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## **Introduction**

This paper updates the previous annual policy reviews for the United Kingdom, adopting for the first time a revised structure in line with changing national and EU approaches to producing strategies on social inclusion. The UK has well developed policies to address housing issues and specifically to address homelessness, but central government also recognises the importance of a multi-dimensional approach to resolving homelessness and meeting the complex needs of homeless households. Given the volume of material to report on progress on housing and homelessness policy across the UK (Chapter 4) it has been necessary to be selective in reporting on the other policy areas (Chapters 1-3).

The web pages of the EU directorate for Employment and Social Affairs states that the new National Strategies on Social Protection and Inclusion are due for submission by September 15 2006. By early August, none were posted on the web pages and no UK document could be accessed through the web pages of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) which coordinates the strategy, or through direct email communication with DWP. The most recent official UK document available for this review was the 2005 Implementation Report on the 2003-5 NAPinc (DWP, 2005). The document states clearly that ‘the fight against poverty and social exclusion is central to the UK Government’s entire social and economic programme’ (p1) and the document recognises the important role of NGOs in combating exclusion. In the chapters below, reference is made to the progress recorded in the 2005 Implementation Report across each policy area, prior to updating on subsequent policy developments during 2005/6.

## **1 Health and social protection**

### **Health**

The UK retains a National Health Service, free at the point of consumption to all citizens. This is a major aspect of the UK welfare state (albeit with dimensions of privatisation) and faces many challenges in meeting the expectations and changing health care demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A separate paper on health services for homeless people in the UK has been produced in 2006 for Working Group 3 of the European Observatory on Homelessness and can be accessed on the FEANSTA web site (Anderson, 2006). Although a national service, policy detail and service delivery is devolved to the Scottish Parliament (and to a lesser extent to the other jurisdictions) but broadly follows the New Labour agenda of Westminster. The health care needs of homeless people and the barriers faced in accessing health services are well established and policies are in place to improve access to health care for homeless people.

Looking at broad trends in the health of the UK population, the DWP Implementation Report (2005, p3) concedes that ‘the gap in life expectancy between areas with the worst health and

deprivation outcomes and the average has **not** narrowed (author's emphasis). This remains a key goal for future policy. The report refers to the National Health Service (NHS) Improvement Plan, key goals for which include improving capacity and moving away from reactive care towards a more systematic 'patient-centred' approach (p17) and a stronger emphasis on prevention (e.g. encouraging action to reduce smoking, alcohol consumption, obesity etc).

With respect to homelessness, a key focus for policy during 2005/6 has been encouraging health services to improve provision for homeless households and to improve their joint working with housing and social care agencies. Central Government has produced guidance for local agencies in England to support improvements in the health care of homeless people (ODPM 2004, 2005a). Partners in interagency working include local authorities, Primary Health Care Services, Drug Action Teams, Mental Health Teams, and the voluntary sector. Anticipated activities include improved access to General Practitioners (local doctors); improved hospital discharge procedures and better information for homeless people on how to access health care.

In Scotland, multi-agency working has also been directed from the 'top' of Government with the introduction of Health and Homelessness Standards which all Scottish Health Boards were obliged to implement from April, 2005 (Scottish Executive, 2005). These standards recognise the importance of commitment at a senior level in NHS Boards; the importance of resource allocation; the need for multi-agency groups at the local level; and the need for effective engagement with homeless people. The value of specialist services for homeless people is recognised but they must not be the only option. A survey of NHS boards is underway in Scotland to establish how well they are responding to the Health and Homelessness Standards (Homelessness Monitoring Group, 2006, p11) and monitoring of homeless people's registration with local doctors is to be incorporated into performance against local housing authorities' homelessness strategies (p11).

Future policy reviews will continue to monitor progress on improving access to health care for homeless people.

## **Social Protection**

The DWP Implementation Report cites the introduction of Working and Child Tax credits as a key dimension of the modernisation of social protection in the UK (DWP, 2005, p15). Other recent measures include the Saving Gateway (to encourage saving among low income groups) and Child Trust Fund vouchers for all children born after 1<sup>st</sup> September 2002 (£250 on birth, or £500 for the poorest third of families and a lump sum at 18).

A key goal for these UK social protection policies has been the reduction of child poverty<sup>1</sup> by one quarter between 1998/9 and 2004/5. Harker (2006) reports that although significant progress was made, the target was only 2/3 achieved (p43). The next interim target is a 50% reduction by 2010/11 and Harker also looks at the factors which will influence achievement of this target. Factors likely to aid achievement of the target include demographic trends (fewer children); labour market trends (favourable to women/mothers); and taxation and benefit changes (targeted on households with children) (p44). Factors likely to impede achievement of the target include broader economic trends and high levels of inequality in income and wealth (Harker, 2006, p45).

