

A Shelter Scotland report: **Housing Options in Scotland**

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Shelter
Scotland

Summary

The Scottish Government is encouraging local authorities to develop Housing Options advice services as a key part of their homelessness prevention work. This paper looks at what Housing Options advice is in practice, how the approach is being developed across Scotland, strengths and weaknesses that are emerging and what the next steps might be.

- Shelter Scotland welcomes the Scottish Government's development of the Housing Options model as part of its homelessness prevention strategy, as we move closer to the 2012 homelessness commitment deadline, but it is very early days and there are potential pitfalls that must be avoided.
- Housing Options advice is an approach which combines assessing a person's legal rights to a home with a broader look at all the possible options open to them which could include: renting privately, support to stay where they are and home ownership. People should be given clear, impartial advice and be empowered to make the choice that is right for them.
- The Scottish Government has established 5 regional local authority 'Hubs' designed to help the development of policy and practice. Within these Hubs some councils are quite far advanced; most are still to develop services.
- Housing Options services represent a major challenge for local authorities. Staff need to have thorough knowledge of all local housing and available services, and the skill to make judgements and give the appropriate advice. This will mean an ongoing investment in training and development.
- The implementation of Housing Options services is currently local authority focused but should include a range of external partners, including local accommodation providers and voluntary organisations. There is only value in a Housing Options approach if there are real options available and these can only be delivered through good partnerships.
- The Scottish Government has high expectations of how Housing Options services can reduce homelessness, but there is a limit to what the approach can contribute in the short-term to meeting the 2012 commitment. Housing Options should be seen as a wider approach to homelessness prevention work which will help local authorities to meet the needs of homeless people when duties are expanded.
- The Scottish Government and the Scottish Housing Regulator must continue to monitor homelessness services and ensure that all legal duties are being met. As Housing Options services develop, it is important that the success of this flagship policy is measured and there is consistency in the service that people receive.

What needs to happen:

1. The Scottish Government must take a stronger co-ordinator role in development of Housing Options services. This does not mean being overly prescriptive of processes, but providing guidance, practice examples and taking forward some developments that are applicable to all local authorities.
2. There needs to be a framework to monitor the development of Housing Options services across all local authorities and to ensure that the housing options people are being offered are successful in the long-term, not just at the point of being provided.
3. At national and local level, Housing Options teams should begin to expand the base of organisations that are involved in the delivery of services and work to draw in partners from housing associations, voluntary organisations and private providers.
4. The Scottish Government should invite local authorities to put forward proposals to run a Housing Options pilot with a third party to measure the value of independent advice and the scope for enhanced partnerships developing.
5. Local authorities should use Housing Options assessments as a way to identify gaps in services across the area and then to expand the range of options available.

1. Introduction

This paper aims to pull together the basic principles behind a good Housing Options service and some of the current practices and developments across Scottish local authorities through the Housing Options 'Hubs'. It also highlights some of the key challenges for councils as they develop Housing Options services and looks at the aims of the policy and how these are being measured and taken forward at a national and local level.

What is Housing Options?

'Housing Options' is a housing advice process that councils can use when someone approaches them with a housing problem and they want to look at what choices that person might have. This means looking broadly at the person's immediate needs, personal circumstances and short and long-term housing aspirations and working out what the best options are.

This process looks beyond simply going on the council house waiting list and/or making a homeless application and focusing on getting people into homes they want to live in as quickly as possible and **helping them to stay there**. This includes looking at private rented accommodation, home ownership in some cases and support to stay in existing accommodation. By talking through a person's living arrangements, financial situation, support needs, social networks and any other factors that could impact on their housing choices, council staff are in a position to give advice and information on what is available in the local area and what the next steps might be.

Housing Options means a change in emphasis from staff simply assessing what someone's rights and legal entitlements are, to instead offering the advice and assistance to empower individuals to make choices that suit them. The range of options available depends on the local housing market, rent levels, affordability, waiting times and the support services available either directly through the council or through referrals. In all cases, making a homelessness application must be clearly outlined as an option anyone is free to make. All advice should be impartial and appropriate to the person and there should be no coercive element to any option.

The Housing Options approach can only be successful if local authority Housing Options staff have thorough and up-to-date knowledge of all the housing and services available in the area. Equally, Housing Options advice is only of value if there actually are options in the area to offer from a range of partners.

Background

The idea of local authorities delivering a range of housing options as part of their advice service to homeless applicants and other customers is not new and has evolved as local authorities have tried to integrate homelessness prevention, tenancy sustainment and best practice for people in housing need. Homelessness prevention has been a priority in England since around 2002 when the government reformed homelessness policy to focus on preventing homelessness rather than accommodating homeless people¹. Housing Options developed as a part of this government strategy, and was mentioned in the 2006 Hills Report which looked at the role of social housing in the 21st century² and what it aims to achieve. The Hills Report suggested Housing Options as part of the enhanced role of the social landlords offering a menu of options for housing. In 2008, a further report was published looking in more detail at housing choices and a model of 'Enhanced Housing Options' was developed which extended the remit of Housing Options advice even further, to look specifically at employment issues and worklessness³. The Enhanced Housing Options (EHO) programme, run by the Communities and Local Government Department (CLG), was supported by The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) who invested £10.2m in 2008 for 42 'trailblazer'⁴ local authorities to roll out the scheme.

