The Right to Settled Accommodation for Homeless People in Scotland: A Triumph of Rational Policy-Making?

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❯ **Abstract_** *This article presents a critical review of the final phase of implementation of the modernised Scottish homelessness framework, taking a 'classical policy analysis' approach to assessing its significance. The article draws on a combination of a review of evidence over the implementation period, new findings from research conducted in 2011-13 and critical observation of the policy process during implementation. Implementation was influenced by political change at Scottish and UK levels and by the impact of changes in other aspects of housing and welfare policy. The essence of the right to settled accommodation was successfully achieved, but incremental policy adjustment has meant that outcomes for those facing homelessness varied somewhat from the highest aspirations of the radical 2002 policy review, which set out the modernised framework. The extent to which the strengthened legal framework represents a policy success over the long term will depend on whether its continued implementation withstands the risk of 'policy blurring' in the most recent shift towards blending homelessness assessment, homelessness prevention activities and the broader assessment of the 'housing options' available to those seeking assistance.*

❯ **Keywords_** *Homelessness, access to housing, policy implementation*

Introduction

In November 2012, after a ten-year implementation programme, the Scottish Housing Minister confirmed that the commitment 'to ensure all people facing homelessness through no fault of their own would have a right to settled accommodation' would be fully in place by 31 December (Scottish Government, 2012a). Although not an unconditional 'right to housing', this final Parliamentary approval endorsed what is possibly the strongest legal framework in the world in relation to protecting people from homelessness.

This article presents a critical review of the most recent phase of implementation of the right to settled accommodation for unintentionally homeless people in Scotland. It begins by setting the context for this major policy shift, before summarising the evolution of the legislative right to settled accommodation, with some initial consideration of its international significance. The main body of the article sets out the approach to assessing progress in implementing legislative change over a ten year period, with a particular focus on the later phase (2009-2012). The analysis draws on published evidence, new research and critical observations of the policy process. Findings from new research are presented in relation to the national picture for Scotland, and local implementation including the perspectives of users of homelessness services. The conclusions identify considerable success in policy implementation along with constraints which impacted on outcomes, and the emergence of possible 'policy blurring' which somewhat limits a rigorous assessment of the original policy vision.

Homelessness in Scotland: the State's Shifting Response

Scotland is part of the UK, which has long been characterised as a liberal welfare state. However, the nature of welfare provision has shifted over the long term, including changes in the relationship between housing and welfare; changing patterns of income inequality; and changing governance, notably with devolution of aspects of welfare policy to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in the post-1999 period (Anderson, 2004; Mooney and Scott, 2012). Legislation to protect certain types of households from homelessness was introduced in 1977, towards the end of the UK's main phase of expanding welfare provision. By the time of Esping-Andersen's influential work on welfare regimes (1990), the UK was shifting significantly towards a much more liberal approach to welfare, with reforms resulting in significant increases in income inequality and significant rises in levels of homelessness (Greve, 1990; Gardiner 2000). Income inequality grew to a historically high level in the UK through both Conservative (1979-1997) and Labour (1997-2010) governments (Joyce *et al*, 2010).

Law and policy on housing and homelessness have been fully devolved to the Scottish Parliament since 1999. The early years of the 21st century witnessed a particularly progressive era in homelessness policy review in Scotland, as the new Executive commissioned a multi-stakeholder *Homelessness Task Force* to undertake a comprehensive review of policy, legislation and practice to alleviate homelessness (Homelessness Task Force 2000, 2002). This strategic approach was mirrored across Europe and beyond, with moves towards comprehensive strategies to tackle the complexity of factors contributing to homelessness and targets to reduce levels of homelessness in many countries (Benjaminsen *et al*, 2009; Hermans, 2011). However, this 'golden moment' of homelessness policy development was somewhat short-lived, as the impact of the financial crisis, which began in 2007-8, resulted in a return shift to welfare retrenchment and austerity measures which impacted severely on the most vulnerable groups in those European countries hardest hit by the international crisis (FEANTSA, 2011).

In their study of the policy process in six European countries, Nutley *et al* (2010, p.136) argued that Scotland had forged a 'somewhat distinctive' path in evidence-based policy and practice, which was not always evident in UK-wide policy analysis. It has also been argued that the Scottish population broadly retains a stronger commitment to social justice and to universal welfare than is evident in England (Nixon *et al*, 2010; Mooney and Scott; 2012) and Scotland retains a slightly higher proportion of social rented housing than other parts of the UK: 23.5 percent in Scotland compared to 17.5 percent in England (Wilcox and Pawson, 2013). However, despite some post-devolution reduction, income inequality in Scotland remained high in absolute terms and relative to the rest of the UK (Morelli and Seaman, 2012). Comparing the achievements of post-devolution Scotland's anti-poverty strategies within Scotland and in relation to the rest of the UK, Sinclair and McKendrick (2012) also concluded that social inclusion policy was not as bold or innovative as expected, given the perceived strength of attachment to social democracy in Scotland. While there remains a need for more robust evidence of any Scottish collective commitment to social democracy and egalitarian social policy, the devolved approach to homelessness merits consideration as having a stronger social justice foundation than evident in other parts of the United Kingdom.

Across the UK, homelessness has been recognised as a state housing responsibility since the passing of the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act (1977) for England, Scotland and Wales (and later for Northern Ireland). For Scotland, this legislation was subsequently consolidated in the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987. The law placed duties on local housing authorities to take action if a household was homeless or threatened with homelessness and the framework remained unchanged in Scotland until the major review by the *Homelessness Task Force* (2000, 2002) which led to the expansion of the right to settled accommodation to all unintentionally homeless

households. It is important to note that Scottish legislation retains a particularly broad and detailed legal definition of homelessness, embracing a wide range of problematic housing situations as recognised in the ETHOS typology for international comparisons (Figure 1; Edgar *et al*, 2004; FEANTSA, 2013). The definition of homelessness remained unchanged by the modernisation of other aspects of the law and Scottish local authorities are required to use this definition when assessing the circumstances of potentially homeless households.

