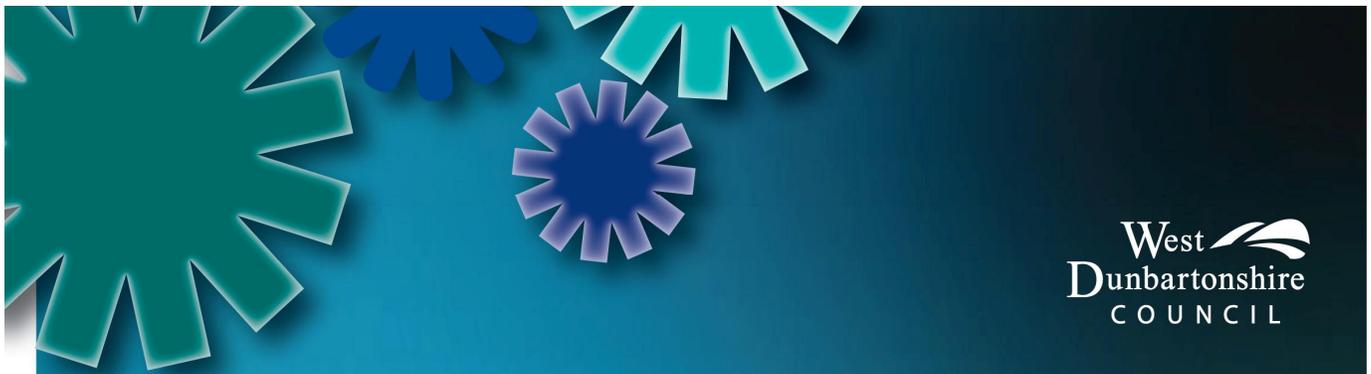
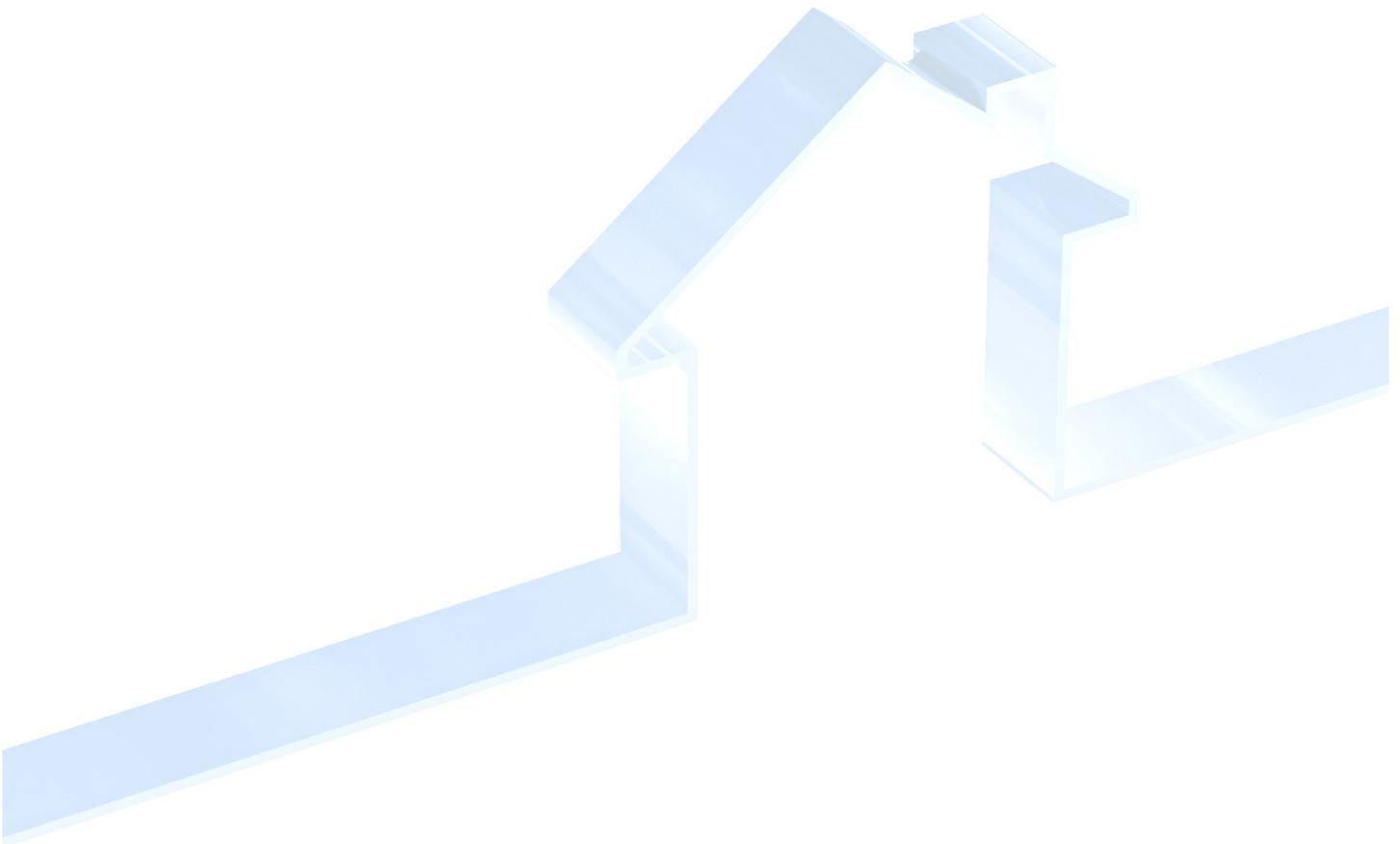


