

Key themes from inspections

Homelessness

June 2005

This is the first in a series of reports by the Regulation and Inspection Division of Communities Scotland (R&I) drawing together key findings from R&I's programme of cyclical inspections of registered social landlords (RSLs) and local authorities.

This document can also be made available on tape, in Braille, large print and community languages. For information please contact Janette Campbell on 0131 479 5162 or email janette.campbell@communitiescotland.gsi.gov.uk.

اپنی کمیونٹی میں بولی جانے والی زبان میں اس دستاویز کے ترجمے کے بارے میں معلومات کیلئے برائے مہربانی
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Executive Summary

Our inspection reports identify those areas of homelessness services that are working well and those that could be better. They also highlight examples of positive practice. This report combines the findings from Pathfinder inspections of 5 local authorities to highlight the key themes that emerged on services for homeless people, and from the inspections of 22 RSLs on their contributions to alleviating homelessness.

Tackling and preventing homelessness is a key priority of the Scottish Executive. The aim of this report is to contribute to this priority by:

- increasing awareness of some key issues in services for homeless people;
- helping local authorities and RSLs by identifying common areas for improvement; and
- helping to improve the experiences of people using homelessness services.

Key findings

- The five councils had different levels of performance in delivering services to homeless people and each had a range of different strengths and weaknesses.
- All the councils had appropriate service access arrangements, but these were not always well publicised.
- Inspectors saw that some homeless people were prevented or discouraged from applying for assistance.
- Most of the councils quickly interviewed people who were looking for assistance, but did not always record initial approaches as formal homeless applications.
- One council had a good, person-centred approach to homeless assessments, and another council was piloting an integrated assessment for young people.
- Inspectors found a range of weaknesses in some of the councils' assessment of homeless applications.
- Not all notification letters provided good information and advice.
- People lost contact with councils because of poor communication or tracking of applications by the councils.
- All the councils operated appropriate review or appeal processes.
- The councils were doing a lot of work to develop local advice and information partnership, and advice and information services to young people were a strength in each of the councils.
- All the councils were committed to a shift in the focus of services to the prevention of homelessness.
- All five councils were dealing with increased levels of need for temporary accommodation.
- The use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation was increasing in three councils.
- Two councils failed on several occasions to meet their duty to provide temporary accommodation to people who were roofless.
- The councils had differing approaches to allocating houses to homeless people: some provided them with more choice.
- Not all of the councils were using section 5 referrals to maximise the availability of houses for let to homeless people.
- Inspectors saw some good contributions by RSLs to alleviating homelessness, but also some confusion around section 5 duties and responsibilities.

Key themes from inspections: homelessness

Background

Levels of reported homelessness in Scotland started to rise steadily in the 1980s and 1990s. The Scottish Executive set up the Homelessness Task Force in August 1999 to investigate the causes of homelessness and how it can be prevented and tackled effectively. The Task Force produced two reports: the initial report produced recommendations which were taken forward in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001; and the final report issued in February 2002, contained 59 further recommendations “on how homelessness in Scotland can best be prevented and where it does occur, tackled effectively”. Some of these recommendations have been taken forward through the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003. The remaining recommendations are being taken forward by the Scottish Executive in partnership with local authorities and others through the work of the Homelessness Monitoring Group.

These far-reaching changes to homelessness in Scotland have happened at the same time as the introduction of inspection of homelessness services by Communities Scotland. Relevant legislation, the Scottish Executive’s Code of Guidance on Homelessness, and the work of the Homelessness Task Force and the Homelessness Monitoring Group set our priorities and define the focus for our inspection of councils’ homelessness services.

Each council provides us with a factual, evidence-based self-assessment of its services to highlight areas of good performance and areas for improvement. This helps inspectors to focus the work of each inspection and to take account of local context.

Inspectors will then use a range of techniques to assess the reality of service outcomes for homeless people: they review individuals’ cases to see how people are treated; have discussions with councillors, staff and service users about the way services are delivered; observe interviews with service users; and, shadow staff carrying out specific tasks, such as putting people into temporary accommodation.