The introduction of the Enhanced Housing Options approach in England as part of a wider homelessness prevention initiative, seems to have correlated with a dramatic fall in recorded homelessness. The number of both homelessness applications and those accepted as homeless by local authorities in England has fallen by around 60% in the period from 1998 to 2010⁵ which is in stark contrast to application numbers in Scotland which have gone up considerably in the same period, although they have plateaued in recent years. In England, the enhanced Housing Options model at its best, has integrated housing advice with a range of other support and information services such as youth offending support, education and training initiatives, health and sexual advice centres and counselling services.

The reduction in homelessness presentations and acceptances by English local authorities shows in black and white terms a reduction in formally recorded homelessness which can be used as a crude measure of successful homelessness prevention. Such a dramatic fall in

¹ 'Homelessness policy in England: Promoting 'gatekeeping' or effective prevention?' Hal Pawson (2009) in 'Homelessness in the UK: Problems and solutions' edited by Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Deborah Quilgars and Nicholas Pleace.

² 'Ends and means: The future roles of social housing in England' John Hills (2006) <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/cr/CASEREport34.pdf>

³ 'Expanding Choice, Address need' (Communities and Local Government, 2008) <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/expandingchoice>

⁴ <http://www.cchpr.landecon.cam.ac.uk/projects/Tailblazers/moreinfo.asp>

⁵ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/housing/housingresearch/housingstatistics/housingstatisticsby/homelessstatistics/livatables/>

recorded homelessness has raised some concerns that the shift to Housing Options was allowing 'gatekeeping' to creep in, with clients diverted away from making a homeless application and led particularly towards the private rented sector. In other words, their housing situation could still be as acute but would be unrecorded and unrecognised. While Housing Options in England relies to some extent on using available housing in the private rented sector wherever possible, the emphasis seems to be on partnership, with a range of external bodies to expand the range of options they can offer. It has been argued⁶ that while some local authorities may have been 'over-enthusiastic' in their prevention interventions, the implementation of Housing Options in England *'unquestionably led to a sea change in frontline practice'* to which the fall in homelessness presentations can in part, be attributed.

Shelter Scotland has welcomed wider use of Housing Options approaches in Scotland and sees a lot of merit in a broader assessment of a person's needs – rather than simply their eligibility for social rented housing. As homelessness prevention work becomes increasingly important in the run-up to the 2012 commitment deadline, taking a more holistic approach to matching people's need with the houses available can help to relieve pressure on local authority housing and reduce housing waiting times. At this early stage there is potential for a gap to develop between policy and practice and there are a lot of questions still to be answered about the implementation of Housing Options. It is vital that Housing Options is fully integrated with the robust legal framework to protect the rights of homeless applicants and that the focus is on achieving the best outcomes for each person. A key question is how the necessary culture change is going to be achieved and how service users can be empowered to make the right choices for their housing future. The reality is that Housing Options can only be successful if there are a range of suitable options available and that relies on partnerships with external organisations, a fair and balanced welfare system that helps those in need and ultimately, there being more affordable housing available.

Our approach

As Housing Options policy and practice develops across Scotland and becomes an important part of homelessness prevention work, Shelter Scotland wanted to speak to policy makers and practitioners to understand more about how services are being delivered.

In order to write this report, we met with the Scottish Government Homelessness team on a number of occasions to discuss their approach, local authority progress and future priorities. In addition, we have spoken to a number of local authorities in different areas, of different sizes and in a mixture of urban/rural areas. This has included discussion with at least one

⁶ 'Homelessness policy in England: Promoting 'gatekeeping' or effective prevention?' Hal Pawson (2009) in 'Homelessness in the UK: Problems and solutions' edited by Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Deborah Quilgars and Nicholas Pleace.

local authority from each of the Scottish Government's 5 Hubs and some face-to-face meetings. As part of this, we also shadowed some Housing Options staff and sat in on a number of interviews and discussions to get an idea of how advice is being delivered and received. Throughout this report, we have included some examples which have been taken from Housing Options interviews we have observed while visiting different local authorities. These examples are not meant to highlight good or bad practice but are simply included as neutral case studies of the types of clients who are having Housing Options interviews and the advice that is being given.

2. Housing Options in Scotland

In recent years it has become apparent that homelessness prevention activity in Scotland has not had the same emphasis as in England and Wales and that more has to be done to try to help people at risk of homelessness, before they reach crisis point. With the deadline for the '2012 commitment' giving every unintentionally homeless person the right to permanent housing, only 18 months away⁷, and with an inadequate supply of housing to meet the need, it is clear that local authorities are going to have to satisfy expanded duties with the resources they currently have. One key part of this is taking a more proactive approach to homelessness prevention to reduce the number of people who find themselves in a housing crisis and who local authorities consequentially, have a duty to provide housing for. Through early intervention it is possible to help people to keep their homes and break the cycles of homelessness.

