# Briefing

# What are my options? Delivering a person centred housing and homelessness advice service in Scotland

**From the Shelter Scotland policy library**

**March 2013**

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# Summary

- Shelter Scotland supports the development of progressive housing options and prevention advice that empowers individuals and families to make choices that are right for them. We believe that embedding user choice and support is key to the ongoing development of person centred homelessness services.

- It is critical that statutory homelessness duties remain an integral part of the Housing Options service and that any prevention advice empowers the customer to make positive choices while maintaining their rights.

- Scotland has some of the most progressive homelessness legislation in the world and this provides a vital safety net for the most vulnerable people facing the crisis of homelessness. The positive development of homelessness services made over the past few years in response to the '2012 Commitment' should not be eroded through service redesign but instead should make up the foundation of the approach going forward.

- Homelessness prevention delivered through Housing Options advice services is developing differently across all Scottish local authorities in response to local context. There is a lot of enthusiasm at local level for a fresh approach to homelessness prevention and for an innovative way of finding housing solutions with the current pressure on the social housing market.

- The Housing Options 'Hubs' model is valued by most of its members but progress is varied and it has been less successful working with external partners. The Hubs model is a useful tool for sharing practice, tackling challenges and jointly commissioning training/research but implementation of practice still resides with each local authority so impact is limited.

- The Scottish Government has not defined national objectives or produced national guidance for the ongoing development of Housing Options advice. It is therefore unsurprising that a gap is developing in some areas between strategic policy and frontline practice. This gap could be closed through effective and ongoing training, national evaluation of policy and practice and monitoring outputs and outcomes both quantitatively and qualitatively.

- The success of Housing Options advice relies in equal measure on corporate buy-in to a strategic focus on prevention, and the culture change of frontline service staff. In order to fundamentally recalibrate homelessness/housing services, local authorities need to properly resource this policy but also work far more closely with a range of partners.

Similarly, frontline staff need the skills, knowledge and confidence to deliver this far more sophisticated advice role and ongoing training and support to build their skills.

- Despite the recent drop in homeless application numbers being attributed to the success of Housing Options advice, more analysis is required to understand the interaction between prevention advice and statutory homelessness. Given the recession, pressure on social housing and ongoing welfare reforms, it is unlikely there is a downward trend in the level of housing need. It is critical therefore, that changes in services result in the best possible outcomes for individuals and not the gate-keeping of services.

## Recommendations

In order to support the continued development of progressive housing and homelessness advice services and to prevent homelessness wherever possible, Shelter Scotland calls for the following steps to be taken:

1. The Scottish Government should produce a framework for the delivery of Housing Options advice and positive homelessness prevention. This guidance should not prescribe *how* local authorities should structure or design their services, but concentrate on strategic objectives, key principles of delivery and what a progressive service should look like.
2. The Scottish Government should encourage and support the use of its prevention monitoring tool – PREVENT1[1] - that is scheduled to be agreed in April 2013. The quality of information should be assessed then any changes/improvements made before making this mandatory from April 2014.
3. The Scottish Housing Regulator should carry out their planned thematic report on the development of Housing Options services to augment the body of information available for stakeholders. This should be used as an opportunity to identify and disseminate both good and bad practice as learning tools for practitioners.
4. The Scottish Housing Regulator should utilise the Scottish Social Housing Charter to monitor the ongoing delivery of statutory homelessness services as a critical part of the overall picture of the delivery of housing services as it feeds into Housing Options.
5. A national Housing Options steering group should be established involving key governmental, public and voluntary organisations to set objectives, collate practice examples and to draw together a national picture of progress and development.

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[1] From recent discussions with the Scottish Government it seems probable that the name for this data set will change to reflect more accurately that it primarily records Housing Options activity.

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6. The work of the local authority Hubs should continue to evolve to include local and national partners including: registered social landlords, voluntary organisations and service providers and health professionals.  This will help to expand the range of options available and the quality of service provided.

7. The Scottish Government and advice partners should undertake a comprehensive review of the National Advice Standards to reflect the radically changed advice landscape and the reality of what is happening on the ground.

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# Introduction

In July 2011 Shelter Scotland produced a report on Housing Options prevention advice services[2] and the early implementation of the approach by local authorities across Scotland. More than a year later, this paper builds on that report and draws on our ongoing discussions and work with the Scottish Government, local authorities and other housing professionals. We have also drawn on our direct experiences, and those of our partners and clients to bring together some key principles, good practice, case studies and priorities going forward.

This report:

1. Maps out the key features of a progressive Housing Options advice service;

2. Reports on how housing options advice is being delivered across different local authority areas in Scotland;

3. Identifies key challenges and next steps for the ongoing development of Housing Options in Scotland, including how we measure success and;

4. Makes recommendations for national and local actions to ensure the next phase of development delivers the right service and the right outcomes for customers.

Shelter Scotland supports homelessness prevention and the development of housing options advice services as the right response to high levels of housing need coupled with inadequate supply of social - and other forms of - housing. We believe, however, that the foundation for all progressive housing options services must be the legal safety net that guarantees all those who find themselves homeless, the right to settled accommodation. It is important that each local authority and its partners establish a housing options service in response to local needs and context, but regardless of the structures and processes in place, the rights of homeless households must be preserved. **Getting the relationship right between advice on the housing options available and the statutory duty to homeless people, is critical to the success of the approach in Scotland.** Drawing on these principles, this report begins by setting out what Shelter Scotland's vision of an ideal Housing Options service looks like.

Drawing on discussions with practitioners, the second part of this report will look at how services are being delivered and how housing options and prevention advice is recorded. This focuses on how we measure both the service and the outcomes that people receive. This means looking at what information about service users is currently collected and what additional or alternative data should be recorded at local or national level to give an accurate and

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[2] 'Housing Options in Scotland' (Shelter Scotland 2011)
http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_library/policy_library_folder/a_shelter_scotland_report_housing_options_in_scotland

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consistent picture of what services are being delivered. It is important that as policy and practice evolves, we capture information about **all** those who use the service, not just those who go on to make a homeless application. It is critical that changes to existing services actually improve not just the process, but the end results for customers, and that any housing 'solutions' identified for people are successful in the long-term.

Finally, this report will set out a series of recommendations for the Scottish Government, local authorities and other partners across the sector. These recommendations are focused to ensure the ongoing development of homelessness prevention services is progressive and effective while safeguarding people's rights.

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### What is 'Housing Options'?

A 'Housing Options' approach is the advice and information given by councils, registered social landlords and advice agencies to people approaching them with a housing problem or issue. This service aims to help people assess the housing options available to them and then to help them to consider their next steps. This advice is delivered primarily to try and prevent, wherever possible, homelessness and to avoid later crisis.

A Housing Options and homelessness prevention interview should look broadly at a person's personal circumstances, their immediate needs, their priorities and what they want. This information is then used to suggest possible housing solutions that are available across all tenures to help people either: to stay in their existing accommodation, to find new rental accommodation or to move into home-ownership. The approach should focus less on processes and more on delivering successful housing 'solutions' directly or through partnership working, advice or referral to a specialist agency. Housing Options advice does not supersede or remove the right of individuals to make a homeless application and this should **always** be considered as an option that may or may not lead to the best solution.