Harker argues that the UK Government faces restraints on public expenditure and taxation and, importantly, lack of public support for greater intervention. The contrast is made between high public support for the international 'Make Poverty History' campaign and lack of engagement with poverty issues within the UK. Harker argues that the UK may have reached the limit of the benefits to be had from rising employment and that remaining child poverty is increasingly concentrated in the households most marginalised from the labour market (as a route out of poverty). Significant increases in skills levels would be required to further expand labour market inclusion (p45). Harker argues (p45) that 'it will continue to be very difficult to reduce child poverty in the context of a very unequal society'. Further, it is argued that more attention will have to be paid to issues such as wage inequality, high housing costs and the child support system. Importantly, Harker argues that both out of work benefit support and the minimum wage would have to increase if child poverty was to fall significantly (p46) and concludes that the Government will only fully meet its policy objectives if it builds a consensus for intervention and greater equality of income across the electorate.

It should also be noted that while there has been some success in reducing child poverty in the UK, policies focused on households with children have not improved the financial position of vulnerable homeless households without children. Indeed there is evidence that low income single people have become relatively worse off in the post-1997 period.

Assistance with housing costs are formally part of social protection in the UK and the DWP has embarked on a process of Housing Benefit Reform (DWP, 2005, p15). The detail of these reforms is reported in Chapter 4 (Housing and Housing Rights).

The disadvantaged position of Gypsies and Travellers is recognised in DWP (2005, p25) but no concrete strategies for change are articulated, other than the use of the European Social Fund for projects to support this group.

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<sup>1</sup> Post 1997, UK social protection policy has focused specifically on reducing **child** poverty, rather than poverty in general.

A national strategy for supporting integration of asylum seekers is in place, but is the responsibility of the Home Office, not the DWP, and is not discussed in the 2005 Implementation Report. Policy on asylum seeking and immigration is increasingly tight and frequently reviewed and changed. Recent Home Office figures show that asylum applications fell by 24% from 2004 to 2005, reaching the lowest level since 1994 (Refugee Council, 2006). The main countries of origin (Iran, Eritrea, Afghanistan, China, and Somalia) were countries with known human rights breaches

## **2 Data collection**

Undoubtedly, data collection issues will be important across the spectrum of social inclusion policies and debate and discussion on the definition and measurement of aspects of inclusion and exclusion is ongoing. That said, relatively few specific issues have arisen from a review of policy developments during the previous 12 months. One example is the review of the 'HL1' system for collecting data on homelessness applications in Scotland, with a revised form for data collection piloted by local housing authorities in 2006 (Homelessness Monitoring Group, 2006).

In Wales, the Welsh Assembly Government commissioned a major overview of the 'Future of Social Housing in Wales' which was published this year (Institute for Welsh Affairs (IWA), 2006) and brings together a wide range of data on housing and homelessness in Wales to inform policy development. The study aimed to examine the role of social housing in Wales in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and consider contemporary challenges for policy. The research brings together existing sources of data and new thinking from practice and interviews with key stakeholders to report on the implications for policy of current trends in housing.

The Welsh study reports that official homelessness virtually doubled between 2000-1 and 2004-5 (IWA, 2006, p42). The Assembly Government explained the rise as being due to a combination of increased priority for some groups; and increased pressure on the rented housing sector combined with fewer allocations due to the Right to Buy (p43). Findings from interviews with local homelessness managers in the Welsh study confirmed these explanations. The report argues that when reductions in Housing Revenue Account Subsidy are taken into account, total funding for housing in Wales declined by 7% over 2002/3 – 2005/6 (p51). One outcome of this expenditure pattern is an increasing trend towards the transfer of local authority housing stock to other landlords (p52). Welsh local authorities report that the impact of house price rises has been increasing numbers joining local authority waiting lists (p103). This includes working people outside the benefit system, who are unable to enter the owner occupation sector. While an added pressure, such a trend does offer potential for a mixed clientele, rather than social housing 'as a last resort'.

Taking account of the overview of data collected, (IWA, 2006, p110-111) make the following predictions for housing trends in Wales:

- Home ownership will continue to increase and to extend down the income scale
- The social rented sector may cater for working tenants who regard it as a temporary tenure, as well as vulnerable tenants living there long term
- Stock transfer will be pursued more vigorously as the only mechanism for levering in additional resources, and,
- There may be a need for greater regulation of the private rented sector.

One of the main policy implications from this review is that local authorities in Wales have not given sufficient priority to homelessness (despite the introduction of homelessness strategies) and that this needs to be addressed urgently (p114-115). If stock transfer proceeds, tackling homelessness will increasingly rely on partner landlords for housing supply.

### **3 Employment**

The 2005 Implementation Report records that unemployment in the UK continues to fall, reaching 4.8% in 2005, well below the EU 25 average of 8.8% (DWP, 2005, p2). Overall economic performance remains strong with continued economic growth (1.9% in 2004). However, joblessness among key vulnerable groups is recognised as a significant driver of social exclusion and providing greater opportunities to work is a key priority for 2005/6.