The pressure on local authority housing is impacting on all those waiting for housing, lengthening housing queues and creating bottlenecks in temporary accommodation. Against this backdrop, the development of a housing advice model that is free to respond proactively to people's need and able to make use of all available stock in an area is very positive. Housing Options as an approach requires local authorities to take a more holistic view of housing need, considering a range of tenures and finance options and wider housing support, along with the option of making a homelessness application. This is a change in emphasis from simply assessing what each applicant is entitled to receive, to an approach which puts the client at the centre and asks what might be the most helpful and sustainable solution.

It was identified in the Homelessness Task Force Final Report in 2002⁸, that in order to meet the 2012 commitment, local authorities must prioritise homelessness prevention and early intervention. While meaningful prevention initiatives were slow off the mark, momentum has been growing, including positive developments around eviction reduction, tenancy sustainment and some innovative work targeting the prevention of youth homelessness. In June 2010 the Scottish Government launched the Scottish Housing Options funding programme, a £500,000 'enabling' fund for local authorities to develop their Housing Options approach. This followed an agreement at the Scottish Government/COSLA 2012 Steering Group that Housing Options should be taken forward as the key homelessness prevention

⁷ For more about the '2012 commitment' see the latest Shelter Scotland Briefing: http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_library/policy_library_folder/shelter_scotland_2012_commitment_briefing

⁸ Homelessness Task Force Final Report (2002) <http://www.clacksweb.org.uk/document/272.pdf>

initiative in the run up to 2012⁹. In launching the Housing Options funding programme, the Scottish Government said it hoped that *'adopting a housing options approach could better help local authorities prevent homelessness and meet the 2012 target'*¹⁰. The modest financial backing from the Scottish Government runs for 14 months from June 2010 and signals its endorsement of the approach for all local authorities. The funding was announced at a Scottish Government/COSLA prevention event for local authorities and since that meeting, the emphasis has been put back onto local authorities to develop their thinking around Housing Options.

Housing Options and homelessness

The government's enthusiasm for Housing Options uptake is as a response to the high demand for housing in the social rented sector, coupled with a growing acknowledgement that fresh approaches are required if Scotland is going to fulfil its legislative commitment to house unintentionally homeless households. Shelter Scotland has long been campaigning for more affordable homes to be built¹¹. In the period from 2002-10 there has been a commitment to increasing the supply of social housing but not to the level we had evidenced the need for, and it is only now that the Scottish Government has acknowledged that *'as we get nearer to the 2012 target deadline, the prospect of new supply assisting this target lessens'*¹². In this context, Housing Options can help local authorities to make better use of the stock in their area and to identify service gaps in the area for those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Despite these changes to the delivery of advice, it is important that the legal framework in place to protect people who are homeless or at risk of being made homeless, continues to underpin all services.

In most cases, a Housing Options interview would take place when someone approaches the council or is referred from a partner organisation i.e. before a homelessness assessment takes place. It may be that for practical or procedural reasons a homelessness assessment might be the first step which leads onto Housing Options advice, but either way it is vital that the two processes are integrated and people are not forced to go down one route or another from the outset. Far more important than the process itself, is that the client goes away from any discussion feeling their expectations have been met to the best of the councils' ability and that service users understand and are aware of what the next steps are and who is taking them forward. It is also important that local authorities make it clear when a homeless

⁹ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/Housing/access/homeless/2012Target/SGCosla2012SGMOM8610>

¹⁰ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/Housing/access/homeless/HomelessnessPrevention>

¹¹ http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_library/policy_library_folder/housing_supply_task_force_-_initial_submission_august_2007

¹² <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/regeneration/pir/learningnetworks/HousingManagement/Publications/housingoptions>

application has, or more importantly, has not, been made. Shelter Scotland is aware of circumstances where the client thinks they have made a homeless application but the council has not taken one, it was only discussed as one possible option. This is confusing for the service user but also means that they are further behind in the homelessness process if they do then make an application. The onus is on the local authority to make it clear what the outcome of the meeting is, especially when the client has come with the intention of making a homeless application.

What is 'gatekeeping'?

In relation to homelessness services, 'gatekeeping' is any activity that prevents someone from making a homeless application or where a local authority refuses to accept a homelessness application when they may have a duty to do so. For example it may be that reception staff dissuade people from seeking an appointment with the homelessness team or during the discussion people are discouraged from making an application because they won't be priority and won't get a house.

A local authority may be reluctant to accept a homeless application because they would have a duty to provide that person with temporary or permanent housing and may struggle to fulfil it. Gatekeeping is often discussed in relation to Housing Options because of concerns that people are being actively discouraged from making a homeless application. For example if a local authority knows they have limited housing and pushes someone to stay in their current house, or to take a private let then they are not presenting their housing options in a transparent and neutral way.

If homelessness prevention is genuinely successful then fewer people will present as homeless. This makes the line between effective prevention and gatekeeping blurred because they are potentially both measured by the same outcome. There is no indication that gatekeeping is common practice across Scotland, but it is the way that Housing Options advice is delivered that will ensure that gatekeeping does not become prevalent.

