested in people who both attract and disable our attention. In my experience, the only resistance to night shelters is the ideological one of “Oh, we just don’t like the idea.”

Elaine Smith: That leads on to what will be my final question, if you do not mind, convener. In Glasgow and Edinburgh, such accommodation is provided mainly by church groups. Obviously, it is much needed, and they are doing a good service, but is it appropriate for such charitable institutions—charity, if you like—to provide that? Should the state not be doing that?

Dr Burley: From a health point of view, the situation could reasonably be described as scandalous. If you think about the massive difficulty that people have in trusting and making relationships with other human beings—which, as I have said, is the fundament that allows us to get jobs, live, have good health and all those things—

such an ailment is actually a fundamental health problem, one of the consequences of which is, for some people, being homeless, jobless and relationship-less and living on the streets. It is a health problem, and the health intervention is the provision of some kind of shelter that allows the person to start developing a trusting relationship with a human object.

It is worth our while to remind ourselves that the average age of death at the Edinburgh access practice over the past five years is 42. The inability to form and maintain human relationships is a really life-limiting condition, and if we could get our heads around it and come to some understanding of what the provision of such shelter means, we might be able to see it as a fundamental health intervention that should form part of our health and social care canon.

Lorraine McGrath: I endorse an awful lot of what Adam Burley has just said. I think that if there is to be a state response, it should be based on giving people the opportunity to access accommodation directly without their having to jump through hoops. That would be an endorsement of all the principles that Adam Burley mentioned, including allowing people to opt in and out on the basis of what their experience allows them to cope with.

There is no such approach in our major cities, but I think that it should be an important part of any new provision or any change in provision. Indeed, it could even be tested in either of our major cities this winter to find out what changes might be made and whether we could have low-threshold services that ensured that people did not have to jump through any hoops to get accommodation on a particular night. They would just have to be there. They would engage with street outreach to get connected with accommodation, and they would be able to leave the next day without any consequences and come back the next night however many times they needed to in order to build up enough trust and engagement with the staff who worked in and around the service. I suppose that that is a bit more of a structured approach than simply having more winter night shelters, which are frankly just mattresses on floors in some shared space. I would certainly support having direct-access arrangements for some of the accommodation that we already have and the ability to use it much more flexibly on the basis of personal choice rather than through engagement with the system.

The Convener: I will take a final, final comment from Councillor Parry. I must make it clear that, even if they have the most interesting thing in the world to say, no other witnesses will be able to come in again, as we have to close the evidence session.

No pressure, then, Councillor Parry.

Councillor Parry: I will be very brief. I just want to urge caution and ask the committee not to think of rough sleeping as a city-centre problem. It is not, of course, and we need to take a strategic approach and think about local issues as part of that. After all, we know that people will go from a rural local authority area to a centre in Glasgow or Edinburgh, and I ask that that be considered in any strategic approach.

The Convener: I thank our witnesses very much for what has been an extensive and—for MSPs—rewarding evidence-taking session. Please continue to follow our inquiry, and if you wish to make any additional comments, please email the clerks or contact us and feed them in. This work will undoubtedly continue.

I suspend the meeting for a couple of minutes to allow our next panel of witnesses to take their seats.

11:27

Meeting suspended.

11:33

On resuming—

The Deputy Convener (Elaine Smith): We are still on agenda item 2, and we have been joined by our second panel. Thank you for your patience; we have taken a bit more time to get to this point than we expected.

Our witnesses are Joe Connolly from the criminal justice voluntary sector forum; Paul Brown, chief executive of the Legal Services Agency; Nicky Brown, homelessness and housing support senior manager at the City of Edinburgh Council; and Jamie Stewart, housing development officer at the Scottish Refugee Council.

Before I ask you to make opening statements—I understand that most of you wish to do that—I welcome you and thank you for coming. I also put on the record an apology from our convener, who has had to leave the meeting because the Conveners Group will meet the First Minister shortly.

I invite Joe Connolly to make a short opening statement.

Joe Connolly (Criminal Justice Voluntary Sector Forum): I am representing the criminal justice voluntary sector forum, but I am also the chief executive of Ypeople. The forum is a collaborative group of 31 voluntary organisations that have come together with a view to working as collaboratively as possible in addressing, with

local authorities and the Scottish Government, issues around criminal justice.

I will highlight some key messages in our submission. First, we have identified a gap between legislation and implementation. When I read the full submission from our forum, I was struck by how disparate the services are. Lots of things are happening across the country, but they are pretty disparate, and the service that people receive depends on which part of the country they live in.

I note that imprisonment is an important risk factor in why people become homeless, and that does not apply only to prisoners, because homelessness can hit the families—when they are left to fend on their own, they can end up running into rent arrears. There is also a clear link between homelessness and reoffending.

As third sector organisations, we believe that we have a critical role to play in service delivery by working with statutory bodies to provide not only accommodation but support. The accommodation that is offered must be of the highest standard. In my organisation, we do not just throw mattresses on the floor; people who come out of prison walk into a nice decorated flat with all the amenities, and they have our wraparound support.

Prevention is the key. We know almost from the day when people arrive in prison when they will leave, so we can start to work towards a plan that identifies whether there are issues of homelessness as well as other issues for them, and we can put that plan into action.

Last but not least, consideration has to be given to the impact of welfare reform. When I was talking to one of my managers yesterday, he described it as a general shambles, given the work that people are having to do to disentangle things because of welfare reform, the introduction of universal credit and so on.

I will leave it there for now. I just wanted to summarise the forum's position.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you, Mr Connolly. I am sure that my colleagues will pick up on some of those points.

I invite Paul Brown to make an opening statement. I also thank him for hosting our visit to the Legal Services Agency as part of our pre-inquiry work.

Paul Brown (Legal Services Agency): We enjoyed the visit and it was much appreciated. I am here to represent the Legal Services Agency, but I am also a member of the campaign for housing and social welfare law, which is a flexible umbrella body. The points that I will make have been discussed with quite a number of people.

Broadly speaking, our position is that, although Scottish homelessness legislation has rightly been praised as a model of good practice, the same cannot be said of its implementation. To reflect what has just been said, I note that there is a disparity between principles and practices. We have not taken on board the unintended consequences of a variety of changes, and the committee's inquiry is a welcome opportunity to look at some of them.

The major change that we see as having happened is that, as an effect of stock transfer, local authorities in many areas have a duty but not the means to carry out that duty. Local authorities need access to RSL stock, but often that seems not to work—I do not know why. I am not in a position to comment on that, as it is a separate issue, but I can say that the legal basis for local authority referrals to RSLs is weak. Section 5 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 is controlled by section 6, which provides for an arbitration process, but that is cumbersome and weak and, as far as I am aware, it has never been used. If it has been used, it has hardly ever been used. It does not seem to represent the right sort of legal relationship, and the arrangements were based on the requirements of another era.

