

PE1821/A

Scottish Government submission of 9 September 2020

The Scottish Government wants to ensure that everyone in Scotland has a safe, warm place they can call home and we are committed to ending homelessness. In partnership with COSLA we have invested in projects totalling £160 million since 2014 to tackle inequalities, support business and create jobs that will promote growth and inclusivity in some of our most deprived, disadvantaged and remote communities across the country.

The Scottish Government is developing a series of interconnected policy measures and programmes which are helping to further shape our ongoing response to homelessness and the redevelopment of unused buildings. These include work undertaken by the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group, Housing 2040, Empty Homes policy, the National Planning Framework 4, and the Town Centre Action Plan Review.

Homelessness

Scotland already has some of the strongest homelessness rights in the world. Anyone experiencing or at risk of homelessness is entitled to help from their local authority, which includes accommodation. Tackling homelessness remains a national priority and coronavirus has shown we must accelerate our ambitions to end homelessness and rough sleeping. This is evidenced in the Programme for Government which commits us to 'take radical action to end homelessness - designing night shelters and dormitory-style provision out of the homelessness system, and continuing to scale up Housing First'.

This Government took swift and decisive action to respond to the current Covid-19 pandemic using the first Coronavirus Act to ensure Scottish tenants hit by the pandemic were protected from evictions until 30 September. We have announced our intention to extend the emergency measures – subject to Parliamentary approval - for a further six months to 31 March 2021, except those relating to antisocial behaviour or criminality.

In June, the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning requested the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group (HARSAG) be reconvened to make recommendations on what actions are needed to end homelessness during the coronavirus pandemic and beyond, and their recommendations place renewed and increased emphasis on prevention, equality, increasing housing options and supply, and supporting people with no recourse to public funds. Recommendations have emerged as a result of COVID-19 in terms of our continued provision of emergency accommodation and support for move onto settled accommodation. It is our intention to publish a refreshed Scottish Government/COSLA [Ending Homelessness Together Action Plan](#) later this Autumn, based on these HARSAG recommendations, reflecting the significantly changed public health and social context we are operating in.

We have also announced that we will establish a £10 million Tenant Hardship Loan Fund in the Autumn, which will provide a further lifeline to support people facing immediate crisis, who may not be able to access financial support elsewhere. We are also providing a further £3 million to support Discretionary Housing Payments, which brings our total support up to £19 million from our initial budget of £11m – in addition to DHPs which fully mitigate the bedroom tax.

Housing 2040

In 2018 we made a commitment to publish a plan for how our homes and communities should look and feel in 2040 and the options and choices to get there.

We consulted on draft vision and principles and the policy options which we published in July 2019 between December 2019 and February 2020. The draft vision and principles recognise that maintaining and improving our existing stock and ensuring it is being put to the best possible use will be crucial, as well as ensuring that we have a sufficient supply of new homes.

We are now carefully assessing the outputs from the consultation alongside our COVID-19 recovery planning to help inform our Housing to 2040 vision and route map, which we will publish later this year.

Empty Homes

Tackling empty homes remains a priority for the Scottish Government. Over 5,000 empty homes have been brought into use since 2010 through the Scottish Government supported Empty Homes Partnership and other initiatives.

Empty Homes Officers based in Local Authorities have played a key role in this and we are pleased to support the extension of this approach across Scotland. We want to ensure the skills and resources are there to provide help to home owners when they need it - every empty home is a missed opportunity to provide someone who needs it with a warm, safe, sustainable roof over their head.

We've also provided dedicated funds to tackle empty homes, including the £4.5 million Empty Homes Loan Fund and the £4 million Town Centre Empty Homes Fund. Further funding is also available from the £30 million Rural and Islands Housing Fund.

National Planning Framework 4

We have begun the process of reviewing the National Planning Framework. National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) will incorporate Scottish Planning Policy which contains detailed national policy on a number of planning topics to guide planning decisions, including for housing proposals. As part of the review we will consider how policy might be used to support bringing empty properties into use for housing. We recognise that creating more good quality homes in town centres, close to shops and facilities, can help to bring life back into town centres, supporting local shops and businesses particularly in the evenings and at weekends.

In terms of the timing and process for NPF4, in Autumn 2020, we will publish an interim position statement. This will provide stakeholders with an update on the Call for Ideas evidence gathered in early 2020; explain how we will align with other Scottish Government strategies; set out an overview of the key challenges, opportunities and potential policy changes for NPF4; and reflect on the impacts of COVID-19 and what NPF4 can do to help societal and economic recovery.

Town Centre Action Plan Review

To advance our thinking about the future for towns and town centres we initiated a collaborative review of the progress and scope of the Town Centre Action Plan. This review will run from July to December 2020. Empowered communities, localism and valuing the skills and assets of our communities have long been central to our approach to regeneration.

The Town Centre Action Plan review provides an opportunity to amplify that by promoting town centre living, building a future that takes account of our ambitions for a healthier, greener country with a focus on social renewal and equality. A key focus for the review is to reinvigorate town centres which includes repurposing empty buildings to return people and communities to town centre living. Our £50 million Town Centre Fund is enabling local authorities to do just that by stimulating a range of investments which encourage town centres to diversify and flourish. Through the review, we aim to better connect local producers and retailers with their local communities to respond to local conditions, circumstances and opportunities and improve community wealth building.

A broad range of stakeholders have shared their views through a series of thematic oral evidence sessions. Written evidence has also been submitted. Separately, local communities have been asked to share their views through a public survey which runs until the end of September 2020.

Our Programme for Government commits the government to establish a Place Based Investment Programme, linking and aligning all place-based funding initiatives to ensure we have a coherent approach to effectively progress our 20-minute neighbourhood ambitions. As part of this Programme, we will invest £275 million to support community-led regeneration and town-centre revitalisation, including the repurposing of buildings, maintenance and repairs, reallocating external space and community-led land acquisition.

Conclusion

As our policy development progress, we will further reflect upon the detail of this petition. I strongly encourage all stakeholders to participate in the engagement phases of policy development and hope that you continue to share your views on homelessness and unused buildings accordingly.