

Inspection report

City of Edinburgh Council

April 2006

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1. Introduction

About this inspection

1.1 This inspection was carried out by Communities Scotland under section 72 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 on behalf of Scottish Ministers. Our purpose in inspection is to provide an independent external assessment of the effectiveness of homelessness service delivery and make recommendations to help improvement. At the time of our inspection Edinburgh City Council was in the process of consulting its tenants over a possible transfer of its houses to a community based housing organisation. In the light of this, our inspection looked at the homelessness service only. Inspections are conducted within a published framework of *Performance Standards**.

How we assessed performance

1.2 Our inspectors asked two key questions:

- How good is the service we have inspected?
- How well is this service being managed for improvement?

1.3 In order to answer these questions inspectors:

- spoke to service users, staff and elected members of the council;
- asked other partner organisations for their views;
- visited temporary accommodation that it owns and manages;
- saw and tested first hand how well services were being delivered;
- examined key policies, publications, information and the organisation's self-assessment submitted for this inspection; and
- analysed published performance and financial information.

1.4 Following our assessment we have awarded a grade for homelessness services. This is what our grades mean:

* see glossary

A	Excellent	Major strengths.
B	Good	Many strengths and some areas where improvement is needed.
C	Fair	Some strengths, but with many areas where improvement is required or with a small number of significant weaknesses.
D	Poor	Major areas where improvement is needed or where a number of very significant weaknesses are found.

The inspection team

1.5 The City of Edinburgh Council inspection was managed by Tony Cain (Inspection Manager). The inspection team included Marion McLellan, Lindsay Stother, Janet Buchanan and Dougie McIntyre (Inspectors). We were on site between 5 December 2005 and 22 December 2005. We would like to thank everyone involved in the inspection, particularly the councillors, staff and tenants and other service users of City of Edinburgh Council for their time and co-operation.

Responding to this inspection

1.6 We expect all inspected bodies to make the summary of this report available to anyone that wants it, report our findings to tenants and other stakeholders and respond to the issues raised in this report.

2. Context

Geography and population

- 2.1 The City of Edinburgh is located in the south east of Scotland and has a population of 453,670 people. As the capital city, Edinburgh faces a unique combination of pressures and opportunities. The city's role as a major tourism destination, its strong economic growth and buoyant and varied housing market provide major pull factors for households seeking to move to the city; these also create significant challenges in service delivery for the City Council.
- 2.2 Edinburgh is 1 of only 11 local authorities in Scotland where the population is projected to increase. More significantly household growth rate in Edinburgh (0.9%) will exceed population growth (0.2%) with a marked increase in the number of single person households. Currently single people account for over 70% of homeless presentations in Edinburgh. Increases in population and household formation will create additional pressures on housing supply across all tenures*.
- 2.3 There is a high percentage of the population in further education, 41,000 students live in Edinburgh and this has an impact in particular on the private rented market in terms of its cost, availability and the community perception of the acceptability of houses in multiple occupation (HMO)*.
- 2.4 The black and minority ethnic (BME) population in Edinburgh accounts for 3.6% of the total population. The largest BME communities in the city are Pakistani and Chinese.

Economy and employment

- 2.5 Unemployment in Edinburgh is notably lower than the national level. In addition the city has higher levels of students in full time education and lower levels of people looking after home/family and retired households
- 2.6 High rates of unemployment do exist in some areas of the city and increases in house prices in recent years have created a problem of housing affordability for

* see glossary

some households in parts of the city. The high levels of tourism in the city also encourage in migration of unskilled workers seeking work in the service sector. This includes a significant amount of international migration including workers coming from the European Union states, and this in turn can impact on homelessness services.

Housing supply

- 2.7 At September 2005, the City of Edinburgh Council owned 23,710 properties, made up of general needs houses and sheltered housing designed for the elderly or other people who need warden support. More than 50% of its stock is tenement or four in a block flats, with the remainder being a mix of houses, maisonettes and multi-storey properties.
- 2.8 More than 58% of the Council's stock has been sold since the introduction of the Right to Buy*. It is continuing to lose over 500 houses each year through sales to its tenants. The Council sees this as a major challenge to it achieving its strategic housing objectives.
- 2.9 Edinburgh has the largest private rented sector in Scotland accounting for 14% of the housing market. Although rental values are high it provides a potentially valuable resource in meeting housing need.
- 2.10 Edinburgh's buoyant property market and in particular the higher values that new build properties attract has an impact on accessing land for the development of new social rented housing. The Council's local housing market analysis suggests that there is a shortage of affordable housing in the city.