Figure 1: Housing (Scotland) Act 1987: legal definition of homelessness in Scotland

1. A person is homeless if they have no accommodation in the United Kingdom or elsewhere.

2. A person is to be treated as having no accommodation if there is no accommodation which they, together with any other person who normally resides with them are legally entitled to occupy. A person shall not be treated as having accommodation unless it is accommodation which it would be reasonable for them to continue to occupy, though regard may be had to the general housing circumstances prevailing in the local authority area.

3. A person is also homeless if

   a. they have accommodation but cannot secure entry to it, or it is probable that occupation would lead to violence or threats of violence;

   b. or the accommodation consists of a movable structure, vehicle or vessel for human habitation and there is no place where they are entitled or permitted to place and reside in it;

   c. or the accommodation is legally overcrowded and may endanger the health of the occupants;

   d. or it is not permanent accommodation and the local authority duty arose before occupation of the accommodation.

4. A person is threatened with homelessness if it is likely that they will become homeless within 2 months.

Source: Amended from Housing (Scotland) Act 1987, accessed online from National Archives
http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1987/26

Scottish housing and homelessness legislation[1] placed a duty on the local authority (municipality) to secure housing if:

1.   The household was homeless according to the legal definition

2.   The household was in priority need (as illustrated below)

3.   The household had not become homeless intentionally

and

4.   The household had a connection with the local authority where they sought assistance (for example through prior residence, family or work).

Importantly, the duty was to secure 'permanent accommodation' defined as a Scottish Secure Tenancy in the local authority or Registered Social Landlord (RSL[2]) sector; or an Assured Tenancy in the privately rented sector (a relatively secure private sector contract). In practice, local authorities mainly discharged their homelessness duties by offering applicants tenancies in their own stock, supplemented to an extent by RSL tenancies. Private sector Assured Tenancies were rarely used and the much less secure Short Assured Tenancy did not meet the legal requirements for discharge of homelessness duty until regulations were subsequently changed in 2010.

The question of who was in priority need under the original legislative framework was at the heart of the changes implemented following the *Homelessness Task Force* policy review (2000, 2002). Essentially the legislation had prescribed key groups of homeless households considered to be in priority need (deserving of assistance). Some amendments were made to the prescribed groups over the years and by 2005 those listed in the Code of Guidance on implementing the homelessness legislation included households which contained someone who was:

•   A dependent child (or children) and/or a pregnant woman (or a woman who had recently miscarried/terminated a pregnancy)

•   Vulnerable due to old age; mental illness; personality disorder; learning disability; physical disability; chronic ill health; discharge from hospital, prison or armed forces; or 'other special reason'

•   Homeless because of an emergency such as a fire, flood, or natural disaster

•   Age 16-17

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[1]   Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977; Housing (Scotland) Act 1987; Housing (Scotland) Act 2001.

[2]   The RSL housing sector includes housing associations, co-operatives and other non-profit landlords who are independent of central or local government, but registered by the Scottish Housing Regulator. The sector accounts for around half of the social rented housing sector in Scotland.

- Age 18-20 and at risk of sexual or financial exploitation; or serious alcohol or drug misuse

- Age 18-20 and been looked after by the state (social work services)

- At risk of domestic violence

or

- At risk of or a victim of harassment or violence on grounds of religion, sexual orientation or race/ethnic identity.

(Scottish Executive, 2005).

Notably there was no straightforward test of income as a means to secure housing; rather the legislation sought to identify other characteristics which were a proxy measure of lack of capacity to secure housing in the market. Households, which did not fall into one of these categories, were defined as not in priority need (not deserving of assistance). These were largely single adults or other adult-only households of working age who did not have any of the priority need characteristics set out in the legislation. In short, those excluded from the original homelessness safety net were mainly single people of working age, and mainly men.

The day to day assessment of homelessness applications is typically the work of frontline local authority housing staff, charged with making decisions based on the legal framework, practice guidance and their own professional judgement or discretion. This aspect of practice can be characterised as 'street level bureau-cracy' in the sense used by Lipsky (1980), who argued that workers in public services had considerable influence over the outcomes of policy through their discretion in making decisions as part of day to day policy implementation. The combination of organisational policy discretion and frontline worker decision-making discretion, meant that outcomes for homeless people could vary across and within local authority areas, despite the existence of a national framework. Discretionary decision-making could result in simplistic decisions that single homeless people were not in priority need, without undertaking a full investigation of their circumstances and research in England indicated that many single homeless people may well have fitted the priority need criteria, if their characteristics had been fully assessed (Anderson *et al*, 1993).

In Scotland, when the *Homelessness Task Force* (2000, 2002) was charged with undertaking a wide-ranging, evidence-based review of the framework for responding to homelessness, one of its 59 recommendations was that the highly complex test of assessing priority need was no longer appropriate and should be abolished. Recognising that a secure home was a fundamental aspect of welfare for all in a modern society, the Homelessness, etc. (Scotland) Act 2003, set the

target date for the phased abolition of the priority need test by the end of 2012. The *Homelessness Task Force* also queried the test of 'intentionality' in the original homelessness framework, recommending provision of a (less secure) Short Scottish Secure Tenancy and social support to deal with the issue that led to the decision of intentional homelessness (for example rent arrears or antisocial behaviour). Although provision was made for this amendment in the 2003 Act there was no fixed time frame for implementation and this part of the framework was still not enacted by mid-2013. Consequently, Scotland's '2012 commitment' to homeless households was somewhat conditional, applying to all who faced homelessness through no fault of their own.