Another issue—it has been a theme throughout the evidence that I have heard today—is that homeless people have no direct voice. It is not surprising that key documents get out of date. The most obvious example is that the code of guidance, which was published in 2005, makes no mention of a load of issues. It does not mention equalities law or people with no recourse to public funds—I am sure that my friends on the panel will comment on that—and it does not discuss in detail the issues about temporary accommodation, such as the exorbitant charges that are often made and the major difficulties in accessing it.

Our experience in providing advice, assistance and representation is that lots of people have difficulty accessing the most basic temporary accommodation, even though there is a clear legal obligation to provide it. The code of guidance does not adequately address the low speed at which permanent accommodation is offered. This morning, someone told me about a case where a client who is in perfectly ordinary circumstances has been in temporary accommodation for well over 32 weeks. That is just a wee example.

The code of guidance includes a section on the now-abolished concept of priority need. As a key document, it needs to be updated. That will take a fair amount of work, but it would be worth while. In terms of cost savings, if everything is in one place, we can give the document to people and say, "Read this and you will understand it". That cannot be said to anyone at the moment because the

code is completely misleading on a number of important points. However, it is an important document.

Once that document is updated, section 37 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 should be amended to require local authorities not merely to have regard to the guidance but to comply with it. At the moment, local authorities do not need to comply with it so, once it is updated, that obligation will need to be tightened.

We also need to discuss services to prevent homelessness further. Research clearly shows that most homelessness is caused by factors that are out of the control of the people who are affected. We have had clear and articulate evidence to that effect. We need to quash the idea that it is a lifestyle choice. We never hear people at conferences saying, "Oh, homelessness is a lifestyle choice; let's discuss this strange lifestyle," but I have heard people say that on numerous occasions. That idea needs to be rejected and the reality must be recognised.

We need to ensure that everyone is given a second or third chance and appropriate support. We need to look outside the box to see what the appropriate support is. Support at the right time saves a lot of money—we have discussed that today. How to save money is a strong theme. A stitch in time does not save nine or hundreds of pounds—it saves tens of thousands, if not millions.

One preventative service that has popped up in discussion recently is the Seattle rent assistance programme, where forbearance is given to people with rent arrears to prevent them from becoming homeless and the programme pays off rent arrears—in whole or in part—as part of a structured rights and money-advice based procedure. The upstream preventative measures have been documented by the voluntary organisations concerned and have saved large amounts of money. We need to look at that experiment—I volunteer to go to Seattle to find out more if members are interested. Actually, an academic who is working in Edinburgh has worked on that programme, so we can get information about such things really easily.

Under the new private rented sector regime, people will be threatened with eviction and could lose their house for really quite small levels of rent arrears. Maybe partly through charitable giving and partly through a Government programme, providing small amounts might make a really big difference, to prevent unnecessary homelessness—although it is always unnecessary.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you, Mr Brown. Mr Nicky Brown has said that he will wait for the

questions. Can Jamie Stewart please make a short opening statement?

Jamie Stewart (Scottish Refugee Council): I will try. Thank you for the opportunity to come to the committee. I am here as a representative of the Scottish Refugee Council, but I am also a member of the campaign for housing and social welfare law and have had discussions about the matter with colleagues in that group.

I will talk about asylum seekers and refugees who find themselves homeless, although I recognise that, because of the intricacies of devolved and reserved matters, the public funds that might offer solutions will not necessarily be the same. I also appreciate that provisions exist in Scotland that seek to accommodate both asylum seekers and refugees. However, as we have said in our written evidence, homelessness is built into the refugee experience and, for asylum seekers, accommodation relies on a hugely imperfect system of recognition of a person's status.

That issue was recognised by the Scottish Parliament's Equalities and Human Rights Committee in "Hidden Lives—New Beginnings: Destitution, asylum and insecure immigration status in Scotland", which was published earlier this year. The report said that it is clear that

"the asylum and immigration system is peppered with points at which the risk of destitution becomes likely. The sheer complexity and inaccessibility of the process makes it unnecessarily difficult in practical terms for someone new to the UK, who is destitute, to initiate the process."

An example of that comes from our destitution advice service, which we deliver in partnership with the Refugee Survival Trust. In 2016-17, 191 people were seen by that service because they were destitute. The impact on mental and physical health of destitution during the asylum process is considerable.

11:45

Our conversations with street teams around Scotland suggest that a significant number of people are labelled under the broad rubric of "no recourse to public funds", which includes asylum seekers who are destitute, European Economic Area nationals and people with forms of insecure immigration status. Councils are struggling to know what entitlements, if any, exist for those people. Concerted action needs to be taken to put people back into available services.

When individuals are granted their legal status in the UK, they are asked to leave their accommodation, and our evidence from our holistic integration service suggests that at least 85 per cent of refugees are dealt with through the homelessness system. Many of them cannot access homelessness assistance at their point of

need, which leads to large amounts of sofa surfing and other types of homelessness. Those who are lucky enough to access homeless accommodation face lengthy stays in hostels, hotels and temporary flats and often wait more than 32 weeks for accommodation.

We work closely with Glasgow City Council—Glasgow is the only dispersal area in Scotland—to seek solutions. Last year, we reached an agreement to work on a system for allocating settled housing early in the process. However, a year on, there has been little change on the ground and more needs to be done to make the statutory services work better in practice.

For those reasons, we have made a number of recommendations. We ask the committee to consider the recommendations of the “Hidden Lives” report on introducing more safeguards in the system in relation to destitution and no provision of accommodation, including taking a proactive approach to ensuring that people who come under the heading of “no recourse to public funds” are properly assessed and, where possible, delivered back into available support systems, to ensure as much as possible that homelessness is not, as is described in the “Hidden Lives” report, built into the asylum process and to learn from local authorities’ experience of Syrian resettlement—

The Deputy Convener: Mr Stewart, I will have to stop you or we will not have time for questions.

Jamie Stewart: I echo the points about the robustness of section 5 of the 2001 act and about the provision of advice, advocacy and support, particularly in relation to the introduction of statutory integration services for refugees who are new to the country.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you very much. The witnesses gave us written submissions, which we read assiduously, and we will tease out some of them through questions. Short opening statements are welcome, but most of your statements covered quite a lot of what the committee wanted to ask about—I hope that that means that the question session will be a little shorter.

Graham Simpson: I have a quick question. I apologise because I will have to shoot off to the same meeting as the convener has gone to—I genuinely have to leave; it is not that I am bored by what the witnesses have to say. How could the housing options process be improved? Should it be given statutory backing?

The Deputy Convener: I invite Nicky Brown to answer that, given that he did not make an opening statement.

