



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Thursday 20 June 2024

Session 6



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SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE
20th Meeting 2024, Session 6

CONVENER

*Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- *Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)
- *Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab)
- *Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
- *Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
- *Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)
- *Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

- Valerie Arbuckle (Police Scotland)
- Mike Callaghan (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)
- Susie Fitton (Scottish Federation of Housing Associations)
- Heather McCluskey (Centre for Homelessness Impact)
- Suzie McIloney (All in for Change)
- Shea Moran (Aff the Streets)
- Sarah Rogers (Families Outside)
- Pat Togher (Edinburgh Integration Joint Board)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Claire Menzies

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Thursday 20 June 2024

[The Convener opened the meeting in private at 08:34]

09:00

Meeting continued in public.

Interests

The Convener (Collette Stevenson): Welcome to the public part of the 20th meeting in 2024 of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. We have received no apologies.

Earlier in the meeting, I welcomed Kevin Stewart as a new member of the committee. At that point, Kevin declared his interests, which I ask Kevin to repeat for the public record.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I have no relevant interests to declare.

The Convener: Thank you. I also thank John Mason for his valued contribution to the committee.

Housing (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

09:01

The Convener: Our next agenda item is a further evidence session on the Housing (Scotland) Bill at stage 1. Today, we will hear from two panels, and I welcome to the meeting our first panel. Joining us in the room, we have Susie Fitton, who is a policy manager at the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations; and Pat Togher, who is the chief officer of the Edinburgh integration joint board. Joining us remotely, we have Valerie Arbuckle, who is the national partnership development manager for Police Scotland; and Mike Callaghan, who is policy manager at the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. Thank you for accepting our invitation.

Before we start, I will mention a few points about the format of the meeting. Before speaking, please wait until I or the member who is asking the question say your name. Our online witnesses should allow our broadcasting colleagues a few seconds to turn your microphone on before you start to speak. If you wish to come in on a question, you can indicate that by putting an R in the Zoom chat box. I ask everyone to keep questions and answers as concise as possible.

We move to theme 1 of our questions. In general, to what extent do you agree with the Scottish Government's overarching policy objective that the homelessness measures in the bill should create a shift away from crisis intervention to prevention activity? That question goes first to Pat Togher.

Pat Togher (Edinburgh Integration Joint Board): We agree in principle with the policy objectives that are contained in the bill, but there must be an acknowledgement that recent policy and legislative changes have not always achieved the ambition that was set out, and there is a view that that is largely because an awful lot of that change has compounded the pressures that we are experiencing. I agree with some of the principles, but there needs to be significantly more detail and significant investment in the overall financial infrastructure through which the objectives will be delivered.

The Convener: Would anyone else like to come in on that?

Susie Fitton (Scottish Federation of Housing Associations): As the membership body for and collective voice of housing associations, the SFHA strongly supports the intention to prevent homelessness rather than simply respond to it. I cannot stress enough that housing associations are uniquely positioned as community anchors that support people in their communities through

the delivery of anti-poverty strategies, the provision of homes for those who need them, the maintenance of tenancies, the provision of housing support and the improvement of outcomes for those who are at risk of homelessness.

We hope that the proposals in the bill—I am sure that all of us here will be stressing this point today—if they are backed up by sufficient resource, guidance and support for the sector, will strengthen existing practice, improve consistency and positively impact those at greater risk of homelessness. We know, through our work to support homelessness prevention, that upstream intervention can provide long-term savings and benefits to services.

The Convener: Thanks—that is helpful. I believe that Mike would like to come in.

Mike Callaghan (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): Good morning. Thank you for inviting COSLA to this session.

COSLA is supportive of the ethos and principles of the Housing (Scotland) Bill in respect of the homelessness prevention duties. They are very much in line with our established political position over the past couple of years on homelessness prevention. Awareness of housing issues at an early stage provides much greater opportunity to avoid homelessness and time spent in temporary accommodation.

A key issue for our member councils is whether sufficient and adequate resources will be available to implement this important bill, particularly given the context in which we are working of eight of our member councils across the country having declared local housing emergencies and the Scottish Government having declared a housing emergency, on 15 May.

That said, the prevention of homelessness duties in the bill are a step in the right direction, and we support the bill.

The Convener: Thanks very much. I invite Valerie to speak.

Valerie Arbuckle (Police Scotland): Police Scotland values the benefits of prevention, and the bill's greater emphasis on that would be helpful. The effects of crisis and vulnerability directly affect demand on policing, so any step towards prevention would be helpful.

The Convener: Thanks for that contribution.

We move on to theme 2, which is the ask and act duty. I invite Bob Doris in.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Good morning, everyone, and thank you for your time in helping us to scrutinise the proposed legislation.

How do the relevant bodies that are listed in the bill in relation to the ask and act duty already work with local authority homelessness services to prevent homelessness? How will the new statutory duty to ask and act make a difference and improve things? I am conscious that some of the partner bodies that are listed in the bill are with us today. Maybe we could start with Susie Fitton to hear a housing association perspective.

Susie Fitton: Our members work with local authorities to provide the key services that support the prevention of homelessness. Those include housing services, such as general support with finding, maintaining and securing an affordable home; offering temporary or permanent accommodation; support with tenancy sustainment; managing rent arrears; and emergency relief services for those who are impacted by an emergency or a crisis in relation to their housing needs.

There is also a range of income maximisation services, including support to claim social security benefits and financial support and money management services, as well as housing support provision, which is key to homelessness prevention; support with physical and mental health issues; support to adapt a property to the needs of a disabled person; employability support, which links into third sector support, which is also crucial; efforts to furnish a tenancy and ensure that a move to a social tenancy will be successful; and housing first services.

Those services are all key to preventing homelessness. Collaboration and partnership working between local authorities and the third sector are vital to making the range of provision that housing associations get involved in successful.

We largely welcome the part 5 provisions, because they will create a shared public responsibility to prevent homelessness. At the moment, we feel that it is unclear what that will mean in practice and what level of change in working practices is necessary.

We know that data-led approaches have enabled housing associations to identify who might be most at risk and to target support at an earlier point. Langstane Housing Association's homelessness prevention project was set up to do just that and enabled the association to target support where it was most needed, and Berwickshire Housing Association works with Penumbra, which is a mental health charity, to help those who are struggling with mental health who might not engage particularly well. That should give you a flavour of the type of work that housing associations do.

Bob Doris: I know that there is a time constraint, but I will check one thing and ask that you answer briefly, although that might be difficult to do. What difference would the ask and act duty make to the best practice that you are sharing with us? Will it relate to housing associations themselves or to their relationship with other public bodies?

Susie Fitton: By having a shared public responsibility for prevention and by assessing the risk of homelessness six months before it is likely to take place, we believe that there will be a greater ability to work in partnership with housing associations and to tackle problems before they require crisis interventions.

Bob Doris: And that is across all public bodies.

Susie Fitton: Yes.

Bob Doris: Valerie Arbuckle, does Police Scotland have a view on that?

Valerie Arbuckle: As part of their existing duties, Police Scotland officers look out for and identify vulnerable people every day, and usually alert social work services teams and other partners across the country to the needs of those individuals. Those needs might involve the risk of homelessness and a person's housing status, although we do not necessarily refer people to homelessness services at the moment, because we tend to find that vulnerable people have an extensive range of needs and other underlying requirements that must be dealt with by other services, as well.

Where police are already involved, our officers will signpost people who suddenly find themselves homeless and help them to access housing services. Our officers have contact details for all the out-of-hours support services, including housing. Our officers also engage with distress brief intervention services that allow third sector organisations such as Penumbra to make contact with vulnerable individuals and give them support and guidance.

Bob Doris: I am really sorry for cutting across you; it is just because of the time constraints. As Susie Fitton did, you are giving examples of existing best practice in Police Scotland. How might the bill make a difference?

I will throw in a second question to all the witnesses. How can we ensure that the duty is not simply to make a standard referral to homelessness services, which would defeat the point of legislation?

Valerie Arbuckle: I totally appreciate that, but I was trying to explain that we are already doing a lot of things, so I do not know whether the bill will necessarily make a huge difference. We are already looking out for people who are homeless,

and we are already engaging with housing services when people are homeless. What we are not doing is looking six months ahead and specifically asking questions relating to homelessness. As I said, the reason for that is that a person can have many complex needs, and homelessness is not the only issue.

Bob Doris: That is helpful, because I think that the intention of the bill is that you look ahead.

Pat Togher, could you please answer both questions from an integration joint board point of view?

Pat Togher: I do not want to repeat everything that has already been said, but section 11 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 places a requirement on social landlords and mortgage lenders to escalate any matters to the council when somebody is at risk of losing their property. That practice works extremely well in adult and child protection services within councils across Scotland.

There are also effective measures that are working really well, including through the rapid rehousing transition plan, housing first—which has already been mentioned—housing options and local poverty mitigation plans. They all take into account the earlier intervention; that is very well understood in councils and IJBs in Scotland.

09:15

I am just setting that out, because I am struggling to see how the additional benefit of all of this—that is, the vision in the bill—will be fully realised without the necessary training, development, infrastructure, support, additional finance and a recognition that, in relation to the housing crisis, we are on an upward spiral right now. We are facing the broader impact of positive asylum-seeking decisions, the impact of Ukrainian displaced persons, the cost of living crisis and, in Edinburgh, demographic growth that looks different when compared with elsewhere. There are huge pressures on the system across the country and particularly on IJBs, including those that have not had homelessness responsibilities delegated to them.