The key policy development in 2005/6 has been the drive to reduce dependency on incapacity benefit (for those who are long term sick/incapacitated) and encourage claimants back into work. A pilot programme entitled Pathways to Work, which involved claimants in mandatory interviews focusing on work and available employment programmes was conducted in seven areas (DWP, 2005, p11). Subsequently, the government published a Welfare Reform Bill on 4 July 2006 (DWP, 2006) to take forward legislative change. Key elements of the bill include:

- A new Employment and Support Allowance for those whose health affects their capacity to work
- Proposals for improved management of health issues in the work place
- Improved advice and support for people who have been ill to return to work
- Provision of a level playing field in the work place for people with disabilities.

The Bill will pass through the various parliamentary stages later in 2006 and will be significant for any vulnerable homeless people who currently receive Incapacity Benefit as they will be required to attend for interviews with a view to planning a return to work, if possible. In Scotland, there are some proposals to provide specific support for homeless claimants. From April 2006, local Community Planning Partnerships will take the lead in developing the local infrastructure for

support services to assist homeless people (and others excluded from work) back into the labour market (Homelessness Monitoring Group, 2006).

### **Migrant Workers**

Policy on migrant workers is determined largely by immigration policy through the Home Office, rather than as part of employment policy. Nevertheless, there is increasing acknowledgement of the need to monitor both the wider social conditions experienced by migrant workers, and the demands they may place on local social and public services. Anderson, Ruhs and Spencer (2006) surveyed 600 migrants from Central and East European Countries, and 500 employers. From 1<sup>st</sup> May 2004, migrants from 8 of the 10 accession countries obtained immediate access to the UK labour market (Sweden and Ireland were the only other EU15 countries which placed no restrictions on migrant workers from the new states). By December 2005, 345,000 had registered employment under the associated Worker Registration Scheme. Anderson et al's (2006) study confirmed that migrants worked in low paid sectors in the UK, often in jobs for which they were over qualified. However, they benefited from relatively higher wages compared to their home countries and also traded off lower level employment for perceived benefits of learning English and gaining, albeit temporary, work experience in England. Employers were generally positive about the role of migrant workers.

A survey of Scottish local authorities indicated a substantial increase in homelessness applications from migrant workers from the A8 countries (SCSH, 2006a). Devolution of housing policy means that these workers are not necessarily excluded from social housing in the way in which they are in England, but they do not have recourse to Housing Benefit as this is a UK-wide policy. Landlords have experienced problems in responding to this client group and many believe that the Scottish Executive code of guidance requires amendment. As noted above, immigration policy remains politically sensitive and subject to review in the UK.

## **4 Housing and Housing Rights**

### **UK-wide issues**

The 2005 Implementation Report on social inclusion policy offers some comment on housing policy issues. Regeneration of deprived communities is cited as an important strand of policy to tackle social exclusion (DWP, 2005, p12). Regeneration potentially has a positive impact on crime, education, health and employment – as well as obvious benefits to housing and the physical environment. DWP reports progress towards narrowing the gaps between the poorest and better off communities through neighbourhood renewal. Regenerating deprived neighbourhoods remains a key priority for 2005/6. While regeneration activities are not specifically targeted at homeless households, formerly homeless/recently housed people may benefit from area regeneration.

Tackling homelessness is discussed in the 2005 Implementation Report under the objective of preventing the risks of exclusion (DWP, 2005, p21). The report cites a 70% reduction in rough sleeping since 1998 and an end to families with children spending long periods in Bed and Breakfast accommodation. There has been a marked trend towards local authorities providing temporary accommodation for homeless households in ordinary self-contained accommodation, rather than in, say, hostel or Bed and Breakfast accommodation and a target was set in 2005 to reduce the number of households in temporary accommodation in England by half by 2010. The introduction of key performance indicators for the Supporting People programme (which provides housing support services) is expected to result in reductions in homelessness through funding preventative services and supporting formerly homeless people once they are rehoused. DWP (2005) reports that homelessness strategies are in place across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – and across local housing authorities/agencies within the four jurisdictions.

A key area for policy review which will apply across the whole of the UK is the proposed new standard Local Housing Allowance (LHA) in the private rented sector which has been piloted in nine local authority areas DWP (2005, p15). Subsequently, the Welfare Reform Bill (DWP, 2006) makes provision for national roll-out of the LHA in the private rented sector. Where Housing Benefit previously paid up to 100% of agreed rent on a means tested basis, the LHA bases assistance with housing costs on a system of standard allowances related to the size of the household and location of the property. Benefit is paid direct to the tenant in most cases, with the intention that tenants develop money management skills and exercise choice in whether they live in a cheaper property and save some LHA or live in a more expensive property and add to their LHA. However, prior to finalising the new legislation, DWP is considering whether there should be a cap on the amount of LHA tenants can receive over the actual rent level. The size criteria may also be amended to exclude living room requirements and focus only on the number of bedrooms the household requires. The actual level of LHA may be set at the median rent level for the area, rather than the mid-point between the highest and lowest.