Nicky Brown (City of Edinburgh Council):

The way in which the housing options process is being rolled out throughout the country means that the number of homelessness presentations will reduce—that is certainly the case for Edinburgh. A couple of things are related. To take a true housing options approach, we need to maximise people’s income, because people’s housing options are very much determined by the amount of money that they have to spend. Edinburgh has an acute shortage of affordable housing. Although we are managing to reduce homelessness presentations significantly, there is a knock-on effect, which Lorraine McGrath, who was on the previous panel, talked about. We are preventing homelessness where it is preventable by using a housing options approach and working together.

However, there is such an acute shortage of affordable housing—of social and private rented housing—in the city that, when people come into the homelessness system, it is incredibly difficult to move them into settled and sustained accommodation. People’s housing options are very much determined by what is available in the city and how much money they have.

A key thing that we do in Edinburgh is ensure that, from the point at which people present for housing advice or a homelessness assessment and throughout their case management, we include support on employability and welfare benefits maximisation, and we constantly review people’s circumstances to ensure that they get up-to-date housing options advice that will assist them in moving on to settled and sustained accommodation as quickly as possible. That is notwithstanding the changes to the welfare reform landscape and Edinburgh’s unique position—well, it is maybe not unique, but there are specific circumstances—of the lack of affordable housing, which are incredibly challenging factors.

The Deputy Convener: Does anyone else wish to comment briefly?

Joe Connolly: On the first question about whether the approach can be improved, the answer is yes. However, where it works, it can work well. We have had good and bad examples. If an assessment of need is carried out properly and positive options are presented, and if there is dialogue between the council and providers on what options are available, people can be placed.

We had a great example in the forum that involved a service in East Kilbride that works with people who have complex needs. Somebody was sentenced to prison; people normally lose their tenancy at that point. However, there is an outreach part of the service—

Graham Simpson: I am sorry—I will jump in there. I have visited that project, which is hugely impressive. I just wanted to put that on record.

Joe Connolly: Thank you—that is good to hear. We worked with the local authority and we were able to sustain that person's tenancy while they were in prison. They came out and they are now doing very well. That is an example of how, when the approach works, it can work well.

Examples have been given, such as the sleeping bag issue, of where the approach falls down. However, in general it is positive, and we have had good experiences with it.

The Deputy Convener: Does Graham Simpson want to ask a further question?

Graham Simpson: I will not, because I genuinely have to leave now, but others can come in.

The Deputy Convener: I will ask Paul Brown a question. Given what you have said, does the legislative framework need to be amended in some way to put housing options on a statutory footing?

Paul Brown: At present, many of the obligations on local authorities are not implemented—or if they are, that is done slowly. I am not altogether sure about what sort of statutory footing housing options could be placed on that would change that fundamental difficulty. There are chronic problems that need to be addressed.

The advantage of having a separate set of homelessness obligations is that they can be used to cut through any procedures or whatever it is that housing options may provide for. I am concerned that putting housing options on a statutory footing would water down the approach. I would like the admirable principles that we have in place to be implemented fully.

We have heard about unintended consequences, which I think are unintended. The crisis in temporary accommodation was not planned; it was probably a good idea in many ways to close hostels, but the knock-on effect was not considered. One witness has said in effect that some people need hostels, which is fair enough.

When changes happen, the debate is not broad enough. We do not have enough people coming along and interrogating the proposed changes. That might involve confrontation, but it needs to be done, and that has not happened so far. There is a major crisis in temporary accommodation. My impression is that people who get into temporary accommodation become logjammed there, as we heard in some of the evidence from Edinburgh—

The Deputy Convener: We will be moving on to temporary accommodation, so I ask you to hold that thought.

Paul Brown: Sure—my apologies.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you. My colleague Alexander Stewart wishes to ask about ex-prisoners.

Alexander Stewart: Yes, I do. Joe Connolly touched on some of the complexities in that regard in his opening remarks. I presume, though, that if you know the date on which someone is expected to finish a custodial sentence, you can plan for that. How can we tackle the risk of that individual becoming homeless? If everything is in place for them when they vacate an institution, it should be easy to process them. Mr Connolly has already touched on what has taken place, but there must be some best practice in the sector that has reduced the problem in some way.

Joe Connolly: There are examples of best practice, but the situation across the country is disparate.

Along with Turning Point, Action for Children and Sacro, we are part of the public social partnership in Low Moss that provides temporary accommodation and wraparound support for people coming out of prison. The planning for that starts in the prison. On the day of release, the person is met when they come out and taken wherever they need to go before they are then taken to a fully furnished flat with everything in place. That support continues for a period. In some cases—and this fits in with the housing first model—people who have become settled in an area have been able to negotiate to keep their accommodation. If they say to us that they want to stay in that area, we will negotiate with the housing association—usually the GHA or Cube Housing Association—and get them another property. That is an example of good practice.

At a recent seminar that I attended in Polmont, there was evident frustration on the part of throughcare officers and a range of providers. They were saying that, although there are lots of resources around, the system quickly breaks down if people are left to their own devices when they get out of prison and, quite often, they reoffend and end up back there again.

Alexander Stewart: The new local community justice planning model gives us the opportunity to take the joined-up approach that can lead to success. As you have highlighted, when that joined-up approach is not taken and the individual feels isolated or does not have connections with the community, the system falls apart. You have talked about the good practice that is taking place in a specific area, but there must be bad practice, too. We know that best practice is not happening

across the piece, so what can we do to ensure that it is?

Joe Connolly: Structurally speaking, the system breaks down in the kind of situation that you have described. Today, I phoned one of the services that provide the type of accommodation that we are talking about, and the person I talked to said that the service had 16 flats available for people coming out of the prison system and five for women on bail, which are provided in partnership with Aberlour and Turning Point. At the moment, however, only 11 of the flats are occupied; there are five vacancies in the service providing accommodation for people leaving Low Moss and two vacancies for women on bail. The vacancies for women on bail are ring fenced, as people move on to other sorts of accommodation or back to their family and so on.

In that example, the system is breaking down, because of the bureaucracy in the structure. Earlier today, Lorraine McGrath talked about what happens when people go to night shelters and suggested that, if you want to provide a better service, you need to take away some of the complications and hoops that people have to go through. If you reduced the number of hoops, you would have a much more fluid system.

I know of examples of people coming out of prison, going to the housing office and being told that they have to go to a hostel, even though they say that they will end up offending over the weekend if they do so. They are simply told that the only thing that is available is a hostel, so that is where they go.

Alexander Stewart: The ex-offender lacks confidence in the system and the support that they are provided with when they get to that stage. Your example highlights how it is sometimes easier for the individual to go back into offending than to go through the hoops that they need to go through in order to get accommodation of a reasonable standard.

12:00

Joe Connolly: It is more than just a lack of confidence.

The Deputy Convener: Can you answer briefly, please? I see that Mr Brown would like to come in, too.