There is still an awful lot to think about, for example, in relation to mental health and addiction and other such intersectional issues that cut across everything that is associated with homelessness. With regard to the extension from two to six months, we are, as we have set out, already taking a strong approach to early intervention and prevention, but risks might arise from people being brought into statutory services too early or disproportionately, to be dealt with by relevant bodies that might otherwise not be fully equipped, skilled, set up or resourced enough to

address the duty to act. I suspect that the default position will remain, which is referral and increased pressure on housing and homelessness services.

Bob Doris: That was helpful. I am sure that colleagues will ask about resources and training later.

Moving on to Mike Callaghan, I am going to be a bit cheeky and roll my third question into what I have already asked and get Mr Callaghan to respond to all of them. Mr Callaghan, can you reflect on what you have heard from a COSLA perspective? Also, are there other bodies or individuals that should be added to the list? Suggestions that we have heard include the Home Office—that would be a voluntary partnership, of course—and, last week, general practitioners. I just want to get your reflections on what you have heard so far as well as on those suggestions.

Mike Callaghan: Thanks very much, Mr Doris. I will be as brief as I can.

Susie Fitton, Valerie Arbuckle and Pat Togher have highlighted some good practice and on-going partnership work. I suppose that what happens across the public sector is more informal; there is some really good practice, but it is not happening consistently or in depth across the country, and that is something that we in the public sector need to improve. I also see a lot of value in changing the time parameters and moving to six months to promote early intervention.

As for other bodies that should be included, it sounds like it would be helpful to get the Home Office involved. We are dealing with, as Pat Togher mentioned, humanitarian programmes and UDPs, and if the Home Office had some sort of responsibility in that respect, that would be helpful.

As for GPs, which you mentioned, they would, where possible, provide a good point of direct contact for people, and you would have the health service itself asking, "Have you got somewhere to go home to? Got a roof over your head?" We, therefore, support those proposals.

Bob Doris: It was helpful to hear that the bill could drive consistency in approach across public bodies six months out.

Susie, do you have any final comments on this line of questioning, including the suggestion that GPs and the Home Office be added to the statutory list?

Susie Fitton: GPs can potentially play a critical role. The current GP contract might not require GP practices to get involved; moreover, they are overstretched and need to prioritise patient care. However, there are models in which social prescribing and social prescribers have been located in GP practices and offer support and

advice to people who are at risk of homelessness. Some of our members have found that some GPs are not always aware of the risks around homelessness, but that awareness improved when they were offered training. We welcome the provision in the bill that will allow the list of relevant bodies to be reviewed.

Bob Doris: Do the other witnesses agree that we should add to the list? I do not think that we have heard from Valerie Arbuckle on that yet.

Valerie Arbuckle: We do not have any suggestions for particular organisations that should be added to the list. The most important thing for us, as a named relevant body, is that we need to be very careful about what we are asking relevant bodies to do. The first question, before we start to add bodies to the list, must be: what are we actually asking the relevant bodies to do? As has been mentioned, GPs are very busy—everybody is very busy—so what are we actually asking people to do here? Otherwise, this will overload the system.

The Convener: We will stick with that theme, and I invite Marie McNair to ask questions.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): Some of the witnesses have already touched on my question, so do not feel that you all have to answer. What might be the financial and resource impacts of the ask and act duty? Do you agree with the Scottish Government that up-front investment will save money in the long run?

Mike Callaghan: That is a very important question. Although I have mentioned that we are very supportive of the bill, we do not consider that the cost implications for local authorities have been accurately reflected in the financial memorandum. That will result in underresourced burdens being placed on local authority housing and homelessness services, which are already under great pressure because of, for example, the local housing emergencies that have been declared, the national housing emergency that the Scottish Government declared in May and the pressures as a result of the cuts to the affordable housing supply programme last December.

We all know and very much agree that an approach of early intervention and prevention is wholly sensible and pragmatic and will ensure better outcomes not only for individuals but in relation to the associated costs to public services. There are lots of really good examples of practice that demonstrate that the front loading of resources works. Therefore, yes, we are supportive of the bill, but resource issues are clearly more pressing than ever for us when it comes to implementation and delivery. We suggest that implementation should be phased or staged over time in order to progress things.

Marie McNair: Thanks. I know that a lot of good practice is happening already in some authorities—it certainly is in my area.

Pat Togher: First, I want to highlight that the financial memorandum says that it will cost £1.6 million across the 32 councils to implement the measure. Funding of that level will be insufficient. If I take the scenario in which the projected case load increase is 25 per cent, Edinburgh alone will require almost £2 million for housing and homelessness specifically.

The IJB commenced the new financial year with a budget gap of £60 million and a requirement to save £48 million, the effect of which will permeate all the services that are delegated to the IJB across mental health and addiction, an awful lot of which accounts for and underpins homelessness presentations. We are under significant financial pressure just now, so to realise any of that, the measures will need to come with significantly more funding.

Marie McNair: Thanks. It is really helpful to get some of that detail.

Valerie Arbuckle: One thing that we have noticed, as others have noted in their written responses, is that the cost has been underestimated. Police Scotland will have extra costs in relation to officer training and roll-out. There is also the extra time that will be taken to fulfil the ask and act duty. The second that you start to ask that question, more time is involved in dealing with that person, and there is obviously then the extra time thereafter. Our chief constable has made it very clear that we are there for the moment of crisis and that, thereafter, we would want to be handing the person and their issues to another relevant body in order for it to fulfil the person's other requirements so that our officers could get on with their work of policing and preventing crime.

There is definitely a cost to Police Scotland that is associated with the duty that has not been accounted for. We want to ensure that that is accounted for by the Scottish Government before anything further is done.

Marie McNair: Thanks for that. Do you want to comment, Susie Fitton?

Susie Fitton: I want to come back to the question about whether up-front investment will save money. We support other witnesses' points about the financial memorandum not appearing to set out sufficient funding for the ask and act duty.

However, the SFHA has supported 11 homelessness prevention projects that have been delivered by housing associations with overall funding of £1.5 million. The Housing Associations Charitable Trust has recently evaluated the return

on investment from the activities and support that were provided by those projects. The assessment showed that just over £31 million of social value was created by the activities of those projects—I can provide information to the committee on that if that would be useful. Significantly, that included £4.9 million in secondary social value in terms of wider financial savings to the state. That really showed, on a practical level, that increased and targeted funding for prevention and person-centred social outcomes really bears fruit as an investment for the Scottish Government.

Marie McNair: If you could send that additional information to the committee, that would be really helpful.

The Convener: I believe that Kevin Stewart would like to come in before you move on to your next question, Marie.

Kevin Stewart: I thank the witnesses for their answers thus far. I think that everybody agrees that the legislation is necessary. Everybody, as always, has tried to point out the best practice that is taking place. It is just a pity that that was not exported across the board. However, the legislation alone is probably not enough, and there needs to be cultural change across the board. I want to concentrate on some of that and on keeping folk out of crisis.

I was interested in two things that Valerie Arbuckle said. First, you said that "everybody is very busy". I get that. Most folk are busy dealing with crisis and will become less busy only if they are not dealing with crisis. Secondly, you used the phrase,

"handing the person ... to another ... body".

I will be honest with you. If that attitude continues—if it is seen to be about handing the person to another body rather than about collaborating with other bodies to provide support—that will not bring about the cultural change that we want to see. Do you want to comment on that, Ms Arbuckle?

Valerie Arbuckle: It is important that people do what they are best at. What I was indicating when I spoke about handing someone over was about making sure that a person has the relevant person to speak to. As I explained in one of my previous answers, people have very complex needs. Homelessness might be one of those needs. I think that, earlier, Pat Togher mentioned mental health, addiction, family breakdown and other issues. Homelessness is one aspect. We are looking at that one aspect as opposed to looking at the whole person—that is what needs to be addressed.

That being the case, it is important that the people who are dealing with the member of the

public who is facing that dilemma can provide more than just an application to a housing authority to ask, “Can this person get a house?”

It is important that there is a fuller, more complex response to a person’s complex needs. The police will not necessarily always be the right people to address all those complex needs, and it is therefore important that the right services provide the right service to the member of the public who is in need.

09:30

Kevin Stewart: We all recognise that a holistic approach needs to be taken, but I think that that kind of phraseology—that is, talking about handing someone over to another body—is part of the problem. Some folk think, “That’s my part of the job done. Now it’s somebody else’s problem.”

Ms Arbuckle, you mentioned some areas in which the police are involved in order to deal with addiction and mental health issues—for example, you talked about DBI. Do you see that sort of thing as part of the job, or is it just a wee bit that you do before handing the person over to somebody else?

Valerie Arbuckle: It is all important. I do not think that you are correct with regard to the tone of my comments—we are not just handing somebody over and saying, “It’s not our problem.”

Kevin Stewart: I am using your phraseology, Ms Arbuckle. It is not my phraseology—it is yours.

Valerie Arbuckle: We will do everything that we possibly can on every occasion to help a member of the public. However, we cannot take the place of social work, the health service or addiction services; we are not that sort of organisation and, because of that, it is important that we put the person in touch with the people who can help them best in their moment of need.

As for helping somebody get from A to B and whether that is really important, I have to say that that is what we are already doing. The question is: what are we being asked to do here? The legislation suggests that we would make an application, but what does that mean? That sounds a bit more than a referral. Does it mean filling out, say, a five-page form for a local authority? What is it that we are being asked to do? That is the fundamental question. Our organisation has no issue at all with the ethos of preventing homelessness and putting in place a network of all statutory organisations to support people at risk of homelessness. That is not a problem for our organisation. The question is: what is it that you are asking police officers to do?