City of Edinburgh Council

- 2.11 The Council has 58 elected members; 29 Labour, 13 Conservative, 15 Liberal Democrats and 1 Scottish National Party (SNP). The political management of the city is through a cabinet and scrutiny model, whereby the Labour administration form the Executive, and a number of scrutiny panels exist with the ability to call political decisions into scrutiny. In addition, there are six local

* see glossary

development committees where local councillors respond to agendas set by communities, and disseminate policy decisions.

2.12 There have been a number of significant changes in the way the Council delivers its service since 2003/04. These include the introduction of:

- a number of new ICT systems* including the Homelessness Information System (HIS) used to manage the Council's service and the Edinburgh Common Homelessness Outcomes (ECHO) system for recording outcomes from services provided by partner organisations;
- a choice based letting system* (Choice); and
- a common housing register* (CHR) called EdIndex, providing a single access route for applicants seeking houses from the Council and 29 registered social landlords (RSLs)* in the city.

The Council has also launched new strategies on arrears management and advice and information and reorganised service delivery in its local housing offices to introduce specialist arrears and homelessness officers.

2.13 The Housing Service has successfully been re-accredited by Investors in People* and has an on-going target for all teams to attain Charter Mark* status. The Homelessness Service and the Council's direct access hostels have achieved Charter Mark status in December 2002 and August 2005 respectively.

Key facts

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05
No. of properties owned	26,313	25,202	23,985
No. of applicants on housing list* at 31 March	-	20,733	22,117
No. of employees(FTE)	802.6	951.21	977.97
No. of employees (FTE) in the Homeless Department/Service	76.56	100.81	106.69
Average weekly rent	£47.24	£48.23	£49.44
Right to Buy sales	665	860	476
Number of homeless applications	4,910	5,484	5,177
% of re-lets made through a CHR	-	70%*	95.2%
Total number of re-lets	4,066	3,662	3,096
No. of section 5 referrals** made to RSLs	66	215	169
Number of Evictions	484	342	195

Source: City of Edinburgh Council's inspection submission and Scottish Executive statistical bulletins.

* *Estimate based upon July to Mar 2004 due to introduction of Choice in May 2003.

* see glossary

3. Homelessness services

3.1 The grade awarded for the City of Edinburgh Council's homelessness service is:

A	Excellent	Major strengths
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We explain at the end of this section how the assessments we have made result in this grade.

How good is the service?

Access to homelessness services

Local authorities should provide open, fair and equal access to their homelessness services and should provide a 24 hour crisis response service for roofless households.

- 3.2 The City of Edinburgh Council delivers its homelessness service through a network of four local housing offices in the North, South, East and West of the city and two centrally located teams, the Housing Options Team (HOT) and The Access Point (TAP). The local offices also provide the full range of housing management services to the Council's tenants in those areas. The HOT and TAP are dedicated homeless and housing advice services; the TAP provides specialist services for rough sleepers.
- 3.3 The Council describes its service as "advice led". It provides a wide range of housing advice and not all people approaching the local and specialist teams are necessarily homeless or potentially homeless. The advice available includes general housing options advice, accessing the private rented sector and help for those living in insecure accommodation. In 2004/05 the Council carried out 7,667 advice interviews, of which 5,177 (68%) resulted in a homeless application.
- 3.4 The Housing Options Team's key focus is to provide advice and assistance to individuals and families who are homeless or who are at risk of losing their home. Over 56% of all people seeking assistance access the service through the HOT. The team also provides an outreach service for local hospitals and HM Prison Edinburgh and an advice and information service for young people. The Access Point provides a range of services to rough sleepers including a GP and dental practice, support for people dependent on drugs and alcohol, benefits advice and