Joe Connolly: I can give you another example. Somebody was met at the prison gate and brought to various offices. Later that day, they fainted with exhaustion, because of the various things that they had to do relating to their benefits and so on. They had to go from pillar to post and, even though they had support, they collapsed with exhaustion. Someone who comes out of prison

faces a rigorous process and, even with support, it can be difficult.

Nicky Brown: I have experienced some of the stuff that you are talking about with people having to look for temporary accommodation after being liberated from prison. In Edinburgh, we have tried to provide many of the things that you are talking about with regard to arranging temporary accommodation, sorting out people's benefits and giving them housing options if they cannot maintain the tenancy that they had when they went into prison. We are actively doing that, and there is good practice there.

We are happy to speak to anybody about the measures that we have put in place to ensure that the transfer is as seamless as possible. Yes, people might have to go to a housing office to be allocated accommodation. Sometimes the allocation will be made on the basis of what is available on the day, but the earlier the notice we get and the earlier we can do intervention work when people are in prison, the more seamless the process will be at the end.

The Deputy Convener: That leads us to the issue of temporary accommodation. I believe that Andy Wightman wishes in particular to pick up on some issues with regard to the City of Edinburgh Council.

Andy Wightman: The City of Edinburgh Council's submission notes the 21 per cent increase in temporary accommodation in the past year, and recently there have been media reports about the increased number of B and Bs that have been bought on a rather urgent basis. Why has the pressure on temporary accommodation increased so significantly in Edinburgh in recent years?

Nicky Brown: I should point out that, in line with the increasing pressure on temporary accommodation services, the number of people presenting as homeless in Edinburgh has gone down; fewer people are coming in. However, you will see from our submission that the major contributing factor in the increased pressure on temporary accommodation services is the increased lengthy stays for people. Homelessness case lengths are extending.

If I were to sum it up simply, I would go back to my previous point about the acute shortage of affordable housing in Edinburgh. For anyone who is welfare dependent or on a low income, it is incredibly difficult to have any options other than social rented housing, of which there is not enough. That is why the council is looking to build a significant number of homes over the next five years.

In answer to your question, I think that the simple reason for the significant pressure on

temporary accommodation at the moment—and the reason for using bed and breakfast accommodation, as outlined in the newspaper article that I am sure you have seen—is that people are staying longer. We are not getting the opportunity to discharge our duties to people by making them an offer of either permanent or settled housing. More people are coming in each day.

Andy Wightman: Is that part of a longer-term trend within a falling homelessness population?

Nicky Brown: It certainly is for Edinburgh. Average lengths of stays have been increasing consistently and significantly. I do not have the figures, but there has probably been a spike over the past three or four years.

Andy Wightman: We heard evidence from the previous panel about the standards of temporary accommodation and so on, and there have been calls for those standards to be improved. Is such a call worth while, or does it just underpin what is a bit of a sticking plaster for the wider problem of the shortage of full-time permanent accommodation?

Paul Brown: To put it bluntly, our experience is that it is difficult to access accommodation for clients. We sometimes get up to 10 people a week—at the moment, the number is five to seven—who are not being offered temporary accommodation. We have to threaten judicial review, although we very rarely have to undertake it. That is one fundamental problem.

Apart from the time people can end up staying in that accommodation, the other fundamental problem is the cost, which is horrendous and which makes it unaffordable for people who are working. That is a major problem, and it is due to certain local authorities not implementing the code of guidance on how temporary accommodation charges are supposed to be worked out. There is a hierarchy of needs—getting accommodation then leads to concerns about overcrowding and other difficulties—but that is the fundamental crisis.

Another major issue is benefit payments that are made towards rent while people are in prison. One way of assisting prisoners would be to extend the length of time that housing benefit can be paid, possibly on a discretionary basis, because that would make a significant difference to some people. However, I share the concern that has been expressed about the problem of prisoners coming out and being expected to deal with everything at once, including finding somewhere to stay. It is very difficult to manage. More generous benefit payments would reduce the need to make provision by 20 or 30 per cent, and that would save a large amount of money.

Jamie Stewart: I echo the point about the cost of accessing long-term temporary accommodation. However, the Glasgow situation, which we are primarily focused on, is often presented in a way that suggests that supply is not an issue, that there are homes and that the issue is about getting people out of temporary accommodation and into the system to get them settled accommodation. A lot of that is about the process of assessment, and the comment that was made earlier about being psychologically informed to understand people's needs, expectations and aspirations is actually fundamental to our context. Nicky Brown's comments about Edinburgh reflect a difference in the approach that local authorities take to temporary accommodation and the drivers for people being in such accommodation.

Andy Wightman: Mr Brown, you said that you are considering strategic litigation in relation to equalities legislation with regard to the needs of people with protected characteristics and their access to temporary accommodation. What is strategic about that litigation?

Paul Brown: Because the code of guidance has not been updated to help local authorities—and anybody else who is interested—work out how to manage people with major mental health disabilities or other protected characteristics, there is a tendency for people to find it difficult to access services if their presenting problems are difficult both for them and for providers. It is fairly obvious that they will find it difficult, as they are affected by the same—possibly informal—appraisal of intentionality as other people, even if intentionality does not come into it. They might be unable to manage their difficulties, and the reasonable adjustments that are needed are often not provided—although I should point out that sometimes those adjustments are provided. I do not want to suggest that local authorities and the voluntary organisations are not doing their best. There is no question but that they work hard.

The use of equalities legislation is strategic, because it is possible to claim compensation. That is important to accountability. If somebody is discriminated against unintentionally—normally indirectly—compensation is a useful way of focusing on the fact that action is needed. We will use freedom of information requests to look into how systematic the approach is to various people with protected characteristics. We have not done that yet, but we might find systematic failure, which would result in a strategic approach to litigation. This is all at an early stage, but our experience is that there is no overall commitment in the system to taking on board the need to make reasonable adjustments in all the circumstances of everybody concerned.

One wee point that I should make about housing options is that some people cannot possibly go online and fill in the forms because it might make them too anxious or they might not have the skills—or both might apply. Making reasonable adjustments would entail saying to somebody, “Here’s a house—you don’t need to get references or have a bank account, and everything else will be sorted out for you.” That is how it was done in the olden days; now, people are expected to jump through a range of hoops. Even if, in theory, they could overcome those hurdles, in practice they cannot. Getting references and that sort of stuff will be difficult for them.

It is fairly naive to think that those people will move into the private sector, or that people will be kept in the private sector when they have problems or need a bit of help paying off their rent or whatever. That is an important issue, but I suspect that we are not going to solve the problem that we all want to address today without greater provision of social rented housing. I do not see that there is any other option.

The Deputy Convener: Given our time constraints, I will turn to my colleague Jenny Gilruth, who wants to explore that issue a bit further.

Jenny Gilruth: Good afternoon. In his written submission, Paul Brown flags up Shelter Scotland’s evidence with regard to a 24 per cent increase in evictions in the past year and says:

“Social Security Austerity includes issues such as the benefit cap, sanctions ... housing benefit”

reform and

“cuts to disability benefits”.