Housing Options should be viewed as a customer service model based on early intervention, as opposed to a change in the basic service that should be delivered to those at risk of homelessness. As will be explored throughout this paper, Housing Options advice is a significant departure from a 'traditional' homelessness service based on rights and duties. Previously, this meant all applicants, regardless of circumstances or priorities, were assisted to make a homelessness application, testing their eligibility for permanent social housing and/or other services. In contrast, Housing Options prevention focuses on the individual and their needs and then the options that are available to them in the widest possible sense. This process of giving detailed and personalised advice and information should help to empower individuals to make choices about their housing which suit them and their household.

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# The development of Housing Options in Scotland

Housing Options advice has developed across Scotland in response to the acute pressure on local authority homelessness services and on social housing stock[3]. The growing recognition that services were struggling to meet the needs of the wide spectrum of people using the homelessness service led to this timely focus on the prevention of homelessness at both local and national level. Analysis of different approaches to homelessness and prevention across the UK have shown radically different policies underpinned by different legislative frameworks, but that the 'ideal' homelessness system would ***"combine the vigour of the English and Welsh preventative measures (alongside appropriate inspection and other safeguards against unlawful gatekeeping) with the strong statutory safety net available in Scotland"***[4].

In 2010 the Scottish Government and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) 2012 Steering Group officially endorsed a move towards homelessness prevention by encouraging local authorities to refocus their homelessness response through Housing Options advice services. The approach was launched at an event in June 2010 with a £500,000 'enabling' fund from the Scottish Government, designed to aid local authorities to work in partnership to design and develop Housing Options prevention services[5]. While this event did not explicitly describe Housing Options or lay out how the Scottish Government thought local authorities should design a housing options service, it expressly linked the 2012 commitment with the need to reduce the number of people who need homelessness assistance through prevention.

> ***"We had to change a system that was simply not working"*** (local authority practitioner)

Some council local authorities had already begun to rethink their homelessness services well before this event, to try and tackle homelessness more effectively and in preparation to meet the 2012 commitment. For others, this emphasis on a housing options model of advice and information was something new and quite different from existing services.

### Housing Options 'Hubs'
Scottish Government endorsement of Housing Options marked the start of a transition period for all local authority homeless services which is ongoing. As part of the Scottish Government's 'enabling fund' local authorities convened roughly geographical, Housing Options 'hubs'. This was to help councils work through the design and implementation of housing options by pooling skills, knowledge and best practice. Each of the five hubs drew up a mutually agreed action

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[3] More detail on the background to Housing Options can be found in Appendix 1

[4] 'The impact of devolution – Housing and Homelessness' Steve Wilcox, Suzanne Fitzpatrick et al (January 2010, JRF) p46 www.york.ac.uk/media/.../The%20Impact%20of%20Devolution.pdf

[5] www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/1033/0103934.doc

plan to take forward Housing Options and prevention and to utilise the money available from the enabling fund. The actions included looking at IT requirements (individually and hub-wide), conducting training needs analyses and commissioning research and training. The five hubs have developed different working relationships, meeting schedules and key priorities. Much of the £500,000 fund has been used to commission research or to conduct hub-wide training needs analyses with the view to developing a training plan across the whole hub.

In May 2012, Ipsos Mori published a report commissioned by the Scottish Government to evaluate the success of the 'Hub' model. This research[6] concluded that the model of working was generally supported by local authorities, it also highlighted that financial and logistical issues meant that arranging meetings could be challenging for geographically diverse authorities and for the Hub to be successful it needs to have a very strong 'lead' authority to drive activity. Local authorities suggested that the main advantage of working in 'Hubs' was to share practice and learn from other council's experiences:

> *"we have been able to tap into other local authorities and benefit from the experience in setting up a homeless prevention team and adopting a homeless options model, because we are being kind of behind them in terms of that approach. That's been the main advantage to us; we have learned from the experience and hopefully we won't make the same mistakes"* (Hub member)[7].

The issue of funding was highlighted in the report as a major inhibitor to the continuation of the Hubs, although 30% of the initial £500,000 fund was unspent, suggesting that local authorities could not define or perhaps agree spending priorities in the agreed time period. It seems that so far, the Hubs have been most successful as a way to share practice and work through common challenges. Participants value the opportunity to exchange information and learn more about what is going on outside their own local authority area. The Hubs have also been an efficient way to consider training which is critical to the housing options approach (and will be discussed in more detail in part 4).

In addition, the introduction of the Hubs coincided with the Coalition government's welfare reforms agenda. This reforming of the welfare benefits system poses a huge challenge for social landlords and their tenants along with potentially homeless households. The Hubs have been proactive in using this forum to try and prepare for and mitigate against the welfare changes through advice and training. The Scottish Government has made some welfare 'mitigation' funding available to hubs and to advice/training providers to try and help councils to prepare for the changes as early as possible. Yet the remit of this Ipsos Mori report was to

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[6] 'Evaluation of the Local Authority Housing Hubs Approach' (Ipsos Mori, 2012) http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3022/Evaluation-of-the-Local-Authority-Housing-Hubs-Approach.aspx
[7] Ibid., p32

evaluate the *model* of working, not the policy itself which means that, as yet, there has been no evaluation of the success or impact of the Housing Options policy.

More recent research carried out by the Scottish Council for Single Homeless (SCSH) of local authorities and other partners such as housing associations and voluntary organisations, suggests a more tepid response to the Hub model[8]. This survey found that while just under half of all respondents felt the Hubs approach 'definitely helped', almost 20% of respondents weren't sure if their local authority was in the right hub or not, and that just over 20% of respondents didn't think the Hub approach helped or weren't sure if it did. There was however a lot of support from local authorities for the approach:

> *"The Hub has been an excellent resource in helping us develop the housing options approach"*

but other agencies, particularly Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) and NHS partners responded less positively:

> *"Cleary, as I have no knowledge of it [the Housing Option Hub], it is not working well".*

From speaking to local authorities and attending hub meetings and national Housing Options events, what is clear is there are significant differences across the country in terms of resources, housing stock, services available and other contextual factors which is shaping the character, workplan and priorities of each Hub.

> *"housing options is being developed from the ground up… [it's] difficult to pull together common understanding, because we're all [in the hub] so different"* (local authority practitioner)

This means that ultimately, the design and implementation of services must be left to individual councils to allow them to take account of different local characteristics and local factors which might impact on the service. Each council has had to consider the shift to Housing Options in the context of their established service delivery model and existing homelessness prevention activity. An approach that works in a large, primarily urban council area may not be applicable in a smaller, rural council or a stock-transfer authority. Likewise, the size of the housing/homelessness team, the availability of social housing, the affordability of the private-rented sector and the profile of homeless applicants in an area, will all impact on the ways in

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[8] http://www.scsh.org.uk/uploads/HubsHOsurveyFindingsNov2012SCSH.pdf

which a housing options approach can be integrated with existing services. Many local authority practitioners consulted feel that the development of their service is still at a very early stage and that it is very much a work in progress.

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In short, there have been 32 different approaches to the provision of Housing Options advice services from 32 different starting points, meaning implementation and development has, and will continue to be, distinct to each council. This leads to inevitable questions about consistency, monitoring and benchmarking.

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## What are we trying to achieve?