The Housing Options model focuses primarily on housing need, but also looks at resolving underlying issues which can underpin or exacerbate housing problems. For some people – especially those in acute need - the best option might still be to continue and make a homeless application which will lead to temporary, supported and/or permanent accommodation as appropriate and available. The Scottish Government stressed at the inception meeting in June 2010 that *'there is no change to legislation'* and that *'if the local authority believes a person to be at risk of homelessness they should take an application'*¹³.

¹³ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/regeneration/pir/learningnetworks/HousingManagement/Publications/housingoptions>

It is imperative that all local authority staff have adequate training and support to ensure they are in a position to give advice on all legal entitlements. It is also vital that the option to make a homeless application is open to anyone regardless of their financial circumstances or current housing situation. What the shift in emphasis means is that making a homelessness application is not the default position, but one possible course of action which may not be necessary or most appropriate for everyone.

Example 1: 28 single man approached a medium sized rural local authority

Aged 28, Pete approached the council because he had been asked to leave an overcrowded house living with relatives and needed to find his own accommodation in 6 weeks.

Having established that staying in his current house wasn't possible, the interviewer went through all the options starting with renting from the council. It was explained that as a single person it would be unlikely that Pete would receive an offer of accommodation within the required timescales. Most of the accommodation provided by the council would be unfurnished and in need of decoration so there would be a cost implication there. This led onto a discussion about renting in the private sector which would be the most likely way for the client to be re-housed within the timescales and offers more choice over area and when the client could move. It was explained that the type of tenancy was shorter and other details. Information was given about the council's rent guarantee scheme and there were some calculations made based on the Pete's part-time hours.

Pete decided to make an application to the rent deposit guarantee scheme and was told that if he was successful the councils private sector access team will contact him directly to arrange an interview. The client was given a print out detailing the discussion, the action points and timeframes.

**This practice example has been included as an example of the Housing Options advice that Shelter Scotland observed. This is not meant to highlight good or bad practice but is included as an example of how Housing Options is being delivered.*

In no way should a homeless application be discouraged when going through the options and equally there should be no coercion towards one option or another. This is particularly pertinent in relation to moving people into the private rented sector where there is potentially more available housing. The purpose of Housing Options is to explain clearly what all the options are, including the right to apply for social housing, and empowering them to make a choice on what best suits their needs and aspirations. If Housing Options advice is well delivered then it will lead to a successful long-term outcome for that person but should not be guided by the availability of local authority housing stock. One of the key lessons from the English model is that bad Housing Options can cross the line into gatekeeping practices

and it is important that Scottish local authorities do not follow suit. For Housing Options to be effective, interviews must still incorporate all existing legal rights and statutory frameworks i.e. Community Care legislation and the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 along with homelessness duties, protocols for young people leaving care and other vulnerable groups.

A Housing Options interview

A Housing Options interview is an opportunity to discuss personal circumstances, housing need, support issues and finances. Because the focus of Housing Options is the individual and his/her housing need, Housing Options staff should offer advice on all relevant options to *all* customers (i.e. not just homeless applicants). A typical Housing Options interview would cover:

- Establishing the current situation and any immediate danger to the person i.e. domestic abuse or any reason the person may have nowhere to sleep that night.
- Establishing recent housing circumstances; this may include some discussion around family/relationships.
- Establishing the financial situation, employment status, including welfare and benefits take-up and other financial considerations that would impact on housing options.
- Establishing any health, medical, addiction or other support needs which could impact on housing options available.
- Establishing what the person's housing need is but also what his/her long and short term housing aspirations are.

By talking through all of these things, the Housing Options interviewer will have a good understanding of the background to the situation and what the next steps could be. This approach also moves away from the assumption that the only suitable route is through a social housing let. The range of options fall into three categories:

- (i) Help and support to allow you **to stay in the home** you have. This could be through advice /referrals/information on:
 - i. welfare and benefit take-up,
 - ii. family/relationship mediation services,
 - iii. adaptations to your existing home (i.e. for people with disabilities),
 - iv. Housing Support and
 - v. advice in mortgage/rent arrears cases etc;

- (ii) Finding **new rental accommodation**. This could be through advice /referrals/information on:
 - i. local authority housing application including guidance on waiting times and available areas
 - ii. housing association housing availability and waiting times,
 - iii. private letting in the area, including rent deposit schemes, affordability and waiting times
- (iii) Financial assistance to move into **home ownership**. This could include information on
 - i. low cost home ownership schemes, including shared equity

With all of the information gathered in the first part of the interview, Housing Options advisors will be able to work out which of the options above might be available. They will then be in a position to give advice, make referrals, provide information and offer support. This approach is about being transparent and giving realistic and impartial information on what is available, where, when and for how much. There is an inherent conflict of interests for local authorities giving impartial advice when they own housing stock and are aware of pressures on that stock and any other financial pressures on the council. There is potentially a role for independent, third party advice when service users first approach the council.

All local authorities will introduce Housing Options in a slightly different way, integrating the approach into current processes and staff structures, but the changes in process and delivery must not muddy the waters for service users. The majority of people approaching local authority housing and housing options services will have serious concerns about their housing future and many, first and foremost, want a solution to their immediate housing crisis. It must be made clear what the outcome of the meeting is and what will happen next to ensure that expectations are met. Some local authorities we have spoken to have a proforma or will introduce a standard form of some kind that is completed and then given to the client at the end of the meeting. This is good practice to ensure the client has a record of the discussion and knows what is expected of them or the council to take things forward. It would be useful if all local authorities introduced these and that it was stated clearly whether a homelessness application has been made.