Likewise, in the City of Edinburgh Council submission, Nicky Brown states:

“The implementation of welfare reform as expected currently could potentially cause significant financial pressures for temporary accommodation.”

With all that in mind, and given what we have heard this morning from COSLA and Simon Community Scotland about the impact of welfare reform on homelessness more broadly, do you believe that welfare reforms are having a direct impact on specific groups, such as women or care-experienced young people?

Nicky Brown: In terms of the general landscape, all the research tells us that, when a major welfare reform like universal credit takes place in some areas, rent arrears increase. If rent arrears increase within a local authority’s boundaries, people inevitably end up coming through the homelessness route. In general, based on some of the welfare reforms that have taken place—I know that reforms are still being rolled out, and there is an opportunity to change

them—there is enough evidence to suggest that it is likely that more people will become homeless, which will have a direct impact on temporary accommodation services.

At present, it is clearly challenging and expensive for most local authorities—certainly Edinburgh—to provide temporary accommodation services. As welfare reforms are further rolled out, and as less money becomes available to people to pay for that accommodation, it is again inevitable that local authorities will have to take some of the hit. Welfare reform, whether it involves the benefit cap, local housing allowance or universal credit, will have a significant impact on local authority budgets.

All the evidence that we have heard from this and the previous panel suggests that we should be looking at how we provide greater standards of service, more accommodation options and better standards of accommodation for people. That is the challenge that local authorities currently face. If welfare reform is going to impact significantly on their ability to collect income and on the amount of income available, how do we bridge the gap?

The creation of the national task force and the welfare fund will presumably provide an opportunity for sector partners or local authorities to pilot schemes that might be more affordable or which might provide better options for people. However, I would like to see some detail on that, because the funding gap that we are going to have in Edinburgh, which will have been created by all manner of welfare reforms, will be so significant that it will be incredibly difficult and challenging for us to deliver services.

The Deputy Convener: Mr Stewart, do you want to comment on welfare reform?

Jamie Stewart: Universal credit has not yet been introduced in Glasgow, but the six-week payment delay will introduce further barriers for many groups, including refugees, who are all new benefit claimants and will need to go through the four-week waiting period.

On housing options—bearing in mind that there is a question about whether the private rented sector is an option for people who already face barriers because they do not have a national insurance number, do not have orientation capacity, do not have language skills and do not understand the system—if we put in place a welfare benefit barrier whereby people are, in effect, not entitled to their payments until six weeks down the line, that creates a further barrier. That is quite apart from the fact that it sets them up to fail—as has been said, people start off in a bad place, with rent arrears.

12:15

Welfare reform impacts on specific groups, and for the refugee population, universal credit limits the housing options that are available. What has been called the bedroom tax limits the number of bedrooms there can be in houses that people can move into, and it limits throughput and the places to which people can move. As of 2019, we will have caps on the local housing allowance maxima, such that people in Glasgow who are under 35 will be able to access only £68 a week to pay their rent, when a lot of accommodation is more expensive than that, even in the social rented sector.

Those are only two examples of how welfare reform stands in the way of moving people forward and is, in effect, at odds with what we all want to do to alleviate homelessness.

Joe Connolly: I echo what Jamie Stewart has said. We provide temporary accommodation for a number of people who have specified exemptions, so they have not been impacted at this stage. The biggest problem that we have encountered is with larger families who are past the benefits cap, because there is pressure to house them.

Paul Brown: I share all the concerns that have been mentioned. Our impression is that RSLs and other housing providers will have more problems with rent arrears. They will then become more assertive. The Shelter figures mask another set of problems: our experience is that the number of cases being called in court has gone up a bit, and the assertiveness of landlords when they are in court has increased substantially. That means that there are more proofs, when people have to apply for legal aid to give evidence, which is very stressful for the lawyers and hell for the families who may be threatened with eviction. Often it can be sorted out, but we have talked about the six weeks' delay. How that pans out—being threatened with eviction as a result of rent arrears, for example—is very worrying.

How services will be able to cope with that change is also very worrying. The fundamental problem with benefits reform is that it is all based on using a stick, rather than a carrot, and there is not enough support. It is based on a fantasy about the need to discipline a small number of people. However, most of the people whom we are talking about need more support and help rather than yet another set of changes.

My experience of changes going through the system is that it takes years for people to understand them—not just the claimants, but all their advisors. People may need medical reports, for example, and that is another cost and difficulty. It takes years before the system is smoothly settled in and all the unintended consequences

have been dealt with. Providers will need to be more nimble and there will need to be more opportunity to discuss the unintended consequences. We do not know what those will be, but it would be tragic if an unintended consequence is that RSLs evict more people, or that more people jump before they are pushed. I am sure that no RSL wants that to happen, but will there be ways out of that? That is why the Seattle programme is interesting—£500 could make all the difference and could save large amounts of money. We need to think outside the box about how to focus generosity in a way that can be monitored and such that it can make a difference.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you. I think that the committee will be interested in looking at the Seattle model.

Jenny Gilruth: We have heard a lot about people working in silos being a barrier to a more integrated approach being taken to homelessness. COSLA's submission says that the current statutory framework does not

“encourage other agencies to support the housing outcomes for those with complex needs.”

How can we get better joined-up working? Does the health and social care partnership model, for example, offer an opportunity?

The Deputy Convener: Does anyone wish to volunteer to answer that question first?

Nicky Brown: I can give an example of work that we are doing in Edinburgh, at the moment. Adam Burley referred earlier to the access practice and the access point. Essentially, it is a building where NHS services, social work services and housing services sit together. We have established through the work of a group—called inclusive Edinburgh—from the local authority that we want to find a way of integrating our services in a more coherent manner that results in the outcomes that have been described for people, and is not necessarily defined only by housing outcomes.

A successful outcome for a person who has presented for accommodation 30 or 40 times in a year, for example, might be the intervention of a service that has the right relationship with them, and which might reduce their number of presentations to five in a year. The issue for the Edinburgh access practice and the access point model of integrating services, including with third sector partners, is finding the right service that can have a relationship with a person and can follow them through the process so that there are no multiple pass-offs. We want to ensure that we are not all working towards different goals—that our goals are aligned. It is about making life better for the individual and getting them to a position in which they can sustain some form of

accommodation. You heard earlier from Lorraine McGrath about the models of accommodation that can be considered.

As we move forward with integration of services, it will be key that we use examples such as the access practice, because we are looking for a common set of outcomes that are person-centred and related to people's personal circumstances rather than to housing outcomes. Work is going on in that area, but it needs to be developed.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you. Mr Connolly will make a brief comment.