Kevin Stewart: I get the gist—thank you.

I turn briefly to Mr Togher, whom I know from another life—it is good to see you, Pat. I would say that some of our previous discussions over the years have been about a lack of co-operation between public bodies to help an individual. Is the legislation enough, or do we need a further cultural shift so that everyone takes ownership of helping individuals?

Pat Togher: I just want to make one or two points, first of all. Our Scottish housing legislation is often cited as being the envy of the world. Getting to the problem with effective earlier intervention should always be a key priority, but my point is about the constraints that are associated with capacity and resilience and the need for them to be reconciled, given where we are with growth, costs and the pressures that I described earlier.

In answer to your question, I think that there will always be a requirement to improve culture and to demonstrate consistency through a culture that is much more aligned with the complexity of the needs of individuals who present through homelessness services—or any service, for that matter. Equally, though, what we are talking about is very varied and complicated. We are talking about, for example, the multiple complex needs that are associated with addiction and mental health issues, trauma, everything that is related to positive asylum-seeking decisions and, as the bill describes, the complexity that is associated with domestic abuse. There needs to be more awareness of all that.

However, the point that has been made fairly consistently relates to the question mark over the duty to act and how we stand up an infrastructure that feels equipped and supported to drive forward a culture shift.

Kevin Stewart: Thank you very much. I will leave it there, convener.

The Convener: Before I bring Marie McNair back in, I think that Mike Callaghan wants to respond. Please be brief, Mike.

Mike Callaghan: Pat Togher made good points about improving the culture. We need sufficient training and awareness for staff across all the public sector partner agencies. Mr Stewart is absolutely right with his point that collaboration is key—we need a joined-up public sector partnership approach. We do not want a situation in which a homeless person has to tell their story multiple times, so we need a no-wrong-door approach to take the work forward collectively as public sector partner agencies.

Marie McNair: The committee really values your views. Earlier, we heard evidence that we need more detail about the bill, particularly on the duty to act and what that means in practice for

relevant bodies. What are your views on how clear the duties are? That question goes first to Pat Togher.

Pat Togher: There are two parts. The ask duty part of it appears to be fairly well understood, and that minimum intervention would be applied across all the relevant bodies.

The act duty part of it needs more information and detail, which might come through secondary legislation and its associated guidance. Some of the issues would be about when to act and the definition of “act”. For example, what is proportionate acting? In order to prevent the backward and forward type of practice, as a homelessness services provider, what information am I expecting in advance of that referral coming to me? We require an awful lot more information and guidance associated with the duty to act part. How far are relevant bodies expected to go with the duty to act in advance of a referral to a specialist service, whether that is in relation to addiction, homelessness or mental health? Details on those aspects remain weak at the moment.

Marie McNair: Does anyone else want to come in on that?

Susie Fitton: Pat Togher said that the duty to ask part is a minimum intervention, and we agree with that. However, there is currently a lack of clarity on how to ask about housing precarity in empathetic and trauma-informed ways. We know very well that people in difficult and precarious housing situations often struggle to engage on those questions, and we are conscious that we do not want them to be alienated or to cause them to disengage.

We are keen that public bodies understand and recognise the risk factors for housing insecurity and homelessness. Where housing options advice is not a core part of a relevant body’s role, we are concerned that, if we do not have the guidance, resource, support and training, as has been mentioned before, it will simply lead to more referrals to local authorities, when other options are not apparent.

There are a number of outstanding questions. How will relevant bodies decide whether there is a risk of homelessness? What reasonable steps will they take to mitigate that? How will they know that they have successfully mitigated it? What level of involvement in a long-term housing solution will there be from a relevant body?

If it is not carried out by a local authority, when does the assessment of potential homelessness happen? Will the people who are carrying out that assessment have sufficient experience or expertise to undertake such an assessment? Is the assessment of homelessness, the risk of homelessness and the threat of homelessness the

same process? How do we ensure the quality of housing options advice?

We know that our members—housing associations across Scotland—work closely and compassionately with people in housing need, in order to give them the best housing options advice that they can. If it is to be delivered across the public sector, how do we ensure that that high-quality advice is properly resourced?

All that comes back to the three key issues: guidance, support and resource.

The Convener: Valerie Arbuckle and Mike Callaghan would like to come in as well.

Valerie Arbuckle: I had mentioned previously the question of what “act” means. We are a national organisation that deals with 32 local authorities, and our divisions do a lot of cross-border work nowadays. Therefore, it is important for us to ensure that we have a simple system in order to make any application.

We already tell local authorities ahead of time—through our vulnerable persons referrals, health and social care partnerships and social work teams—about people’s vulnerabilities, which might have been identified at an earlier date. Therefore, a system might already be in place for that particular part of the duty, because further conversations will happen.

We must also consider section 36C, which says that the relevant body must make an application if that is “appropriate” and it is in a position to

“remove ... or minimise the threat”

of homelessness to the applicant. The question is how we, as a relevant body, could remove or minimise that threat. What does that mean?

As a police force, we also have to consider that the Information Commissioner’s Office has already advised us that, because of a power imbalance between us and members of the public, we should not ask them for consent. People tend to agree with what police officers say because they are police officers. They potentially feel that, if they say no to a suggestion, that will cause them more problems or difficulties, which is obviously not the case. We are genuinely offering support, but we have to work under the public task model, so that would be a question for the legislation to address.

Finally, the bill requires us to do the asking. We already try to establish what people’s vulnerabilities are, but we do not always look at the housing aspect. I appreciate that, and it is fine if we need something to highlight that for policing, but it is important that the duty to ask is more detailed as well. What are we actually asking? Who are we asking? Obviously, our officers regularly see people who are homeless, in the

sense of living on the streets. We want to make sure that we are asking appropriately and, as Susie Fitton said earlier, in a trauma-informed way. All those things have to be considered.

Mike Callaghan: I broadly agree with what Pat Togher said about the fact that the ask duty is understood, but the act duty requires a bit more detail and guidance. What we want to achieve from the bill is that public bodies have guidance and know what is expected of them in identifying people who are at risk of homelessness and the level of response that is required. Essentially, the duty should be there to identify those health and support needs—or whatever else might result in a higher risk of homelessness—and to provide treatment and support to address those needs. It is about being clear that all partners are fully aware of their responsibilities, so that they have some level of accountability in relation to the prevention duties to ask and act. I have understood that, and I am aware that, along with other partners, our chief housing officers will be able to make a valuable contribution in developing some of the guidance.

Marie McNair: Those were really helpful responses.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning. Again, there is no need for everyone to answer every question, but I would like to know your views on how clear the bill is about the enforcement and accountability framework for the ask and act duties. Would anyone like to come in on that?

09:45

Pat Togher: We need to be clear about what measurement we are talking about. How we know whether we have been effective really needs to be defined much better in the guidance, so that we have a consistent approach and are being measured against something that is more consistent. There is still some way to go in that regard.

Katy Clark: Would it be fair to say that you do not think that it is as clear as it could be?

Pat Togher: I do not think that it is.

Susie Fitton: We agree with that. It is not clear which body would monitor and measure the activity of all the different bodies on which prevention duties are being placed. I think that there is an intention for the Scottish Housing Regulator to assess compliance with the duties, but more widely, it is not clear how other bodies would be involved. We need more clarity.

Mike Callaghan: The bill needs to be clearer. There needs to be some kind of definition of what good would look like. Some bodies already have

roles in this area, including the Scottish Housing Regulator and the courts, and that could be extended. We need to look at what we already have. There is a homelessness prevention and strategy group that is chaired by the Minister for Housing and COSLA's community wellbeing spokesperson, Councillor Maureen Chalmers. A number of task and finish groups have developed some good practice. For example, the measuring impact task and finish group helped to define how work on monitoring progress can be undertaken and did work outcomes for public bodies, because we also need to look at that work in respect of the outcomes that we want to achieve.

Valerie Arbuckle: Our chief constable has explained the importance of public trust and confidence in policing. I will go back to my earlier point about the declaration of the housing emergency. People's expectations of police officers are sometimes different from their expectations of people who provide other services. That being the case, it is possible that, if a police officer commits to making an application for a member of the public, there could be a higher expectation that there would be a result from that application. From our perspective, we have to be careful about the framework and we must be careful to ensure that the "act" part of the ask and act duty is taken into account when we are looking at the national housing emergency. Without that, trust and confidence in policing would be reduced. As an organisation and a society, we cannot afford for that to happen.

The Convener: We move on to theme 3—preventing homelessness sooner—which Paul O'Kane will ask about.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning. We are keen to understand how the current policy is working and how we could improve it. I want to understand some of the problems with the current legal framework, which considers people to be threatened with homelessness if it is likely that they will become homeless within two months. What would be the benefit of extending that to six months for people who are at risk of homelessness? What impact would that have?

Susie Fitton: We support the proposed change to allow assessment of whether a household is threatened with homelessness up to six months before homelessness appears to be imminent, because that will give local authorities time to work with partners to offer decent housing options advice.

We also support efforts to bring clarity on the "reasonable steps" that must be taken to tackle the risk of homelessness. An attempt has been made to draw on the prevention review group's recommendations to work out what those

“reasonable steps” should be. At the moment, there is a lack of time to respond to a threat of homelessness or to really dig into what factors contribute to someone being more at risk of homelessness.

