

Housing Strategy and Development Briefing Note 15/5

Commission on Housing and Wellbeing: A blueprint for
Scotland's future (June 2015)

July 2015



Introduction

Welcome to a series of regular briefings prepared by the Housing Strategy and Development team on the big issues concerning housing. These briefings will be shared with staff, tenants and elected members and keep everyone up to date with regards the ever changing policy context that we are operating within.

The Housing Strategy and Development section is responsible for:-

- Providing the statutory strategic housing authority role within the local authority area;
- Strategic Housing Asset Management delivery;
- The delivery of the Council House New Build Programme and the delivery of the affordable Housing supply programme;
- Supporting the development of a culture of continuous improvement in Housing services and to facilitate opportunities to excel;
- Developing and implementing effective strategies for Housing Services within West Dunbartonshire;
- Developing the Council's housing strategy to ensure that it supports the delivery of our strategic priorities;
- Service development within Housing and Community Safety services; and
- Promoting effective management and the involvement of tenants across all aspects of Housing Services.

For further information on Housing Strategy and Development please telephone 01389 737889 or e-mail: housing.strategy@west-dunbarton.gov.uk



Briefing Note

Commission on Housing and Wellbeing 'A blueprint for Scotland's future' (June 2015)

Background

The Commission on Housing and Wellbeing was established by Shelter Scotland in the autumn of 2013. Its purpose was to make an independent, evidence based assessment of the importance of housing for general wellbeing in Scotland and to make recommendations for future priorities and policies that would help improve housing conditions and wellbeing.

Its findings and recommendations are set out in the report, 'Commission on Housing and Wellbeing: A blueprint for Scotland's future' (June 2015).

Main issues

Although many households in Scotland live in satisfactory housing, the Commission on Housing and Wellbeing concludes that there is '*very clearly a homes crisis*'.

The report sets out 47 recommendations with the aim of sustaining and improving the wellbeing of the Scottish population through policies and programmes which reinforce the importance of good housing in building strong local communities and helping people to live better lives.

The report focuses on 8 types of wellbeing considered relevant to assessing the benefits of good housing; these are grouped under five headings and provide the framework for the Commission's report:

- Housing as 'Home'
- Neighbourhood and Community
- Economic Wellbeing (Employment and Income)
- Health and Education
- Environmental Sustainability

Eighteen of the Commission's recommendations have been identified as **Priority Tasks**, however, all of the recommendations are considered key to sustaining and improving the wellbeing of the Scottish population and giving people the environment to live better lives.

The Commission has described their report as a '*call to action*', and have concluded their report with a delivery plan which outlines broad implementation and resource implications. The final recommendations suggests that the Scottish Government establishes an independent advisory body to report annually to the Scottish Parliament on the state of Scottish housing and implications for people's wellbeing

Wellbeing

Although housing is one of many factors that affect people's quality of lives, its value is all too often underplayed; the benefits of good housing are relevant to many types of human wellbeing.

The Commission recommends that:

1. The Scottish Government should strengthen and clarify the links between housing and the various outcomes of the National Performance Framework. The current review of national indicators should ensure that full recognition is given to the importance of the home to people's wellbeing.

Housing as 'Home'

The most direct wellbeing benefit that housing can provide is a good home that ensures shelter, security, space for family life and activities. The Commission considers that there are a number of indicators that suggest there is a need to build more housing in Scotland; this includes the number of households on waiting lists for social housing and rising house prices in the private sector. There is also a need to ensure that the existing stock is of a satisfactory standard.