The Scottish Government defines Housing Options as:

> *'Housing Options is a process which starts with housing advice when someone approaches a local authority with a housing problem. This means looking at an individuals options and choices in the widest sense. This approach features early intervention and explores all possible tenure options, including council housing, housing association housing and the private rented sector.*

> *The advice can also cover personal circumstances which may not necessarily be housing related, such as debt advice, mediation and mental health issues. Rather than only accepting a homelessness application local authority homelessness services will work together with other services such as employability, mental health, money advice and family mediation services etc to assist the individual with issues from an early stage in the hope of avoiding a housing crisis'[9].*

Beyond this definition, the Scottish Government has consciously encouraged local authorities to develop their policies according to their own priorities. No strategic objectives have been produced by the Scottish Government or core principles for service redesign. For the past 10 years homelessness services have been governed by legislation and also through the statutory Code of Guidance published in 2005[10] and amended in 2009 to include homelessness prevention. Although now outdated, this statutory guidance has been a useful tool for local authorities and has encouraged a consistent response to common issues. Housing Options was endorsed by the Scottish Government and Cosla over two years ago, but no equivalent or updated guidance has been produced. The Scottish Government has made it clear that this is to allow local authorities to develop local solutions to the housing needs in their area, which has been met with mixed feelings across the sector.

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[9] http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/Housing/homeless/HomelessnessPrevention/hubs/options
[10] http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/05/31133334/33366

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> *'difficult to define housing options or even the basic principles – we can't have time limits or prescription, this is about the individual'* (local authority practitioner)

> *'what do we mean by 'good outcomes' and how are these being recorded, how can we ensure the outcome is better than if a homeless application is made? Seems to be confusion between the Scottish Government and the Housing Regulator so we need guidance on some of the detail'* (local authority practitioner)

Some local authorities and Hubs have filled this gap with their own protocols and frameworks. Most notable is the work carried out by the West of Scotland Hub[11] . This protocol defines Housing Options for Hub members, what that means and critically what Housing Options is <u>not</u>:

> *'Housing options is NOT a service for homeless applicants only or focussed on:*
> - *Screening applicants to gate-keep services'*
> - *Preventing customers from making a homeless applications*
> - *Making an application for social housing only[12]'*

This is a very clear statement of intent around making services transparent but also consciously addressing the concerns within the sector that the line between positive prevention advice and bad gate-keeping practices can be extremely fine. The protocol goes on to define some top level outcomes and delivery principles. Significantly, when this protocol was launched the signatories from each organisation were mainly from senior management or councillor positions underlining the high level buy-in to this approach.

Shelter Scotland believes that while local authorities should have the flexibility to design their services in response to local context, key objectives must be set at national level. It is very clear, from speaking with a wide range of local authority practitioners, that local context does and should determine the shape of the service. The size and characteristics of the authority, the availability of social housing, the size and breadth of the private rental market and the profile of the people approaching the council for advice will all dictate what housing options can be delivered. However, homelessness services are vital for the thousands of people who find themselves in housing crisis every year and while Housing Options advice may be a positive way to resolve or prevent housing issues, that vital safety net must remain an integral part of the service.

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[11] Members of the hub: East Dunbartonshire Council, East Renfrewshire Council, Glasgow City Council, Glasgow Housing Association, North Lanarkshire Council, Renfrewshire Council, South Lanarkshire Council & West Dunbartonshire Council.
[12] 'West of Scotland Housing Options Hub – Protocol' (October 2012)

The flexibility and choices that frontline staff are now being encouraged to use must not erode all of the positive developments around homelessness services in the past decade. As policy develops in an unstructured way, a gap between high-level policy and frontline practices must not be allowed to develop. Shelter Scotland would like to see good practice identified and promoted at a national level (not just within Hubs or intra-Hub) but critically, when poor practice or gaps in service delivery are identified, there should be mechanisms to ensure improvements are made. This will help to ensure that it is the right, most progressive form of homelessness prevention that is being developed, regardless of local priorities and factors. The issue of consistency was also highlighted by the Scottish Parliament's Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee that *"the Scottish Government and the Scottish Housing Regulator should put in place measures to ensure that such services are consistent across Scotland and that legal duties are being met"*[13].

This could be achieved by setting out some national principals that would help to safeguard core homelessness responses as a key component of each and every service. These should not be prescriptive about **how** services should be delivered, but outline key objectives of the approach, common benchmarks to be used and what a successful service should be achieving. By laying out the characteristics of a progressive service, the Scottish Government would help councils and their partners with the ongoing development of the right service. Creating a framework at this stage in development would help to cement good practice and provide a useful tool for those local authorities who are still designing their service and evolving their processes. This in turn, would be useful for the Scottish Government and the Scottish Housing Regulator to help monitor processes, performance and outcomes for individuals and across the hubs.

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[13] http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/48589.aspx#b

# What should an ideal Housing Options Service look like?

The success of a Housing Options approach relies on it being person-centred and individual, which means it is neither possible nor desirable to prescribe a set process that all housing options advice interviews should take. Housing Options should not be a defined process but a method of responding to and advising people who are facing housing difficulty. It is the customer service model through which local authorities should try and prevent homelessness wherever possible. Some local authorities will have had a physical list of possible 'housing options' on their website for many years, but this approach is about **how** this information and advice is delivered and how service users are empowered to make a choice that is right for them.

While not prescribing a process, in all but the most acute cases of crisis, the Housing Options interview will need to cover some/all of the areas listed below. In reality, some of this information will be immediately apparent, and in other cases the discussion will be very short but it will inform the next stage.

1. Establishing the current situation and any immediate danger/roofless risk to the person i.e. domestic abuse or any reason the person may have nowhere to sleep that night.

2. Establishing recent housing circumstances; this may include some discussion around family/relationships, dependent children etc.

3. Establishing the financial situation, employment status, including welfare and benefits take-up and other financial considerations that would impact on housing options, particularly in relation to ongoing welfare reforms.

4. Establishing any health, medical, addiction or other support needs which could impact on housing options available.

5. Establishing what the person's housing need is but also what the long and short term housing aspirations are.

The approach looks beyond simply going on the council house waiting list and/or making a homeless application and focuses on getting people into homes they want to live in as quickly as possible and helping them to stay there. This could include providing information about: registered social landlords, private rented accommodation, home ownership, family mediation or housing support, debt or financial advice to help people stay in their current housing or making a homeless application. All information and any advice should be tailored to the household's

needs and current situation but also with knowledge of the local area, affordability, waiting times and other factors which could impact on the availability of housing or services.