**SHR Housing Options Thematic Study**

**June 2014**



## Introduction

Welcome to a series of regular briefings prepared by the Housing Strategy and Development Team on the big issues concerning housing. These briefings will be shared with staff, tenants and elected members and keep everyone up to date with regards the ever changing policy context that we are operating within.

The Housing Strategy section is responsible for:-

- Supporting the development of a culture of continuous improvement in Housing services and to facilitate opportunities to excel;
- Developing and implementing effective strategies for Housing and Community Safety Services within West Dunbartonshire;
- Developing the Council's housing strategy to ensure that it supports the delivery of our strategic priorities;
- Performance management within Housing and Community Safety services; and
- Promoting effective management and the involvement of tenants across all aspects of Housing Services.
- Providing the Strategic Housing Authority Role within West Dunbartonshire and delivering the Affordable Housing Supply Programme throughout the area.

For further information on Housing Strategy and Development please telephone 01389 737889 or e-mail: [housing.strategy@west-dunbarton.gov.uk](mailto:housing.strategy@west-dunbarton.gov.uk)



## **Background**

Preventing homelessness is a key priority for the Scottish Government and local authorities. In 2010 the Scottish Government and the Convention of Local Authorities (CoSLA) 2012 Steering Group held a joint seminar where they discussed homeless prevention actions, particularly focusing on housing options approaches. At the seminar the Scottish Housing Options (SHO) funding program was launched.

### ***The Scottish Housing Options Funding Program***

In September 2010 the SHO Funding program had £500,000 of funding available over a 14 month period to enable housing options initiatives to get off the ground. The funding was to encourage local authorities to move towards a holistic housing options funding approach to prevent homelessness.

This funding led to the development of five *hubs* being set up across Scotland to look at priorities and share good practice. The idea was that they would take forward Housing Options initiatives that are tailored to suit each individual authority.

### **West of Scotland Housing Options Hub**

One of these *hubs* is the West of Scotland Housing Options Hub. The West Hub consists of East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Glasgow City, North Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, South Lanarkshire and West Dunbartonshire. Glasgow Housing Association is also included in the West Hub. Each year the hubs submit plans on how they plan on taking housing options forward in that coming year and receive funding to do so.

### **Homelessness in Scotland**

There has been a decrease in homelessness presentations across Scotland since 2006/07. A dramatic decrease in homeless presentations 2010/11 can be partly attributed to the housing options approach. There has also been a decrease in the number of households in temporary accommodation.

### **Prevent 1**

The Scottish Government introduced a mandatory data collection on monitoring homelessness prevention and housing options since 1 April 2014.

### **SHR Methodology for report**

The Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) has undertaken a thematic enquiry into Housing Options. The inquiry included

- Analysis of national performance and statistical information
- Onsite case study of 6 local authorities from the different hubs
- Discussions with key stakeholders and service users

## Key Points

### Housing Options Assessment Outcomes

The SHR welcomes the introduction of prevent 1 as an important development in homeless prevention and housing options. The regulator found there to be inconsistencies in the recording of outcomes.

Whilst undertaking the thematic enquiry the SHR looked at many outcomes for people who had undergone a housing options assessment and found that there were inconsistencies in the approach taken. There were people who were in similar circumstances but who were dealt with differently. There was a range of outcomes from a local authority house or RSL house to a private rented sector lease. The regulator felt that some of these outcomes were not always the best outcomes for the individuals involved. The regulator also felt that in some cases a homeless application would have been more appropriate as the some individuals were either sleeping rough or sleeping on sofas of friends and family – and had been for a while.