Inspectors then use all of this information to make assessments on the quality of a council’s services to homeless people. In doing so, our inspectors consider:

- the impact of performance levels on the service user;
- performance against key indicators in comparison with others;
- compliance with legislation;
- how far good practice is embraced;
- the council’s awareness of strengths and areas for improvement;
- its commitment to, and track record of, improvement; and
- local context and legitimate local priorities.

The pathfinder inspections

Between June 2003 and June 2004, we inspected the homelessness services of five councils: East Lothian, Angus, West Dunbartonshire, Inverclyde and Stirling. Inspectors found a considerable variation in performance between the five councils. Each had a range of different strengths and weaknesses.

Inspectors award inspection grades (A to D) for councils' homelessness services as a way of describing and summarising performance that can be easily understood by everyone.

Of the five councils inspected:

- West Dunbartonshire achieved a B grade, which means its services to homeless people are good with many strengths and some areas where improvement is needed;
- Angus and Stirling both achieved a C grade, which means their services to homeless people are fair with some strengths, but with significant areas where improvement is needed; and
- East Lothian and Inverclyde both achieved a D grade, which means their services to homeless people are poor with major areas where improvement is needed.

We set out below the common themes that emerged from these inspections.

Access to homeless services

The Code of Guidance emphasises the need for easy-to-access services for homeless people and encourages councils to avoid any form of screening out, or “gatekeeping”, of homeless applications.

All five councils had appropriate arrangements for people to access their homeless services, although only one publicised these arrangements well. Publicity for homeless services was particularly poor in rural areas. Each of the councils operated a 24-hour telephone helpline for homeless people and three of these were free to use. Two councils provided phone contact points in open reception area which provided callers with little privacy. In one council inspectors found that some people had difficulty in accessing homeless services out of normal office hours.

Inspectors found evidence of some gatekeeping – where homeless people are prevented or discouraged from applying for assistance – in four of the five inspected councils. This often resulted from reception staff not being clear on how or when to refer people to homeless services, and reflected inadequate staff guidance or training. Inspectors saw examples in two councils of staff actively deterring homeless people from applying by telling them about shortages of permanent housing and a lack of temporary accommodation.

All the councils interviewed people who were roofless – nowhere to stay that day – on the same day they first applied for assistance. Most other people were interviewed within a few days of presenting at the homeless service, except in one council where it could take up to two weeks to have an interview with a homeless officer.

Four of the five councils did not record all initial approaches to their homeless services; inspectors found that many approaches were not recorded as formal applications for assistance until an interview with a homeless officer had taken place. None of these councils monitored rates of lost contact with people who had applied but had not yet been interviewed. Inspectors also saw inconsistencies within and between councils on how they recorded applications for assistance, including in the completion of statutory returns to the Scottish Executive.

Positive practice example 1

Stirling Council’s support worker holds a weekly drop-in service at a local Salvation Army soup kitchen to give information and advice to people with a transient lifestyle, and to encourage them to access the Council’s homeless service. This a proactive approach to providing access to services for a potentially difficult to reach group.

Assessment of homeless applications

Councils have a statutory duty to make all necessary inquiries to satisfy themselves as to whether people who apply to them for accommodation or help in obtaining accommodation are homeless and in priority need.

The Homelessness Task Force recommended that service providers promote values, attitudes and behaviour which deliver responsive and personalised services.

The Code of Guidance on Homelessness advises councils that the emphasis in their assessments of homeless people's applications should be on finding sustainable solutions – not on a rigid application of the legislation.

All of the councils followed the correct sequence of enquiries when assessing applications for assistance from homeless people. One council had a good, person-centred approach to the assessment of homeless applications. Another council was piloting an integrated assessment of vulnerable, single, young people and hoped to extend these more holistic assessments to other groups of homeless people.

Inspectors did find some commonly occurring weaknesses in some of the councils' assessments of homeless applications, including:

- inadequate or incomplete investigation of applications;
- failures to consider relevant information, or consideration of irrelevant information;
- placing the onus on homeless people to provide proof for assessments;
- limited use of discretion and narrow interpretations of legislation; and
- one council's assessment of homeless applications was more characteristic of a system designed to ration people's entitlement rather than one that emphasised finding solutions to people's housing and related needs.