## Prevention v. gatekeeping?

As described, the statutory homeless duties should make up a central component of any Housing Options and homelessness prevention approach. For some people who approach the service in a crisis situation, the immediate priority should be to identify risk to that individual or family and when necessary get them temporary accommodation and services immediately. For this group already experiencing crisis, the wider discussion around need/aspiration/options will be secondary to their more immediate housing need which should be met through making a homeless application. For those whose housing problems are not so acute, there should be an opportunity to have this wider discussion and where possible, prevent future homelessness.
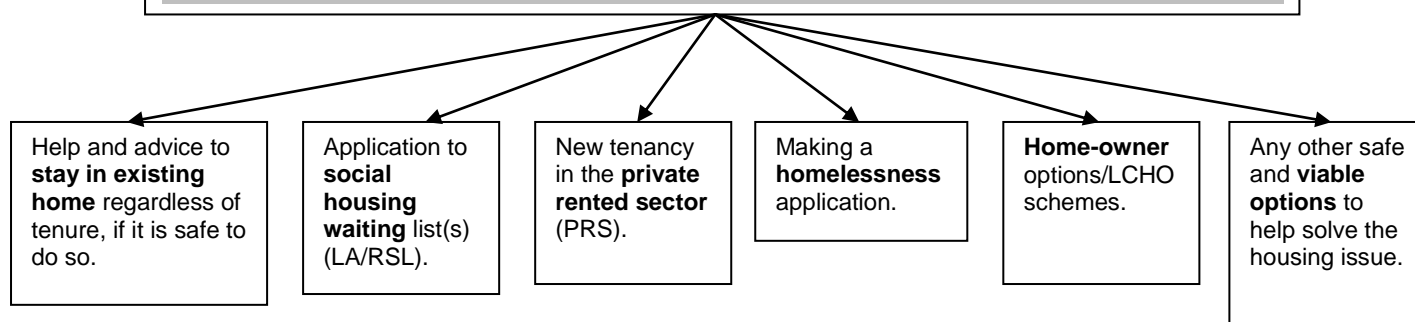
In many local authorities the homelessness assessment staff sit in a different team to the prevention advice staff. This means that when the decision is made to make a homeless application (either immediately, or after an in-depth discussion) the client is then passed over to a different team to carry out the statutory assessment. Whatever staffing structures or internal processes are being followed, there must be fluidity between homelessness prevention activity and the option to make a homelessness application at any stage of the process. As people's circumstances change or they have time to consider all of their options they may want to explore other housing solutions or have a further discussion. Essentially, people should not have to go down one 'route' or another. The opportunity to help someone resolve their housing problem does not end if they make a homeless application and good quality advice must still be available to help people consider their options.

In no circumstances should Housing Options advice supersede a person's right to make an application regardless of what might be perceived by staff as the 'best' option for an individual. For this approach to be successful in the long-term, this must be about empowering people to understand their options including the benefits or drawbacks of any decision they make. It is critical that staff are not making decisions for people or obscuring some options reflecting their own priorities, resources etc. The right to make a homeless application should be discussed as one option from a range available, as shown below:

# Housing Options/prevention advice

1. If there is immediate or imminent risk to the service user, that should be resolved as a priority – usually through making a homeless application and accessing temporary accommodation.
2. All service users have an initial discussion to determine circumstances/histories/need/aspiration.
3. From this, one or more housing options/solutions will be identified for that individual or family that will meet their housing need and/or prevent homelessness.
4. Making a homeless application and the implications should be discussed as one of these options, but not necessarily taken forward. Pros and cons of **all** options should be discussed.
5. Options/actions may be taken forward directly or through referrals and partnerships with other organisations.
6. Regardless of next step, service user can revisit any option, seek further advice, change their minds etc.

From information received, staff will assess the options and talk through those that are relevant and financially viable from those below.

| Help and advice to **stay in existing home** regardless of tenure, if it is safe to do so. | Application to **social housing waiting** list(s) (LA/RSL). | New tenancy in the **private rented sector** (PRS). | Making a **homelessness** application. | **Home-owner** options/LCHO schemes. | Any other safe and **viable options** to help solve the housing issue. |

Prior to Housing Options being introduced, the majority of people approaching their council would have automatically made a homelessness application regardless of their personal circumstances. By discussing the range of options available, there is potential to find a quicker and better solution to someone's housing need which may or may not involve the statutory homelessness duty. As we set out later in this paper, no single approach to integrating prevention advice with homelessness duties is being followed across Scotland.

Given the spectrum of approaches, it is worth reiterating that **the statutory duty to homeless households remains unchanged**. Shelter Scotland has outlined a list of 'triggers' that, as the very minimum, should alert frontline staff to homelessness or risk of homelessness meaning the option of a homeless application **must** be discussed as one of the options. This does not mean that an application will always be made. We would expect to see this or a similar list of those most at risk identified explicitly in all council guidance and paperwork for staff. This is inline with

homeless legislation and some authorities and providers are already integrating this into their paperwork.

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**Trigger 1:  Are they roofless?** If the person/family is in an immediate crisis situation and is roofless this may mean they are currently, or are intending to, sleep rough.

**Trigger 2:  Have they been asked to leave?** If the person says they have been asked to leave their current accommodation and they have nowhere else to stay.

**Trigger 3: Are they escaping domestic abuse?** If the person is suffering from domestic abuse (violent or otherwise) which means they no longer feel safe in their existing accommodation.

**Trigger 4: Are they escaping abuse outside the home?** If the person is suffering from abuse (violent or otherwise) from neighbours or people in the area, which means they no longer feel safe in their existing accommodation.

**Trigger 5:  Have they been discharged from an institution?** If the person has recently been discharged from residential care/prison etc and has no other accommodation.

**Trigger 6:  Have they, or do they face, eviction?** If the person has been evicted by their landlord (PRS/social) or is in a dispute with their landlord, cannot gain access and has no other available accommodation.

**Trigger 7:  Are they experiencing overcrowding?** If the person describes their living situation and they are living in overcrowded conditions.

**Trigger 8: Is there home no longer habitable?** If the person's current accommodation has recently been damaged by fire/flood etc and they have no alternative accommodation.

**Trigger 9: Do they wish to exercise their right to make a homelessness application?**  If the person says they wish to make a homeless application then they have the legal entitlement to do so. The assessment process will determine the merits of the application.

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Ideally the discussion/advice will be transparent and comprehensive for the service user and empower them to make a choice that is right for them.  This may or may not be to make a homeless application but their statutory right will have been observed as in the case example below:

**Practice example[14]**

Mr Todd approached his local council as he was very concerned about his housing situation. He had a Housing Options interview and the staff member collected information about his current living situation/history, financial concerns and housing aspirations. Mr Todd had been living at the family home but had fallen out with his family and been asked to leave. He was currently sleeping on his grandmother's sofa and working part-time in a local takeaway. He was not collecting any benefits and was keen to get a full-time job where he could use his HND business qualification.

The staff member went through his options including claiming benefits because of his low income, joining local authority and RSL waiting lists for a home, renting in the private sector and making a homeless application with the option of moving into temporary accommodation. They also discussed the option of referral to an employment service to help him secure a permanent job.

Having considered his options, Mr Todd was helped to apply to a local housing association who he was advised, should be able to offer him a home in a matter of weeks. Mr Todd decided he was happy to continue staying with his grandmother on a short-term basis which meant he could maintain his job. He was also referred to a local employability service which helped him prepare his CV, make job applications and prepare for interviews.

**Outcome:** Mr Todd was offered and accepted his own tenancy and he secured full-time employment in an accountancy firm. Homelessness prevented.

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[14] The practice examples highlighted in this report are genuine cases which have either come directly from Shelter Scotland advice/support work or from local authority colleagues who have been kind enough to allow us to use them.

# How are Housing Options being delivered in Scotland – the evidence?

I have set out above what an ideal housing options service should look like. I now draw on evidence from discussions with practitioners across Scotland[15] to show how Housing Options is being delivered in practice.

### Changing the approach

A Housing Options service can only be successful if local authority Housing Options staff understand the core elements of the service, the interaction between prevention and homelessness and where choice and rights come into play. Identified as equally important is the need for corporate buy-in to the approach and for a strategic priority to be put on the prevention of homelessness across all departments.

All the local authority practitioners consulted for this report, have emphasised the importance of thorough and rigorous staff training and ongoing development of frontline staff. They have all either restructured or are currently running pilots with a view to rolling out the approach across the whole authority, but with staff being trained at all stages of the process.