Approaches to homelessness have represented a key area of policy divergence across the UK's four jurisdictions, with Scotland's neighbours taking different approaches (Fitzpatrick *et al,* 2012a; Mackie *et al*, 2012a, b). The distinctive Scottish framework received some important early accolades, indicating its potential international significance. As early as 2003, the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE, an international Human Rights NGO) awarded the Housing Rights Protector Award to the Scottish Executive for this homelessness legislation, in recognition of its contribution to protecting human rights and safeguarding human dignity (Goodlad, 2005). In 2007, France also implemented a legal right to housing (Loison-Leruste and Quilgars, 2009) and in 2009, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recommended that the Scottish homelessness framework be adopted throughout the UK (Bowcott, 2009). The question for 2013 is, to what extent programme implementation measured up to the expectations of these initial praises?

The following sections assess the effectiveness of programme implementation, drawing on evidence over the ten-year phase of policy implementation, but with a particular emphasis on the later post-2009 period. The research methods adopted in order to develop the analysis included:

- Reviews of published scholarly literature; legislative, policy and practice change; and trends in Scottish Government housing and homelessness statistics. These reviews covered the period 2000-2013.

- Qualitative discussion groups with representatives of local authorities, RSLs, homelessness NGOs, and service users, conducted during 2011 and 2012 and focused on the later period of implementation (2009-12).

- Critical observations from direct engagement with the research, policy and practice communities, for example through participation in conferences and practice networks; delivery of education and training; monitoring of press and media debates; and direct dialogue with policy makers and practitioners.

An ideal analysis would have included even more substantive empirical investigation and elements of this analysis are necessarily constrained by the evidence available.

National Level Outcomes

Official statistics on implementation of Scotland's homelessness legislation have been routinely collected and published by Government since the late 1970s. The analysis conducted for this research focused on full-year reporting (April-March annually), but Scottish Government also publishes interim quarterly returns (e.g. Scottish Government, 2013a).

In the implementation process, local authorities were given discretion in how they gradually incorporated an increasing proportion of 'non-priority' homeless appli-cants into the 'priority' category, so that when 100 per cent of applicants were recognised as having 'priority need', the test would effectively be abolished. Figure 2 shows that across Scotland, the proportion of homelessness acceptances assessed as being in priority need rose from 73 percent in 2001-2 to 96 percent in 2012-13, by which point, single people (26-65 years) had become the largest priority group, rather than an excluded group. For most of this period, more than 40 000 households per year were accepted as homeless in Scotland. This figure reduced to less than 32 000 households in 2012-13, a decline attributed to the implementa-tion of homelessness prevention initiatives, and the introduction of the 'housing options' approach to applications for social housing which is discussed further below (Scottish Government; 2012b, 2013c). By the end of 2011-12, 8 of Scotland's 32 local authorities had fully abolished the priority need test; with another 14 more than 90 percent of the way towards meeting the target; and 11 authorities reporting 68 to 89 percent of all homeless households as in priority need (Scottish Government, 2012c). Quarterly statistics indicated that as Scotland passed the 31 December 2012 milestone, 96 percent of applicants assessed as homeless were accorded priority need, just a few percentage points below fully meeting the policy goal (Scottish Government, 2013b). The goal was fully met in 26 out of 32 local authorities, with two others achieving 98 and 99 percent of the target and just four in the ranges from 88-97 percent of the goal. As of 1st January 2013 it effectively became a breach of the law to distinguish between priority and non-priority need in homelessness assessments, and Scottish Government (2013c) reported that from January to March 2013, all Scottish local authorities met this commitment.
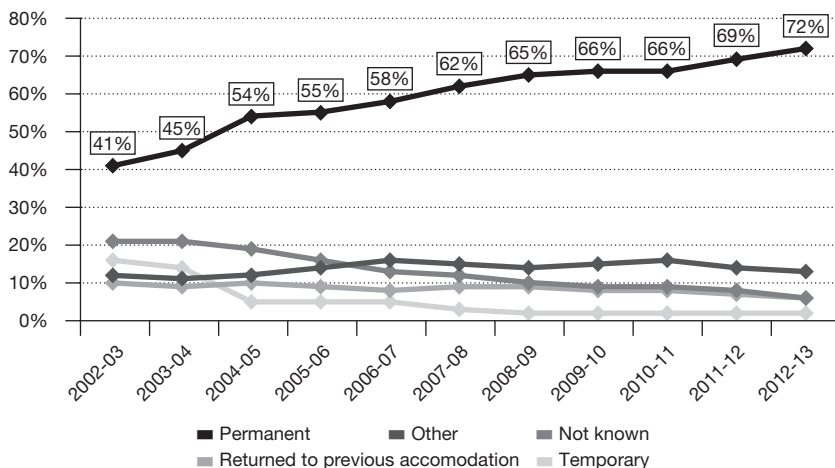
**Figure 2: Number of applications to local authorities
under the Homeless Persons legislation: 2002-03 to 2012-13**
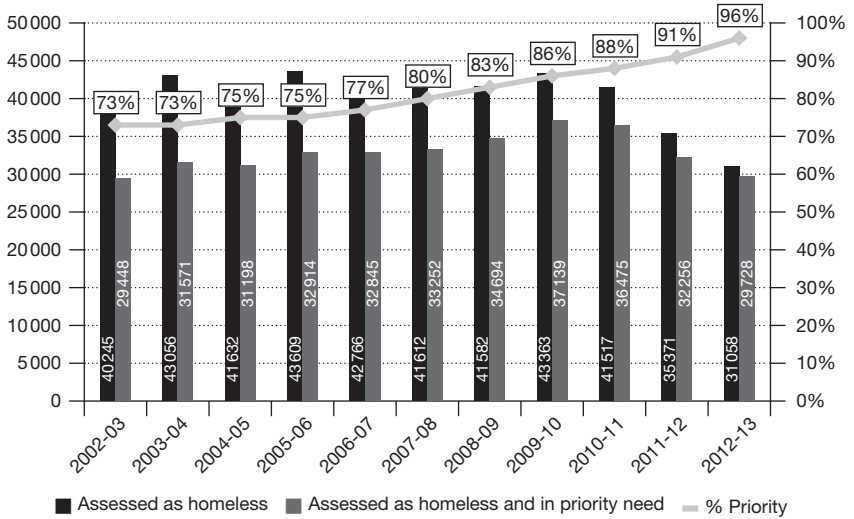
Source: Scottish Government, Operation of the Homeless Persons Legislation (2012-13), Table 1