We know that the role of applicant choice in accepting preventative measures or in choosing to seek a new settled option through a homelessness application can also be unclear at the moment. It can be difficult for local authorities to know at what point their responsibility to prevent homelessness is discharged, or when reasonable steps have failed and the responsibility to secure settled accommodation arises.

We support the desire to ensure that the prevention duty really is an upstream intervention and that there is enough time to tackle the myriad contributing factors that can lead to someone being at risk of homelessness. Pat Togher mentioned multiple complex needs, addiction or mental health issues and issues with physical or learning disability. All those factors can contribute to someone’s housing precarity, so assessing those issues six months before homelessness is likely to become imminent can only be a good thing.

Paul O’Kane: That is the ideal—we all agree that that would be a positive step—but are there concerns about resourcing that so that the assessment is made well and follow-on services are provided? Would anyone like to comment on that? I will come on to local authorities. Pat Togher, do you want to come in?

Pat Togher: First, to repeat what I have already said, early intervention is key. I am not convinced about having a six-month period, because I do not know how we will know when that period started, or how it will be measured. At what point in someone’s individual journey can we know that it will be six months until they might become homeless? That part feels quite difficult and slightly nebulous, and I do not know how we would demonstrate an effective intervention.

Homelessness can occur really rapidly and can co-exist with a number of other factors, some of which are already mentioned in the bill, such as domestic abuse.

I am glad that you asked the question, because I genuinely believe that resourcing is key. The projected growth in demand and in the pressures that we see every day will play into all that. If the bill becomes legislation and it is not adequately funded, we will not realistically be able to deliver on its vision, whether we are meant to assist two, three or four months ahead or as early as possible. I suspect that most IJBs would share that view.

The Convener: Mike Callaghan wants to come in.

Paul O’Kane: It might be helpful if he could answer my next question as part of his more general response. I am keen to hear local authorities’ view of the proposal in the bill that, as part of a local housing strategy, councils should assess people’s housing support needs and the availability of housing support services, including in relation to homelessness.

Mike Callaghan: I will start with the issue of early intervention. An assessment of housing needs at an early stage will provide a far greater opportunity for someone to avoid homelessness or having to spend time in temporary accommodation. It will also allow more time for better co-ordinated planning and for exploring the housing options that are available for a local authority and its partners.

The duty to assist people six months before they are likely to become homeless gives those who are at risk the option to judge when they should approach the local authority for help, and it should mean that more time is available to provide them with appropriate solutions to sustain their existing accommodation or to support them to move on to somewhere more suitable.

As Pat Togher said, services must be adequately resourced to allow implementation of the legislation. That is key, not only for local authorities but for the other partners concerned.

The other element of the question was about the proposal in the bill regarding local housing strategies and councils undertaking an assessment of people’s housing support needs. That seems to be a sensible approach, but local authorities need adequate support. Housing support is not social care or social work. As far as I understand it, the prescribed housing support services are set out in the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 and the words “advise and assist” do not, as I understand it, extend to acting on behalf of, or representing, someone, which means that there are limits to what councils could be required to do to meet that duty.

In general, we are supportive of local authorities assessing housing needs in order to make provision.

The Convener: The next theme is that of domestic abuse, which Jeremy Balfour will ask about.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): In the interest of openness, I declare that my older brother, Dr Balfour, is a member of the Edinburgh IJB and that my wife is a special constable.

Before we turn to domestic abuse, I will quickly go back to the previous theme and ask Pat Togher

a question about how IJBs work in practice. If someone is in hospital and needs housing or might become homeless, is it the role of the local authority or of the national health service to deal with that, or is that your role? How do we ensure that such individuals do not fall between the cracks?

Pat Togher: As you might be aware, the vast majority of IJBs do not have responsibility for dealing with homelessness delegated to them—only two or three IJBs in Scotland deal with that. In principle, when it is recognised that someone is experiencing homelessness or issues associated with homelessness, a referral will be made to the homelessness service.

Jeremy Balfour: The obvious follow-up question is whether you think that that should be delegated to IJBs in all 32 local authorities.

Pat Togher: I am the chief officer of an integrated service, so if you were to ask me a question about integration, I would argue that all services should be integrated.

Jeremy Balfour: That is a good answer.

Moving on to the issue of domestic abuse, the bill's provisions aim to prevent homelessness for those who are at risk of, or are suffering, domestic abuse. What is your view of the effectiveness of those provisions? Perhaps Mike Callaghan or Pat Togher could come in first.

Pat Togher: I am happy to answer that question.

First, we largely support that. Our knowledge of domestic abuse is significantly better than it was a number of years ago, but it is a deeply complicated area and should be recognised as such. It is often misunderstood. To give an example of one area of complexity, Glasgow city health and social care partnership recently produced a domestic abuse strategy, which makes 80 recommendations. That gives a strong indication of what we are talking about. Domestic abuse is not always visible. For example, it is often difficult to ascertain evidence of coercive control.

The bill's inclusion of a domestic abuse policy might go some way towards addressing that. However, that goes back to the point that has already been made, which is that we need to have an infrastructure that supports the policy, with considerable investment in tackling domestic abuse across all services, to ensure that there is a cohesive alignment and that our approach to the wide and varied nature of domestic abuse is what is required.

10:00

Mike Callaghan: COSLA, on behalf of local government, is very supportive of the bill's provisions on domestic abuse as a key part of leading the equally safe strategy to prevent violence against women and girls. Domestic abuse, particularly for women, is a leading cause of homelessness. We strongly support all the provisions in the bill that relate to domestic abuse.

COSLA and the Scottish Government co-own the equally safe strategy to eradicate all forms of violence against women and girls. The strategy has been refreshed recently, with strong input from the Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers and the involvement of the police and other key partners. Our COSLA spokesperson, Councillor Maureen Chalmers, co-chairs the equally safe board with the Minister for Victims and Community Safety.

COSLA is clear that housing and the prevention of homelessness are key and must be considered from a gendered perspective, in terms of risks and protections for women's equality, safety and security. Clearly, the drivers of homelessness are different for men and women. The equally safe approach recognises that domestic abuse is the largest driver of homelessness for women, so we are very supportive of that aspect of the bill.

Jeremy Balfour: Thank you. I want to come to Valerie Arbuckle on that point. Obviously, the police are the first to deal with domestic abuse. Do you have any views on that aspect of the bill? Just to develop the discussion slightly, is Police Scotland concerned that you are becoming more social workers than police officers?

Valerie Arbuckle: Yes, the police are often the first port of call for a person who is suffering from domestic abuse. However, they are not always the first port of call. Often, a person may try to escape from an abusive relationship, and, as Pat Togher has mentioned, abuse comes in a variety of different forms—physical and mental. Therefore, a person might initially seek to escape their accommodation, and they may approach housing services first in an attempt to move away. I suppose that that is really where the “ask” element of the ask and act duty comes in, because that ask would not necessarily be about whether someone was going to be homeless; it would be about why they were going to be homeless and whether there was more behind that.

I am wondering whether the bill will require members of the public to go to the police. Obviously, a person who is already suffering from domestic abuse will have fear issues in relation to what is going to happen next. I would be concerned if a person had to have somebody

charged before they were allowed to escape a situation. That is one aspect to consider.

In relation to the alleged abuser, there is obviously some domestic abuse legislation already going through, but I would ask the committee to look at that and to find out whether that contradicts or aligns with this particular bill. Not all people who are charged with domestic abuse are remanded—many will be released on bail. What happens will depend very much on what the victim wants and needs. The victim might want to disappear and go somewhere else, in which case they might want to declare themselves homeless in order to move closer to friends, family and a support network. However, the person who is alleged to have abused that person will then be homeless themselves, so it is important that we look at the homelessness aspect for the individuals and at whether evidence would be required.

If the police were required to support applications for housing because of allegations and charges of domestic abuse, that would put further pressure on our system. We hope that members of other relevant bodies would be able to accept a person's statement as being the situation.

Jeremy Balfour: I will move on. Susie, the bill contains a requirement on social landlords to have a domestic abuse policy. Many social landlords already have such a policy. In your experience, do social landlords already implement domestic abuse policies? What difference would a statutory requirement make, if any?

Susie Fitton: We recognise that there is work to be done in the sector in relation to being responsive to and supportive of victims and survivors of domestic abuse. For example, the report by Scottish Women's Aid and the Chartered Institute of Housing, "Policies Not Promises: A review of Scottish social landlords' domestic abuse policies", found that, four years on, despite good intentions, a range of really good practice in the sector and a campaign involving a commitment by social landlords to sign up to the "Make a stand" pledge and put in place their own domestic abuse policies, many social landlords in Scotland still did not have a policy in place. We therefore recognise that there is room for improvement, and the statutory requirement should be a driver for change in that area. We hope that the provisions will be a supportive driver for change.

Housing associations and co-operatives have a unique role in their communities and they are well placed to spot the signs of all kinds of abuse, including hidden harm such as financial abuse and emotional abuse. They build strong relationships with tenants, and staff and contractors have fairly unique access to homes that other organisations

simply do not have. Our members are, therefore, in a unique position to train a variety of staff to spot the signs of domestic abuse and report concerns safely.

Our members can support victims and survivors in a wide range of ways. That can involve anything from analysis of repairs—looking at patterns and trends of certain repair codes, which can suggest that domestic abuse is prevalent in a household—to acknowledging and dealing with the fact that domestic abuse can have an impact on rent arrears and antisocial behaviour. Procedural guidance to recognise the root cause of rent arrears and antisocial behaviour complaints can be a significant part of responding appropriately.