Joe Connolly: Co-production to address homelessness, of which there are models around the country, is a good example. The model in Glasgow is looking at co-production and moving away from the purchaser-provider model. It is about a group of organisations getting involved with the council in respect of how services are developed and commissioned. If the theory works, it should be a successful model in terms of breaking down some of the silos.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you. We are quite tight for time and there are other areas that the committee wants to explore—in particular, we want to drill down into the kinds of homelessness that people experience. We will turn to rough sleeping.

Andy Wightman: The City of Edinburgh Council referred in its written submission to the need for further work to identify rough-sleeper profiles in order to be better able to respond to the needs of rough sleepers. We heard from witnesses earlier about the importance of that. What is the council doing to achieve it?

Nicky Brown: As recently as August—the committee heard about this from Lorraine McGrath earlier—the City of Edinburgh Council, in conjunction with the Cyrenians, the Bethany Christian Trust and Streetwork, instigated the first in a series of rough-sleeping counts. There is a lot of anecdotal evidence that rough sleeping in Edinburgh is increasing. We wanted to drill down into that to see whether it is increasing, because the figures for the number of people who present as homeless following a night of rough sleeping are falling. There are two ways of looking at it: either the numbers in Edinburgh are falling, or there is a gap in getting rough sleepers to appropriate services.

That was why we wanted, with our partners in Edinburgh, to do a true rough-sleeping count. By that, I mean going beyond just counting people and instead trying to understand what support is required and the best way to deliver it. As we progress with our series of rough-sleeping counts, we will need to monitor carefully what is working for the people we get from rough sleeping into

services. Beyond that, if we find that the same people appear in subsequent counts, we will need to learn why they are still rough sleeping as time elapses.

The City of Edinburgh Council has a clear commitment, with our partners, to minimising rough sleeping, wherever possible. The rough-sleeping count is just the first stage of that, because there is an enormous amount that we need to learn about how we get people from rough sleeping into services, and what the current barriers to our doing that are.

For example, every morning, Streetwork goes into care shelters—which we talked briefly about earlier—picks up people who are incredibly vulnerable and might require a housing service, and gives them advice, but that does not necessarily translate into an increase in homelessness presentations by people who come out of the shelters, which is what we would like to see. However, it removes people from an insecure set of circumstances in which they have to access care shelters or sleep rough, so to me an increase in homelessness presentations would be a benefit if we are managing to get to the people who most require services.

Over the winter, an enormous amount of support goes into the care shelters from a variety of services—health services, GPs, district nurses, homelessness professionals and support workers from various agencies. That work is co-ordinated by the Bethany Christian Trust, which operates the shelters. From this year, we will learn an enormous amount about how we need to develop our services to take into account the needs not only of people who access the care shelters, but of those who are not accessing the shelters whom we pick up in the rough-sleeping counts.

The Deputy Convener: Jamie Stewart wants to come in on the specific issue of rough sleeping among migrants and asylum seekers.

Jamie Stewart: As I said in my initial remarks, there is a lump of people who are referred to as “no recourse to public funds”. Various bits and pieces of work have been done, but we have no clear idea of how many people are “no recourse to public funds” and are therefore rough sleeping or otherwise homeless.

The next step is to ask why people are in that position. They may be European Economic Area nationals who have some entitlement to mainstream housing accommodation, or they may not have such entitlement. Some may have insecure immigration status, or have been asylum seekers and are now destitute. Local authorities need to dig down for the detail of why and how people who are currently lumped in the “no recourse to public funds” group—I apologise for

continually using scare quotes—are sleeping rough.

There are a number of groups of people. Ultimately, the solution that we have found is our destitute asylum seeker advice service, which aims primarily to get people back into the current structures, with support through section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 and through the Home Office. The start point should be the diagnosis of what the person's status is, how they can regularise that status, what actions they need to take, and whether their options are limited under the provisions of the current strategy. We can have a look at their situation and ask what we can do.

That work will require specialism in terms of immigration advice, and we need to be careful about who provides that advice. To make that diagnosis, a person needs to be qualified through the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner at level 1 at least. They would be able to provide a controlled level of legal advice, make an assessment and tell the person what their legal status is. Level 1 competency enables an adviser to tell people where they need to go, and to signpost services. An adviser with a level 2 qualification can give far more detailed advice. In respect of destitute asylum seekers, level 1 competency would allow an adviser to say to a person that they can apply for section 4 support through the asylum system, and tell them where to go to make that application.

Other elements of our work, in particular the holistic assessment, allow people to consider how they can progress their lives, regularise their status and address health problems. Those things can all be packaged in that intervention. However, there is a need for a much more proactive approach and a much more delineated way of working out who has recourse to public funds and who does not, and what “no recourse to public funds” means in the first place.

Jenny Gilruth: I have a specific question for Paul Brown. In your submission you say:

“Our observation is that the number of rough sleepers has soared. They are younger and there appear to be many more young women than was previously the case.”

Can you account for why that might be happening?

12:30

Paul Brown: It is quite difficult to say. It is difficult for people to access temporary accommodation. You can track that quite easily in our practice, although we do not collect very sophisticated statistics, because things change when the night shelters open in the winter. There

is no doubt that the night shelters serve a very important function.

I do not know why the number of non-traditional rough sleepers has increased. The reasons change, and I speculate that the vulnerability of people in private rented sector accommodation changes. Some of the people have no recourse to public funds or think that they have not. Sometimes they are care leavers or people with mental health problems.

My impression is that the most vulnerable often get access to services—I do not want to suggest that the system is not working at all. However, there is a need for equalities legislation to be taken very seriously. Housing management trainers talk about walking the walk, and we need to walk the walk for people in all those situations.

Things seem to have eased. In our experience, the situation does not seem to be as bad as it was a year ago. The problem is that if no fundamental changes are made, one worries that something will happen—one does not know what—and the figures will soar again. At the moment, we are coping with the numbers of people who come to see us, in the limited bit that we do. In the past we have not been able to cope and have had to turn people away. We never want to do that.

The Deputy Convener: I would like to have a quick discussion about the housing first model, but I am conscious of time and the fact that we have to finish by quarter to 1. My colleague Kenneth Gibson has been waiting patiently, so I will bring him in at this point.

Kenneth Gibson: I wanted to talk not about housing first, but about the rights issue.

The Deputy Convener: We will come to housing first, but I thought I would bring you in before that.

Kenneth Gibson: Okay, thank you. One of the people who gave evidence to us was Mr Thomas Lyon, a former service user, who was supported by the Legal Services Agency. He had spent six and a half years on the street in Glasgow and he said:

“I was in every hostel in Glasgow, four or five times each.”—[*Official Report, Local Government and Communities Committee*; 20 September 2017; c 46.]

He was never offered any temporary accommodation and had to go the Legal Services Agency to get into a temporary furnished flat. He is now back in mainstream housing.

My question is for Paul Brown. Will you talk to us about the inability of homeless people to access their rights, simply because they do not know what they are?

