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Sent: 24 January 2008 22:19
To: Housing Consultation 2007
Cc: DAVID SINCLAIR
Subject: Firm Foundations - Church of Scotland Response

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Please find attached the Church of Scotland's response to the consultation "Firm Foundations", submitted on behalf of the Church by Rev Dr David Sinclair, Secretary to the Church & Society Council of the Church of Scotland, 121 George St, Edinburgh, EH2 4YN. The Church is happy for this response to be made public, and for the Scottish Government to contact Dr Sinclair again directly, or through this office, in relation to this.

Yours,

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CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

CHURCH AND SOCIETY COUNCIL

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Firm Foundations:

Response from the Church and Society Council of the Church of Scotland

The Church of Scotland is one of the bodies supporting Scottish Churches Housing Action. The points below are taken from and offered in support of the submission provided by that organisation. In addition, we would wish to offer our agreement with the answers to specific questions that they give in their paper.

There is much in the consultation paper which we find encouraging:

- ❖ the continued commitment to the 2012 target on homelessness
- ❖ the intention to abolish the right to buy for new-build homes in the local authority and housing association sectors. We hope this will be the first step in dismantling this damaging policy
- ❖ the proposed incentives to local authorities to build new social housing under prudential borrowing arrangements
- ❖ the introduction of a target for new house building
- ❖ the recognition of the need to stem the process of marginalisation of the demographic profile of tenants of social housing.

The desired ends of current policy are:

- ❖ To increase the overall volume of new house building in Scotland, to 35,000 a year by 2015
- ❖ To offer settled accommodation to every non-intentionally homeless applicant by 2012, with a new emphasis on the role of the private rented sector
- ❖ To reduce the public subsidy per house built by the housing association sector, while maintaining at least the present level of new building, and improving physical standards and environmental sustainability
- ❖ To make access to owner-occupation more affordable.

The following aspirations should be added to this list:

- ❖ To ensure that a minimum level of new affordable housing is added to the national stock each year (we are aware that the Government does not agree with the target of 10,000 per year that we and other organisations have proposed, but we believe setting a target will be beneficial, even if it falls short of the volume we have identified)
- ❖ Recognising the role of land price inflation in adding to the costs of new social housing, to identify ways of reducing this component of the development cost
- ❖ To recognise and support the work of the voluntary sector and volunteer action in contributing to achieving the homelessness target for 2012 and to sustaining its benefits; and in demonstrating innovative responses to housing and homelessness problems.

In the parliamentary debate introducing the consultation paper, the Cabinet Secretary for Health & Wellbeing described that target as 'not an aspiration but an absolute pledge'. We congratulate the Government for this commitment. However, the additional aspirations listed above are needed because the ends that are clearly desired by the Scottish Government, and shared by ourselves and many others, will not be reached by the measures proposed in the consultation paper.

The elements required to meet the target go beyond the scope of the consultation document, including as they do a wide variety of forms of support; and, at the Westminster level, substantial change in

Housing Benefit arrangements. But they clearly include an accommodation component, in terms of both temporary accommodation and settled accommodation.

We are disappointed on two fronts:

- ❖ Firstly that consideration of homelessness is almost entirely in the context of the paper's chapter on the private rented sector
- ❖ Secondly, that the volume of affordable housing to be developed, which we see as the key precondition for seriously contemplating success in meeting the 2012 target, is inadequate.

It is our view not that the maximum should be done within available resources to approach the target, but that the resources must be found to deliver on it.

With only four years to go, decisions need to be made now that put the houses needed in place. The Government is right to look to the private sector to add to the provision that is available to meet homelessness need, but the main responsibility, for providing settled housing as well as for assisting applicants through the homelessness process, will remain with local authorities, supported by their arrangements with housing associations.

We are disappointed, too, that no mention was made in the paper of the work of the Homelessness Monitoring Group, set up in 2002 to make annual reports on progress to the 2012 target; meetings of the group have been less frequent since May. It would have been good had the opportunity been taken to make its future clear, and if it is not seen as the appropriate vehicle for progressing towards the target, what is to take its place.

Little mention is made of the contribution of the voluntary sector in housing. While this does not represent another landlord sector alongside councils, housing associations and private lets, the voluntary sector plays a major role directly in relation to housing, covering among other things:

- ❖ Supported accommodation
- ❖ Emergency accommodation and hostels
- ❖ Advice & advocacy services
- ❖ Routes to access housing, including rent & deposit guarantee schemes
- ❖ Resettlement services
- ❖ Tenant organisations
- ❖ Specific groups such as elderly people, refugees, women experiencing violence in the home
- ❖ Support in a variety of forms
- ❖ Development opportunities
- ❖ Policy analysis.

In addition, many of the ancillary services crucial to creating opportunities for accessing and sustaining independent housing lie within the voluntary sector: drugs and alcohol recovery; training and access to work; mental health support; services for care leavers and others with an institutional background; work with offenders. The paper is written as if this were of little significance to the overall housing picture, but if the sector were not there, to offer routes to settled housing, to pick up the pieces when things go wrong, to develop demonstration models for ideas that then become mainstream, the main housing agencies would be at a loss.

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