Support can also involve promoting support services and anonymous ways of receiving support. Partnerships are key, so support can involve ensuring that information is up to date, available and easily accessible and that people understand the support offer and how and when they can access it. It also involves, in essence, rehousing people—working collaboratively to provide temporary and permanent rehousing solutions and referral pathways. That means working with partners to ensure that victims have a single door so that they do not have to seek advice and support from multiple agencies.

Lots of registered social landlords are doing some really good work in that area and, as a membership body, we are working to promote that practice. I visited Berwickshire Housing Association recently, which has some excellent practice, as does Almond Housing Association, for example. There are some really good examples. It is just about making sure that resource, support, leadership and culture change are supported in the sector. We also need to implement the provisions that are waiting to be implemented to support housing associations to end an abuser's tenancy.

The Convener: We move on to questions on the final theme, which is equalities issues and the impact on rural areas, from Roz McCall.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Good morning, everyone. I am the last committee member to ask some questions. You will be happy to know that.

Susie, have we got it right on equalities? What are the issues with regard to equalities and are they addressed in the bill? You have alluded to that a couple of times in your responses.

Susie Fitton: The causes of homelessness and whom it affects are not always widely understood, so more work is needed to raise awareness. The bill mentions homelessness in a generic way, but the situation is not always clear with regard to, for example, homelessness among people with

learning disabilities or people with physical impairments or disabilities. It may be unreasonable to expect them to occupy certain properties because of access issues or other issues that are related to impairments.

Refugees and asylum seekers have particular experiences of accessing provision and housing, and homelessness among minoritised ethnic communities, women and other groups with protected characteristics will need to be considered.

As far as I am aware, there is no equality impact assessment for the bill at the moment. Is that correct?

Roz McCall: Yes.

Susie Fitton: In some ways, it is unclear whether that has been factored in.

We are more than happy to provide the committee and others with evidence on how homelessness impacts people with particular protected characteristics. A recent report by the Scottish Commission for People with Learning Disabilities found that there are particular challenges for people with learning disabilities. Members of that group face difficulties in relation to housing that are not always recognised. We are willing to assist with that, if it would be useful.

Roz McCall: I will ask a yes or no question and put you on the spot. Basically, what I took from that answer is that you do not think that we are sufficiently accounting for that in the bill. Is that correct?

Susie Fitton: At the moment, we are not.

Pat Togher: I touched on this earlier, but there is an issue with intersectionality across some of the population that are more predisposed to homelessness and to repeat homelessness. The bill stops short in relation to that. I do not want to repeat what Susie Fitton said, but we need to consider those who are living in poverty, and especially people in Scottish index of multiple deprivation—SIMD—1 and 2 areas; care-experienced young people; the asylum population; the black and ethnic minority population; those with comorbidity issues; and those with addictions, mental health problems and learning disabilities. Unless all the provision is carefully considered and proportionately funded, the vision will not be realised.

Roz McCall: Rural provision is a big thing for me, as many people will know. When we took evidence from the third sector last week, we heard that, basically, the current system is broken, especially when it comes to rural areas, where there is an entirely different set of issues. Will you give us an insight into whether rural areas are covered properly and whether the bill will do what

it says on the tin? I hope that Mike Callaghan and Pat Togher will answer that question.

Mike Callaghan: It is a very good question. As I understand it, there are different approaches to dealing with rurality issues across the country. Rural areas have rapid rehousing transition plans, but there are difficulties with building homes in rural areas, in addition to the cost. We have been informed of that by some of our member councils in rural areas. That being said, good progress has been made in some areas.

We have significant challenges, and housing emergencies have been declared in some areas. Of the eight councils that have declared an emergency, one is a predominantly rural area—Argyll and Bute. The provisions in the bill are welcome as they will address some of the challenges that are faced in housing programmes and they will assist and support those parts of the country. Obviously, resources will be part of the answer, as will implementing the bill's provisions in a phased way.

Roz McCall: Pat, do you have anything to add from an IJB perspective? I know that you are based in Edinburgh.

Pat Togher: I suppose that the point to be made—it has already been made—is that there is no single reason why people become homeless. Homelessness is multifaceted and extremely complicated. One aspect, which Mike Callaghan has just touched on, is that, as well as the high costs of materials for refurbishing properties and making sure that void repairs take place timeously, there are workforce uncertainties. A large part of tackling that comes down to having consistent funding arrangements. We also touched earlier on the role that third sector provision plays. All of that needs to be duly considered.

The Convener: You will be pleased to know that that concludes our questions. I thank you all for your contributions.

I will suspend the meeting to allow us to set up for the next panel.

10:14

Meeting suspended.

10:19

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome our second panel on the Housing (Scotland) Bill. We have Suzie McIloney, who is change lead at All in for Change; Heather McCluskey, who is implementation lead at the Centre for Homelessness Impact; Sarah Rogers, who is a senior policy and public affairs officer at Families Outside; and Shea Moran, who

is a senior representative from Aff the Streets. Thank you for joining us.

We move straight to questions. In general, to what extent do you agree with the Scottish Government's overarching policy objective of the homelessness measures in the bill to create a shift away from crisis intervention to prevention activity? I go to Heather McCluskey first.

Heather McCluskey (Centre for Homelessness Impact): The Centre for Homelessness Impact absolutely agrees with the policy intention of a shift from a crisis response to homelessness to a more preventative response. The key to the bill's success will be well-planned and well-resourced implementation. Early engagement and support from local authorities and relevant bodies will ensure that the prevention duty shifts to other organisations that are not the homelessness team, and that it does not just become a duty to refer. That will also be key.

On a wider overarching point, we also need to understand more about what works to prevent homelessness. We do not have a lot of robust and well-evaluated evidence on what works. We see the implementation of the bill as a real opportunity to grow that evidence. If we fund some independent evaluation of pilot areas, we can grow that evidence. That will help us to understand what works best, so that we can put our resources into those areas in a better way.

Shea Moran (Aff the Streets): We certainly agree with the objective in principle. I add that attempting to shift away from the perpetual crisis response mode that we have been in for some years and move towards a more preventative model instead is, in fact, essential. We have decades of research that shows us the consequences of not having an adequate focus on prevention. Those can include negative effects on physical and mental health, disruption to education, placing young people at risk of abuse and violence and other issues that can continue well into later life.

We are yet to be convinced that the bill as written is the correct vessel to achieve those aims. I have worked on behalf of Aff the Streets to ensure that young people with lived experience had representation in two youth homelessness prevention pathways, on the prevention commission, which came up with the ask and act principle and worked alongside the prevention review group, and on the prevention task and finish group. All those groups produced comprehensive final reports that laid out exactly how we would like the Scottish Government to tackle prevention in the bill. However, I believe that the bill currently falls quite a bit short of our expectations and could be far more ambitious in its scope.

Shifting our focus to a more upstream prevention methodology would have benefits in reduced homelessness presentation in the long term, but it would also result in long-term savings across multiple sectors. There is not enough in the bill that aims to address the unique routes into youth homelessness and the unique circumstances that young people find themselves in when faced with homelessness.

Suzie McIloney (All in for Change): We absolutely agree with the homelessness measures in the bill. We really want to push for that culture change. If this is a shared responsibility, we need everyone to buy into it and everyone to be at the table.

The scale of the culture change that is required is perhaps being overlooked. It takes years for legislation to take effect. We need to think about the housing emergency as it is right now. The options that are available for people are very limited. If we are to head towards prevention, we need a menu of options that are available to people, which will allow us to look at moving away from crisis and heading more towards the prevention work that we really need to do.

Sarah Rogers (Families Outside): Families Outside strongly supports the overarching policy objectives of the bill. It is clear that there is an urgent and pressing need to move to the prevention model. The provisions in the bill have a real potential to drive that shift, bearing in mind the issues around implementation such as resourcing, capacity and housing supply, which I am sure we will come on to speak about.

However, our key concern about the bill is that we do not know whether, as it stands, it will make a tangible difference on the ground for families who are affected by imprisonment. That is largely due to the fact that such families are very much a hidden group, and there is a real lack of awareness across our public services of the damaging impacts of imprisonment on families, including, specifically, the housing issues that they experience.

I will briefly touch on some of those, to give a bit of context. For example, imprisonment is associated with huge financial hardship for families. Very often, when someone goes to prison, families find that there is a drop in household income and that that comes with huge costs in supporting the person in prison. We explored that in detail in our "Paying the Price" report, with which some of you may be familiar. Those costs can make it very difficult to continue to meet housing costs.

Another issue can arise if the person in prison has been the tenancy holder or the main claimant

of universal credit or housing benefit. That can end up putting the family home at risk.

Another situation that is specific to families who are affected by imprisonment is that they can be forced out of their family home or local community because of harassment and targeted attacks that they receive in their home, due to the crime that their loved one has been involved in.

Another specific issue that we encounter is that families often look to be rehoused because they want to be closer to the prison that their loved one is placed in. Often, people are in a prison that is not near the family home. We recently looked at that issue in depth. The costs and the logistical and geographical issues that are involved in trying to maintain that relationship are a huge barrier, so families look to be rehoused.

Our concern is that, if there is no awareness among our services about those specific challenges, families who are affected by imprisonment will not benefit from the bill and will, basically, fall through the cracks in the legislation.