- social work services. TAP is an excellent example of a multi-agency approach to promoting access to homelessness services and meeting the wider needs of those who are sleeping rough or at risk of doing so.
- 3.5 All of the Council's homelessness service access points have low-level counter facilities and accessible interview rooms and toilets. Staff can provide an interview by a member of the same sex and can arrange a home visit where this is preferred by the client. Posters and other material clearly publicise the translation service for those whose first language is not English and loop systems for the hard of hearing are also available.
- 3.6 We found that one of the Council's local offices was not fully accessible to people with mobility difficulties. In addition the reception areas at the Council's offices in Waterloo Place are relatively poorly laid out and signposted. The Council is aware of the problems with the Waterloo Place reception area and is committed to moving to more suitable premises by the end of 2006. The Council responded positively when we highlighted the limited accessibility of one of the local offices and has put in place plans to address the problem.
- 3.7 The number of applications to the Council for assistance has risen from 4,410 in 2000/01 to 5,177 in 2004/05. The number of homeless applications received in 2004/05 equates to 2.34% of all households in the Council area, which is a slight decrease on 2003/04 and is below the national figure of 2.41%.
- 3.8 The Council recognised it needed to improve information and publicity about its homelessness services and has recently revised its leaflets providing details of its service. These leaflets provide a good outline of what information and advice is available, where the service can be accessed across the city, the service standards that people can expect, the out of hours contact number and how to complain if an applicant is dissatisfied with the service. The leaflets are available in a range of formats including tape, large print and Braille. The English version includes information in a range of community languages on how to obtain a copy in translation.

- 3.9 All the public reception areas of the Council's housing and homeless offices have recently had plasma screens installed that provide a range of information on the housing services provided by the Council, including performance information on the homelessness service. The Council's website includes a Housing Options Guide and provides a wide range of advice and information on housing and homelessness services. Some of the information available on the website was out of date at the time of the inspection, however, the Council took action to correct this when we made them aware of it. In addition the Council is finalising a leaflet on homelessness advice and information and will introduce this in the near future.
- 3.10 We found that the leaflets currently available are not widely distributed by the Council to locations such as libraries and health centres and it provides no posters advertising the homelessness service or the out of hours contact number. The Council distributed leaflets to a range of locations during the inspection and we found that applicants we spoke with were aware of how to access the service. Third parties we spoke to also said that there are no significant barriers to accessing the service.
- 3.11 The Council's reception staff are knowledgeable and responsive when speaking to members of the public. The Council interviews people who are homeless, or are likely to become homeless before an appointment can be provided and anyone who is experiencing domestic abuse, immediately. Others are given an appointment for an interview. Council staff also make good use of the translation service and are aware of the need to offer private interview facilities for people to provide initial information. The Council provides clear guidance and procedures on staff roles and responsibilities and has supported this by making good use of the HomePoint* training programme. The Housing Options and Temporary Accommodation Teams achieved Type II accreditation in 2005 and, all the other teams in the homelessness service are working towards accreditation at this level.
- 3.12 The Council aims to provide an appointment within five days of first contact. During 2005 the average time to appointment declined to 9.2 days. The Council

responded to this by increasing the staff available to carry out appointments. As a result performance improved to an average of 6.6 days. The Council is continuing to work to improve performance in this area.

- 3.13 The Council's out of hours homelessness service is accessed through the Council's 24 hour contact centre which handles all out of hours housing enquiries. Unlike other Council call centres this is not a free phone number. Details of callers are taken by the contact centre and passed to staff on duty, who then contact them directly.
- 3.14 In 2004/05 the out of hours service responded to 2,947 enquiries, 474 of which resulted in the person applying being provided with temporary accommodation. The Council provides callers with advice on a range of homelessness services and how to access them. Homeless people and partner organisations we spoke with said that this call back system works well.
- 3.15 We also found a small number of instances where the Council failed to provide temporary accommodation to clients contacting the out of hours service to whom it had a duty to do so. This was as a result of officers not having access to sufficient levels of temporary accommodation. The Council was aware of this problem and had issued guidance to out of hours staff on how they should manage access to temporary accommodation to ensure that households at most risk were offered a placement, other households were directed to other service providers. The Council also has well developed plans to address the problem by making additional temporary accommodation available out of hours from spring 2006.
- 3.16 Although the Council records all contacts made to the out of hours service it does not report the number of people refused accommodation or the reasons why and was therefore unaware of the extent of the problem or of the outcomes for the people involved. When we raised this issue the Council was able to demonstrate that acceptable outcomes had been achieved for all the cases we identified and that the strength of the network of provision available in the City was ensuring that no one seeking to make contact with the service was left without assistance.

