1. Scottish Churches Housing Action brings together the main Christian churches in Scotland, with a vision that there can be a Scotland free of homelessness. Our purpose is to support the churches in making a contribution to this vision.

2. We do this through:
   - development of volunteer-based responses to homelessness at a local level
   - encouraging the churches to make redundant or under-used church property available for affordable housing
   - a programme of awareness-raising and education on homelessness throughout the churches, and speaking out for justice on behalf of the churches.

3. Scottish Churches Housing Action strongly supports the aims of the Housing (Scotland) Bill, in improving the value of social housing to those who live in it, or aspire to live in it, in securing the supply of affordable housing for rent, and in improving arrangements for private sector housing.

4. We further believe that the Bill represents an opportunity to improve the arrangements for tackling homelessness effectively, and that it is the last chance before the target date of 2012, which the Scottish Government has set for giving an entitlement to settled housing to almost all applicants under the homelessness provisions.

5. The specific improvement that we advocate is that when a local authority conducts a homelessness assessment for an individual household, the support needs, as well as the accommodation needs, of members of that household should be taken into account. The assessment process should include establishing a package of support measures, if needed to assist the household in sustaining any accommodation arrangements that are reached as a result of the homelessness application.

6. The current legislation simply instructs the local authority to consider the housing needs. Some councils already do what we are proposing, and including this provision in the Bill would ensure that all carry out the practice that is currently done by the best.

7. Support is a wide range of activities which can be grouped into four categories – examples are given for each:
   - **Settling in** – provision of furniture and/or starter packs of basic household items; assistance with decorating;
   - **Sustaining a tenancy** – assistance in developing cooking & household skills; training in budgeting; physical care where needed; neighbour mediation
   - **Access to services** – helping with routes to health and/or rehabilitation services; employment & training; benefits and debt advice
   - **Social networks** – breaking down isolation; building positive social links in the community.
8. Not all homeless applicants need all these services, but many will need some, and the point of an early assessment is to secure what is needed at a crucial point of transition. Experience is that things can easily go wrong, with repeat homelessness the result.

9. It should be emphasised that it is not envisaged that the local authority is obliged to provide all these services directly – there is already a strong network of services, provided by councils, housing associations, voluntary organisations, health and other services. The purpose of our amendment would be to ensure that both the applicant and the assessing officer have considered what needs the household might have, and that the applicant is aware of what is available locally.

10. Scottish Churches Housing Action presented this proposal to a seminar held by Shelter Scotland in Glasgow on Wednesday 3 March 2010, and it was met with support from those present, who included local authority staff and members, housing associations, voluntary organisations and others. We support the more detailed submission included in Shelter Scotland’s evidence already submitted to the Committee.

Alastair Cameron
Chief Executive
Scottish Churches Housing Action