As well as abolishing the priority need test, implementing the right to housing required local authorities to secure 'settled accommodation' for homeless households. During the implementation period, the term 'settled accommodation' came to replace the use of the term 'permanent accommodation' in the original framework. This 'incremental change' (Lindblom, 1959), related to the re-definition of settled accommodation in 2010 to include a 12 month Short Assured Tenancy in the private rented sector (Scottish Government, 2010). This still presented a considerable challenge for local authorities working with private landlords as the minimum Short Assured Tenancy period remained just six months. From 2002-3 to 2012-13, the proportion of all homeless households moving into permanent/settled accommodation (local authority, RSL or minimum 12 month private tenancy) as the final outcome of their application increased from 41% to 72% (Figure 3). Moreover, the use of temporary accommodation as a final outcome had decreased; as had the 'outcome not known' category, suggesting local authorities had become better at maintaining contact with applicants through to discharge of duty (Figure 3).
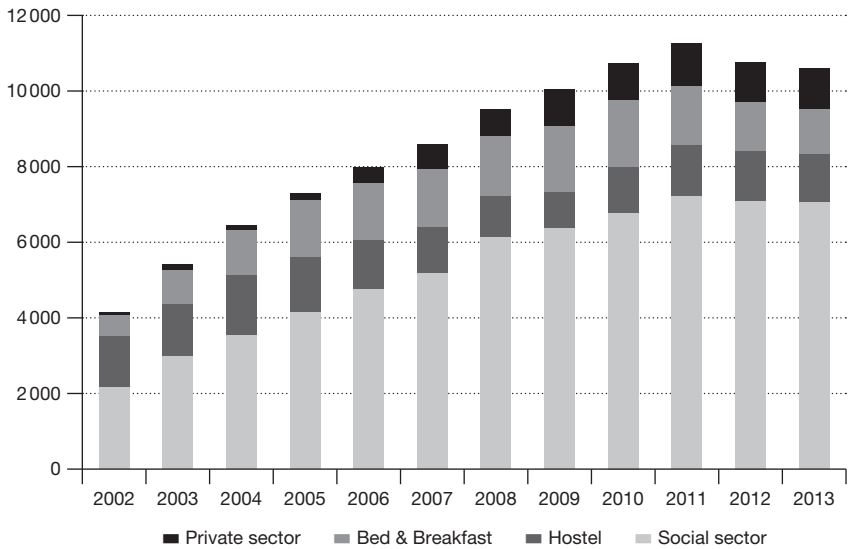
Figure 3: Outcomes for homeless households following final discharge of local authority duty: 2002-3 to 2012-13

Source: Scottish Government, Operation of the Homeless Persons Legislation (2012-13), Table 8a

Although temporary accommodation was rarely a final outcome for homeless households, applicants were often provided with temporary accommodation until the local authority made a decision on their application, or until settled accommodation became available. Figure 4 shows the increase in the number of homeless households in temporary accommodation from 2002 to 2013. The use of ordinary social housing for temporary accommodation increased very significantly. While other types of temporary accommodation were used less frequently in absolute numbers, the use of bed and breakfast accommodation also increased substantially. The use of hostels decreased slightly during the period, and the use of the private sector as temporary accommodation grew from almost non-existent up until 2005, to being used as frequently as hostels in 2013. A critical gap in the national data set however, is that it does not indicate the period of time homeless households spend in temporary accommodation until the final outcomes in Figure 3 above are achieved.

**Figure 4: Households in temporary accommodation by accommodation type:
31 March 2002 to 31 March 2013**

Source: Scottish Government, Operation of the Homeless Persons Legislation (2012-13), Table 11

A final key national indicator of programme implementation has been the share of social lettings allocated to homeless households. Figure 5 indicates the extent to which local authorities were able to use their own housing stock to provide settled housing for homeless people. However, the picture is quite complicated. During the period 2001-2 to 2010-11, the absolute number of vacancies let by local authorities declined significantly. This meant that relatively modest absolute increases in lettings to homeless households resulted in a disproportionately high share of the (declining) pool of total vacancies being allocated to homeless households. The number of local authority lets made to any household decreased by more than half over the ten-year period from 53 187 in 2001-2, to just 26 222 in 2010-11. So, local authorities were increasingly required to 'make best use' of a much smaller pool of vacancies. Some of this decline reflected whole-stock transfers of council housing to RSLs in six local authority areas during the period. The decline in vacancies at least partly explains why, in striving to meet the 2012 target, the proportion of total local authority lets to homeless households increased significantly from 17 percent in 2001/02 to 45 percent in 2010/11. However the absolute number of lettings to homeless households was just less than 3 000 greater in 2010-11 (around 12 000) compared to 2001-2 (around 9 000).

Although the high proportion of local authority lets to homeless households was explained by falling numbers of available vacancies, as well as the increase in the number of permanent lettings made to homeless households, debates in practice conferences and events during 2011-12 revealed the figures caused some concern to Scottish Government. It was argued that homelessness was becoming somehow too significant a route into council housing, even though this was directly a function of implementation of national government policy. Further, the trend in council housing allocations exaggerated the national picture as RSLs, with half of the social rented housing stock, allocated only 27 percent of lettings to homeless households in 2011-12 (Scottish Housing Regulator, 2012).