Paul Brown: There is an issue about people not knowing what their rights are or where to go to access them. We have made a suggestion in our submission about a requirement for more systematic publicity that is flexible—because the system changes—and focused on the problems that people have, rather than on general issues.

There is an issue about enforceability, because local authorities are not going to go around telling people—at least not formally—that the remedy is judicial review. There is an issue about the fundamental remedy not being built into the legislation, and maybe thought needs to be given to telling people more about that. In England there is a statutory appeal process, but there is no such process in Scotland. Judicial review serves a function but you would have to be fairly sophisticated to know about that. It works quickly once you get going, but one of the issues is that if a local authority is systematically unable to fulfil its statutory functions it can avoid judicial review by giving someone accommodation for one or two nights, and so the problem recurs. I cannot comment on the circumstances of the person that Mr Gibson quoted, but that is something that happens fairly regularly: there is no permanent, systematic provision made for the right sort of temporary accommodation. One area of strategic litigation that we might need to look at—and, indeed, that we are interested in looking at—relates to the fact that this is not just a case of saying, “This person needs that”, but about saying “These people need this, this and that.”

I am not suggesting that anyone wants to do this, but the conclusion, I suppose, is that it is quite easy for a local authority to get round its obligations to this group if it needs to do so, given how long it takes for things to go through the system. People realise that, which is why they need more of a voice, and it is great that you have taken evidence from service users.

Kenneth Gibson: Indeed. In your submission, you say:

“There should be a system in place where people offered accommodation are directed to law centres to ensure they are fully aware of their rights and the possible consequences of refusing accommodation before they refuse the accommodation.”

That comes on the back of another rights-based issue that you highlight with regard to

“homeless people”

being

“offered only one property”.

On that matter, you point out:

“If they refuse this property the local authority can discharge their duty to provide permanent accommodation.”

It seems that people are not being given information about the consequences in that respect.

Paul Brown: Of course, that can be very serious. That is not necessarily the case with a flexible local authority that takes the housing options approach and so on, but the statutory obligation is one offer. We have come across really terrible cases of people saying, “I wanted somewhere with a garden”—which might sound idiotic in that context, but they did not realise that they were causing themselves major problems. There is a need for the right sort of advice to be given, and perhaps in a more formal way than most housing providers would want. After all, that would be the kind of formal accountability that everyone tries to avoid to some extent.

Kenneth Gibson: Is that why you said in your submission that you want things in writing?

Paul Brown: Yes. A fair amount is done informally, but we need something more formal. In fact, that is why the code of guidance needs to be rewritten. It needs to explain all the glitches in detail so that everyone—all the advice workers, doctors who are not experts in the field but who want to check things out and so on—knows how the system operates. At the moment, there is no one place where people can go.

The Deputy Convener: Perhaps Nicky Brown can give us a different perspective on this, and then I will come to Jamie Stewart, who has been catching my eye.

Nicky Brown: In Edinburgh, we operate a choice-based letting system in which people are required to make bids for permanent or settled accommodation. That happens through both the local authority and our RSL partners. If people who are offered a flat or a house that they have bid for refuse that accommodation, we can discharge our duty in that respect. In the majority of cases, however, we can be flexible if people have a valid reason for refusal; sometimes we get medical information, information from the police or whatever. There is also an appeals system. All of that is clearly outlined at the point of presentation and throughout the duration of their case.

We always maintain contact with people to check that they are bidding for housing and that their bids are suitable, are of the right size and are in the area that they said they wanted to be in. All through the case management process, we are constantly speaking to people about what the choice-based letting system means and ensuring that we make it as clear as possible that the very definition of such a system is that when a person chooses a property to move into we as a local authority will, unless there is some exceptional reason, expect that person to take it. We are

constantly working with people to ensure that they know what their responsibilities are—and, indeed, what our responsibilities are—in choosing the house that they want to move into.

Jamie Stewart: A lot of people going through the system, particularly in the context in which I work, refuse accommodation, but the reasons for refusal are not always entirely clear. The understanding is not entirely there. I return to the point that the support systems in place do not seem to be consistent and do not assess people's needs, aspirations and expectation properly. Statistics that we have seen suggest that the level of refusals in the refugee population is quite high; we need to dig down into why that might be the case, but people's understanding of what they can expect and what might be available has to be part of that. We have talked a lot about choice, options and so on, but it should be made clear to people whether they have any choice or whether they are allowed one offer and that is all, and they should be supported in that respect.

Independent advocacy and support have a big place in the matter. At the moment, some of that is being taken up by housing support agencies, but the intention of the housing support legislation was not necessarily to support people to decide whether they should accept a property. We have had situations in which people have said that, because of a certain reason, they do not like or do not want a house that they are offered, but the housing association is saying, "Well, you have until tomorrow to decide. You must make a decision. Do you want it or not?" For someone with limited understanding, limited orientation capacity or limited language abilities that is incredibly challenging.

We can add into that the effect of community misinformation. There are still lots of people who think that, in Glasgow, they will get three choices and that they should never take their first one because it will be rubbish.

The Deputy Convener: Mr Stewart, can I hurry you on a bit?

Jamie Stewart: We need to do work on that level of community misinformation and there needs to be more support and advocacy on the matter.

Kenneth Gibson: I have a question specifically about refugees for Jamie Stewart. In paragraph 16 of your submission, you say that a two two-tier approach is developing between those who have been housed through

"the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (for whom Local Authorities have been able to secure settled housing from day one) and those that claim protection through the asylum process".

My question is about the differences between those aspects.

You also talk about the need for

"The creation of a 'Scottish anti-destitution strategy'".

Will you touch on the philosophy behind that, too, without going through all nine of the points under that paragraph?

The Deputy Convener: Please do not discuss all nine points, because we are in rather a rush now.

Jamie Stewart: There is a need for the Syrian VPR scheme to examine practice, because it is not consistent throughout the country, and consider where the successes are. We have been getting information that there are really good examples of practice in which people are provided with accommodation—which is usually sublet by the council from a housing association, although not in all circumstances—and after a couple of months, once they are settled in and have their benefits, that accommodation is, in effect, flipped from a council tenancy to a full tenancy. The examples that we have seen have been very successful, so they should be considered.

The scheme is not consistent throughout the country by any stretch of the imagination. Some local authorities are using more private rented sector accommodation than others. There are also different levels of silo working. Some local authorities have so many different agencies involved in the scheme that we could use it as an example of how to get lots of different agencies involved more widely.

What was the other part of the question?

Kenneth Gibson: It was about the anti-destitution strategy.

Jamie Stewart: That touches on what I said about the fact that, in the current statutory structure, it is not possible to say that there is a solution across the board as long as people do not have access to public funds, although some people do.