For the time being, Local Housing Allowance will only be introduced in the privately rented sector. The 2006 Welfare Reform Bill recognises the complexity of attempting to implement LHA in the social rented sector due to the different circumstances of landlords and tenants. Any future proposals will be developed over a longer timescale and with caution.

## **England**

With respect to the overall housing system in England, the Government published its agreed response to the 2003/4 Barker review of housing supply (HM Treasury, 2005). The Government accepted Barker's argument on the need for a 'step-change' in housing supply to meet changing needs in England. Measures adopted to achieve this include planning reform and infrastructure

provision to increase the supply of new homes for sale, as well as increasing the social housing supply and shared equity schemes. The response recognises that new housing must be connected to economic development and jobs, and that new communities must have access to leisure and recreation facilities. High environmental standards are also increasingly a priority. Current projections suggest 200,000 additional new homes per year are required (p4), including 10,000 new social homes per year by 2007-8 (a 50% increase on 2004/5). Further plans would be announced in the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review.

During the second half of 2005, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) continued to take forward a range of initiatives specially devised to tackle homelessness. The need to address the quality of accommodation and service provision in hostels for homeless people in England resulted in the announcement of a £90million Hostels Capital Investment Programme over the three years 2005/6-2007/8 (ODPM, 2005b). The programme aims to transform hostels into 'centres of excellence and choice which will positively change lives' (p4). Alongside capital works to improve the physical environment, service delivery must improve (including housing, health, employment and personal development outcomes for residents). Other targets include reducing the number of residents who are excluded or who abandon their hostel places and contributing to the broader delivery of local authority and ODPM homelessness strategies. The briefing paper gives examples of the types of physical improvements which should be undertaken as well as guidance on providing 'meaningful activity' for residents and working towards sustainable resettlement (including partnership working).

Prevention of homelessness has become a key goal of current policy. ODPM conducted a survey of English local authority homelessness services which found that staffing levels in homelessness services were increasing and that all but one authority had implemented some homelessness prevention activities (ODPM, 2005c). Prevention initiatives included rent deposit schemes and accredited landlord schemes to enhance the role of the private rented sector as well as implementation of Choice Based Lettings schemes in the social rented stock. Local authorities were optimistic that almost half of homeless presentations could be prevented (p8). However, some service users expressed preference for social rented housing and there were concerns about cost and insecurity in the private rented sector. Local authorities were also optimistic about reducing the number of households in temporary accommodation and achieving efficiency savings on their homelessness services, although the main barrier remained 'the lack of affordable accommodation'.

ODPM commissioned a review of settled housing for former rough sleepers in London (Research and Information Services, 2006). The research drew on the experiences and monitoring data of agencies providing permanent housing for this client group in London, but did not appear to

include client views on this occasion. There was clear support for continuing with the established system of a Clearing House through which clients are referred for permanent housing from a pool of nearly 4000 RSL lettings reserved for former rough sleepers. Agencies were also concerned to maintain strict targeting of these resources on those who had experienced street homelessness but were ready to settle longer term in their own tenancies. The research raised issues of detailed service delivery such as co-ordinating moving in; ensuring support was appropriate and adequate; and ensuring quality of pre-tenancy work to prepare clients for settled living. The report makes a number of recommendations for fine tuning the system and improving performance on lettings and tenancy sustainment (Research Information Services, 2006).

The independent body responsible for monitoring the delivery of public services and efficiency in expenditure on services published a review of the Supporting People programme in England (Audit Commission, 2005). The national report was based on 63 prior inspections of local service providers, other published data and additional interviews with key stakeholders. The key findings were that while services had improved, delivery was not yet 'consistently good' and there was a need for a long-term central government commitment and stable financial framework (p2). Whilst noting that further review was underway, the Audit Commission report concluded that there was not yet any clear national strategy and vision for the future of Supporting People (p3) and this hindered effective delivery at the local level, despite broad commitment to the programme and its ideals. There was little appetite for radical change but the report was able to make practical recommendations to improve the effectiveness of planning, funding and delivery of, much needed, housing related support services. A new web-based directory of supporting people services was also launched in 2005. Through the site ([www.spdirectory.org.uk](http://www.spdirectory.org.uk)) agencies and members of the public can search for accommodation and housing support services provided through the Supporting People programme (ODPM, 2005d).