Figure 5: Local authority permanent lettings during 2001-2 to 2010-11 and lets to homeless households
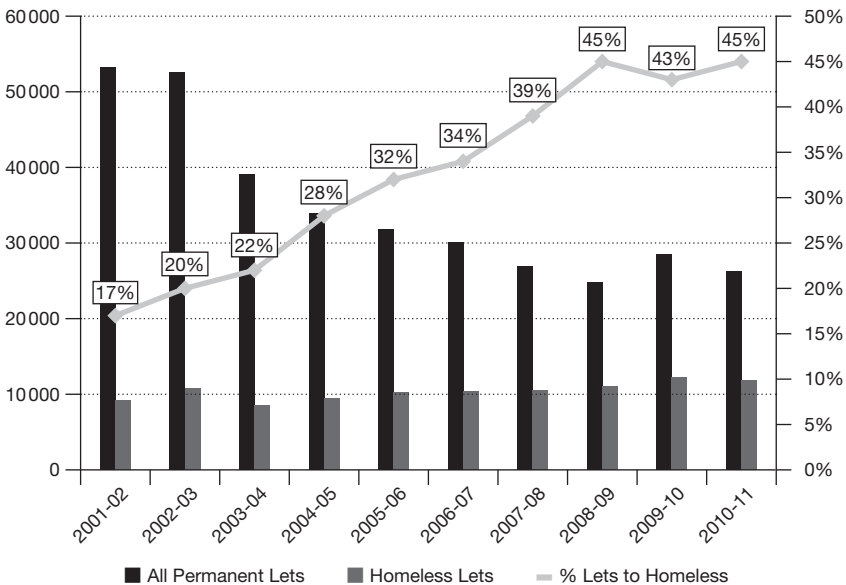
Source: Scottish Government, Management of Local Authority Housing (2010-11), Lettings

All of the above national indicators disguise both the variation across local authorities and the complexity of the strategic and frontline processes behind policy implementation. These are considered in the following section.

Local Practice and Service Users' Views

Qualitative analysis of group discussions with local housing practitioners sought to provide a deeper insight into questions and issues emerging from the literature review and statistical analysis. Three discussion groups were conducted in late 2011 and early 2012: one group including representatives of local authority homelessness services and voluntary sector homelessness agencies; one group of local authority homelessness strategy officers; and one group with RSL representatives. There was no overlap in local authority representation between the first and second groups, with representation covering twelve local authorities, seven RSLs and two homelessness agencies.

Some participant local authorities had already fully achieved the abolition of priority need, but acknowledged difficulties in securing enough settled accommodation for homeless households. Others were at varying stages of progress. No single factor appeared to explain which authorities had and hadn't met the target. Participants made reference to both internal policy decisions and the balance between demand from homeless households and the available pool of stock.

> 'We have met the priority need target in terms of abolishing non-priority but month on month the homeless list is increasing. It was a huge commitment. There was not one policy decision or operational process. It was a huge combination of factors. There was a massive commitment from the council to improve services to homeless people. A poor Scottish Housing Regulator inspection report was also a driver. More resources were allocated, we introduced a common housing register, housing options, an allocations review, and improved void turnover. It was a whole range of factors together' (Local Authority Participant A).

Other participants mentioned similar processes, but one authority had taken a very different approach of implementing alternative solutions instead of pushing towards abolishing the priority need test:

> 'We haven't met the target. That was a deliberate policy decision by senior managers. Despite efforts to encourage removal of priority need, the senior management team said – no we don't agree. We will only deal with it when the legislation says we have to. In the mean time we will try to intervene more effectively to meet need and avoid crisis' (Local Authority Participant D).

Another participant recognised that the expanded safety net had resulted in very significant improvements in terms of homelessness services for single people.

> 'The service people get now compared to 19 years ago is very different. People weren't even assessed before – they became priority need anyway once a proper assessment was done' (Local Authority Participant E).

Local authority participants were equally clear that securing settled accommodation for all those accepted was a more significant challenge than abolishing the priority need test. One discussant commented that the code of guidance on homelessness did not specify a time period for finding settled accommodation and in another area the number of applicants for a property was commonly 'in the hundreds'. Part of the local authority's role then became 'managing people's aspirations about what is realistic, in different time scales' (Local Authority Participant E). In the homelessness strategy officer's group some participants agreed that fully implementing the right to settled housing for all non-intentionally homeless households was a huge challenge, but others commented that abolishing the priority need test saved time and resources in making complex enquiries.

All local authority participants reported extreme difficulty in securing settled accommodation for homeless households in the private rented sector, even where successful private schemes operated for different client groups. The following summary was a typical experience:

> 'We have not managed to achieve final discharge of duty. We have a lot of initiatives in place and work very closely with the private rented sector. We have everything in place to discharge duty. The difficulty has been getting the length of tenancy (12 months). Getting landlords to sign up to that. We have a landlord forum, a private sector team, a rent guarantee, private sector leasing for temporary accommodation...... There is still a huge amount more we can do in terms of engagement, and giving tenants support.… There may be an argument for letting local authority properties come back to mainstream letting and use more private rented housing for temporary accommodation' (Local Authority Participant A).

Other participants reported similar experiences, including where private landlords would accept tenants with support packages in place, but remained unwilling to extend the length of tenancies to the required 12 months. Consequently, the private sector was seen as more suitable for those seeking housing advice than those facing homelessness: 'We don't discharge duty in the private rented sector but we do use it for other groups' (Participant E). It was recognised that for some households, the private sector could be a positive option in terms of choice of location and speed of securing accommodation. Some participants commented specifically on the valuable role of the private rented sector in rural areas, where demand could not be met through social housing. However, participants in the Homelessness Strategy Officers' group reported private renting to be expensive and had concerns about quality. These challenges were compounded by changes to housing benefit (housing allowance) regulations which meant that adults aged up to 35 years of age could only receive benefit equal to the cost of shared accommodation (rather than an independent tenancy). Homelessness agencies

were aware of the constraints in securing settled accommodation in the private rented sector, with the Short Scottish Assured Tenancy acknowledged as one of the least secure tenancy types in Europe.

