

Shelter lambast MSPs on dealing with homelessness

✘ Graeme Brown, Director of Shelter Scotland, has issued a hard-hitting statement about The Housing Bill currently being debated at Holyrood. He said:-

“Across the developed world Scotland is held in high esteem for its landmark commitment to ensure that every homeless person has the right to a home by the end of 2012.

Although that commitment was set back in 2002, today’s crop of MSPs have seemed to show similar appetite for progressive reform. The housing bill currently going through parliament has been amended, with the unanimous backing of a parliamentary committee, to give homeless people the help they need to keep a home.

The argument is simple. For a minority (up to a third) of homeless people the right to a home is not enough. They need additional help – housing support in other words. This support is to help them deal better with their money and household budgets, or meet tenancy conditions or cover day to day matters in the home. It allows them to settle into a tenancy and to develop the skills and independence to be able to keep it and become good neighbours. Government commissioned research, both north and south of the border, has shown the value of this support and concluded that the value more than outweighs any cost.

Progressive local authorities already provide this support and it is already stressed heavily in official Government guidance. However, despite this, far too many homeless people don’t get the support they need – it is a post code lottery. So some people end up prey to a cycle of repeat homelessness which devastates households and families and costs more in

the long run.

That is why a strengthening of the legislation is needed. In accepting that case, Housing Minister, Alex Neil, said that the amendment was "sufficiently flexible for me to be content to support it."

So far so good. However, the Bill has not yet passed its final parliamentary hurdle. In an astonishing u-turn, Liberal Democrat MSP, Jim Tolson, has submitted an amendment entirely deleting the change for which he voted earlier and substituting for it a simple requirement that the Scottish Government issue guidance on housing support for homeless people. Since there is already guidance in place this is simply re-asserting the status quo.

It is a shocking betrayal of the interests of homeless people and of cost-efficient, progressive public policy. It is based on flimsy and, at times, false evidence.

Of course, the fact that a Liberal Democrat MSP has chosen this path may matter little in itself. It is what the other parties and what the Scottish Government chooses to do that counts. The minister can choose to listen to progressive, factual arguments as he did three weeks ago or cave in to an ill-evidenced reactionary case and join in this remarkable volte-face.

MSPs as a whole can recognise that homeless people, like all people at the margins of society, face very tough years ahead as a result of Westminster spending cuts, not least to housing benefit. They can decide to use devolved powers to shield vulnerable people from some of the worst effects. They can spend a few million pounds to offset the impact of billions being sliced off public services and the welfare budget.

Or they can wring their hands in defeat, leave those same people without protection, and turn their back on almost a decade of Scotland being in the vanguard of social policy.

The SNP can ally with the Liberal Democrats to magnify the Conservative-Lib Dem cuts at Westminster or they can seek to mitigate those cuts.

It is not really a hard choice, surely?"

✘ Shelter Scotland, the housing and homeless charity works to alleviate the distress caused by homelessness and bad housing. You can read more on their [website](#).