

REPORT TO HOUSING & SOCIAL WORK COMMITTEE 2ND JUNE 2016

HOUSING OPTIONS GUIDANCE

1 Recommendations

The committee is recommended to:

- 1.1 Acknowledge and comment on the content of the report.
- 1.2 Agree to a future report on the implementation of the guidance following further investigations.
- 1.3 Agree to a Bulletin report to Area Committees due to the importance of Options related issues at a local level.

2 Background / Discussion

- 2.1 This report provides information about the values, ethos and principles of the Housing Options Guidance (HOG) to ensure successful implementation.
- 2.2 In March 2016, The Scottish Government and COSLA published the HOG. It is for use by all Local Authorities in Scotland, but local circumstances will be taken into account when delivering a Housing Options service. It has been produced to establish principles for an effective service but is not prescriptive in its delivery. There is a dedicated and detailed web page on HOG on the Scottish Government's website

"Housing Options" is regarded as providing advice under Section 2 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, which states that:

- 1) Every local authority must secure that advice and information about:
 - a) Homelessness and the prevention of homelessness, and
 - b) Any services which may assist a homeless person or assist in the prevention of homelessness, is available free of charge to any person in the authority's area.
- 2.3 Housing Options is not a new service but has succeeded "Homeless Prevention and Housing Advice". Many Local Authorities have already adopted this approach.

Housing Options provides a preventive approach to stop clients becoming homeless or threatened with homelessness in the first place. This is done by using an early intervention approach and assessing clients' underlying needs to enable them to remain in their existing accommodation before reaching crisis situations. The client/applicant's safety is paramount in these assessments and the option of staying at home will only be explored where it is safe to do so. There may be other circumstances that prevent a client from staying in their current accommodation - for example receiving a Notice to Quit from a Private Landlord.

The Housing Options approach is very diverse and covers a number of services including:-

- Housing Advice
- Homelessness Advice
- Budgeting Support
- Health Advice
- Aids and Adaptations
- Financial Inclusion
- Employability Advice

2.4 The service provided should be person centred, holistic and decisions should be made solely by the client with support from Officers. A permanent solution may not have to be resourced by the Local Authority itself. Solutions could involve:

- Social rented properties from RSL partners
- Using the Private Rented or Mid Market sectors
- Staying in current accommodation.

Successful implementation of HOG will be heavily reliant on partnership working. It is essential that the approach is led by housing professionals but not seen as the sole responsibility of housing. Partnerships and referral protocols will have to be robust and efficient for Housing Options to be successful. It will include input from other services i.e. Health & Social Care Partnership (H&SCP) alongside other council Services and voluntary/third sector partners.

The introduction of the H&SCP offers great opportunities providing robust “joined-up” working for clients’ benefit. One fifth of clients who approached Housing Options services in Scotland from April 2014 – September 2015 (Source: Scottish Government PREVENT1 data) had some form of vulnerability from mental and/or physical health needs. A good working partnership is essential between Housing and the H&SCP to provide a well organised service to clients.

2.5 Guidance has been produced to support a ‘Golden Thread’ approach. It has been developed to cover what will be expected from Elected Members to front line staff, while providing performance monitoring and audit frameworks. This will support service improvement and encourage suitable scrutiny of performance monitoring. Continuous self-assessment and audit is highly recommended to constantly review and improve services. Performance on Housing Options activities will also be regulated by the Scottish Housing Regulator in line with the Scottish Social Housing Charter.

In order to accurately record Options activities and outcomes successfully, our Options and Homelessness (O&H) Service is meeting other Local Authorities to investigate the functions that their Housing Management systems carry out. This will allow staff to evaluate Aberdeenshire Council’s current recording facilities and consider improvements. The O&H Team will continue to report mandatory data to the Scottish Government (HL1 and PREVENT1).

- 2.6 It is essential that staff are highly trained in order to give the most accurate and up to date advice. The Scottish Housing Hubs are developing a Training Toolkit to provide a resource ensuring all staff in Scotland are trained to the same high level. The Toolkit is currently being led and procured by the West of Scotland Housing Hub and anticipated that training providers will be sourced by summer 2016. The modules will cover more than just Housing Law and include Health and Wellbeing; Income and Affordability and Employment and Training. Staff will not be expected to be experts in all of these fields; a basic knowledge of these issues and the relevant organisations that can provide more detailed assistance will be essential. Suitable training budgets are critical for future years to deliver this commitment.

The guidance suggests that a client should deal with one member of staff throughout their Options journey. This may impact on the Housing staffing structure currently existing to implement a more generic Housing Officer (Options) role. HMT will consider developing this; however the current staffing structure works well and staff will be consulted throughout the process to gather their views.

- 2.7 An action plan has been prepared and discussions started on implementation. This is at a very early stage and O&H are utilising all resources to ensure successful implementation. The Highlands & Islands Housing Hub is a network of Local Authorities working together to share good practice. In May, the Scottish Housing Network will provide some support and advice to the Hub which will be invaluable in delivering an Options approach.

The team will also explore ways to ensure that partner organisations are aware of the HOG and how they can assist in the delivery of the approach. Robust referral processes will be set up to ensure the client moves seamlessly to services required. This will include the H&SCP; Mediation services; links to support for people with addictions and/or mental health concerns; money advice services and employment support.

Policies and Procedures will be reviewed in line with the guidance and EIA's carried out where appropriate and referred to Committee for approval.

Performance monitoring data will be considered during this process. Relevant indicators will be identified and reported to the appropriate levels at agreed intervals throughout the year. This information will be key to assessing service improvements.

Whilst the service intends implementing a Housing Options approach, the current lack of affordable housing options in the Aberdeenshire area will continue to present a challenge for staff in finding sustainable housing options for some clients. Implementation of welfare reform will also prove problematic when trying to assist clients in obtaining accommodation, particularly those under 35 years old. Staff will undertake every action possible to mitigate the impacts of these challenges, but economic factors will have to be taken into consideration when monitoring performance.

- 2.8 The Head of Finance and Monitoring Officers within Corporate Services have been consulted in the preparation of this report and are in agreement with it.

3 Equalities, Staffing and Financial Implications

- 3.1 An equality impact assessment is not required because this report is for information.
- 3.2 There are no staffing implications arising from this report, however following further investigation into the implementation of the Guidance, staffing roles may be altered.
- 3.3 There are no financial implications arising from this report

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Date; May 2016