### **SHR recommendations**

- ***Local authorities should ensure that they are recording clear and consistent outcomes. They should also use these outcomes to understand evaluate the effectiveness of housing options and homeless prevention work.***
- ***Person centred approach to housing options that is consistent with available guidance***

### Support Services

From June 2013 local authorities must carry out support assessments for people who are unintentionally homeless. This duty had just been enacted when the regulator started their enquiry. The regulator saw some inconsistencies as some people got a full support assessment whilst undergoing a housing options assessment. Other housing options interviews saw little or no discussion about support needs.

The SHR saw that many local authorities are using mediation as an attempt to resolve relationship breakdowns - particularly in relation to young people. Whilst the regulator saw this as a positive approach when conducted by a trained independent mediator, they saw some instances where they felt that this was more of a “protected discussion”

### **SHR recommendation**

- ***Ensure support assessments are given to those that need them***

### Performance Targets

The SHR noticed that some local authorities were using the number of homeless applicants and as solitary measure of the success of housing options. The SHR felt this was detrimental to the housing options approach as some organisations had targets for dropping homeless presentations.

### ***SHR recommendation***

- **Review any use of staff performance targets around reducing numbers of homeless applications to ensure these do not result in behaviour that act against the achievement of good outcomes for people in need.**

### Housing Options in Practice

The SHR noticed a number of different practices in housing options at the frontline

- The range of different ways that people seeking housing assistance can access the local authority services. These varied depending on local authority. Tenant assessors carried out mystery shopping and the majority did result in a positive outcome. Some results were not as positive showing the differences between how housing options/homelessness cases can be dealt with. There seems to be confusions as to how to access services since the introduction on housing options and the changes to the way homelessness services are delivered.
- Lost contact appears to be an issue between initial contact and interview. This is partly due to the long time between initial contact and interview that some local authorities have.
- A requirement for clear policies and procedures is essential for a consistent approach. The SHR found there to be some good practice in this area but also found some lack of clarity regarding homelessness definitions.
- Some officers from some of the case study authorities said that they were unsure of their roles and responsibilities. In addition to this some officers were unclear when as to whether a homeless application should be taken or a housing options application.
- The ranges of housing options delivered in local authorities although similar were very narrow. There were mainly a private sector let, social let, remain in accommodation, pursue a homelessness application.
- Most officers did not actively seek to deliver this outcome but rather referred on to other services.
- The housing options interviews varied and some lacked a clear and consistent structure ensuring all relevant information was given
- Some information and advice was poor, insufficient or wrong resulting in the interviewee unable to make an informed decision.
- Some local authorities produced housing plans. These were often generic and not an accurate interpretation of the discussion. The regulator spoke to some service users who felt the plans were hard to understand.

### ***SHR recommendation***

- **Minimise the time people wait between contact and housing options interview**
- **Support frontline officers with appropriate training and clear guidance and procedures.**

- **Ensure they complete a homeless assessment while progressing housing options efforts, which there is clear evidence of homelessness or potential homelessness.**
- **A consistent structure of a housing options interview**
- **Ensure advice and information is balanced and appropriate**
- **Implement a systematic and consistent system of audit of housing options work to improve service delivery**
- **Produce a timely record of discussions and actions for the service user**

### Temporary Accommodation

The SHR noticed during their thematic study that there was issues around temporary accommodation. They noticed that the availability and information given on temporary accommodation. The location, cost, type and accessibility of temporary accommodation were important factors | whether people chose to pursue a homelessness assessment.

The SHR also observed that some housing options applicants are offered temporary accommodation who have not gone through a homeless application. This created confusion amongst staff and applicants about the homelessness status of these households.

There has been a reduction in the number of temporary accommodation units across the country. The regulator was concerned about the lack of strategic decision making around the level of temporary accommodation units.

### **What it means for West Dunbartonshire Council?**

West Dunbartonshire Council should consider the recommendations of the SHR report alongside developing its housing options approach. These include

- recording clear and consistent housing options outcomes and using these outcomes to understand evaluate the effectiveness of housing options and homeless prevention work.
- Ensure that support assessment are given to those that require them
- Review any use of staff performance targets around reducing numbers of homeless applications to ensure these do not result in behaviour that act against the achievement of good outcomes for people in need.
- Ensure that officers delivering housing options are clear about their roles and responsibilities. That they are trained to the highest of standards to ensure that they are able to give the advice and assistance that allows the client to make and informed choice.
- Implement a systematic and consistent system of audit of housing options work to improve service delivery

- Produce a timely record of discussions and actions for the service user
- Support the Scottish Government in developing some new guidance for example though the councils continued use of prevent 1. Prevent 1 can be used to help in the development of the new guidance.

For further information please contact

**Jennifer MacMahon, Housing Policy Officer**

**Housing Strategy and Development**

**01389 737721**

[jennifer.macmahon@west-dunbarton.gov.uk](mailto:jennifer.macmahon@west-dunbarton.gov.uk)

