

JOINT HOUSING POLICY AND DELIVERY GROUP

13 JUNE 2019

TABLE DISCUSSION ON PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS TO HOMELESSNESS

This is a record of the points made by participants and does not necessarily represent the views of the Scottish Government or the Group.

Background and context setting

Catriona MacKean briefly highlighted key findings from a 2017 survey which explored people's perceptions of homelessness and she compared these to statistics about reasons for homelessness in Scotland. Catriona invited attendees to discuss these findings and how their organisations could help challenge negative perceptions.

The discussions were wide-ranging and covered a number of topics including housing supply, improving public understanding of the issues people experiencing homelessness face and the importance of language in delivering the messages we want people to hear. A short summary of the key points made is below.

Housing supply – social housing is becoming more scarce – this means that available stock is more often allocated to more vulnerable/complex households which can have the effect of weakening communities. Quality of housing is improving but is poverty of opportunity increasing? People need to have a home. Rapid rehousing will help but more houses are needed in the system now.

Competition for housing due to insufficient supply

- Tensions exist between enabling tenancy choice whilst less desirable stock is available.
- The supply issue is critical. The private rented sector is driving poverty and those living in poverty in private rented properties are less likely to get rehoused by the local authority. Supply also needs to be about the way homes are accessed and how affordable they are.
- We need more social rented housing, but we also need to be more innovative in how they are allocated. E.g., we need better responses and procedures for victims of domestic abuse.

Perceptions of fairness

- There are tensions about people waiting on a local authority housing list and people who gain access to accommodation by being homeless – need to work to make sure this doesn't gain too much of a foothold.
- An effective response to homelessness requires additional investment from other sectors which could have an impact on other services they deliver.
- Will all the changes we are making create a backlash against homeless people – because of perceptions of fairness?
- Consistent practice across Scotland is important.

Understanding and awareness – homelessness is often un-relatable to people's experiences, as fortunately it is still relatively rare. We need to make sure people know that anyone can become homeless – and this can be achieved by sharing life stories.

Accurate evidence

- We know that the current homelessness system has a success rate of 80% and should focus this work on what drives repeat homelessness in the remaining 20% (links to health services).
- While statistics identified that 51% of people just need a house, addictions and mental health was identified as a key issue and this could help people understand underlying reasons for people becoming homeless.
- Another key stat that could be used is that 80% of instances of homelessness are one-offs without repeating.

Visible vs hidden homelessness

- There is a lack of distinction between homelessness and rough sleeping in the public mind. Rough sleeping is just the tip of the homelessness iceberg and this is partly explained by the public's exposure to homelessness through street begging.
- Need to shine a light on the less visible manifestations of homelessness, not just rough sleeping.
- Clarity is needed about who is regarded as homeless.

Empathy

- It was felt that some groups of homeless people elicit more sympathy than others and that it would be wise to tap into this. There was a suggestion about drawing on the front-footed approach taken in relation to old-firm derbies which correspond with increases in incidents of domestic abuse, which uses social media well.
- Homeless people are seen as victims which attributes blame, often against the individual.
- Consider natural levels of empathy for certain groups.
- There is a need to engender greater empathy amongst the frontline delivery professionals.
- Domestic abuse is an area where we need to do much more.

People with complex needs often have trust issues. Encourage front line staff through training/guidance to show empathy and a willingness to understand individual circumstances/needs. Need to recognise that often people don't want to continually re-tell their story. Should streamline the assessment process and share information across agencies so that people don't need to repeat their back stories.

Creating change - we need to be clear about what we're trying to achieve in shifting public perceptions, why it matters. Public perceptions of homelessness are linked more broadly to our understanding of society and societal structures and are therefore hard to shift.

Front line staff - are as key a group as the general public, if not more so. Attitudes of staff are just as important as attitudes of the public, and we need to be careful not to attribute the characteristics of the *system* (impersonal, inflexible, etc.) to the *people* working within in.

- There needs to be strong partnership working on this. Social housing providers can play a key role along with local authorities and the third sector. What can SG do – a formal marketing campaign?
- Integration and joint working within the housing sector and across other sectors – for example the creation of prevention pathways for veterans and on domestic abuse will require a number of organisations to work together.

Learning from others - there is the potential to learn from other policy areas to change the way people think about these things, such as:

- suicide prevention
- child poverty
- social security as an investment – dignity and respect, dismantling “scrounger” label
- shifts in attitude towards people who identify as LGBT (see Scottish Social Attitudes Survey)
- socioeconomic diversity

Influencing the media

- Media coverage is blurring the overall picture.
- Need to influence messaging to steer media away from exacerbating myths around homelessness and street begging/rough sleeping in particular. Too often stock photographs are used that bare little relation to the overall homelessness landscape. People who present as homeless often have jobs and this is not represented in media coverage.
- Government and third sector pressure groups could do more to get onto the front foot with messaging and to challenge myths and inaccurate reporting. Schools could also do more to change perceptions for the new generation coming through.

Careful use of language

- There needs to be a change in the narrative and the use of language when talking about homelessness. The word ‘homelessness’ starts with a negative premise rather than a positive one. Some suggestions follow:
 - We can draw on the research about the word ‘poverty’ as an example which can be seen as feeling threatening or frightening. This research shows the value in changing and reframing the conversation by making it a personal issue rather than a systemic one.

- We can also draw on the example of Housing to 2040 which sets out a positive vision of the future, rather than a negative one. Also useful to refer to ensuring people have a 'home' rather than a 'house' to live in.
- "Housing Options Officers" rather than "Homelessness Officers"
- We need to consider how we get across that homelessness is a result of structural impacts rather than individual agency.
- There always will be tensions for charities – requirement for fundraising leads to painting a particular picture, whereas charities are also wanting to change hearts and minds.
- Frontline workers can be key in the use of more positive language. A toolkit for housing officers would be a useful support to enable them to do this.
- How can we highlight and promote good and innovative practice?

Telling the story around the statistics

- The release of our bi-annual statistics currently doesn't tell the wider story of where progress is happening so entrenched ideas re homelessness continue.
- We need to create a more comprehensive story around the homelessness statistics when they are published.