ODPM published research on the causes of homelessness in minority ethnic communities in England (ETHNOS, 2005). BME households remain three times more likely to become homeless than the majority white population in England, with Black African and Black Caribbean the highest risk groups. The research sought to better understand the causes of homelessness among different minority groups. For example, it found that domestic violence was the most common cause of homelessness amongst single women of South Asian origin, but among couples it was being forced to leave private rented housing. Among Black Caribbean households, family disputes often linked to pregnancy/lone parenthood and/or overcrowding were a key trigger for homelessness. Single males experienced homelessness commonly associated with problems such as child abuse, being in care, school exclusion, drug use, mental health problems and complex issues resulting in chaotic lifestyles. The research uncovered problems of knowledge of statutory services and negative experiences of statutory services among minority clients. Further, local

housing authorities lacked a strategic approach to tackling homelessness among minority communities.

Following publication of the research on homelessness in minority communities, ODPM (2005e) published guidance for local authorities to help them improve services to these groups. An Ethnic Minorities Innovation Fund was launched, consisting of £3 million revenue funding for the two years 2006/7 and 2007/8 (ODPM 2005f). The fund aims to support homelessness prevention by developing innovative approaches to tackling homelessness amongst ethnic minority populations. Local authorities, RSLs and NGOs were all eligible to apply for project funding.

In 2006 the Government department with responsibility for housing and homelessness policy for England changed its name from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) to the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). An early policy discussion paper in June 2006 reviewed progress on current housing policy (DCLG, 2006). The paper identifies progress in three key areas: stability in the owner occupied market (house prices and interest rates); quality improvement in the social rented sector through the 'decency' target for 2010; and reductions in the number of people sleeping rough and the number of families living in Bed and Breakfast accommodation. A current pressing issue is the need to continue to increase house building to meet demand. Three key goals for current housing policy seek to deliver:

- 'A step on the housing ladder for future generations of home owners
- Quality and choice for those who rent
- Mixed, sustainable communities' (DCLG, 2006, p1).

This consultation paper seeks the views of relevant stakeholders by 15 September 2006, to feed into priority setting for future rounds of housing planning and investment. There is a particular focus on social and affordable housing which are to be a priority for the Comprehensive Spending Review (p2). However, there is also an emphasis on increasing the impact of public investment and leveraging in private finance.

The 2006 policy consultation paper cites progress on the Decent Homes programme which has invested in the physical fabric of the social housing stock with £20 billion invested in council housing since 1997 and a further £7.4 billion levered in through stock transfers and private finance. Some flexibility on the 2010 target is to be given to English local authorities undertaking 'substantial transformations' of their stock where this makes more sense than driving through limited improvements for 2010 (DCLG, 2006, p7). The housing association/RSL sector remains the key vehicle for constructing new social housing, and is expected to lever in 40% additional funding through private borrowing (p7). Mechanisms for private sector and local authority Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) construction of social housing are also being explored. An 'Extra Homes Pilot' will test and develop temporary housing initiatives in London

to avoid expensive and insecure alternatives for homeless people and to assist resettlement (p8). One early example involves the local authority buying privately rented properties and converting them to social housing. This results in savings in Housing Benefit. DCLG seeks views on other possible measures to reduce the Housing Benefit costs of expensive temporary accommodation.

The consultation paper also seeks measures to improve the effectiveness of 'Section 106' planning requirements to include affordable housing in all new developments (DCLG, 2006, p8). A wider review of Housing and Regeneration will examine how new housebuilding can better contribute to sustainable, mixed communities (p8). Government in England continues to encourage shared equity schemes as a mechanism to increase low cost home ownership (p8). Policy continues to emphasise economic as well as physical regeneration including new pilot 'Private Finance Initiatives' (PFI) in the housing sphere. There is a stated commitment to 'high quality sustainable homes' (p9) but this is also against a context of efficiency gains and increased prescription in methods of construction (p7). Nevertheless, there is recognition that mass building must not 'repeat the mistakes of the past' (p9). The final section of the paper (pp10-11) considers options for future investment including increased flexibility for local authorities and RSLs to make housing investment decisions at the local level in the wider context of sustainable communities. This could include operating beyond the long established mechanism of the Local Authority Housing Revenue Account Subsidy system. Local Area Agreements could be a new mechanism for agreeing cooperation between local councils as the strategic authority and ALMOs and RSLs as the vehicles for delivering new and improved housing. Greater tenant participation continues to underpin these developments (p11).

In June 2006, DCLG published further research on prevention of homelessness (Heriot Watt University, 2006). The research was based mainly on detailed case study work in ten local authorities selected as 'active' in prevention work. The most widely adopted activities included housing advice, assistance with deposits for private rented accommodation, mediation, domestic violence support and tenancy sustainment services. It should be noted that none of these activities are particularly new. The main change appears to be a shift to a proactive approach to resolving the threat of homelessness, rather than a reactive approach to homelessness presentations. That said, the study concluded that it was likely that a 'substantial part' of the fall in homelessness presentations in England was attributable to prevention activities. Importantly, prevention could be more cost effective than dealing with homelessness presentations (Heriot Watt University, 2006). Drawing on the findings from this research, the DCLG published detailed guidance on good practice in the prevention of homelessness for use by local authorities and their partner agencies in England (Pawson, Netto and Jones, 2006).

