Local authority homelessness strategies should be nearly complete. What have councils learned from the process?

Catherine J. Amieson takes a look

Homelessness in Scotland is going through a period of significant change. For the first time in nine years, councils and their partners have been gathering information for, drafting and consulting on their homelessness strategies, which must be submitted to the Scottish Executive by the end of March.

Both the Scottish Parliament and the Executive have made homelessness a high priority. The Homelessness Task Force final report, which was issued in February 2002, set out 59 recommendations for change in homelessness provision and services. Following the report the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, introduced a number of changes for councils and RSLs on homelessness that included:

- a requirement for local homelessness strategies;
- making improved homelessness advice, if available;
- providing interim accommodation to those believed to be homeless (not just those in priority need);
- a duty to secure permanent accommodation to intentionally homeless people in priority need;
- for non-priority homeless people, a duty on the council to secure temporary accommodation and provide advice and assistance for an assessable period to allow applicants to find accommodation themselves;
- an applicant’s right to a review of a homelessness decision;
- a wider duty on RSLs to assist councils in discharging their statutory duties of providing temporary and permanent accommodation;
- As if the above is not enough for councils and service providers to take on board and implement, there is further legislative change on the pipeline. The Homelessness etc (Scotland) Bill had its third reading in the Scottish Parliament on Wednesday this week. This bill proposes more radical changes, including:

- the phased expansion of the categories of people who will be considered as being in priority need and entitled to permanent accommodation;
- allowing homeless people to apply to any local authority, without demonstrating local connection;
- requiring landlords to inform councils of repossession cases so that early preventative action may be taken;
- improving the way in which intentionally homeless people are assisted through the provision of advice and information on the occurrence and prevention of homelessness. All these organisations should be aware of strategies that impact on homelessness and understand that across the board they need to be fully integrated, reduce duplication of services and fill in the missing gaps.

That’s not an easy task as the maze and interconnections of strategies will be complex. Councillors in particular need to be clear about their responsibilities and how any new or revised strategies interact with homelessness requirements.

Information and advice

In many councils, the research into homelessness has identified the many and varied organisation that offer advice to homeless applicants. These have included council and RSLs, advice centres, health projects and voluntary groups, including faith-based projects. Few councils have an integrated database of advice and information on the occurrence and prevention of homelessness. All councils will have to develop an integrated information and advice strategy that will meet the industry norm identified by Communities Scotland.

This should include making advice, support and information as easily available as possible. It should also provide a wider range of support services. People who are homeless should be linked to mainstream services and be able to access them easily.

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