The Commission recommends that:

2. The Scottish Government should adopt an indicative national target for new house building, initially for the period up to 2020. The figure of 23,000 new houses each year, built to last with a high standard of energy efficiency, would be an interim target until national estimates can be made from forthcoming local Housing Need and Demand Assessments. **PRIORITY TASK**
3. The Scottish Government should increase the level of new building funded by the Affordable Housing Investment Programme to 9,000 houses each year over the period up to 2020. The social rented new build programme should be increased to 7,000 houses each year (an increase of 3,000 over the current level) and there should be a doubling of the mid-market rental new build programme which, together with the existing level of grants for new owner occupied houses, would provide 2,000 new houses each year. **PRIORITY TASK**
4. The mid-market rental new build programme should be opened up to private landlords – including private estate owners in rural Scotland – providing that they agree to suitable contractual terms and conditions with the Scottish Government. **PRIORITY TASK**
5. The Scottish Government should establish a dedicated source of advice to assist housing associations in the complex process of finding loan finance that suits their particular circumstances.
6. The Scottish Government should set up pilot schemes to attract institutional investors who are interested in investing in new build in the private rented sector.

7. The Scottish Government should seek to clarify the discrepancy between the success rates reported by social landlords to the Scottish Housing Regulator in meeting the 2015 target for achieving the Scottish Housing Quality Standard as compared with the success rates recorded by the Scottish House Condition Survey.
8. The Scottish Government, in consultation with local authorities, should review the use of the various powers provided by the Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 to improve the standard of private sector housing (renewal areas, works notices, and maintenance orders) - including their use for common repairs in flatted blocks - to ensure that these are fit for purpose and are being used when appropriate.
9. New tenancy arrangements in the private rented sector should allow for longer-term tenancies. As in the social rented sector, tenants should be able to terminate their tenancy with a suitable period of notice. New arrangements should ensure that landlords are able to revoke the tenancy where there is a clear and demonstrable reason for doing so.
10. The Scottish Government should implement measures to allow for some limited intervention in rents in the private rented sector providing that any measures strike a reasonable balance between the need to protect tenants and ensuring a reasonable return for landlords and do not deter investment.
11. There should be a review of the full range of powers currently available for regulating the private rented sector at some stage in the next Parliament. This review should clarify the actual need for regulation in current circumstances, the effectiveness of the various existing measures and the scope for their rationalisation.

Neighbourhood and Community

Good housing is an essential part of a successful neighbourhood but should have good access to essential local facilities and services; this includes schools, shops, open space and employment opportunities. The oversight of the neighbourhood by local authorities and other public bodies can help community development in a number of ways, including fostering a positive reputation, minimising crime and anti-social behaviour and providing opportunities for residents to influence their local environment. The Commission recommends that:

12. Further development of the Place Standard for Scotland should take account of what has and has not worked and should describe clearly how the standard might be used to promote wellbeing.
13. Community anchors should be established in all housing renewal programmes and in areas where there is significant dissatisfaction with the quality of the local neighbourhood. **PRIORITY TASK**

14. All Community Partnerships should be asked to identify clear objectives for priority neighbourhoods and to develop a monitoring framework to measure success.
15. Effective partnership arrangements should be established at the working level within neighbourhoods; initially, these might be ad hoc informal arrangements, although local neighbourhood Community Planning Partnerships could provide a more formal structure in priority areas. **PRIORITY TASK**
16. The Scottish Government should either provide, or more likely commission, an appropriate organisation to offer advice, encouragement and support to housing associations and other community anchor organisations in order to deliver service innovation in local communities.

Economic Wellbeing (Employment and Income)

Housing is important to the economic wellbeing of individuals and society as a whole. For individuals the cost of housing is a major element in their budgets and proximity to employment opportunities is important. Large numbers of jobs are also created by the building, management and selling of houses.

