SUBMISSION FROM GLASGOW HOMESLESSNESS NETWORK

Introduction
1. Glasgow Homelessness Network (GHN) is delighted to offer this written evidence to the Local Government and Communities Committee on the general principles of the Housing (Scotland) Bill.

2. GHN is the umbrella and coordinating body for homelessness in Glasgow. This paper is submitted in full consultation with a number of key member organisations providing services to people affected by homelessness across Glasgow.

3. The main focus of this response is on the Housing (Scotland) Bill focus on the modernising of the regulatory regime for social landlords.

Comments on Housing (Scotland) Bill: Modernising Regulation of Social Landlords
4. GHN welcomes the approach of making the Scottish Housing Regulator a body that works entirely independent of Scottish Ministers and understand the broad movement towards regulation becoming more risk-based and proportionate.

5. However, a number of questions have been raised about the regulatory tools available to the SHR in their work. The Policy Memorandum refers to the power to carry out inquiries about social landlords rather than to inspect and it is not immediately clear that this would go far enough to meet the needs of people using housing and homelessness services.

6. GHN would like to see a broad range of regulatory tools, including inspection where necessary, being made available to the Scottish Housing Regulator. It would be possible to make use of inspections only in the identified cases of concern, avoiding the blanket inspection process that has been carried out in order to gather baseline assessment data and thus remaining proportionate.

7. The implementation of the proposed self-assessment procedures also need a great deal of consideration. GHN would suggest that social landlords and homelessness services should be required to engage with third parties as part of any self-assessment process.

8. GHN is pleased to see the inclusion of homeless people as one of the key customer groups whose interests the Scottish Housing Regulator will work to safeguard and promote. This is an important step forward from the draft version of the Bill.

9. The interests of homeless people are of particular importance as the initial round of baseline inspections of statutory homelessness services have clearly shown that the majority of local authorities are providing services that are either ‘fair’ or ‘poor’, ultimately meaning that the majority of people approaching local authorities for assistance have not been receiving a good service.

10. However, GHN would suggest that a level of clarity is still required in the Bill over the bodies to be overseen by the Scottish Housing Regulator. The Bill and supporting documents refer heavily to the regulation of social landlords, covering both local authority landlords and registered social landlords, but there is no specific mention of regulation of statutory homelessness services that carry out the legal homelessness assessment and act as the
gateway to temporary and permanent accommodation. This causes an amount of confusion as the lack of reference statutory homelessness services is not in alignment with the promotion of the interests of homeless people.

11. If it is intended that statutory homelessness services are covered within the definition of ‘housing activities’ carried out by social landlords (part 1, section 3 of the Bill) then this needs to be made more explicit.

12. This is particularly important in relation to the local authority areas, including Glasgow, where the former council housing stock has been transferred to Registered Social Landlords. Without any specific reference in the Bill the risk is run of creating a gap through which non-landlord local authorities can slip in terms of regulation of their statutory homelessness services as the term social landlord is no longer applicable to them.

13. With reference to the proposals for the development of a Scottish Social Housing Charter, GHN welcomes the underlying principle of the existence of an accessible set of standards against which people can assess the services they receive. However, in line with previous comments, it is difficult to see how this will work in practice in relation to statutory homelessness services. The remit of such services differs greatly from those providing a landlord function and this would need to be reflected in the development of any Charter.

14. As such, it would be worth considering a separate Homelessness Charter for people accessing local authority homelessness services in order to recognise the different sets of expectations people have of the different service types as well as ensuring a link between the performance of statutory homelessness services and the detailed homelessness legislation that dictates the level of service provision required.

15. Broad statements within such a Charter could cover the key entitlements people have when accessing homelessness services such as:

- Their right to make a homelessness presentation;
- Their right to interim accommodation while the assessment is carried out;
- A homelessness assessment carried out in accordance with legislation;
- A decision on homelessness assessments within 28 days;
- The provision of a letter clearly setting out homelessness decisions.

16. Such statements within the Charter would also be well placed to allow the Scottish Housing Regulator to assess performance against homelessness legislation post 2012.

Comments on Housing (Scotland) Bill: Reforming the Right to Buy Social Housing

17. GHN welcomes the moves in the Housing (Scotland) Bill to make further reform to the Right to Buy social housing and agrees with the policy objectives set out in the Policy Memorandum in relation to protecting the current stock of social housing.

18. While this is of great importance, GHN would continue to note that this will only have the desired effect when implemented alongside a significant increase in the provision of affordable housing to prevent and alleviate homelessness.
Comments on Housing (Scotland) Bill: Amending the Law on Registering Private Landlords

19. The proposals put forward in the Bill regarding the registration of private landlords are welcomed by GHN and members of the network.

20. Any steps to provide the public with information on poorly performing landlords would be an important tool in preventing homelessness.

Comments on Housing (Scotland) Bill: Protection of Unauthorised Tenants

21. GHN is pleased to see reference to the protection of unauthorised tenants in the Bill and would support plans for more detailed proposals being put forward at stage 2.

Comments on Housing (Scotland) Bill: Local Connection

22. GHN welcomes the changes in homelessness legislation to ensure that residence or employment in the Armed Forces forms a local connection to an area.

Conclusions

23. Overall GHN and members of the network in Glasgow recognise the important changes set out in the Housing (Scotland) Bill.

24. It is clear that the changes proposed to the Scottish Housing Regulator are significant and will require serious consideration by the Local Government and Communities committee and the wider Parliament to ensure that people’s rights under Scotland’s progressive homelessness legislation are being met.

Glasgow Homelessness Network

4 March 2010