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scottish
refugee
council

Consultation Response



Housing: Fresh Thinking, New Ideas

Scottish Refugee Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Green Paper, ***Fresh Ideas, New Thinking***, and the opportunity to have its say on the future of housing policy in Scotland.

Scottish Refugee Council (SRC) provides help and advice to those who have fled human rights abuses or other persecution in their homeland and now seek refuge in Scotland. We are a membership organisation that works independently and in partnership with others to provide support to refugees from arrival to settlement and integration into Scottish society.

We provide a range of specialist services including housing advice and community development. Our Refugee Housing Team provides an advice, information and advocacy service to refugees who have been granted leave to remain in the UK, ensuring that they can exercise their rights to access all forms of housing, including the social rented sector.

More recently, the Scottish Government has funded the post of a Housing Development Officer to join the Housing Team with the aim of increasing the awareness about housing rights and entitlements of refugees within the social housing sector, and ultimately increasing the access of refugees to better housing options in safe communities.

Our response is based on our experiences of providing this service, and on recently published research, 'Navigating the maze,' (available from our website

http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/pub/Housing_maze_pdf) that we commissioned into refugees' experiences of accessing stable housing in Scotland.

We focus our response on Chapter 1 on 'Housing Needs' and on Chapter 3 on 'Choice, Fairness and Making a Better Use of Housing'. We give more general comments on Chapter 4 on 'Sustainable Quality Homes and Place' and on Chapter 5 on 'Excellence across the Housing System'.

Chapter 1: Housing Needs

Question: Should the Government aim to focus its spending on those households in the lowest income groups and those most in need through rental products, or continue to try and meet the ownership aspirations of lower and middle income groups?

SRC recommends that the Scottish Government focuses its investment on social housing, on both new development and improvement of existing stock. This will be the most effective way of meeting the housing needs of refugee households, some of the most vulnerable members of our society, who are likely to be on very low incomes, and to be reliant on support from homelessness services to access housing.

Refugees are very vulnerable when being granted refugee status. This can result both from traumatic experiences in their country of origin but also from the practical and psychological challenges of restarting a new

life in a new country, living in a new culture, adapting to new systems and sometimes having to learn a new language.

Refugees also face financial challenges. During the asylum process, the majority of asylum seekers don't have the right to work and receive benefits. Benefits provided during the asylum support are equivalent to around 70% of the Income Support payment or are provided as £35 cashcard support per week. Once granted leave to remain, refugees become entitled to full access to public funds and can claim mainstream benefit until they find employment or become fit to work.

The SRC Housing Team's major challenge is to assist those refugees who face homelessness at the point of being granted refugee status. During the asylum process, refugees are provided accommodation on a no choice basis by the UK Border Agency. When granted refugee status, households are given 28 days' notice to vacate their property and secure alternative accommodation.

Despite being legally entitled to all housing options available in Scotland, refugees cannot afford private rented housing or home ownership. Most refugees will therefore apply for social housing. However, 28 days is a too short a period to be able to secure accommodation within the social housing sector. As a result, most refugees will be forced to present as homeless, and the Code of Guidance on Homelessness states that new refugees should be accepted as being in priority needs due to their vulnerability. In 2009/10, SRC Housing Team assisted a total of 292 households, 53% of whom were homeless or threatened by homelessness.

The affordability offered by social housing is essential for refugees who wish to start employment or studies and become active members of Scottish society. Furthermore, cuts in investment in social housing would result in refugees, amongst other groups, having to remain in temporary accommodation for an increased and excessive period of time, during which access to employment and education would be very difficult.

SRC's housing team also assists a minority of very large households for whom housing options are very limited. In our experience, RSLs have difficulty in obtaining funding to build larger accommodation, with the consequence that many refugees face overcrowding either in permanent accommodation as their family grows, or in temporary accommodation. The SRC's housing team has evidence of cases in which large families have been forced to remain in temporary homeless accommodation for 6 years.

Question: How could public services and Government funded bodies work better together to improve housing and related services to vulnerable groups?

SRC would welcome better joint working between public services and Government funded bodies in the voluntary sector to develop support provision targeted at vulnerable groups who face homelessness, or who experience difficulties in their home/ the management of their tenancy which would put them at risk of homelessness.

We support strongly the Government's general emphasis on prevention and early intervention. Investment in tenancy sustainment support, finance and welfare rights advice, employment and education advice, and building social networks has been proven to empower people, help them to sustain their tenancy, and in the long term delivering savings to the public purse by diverting people away from the homelessness route.

Other areas of joint working offer benefits. The SRC's Housing Team has recently started partnership work with housing associations to increase housing options for refugees and improve tenancy sustainment to provide support and advice to new tenants and training to staff members.