* see glossary

The Council also took immediate action to increase the availability of out of hours temporary accommodation, to revise the guidance to staff and to improve the recording and monitoring of contacts made to the out of hours service.

- 3.17 The Council routinely collects ethnicity information about applicants as part of their homeless applications. It monitors and reviews this information regularly and has a good awareness of the issues that are likely to create barriers for members of BME communities seeking to contact or using the service.
- 3.18 The City of Edinburgh Council provides good access to its homelessness service. It has a well developed network of offices and specialist services for vulnerable clients. Staff are responsive and well trained and the “advice led” approach ensures that some people who may not be aware of their rights to seek assistance are encouraged to do so. Publicity and information on what and where services are available is improving and the well developed network of organisations working with homeless people ensures that people can access the service easily. The Council was not aware of the significance of the weakness we found in its approach to providing temporary accommodation out of hours, but took immediate action to address the problem as soon as it was made aware of it.

Assessing homeless applications

Local authorities should treat homeless people fairly and consistently and be responsive to their individual needs when assessing their application for help.

- 3.19 The Council has a duty to make all necessary inquiries to satisfy itself as to whether people who apply for accommodation, or for assistance in obtaining accommodation, are homeless or threatened with homelessness, have a priority need, and became homeless or threatened with homelessness intentionally. The City of Edinburgh Council assessed 5,177 applications in 2004/05. The table below provides an overview of the Council’s assessment decisions of people who applied to it for assistance.

	2002/03		2003/04		2004/05	
	Edinburgh	National	Edinburgh	National	Edinburgh	National
Total number of applications assessed in period	4,910	47,740	5,484	49,937	5,177	54,302
Priority unintentional	60.5%	54.0%	62.4%	54.0%	64.9%	52.0%
Priority intentional	1.6%	3.0%	1.4%	2.0%	1.9%	2.0%
Non-priority	30.3%	21.0%	29.0%	21.0%	26.0%	19.0%
Not homeless	3.1%	9.0%	3.0%	8.0%	3.5%	9.0%
Lost contact/withdrew before assessment	3.9%	9.0%	3.4%	9.0%	2.8%	12.0%
Resolved prior to assessment	0.6%	4.0%	0.8%	6.0%	0.9%	6.0%

Source: Scottish Executive Statistical Bulletins and the City of Edinburgh Council's inspection submission

- 3.20 In 2002/03, the percentage of applications assessed as unintentionally homeless and in priority need was 60.5%, which was significantly higher than the national figure of 54%, and this increased to 64.9% in 2004/05 whilst the national figure decreased slightly to 52%. Over the same period the proportion assessed as homeless but non-priority decreased, although it remains above the national figure. The percentage of applications assessed as not homeless is around a third of the national figure, although there has been a slight increase to 3.5% in 2004/05.
- 3.21 Homeless assessments are carried out by 32 officers in 6 different teams based in the Housing Options Team (HOT), The Access Point (TAP) and the 4 outlying local offices. In 2004/05, 54.17% of applications were received at the HOT, 9.07% at TAP and the remaining 36.77% between the four local offices. In the local offices, until 2004, the assessment of homeless applications was carried out as part of the generic housing management role. The Council introduced specialist homelessness officers in the area offices in 2004 to provide housing advice and carry out homeless assessments.
- 3.22 We found that the proportion of decisions of each type was broadly consistent between offices, but there were some variations, most notably higher proportions of not homeless decisions in the North and West offices.

- 3.23 The Council actively manages the quality and consistency of assessments and decision making by auditing 10% of all concluded applications in each team. These audits are subject to a further check by centrally based staff. Variations in decision making are monitored across offices and between officers. It reports performance by office, quarterly, and officers discuss their performance at regular one to one sessions with Senior Housing Officers. As a result of this the Council is aware of the area based variations in decision making and has carried out an initial analysis of the reasons for them. The Council has discussed these at the Senior Officer's forum and has changed some operational practice to improve the quality of decision making. It plans further detailed investigation, research and audit work in the future. This is an excellent approach to promoting continuous improvement in assessments and ensuring all homeless people receive the same quality of service.
- 3.24 We observed a number of interviews (initial advice, follow-up and assessment interviews) across the teams and saw that officers are sensitive to the needs of people who approach the Council for assistance. We saw some inconsistencies in the level of information the Council provided to homeless people and the level of detail it gathered during interviews. In addition, the Council did not always make clear to applicants if and when an advice interview became an assessment interview. However, officers were clearly focused on finding solutions to the individual's situation and the people we spoke with were happy with the way they had been treated.
- 3.25 We found that the Council generally follows the correct sequence of inquiries when assessing homeless applications but the recording of reasons for decisions and evidence of investigations is generally poor. In particular, it does not adequately record the reasons why someone is homeless. The quality of recording varies between individual officers and teams but is generally better in TAP. The Council was aware of some of these issues as a result of its regular auditing of closed cases. In response to the additional issues we identified the Council has put in place plans to introduce a report template and update the guidance and procedures on the recording of investigations for staff by June 2006.