The group of RSL participants were less explicitly focused on meeting the 2012 homelessness target, although all were supportive of the legislative change and of the need for RSLs to play an active role in housing homeless people. Discussion focused on the processes by which local authorities referred homeless households to RSLs for rehousing, including participation in common housing registers and choice based lettings schemes in partnership with local authorities. RSLs sought to fit homeless households referred by the local authority to their available housing stock, through good housing management practice. While national statistics indicated the RSL sector housed a much lower proportion of homeless households than the council sector, RSL participants in this research were generally positive about housing homeless households. Debates about conflict with other applicant groups were acknowledged but not thought to call into question the fundamental principles of the modernised homelessness framework. Most participating RSLs had reviewed their procedures for managing referrals from local authorities. Importantly (and as was the case for local authority landlords) RSLs had implemented flexible lettings policies such as accommodating single homeless people in two bedroom properties.

'We deliberately under-occupied properties. We were encouraged to do that, for example to manage child densities. Also in terms of mutual exchanges, if we are alleviating overcrowding by slightly under-occupying in the exchanged property we will do that. Similarly, we do have a lot of people whose circumstances change, who are in two bedroom properties. The majority of our stock is two bedrooms' (RSL Participant G).

'We are the same. Our policy is that we will allocate a two bedroom property to a single person. Because otherwise we would just disadvantage the majority of people on the waiting list' (RSL Participant J).

However, participants were concerned that this strategy would be seriously undermined from April 2013 when welfare reform imposed by the UK government would claw back housing benefit from social tenants with a spare bedroom. Housing Benefit, along with other social security benefits, remained a reserved power of the Westminster/UK government, and emerged as a key area of conflict with devolved Scottish housing policy.

> 'We didn't for the last 15 years ever build anything less than 2 bedrooms, because we were told 'you want to have life time homes, you want to be able to accommodate carers'… so we have a huge pool of barrier-free 2 bedroom properties, and although some on disability benefits may be exempt from proposals, future tenants are the worry really' (RSL Participant H).

Some participants felt that the proposed benefit restrictions were largely unnecessary in the Scottish housing system and had emerged in order to tackle a 'London-centric problem': 'we are here in Scotland with our own housing needs and knowledge and everything is being run from Westminster, based on a few London authorities. I have not seen evidence in Scotland that large sums are being spent on people living in homes that are too big for them' (RSL Participant G).

A further discussion group was held with homeless or formerly homeless users of a Scottish local authority homelessness service. Their experiences were illustrative rather than representative, but they were encouraged to discuss the delivery of homelessness services from as general a point of view as they could. Participants were at varying stages of assessment, placement in temporary accommodation or having been recently rehoused into settled accommodation. Most were single, but one woman had applied with a partner and children. Participants were asked about their experience of using local authority services, rather than how they saw progress on legislative change. Their views were very similar to those of a larger group of participants in an earlier, substantive national study of the priorities of homelessness service users by Evans and Littlewood (2011).

Some service users had found it difficult to contact the homelessness service because of a lack of information about how to do so. They suggested wider advertising of how to get help in the event of homelessness, for example through job centres, the police, doctors' surgeries and radio and television. Participants also had varied experience of the homelessness application process. Service users wanted a quick response from local authorities, especially if urgent shelter was needed, and they required accessible emergency accommodation or help with transport to temporary accommodation. There was a strong recommendation for having one key worker who worked with an applicant throughout the assessment and rehousing processes. Participants also wanted to be treated with dignity and to receive clear explanations of the law and any local practice. Some expressed concern about the interview process and the 'evidence' needed to demonstrate their state of homelessness:

> 'I was just out of hospital with my bags in the car – how much more evidence do you need?' (Service User A).

The option to be able to work was very important to the homeless service users, and this had implications for the location, cost, tenure, and associated service charges in both temporary and settled housing. However, participants were also able to articulate a sense of fairness in relation to the needs of other groups waiting for assistance with housing. Participants acknowledged that many homeless people required social support in temporary and settled accommodation. Taking account of these needs, most participants expressed a preference for a council tenancy as their preferred outcome. Scottish homeless service users were able to articulate a rational preference for social rented housing based on its core characteristics of affordability, security, quality, and a supportive management ethos. Service users understood the process of waiting in temporary accommodation until settled housing was available, but felt this should not generally be for more than six months. They welcomed information about different options, but were resistant to sharing in the private rented sector. They also valued support with settling into a new tenancy, especially help with benefits and appreciated the efforts of friendly, understanding staff. When the discussion group participants were asked to name a key change which would improve local authority homelessness services the main suggestion was the provision or availability of more affordable one bedroom housing.

Participants were asked if they thought homelessness could be prevented – with differing views emerging. One person had become homeless because of relationship breakdown and did not think this could have been prevented while another had been invited to speak to young people about their experience of homelessness as part of a prevention programme for local schools. Other participants emphasised that their housing situation had been completely outwith their control, for example because of financial constraints, health issues or relationship breakdown. One participant pointed out that someone facing homelessness needed to have a certain amount of confidence to be able to ask the right questions of the right people, and that the advice received might be complex and challenging to take in. Few participants had heard of a housing options service, although most were receptive to the idea. However, they reiterated the importance of the actual final housing outcome, rather than just the existence of an advisory service.

Overall the qualitative group discussions indicated continuing support for implementation of the strengthened homelessness safety net. However, some practical challenges for delivery emerged which were not always evident from official statistics, for example: discretionary practice around the phasing in of the new framework; the increased time some homeless people spent in temporary accommodation; and the threat posed by UK government reform of housing benefit.

Discussion: Shifting Policy Implementation in a Changing Context

In many ways the policy review conducted by the Homelessness Task Force in 2000-2 represented a 'textbook' example of rational policy-making (Simon, 1959; Hogwood and Gunn, 1984). All of the Task Force's recommendations were accepted by the Housing Minister in 2002 and the very strong consensus in support of reform (across political parties and non-government stakeholders) no doubt helped sustain the commitment to implementation over a ten-year period. However, the political and economic environment did not stand still during the implementation phase and the evidence presented above suggests that while the core policy goals were largely achieved, there were some subtle shifts in the interpretation of what might be considered 'successful' implementation over the years.