Kevin Stewart: Good morning. I turn first to Shea Moran, because he stated very clearly that the working groups that he was involved in—the voices of lived experience—feel that elements are missing from the bill. Mr Moran, will you expand on that? What is missing? What is required for the change that you seek? Is it legislation or is it the cultural change that Suzie Mcilloney mentioned in her opening remarks?

Shea Moran: The cultural change that is required definitely cannot be overstated. However, I feel—and, certainly, the young people with whom I work have indicated—that, up to now, we have had too many disparate systems working towards trying to achieve the aim of prevention. From one local authority to the next and from one service to the next with which an individual interacts, the results can be vastly different—and, in some areas, prevention is still very light touch.

There are fantastic examples of good practice, which we certainly need to carry forward, but we need to have a candid discussion about where the failings are in the current system and legislation, so that we can carry forward that learning and come up with a more streamlined and universal model that can be applied to all relevant services equally.

Kevin Stewart: What is not right? Is it failures in the legislative framework or is it the interpretation of the legislation, as it stands, by certain bodies? In addition, can we do something with the new piece of legislation to make sure that the kind of uniformity and best practice that you want is exported through good legislation and regulation?

10:30

Shea Moran: On the first point, it is a mixture of the two. There are certainly failings in the legislation; up to now, it has come from too many different avenues, and it has not always closely aligned with the overarching objective of preventing homelessness.

As to what could be changed, our issue with ask and act is not so much the principle or the idea of legislating for it as the fact that, at the moment, how it will work in practice is very unclear. We would like a more robust take on it in the bill and the supporting guidance, fully informed by the reports of the prevention task and finish group and the prevention review group, to design a more uniform system.

I believe that that needs to come from a legislative standpoint because, up to now, leaving things open to interpretation, as you said, has resulted in far too many people slipping through the cracks and in there not being an adequate understanding of exactly how people are affected by homelessness and the routes into it.

Kevin Stewart: Thank you. I could ask what you mean by “robust”, but I had probably better leave that for now, and you might give us an indication afterwards of what you would like to see in terms of that “robust” action.

I turn briefly to Suzie Mcilloney on the culture change aspect. We all know that excellent legislation can be brought into play—we heard earlier from witnesses about our having some of the best homelessness legislation in the world—but that it does not necessarily work for everyone in practice. What do we need to do to underpin the new legislation when it comes to that cultural change? What should we ask public bodies to do to ensure that?

Suzie Mcilloney: Training is massively important for public bodies to have a good solid understanding of homelessness. In looking at prevention, public bodies need to understand the signs of homelessness. That is about moving away from having a person sitting in front of you when they are in crisis, and looking much further back and thinking, for example, about whether a change in income might lead to something else. It is about being a wee bit more understanding of the issues when they first begin and not having to act on them at a much later date, when the options are very limited.

Kevin Stewart: I do not want to put words into your mouth in any way but, when folk come to me with a problem, I often find that the initial problem that they come with is not the real problem at all—I do what we call “the delve” to find out what the underlying problem is. Are you talking about that aspect—that further delve into asking folk what the

real difficulties are? Beyond that, is there enough training in trauma-informed practice on the front line to get folk to do that delve and understand what folk are going through?

Suzie Mcilloney: On the first part of that, about the questioning, how we ask—the language that we use—is very important. We talk about being trauma informed and trauma responsive, and we need to have that put into practice. It is not just about the training; we need to go much further than that. We are all aware of the damage and the trauma that homelessness causes. With public bodies—in that shared response—we want to be able to find areas that are problems for people and identify how we can step in and what we can do.

Relationships are massively important and play a massive part in cross-sectoral culture change. We also want to acknowledge the role that communities play. There are many smaller organisations in our communities that do amazing work. There is not much about the input of the third sector in the bill, and we would like to see more of that in the legislation and guidance.

The Convener: I will move on to the theme of the ask and act duty and invite Paul O’Kane to ask questions.

Paul O’Kane: Good morning. We are interested in hearing your views on the ask and act duty as defined in the bill. Perhaps the place to start is to build on some of the previous contributions on how the relevant bodies that are listed in the bill currently work to prevent homelessness and on the relationship between third sector organisations and local authority homelessness services. Do you think that the proposed statutory ask and act duties will address some of the issues and create improvement? I appreciate that that question covers quite a broad sweep, but we are keen to get your initial views on that.

Suzie Mcilloney: Data sharing is, and has continued to be, a massive barrier that we need to address. If we are looking for culture change and to move towards shared responsibility, we have to get data sharing right, as it is massively important. There is still fear around what cannot be shared, so we are not sharing anything and nothing is getting done, which means that we are missing the opportunities to intervene. We are not starting from scratch on the prevention work: we have RRTPs, there are lots of pathways, there is good work in prisons and work is being done for residential rehabilitation. We need to learn about what is already happening and build on good practice.

Heather McCluskey: I am so glad that Suzie Mcilloney mentioned data sharing and data integration, because that is key to the involvement of relevant bodies as well as to helping us to

understand the routes in and out of homelessness. At the moment, the data are separate: there is homelessness data and there is health data, but very little of it meets in the middle. It is hard to understand how people travel from being at early risk of homelessness to walking into the door of their local authority homelessness department. Along with culture change, we also need there to be a shift towards greater data integration, which will help us to share data, as well as helping our practice and our understanding.

Suzie is right that we have great examples of preventative services. As a research organisation, we would always argue for more robust research on what the impact of those services is. When we have a greater understanding of the outcomes and impacts of particular services, we can make the best decisions about how to allocate resources.

Sarah Rogers: I will pick up on data, as it is a huge issue for families who have been affected by imprisonment. As I have said, those families are a hidden group. That is partly to do with a lack of awareness and partly to do with a lack of data. At the moment, we do not have data or numbers, and there is nothing systematic that is in place at any stage of the criminal justice process that captures who those families are. What that means in relation to the bill and the homelessness prevention duties is that it is very difficult for public services to act in a preventative manner, because if they do not know who those families are, they cannot reach out to them to see whether they need help with any issues. They are relying on families identifying themselves and reaching out for help. I do not think that it can be overstated how difficult it is for families who have been affected by imprisonment to do that because of the associated stigma, along with the fact that housing is likely to be only one of many issues that they are facing, which makes it complex for them to know where to start to look for help. That is compounded by the fact that at no stage in the criminal justice process are information and advice accessible to families.

On the second part of your question, which was whether the ask and act duties in the bill could improve things, we think that they have the potential to do so. Although families might not really be on the radar of public services, they have significant contact with agencies throughout the criminal justice process. I find it hugely promising that the police and the Scottish Prison Service have been named as relevant bodies in the bill; indeed, it is important that they are, given that we are looking at supporting the housing needs of individuals who are directly involved in the criminal justice system.

However, we want to ensure that these agencies also have a role in relation to families. At

the moment, our experience is that they do not directly engage with families to find out whether they need support or to be referred on. However, they could have that engagement under the bill, and we therefore need to look at how that would work in practice. There is not necessarily any easy answer, but we need to try to tap into families' interactions with the criminal justice agencies and ensure that questions are being asked and that they are being appropriately supported or referred on. We think that the ask and act duties have the potential to do that, but at the moment it is not entirely clear whether they will do so under the bill.

Shea Moran: My colleagues on the panel have already covered much of the first part of the question. As for the second part, which was how or whether the ask and act duties will improve outcomes, I believe that that will largely come down to the training and guidance that are provided. At the moment, many of the issues that we have arise from a lack of general knowledge about homelessness, what it looks like and how it affects different groups of people in very different ways.

For example, we know that many young people are likely to be affected disproportionately by hidden homelessness. It would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that many of the young people with whom I interact do not realise that they classify as homeless and are entitled to support. A large part of what will be required from relevant bodies under the ask and act duties is their being able to identify these things, not just by asking, "Is your housing situation stable?" but by taking into account a range of other factors, and they should also be able to identify adequately the various warning signs and know what method of acting will be most appropriate in each circumstance.

Unfortunately, up to this point, there has been quite a large focus on the referral aspect of acting. Personally, we would like to see that as a duty separate from the ask and act duties; indeed, it would be almost a follow-up. Our belief is that, if we are relying too much on referrals to a housing body within a local authority, we have already failed to prevent homelessness; all that we have done is streamline the process for someone to reach that stage of presenting as homeless, which completely undercuts the entire principle of the ask and act section of the bill.

Paul O'Kane: Those contributions were helpful.

We had a discussion with the previous panel on the need for resourcing with regard to the bill, which we appreciate will be a challenge, and I wonder whether I can get your views on how the ask and act duties can be implemented and on the associated resourcing and financial implications. The Government has said that this should be

about up-front investment in order to be preventative, but do you think that that will happen? What more needs to happen, particularly for those who are interacting with local authorities and those funding structures?

Sarah Rogers: We would not comment on whether the costings in the financial memorandum are sufficient—we are not experts on the housing issue—but we think that, as has been alluded to a few times, account needs to be taken of the training aspect, as that will require a significant amount of resources. We need to recognise that any such training and awareness raising should not just be about telling people, "These are your duties"; they should, as has been mentioned, be about understanding homelessness and how it differs for different groups. From our perspective, there would need to be an understanding of the circumstances that families affected by imprisonment find themselves in, because, without that, there is a risk that the needs of our families and indeed other groups will not be understood and recognised and that they will continue to be unsupported.