Inspectors found a wide variation in the time the five councils took to complete homeless assessments, from 37% of applications completed within 28 days to 82% completed within 28 days.

Councils have a duty to give all people who apply for assistance written notification of the outcome of their assessments. All five councils' notification letters met basic legislative requirements, although not all the letters advised people of the right to a review of decisions made by the councils. Generally, the councils did not use the notification letters effectively to provide information and advice, particularly on sources of independent advice.

The number of people who applied for assistance and who subsequently lost contact was high in two councils; up to 36% of all people who applied lost contact with one council. However, inspectors found that all five councils lost contact with people who had applied for assistance because of inadequate follow-up and communication with applicants and weaknesses in systems for tracking homeless applications.

Positive practice examples 2 & 3

Customer charter for homelessness

East Lothian Council has developed a customer charter for homelessness to highlight key service standards for homeless people. These include:

- clear timescales for interview;
- the right to a dedicated case officer;
- the right to appeal against the Council's decisions;
- what to expect from an interview; and
- signposting to relevant agencies for applicants experiencing domestic abuse.

Person-centred interviews

West Dunbartonshire Council always conducts interviews in private and advises applicants that they can bring someone with them for support; it will arrange an interview with a staff member of the same sex, if requested; and, provides written confirmation of what is discussed at the interview and details of what to expect from the service. The Council also aims to have a further interview with all homeless applicants before it makes a final decision on the outcome of each case to explain the outcomes of its inquiries, establish that there is no change in circumstances and advise applicants of the right to appeal.

Appeals

Councils have a statutory duty to review decisions made on applications for assistance, if requested. Councils also have a duty to notify people who have applied for assistance that there is a right to a review of their decisions, the time within which requests for review should be made and of any advice and assistance that is available.

All five of the inspected councils operated review or appeal processes that complied with the statutory requirements; one went beyond these requirements by providing a right of further appeal to a panel of elected members. However, none of the councils widely publicised the review or appeal procedures, and inspectors found that not all of their notification letters contained the necessary information on the right to review.

Information & advice

Councils have various duties to provide information and advice to people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.

All the councils were aware of their duty to provide information and advice and join up with external agencies to make sure independent information and advice is available. Inspectors found that councils were doing a considerable amount of work to develop local partnerships and service level agreements for the provision of information and advice, although this was not always well co-ordinated. One council had an information and advice strategy in place and two were developing strategies.

In all five councils, by far the most developed housing advice and information services were those to young people. Inspectors saw widespread use of tools such as the “Streets Ahead” pack published by the Scottish Council for Single Homeless. Three councils ran housing education programmes in local schools and one provided a young person advice drop-in centre in partnership with a voluntary agency.

Inspectors also found that:

- in all five councils, homeless and advice staff had either been trained to the National Standards for Information and Advice or the councils were actively working to achieve this;
- the quality and scope of housing options advice varied considerably between the councils;

- information and advice materials were not as widely distributed as they could be, particularly to locations where those at risk of homelessness are likely to visit; and
- one council was not yet providing adequate advice and assistance to help homeless people not in priority need to find accommodation.

Positive practice example 4

Inverclyde Housing Rights Project

Inverclyde Council has agreed a contract with the Legal Services Agency to provide an independent information and advice service. This project is particularly aimed at preventing homelessness and meets the requirement for the provision of type III services of the National Standards for Information and Advice. The project provides:

- free legal advice and, where appropriate, representation for homeless applicants;
- advice on housing benefit and rent arrears;
- representation at Greenock Sheriff Court in all housing matters, particularly defended evictions and rent arrears; and
- help for homeowners that includes advice and representation on the Mortgage Rights (Scotland) Act 2001.

The Legal Services Agency is a key partner in the delivery of the Council's homelessness strategy and is represented at the homeless strategy meetings.

Preventing homelessness

Councils have duties to work proactively to prevent people becoming homeless. It should be a key strategic aim of councils and should be pursued through their homelessness strategies. The Code of Guidance on Homelessness encourages councils and relevant local agencies to work together to prevent homelessness occurring and to take action to prevent the recurrence of homelessness.