Example 2: 58 year old single woman approached a medium sized rural council

Originally having been referred to the council through Woman's Aid, Jane put an application on the mainstream waiting list and took up a private rented tenancy. Within 8 months she had been given a valid Notice to Quit (NTQ) because the owner was selling the property. Jane has mobility issues and needs to be on the ground floor or in a property with a lift.

The interviewer went through the NTQ and said they would check it with the council's legal team to ensure its legality. It was explained that Jane had a right to make a homelessness application and she would probably be found in priority need. However, Jane had extremely specific area preferences, which the interviewer explained could not be guaranteed to be met through a homeless application. They discussed the possibility of finding another private let, but Jane felt that she didn't want to stay in the private sector because of the uncertainty and upheaval of being asked to move. The interviewer went onto the councils database to look at Jane's waiting list application and saw that it was severely restricted by choosing one sub-area and only ground floor flats.

With Jane's approval, the interviewer helped amend the application to include flats with lifts or that would suit her mobility needs, to give her more chance of being offered a home within the timescales of her NTQ and a follow up appointment was made.

**This practice example has been included as an example of the Housing Options advice that Shelter Scotland observed. This is not meant to highlight good or bad practice but is included as an example of how Housing Options is being delivered.*

3. Housing Options at local level

While some local authorities such as North Ayrshire Council and City of Edinburgh Council have been delivering Housing Options service for some time, other local authorities are a few steps behind and are at the early stages of developing a Housing Options strategy. To continue to develop Housing Options at a local level, 5 regional 'Hubs' were established in Autumn 2010 to share knowledge and learning across different local authorities:

- i. **West Hub:** Renfrewshire Council, East Dunbartonshire Council, East Renfrewshire Council, Glasgow City Council, North Lanarkshire, South Lanarkshire, Stirling Council & West Dunbartonshire Council
- ii. **North & Islands Hub:** Highland Council, Shetland Islands Council, Orkney Islands Council, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeenshire Council & Moray Council
- iii. **Ayrshire & South Hub:** North Ayrshire Council, Dumfries and Galloway Council, South Ayrshire Council, East Ayrshire Council & Inverclyde Council
- iv. **Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders Hub:** City of Edinburgh Council, East Lothian Council, Falkirk Council, Midlothian Council, Scottish Borders Council & West Lothian Council
- v. **Tayside, Fife and Central Hub:** Perth and Kinross Council, Dundee City Council, Fife Council, Clackmannanshire Council, Angus Council, Argyll & Bute Council

Each Hub has a 'lead' authority that is co-ordinating the activity and hosting meetings. This is an acknowledgement that Housing Options services must develop principally at local level depending on local factors such as housing stock and local pressures. Some councils have expressed concern about being called a 'lead' authority and see themselves more in the role of 'host' for the Hub. This reflects the fact that a lot of councils are only just starting to develop their thinking around Housing Options and do not feel they are at the implementation stage yet. Many of the councils that we have spoken with, understand the purpose of the Hub to share learning and help develop Housing Options, but agree that it is not about developing uniformity across the authorities in that Hub. It is very clear that each local authority is working within a different context, and also that their homelessness prevention work is at different stages. While some councils have had a designated homelessness prevention team for some time, others are only establishing them now or the responsibility for Housing Options and homelessness prevention is being done by existing teams.

The Hubs have been created to work together to decide on and then progress, locally agreed priorities through Scottish Government funding. Each Hub has produced an Action Plan, which has had its funding approved by the Scottish Government, laying out what steps are required to develop and refocus services around the Housing Options model. These primarily focus on training and service development starting with a training needs analysis to be taken forward by each Hub. Local authorities are being encouraged to share skills and expertise, for example, one local authority might have capacity to develop certain training, while another in the Hub might have a good model for working with the private rented sector. The Action Plans and the recently produced Quarterly Reports, are available to view through a closed online forum for practitioners through the Communities of Practice website¹⁴ where members can share information, protocols, templates and ask advice. This community is used by members to circulate key documents and share ideas and has members from 26 of the 32 local authorities¹⁵. As the Hubs develop, the Scottish Government is hoping they will become the main mechanism for disseminating best practice for the prevention of homelessness.

There are some positive elements to the Hub model of partnership working, but concerns have been expressed by some local authorities that there is a lack of clear, national guidance and information. Equally, some external partners have said there is no public information at all on the Scottish Government's aims and objectives for the Housing options approach, no clear plans and no contact information for lead people within each local authority. For Housing Options to be successful in the long-term, the model relies on good internal partnership but also partnership working with external organisations and the voluntary sector that provide services, support, advice and accommodation. Inclusion of RSLs and private housing bodies in the development of Housing Options strategies has so far been very marginal and there is little evidence of much active engagement with voluntary partners at Hub level albeit there is some at local authority level. Working with RSLs and developing the approach in partnership is particularly important for stock-transfer local authorities. As English local authorities have highlighted, working with the widest range of partners is the key, and the more partnerships, the more options there are to work with¹⁶.