- 3.26 The Council has a service standard of completing homelessness assessments within 14 days. This challenging target is half the 28 days suggested in the Code of Guidance. For the year 2004/05, the Council reported that it completed 92.2% of assessments within 14 days and 94.1% within 28 days. Officers make quick decisions, frequently on the same day they interview the applicant. However, actual performance may be less than that reported, because the time between initial approach and appointment is not always included. Service users and partner agencies we spoke with were happy with the time it took to make an assessment and one agency identified the speed of decisions as a particular strength.
- 3.27 The Code of Guidance says that local authorities should aim to issue decisions within one working day of the completion of inquiries. The Council has excellent ICT systems and procedures to ensure standard decision letters are produced as soon as a decision is made. This assists the Council to ensure that letters are issued quickly and that information provided to all applicants is consistent. The content of decision letters is good and meets the requirements of the Code of Guidance.
- 3.28 The percentage of applicants who lost contact with the Council or withdrew their application before their assessment was completed was half the national figure in 2002/03 and has reduced further to 2.8% in 2004/05 compared to that for Scotland which increased to 12%. The Council monitors the number of people who fail to attend appointments and has improved performance by introducing new procedures to remind applicants about appointments. This is a customer focused approach to maintaining contact and ensuring an efficient use of appointments.
- 3.29 The Council's performance in assessing homeless applications is good. The Council treats people well when it conducts interviews, maintains contact with them during the assessment process, makes quick decisions and sends out decision letters quickly. It has excellent procedures in place to ensure that officers make decisions consistently across the service and the Council has a good understanding of where variations in decision making occur and is taking action to address these. The Council is also aware of the need to improve its

recording of evidence of investigations and reasons for decisions and is taking action to address this.

Temporary accommodation

Local authorities should make available an adequate supply of good quality temporary accommodation to meet the needs for homeless people.

3.30 The Council provides temporary accommodation for people assessed as being homeless in a range of property types including:

- dispersed furnished flats;
- warden controlled furnished flats;
- bed and breakfast establishments in the private sector;
- Council owned supported accommodation managed by partner organisations;
- flats leased from private landlords and the RSL sector; and
- direct access hostels.

3.31 The table below shows the number of households accommodated in temporary accommodation by the Council over the last three years.

	2002/03		2003/04	2004/05
	National	Edinburgh	Edinburgh	Edinburgh
Number accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation	n/a	798	1,462	1,515
As % of total	36.7%	37.1%	49.3%	49.6%
Average length of stay (days)	26	34	29	39
Number accommodated in Council furnished accommodation	n/a	1,352	1,504	1,536
As % of total	25.6%	62.9%	50.7%	50.3%
Average length of stay (days)	142	60	64	67

Source: Audit Scotland's published performance indicators and the City Of Edinburgh Council's National comparators are available until 2002/03, after which Audit Scotland ceased collection of this information

3.32 Between 2002/03 to 2004/05 the number of people the Council placed in temporary accommodation increased by 42%, however, the Council does not accurately record the number of people that are referred to direct access hostels or supported accommodation provided by voluntary sector organisations. As a result the Council is not fully aware of the numbers of applicants that are placed in these types of accommodation. During this period the average length of stay