The local authorities and housing associations with the most developed housing options services across Scotland have shared their experiences of developing staff confidence and understanding of housing options and importantly trying to stimulate a positive change in culture. At national and local events, leading local authorities have given presentations, run workshops and shared case studies and examples of their practice. Many frontline staff have also had the opportunity to shadow colleagues in different local authorities which has been extremely valuable. Through the 'Hubs', many local authorities have been involved in an independent Training Needs Analysis (TNA) to identify gaps in staff skills and knowledge. Many have used these results as the basis for the commissioning of external training on particular topics for example, around tenancy rights in the private rented sector, or homelessness legislation.

In order to deliver positive homelessness prevention it is evident that staff need to feel supported as the service evolves and need to have clear objectives and training to help clients find housing solutions without eroding statutory rights.

> *'culture change is hard, but we're now at a point where everyone in the service is on message and understands and believes in our aims and objectives'* (local authority practitioner)

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[15] See Appendix 2

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*'it [culture change] is a challenge. The fine line between giving someone a 'reality check' and then gate-keeping….and how do we ensure it's consistent?'* (local authority practitioner)

*"good housing options comes down to the ethos of the organisation and that needs to come from senior managers"* (local authority practitioner)

### Building new Skills

Delivering good Housing Options advice means giving more proactive and individual information to people, which is a big augmentation of the role for many frontline staff. Housing Options and prevention advice is about empowering the customer to make a decision that is right for them by gathering the necessary information, appraising the situation and any risks involved, making judgements on what options are or are not available and then communicating these in a clear and comprehensive way. This means a dramatic shift in emphasis for staff, from going through a *process* of a homeless assessment, to delivering tailored advice and information in response to the information they are given by the customer. Through the delivery of housing options, staff will need to make judgements on what advice is/isn't applicable, when certain options are appropriate and at what point they need to refer to or consult specialist agencies for more detailed advice. In the first instance, staff must have the communication and positive interviewing skills to illicit the right information. This is particularly important since a number of people approaching the service will be experiencing crisis or in a stressful situation which could make this process more challenging. As such, many providers are prioritising training around these 'soft skills'.

### Expanding knowledge

In addition to building these skills, staff delivering the service have thorough and up-to-date knowledge of all the housing and services available in the area or have clear reference points and referral routes to such expertise. In some cases there will be an obvious next step or solution. In particular, when someone is roofless or at risk they will need to make a homeless application and be offered emergency accommodation. In other cases, for example where a referral to an income maximisation officer will resolve the financial concerns or where an adaptation can be arranged for the property to enable someone with mobility issues to remain in their existing home then there is an obvious next step. In more complex cases however, staff will need to conduct a more thorough investigation of circumstances, understand what the person wants and needs and what the pros and cons of each option are. In order to do this, staff could need, for example, information on affordability in the private rented sector, approximate availability and waiting list times for social housing providers in the area, detailed

knowledge of the benefits system and the impact of forthcoming changes, sources of independent advice, referral routes into other services etc.

As part of the discussion of appropriate options, staff should be clearly highlighting the pros and cons of each option in a neutral and non-coercive way.  Only once a customer has information on **all** their options, including a homeless application – can they make an informed choice.

### Training

Many practitioners consulted have suggested that training is critical to ensure staff are confident in their delivery of options without gate-keeping services:

> *'this changed and improved our partnerships, we're working better with other council departments but also with the voluntary sector, the prisons service, criminal justice etc, we're joining up our whole approach'* (local authority practitioner)

While all senior practitioners I consulted were committed to the prevention of homelessness and delivering progressive housing options advice, through some service user feedback and case work, it is apparent that in some areas the approach is being applied inconsistently.  The flexibility to problem solve has been articulated as one of the most positive aspects of this prevention approach, as under the previous regime many practitioners felt the assessment process had become a straight jacket in many cases, producing poor outcomes.  This flexibility however, means there is far more onus on the individual to get their response right and to really shape the outcome for the individual.  This is a big change for many local authorities and in particular, frontline staff and as such the process of evolving the service and getting buy-in at all levels will be a gradual one.  One important way to reinforce these fundamental changes is through an ongoing programme of training and development for staff to build skills, but just as critically, to build confidence for this new, enhanced role.

**Practice example**

Ms Bell approached the Housing Options service with her 1 yr old daughter.  She was in a refuge having fled her private sector tenancy due to serious violent assault by her ex-partner.  Ms Bell was told she had a tenancy where it was reasonable for her to reside, but the council acknowledged there were some risks and referred her to the 'security at home' initiative to have a panic alarm and other security measures fitted.  Social services were so concerned over the wellbeing of the child that they called a Children's Hearing stating that if the family returned to the tenancy then there was a real possibility that the child would be taken into care.  Through advocacy from a range of external agencies, Ms Bell was helped to make a homeless application and secured temporary accommodation.

Local authorities are developing their own ongoing training priorities but some practitioners we have spoken with felt that it would be helpful to have a revision of the 'National Standards' in light of recent changes. The 'National Standards'[16] are a quality assurance framework for advice providers widely used by the sector. Originally produced in 1995 by the Scottish Government and subsequently updated, these standards are a valuable tool for local authorities and their partners. Given the changes implicit with the move towards Housing Options advice and with the challenge of ongoing welfare reforms, the provision of good quality, consistent advice has never been more important. Shelter Scotland has been involved in discussions with the Scottish Government looking at the National Standards and would welcome the opportunity to feed into any review process.

> *'our staff are generally happier with the approach, we're not testing eligibility anymore, we're empowering our staff to actually help people and problem-solve'*
> (local authority practitioner)

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[16] http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/Housing/access/nationalstandards

# Next Steps and measuring success

There is a great deal of time and resource being spent at local authority level to support service development and practitioners seem to welcome the approach and value the freedom to be proactive about preventing homelessness. There are however some unanswered questions about monitoring and measuring under this new delivery framework and how we can ensure that people are getting the best possible service regardless of the local authority or the staff member they engage with. It is critical that the gap between policy and practice is not permitted to grow. This must be done by embedding good safeguards at each step of the process.

## Measuring Success – are we giving all the options?

To date a lot of focus has been on restructuring services, training staff and making sure the right infrastructure is in place to deliver housing options prevention advice. The other part of the picture which has not had the same level of priority, is measuring and recording activity, monitoring the outcomes for customers and understanding what the changes in recorded data mean.

In the past two years the Scottish Government has reported a significant drop in homelessness application numbers and this has been attributed to the move towards Housing Options and prevention advice. While on the surface any reduction in homelessness application numbers should be positive, we simply don't have enough data to assess the impact of Housing Options or to say with confidence that this policy is having a positive impact on the outcomes for individuals and families.

Before the move towards Housing Options, practically all those who approached a council homelessness service would go on to make an application. They would then be subject to an assessment which would determine their situation and eligibility for services. While there is wide agreement that this led to an unhelpful over-inflation in application numbers, it meant that each applicant had a unique record under the mandatory data recording of statutory homelessness and their journey through the system was mapped. Through Housing Options a significant proportion of those approaching the service are no longer progressing through to a homeless application. This *could* be because of positive interventions but because approaches without application are not recorded at a national level, we have an increasingly incomplete picture of:

- exactly who is approaching these services,
- what service they are receiving (if not statutory) and;
- what the outputs and outcomes are.