Inspectors found that the councils were committed to a shift in the focus of services to the prevention of homelessness and its recurrence. All five had placed particular importance on the provision of support to vulnerable homeless people to help them to sustain new tenancies; all had established teams to support homeless people and those at risk of losing their tenancy, or had plans to expand their provision of support.

Inspectors found that the councils were using or were developing a range of other initiatives aimed at preventing homelessness, including:

- family mediation services;
- promotion of the Scottish Executive's Mortgage to Rent scheme;
- access to Rent Deposit Guarantee schemes; and
- early access to specialist advisors for people experiencing financial problems.

Two of the five councils had effective working arrangements to ensure that people leaving the armed services, hospitals and prison did not become homeless. These councils were also working well with other local landlords to identify people at risk of

losing their tenancy. These types of referral arrangements were less well developed in the other three councils.

None of the councils were effectively tracking the outcomes of their prevention work, and so could not properly assess the impact on levels of homelessness.

Positive practice example 5, 6 & 7

Support provision to homeless people

West Dunbartonshire Council's support service for homeless people means that it is well placed to meet its duties to provide advice and assistance to all homeless people, and this service should make a major contribution to preventing the recurrence of homelessness. The Council has established a support team to work with:

- homeless people in temporary accommodation;
- people who have recently taken up permanent accommodation;
- people who are at risk of homelessness; and
- people who are in need of support to sustain their accommodation.

The Council's approach to identifying people at risk of homelessness and people in need of support to sustain their tenancies is also good.

Greenock Prison surgery

Inverclyde Council provides a twice-weekly information and advice surgery at Greenock prison for prisoners who hold council tenancies and those who will need accommodation on being released from prison. Through the work with prisoners who are existing tenants it tries to help them to manage their tenancies in relation to security of their property, housing benefit and rent arrears issues.

In its work with people who are due to be released from prison it provides advice about housing options, and referrals to other agencies to try to help people avoid becoming homeless.

The Council also works well in partnership with other agencies in the approach it takes to prisoners. It attends quarterly meetings of an external agencies group that includes a network of prison and housing agencies; this group is working to improve the access to their services, the information sharing and the referral of individuals between them.

Rent Deposit Scheme

In partnership with the Cowanes Trust, Stirling Council has a successful Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme which, from April 2003 to March 2004 enabled 49 people to secure a tenancy in the private sector by:

- providing guarantees for rent;
- providing practical assistance to help clients move into their tenancy;
- providing on-going tenancy support; and
- encouraging clients to consider their future housing options.

Only one tenancy has failed in the last two years and a number of people have moved on from the private rented sector into social housing.

Providing temporary accommodation

Councils have a statutory duty to provide temporary accommodation to any person they believe to be homeless. This duty applies until a final decision is made on the application for assistance and until the council discharges subsequent duties to provide accommodation or advice and assistance.

All five councils were dealing with increased levels of need for temporary accommodation. All were using a range of accommodation types including hostels, and furnished houses and flats. Inspectors found that most of the councils were not planning effectively to identify and address future temporary accommodation needs. At the time of inspection, two councils did not have adequate supplies of temporary accommodation to meet current levels of need; they had failed on several occasions to meet their duty to provide temporary accommodation to people who were roofless.

A key recommendation of the Homelessness Task Force was that councils should reduce the use of use of Bed & Breakfast establishments (B&Bs) as temporary accommodation to a minimum. It also recommended that B&Bs should not be used for families.

Each of the five councils we inspected was using B&Bs to provide temporary accommodation to homeless people. Inspectors found that:

- Two councils placed more than 80% of people who needed temporary accommodation in B&Bs. One council used B&Bs for only 14% of people who needed temporary accommodation.
- The use of B&Bs was decreasing in two of the inspected councils and increasing in three.
- In the five councils, the average lengths of stay in B&Bs ranged from 14 days to 49 days. Three of the councils reported lengths of stay above the Scottish figure of 26 days.
- 37% of one council's placements in B&Bs were to establishments located outwith its area, and a further two councils made occasional use of out-of-area placements. Two of these councils provided help with transport costs for people placed outwith their areas.
- One council had an effective process for the procurement of B&Bs ensuring a good quality of accommodation was provided to homeless people.