The Housing Corporation is the regulatory body for Housing Associations and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) in England. The agency issued a consultation paper on homelessness policy and strategy for the sector in April (Housing Corporation, 2006). Following the consultation exercise, a homelessness strategy will be published by the Corporation, later in the year. The consultation examines how best the Corporation and the RSL sector can meet central government expectations that they will help meet national objectives to tackle and prevent homelessness. The Housing Corporation aims to implement its homelessness strategy within the current regulatory framework (Housing Corporation, 2006, p5). The paper then lists six main objectives with respect to homelessness (p6):

- Better partnership working
- Achieving sustainable communities, including transparent lettings policies
- Preventing homelessness through seamless housing allocation and management, with eviction as a last resort
- Making best use of stock
- Improving access to housing for those in greatest need
- Identify and promote good practice.

The remainder of the document discusses these objectives in more depth, raising questions for which responses are sought through the consultation exercise. For example there is a discussion on circumstances in which RSLs refuse to house applicants nominated by the local housing authority (p15). The corporation recommends that such 'exclusions' should be minimal and that grounds for exclusion must be clear and invites views from interested stakeholders. Other areas of practice discussed include tenancy support, lettings policies and evictions policies. Rent arrears still account for 79% of RSL evictions and the consultation paper argues that support for tenants in arrears can be more cost effective than eviction (Housing Corporation, 2006, p24). Responses to the consultation paper were due by 30 June 2006, to feed into the process of developing a final strategy.

The Local Government Association (LGA), the umbrella group for English local authorities, set up a Task Group to consider implementation of new planning guidance for the provision of Gypsy and Traveller sites which reported in 2006 (LGA, 2006). The Task Group sought to consider issues of supply and demand from the perspectives of local authorities as well as Gypsy/Traveller and settled communities. While English local authorities no longer have a statutory duty to provide public sites for Gypsy/Travellers, there is a requirement to assess accommodation needs and develop policies to make appropriate site provision (p5). However, the LGA argued that there needed to be a clearer implementation timetable set by central government (p6). The report suggests that local authorities should examine the scope for private provision of temporary sites (including public/private partnerships) and recognises the need for smaller scale transit/stopping sites, as well as for longer term established sites. The report requests the publication of good

practice guidance on site provision and management, by central government to inform local authorities' strategies. It is also argued that enhanced provision needs to be backed up by better enforcement against unauthorised encampments. The Task Group also calls for increased funding from central government to local authorities to support implementation of their strategies.

## **Scotland**

In Scotland, implementation of the suite of policies arising from the Homelessness Task Force and subsequent legislative change continues, with progress reported by the Homelessness Monitoring Group (HMG) in its annual report (Homelessness Monitoring Group, 2006). A key activity was progress towards the abolition of the priority/non-priority need distinction by 2012. A Ministerial Statement was published in December 2005 confirming an interim target for local authorities to reduce the proportion of homelessness applications assessed as non-priority by 50% by 2009 (HMG, 2006). Within this, authorities have discretion in how they prioritise different groups of homeless people. This means that, at least until 2012, the basis for deciding priority need can vary across Scottish local authorities, for the first time since its introduction in 1977. All local housing authorities have conducted an assessment of their capacity to meet the 2012 target.

Research was undertaken on the accommodation and support needs of households considered to be intentionally homeless, the findings of which will inform policy development (HMG, 2006). Following earlier research, consultation was underway on the Homelessness Task Force recommendation to abolish the local connection requirement within the homelessness legislation.

Consultation was underway on the inspection and regulation role of Communities Scotland, which includes inspection of homelessness services (HMG, 2006). Communities Scotland published a themed report on their findings on homelessness. A revised performance indicator on rent arrears has been introduced for 2006/7, to acknowledge the need to minimise evictions in the prevention of homelessness. The Scottish Housing Best Value Network piloted a peer review programme for homelessness services which incorporated service user involvement, and received positive feedback from homeless clients.

A Development Officer was in post to provide advice and support to rent deposit schemes across Scotland, although not all local authorities had their own schemes. SCSH (2006b) reported that the National Rent Deposit Forum had closed although its work was taken on by NGO Crisis in London and the Scottish Development Officer was based within FEANTSA member, SCSH. Agreement was reached to continue to support the national furniture grant scheme which provides 1000 furnished tenancies per year, subject to further review of effectiveness. The fourth of the large hostels for homeless people in Glasgow was due to close in July 2006, as part of the ongoing strategy to transform homelessness services in the City (HMG, 2006).