What is clear from reading the Hub Action Plans and speaking to a range of local authorities, is that implementation is being managed differently across the different councils and that some are far more advanced than others. All the Action Plans outline the need to do some benchmarking across their Hub looking at what is currently being measured and then agreeing common indicators. Local benchmarking is an opportunity for greater scrutiny across a smaller range of councils, although some of this type of activity could potentially be

¹⁴ <http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk/comm/landing-home.do?id=7595505>

¹⁵ At the time of writing.

¹⁶ <http://www.cih.org/scotland/conferences/presentations/rethinking-housing-options-advice/JoBeck.pdf>

co-ordinated centrally by the Scottish Government, collating all the information and disseminating it across all the Hubs. This would not mean being overly prescriptive about processes and local authority implementation, but it would be useful to have a central bank of information, practice examples, guidelines, training aids and case studies. Equally, a need has been identified for a diagnostic tool for use in Housing Options interviews which the Government is considering *'facilitating this development on a country-wide basis, thus avoiding duplication of work and an unnecessary drain on hub finances'*. It is important that this approach is taken across all areas to make the Hubs as efficient as possible. It is not cost-effective for each Hub to have to reinvent the wheel with regards to training assessment, interview diagnostic tools and guidance and it should be investigated at each stage what can be taken forward centrally.

The Hub hosts are facilitating regular meetings to discuss progress and taking forward the different parts of their Action Plans. The level of activity at local level is encouraging. However the level of engagement is varied, with some councils meeting every couple of weeks while others have failed to attend any Housing Options Hub meetings at all. Engagement with the local Hubs is very dependent on the motivation of individuals within each council and how much corporate buy-in there is to the Housing Options work. As part of ongoing evaluation, Ipsos Mori will be carrying out a Scottish Government funded evaluation of how the Hub model is working in practice¹⁷. This will not report on the outcomes of the Housing Options approach, but how useful local authorities are finding the Hub way of working. The Hubs are also reporting quarterly to the Scottish Government on progress and have recently completed a short questionnaire on what they need to be able to implement their Housing Options strategy.

Housing Options in practice

Of the local authorities that already deliver a Housing Options service, North Ayrshire Council is considered by some to be the most advanced and has had a Housing Options service for the past few years. North Ayrshire Council has been at the forefront of development of Housing Options in Scotland, having been involved in Scottish Government events and promotion of Housing Options, and serving as the 'lead' organisation for the Ayrshire and South Hub. North Ayrshire has reported a very positive Housing Options experience and other local authorities have visited the Housing Options team to talk through their approach and to shadow staff. The development of Housing Options in North Ayrshire Council was quite gradual, evolving out of a number of different initiatives and the growing recognition that something needed to be done to prevent homelessness in the area. This focused particularly on services for young people but also brought together tenancy

¹⁷ The final report for this research is due to be published around April 2012.

sustainment, homelessness prevention and family support. The council views Housing Options as a tool where *'Service Users are provided with realistic, clear and transparent housing options empowering them to make informed choices to respond to their housing need'*.

While North Ayrshire Council has indicated some very positive signs in their homelessness statistics, they have been developing their Housing Options model for a number of years as part of a wider homelessness prevention focus, including a major staff restructure and a thorough training and development programme. A lot of resources have been put into North Ayrshire Council's model with a heavy emphasis on staff development, IT systems and culture change and the results they report appear dramatic: no longer using B&B accommodation, returning some of their surplus temporary furnished accommodation, 99% of all homelessness assessments are being made within 28 days and the council abolished priority need categories in April 2011. This is a very positive experience of Housing Options but it is a model that not all local authorities will be able to cut and paste onto their own services. The resources and funding available has reduced significantly in the past few years and each local authority will be working with different internal structures and personalities but also with their own local housing market, homelessness profile, PRS and other factors which will impact on the housing options available. While each local authority should be aiming to achieve similar results in time, there is no easy way to shortcut the process of developing the service and changing the culture.

Using the experiences of North Ayrshire Council as a guide moving forward means that other councils can benefit from their experiences. This means building on good practice, particularly around IT requirements and training and adapting what is applicable to their authority. It is clear from visiting North Ayrshire Council that the lead staff feel a key part of their success is down to staff buy-in to the approach at all levels of the organisation and they are confident they have achieved a significant culture change. This peer support model of the Hubs is a good way to share practice, but the lack of central guidance on Housing Options or how it should be delivered and measured is placing a lot of responsibility in the hand of each 'host' authority to maintain momentum within their Hub. While the Scottish Government is placing heavy emphasis on the Housing Options approach, some local authorities have concerns that beyond the initial *'strong steer'* it is *'difficult to see any real detail'*. Some local authorities we spoke with also thought that more frequent national Hub meetings would be beneficial to help get a sense of where other local authorities/Hubs are and what practices could be shared across all local authorities.