Chapter 3: Choice, Fairness and better use of housing

Question: How can we move to a 'housing options first' approach, across tenures, so that households can plan for the future and avoid housing crises and homelessness?

SRC welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to encouraging moves to a Housing Options approach ensuring that people in difficult situations are able to make informed decisions that meet their needs.

The housing option approach is not new and has been reinforced by the Scottish Government Guidance on Prevention of homelessness published in June 2009. It is essential to ensure that despite the economic recession, vulnerable people (including refugees) keep on having access to suitable housing options.

SRC believes that making the Housing Option approach a reality requires that:

- A support needs assessment is completed before people are advised about their housing options. This would avoid people moving to accommodation that is not affordable, or separated from social networks or facilities/ support services that they need. SRC would welcome clarification and strengthening in the new Housing Bill of the way in which support is provided to households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.
- More training provided to staff whose role is to advise people on housing options, in particular Local Authority homelessness, housing and social work staff, ensuring that they are fully aware of all the social, private and supported housing options in their area.
- The person who is in need of housing is empowered and can make an informed decision about their future housing situation.

In relation to the increased use of housing

options within the private rented sector to meet the needs of homeless people, SRC believes that it is absolutely essential that the private housing sector is not used as a replacement for the lack of social housing stock.

Private tenancies do not offer the same security of tenure as social tenancies, and there remain ongoing concerns about the consistency of the quality of provision, and the lack of a control mechanism to ensure reasonable standards are reached.

Without legislative changes ensuring that private landlords meet quality standards prior to renting out their property, and offering more security of tenure to private tenants, SRC does not believe that private tenancy will generally be a suitable and sustainable option for refugees.

Question: How can we balance the interests of existing and prospective future tenants by ensuring better and more flexible use of available social rented stock?

SRC Housing Team does a considerable amount of work to assist families in overcrowded situations in both temporary accommodation and permanent housing. Overcrowding in the latter case can occur both due to natural growth of the family and due to a successful family reunion procedure.

Large families often have to wait years before being offered a large property in social housing. To increase their housing options, SRC would recommend that in addition to future planning, processes taking account of the need for large accommodation, priority for re-housing and incentives to move are given to social tenants who are under-occupying.

Incentives are an important part of this process as households who are under-occupying are likely to be elderly and who have been living in the same accommodation for many years. Their home is often the 'family home' with a lot of emotional attachment which will make people reluctant to move. In

addition, practical and financial help will be necessary to organise any move.

In addition to general publicity, such initiatives should be supported by RSLs being proactive not only in the monitoring of their waiting list, but also in being aware of the needs of their long term tenants who may welcome advice and information about their longer term housing options.

To be able to prepare for the future growth of a family due to a successful family reunion procedure, RSLs should be encouraged to investigate when dealing with refugees if such a procedure has been started by their prospective tenants and take this into account when allocating properties. This would avoid future and expected overcrowding.

Chapter 4: Sustainable quality homes and place

SRC's Housing Team assists many households who are at risk of becoming homeless because they experience some level of racial harassment in or around their property. It is essential that housing providers adopt a proactive approach to tackle racial harassment and make their community safer.

Close work in partnership with the police and relevant community organisations is recommended to tackle any form of hate crime. In Glasgow, local integration networks have had very positive impact on community cohesion bringing together new refugee community with longer term residents of different areas. Consideration should be given to the investment required to enable such initiative to sustain and develop in new areas of Scotland where there are refugees and/ or migrant workers.

Research from GoWell, a research and learning programme that aims to investigate the impact of investment in Glasgow's regeneration on the health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities over a ten-year period, confirms the ongoing need to tackle issues around safety and cohesion, even when wider positive change has been achieved in a community.

Chapter 5: Excellence across the housing system

SRC's Housing Team assists many refugee households who have difficulties understanding the Scottish Housing System and experience extremely difficult housing situations including homelessness and lack of safety in the home. Further information on those issues can be found in '**Navigating the Maze: Refugee Routes to Housing, Support and Settlement in Scotland**' referred to above and available at: <http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/pub/Researchreports>

There are shortcomings in many of the services provided to too many of SRC housing team's clients as they seek to move out of homelessness and sustain their tenancies. We believe that many of these shortcomings result from a lack of investment in services, resulting in limited capacity and excessive pressure on staff.

In this light, the potential for these services to be cut further, given the current financial situation facing the public sector, is deeply concerning. SRC believes that projects providing specific support to vulnerable people offer the opportunity to 'spend to save', with the impact of their work resulting in fewer people becoming homeless or returning to homelessness.

We would wish to highlight a particular example of an effective preventative approach. The Saffron project, managed by Southside Housing Association, is aimed at young people from BME communities and refugees. It provides accommodation and support until young people are ready to move on to and manage their own tenancy, and succeeds in reducing the risk of homelessness amongst young people.

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