SOCIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE

AGENDA

20th Meeting, 2002 (Session 1)

Wednesday 13th November 2002

The Committee will meet at 10.00am in Committee Room 1.

1. Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Bill: The Committee will take evidence on the general principles of the Bill at Stage 1 from—

Panel Session One

Shelter:
Gavin Corbett, Head of Campaigns
Grainia Long, Parliamentary and Policy Officer

The Big Issue in Scotland Ltd:
Kathleen Caskie, Director of Public Affairs
Stephen Strang, Grand Central Union Member

Scottish Council for Single Homeless (SCSH):
Robert Aldridge, Director
Alice Ann Jackson, Convener

Panel Session Two

Hamish Allan Centre:
Ian Robertson, Chief Housing Officer

Edinburgh Cyrenians:
Des Ryan, Director

The Calman Trust:
Isobel Grigor, Agent

Jim Johnston
Clerk to the Committee
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The following paper relates to the meeting:

SJ/02/20/01 Submission from the Edinburgh Cyrenians
Views of Edinburgh Cyrenians

Executive Summary

- Edinburgh Cyrenians enthusiastically welcomes the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Bill. It fulfils all of the targets for changes to housing legislation campaigned for by this charity over the past 25 years.
- We particularly support the powers for Ministers to suspend the local connection rule and the phased abolition of the priority need test.
- We recommend, based on growing agency experience, that refugees are included as a priority group at the earliest opportunity.
- We recommend that implementation of the provisions must be closely monitored and rigorously enforced across all local authority areas.
- We judge that implementation of new duties on local authorities will require a major expansion of rented accommodation but that this should be set up in such a way that does not create benefit dependency.
- In our experience homelessness is often more than a housing issue and local authorities should provide - or obtain from social work services or voluntary agencies - assessment and support that is holistic, person centred and aimed at long-term solutions so that people do not return to homelessness.

Background

Edinburgh Cyrenians is an independent charitable trust, dedicated 35 years ago to tackling homelessness. The focus is on those most at risk of long-term homelessness, whose houselessness or fragile living situation is compounded by a range of disadvantages and personal difficulties. It is also increasingly focused on preventing homelessness, through use of the private rented sector and schools education.

As part of its work, the charity maintains a close dialogue with its service users and networks extensively in the public, voluntary and business sectors. A key characteristic of the charity is the provision of innovative solutions, being amongst the first in Scotland to pilot Rent Deposit Guarantee Schemes (1995) providing ‘FareShare’ as a means of promoting healthy eating and food education as part of effective care and resettlement, (2000). The charity is currently highlighting the risk of the rise of long-term homelessness amongst young male refugees by developing a new ‘model’ project in Edinburgh. Edinburgh Cyrenians maintain that – to be effective in tackling homelessness – the aim must be to enable people to achieve their potential as contributing members of society, accessing training, health, education and employment opportunities as well as a home.

The Edinburgh Cyrenians Director, Des Ryan, has been with the charity for 14 years. He has worked continuously in tackling homelessness with a variety of charities around the UK for the past 25 years, having started providing soup runs in London in the run up to the 1977 Homeless Persons Act. Comments have been prepared in consultation with service users and with CEO’s from Aberdeen Cyrenians, Dundee Cyrenians and Glasgow Simon Community – members of the Scottish Simon / Cyrenian Alliance.

Introduction
Edinburgh Cyrenians enthusiastically welcomes the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Bill. It fulfils all of the targets for changes to housing legislation campaigned for by this charity over the past 25 years. The Homelessness Task Force should take great credit for their comprehensive report and well targeted recommendations. The Scottish Executive is to be congratulated on accepting its conclusions, and for adopting its proposals for legislation through the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Bill. From our perspective, the provisions of the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Bill will be of significant benefit to people who are homeless or facing this damaging trauma. Depending on implementation, local authorities (and their staff) also have an opportunity to dispense with the role of investigator or gatekeeper and adopt that of brokers on behalf of homeless people, helping them find the housing and support they need.

Process

The charity compliments the Scottish Executive on the process used leading to this Bill – especially the welcome element of consultation with front-line agencies. It has also given us the opportunity to inform and get feedback from our service users.

Current Provisions in the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Bill.

We have no quibble with any of the provisions of the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Bill. We acknowledge and understand the need to phase in or phase out certain elements and welcome the inclusion of target dates for the provision by ministers of progress reports.

Edinburgh Cyrenians welcomes the recognition that all homeless applicants should be entitled to the rights that at present accorded only to those assessed as homeless and in priority need. The Bill recognises that homelessness itself is the priority, rather than distinguishing levels of priority within homelessness.

Our agency experience of the growing number and the vulnerability of homeless refugees leads us to recommend that refugees should be included in the first wave of groups for whom priority is given.

We recognise public sensitivity around the issue of the suspension of ‘local connection’ and support this as an essential progressive element in the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Bill. Whilst there may be risks in people being drawn to certain ‘honey pot’ areas and a public reaction to what might be portrayed as ‘queue jumping,’ it is – in our view – a better problem than that of vulnerable and often traumatised people being denied help when and where it is most needed.

In common, we know, with many interested parties, our focus is now on the issues of implementation and resourcing.

Implementation & Resources

The implementation of the provisions of the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Bill would require to be closely monitored and robustly enforced to ensure good and equal practice across all local authorities.

There must be an expansion of availability of affordable rented accommodation across all local authority areas. The cost of rented accommodation – especially furnished accommodation – should not make people benefit dependent or stop them from moving to employment, training or education.

Assessment and support

Homelessness is often more than houselessness – especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. This is fully acknowledged in the Homelessness Task Force Report. It appears inconsistent that given this

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1 Tackling homelessness involves a wider range of problems and issues relating to health, benefits, employment opportunity etc.
2 The final report of the Homelessness Task Force, Helping Homeless People, emphasises from its first page on that, while the housing dimension is crucial in resolving homelessness, it is not on its own enough:

...housing is not the only dimension which needs to be addressed. In many instances homelessness is the result of wider needs which have not been recognised, or which have not been met effectively...All the varying needs of people affected by homelessness must be assessed and addressed... Para 5
emphasis, there is no measure on the face of the Bill requiring local authorities, in carrying out a homelessness assessment, to look at anything other than the accommodation needs of the household. Local authorities should have a duty to assess support needs as well as housing need. Current practice is too ‘departmental’ and this results in too many housing failures. The challenge to local authorities – in partnership with voluntary providers – is to provide a more holistic assessment and a more holistic, person centred service, aimed at a long-term and sustained solution. Where possible, applicants should have a choice about receiving support and from whom they receive that support.

Des Ryan
DIRECTOR
Edinburgh Cyrenians Trust Tuesday, 05 November 2002