A key contextual change in the policy landscape was the 2007/8 economic crisis, although the impact of ensuing austerity on implementation of the expanded home-lessness safety net has not been accurately quantified (Fitzpatrick *et al*, 2012b). Nevertheless, the effects on mortgage finance, pressures in the home ownership and construction sectors, and constraints on budgets for welfare and investment in new social housing, all contributed to increasing the pressure on local housing authorities as they sought to expand their homelessness services to include previ-ously excluded groups. While Scotland retained a more substantial social rented sector than the rest of the UK, the substantial decline in vacancies over the imple-mentation period (Figure 5 above) suggests the risk of losing social housing as an effective solution to homelessness should not be ignored.

The implementation period also saw important changes in political power. During the early period of implementation (2000-2007), the Labour Party was in power at the UK level and was the stronger partner in the Labour–Liberal democrat coalition in the Scottish Parliament. This UK-wide political consensus changed sharply after 2007. First, a Scottish National Party (SNP) government was elected to the Scottish Parliament in 2007 and re-elected with a significant majority in 2011. Despite many other conflicts with Labour policies, the SNP Government adopted the commitment to the abolition of the priority need distinction in homelessness assessments. However, the Homelessness Monitoring Group which had followed progress of all 59 task force recommendations was replaced by a '2012 steering group' with a tighter focus on the abolition of priority need. Other policy changes arguably resulted in the dilution of the spirit of the Homelessness Task Force's review, as well as technical redefinition of the policy target. These measures included a shift towards homelessness prevention through the introduction of 'Housing Options' approaches to dealing with applications (Scottish Government, 2009; Shelter Scotland, 2011, 2013); greater emphasis on settled accommodation in the private rented sector (Scottish Government, 2010; SCSH, 2011) and a consultation on the

future role of social housing which questioned the longstanding categories of applicants (including homeless households) given reasonable preference for social housing allocations (Scottish Government, 2012d).

The evidence reviewed for this study indicated that policy development at the national level in Scotland (Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities) drove local practice and could shift policy without further legal change. This was very much the case in relation to the introduction of homeless-ness prevention activities and the Housing Options approach which potentially blended the assessment of homelessness and the assessment of wider housing needs into one process. The perceived success of homelessness prevention in England during the mid-2000s was a factor in the shift towards prevention in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2009). This was despite the findings of Pawson (2007) that the fall in official homelessness figures in England concealed the extent to which homelessness prevention resulted from the adoption of more restrictive interpretations of the homelessness legislation, redefining rather than resolving the problem. The official New Labour (UK) position at the time of Pawson's study was that homelessness prevention should not be a tool to divert those at risk of home-lessness from applying for assistance under the legal framework. This has equally been the position of Labour/Liberal Democrat and SNP administrations in Scotland, but there remains a lack of clarity on the impact of homelessness prevention measures in both jurisdictions. A different method of monitoring and evaluation is required for homelessness prevention compared to implementation of a housing duty to those accepted as homeless or at risk of homelessness, but recent Scottish evidence indicates challenges in interpreting available data as well as the possibility of diversion of applicants from the statutory system:

> 'the administrative changes associated with the increasingly robust implementa-tion of homelessness prevention activities have somewhat undermined the value of the homelessness statistics as an indicator of trends over time in 'acute housing need'. This is because the 'housing options' approach now widely adopted has resulted in a narrowing of the scope of official statistical recording. As confirmed by our local authority interviews, applicants subject to prevention assistance tend to be considered as having been aided outwith statutory provi-sions' (Fitzpatrick *et al*, 2012b, p.12).

This perceived tension or policy blurring between homelessness prevention and the original vision of the Homelessness Task Force is a question which cannot be fully explained without further detailed empirical investigation. Evidence from England to date does not provide adequate data for direct comparison and there remains a need to systematically explore whether and to what possible extent preventative services in Scotland may divert homeless households from accessing

their statutory rights. It would have been highly unlikely that the policy landscape would not have changed over a ten year implementation period, but the shift towards a housing options approach, coupled with housing benefit reform appeared to somewhat overwhelm the final stages of implementation of the 2012 target to an extent that the different effects could not readily be disentangled. There remains a need to better capture the lived experiences of those facing homelessness and seeking housing advice in both national and comparative housing research. Researching these experiences almost inevitably involves the co-operation of statutory and non-statutory agencies working with homeless households and this may be another aspect of 'gatekeeping' which presents a challenge. Ethically, neither agencies, workers nor homeless households can be pressurised into research participation, but a research method which gets 'behind the statistics' (which say something about outcomes, but little about process or household satisfaction with outcomes) would significantly enrich the existing evidence base.

Other policy changes under the SNP government included a modest return to council house-building and the phased abolition of the right to buy for social tenants, both measures which should protect the social housing stock to some extent. However, the fundamental principle of a social housing tenancy as the primary outcome for homeless households was questioned in the consultation paper on increasing flexibility for landlords (Scottish Government, 2012d). Initial proposals fell short of a clear commitment that statutorily homeless households would remain a key priority group for access to social housing. This would be a significant shift from the previous SNP Government guidance on matching people to properties, which clearly prioritised homeless households along with other key needs groups (Scottish Government, 2011). McKee and Phillips (2012) also argued that Scotland's strengthened homelessness framework threatened social cohesion in the social rented housing sector, but the statistical analysis undertaken for this study indicated the problem of a declining pool of vacancies was much more significant than increase in the number of homeless households rehoused. Moreover, Pawson (2007) concluded that arguments that homeless households 'crowded out' access to social housing for other groups remained unproven; and Wilcox *et al*, (2010) found no substantive evidence that homeless households were more likely to result in concentrations of poverty than other groups in need of social housing. Beyond these studies, evidence of street level bureaucrats' practice of letting individual properties is also limited. As discussed above, flexibility with property size in allocations was subsequently threatened by housing benefit reform. Other mechanisms to smooth the allocations process included: mutual exchanges between tenants; using tenancy transfers to create vacancy chains; and local

authority nominations to RSLs. The use of strategic lettings plans to co-ordinate allocations across landlords in a local authority area emerged as a tool to facilitate fair quotas of lettings for different groups, including homeless households.