**Homeless applications**

Nationally, there was a 19% fall in the number of homeless applications made in 2011/12 compared to the previous year and the change over two years is 21% (Table 1). Underneath this headline figure, there are significant regional differences with some local authorities reporting a drop in applications as high as 56%, 49% and 40% in one year, while at the other end of the spectrum some councils are reporting very little change or a slight increase. Given the wider economic climate and the impact of welfare reforms beginning to bite, there is no indication that there is a reduction in housing need. Although there is not yet data in the public domain, local authority practitioners have suggested that the number of Housing Options approaches they are recording equals or exceeds the fall in applications. This suggests that housing need remains high, even rising, but that the way people are receiving information and advice has changed. In releasing these annual statistics, the Scottish Government stated that:

> *'The fall in applications is mainly due to the impact of housing options/ homelessness prevention strategies adopted by most councils over the past few years rather than to changes in the underlying drivers of homelessness'*[1].

There is appetite from practitioners for a more comprehensive recording and monitoring system, to help understand how effective their prevention interventions are and to help build up a robust data set to help safeguard against gate-keeping practices. Most councils consulted have established their own monitoring frameworks and are, to an extent, recording outcomes. This has required an overhaul of existing processes and of the IT systems and software used, sometimes at a Hub wide level. There is some nervousness around the ad hoc nature of this recording and questions being asked about how the Scottish Housing Regulator intends to measure the delivery of Housing Options advice.

> *'we need a system to comprehensively record housing options services, at the moment the only thing being recorded is a change in applications and this is about more than that'* (local authority practitioner)

- **Table 1: Number of applications under the Homeless Persons legislation by local authority: 2004/05 to 2011/12**

| | 2004-05 | 2005-06 | 2006-07 | 2007-08 | 2008-09 | 2009-10 | 2010-11 | 2011-12 | % change 10/11 to 11/12 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Scotland** | **57,395*** | **60,698** | **59,608** | **57,211** | **57,681** | **57,214** | **55,663** | **45,322** | **-19%** |
| Aberdeen City | 1,623 | 2,074 | 2,301 | 2,499 | 2,831 | 2,614 | 3,407 | 1,483 | **-56%** |
| Aberdeenshire | 1,398 | 1,470 | 1,659 | 1,586 | 1,555 | 1,719 | 1,786 | 1,590 | **-11%** |
| Angus | 1,547 | 1,290 | 1,146 | 1,238 | 1,139 | 1,162 | 1,186 | 1,181 | **0%** |
| Argyll & Bute | 976 | 1,120 | 988 | 1,029 | 867 | 926 | 811 | 606 | **-25%** |
| Clacks | 1,122 | 1,157 | 1,068 | 703 | 657 | 719 | 763 | 708 | **-7%** |
| D&G | 1,694 | 1,623 | 1,568 | 1,508 | 1,391 | 1,329 | 1,231 | 1,003 | **-19%** |
| Dundee City | 1,461 | 1,938 | 2,127 | 2,418 | 2,578 | 2,290 | 1,914 | 1,611 | **-16%** |
| East Ayrshire | 1,185 | 1,252 | 1,186 | 1,018 | 975 | 827 | 803 | 649 | **-19%** |
| East Dunb | 562 | 690 | 659 | 702 | 671 | 713 | 700 | 637 | **-9%** |
| East Lothian | 1,000 | 1,116 | 1,178 | 1,124 | 1,150 | 1,195 | 1,192 | 773 | **-35%** |
| East Ren | 404 | 368 | 373 | 327 | 359 | 354 | 314 | 271 | **-14%** |
| Edinburgh | 5,171 | 5,040 | 5,512 | 5,148 | 4,886 | 4,781 | 4,656 | 4,400 | **-5%** |
| Eilean Siar | 260 | 246 | 278 | 251 | 240 | 202 | 203 | 170 | **-16%** |
| Falkirk | 1,636 | 2,108 | 1,953 | 2,466 | 2,745 | 2,513 | 2,309 | 1,187 | **-49%** |
| Fife | 4,124 | 4,173 | 4,378 | 3,631 | 3,439 | 4,007 | 4,566 | 3,946 | **-14%** |
| Glasgow City | 10,680 | 11,220 | 10,502 | 9,947 | 10,128 | 10,640 | 10,422 | 9,144 | **-12%** |
| Highland | 2,304 | 2,458 | 2,214 | 2,293 | 2,376 | 2,376 | 2,149 | 1,285 | **-40%** |
| Inverclyde | 837 | 878 | 746 | 520 | 633 | 587 | 533 | 432 | **-19%** |
| Midlothian | 615 | 646 | 687 | 743 | 873 | 729 | 660 | 762 | **15%** |
| Moray | 986 | 1,126 | 804 | 859 | 744 | 901 | 661 | 516 | **-22%** |
| North Ayrshire | 1,727 | 1,637 | 1,521 | 1,452 | 1,370 | 1,066 | 766 | 707 | **-8%** |
| North Lan | 4,000 | 4,092 | 3,749 | 3,544 | 3,502 | 3,006 | 2,476 | 2,223 | **-10%** |
| Orkney | 210 | 201 | 237 | 137 | 100 | 137 | 144 | 142 | **-1%** |
| Perth & Kin | 1,467 | 1,347 | 988 | 1,222 | 1,096 | 1,030 | 1,128 | 977 | **-13%** |
| Renfrewshire | 1,651 | 1,493 | 1,638 | 1,064 | 1,272 | 1,250 | 1,253 | 1,186 | **-5%** |
| Scottish Bord | 801 | 991 | 991 | 1,093 | 1,070 | 972 | 862 | 541 | **-37%** |
| Shetland | 163 | 191 | 228 | 241 | 267 | 266 | 270 | 200 | **-26%** |
| South Ayr | 1,081 | 1,030 | 962 | 919 | 909 | 962 | 910 | 948 | **4%** |
| South Lan | 2,278 | 2,412 | 2,405 | 2,736 | 3,036 | 3,128 | 2,945 | 2,313 | **-21%** |
| Stirling | 1,037 | 1,062 | 1,095 | 887 | 929 | 959 | 706 | 461 | **-35%** |
| West Dunb | 1,431 | 2,270 | 2,403 | 2,251 | 2,141 | 2,092 | 2,000 | 1,544 | **-23%** |
| West Lothian | 1,964 | 1,979 | 2,064 | 1,655 | 1,752 | 1,762 | 1,937 | 1,726 | **-11%** |

* Red boxes indicate an increase on the previous year while green boxes show a decrease from the previous year.

This issue was also recognised by the Scottish Parliament's Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee who recommended that *"the Scottish Government should consider the development of a measurement tool for homelessness prevention work*[17]. This tool

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[17] http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/48589.aspx#b

would help encourage a consistent approach and provide data for a more comprehensive assessment of the approach but would also help local authorities to benchmark their prevention activity and design their service response in targeted prevention activity which is shown to be having an impact.

The Scottish Government has begun to address this issue through the work of the Homelessness Statistics Provider and User Group[18] which has, over the past year been designing a framework for recording Housing Options activity called PREVENT1. This Group has a wide membership of local authorities and other stakeholders and there has been a process of ongoing discussion and input which has resulted in a monitoring framework due to be agreed in April 2013. This series of questions records the following and will be collected in addition to the existing HL1 data:

- reasons for approach,
- types of prevention activity,
- areas of advice given and
- outcome.