We need to put in place an anti-destitution strategy that considers what it is possible for the Scottish Government to do. What can the Scottish Government pick out of its responsibilities? There are many areas in which the Scottish Government can and does get involved or Scottish local authorities get involved through social work services or the allocation of funds for advocacy, support and advice services for people who would not be able to apply as homeless but whose destitution might be alleviated. However, even after people have moved on from temporary accommodation, they still find themselves destitute. Taking into account what we have said

about universal credit, people will be destitute well past their 28-day move-on period. An anti-destitution strategy could target those areas.

The Equalities and Human Rights Committee was dealing with not just refugees and asylum seekers but people who have insecure immigration status, which is an issue that we have not really touched on today. We need to focus on delineation so that we can say, "You're destitute because of that issue, and this is your solution."

12:45

The Deputy Convener: I ask Paul Brown to comment briefly on immigration status, to which his submission refers.

Paul Brown: When people get a certain status, housing does not necessarily go with that. On various occasions, we have had 10 people in our waiting room saying, "I'm homeless." The different parts need to be joined up. There is a willingness on the part of local authorities to do that—it just needs to happen.

That brings us back to the need to look systematically at unintended consequences. Unfortunately, welfare reform is sitting on the horizon, and there are other issues as well.

The Deputy Convener: We are well over time now, so I ask my colleague Andy Wightman to finish the session with some quick lines of questioning.

Andy Wightman: I will ask three brief questions, and it is up to the witnesses to decide who picks them up.

First, on the back of Kenneth Gibson's question, I note that Thomas Lyon ended up in a 10-year cycle of homelessness because his private sector landlord went bankrupt and the creditors evicted him. That remains as grounds for eviction under the Private Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) Act 2016; perhaps Paul Brown could address the issue of whether that approach is still valid.

Secondly, we discussed the housing first model with the previous panel, and I would like some brief comments on your feelings about it. Thirdly, do you have any comments on the Scottish Government's proposed short-life working group to end rough sleeping or on how it has been set up?

The Deputy Convener: We will take the first two questions first. I ask Paul Brown to respond on the specific question that was put to him.

Paul Brown: With regard to the grounds for eviction, do you mind if I send the committee a written submission that makes the situation absolutely clear? I do not want to get it wrong in any way, as there are nuances and complexities. It is certainly an area of concern.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you.

Paul Brown: On the second question—

The Deputy Convener: The second question was about whether you wished to comment on the housing first model.

Paul Brown: I am not in a position to talk about housing policy issues. The Legal Services Agency focuses on legal issues, although I have personal views on the subject.

Nicky Brown: From a local authority perspective, most people have bought into the housing first approach and, as a local authority, we will absolutely consider using it. We have just set up our own task force in Edinburgh, which will be led by elected council members, and one of the key issues on which I am required to brief the task force is housing first and the various other models.

It was really interesting to hear about the Helsinki model. The reports from other academic work have been very clear about the process that needs to be followed to introduce housing first, so it was interesting to hear that Finland has chosen to do it differently.

The Deputy Convener: Before we come to comments on the Scottish Government's short-life expert working group, I ask each of you if you wish to make any final comments on anything that you feel that we have not covered. If there is one point that you would like us to consider that we have not covered, now is your chance. I will start with Joe Connolly.

Joe Connolly: Can I make a brief comment on the housing first approach?

The Deputy Convener: Of course.

Joe Connolly: Many of our member organisations have adopted the housing first model. As Nicky Brown said, the early implementation of housing first was pretty fundamentalist and rigid. There must be flexibility in the implementation, as Lorraine McGrath succinctly highlighted.

We would support the Scottish Government's use of the model 100 per cent, as our members have embraced it, but it should not be used in a fundamentalist way. Flexibility must be built in—

The Deputy Convener: Do you have any opinions on the expert working group?

Joe Connolly: I do not have any opinions on that.

The Deputy Convener: Do you want to put on record briefly anything that we have not touched on?

Joe Connolly: The psychologically informed environment model, which was touched on earlier,

is valid and is being rolled out in the voluntary sector. I would like the Scottish Government to embrace and promote that model, which focuses on people's emotional and psychological needs rather than just on all the physical stuff.

The Deputy Convener: Mr Stewart, do you have any views on the expert working group, or any final comments on issues that you have feel have not been touched on?

Jamie Stewart: Yes. The housing first model focuses on multiple and complex needs in order to get rid of the idea of tenancy readiness. That is absolutely valid and should be an on-going theme, in particular for the short-life working group.

However, the rest of the homeless population, who do not have multiple and complex needs, still have needs and require support, and the idea of the assessment should still be central. To provide support, we need accurate assessments. We need to be able to get at people's needs and aspirations, and all the other aspects, which has not been happening during the current implementation.

If we can push people through homelessness systems where there is supply, as there appears to be in Glasgow, it frees up temporary accommodation and makes space in the rest of the system. It is a form of preventative spend, which we have talked about.

The message is that, while housing first is important, we also need to consider the rest of the homeless population who will not qualify for housing first as they do not have multiple and complex needs. They have needs, and those must be assessed. By assessing and intervening early in those cases, we will in turn free up the rest of the system to enable us to deal with cases that are perhaps more difficult.

It is certainly true that there are people with multiple and complex needs who fall within the refugee population, and we would like those people to be dealt with intensively. Dealing with the body of people who might need support with orientation or advocacy on their behalf will have a knock-on effect—it will ensure that people get what they need and also free up the system.

The Deputy Convener: Paul Brown, do you have any comments on the expert working group or any final remarks?

Paul Brown: Any working group is great news, but I hope that the process will be undertaken in an open way. There is a fundamental lack of debate and discussion. I would not see an expert working group as functioning well if it just went off and applied its expertise to produce a whole load of proposals.

It needs to be an open process that may involve taking evidence individually and holding a series of conferences or workshops. That needs to happen. No one person is an expert on everything to do with homelessness. In fact, there have been fundamental problems on the occasions when people have thought that they have been.

I hope, and I am sure that everyone shares this hope, that we can get over to the public and to policymakers the message, as a result of all our experience and research, that the problem is caused by poverty and disadvantage rather than by people having some sort of strange, peculiar personality defect. The latter view comes up too often as people's answer to everything about homelessness.

Our great advantage is the fact that recent research shows pretty comprehensively what the causes of homelessness are, so we can go out there and say that with 100 per cent confidence. If we can get that message over, and get that approach into the guidance and into any further reform, that will be a real achievement.

The Deputy Convener: Nicky Brown can have the last word.

Nicky Brown: I echo some of the stuff that Paul Brown said about poverty and disadvantage. I will save my comments on the working group until we have seen some actions coming from it.

The Deputy Convener: I thank you all for coming along. I apologise again for the delay, but I think that we have managed to allocate sufficient time as far as possible to this particular session and panel.

The committee will move into private session for the next agenda item.

12:53

Meeting continued in private until 13:06.

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