The political complexion of the UK government also changed in the late phase of policy implementation with the election of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010. This was a potentially much more challenging political change as the new UK government pursued a radical neoliberal welfare reform agenda in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007-8. Austerity measures impacted on both the overall financial settlement for Scotland and, crucially, on the welfare benefit system which underpinned aspects of housing policy implementation. Through powers reserved to the Westminster Government, the Welfare Reform Act 2012 introduced measures to reform welfare benefits (including housing benefit) which were contradictory to the goals of Scotland's homelessness policy reform and which undoubtedly made its long-term sustainability much more challenging to secure. The clawing back of benefits where social tenants were considered to be 'over-housed' was a key element of this package which caused considerable concern amongst participants in this study as discussed above. Nevertheless, the SNP government and its partner local authorities continued with implementation of the expanded homelessness safety net, while policy in England resulted in a diminution of housing rights and tenure security (Fitzpatrick *et al*, 2012a).

In their study of thirteen European countries, Pleace *et al* (2011) reported a variation in the proportion of national housing stock in the social rented sector of between 1 and 32 percent. Scotland therefore had a relatively generous, but not exceptional, supply of social housing; what was more exceptional was the expansion of an existing legal route into social housing for homeless people. Across Europe, landlord reservations in allocating social housing to homeless households related to the capacity of homeless people to sustain tenancies; increasing aversion to financial risk; and policies to avoid concentrations of poverty (Pleace *et al*, 2011). The evidence base for such assertions merits further investigation in both the Scottish and international contexts. While the requirement to meet a range of housing needs was acknowledged, Pleace *et al* (2011) argued for improved co-ordination of social housing allocations and concluded that in combination with a reasonable minimum income and help with housing costs, social housing remained an important resource in relieving homelessness. The Scottish evidence reported here supports those recommendations. However, there remains a gap in the international evidence base in terms of rigorous comparative analysis, in particular a specific comparison of the implementation of 'the right to housing' in Scotland with that of France. While the transfer of the Scottish or French systems to different national housing contexts may not be

feasible in any simple, mechanistic sense; the principle of the proven effective implementation of a legal duty to assist homeless households may well be adaptable to different housing tenure and welfare systems.

Conclusion

As Scotland passed the 2012 milestone in homelessness policy implementation, the evidence indicated considerable success in abolishing the priority need test, but continuing challenges in the provision of settled accommodation for all unintentionally homeless households. The Scottish Government's press announcement of 21 November 2012 stated that the commitment 'will be met and in force from 31 December' (Scottish Government, 2012a). However, official statistics (which lagged behind the ministerial statement) indicated that six local authorities fell short of the target (to varying degrees) at 31 December 2012 (Scottish Government, 2013b). There was no substantive public debate around what action would be taken where a local authority did not meet and/or sustain the commitment and Scottish Government (2013c) reported complete compliance from January – March 2013. Overall implementation demonstrated that with political consensus, policy goals could be achieved over a ten-year period but that political shifts also mediated planned outcomes: such as 'settled accommodation' in a 12 month private tenancy rather than a secure social tenancy; or after an unreasonably lengthy period in temporary accommodation. Continuing monitoring of the strengthened framework would remain essential to demonstrating *both* the abolition of the priority need test *and* the provision settled accommodation within a reasonable time period.

In terms of social justice, the expanded homelessness safety net removed long-standing discrimination between different groups of homeless households, thereby increasing equality in access to housing. It could be argued that Scotland was not fully free to implement completely egalitarian welfare policies as the core redistributive mechanisms of taxation and welfare benefits remained reserved powers of the UK government. Morelli and Seaman (2012) made the case for maintaining, and increasing, universal welfare in areas where Scottish Government had devolved power, for example through progressive reform of local taxation (the Council Tax), and some notable achievements do distinguish devolved social policy in Scotland. Along with free personal care for older people and free access to higher education, the strengthening of the Scottish homelessness legislation emerged as a beacon policy which survived political change at Scottish and UK levels. However, a key challenge for Scotland remained the extent to which the political rhetoric of social justice (evident in successive policy statements of the Labour, Liberal Democrat and Scottish National Parties) would be matched by the outcomes of policy programmes. Mooney and Scott (2012) acknowledged that devolution was more

fundamentally equated with territorial justice, than social justice, but they also suggested that social policy could be a nation-building tool, drawing comparisons with other contemporary examples of devolved government (Spain, Canada and Belgium) as well as with potential models for an independent Scotland (notably the Nordic nations). The modernised homelessness framework could be one indicator of such nation building.

As the Scottish Parliament moves into a more mature phase of governance (with a referendum on full independence in 2014), the implementation of the right to settled accommodation for all unintentionally homeless households can justly be cited as a major policy achievement. Whether it truly emerges as a triumph for housing rights and egalitarian social policy will depend on whether the Scottish housing policy community sustains this strengthened legal framework; or whether the risk of policy blurring becomes increasingly pronounced as homelessness assessment is blended with broader housing advice services. While the case for progressive measures which genuinely prevent the trauma of homelessness is irrefutable, this should not be at the expense of diluting Scotland's broad definition of homelessness or diverting those facing homelessness away from the strengthened legal safety net which has been such a focus of national and international acclaim. Perhaps most importantly, a good deal more empirical evidence of the actual lived experiences of those facing homelessness in Scotland is needed in order to 'de-blur' the picture and fully assess implementation of the right to settled accommodation for homeless people.

Acknowledgements

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