For society, rising house prices relative to incomes has brought gains for some but excluded others from the housing market. House price volatility can have adverse economic impacts and we consider that it makes sense to promote policies that encourage long term stability. The Commission recommends that:

17. The Scottish Government should develop an improved property tax to replace the Council Tax in Scotland. Properties would be re-valued at least every three years using an agreed formula. **PRIORITY TASK**
18. The UK Government or Scottish Government (depending on whether it is to be a national or local tax) should introduce a regularly re-valued land valuation tax, with further work being carried out to investigate whether it should be organised as a national tax or as a local alternative to the Council Tax. **PRIORITY TASK**
19. Further research should be undertaken to examine ways of helping low-income households caught by any new property tax, including 'asset rich, cash poor' households. This could be through a rebate system, with possible exemption for low-value properties and low-income households or deferred payments recoverable as a charge when the property is sold.
20. The proposals of the RICS Commission and the Land Reform Review Group for a Scottish Land Corporation or Delivery Agency with powers to acquire, service and sell land on to developers should be carried forward. **PRIORITY TASK**
21. The proposals of the Land Reform Review Group for legislation to allow for compulsory selling orders, majority land assembly and land readjustment should be carried forward.
22. The proposals of the RICS Commission for improving the performance of planning authorities - including increasing the effective supply of land from five to

ten years' supply of land, improving the training for planners and reviewing existing consents - should be implemented. **PRIORITY TASK**

23. Local authorities and other public bodies should be encouraged and incentivised to release surplus land for housing developments.
24. If the Smith Commission proposals are implemented, the Scottish Government should - as soon as practicable following enabling legislation - permanently end the 'bedroom tax'. **PRIORITY TASK**
25. Given concerns by landlords over the impact of any abrupt change to current arrangements for direct payment of Housing Benefit, tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit should also have the choice over whether or not to continue with direct payments.
26. Serious consideration should be given to practical ways to shift the balance from personal subsidies towards funding subsidies that support the supply of houses. Any changes should be implemented in such a way as to minimise any negative impacts on those in receipt of Housing Benefit. **PRIORITY TASK**
27. The Scottish and UK Governments should jointly undertake a detailed exploration of options for long-term reform of ways of helping low-income households with their housing costs.

Health and Education

Housing which is secure, adequately heated, free from serious dampness, provides adequate space and supports independent living is important for both good physical and psychological health, as well as positive educational outcomes.

Homelessness is a continuing and unacceptable social problem with potentially serious health and educational consequences, as too can serious overcrowding, damp housing and fuel poverty. And the growing number of older households, particularly older people living on their own, is a major challenge for Scottish society. The Commission recommends that:

28. Housing should be a full and equal partner in health and social care partnerships. The new bodies should be accountable for a joint budget, which would include funding for all relevant housing services and be given challenging targets that reflect the housing contribution to relevant National Outcomes. **PRIORITY TASK**
29. The Scottish Government should undertake a review of the current service delivery arrangements and facilities for rough sleepers, to ensure that those in place can cater for the potentially complex and multiple needs of each individual.
30. There should be a strengthening of the emphasis on the prevention of homelessness and repeat homelessness through early intervention and joint agency working involving various statutory bodies/departments and voluntary sector partners. This should be linked to an extension of the housing options approach, including identifying health and social needs as part of the same process. **PRIORITY TASK**

31. There should be a significant reduction in the length of time any one household spends in temporary accommodation. Minimum standards for temporary housing – as recommended by Shelter Scotland and the Chartered Institute of Housing Scotland – should also be implemented.
32. The Scottish Housing Regulator should undertake a thematic study of overcrowding in homes supplied by all social housing providers and offer guidance on how best to minimise this.
33. As part of its work of monitoring progress with the achievement of the Scottish Housing Quality Standard, the Scottish Housing Regulator should be asked to produce a report on the extent of serious problems of dampness, condensation and associated mould and fungal growth in the social rented sector.
34. The Scottish Government should provide more resources for housing services, such as help with handyman tasks and small repairs for older households, which can help to reduce demands on the NHS. **PRIORITY TASK**
35. The Scottish Government should continue to expand the use of technology to help older people live independently in the community.
36. The Scottish Government should press ahead with the rationalisation of funding for the provision of adaptations. **PRIORITY TASK**
37. The Scottish Government should help to establish a service that would provide advice and support for older persons who wish to consider moving or consider shared housing options.
38. The Scottish Government should seek to establish a suitable equity release scheme for older people to fund repairs, improvements and adaptations. Ideally this would be provided by commercial lenders with Scottish Government support.