10:45

Heather McCluskey: I will be brief. We fully agree that there needs to be up-front investment to ensure that these duties are well implemented. When we look at Wales and England, where prevention duties have already been introduced, we see that, when they were implemented, significant up-front investment was needed for training and hiring new staff to fulfil them. The duties are very different in Wales and England, but we can certainly learn those lessons about the need for significant investment. Again, I make the point that some investment is needed for pilots so that we can see what works and, as a result, develop a list or menu of options for what effective intervention might look like, what actions relevant bodies can take and what more local authorities can do to push their prevention work more upstream and truly prevent people from moving into homelessness and from getting to the point where they need to go into temporary accommodation, potentially staying there for years.

The Convener: I invite Bob Doris to ask some questions on the same theme.

Bob Doris: Good morning, everyone. I have just a couple of brief questions. The bill lists specific bodies that will have the new statutory ask and act duties placed on them, but are they the right ones? What role is there for third sector organisations in helping to implement the duties? In short, are the right organisations in the list, and how can the third sector contribute?

Shea Moran: The list is a good start, but we would certainly recommend expanding it. For instance, the bill at present groups certain bodies such as education authorities under the local authority heading, and we would recommend that they be explicitly mentioned in the bill, just to make it entirely clear that they will be subject to the ask and act duties, too. Ideally, educators, social workers and anyone who falls under the corporate parenting responsibilities should have the ask and act duties explicitly applying to them.

As for other bodies, the third sector will certainly have a large part to play in the successful implementation of the ask and act duties by creating and fully supporting the cultural change that will be required. For many people, the first interaction in which they might feel comfortable disclosing that they might be at risk of homelessness will not be with a health worker, an educator or someone from justice; most likely, it is going to be someone at the local community centre, someone at a youth centre or someone in the community with whom they already have a rapport. Adequate routes need to be in place to allow those bodies to refer people to the correct services that will then be covered by the ask and act duties.

Sarah Rogers: As I have said, we were particularly pleased to see the police and the Scottish Prison Service included in the list. At the moment, it is a good starting point, and we welcome the fact that the bill allows it to evolve.

We agree that the third sector will play a crucial role here. Many third sector organisations already work in this space and with service users; indeed, as Shea Moran has pointed out, they often have trusted relationships with individuals, and that could be key with regard to the interactions that those individuals have with the statutory services that they will then have to engage with.

The third sector quite often works very well with a lot of the relevant bodies. For example, we already have good relationships with the Scottish Prison Service, and we need to build on and, I suppose, value those partnerships. Another important point to make is that the third sector is, like everybody else, stretched in terms of resources, and if it is to take a role in implementing this legislation, we need to ensure that it is resourced appropriately.

Bob Doris: That is helpful. Before I bring Heather McCluskey in, I will throw in my next question, too, because of the time constraints. It would be helpful if you could reflect on this as well, and we would like to hear anything more that you have to say on the relevant bodies for the ask and act duty. How do we make sure that the enforcement and accountability framework is meaningful and substantive but not overly

bureaucratic? I throw that in at the end, Heather. We might get very similar views on the bodies from all the witnesses.

Heather McCluskey: I do not have much more to add on the relevant bodies beyond what my colleagues have already raised.

As it stands, the bill does not go into much detail on what the ask and act duty will look like or how it will operate, nor does it say anything about enforcement and accountability, so there is a hole there. It will be important to have clear and practical guidance for local authorities and other relevant bodies about how to act, when to ask about homelessness and what actions might be taken. Again, those actions should be well informed by evidence on what works.

It will be important to have a monitoring framework in place and to have data integration. Indicators from other relevant bodies should be included in that monitoring framework so that the ask and act duty is not just about the local authority's performance on homelessness but is rather about what we as a society are doing to prevent homelessness.

Bob Doris: That is helpful, because local authorities' current statutory duty is the easy bit to analyse, but things have gone wrong by the time you get to counting those numbers.

Heather McCluskey: Absolutely—it is very hard to count and measure prevention, but we need a monitoring framework.

Bob Doris: The Government will have to sharpen up its thoughts on how we do that. Suzie, do you have anything to add?

Suzie McIloney: We feel that there should be more bodies on the list. It could involve partners from the Department for Work and Pensions and Social Security Scotland. To give an example, in South Ayrshire we have a good working relationship with our local jobcentre. If there has been a change in income, it can identify that there is a risk of homelessness. It would then make contact with the relevant parties, such as the housing advice centre or our housing options team. The wraparound support that is needed for that person is then identified, the risk is very much minimised and there are opportunities to move on and totally avoid having to go down the homelessness route. That is an example of why we need to think beyond the current list of bodies.

To answer the question on enforcement and accountability, it is not clear what that means for public bodies and local authorities in relation to both parts of the ask and act duty. We need much more detail to know what that will look like. The initial pick-up point of identifying somebody is important; that party should then be part of that

person's journey. We talked about personal housing plans at previous committee meetings. Those are essential so that everybody is aware of where that person is on their journey, and so that they can get the right support quickly.

Bob Doris: That is helpful. I will not ask any more questions, but I will reflect briefly on what you say, Suzie.

I think that you suggested last week, convener, that whether this Parliament can put a statutory duty on an organisation to have that responsibility is one thing, but if we are involved, we should at least have a voluntary arrangement with organisations. We have heard about the Home Office and GPs, and Suzie mentioned the DWP. I will not come back with any more questions, but would you like to see any other organisations on the list in relation to the duty?

Suzie McIloney: Is that question for me?

Bob Doris: It is for anyone, because I will not get back in. It is an opportunity for any other organisation to come back in and to say something that will go into the *Official Report*. If no one wants to speak, that is fine.

The Convener: The jobcentre was also mentioned.

Jeremy Balfour: And Social Security Scotland.

The Convener: And Social Security Scotland. Thank you, Jeremy.

The next theme is preventing homelessness sooner and I invite Jeremy Balfour to come in.

Jeremy Balfour: Good morning, panel, and thank you for coming.

What are some of the problems with the fact that the current legal framework considers people to be threatened with homelessness if it is likely they will become homeless within two months? The bill would change that period to six months. Would that make a difference?

Perhaps we can start with Shea Moran and work along the row.

Shea Moran: As has been said before, a person is already in crisis two months before they become homeless, and prevention becomes exceptionally difficult. Moving further upstream to a model that begins six months away from homelessness will certainly help, but we are concerned about implementation and about how that provision is currently worded in the bill.

One issue with the current system is that its enforcement is counter to the intended spirit. People who present when they are nine weeks away from becoming homeless will be told that they cannot get help until they are eight weeks, or

two months, away from homelessness and that they must come back then. We would recommend altering the wording of the bill, so that rather than saying "six months" it refers to someone being "at least six months" away from homelessness.

We also have serious concerns about how that will be evidenced and where the burden of proof will lie. We speak to many young people—this will also apply across the board, and I believe that it was mentioned by the first panel—who do not know whether they are six months away from homelessness and do not know how to demonstrate that. In many instances, people will be unable to receive support unless they can provide proof.

We are moving to extend that period to up to six months away from becoming homeless and focusing on prevention, but many of the young people with whom I work are concerned that if they are still within the family home, or are living with a carer or guardian, and attempt to present to their local authority to receive housing support, they will be required to provide proof from their family—with whom they are having issues—that they are at risk of homelessness. That can compound the issues and might ultimately be the trigger that leads to them becoming homeless.

At the moment, because of the overarching issue about where the burden of proof will lie, we are unsure how effective the six-month period will be. We believe that the only people who will get any true benefit from that will be those who are leaving prison and have a set release date, or care leavers who have a set date for when they will leave care.

Sarah Rogers: I agree with Shea Moran's concerns about how the six-month period will work in practice.

It will bring some positives, because it will allow more scope for a preventative approach and should allow the multi-agency working that the bill seeks to bring in. We should be able to have a more holistic approach. I know that six months is not a huge amount of time and I agree that the period should be at least six months, but having that extended period will mean that we should be able to start looking at the wider issues that sit alongside the risk of homelessness. Once again, that all comes down to whether services will be appropriately resourced.

There will be some situations in which it is possible to plan in advance, including when someone is in prison. We have spoken about families' issues with homelessness, but families play a crucial role in preventing homelessness for people who are involved in the justice system. At the moment, those people are often not

meaningfully, or not consistently, involved in pre-release planning.

People who have been in prison often go back to the family home, but if families have not been involved in planning and are not appropriately supported after the person's release, that puts a huge strain on family relationships. Because of that lack of support, we sometimes find that relationships are at risk of breakdown when the person is released, which means that they are then at risk of homelessness. Therefore, if we can involve families more in pre-release planning, we can avoid some of that risk for the person who is leaving prison.

11:00

Heather McCluskey: There is real benefit in extending the duty to six months—or to at least six months—before homelessness happens, as it has the potential to shift the focus away from the crisis response that we have at the moment to real preventative work. We know from Wales and England, where the prevention duty is in place, that prevention work can work and can achieve positive outcomes in a lot of cases.

Our caution arises with regard to the delineation between prevention work and things moving into the homelessness pathway—that is, the point at which a person transfers from being at risk of homelessness to being threatened with or experiencing homelessness. The bill could contain a stronger definition of what those issues are and look like, and it might also help answer the question of where the burden of proof lies.

It sounds counterintuitive, but we would also argue for local authorities to have separate teams working on this to ensure a really clear separation with regard to the prevention duty and when it ends, and as far as relevant bodies are concerned, a separation between the prevention duty and the homelessness duty as it exists now, as well as an awareness of when each of those duties are discharged.