Local authorities appeared to be making good progress in implementing their homelessness strategies, including a wide range of services and partnerships (HMG, 2006). They still faced challenges with respect to rising applications and the supply of suitable temporary and permanent accommodation. A new Innovation Fund was created to support demonstration projects on the prevention of homelessness, to which local authorities could bid for funds.

The HMG annual report (2006) also recorded progress towards meeting key national targets during 2005/6:

- (1) **No-one need sleep rough.** No new counts were available but improved measurement of rough sleeping was being considered as part of changes to the common monitoring system and a consultation exercise was to be undertaken with local authorities.
- (2) **Existing homelessness becomes more visible.**<sup>2</sup> Homelessness applications continued to rise, albeit at a slower rate, but some homelessness remained hidden, especially among minority communities. A related outcome was the increased use of temporary accommodation. The proportion of applications accepted as homeless fell by 4% in 2004/5 and this would continue to be monitored.
- (3) **Sustainable resettlement.** Statistics indicate a slight decrease in repeat homelessness, but improved monitoring is required.
- (4) **Fewer people becoming homeless in the first place**<sup>3</sup>. Homelessness applications continued to rise and research had been commissioned to produce guidance on homelessness prevention.
- (5) **The duration of homelessness is reduced.** The average length of time taken to process a homelessness application had actually increased by 5 weeks to 15 weeks, although there was significant variation around this average (p15).

It can be seen then, that despite the positive programmes adopted in Scotland to reduce homelessness, targets were not yet being fully met.

The Homelessness Monitoring Group sub-group on awareness raising and best practice commissioned an important study of the attitudes of housing/homelessness professionals towards homelessness and policy developments (Jardine and Bilton, 2006). The survey of workers in local authorities, RSLs and the voluntary sector found that housing professionals reported high levels of commitment to the policy agenda and to service delivery. Respondents also prioritised service user views in measuring service responsiveness. However, there was also clear evidence that deeply entrenched views about 'priority' and 'non-priority' needs persisted into the post-2000 policy era.

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<sup>2</sup> This should be interpreted as better quantified, rather than more visible, for example, on the street.

<sup>3</sup> This should be interpreted as a goal of preventing homelessness where possible.

For example, more than half of respondents felt that the key policy of abolishing the priority/non-priority distinction by 2012 was **not** fair (Jardine and Bilton, 2006, p4, author's emphasis). When asked about priorities within the homeless population, 'non-vulnerable' homeless applications received very low priority (p6). Those most disadvantaged in the housing system, such as former prisoners, and those with alcohol/drug problems and chaotic lifestyles were also given very low relative priority by homelessness workers. These findings must raise concern about the depth of understanding and commitment of local agencies and frontline workers to implementation of national policy and to meeting the needs of those most at risk of homelessness. Recommendations from the research include improved training and joint working; further review of the Code of Guidance for local agencies; and the appointment of a national co-ordinator to support local authorities towards meeting the 2012 target for abolition of the priority/non-priority need distinction (p10). It was also recommended that the Scottish Executive commission a survey of broader public opinion of homelessness and government policy to tackle the problem.

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 received Royal Assent on 5 January (CIH Scotland, 2006a). The Act introduced a range of measures to improve housing quality, mainly in the private housing sector. Local authorities were given new powers to designate Housing Renewal Areas to deal with concentrations of sub-standard housing. Local Housing Strategies were required to include the improvement of housing standards as part of their purpose. The Act introduced changes to the Tolerable Standard and Repairing Standard in Scotland and amended local authority powers to deal with disrepair in the private housing sector. Other provisions included mandatory production of certain information to prospective house purchasers; provision for a national tenancy deposit scheme (private rented sector) and provisions for the licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO).

The Planning Etc (Scotland) Bill was introduced in December 2005, aiming to modernise the planning system (CIH Scotland, 2006b). The Bill makes provision for the National Planning Framework to become a statutory document. Local Development Plans are to involve local people more and provide a simplified approval system. There will also be a duty to contribute to sustainable development. Strategic Development Plans will replace structure plans in the four major city/urban regions and will concentrate on strategic issues which cross local authority boundaries. CIH Scotland (2006) argue that the links between adequate supply of affordable housing and economic activity are not highlighted and it is important that implications for housing are given full consideration as the Bill progresses through the Scottish Parliament.

The Scottish Executive published a National Strategy on Offender Management for 2006-2008 (reported in SCSH 2006b). The multi-agency strategy recognises the importance of housing

provision and homelessness prevention. A national accommodation strategy is to be developed for high risk offenders.