Shelter Scotland welcomes the emphasis that has latterly been put on trying to more accurately record Housing Options activity and has been part of the consultation process around PREVENT1. While there is wide support for PREVENT1 and for putting in place a more comprehensive data monitoring system, it has been slow to develop and some authorities are concerned about the resource implications of changing their data recording systems. It is therefore proposed that this data will be collected on a voluntary basis after April 2013. Shelter Scotland believes that after an initial testing period, this information must be collected on a mandatory basis as per the HL1 data. Together these two data sets will help provide a more complete picture of who is receiving what service and only then can we empirically assess the success of the Housing Options approach.

## Measuring success - Outputs versus outcomes?

The whole ethos behind a person-centred housing options advice service is to try and resolve housing problems as quickly and effectively as possible, prioritising the needs and circumstances of the service user rather than responding through the prism of processes, entitlement and availability. With that in mind, the critical success measures should be:

1. Is the housing problem resolved in a way that is satisfactory to the service user?
2. Is the chosen housing option sustainable for as long as the individual wishes it to be?
3. Are people happy with the service(s) they are getting?

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[18] http://scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/15257/22540

4. Is future homelessness prevented?

Information around sustainability of housing solutions is one of the most difficult elements to capture. In order to assess longer-term sustainability, local authorities would need to maintain contact with service users for at least 12 months which is extremely time and resource intensive. There would also need to be a way to understand if a housing situation changes whether this is negative (i.e. tenancy failure, debt issues, ASB etc) or positive (i.e. moved in with a partner, moving because of work etc).

> *"what do we mean by a sustainable outcome? Will be different for different people in different areas"* (local authority practitioner)

Despite some key developments at a national level on the recording of Housing Options activity, there remain some unresolved questions. In particular, local authority practitioners have raised issues of: when cases are closed, when you record an output or outcome and how you evaluate the success of that outcome or its sustainability.

This qualitative information will not be recorded through the PREVENT1 framework when it comes into effect. The proposed PREVENT1 framework records the immediate housing outcomes i.e. remained in current accommodation, local authority tenancy, women's refuge, private rented assured tenancy etc, but there is currently no way to capture the sustainability of each of these options. It is therefore, important that local authorities continue to carry out their own evaluations and undertake service user consultation to get feedback on their service. The Scottish Housing Regulator has identified the need for a thematic study on Housing Options services as part of their scrutiny work which will be extremely useful in collecting some of this qualitative information and a means of disseminating practice examples. There is no fixed timetable for this, but should be completed during 2013/14 and we would hope this opportunity is taken to produce a comprehensive and useful piece of research.

# Conclusion

The priority being put on homelessness prevention largely through the Housing Options model, is a timely and pragmatic response to the pressure on housing resources and local authority budgets. However, the positive development of homelessness services made over the past few years in response to the '2012 Commitment' should not be eroded through service redesign but instead should make up the foundation of the approach going forward. Scotland has some of the most progressive homelessness legislation is the world and this provides a vital safety net for the most vulnerable people facing the crisis of homelessness. The move towards Housing Options is an opportunity to embed solid prevention principles alongside the statutory homelessness framework to ensure that people get all the advice and information they require to find a positive housing solution which enables them to move on or away from homelessness.

The ongoing reform of the welfare and benefits system presents a huge challenge for social landlords and their partners and there is increasing concern about what housing options are and will continue to be available in light of the changes to housing benefit. A significant proportion of social tenants, those in temporary accommodation, and housing advice service users will be impacted by cuts in housing benefit either through the 'bedroom tax' coming into force from April 2013, changes to Local Housing Allowance, the overall benefit cap and Universal Credit. A lot of work has already been done at local authority and Hub level to engage with existing tenants affected and consider their options. Social landlords are investing in getting their advice staff trained and fully informed in order to give people accurate advice on their situation and therefore their options. A Housing Options service is only as good as the options that are available. The role of Housing Options advice is even more critical in the face of these changes and good quality advice and information is key to helping those affected.

The welfare changes will however, impact on the options that people have available to them especially in the private rented sector. Something local authority practitioners are very concerned about:

> *'we fear that progress made under housing options is and will continue to be eroded by the welfare reforms'* (local authority practitioner)

> *'You can't suppress social care need, it will appear/reappear somewhere'* (local authority practitioner)

Given these concerns it is even more important to share good practice and to understand the service that is being delivered on the ground, this includes: mediation services, initiatives to work more closely with private landlords and youth prevention services. This is the only way to

ensure service users are receiving a good service and a sustainable outcome for their housing problem but it is also critical to safeguard against gate-keeping practices which at a time of scarce resources, could creep in.  Housing Options and prevention can only be a success if homelessness is not just delayed but prevented in the short and long-term.


## Recommendations

In order to support the continued development of progressive housing and homelessness advice services and to prevent homelessness wherever possible, Shelter Scotland calls for the following steps to be taken:

1. The Scottish Government should produce a framework for the delivery of Housing Options advice and positive homelessness prevention.  This guidance should not prescribe *how* local authorities should structure or design their services, but concentrate on strategic objectives, key principles of delivery and what a progressive service should look like.

2. The Scottish Government should encourage and support the use of its prevention monitoring tool – PREVENT1 - that is scheduled to be effective from April 2013.  The quality of information should be assessed then any changes/improvements made before making this mandatory from April 2014.

3. The Scottish Housing Regulator should carry out their planned thematic report on the development of Housing Options services to augment the body of information available for stakeholders.  This should be used as an opportunity to identify and disseminate both good and bad practice as learning tools for practitioners.

4. The Scottish Housing Regulator should utilise the Scottish Social Housing Charter to monitor the ongoing delivery of statutory homelessness services as a critical part of the overall picture of the delivery of housing services as it feeds into Housing Options.

5. A national Housing Options steering group should be established involving key governmental, public and voluntary organisations to set objectives, collate practice examples and to draw together a national picture of progress and development.

6. The work of the local authority Hubs should continue to evolve to include local and national partners including: registered social landlords, voluntary organisations and service providers and health professionals.  This will help to expand the range of options available and the quality of service provided.

7. The Scottish Government and advice partners should undertake a comprehensive review of the National Advice Standards to reflect the radically changed advice landscape and the reality of what is happening on the ground.

**Shelter** Scotland

## Appendix 1:

**Background**

Under the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987, local authorities across Scotland have a duty to investigate the circumstances of those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness and provide a range of services depending on the outcome of that enquiry. Post devolution, the Scottish Parliament put emphasis on homelessness policy by establishing an expert Task Force to investigate and report on how the system was working and critically, where improvements could be made. This resulted in a final report detailing 59 recommendations addressing both the causes and consequences of homelessness, emphasising the need to improve partnership working, change the culture of those working in homelessness and to prioritise the prevention of homelessness[19].

These recommendations sought to kick-start a wide programme of reform including making legislative changes to the homelessness test to ensure all those who were homeless had the same rights, regardless of household composition. The commitment to remove the 'priority/non-priority' distinction for homeless households was set for the end of 2012 and as such has become known as the '2012 commitment'. The legislation was introduced with cross-party support and marked a significant departure from UK policy for the newly devolved Scottish Parliament. The legislation was introduced as part of the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003 and was finally commenced on the 31 December 2012.