Suzie McIloney: What we are essentially talking about is providing a window of opportunity, and six months should really be the minimum. There also needs to be a focus on transitions—for example, as my colleagues have mentioned, when young people leave care or when people leave prison. We should also be thinking of those leaving residential rehabilitation for drug or alcohol addiction and focusing on hospitals, colleges, universities and other areas where there could be an increase in such activity.

We also want to ensure that the support services on offer are adequate and adequately resourced and are providing up-to-date and accurate information and advice on housing.

Moreover, we want the support that is on offer to be meaningful and, indeed, to support the person, because, at the end of the day, this is all about people and what we are doing for them with regard to prevention.

Jeremy Balfour: Following on from that, does anyone have comments on the proposal in the bill that, as part of the local housing strategy, councils should undertake an assessment of people's housing support needs and the availability of housing support services, including homelessness services?

Shea Moran: We would absolutely welcome that change, although I would add that, as part of this, we should be moving away from the almost stigmatising view that homelessness is just a housing issue. If the plan is to include some sort of guidance on how local authorities' housing strategies are constructed, we would ideally want that guidance to include other factors such as health and the wraparound needs that come with supporting someone through their journey through homelessness.

The Convener: I invite Marie McNair to ask some questions on the next theme, which is domestic abuse.

Marie McNair: Good morning, panel. I seek your views on the bill's provisions that aim to prevent those who are at risk of or who are suffering domestic abuse from becoming homeless. I will pop that question to Sarah Rogers first, if that is okay.

Sarah Rogers: We definitely welcome the provisions, although we do wonder how they will join up with existing schemes and policy frameworks. A particular issue that has come to our attention from families whom we support is how they might link with, say, the victim notification scheme. We are aware of many instances of survivors of domestic abuse not being informed timeously of a person's release when that might have had an impact on them and led to their feeling at risk of abuse and perhaps their looking to be rehoused. Therefore, we have to look at how the provisions join up with everything else, because if they do not and if we do not ensure that all the systems are working together, the duties to act sooner and so on are not really going to bring any real benefit.

Shea Moran: Like Sarah Rogers, we absolutely welcome any additional provisions that protect people from the risk of domestic abuse. However, we were quite disappointed to see several things missing from the bill that we would have liked to have been included. I know that witnesses in previous evidence sessions have highlighted the private rented sector as something that, ideally,

should sit alongside the social housing provisions in the bill.

Young people are already significantly and disproportionately disadvantaged within the private rented sector, and I have had several young people highlight to me their concern that, if no adequate provisions are in place, they will be forced into a situation where they are stuck in a home with an abuser, purely because they do not have any option if they move out. Given the current wait times across Scotland for social housing, that might cause several issues for someone newly presenting.

There are also no provisions to cover domestic abuse taking place within the family home, and we would like something to be done about that alongside what is currently in the bill.

Suzie McIloney: We in All in for Change absolutely welcome the provisions and the need for a housing domestic abuse policy. The key, though, will be what is in the detail, the quality of the policies and the robustness with which they will be implemented.

As with the prevention side of things, we want staff and colleagues to feel confident that they can approach this subject, but in a very caring and sensitive way. Perhaps there is something that we can learn from how the routine inquiry and the questioning in that respect are implemented with regard to domestic abuse by, say, taking that further and asking questions about homelessness prevention and housing stability.

As we have heard from colleagues, domestic abuse is not always visible. It is a really complex issue; as we are probably aware, it can take a person seven, eight or nine times to physically leave a relationship, so support needs to be offered from the very beginning and then needs to be continued. I know of safety plans that have been established through, for example, Scottish Women's Aid, and I think that we might want to consider that sort of approach with regard to personal housing plans, which should be very much a key factor when moving forward with the domestic abuse part of this policy.

Marie McNair: My next question is for you, too, Suzie. Can you expand on the comment in your submission that some parts of the bill seemingly contradict each other—for example, the measures to end joint tenancies and the measures to address domestic abuse? You have already touched on the additional costs associated with ending a tenancy. If you could expand on that, that would be great.

Suzie McIloney: My colleague Shea Moran mentioned the gap with regard to the private rented sector and the fact that there is not a lot of guidance, or anything else, on how this is going to

be delivered in that sector. For example, with someone who might be in this kind of relationship in a private rented property, any move to end the tenancy would need to involve notification, which means that the person would still be liable for two months' rent. To me, that essentially traps the person in the property, and we need to take a wee bit of a look at how we ensure that they can leave safely without incurring rent arrears or anything else that will impact them in the future if they want to access housing in the private rented sector again.

Marie McNair: Thank you for that. Back to you, convener.

The Convener: The last theme is equalities issues and the impact on rural areas.

Roz McCall: Good morning—it is still morning. I have two questions: one is on the rural side and the other is on equalities. From your perspective, have equalities issues been properly looked at? Have they been involved? The witnesses in our previous session did not think that they had been considered. On the equalities side of the bill, what do you think? We will start with Suzie McIloney and work our way along.

Suzie McIloney: All in for Change would absolutely welcome the idea of an equalities impact assessment, and I believe that other witnesses have called for that too. That needs to be done in a trauma-informed and sensitive way, in terms of how we make people feel safe when they disclose any housing risk; I mean the groups that are covered by the impact assessment. Pilot projects are happening across the country, and it is fair to say that some groups feel safer in going to the community-based pilots and programmes—work that is done in the community—rather than the statutory services. Again, I bring in the importance of the role of the third sector.

Heather McCluskey: I echo my colleague's calls for an equalities impact assessment, but I also highlight that we do not currently gather information about some protected characteristics. In homelessness statistics, we do not currently gather information on sexuality or transgender identity. That is part of the review of Scottish Government data—it will be added, but not for several years. In addition, we do not gather good data on disability or support need. My answer on how people with protected characteristics will be affected is, therefore, that we do not really know very much about it, and we need to get better at gathering the data, in order to know.

We also need to get better at gathering that data so that we know much more about routes into homelessness. I am thinking in particular about LGBT people—who, we know, are at higher risk of

homelessness and may have different routes into and causes and consequences of homelessness.

Sarah Rogers: We agree about an equalities impact assessment, but we are keen to emphasise that consideration needs to go beyond the protected characteristics, because some groups, including families who are affected by imprisonment, who are particularly vulnerable and need specific consideration, will otherwise not be captured. We need to make sure that we do not allow them to fall through the cracks, as I have said. We cannot limit it to the protected characteristics.

Shea Moran: I agree with all the points that have been made so far. I will expand on those only to say that we already know—not necessarily through Government statistics but through statistics that have been gathered by third sector organisations—that many groups are massively overrepresented in homelessness.

For example, young people are hugely disproportionately represented in homelessness statistics year on year, and have been for a very long time. Care leavers, LGBT young people and young parents are all overrepresented within the figures that we currently have. The full extent is hard to measure, though, because, to date, we have not captured any of that information.

That applies to the domestic abuse provisions as well as to the homelessness provisions. From third sector organisation research that has been done over the years, we know that more than 50 per cent of LGBT young people experience domestic abuse from a partner, and more than 60 per cent have witnessed domestic abuse in the family home. None of that is adequately reflected in the bill, unfortunately.

11:15

Roz McCall: That is very interesting. Thank you.

My other question is on the rural side. From looking at the differences, we know, and we have a lot of evidence, that what is happening in urban areas and what is happening in rural areas are two different things. Are the homelessness issues in rural areas taken into consideration? Have we got it right? How is the bill looking to tackle those?

Shea Moran: The main area in which consideration is lacking at the moment probably results from the fact that no budget is currently allocated in the financial memorandum for the training of front-line staff. I believe that that will cause significant issues in rural areas. That is based on responses that we have had from young people, who have said that they would not feel comfortable disclosing their risk of homelessness

to staff in rural areas, purely because of the limited number of services and the closed communities that they exist in. We have heard several examples from young people who have disclosed their risk of homelessness. They quickly found that that information had made its way around quite a small community and back to the people who were putting them at risk.

For young people in particular—although this applies across the board—access to services in rural areas as well as access to housing that is offered are significant barriers. We heard several examples from a rural local authority area in which people were offered housing by their housing team, but that was at the opposite end of the local authority area, and no assistance was provided on how to access that, and no consideration was given to how that would cut them off from support networks, their work or any of those other factors.

Roz McCall: Thank you. That is interesting.

Sarah Rogers: We know that families that are affected by imprisonment and live in rural areas experience unique issues, one of which relates to visiting. As I have said, that can pose issues relating to housing. That is an issue that needs to be considered.

Heather McCluskey: I go back to the implementation of the duties around prevention and thinking about setting up and funding pilots to find out what works to prevent homelessness. Those should be in rural areas, on islands and in more urban areas.

Suzie McIloney: The provisions in the bill do not seek to address specific issues in rural areas and, as we know, rural areas face challenges that are different from those that urban areas face. Public transport and travel costs are issues. It is fair to say that digital inclusion should be added to those, because that is also a factor for people in accessing online information or online support.

Community-based organisations are important. If they are already established in rural areas, let us look to them and bring them around the table when we talk about prevention in rural areas. The relationships and the trust are there. That is a key part of ensuring that the bill works and is implemented well.

Roz McCall: Thank you. That is fine.

The Convener: That concludes our second evidence session today. I thank all of you for your contributions. Next week, we will hear from the Scottish Government.

We will now move into private session to consider the remaining item on the agenda.

11:18

Meeting continued in private until 11:31.

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