### **Wales and Northern Ireland**

The Welsh Assembly Government published its updated National Homelessness Strategy for Wales in November 2005. The introduction makes clear that the Welsh Assembly expects committed joint working and engagement with the homelessness strategy across health, social services and education, as well as housing providers (Welsh Assembly Government, 2005, p1). This is in order to meet both the housing and other support needs of homeless households. In line with strategies in the rest of the UK, the Welsh Assembly prioritises the prevention of homelessness and requires strategic planning of local services to meet needs. Other objectives include improved information; fairness in application of the law; minimising time in temporary accommodation and ensuring temporary accommodation is adequate; and improving access to social and private tenures, and support services (p8). The strategy also sets clear targets to prevent homelessness and reduce homeless acceptances and placements in Bed and Breakfast accommodation (p9). The remainder of the strategy takes the form of a detailed action plan for central government and local services in Wales across all aspects of homelessness (prevention; accommodation; support services; and complex needs).

The Northern Ireland Homelessness Strategy published in 2002 remains in force (Northern Ireland Housing Executive, 2006). This strategy also prioritises homelessness prevention and provision of accommodation and support for those who do become homeless. There is a stated policy of ending use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation as soon as possible and improved standards for temporary accommodation have been put in place.

## **5 Good Practice**

The inclusion of good practice examples in a policy report raises the question of how, precisely, good practice is established. Issues may arise around differing perspectives on what constitutes good practice across different stakeholders in the homelessness policy community (including homeless households). Perhaps most importantly, ideally there should be some rigour in evaluation of practice and achieved outcomes, to underpin consensus across stakeholders (e.g. central government; service providers; professional bodies; and service users) that service delivery meets some agreed 'good practice standard'.

In the UK the Chartered Institute of Housing has a role in agreeing professional standards for housing practice, as would social work professional bodies. In addition, the regulatory frameworks for housing and social care service providers also set standards for practice. To the extent that NGO service providers are involved in implementing homelessness policy and, importantly,

receive public funding, they will be bound by these regulatory frameworks and performance standards. That set, meeting such good practice standards would represent a 'minimal' or 'normal' level of service delivery, rather than a particularly high quality model for other to emulate.

Further, caution must be expressed as published documents often include examples put forward as good practice which have not necessarily been rigorously evaluated and/or have not clearly demonstrated that they meet an agreed good practice standard. Innovation is often confused with good practice. While innovation is a necessary part of the policy and service development process, again, evaluation is required in order to clarify what, precisely, has been achieved by innovation.

In its 2005 Implementation Report on social inclusion, the DWP (2005, p27) cites its own 'Pathways to Work' pilot as an example of good practice. The pilot programmes sought to help those in long term receipt of incapacity benefit back into work. While there are clearly positive dimensions to this process, there are also inherent conflicts in pressurising people with severe illness into the labour market in a manner which may not be appropriate.

The Scottish Executive's homelessness strategy and delivery programme is often held up as an example of good practice at the policy level. However, delivery is not yet fully meeting the policy objectives of this ambitious programme. Nevertheless, the progress made across all four jurisdictions in the United Kingdom in agreeing the principle of a strategic approach to tackling homelessness and subsequently devising and implementing both national and local homelessness strategies does appear to represent a genuinely holistic and committed approach to homelessness which is supported across stakeholders. The challenge of implementation and meeting stringent targets to minimise rough sleeping and prevent homelessness still requires ongoing monitoring and evaluation.

From this year's policy review, the Rough Sleepers Initiative probably continues to stand out as an area of good practice in the United Kingdom. The most recent work by Research and Information Services (2006) builds on more than a decade of continuous monitoring and refinement of London's RSI services which has demonstrably resulted in a reduction of the problem as well as learning from evaluation and refinement of policy to meet the reality of the needs of people sleeping rough. Practice has also been evaluated across the rest of England and in Scotland.

## **Conclusion**

This annual homelessness policy review for the UK has considered the Government's own assessment of its social cohesion policies as documented in its Implementation Report (DWP, 2005). While this document thoroughly reviews all the relevant dimensions of policy, it presents a largely uncritical account of government policy and progress. For example, precise progress

against clear targets is not always entirely transparent. Given the breadth of scope of inclusion policies, discussion of housing and homelessness in such a report is necessarily limited.

The broader review of policy developments during 2005/6 does indicate, however, that both wider housing policy and policies specific to homelessness continue to receive a high priority across the UK central government bodies and at local implementation level. However, while resources for housing have increased, there will always be pressures for further investment in new housing and for funding necessary support services. The nationwide commitment to a strategic approach to homelessness is commendable and the increasing emphasis on homelessness prevention appears positive. Some caution is necessary in interpretation however, particularly in terms of frontline service delivery with respect to homeless and potentially homeless households' own views of their circumstances and desired solutions. The translation of broadly positive policies into 'good practice' in the frontline, which can both meet targets and still keep the needs of individuals and households paramount, remains a huge challenge across the UK.

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