The impact of the Homelessness Task Force recommendations generally and the 2012 commitment specifically, has been positive, acting as a catalyst for a culture change within local authority homeless services over the past decade[20]. This landmark legislation put Scotland at the forefront of progressive homelessness policy, but also set local authorities and their partners the challenge of providing all unintentionally homeless households with a permanent home. This legislative change at the end of 2012 was envisaged as the culmination of 10 years worth of prevention, early intervention and partnership working as laid out in the Task Force recommendations. While there has been a lot of focus on the '2012 commitment', other parts of the reform programme have not been approached so strategically. This meant that until very recently, the prevention of homelessness took a backseat to the 2012 commitment creating a situation where eligibility for social housing has grown while homeless application numbers remained relatively constant until 2010.

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[19] Homelessness Task Force Final Report (2002) http://www.clacksweb.org.uk/document/272.pdf
[20] 'Progress and Drift: A review of the Homelessness Task Force Recommendations' (Shelter Scotland, Feb 2011)
http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_library/policy_library_folder/progress_and_drift_a_review_of_the_homelessness_task_force_recommendations

The legislative right to settled housing is of course, meaningless unless there are good quality, affordable houses available. When the commitment was made there was already a discrepancy between the demand for and supply of socially-rented housing. The intervening 10 years has put even greater pressure of dwindling supplies of housing, housing which is critical to the ongoing delivery of the 2012 commitment. With 157,700 people on the 'mainstream' council house waiting list[21], there are simply not enough homes available. This is partly due to an inadequate supply of new build socially-rented housing but also through depletion from right to buy sales and demolitions[22]. Even before the economic crisis, it was clear that local authorities were not going to be able to 'build their way' to meeting the commitment. With pressures on public spending it was necessary for services to be redesigned to ease the pressure on local authority housing but also to better meet the needs of those in housing crisis. On the back of the removal of 'priority need', Housing Options provides an opportunity to follow through with that commitment to homeless households and work more effectively to prevent homelessness wherever possible.

**Homelessness prevention**

It is against this backdrop that the Scottish Government looked to England and the development of 'Housing Options' services to try and redress the delivery of homelessness with a strong focus on prevention. This approach, as part of a wider homelessness prevention initiative had contributed, until very recently[23], to a dramatic drop in homelessness application numbers in England since 2003/04 (Table 1). This fall in recorded homelessness was down to a shift in resources and an emphasis towards early intervention and the prevention of housing crisis wherever possible. The approach focused on helping people to explore alternative options to making a homelessness application, including specifically, renting in the private rented sector (PRS). The shift to Housing Options has also put a lot of emphasis on good partnerships with a range of organisations and bodies to help people resolve not only housing crisis but issues with health, money and debt advice and even employment[24].

Housing Options advice in England has been evolving as part of wider prevention activity since 2006. Despite some concerns around the issue of 'gate-keeping' and whether people were being prohibited from making a homeless application, research has shown that by and large,

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[21] Scottish Government statistics (March 2011)
http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Housing-Regeneration/HSfS/HousingLists
[22] Since the introduction of Right to Buy (RTB) in 1979 nearly half a million properties have been lost from public sector stock http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Housing-Regeneration/HSfS/Sales
[23]
http://www.communities.gov.uk/housing/housingresearch/housingstatistics/housingstatisticsby/homelessnessstatistics/livetables/
[24] 'Expanding Choice, Addressing Need' Communities and Local Government (March 2008)
http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/expandingchoice

the approach has contributed positively to a fall in recorded homelessness[25]. While the model in Scotland may initially have been 'borrowed' from English local authorities, it has developed uniquely across Scotland taking account of a very different legal framework for homeless households and a different operating context. A key difference is that the English approach was facilitated by a £10.2m investment from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Enhanced Housing Options Programme was run by the Communities and Local Government Department (CLG)[26]. This represents far greater investment and stronger leadership from central government than in Scotland where the policy was introduced with an 'enabling fund' of £500,000.
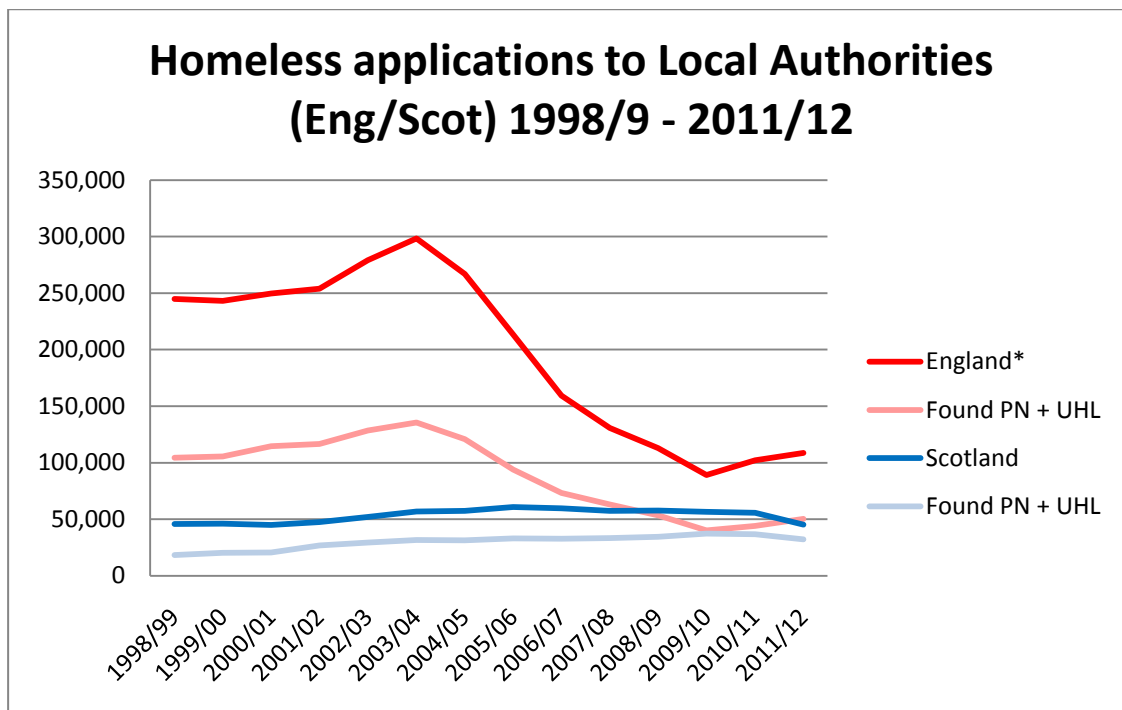


Table 1. Homelessness in Scotland and England (1998/9 – 2011/12)
* English data collected is for acceptances rather than applications

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[25] 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.
[26] http://www.cchpr.landecon.cam.ac.uk/projects/Trailblazers/moreinfo.asp

## Appendix 2

This report was written after discussion with a number of practitioners, primarily from the following local authorities and I appreciate the time given to impart valuable insights.

- Aberdeen City Council

- Angus Council

- Argyll and Bute Council

- Dundee City Council

- East Renfrewshire Council

- Fife Council

- Glasgow City Council

- Glasgow Homelessness Network

- Glasgow Housing Association

- North Ayrshire Council

- Perth and Kinross Council

- Scottish Borders Council

- Scottish Housing Regulator

- South Lanarkshire Council

- West Lothian Council

- West Dunbartonshire Council