- in temporary accommodation has increased by five days for bed and breakfast accommodation and seven days for furnished flats.
- 3.33 The Council has significantly increased the supply of temporary accommodation over the same period and continues to develop a range of projects to cope with this increased demand. These include:
- the addition of 73 dispersed furnished flats in the past year;
 - developing a new 30 bed supported unit to be opened in the spring of 2006;
 - leasing flats from RSLs; and
 - leasing properties from private landlords.
- 3.34 Despite this, the current supply of directly provided temporary accommodation is not meeting demand. To cope with this the Council places over 140 households in bed and breakfast establishments every month. Most of these establishments are located within Edinburgh, however the Council uses bed and breakfast establishments outwith the city to accommodate some clients during periods of high demand. Between July and September 2005, 7% of temporary accommodation placements were in bed and breakfast establishments outwith the city although no out-of-area placements were made in the period October to December 2005. The extent to which the Council uses bed and breakfast establishments for other clients is, however, a weakness in the overall provision of temporary accommodation.
- 3.35 The Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2004 prohibits councils from using unsuitable temporary accommodation, this includes most bed and breakfast establishments, for households with children and pregnant women if the stay is for longer than 14 days. We found that the Council was fully complying with the terms of this order.
- 3.36 The Council has recently launched a Private Sector Leasing Scheme to obtain flats for allocation to people in temporary accommodation and has set a target to lease 1,500 properties over the next 5 years. These properties are let to homeless persons to relieve pressure on its limited supply of temporary accommodation with the intention that some clients may stay in them for

- extended periods if they wish. To date 107 flats have been sub-let to homeless people.
- 3.37 The Council charges rents for these properties that are generally above those for mainstream private sector lets. As a result these properties are not affordable to those in work or seeking to take up employment and are not generally offered to those with chaotic lifestyles or a history of rent arrears. The Council is clear that this sort of accommodation is not permanent and clients are advised that, should they wish to move on, or if the lease to the Council is terminated by the landlord, they will retain their homeless priority.
- 3.38 Applicants who are offered temporary accommodation in the area offices or TAP are required to go to the Temporary Accommodation Team (TAT) at Waterloo Place. This means that the time taken to complete an initial homelessness interview and allocate temporary accommodation can be quite long. For some clients this means travelling into the centre of the city and then back to where they first presented. This approach is inconvenient for clients, adds significantly to the number of people using the homelessness service reception area at Waterloo Place and increases waiting times. Clients and third parties we spoke to said that this often causes frustration and can give rise to problems. The Council is aware of this issue and plans to change its procedures to allow temporary accommodation to be allocated from TAP and the area offices from September 2006.
- 3.39 The Council takes account of an applicant's needs and circumstances as well as availability, suitability and client preferences when allocating temporary accommodation. Where no accommodation is available that fully meets a client's needs, including where they are placed outwith their preferred area, they are moved to more suitable accommodation quickly. The Council makes appropriate arrangements to store any possessions that cannot be accommodated in the temporary accommodation and will also arrange for the boarding of pets until permanent accommodation is found.
- 3.40 The Council gives service users good advice and clear verbal instructions both at their interview and when being booked into their accommodation. It also gives

- new residents a copy of the tenancy agreement* along with an information leaflet. We reviewed the tenancy agreement and found that the tenant's responsibilities and the Council's obligations are not clearly stated, and in some cases the agreement does not comply with current legal requirements or fully reflect the way the service is being delivered. When we made the Council aware of this, it put in place plans to review these documents. All the residents we spoke to were happy with the temporary accommodation they had been provided with, and all had received support and guidance from staff in the TAT.
- 3.41 The Temporary Accommodation Team aims to visit clients every two weeks. For those in bed and breakfast accommodation, where contact is not made, a reminder card is left to encourage the applicant to contact the housing officer. In the scatter flats wardens gain access to occupied flats every two weeks using a master key. While residents are told about this prior to taking the accommodation this practice may not ensure the safety of the staff nor give adequate privacy to the residents. When we raised this with the Council, it immediately agreed to review the procedures for gaining access to occupied flats.
- 3.42 The Council has developed its own standard for the bed and breakfast establishments it uses. We found that these standards were not always being enforced and in some circumstances the standards did not comply with those recommended by the Code of Guidance. We found that important safety information was not always checked and recorded, for example that the landlord has a valid gas safety certificate. The Council is encouraging the owners of bed and breakfast establishments it is using to register as Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO's). To date half have successfully done so.
- 3.43 Service users and third parties we spoke to thought that the quality of the Council's temporary accommodation was good. All the accommodation we visited, including the bed and breakfast establishments, was clean and had the basic equipment needed for clients to move in.