Environmental Sustainability

Housing has the potential to make an important contribution to reducing the use of scarce resources such as energy, land and building materials. With care, new housing can be built to very high environmental standards, but the long life of most housing and the low level of replacement in any one year suggest that a major effort has to be directed at existing housing.

Reducing greenhouse gas emissions in line with statutory targets is a key environmental objective. As some 13% of greenhouse gas emissions come from energy used in the home, we have particularly focussed on energy efficiency measures, which are also the main tool available to the Scottish Government for tackling fuel poverty. The Commission recommends that:

39. The Scottish Government should seek to ensure stability in its grant offer to private owners and seek to rationalise grants provided from the different sources.

40. The Scottish Government should review the funding required to meet its 2030 milestone of delivering a step change in the provision of energy efficient homes. This will require much more progress with solid wall insulation as well as further improvements in cavity wall and loft insulation. The estimated budget for grants and loans should take account of a realistic assessment of the likely contribution from owners. **PRIORITY TASK**
41. The Scottish Government should encourage councils to select a wider range of neighbourhoods for area-based grant funding - including older private sector flats.
42. Regulations requiring owners to insulate their homes should have a part to play in securing the necessary improvement in insulation standards. Regulation should be directed at achieving stretching but practical levels of insulation, although there may need to be a system of exemptions for properties that cannot be improved up to that level without disproportionate cost. Assistance should be available for low-income owners. Owners on low incomes but with significant assets might be offered loans to be repaid when the house is sold. **PRIORITY TASK**
43. The Scottish Government should redesign the energy report, especially if regulations are introduced to require energy efficiency improvements to be made at the point of sale.
44. The Scottish Government should clarify the future development of micro and community heat technology in the longer term beyond 2020 – in particular, whether it is expected to remain a niche opportunity for a small number of homes or an option which they hope will be taken up on a much wider scale and, if the latter, how they hope to achieve this.
45. There should be a review of other building standards to make sure that they encourage sustainable design and building and take sufficient account of design concepts such as ‘lifetime’ and ‘barrier free’ housing intended to make homes better adapted to the needs of an aging population.
46. Social landlords and councils should look carefully at proposals for demolitions to ensure that they can be justified.

Delivery, Implementation and Resources

Public finances will be under severe pressure for many years and the implementation and resource issues in relation to recommendations are in the full report on pages 51-59. The Commission recommends that:

47. The Scottish Government should establish an independent advisory body, chaired by the Minister, consisting of people not only from the housing profession and organisations, but also from a range of backgrounds and expertise which are relevant in considering housing, homes and wellbeing in the round. This body should report annually to the Scottish Parliament on the state of Scottish housing and the implications for wellbeing. **PRIORITY TASK**

48. What it means for West Dunbartonshire

Whilst it is for the Scottish Government to take the lead on most of the Commission's recommendations Local Authorities and other public sector organisations also have a role to play.

Many of the recommendations reflect the Council's existing housing policy direction and an expansion or strengthening of these initiatives is supported, for example increased and new housing building, continued improvements to housing stock, and strengthening the private rented sector (and regulation where appropriate).

The report also recognises some of the key challenges we face for example around welfare reform and homelessness and supports positive initiatives around bringing back empty homes into use and ensuring that housing isn't demolished for short-term social and management reasons alone.

There are recommendations in the report which are much more radical and areas where fuller discussion around implications, implementation and resources are required. However the Commission's report highlights the benefits of housing and the role it can play in ensuring wellbeing and is welcomed as a step in the right direction.

For more information contact Joanne Martin, Policy Officer 01289 737 721
joanne.martin@west-dunbarton.gov.uk

A copy of the full report can be downloaded here: www.housingandwellbeing.org