4. Is Housing Options working?

There are positive signs that Housing Options advice is gathering momentum across Scotland and that local authorities are taking steps to develop their services to meet local needs. Despite these signs, the picture is inconsistent and some local authorities are more advanced than others. The current emphasis on Housing Options is underpinned by wider homelessness prevention initiatives that have been developing over the past few years. Considering how much some local authorities have to do, Housing Options will not be sufficiently advanced to make a significant difference by the time the 2012 commitment has to be met. Instead, it will be an important part of ongoing service development to meet the needs of potentially homeless people, once the rights to permanent housing have been expanded post-2012. It is important that local authorities do not rush to implement Housing Options in the run up to 2012, but that they take steps to embed practices that will have the most successful long-term results in preparation for the post-2012 era.

Some local authorities are seeing the positive impact of good homelessness prevention work over the past few years with a reduction in homelessness presentations and repeat homelessness. There are signs of a genuine culture change across some homelessness services with an emphasis on empowering people to make positive choices about their housing future. There seems to be a good appetite across the local authority Hubs and some positive practice examples are emerging. There is also evidence of good partnerships developing between local authorities to share skills and build resources. At a local level some partnerships are also developing with external partners in the PRS and housing associations, although these should be more widespread. While it might be some time before the impact of Housing Options is seen through Scottish Government homelessness statistics, the shift to a more comprehensive advice and information service is very positive and will be beneficial once housing duties are expanded post-2012.

There are, however, some significant challenges in delivering Housing Options and these should not be overlooked. As resources are stretched further and further and with the 2012 commitment deadline just around the corner, the scale of change required is quite daunting for local authorities and the emphasis must be on getting it right. At the Hub launch meeting in June 2010, early concerns were expressed by local authorities about compromising people's 'right to present [as homeless]'¹⁸ and that the lines between Housing Options and gatekeeping might become blurred. This remains a key concern of many of the local authorities we have spoken with and one Hub Action Plan states as a specific action, that they want to approach the Scottish Housing Regulator and the Scottish Government 'to

¹⁸ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/regeneration/pir/learningnetworks/HousingManagement/Publications/housingoptions>

ascertain commitment to the Housing Options approach as a legitimate form of homeless prevention and not an exercise of 'gate keeping'.

This emphasises the concern that if the approach is adopted in the wrong way or without the appropriate training for staff to deliver advice properly, that gatekeeping practices could creep in. It also reflects a concern that local authorities who move away from a traditional homelessness assessment might be penalised by the Regulator. It is important that local authorities are given clear guidance on what the Regulator expects from a Housing Options service and what the performance indicators are. Housing Options in itself is not new but it should not be underestimated what a significant shift in approach this is. Through the training needs assessments being carried out by all the Hubs, councils will be able to map out next steps for ensuring that all staff have the right skills to deliver the right advice to service users. A recent independent report published by the Scottish Housing Regulator¹⁹ shows clearly that from a service user's point of view, homeless services still have a lot to do to make them customer friendly and this should be built in to any Housing Options training.

While the Scottish Government believes the Housing Options approach to be a '*cost-effective use of existing resources*' this is only the case if the housing found for people is successful in the long-term and repeat homelessness is avoided. This is a particular concern with expanding the role of the PRS with the recent changes to the local housing allowance (LHA). These changes could mean that for some people Housing Benefit no longer covers all of their rent and they are forced to make up the difference. This may make private renting unaffordable for some people especially if they begin working or increase their working hours and the amount of their contribution goes up dramatically. There is no value in people being encouraged to find housing in the PRS if it becomes unaffordable in a very short time. The same goes for all the options, that they must be sustainable to avoid repeat homelessness.

It is important then, as local authorities develop their Housing Options services that these challenges are recognised and steps are taken to ensure they do not derail implementation. This comes back to the skills of the staff delivering Housing Options interviews. In one interview Shelter Scotland sat in on, a person claiming Jobseekers Allowance and full Housing Benefit was talked through every single option the council offered, included shared-equity ownership schemes. Aside from the huge amount of information that was being given, home ownership was not appropriate or relevant to these particular circumstances and should not have been part of the discussion. A far more positive example from another local authority was where the preliminary discussion gave the interviewer most of the information required to make a judgement on what were the realistic options and then spent

¹⁹ 'Priorities of Homeless Service Users' Anna Evans Housing Consultancy
http://www.scottishhousingregulator.gov.uk/stellent/groups/public/documents/webpages/shr_priorities_ofhomelesssservic.pdf

time going through these in some detail, making sure the client fully understood everything as they went. This highlights the differences that are developing in different councils and also the difficulties that can arise in delivering Housing Options advice.

Example 3: Couple with children approached urban council

Mum/ Dad and four children (under the age of 12) in receipt of housing benefit, JSA, child benefits and child tax credits. Currently in private rented accommodation in the town centre but been given a valid Notice to Quit in 3 months time. No physical/mental health requirements and no substance misuse issues.

The interviewer explained that they would go through all the options available, including making a homeless application, and discuss each of them in turn. It was explained that through a homeless assessment they would get priority because of the children, but that houses of that size are very limited, especially in the areas they would like to live in. The letting system was explained and using the database, the interviewer showed the waiting times/number of bids for houses in a sample of areas of different sizes. The interviewer spent a lot of time explaining what the family could realistically expect. They then went through rent deposit, PSL and shared equity schemes including possible cost implications if their financial circumstances changed and then explained how all these schemes fit together and what would happen to priority status.