Each of the councils recognised the need to increase the supply of alternative forms of accommodation to B&Bs. Some were more advanced than others in achieving this aim. One council was part way through an 18 month programme to increase its provision of temporary accommodation in furnished flats by 650%. At the other end of the spectrum, another had slightly reduced its provision of furnished flats.

Inspectors also found that:

- Average lengths of stay in councils' own furnished properties ranged from 58 to 218 days. The Scottish figure was 142 days.

- None of the councils provided good levels of suitable temporary accommodation for people with particular needs.
- One council provided good support to residents in temporary accommodation, and had a person centred approach to determining reasonable periods in temporary accommodation to give people opportunities to find alternative accommodation.
- All of the councils made only limited use of RSL properties for the provision of temporary accommodation.

The Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation)(Scotland) Order 2004 defines accommodation which councils are not allowed to use in providing temporary accommodation to homeless families, other than in exceptional circumstances. In most circumstances accommodation provided in B&B establishments would fall within the definition of unsuitable. This order came into force in December 2004, after we had inspected the five councils. At the time of inspection all five councils were using B&Bs for homeless families; however, all were actively working to reduce the time spent by families in this type of accommodation.

Securing permanent accommodation for homeless people

Councils have a statutory duty to secure permanent accommodation for any person they assess as unintentionally homeless, in priority need and with a local connection to its area. Section 5 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 enables local authorities to request RSLs to provide accommodation for homeless people. RSLs must comply with these requests within six weeks unless there are good reasons for not complying.

The Code of Guidance on Homelessness advises councils that they should treat homeless people on the same basis as other housing applicants in relation to the number of offers of accommodation they receive, and should take into account the particular circumstances and needs of the applicant and their household.

The five councils we inspected let between 12% and 42% of available houses to homeless people and had differing approaches to securing permanent accommodation:

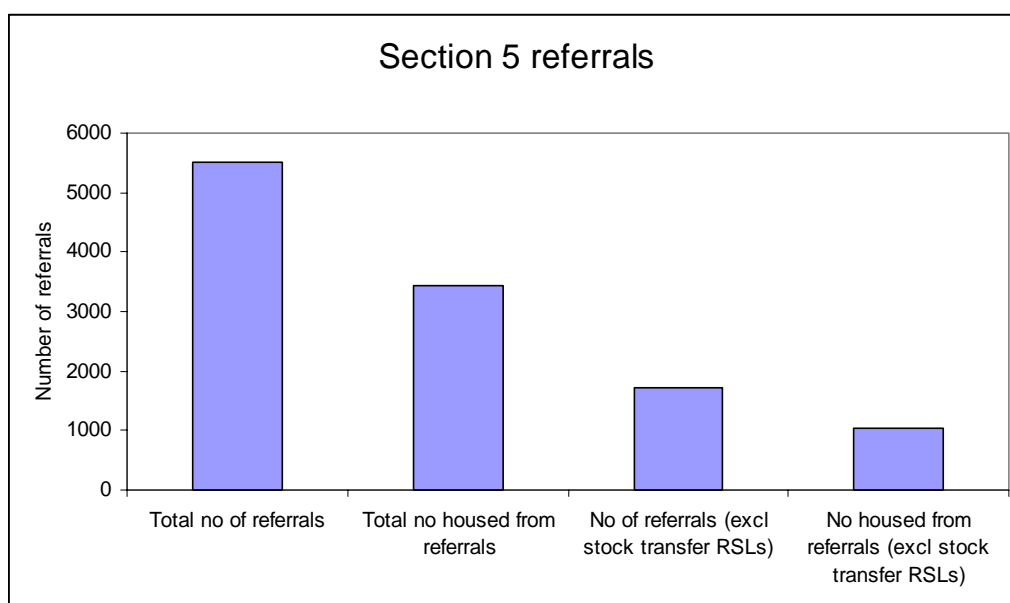
- Two treated homeless people equally with other applicants in the number, quality and location of houses they are offered. People had to wait, on average, for four to six weeks for permanent accommodation.
- One made adequate numbers of permanent lets available very quickly – on average in less than two weeks – but limited choice for homeless people and did not always fully consider their needs. As a result, a significant number of offers were refused. This council operates in a pressured housing market area.
- One restricted access to housing for homeless people through the operation of a 1 in 4 quota of all lets. This resulted in lengthy waits for permanent accommodation: the average wait was 29 weeks. We found one person who had to wait 67 weeks. This council operates in a pressured housing market area.
- In one council a significant number of homeless people did not get access to the houses they needed and the council did not know what happened to them.