The couple explained that the area they needed to live in was very specific because of their child care arrangements, schools and doctors. The couple were told they could make a homeless application straight away or take the leaflets and talk through the options. If they did decide to go ahead and make a homeless application, it would be backdated to the original interview date. The couple decide to go away and read through the information and made an appointment to come back in 2 weeks time.

**This practice example has been included as an example of the Housing Options advice that Shelter Scotland observed. This is not meant to highlight good or bad practice but is included as an example of how Housing Options is being delivered.*

The success of Housing Options relies heavily on how the advice is delivered and the range of options available for people. The Scottish Government and the Scottish Housing Regulator have a role to play to ensure there are some consistent outcomes of Housing Options across Scotland. As the approach develops, there needs to be a framework for measuring performance across all local authorities. It is vital that a fall in homelessness applications is not the sole measure of successful Housing Options as this could put too great an emphasis on staff to avoid taking an application. Performance indicators should measure a range of long and short-term outcomes for people to give a more complete

picture of Housing Options in practice. A key part of measuring how well Housing Options is working is to consult service users on how valuable the advice they are being given is, but also whether they have been presented with a housing option that meets their needs and resolves their housing difficulty. This should be in addition to recording application numbers, repeat homelessness figures, previous circumstances and long-term sustainability of tenancies across all tenures. There may be scope in the future to revise some parts of the Scottish Government's HL1 statistical return that local authorities complete to reflect this change in focus, although the monitoring of existing legal duties must also be maintained.

Housing Options is the biggest change to the way of working for homelessness services since Homelessness law was introduced. The move to a hybrid approach that tests eligibility for housing but also facilitates access to it is fundamental, and cannot be delivered overnight. Having good processes, training and performance measures in place is vital to good delivery of Housing Options, but in real terms the advice can only be as good as the options available. This means that there needs to be a genuine expansion of the housing available through increasing the supply of affordable housing, but also expanding private letting schemes, rent deposit schemes, family mediation services and low-cost home ownership options. The other side of the Housing Options coin is tenancy sustainment. It is not enough to find people houses, the advice and support must be available to help people keep their homes. That relies on good housing support delivered through local authorities and their partners but also a strong, fair welfare system that provides help to those who need it.

5. Conclusion and ways forward

In this report we have argued that while there is much to be positive about in this new approach, it is still very early days. Housing Options approaches must be seen as complementary to, not a replacement for, the legal rights that people have, primarily under homelessness legislation but also Community Care legislation and the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. While the approach will be implemented differently across all local authorities, there are common themes developing and it seems cost-effective for some things to be taken forward nationally by the Scottish Government, particularly around training needs analysis and delivery and some of the IT requirements.

Delivering a Housing Options approach means looking beyond the rights-based model of testing who is legally eligible for assistance, and instead asks what help can be given to anyone in housing need. The best approaches successfully combine legal entitlements with genuine options and informed advice and support. This relies heavily on well trained and motivated staff who understand the issues and have the skills to deliver advice in a sensitive way to help people to find a new home, or to assist them to keep the one they have. All information about options must be transparent and easy for clients to understand and aim to empower people to make the right choices for their own situation. This means investment in staff training, good processes and strong partnerships with local organisations and service providers to ensure that housing solutions are sustainable.

Despite some positive signs, many local authorities are still only taking tentative steps and whether those at the rear will be able to emulate those at the forefront is open to question. Progress is at different stages across the Hubs and across local authorities, and it may take some time for all local authorities to be offering a full Housing Options service. As services evolve, it is important that homelessness duties are still being met and that progress is being made towards the 2012 commitment. The fruits of the approach may not be apparent until 3 or 4 years time so for many local authorities it will not be 'the answer' to the 2012 commitment, but a part of preparing for the change in legislation. It is important that the Scottish Government develop a strong national guidance role and that as practice develops the learning is captured and shared across all local authorities. This means as practice is embedded it might be necessary to revise existing performance measures to reflect this change in approach.

It should be perfectly possible for Scotland to pioneer an approach to Housing Options which integrates statutory duties while learning lessons from the English approach and avoiding any move towards a gatekeeping culture. With acute pressure on local authority housing stock and the 2012 commitment target looming, Housing Options should not be seen as a

quick fix, but as a mechanism to match people with housing more successfully in the long-term.

What needs to happen

1. The Scottish Government must take a stronger co-ordinator role in development of Housing Options services. This does not mean being overly prescriptive of processes, but providing guidance, practice examples and taking forward some developments that are applicable to all local authorities.
2. There needs to be a framework to monitor the development of Housing Options services across all local authorities and to ensure that the housing options people are being offered are successful in the long-term, not just at the point of being provided.
3. At national and local level, Housing Options teams should begin to expand the base of organisations that are involved in the delivery of services and work to draw in partners from housing associations, voluntary organisations and private providers.
4. The Scottish Government should invite local authorities to put forward proposals to run a Housing Options pilot with a third party to measure the value of independent advice and the scope for enhanced partnerships developing.
5. Local authorities should use Housing Options assessments as a way to identify gaps in services across the area and then to expand the range of options available.

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