None of the five councils routinely monitored or reported on the type and location of lets to homeless people nor made comparisons to lets made to other categories of people applying for houses.

Inspectors found that some, but not all, of the councils are using section 5 referrals to maximise the availability of houses for let to homeless people. From inspections of RSLs, inspectors saw some good contributions to alleviating homelessness, but also some confusion around section 5 duties and responsibilities.

Beyond those organisations that have been inspected, many councils and RSLs are still developing section 5 protocols: by March 2004, 128 protocols were agreed out of a total possible number of 430¹.

During 2003/04, councils made 5,520 section 5 referrals to RSLs, resulting in 3,437 homeless households being housed; this equates to 62% of referrals resulting in rehousing, and to 13% of all re-lets by RSLs. The vast majority of these referrals were to the three whole stock transfer RSLs (Scottish Borders Housing Association, Glasgow Housing Association and Dumfries and Galloway Housing Partnership). Excluding referrals to these three RSLs, councils made 1,711 referrals to RSLs, resulting in 1,042 homeless households being housed; this equates to 61% of referrals resulting in rehousing, and to 6% of all re-lets by RSLs excluding those by the three whole stock transfer RSLs.



Management of performance and service delivery

Inspectors found that staff who provide homeless services are committed to meeting the needs of homeless people, but were often working without clear or comprehensive policies and procedures to guide their actions and decisions. Inspectors also found that procedures for managing the quality of homelessness assessments were generally underdeveloped:

¹ Derived from RSLs' Annual Statistical and Performance Returns to R&I

- One council did ensure that all assessments are confirmed by senior officers before the person applying for assistance is notified of the council's decision.
- Three councils had no mechanisms to check the quality of decision making on homeless applications.
- In one council senior officers confirmed assessments only in cases where the council would have a duty to secure permanent accommodation.

The inspectors saw some examples of clear standards and targets for homeless services, but generally these were not well used by the councils as a way to let people know what to expect from the services or as the basis for monitoring and reporting performance.

The five councils were collecting a range of information to help them manage homeless services, but inspectors found that they were not collating and reporting enough of the right information to effectively monitor performance or the effectiveness of homeless services. In particular, information on the quality of outcomes for homeless people using the councils' services was not always or consistently measured and reported.

Three councils had developed exit surveys to capture feedback from service users on temporary accommodation and furnished properties, and two of these were being actively implemented. One council had funded a broader consultation exercise with homeless people who had used its services. Beyond this, inspectors found that councils did not collect and use feedback from homeless people to understand their views on the quality of the services they provide.

Positive practice example 8

Consultation with homeless people

Augment is a voluntary sector organisation working to support people with mental health problems in Angus. Angus Council funded Augment to train volunteers with mental health problems who had been homeless to carry out consultation with people who are currently using the Council's homeless service. The volunteers then fed this information back to Angus Council. The Council plans to use this approach to obtain further feedback from homeless people.

Further information

This report highlights only key or common findings from the Pathfinder inspections. More detail of these, and information on the full assessment of the services to homeless people provided by councils and RSLs are contained in published inspection reports. These are available on our website at www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk

Our Guide to Inspection is available on our website at www.inspection.communitiesscotland.gov.uk.

Further information on the work of the Homelessness Task Force and the Homelessness Monitoring Group is available on the Scottish Executive's website at www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Housing/Homelessness

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