* see glossary

- 3.44 The Council has appointed consultants to review the use and effectiveness of temporary accommodation used and responded to all the areas for improvement that we identified by agreeing to make changes to the service. This shows a good approach to improving the quality of this aspect of the service.
- 3.45 The City of Edinburgh Council has a good approach to the provision of temporary accommodation for homeless people. The quality of accommodation is good and the Council has substantially increased the amount of temporary accommodation it has available to meet rising demand. The Council is good at taking peoples' needs into account when allocating temporary accommodation. Residents are satisfied with the accommodation they get and receive good support while in the temporary accommodation. However, the Council places significant numbers of households in bed and breakfast establishments, not all of which meet the Council's own standards or those set out in the Code of Guidance. The Council responded positively to all the points we raised during the inspection and has put in place plans to address them.

Permanent accommodation

Councils should, so far as possible, make offers of permanent accommodation quickly and should offer the same level of choice and quality of houses as other applicants.

- 3.46 In 2004/05 the Council offered permanent accommodation to 79% of the people it assessed as having a priority need, which is higher than the national figure of 72%, and it housed 69%, which is equal to the national figure. The Council has increased the percentage of its houses that it lets to homeless people from 35% in 2002/03 to 58% for the first 6 months of 2005/06. In the same period it has reduced the average time taken to make an offer of housing from 52 days to 47 days and reduced the refusal rate from 20% to 13%.
- 3.47 The Council introduced a choice based lettings scheme (Choice) in May 2003. The Council defines applicants as either a "starter" (private rented sector tenants and anyone without secure accommodation including homeless people) or a "mover" (council or RSL tenants and owner occupiers). The Council awards priority to two groups over other applicants:
- gold priority is the highest and awarded to people with a health need; and

- silver priority is awarded for a range of circumstances, primarily to those who are unintentionally homeless and in priority need.
- 3.48 The Council advertises all its vacant properties in a free paper, local newspapers, and on its website and designates properties for allocation equally between “starters”, “movers” or “starters or movers”. Applicants then have to bid for properties they wish to be considered for that are in the categories for which they are eligible. The Council considers bidders for the let in order of priority. Where a number of people with the same level of priority bid for the same property, it is offered to the applicant who has held that level of priority for the longest time. In 2004/05, the Council allocated 71.5% of its lets to “starters”.
- 3.49 We found that the Council has no written procedures to guide staff when deciding whether a property should be designated as suitable for “starters”, “movers” or “starters or movers”, and it does not record how these decisions are made. This limits the transparency of the process.
- 3.50 The Council gives homeless people advice on how to bid effectively and has identified 12 areas where they are likely to have a realistic chance of bidding successfully. They are expected to make three bids each week, two of which should, in the Council’s view, be in “realistic” areas. In the first 6 months of 2005/06, 47% of all vacancies and 53% of lets to homeless people were in the 12 areas the Council regards as being most realistic.
- 3.51 The Council gives silver priority to homeless people for nine weeks and then reviews the award. We found that homeless people, who are bidding in a way the Council considers to be “realistic”, retain their silver priority and continue to receive priority when bidding. The Council removes the priority if an applicant with silver priority refuses an offer unreasonably. Applicants whose silver priority has been removed continue to receive support to bid without priority and may still be successful in securing accommodation.
- 3.52 The Council uses turnover and demand information to review the areas it considers as realistic for homeless people to bid for, but it does not have a systematic approach to defining them and does not always record how these judgments are made for particular people and the advice they are given. As a

result the process of deciding what is realistic is unclear. Some third parties told us that, on occasions, some homeless people they work with feel pressurised into bidding for properties that they do not want.

- 3.53 The Code of Guidance advises that offers should take into account the particular circumstances and needs of an applicant and their household and give people a genuine choice of accommodation. We found that the Council sometimes assesses whether the offer of a property that a vulnerable applicant has bid for is reasonable. It bypasses them if, in its view, the offer is not appropriate. Assessing the suitability and reasonableness of the offer is good practice, however the Council does not do this for all applicants. We also found that the Council does not monitor or audit this process.
- 3.54 Homeless applicants have to fully understand Choice to enable them to successfully bid for any vacancies which are suitable for their needs. We found that Council staff generally provided good information on Choice to applicants before they start bidding. Council staff review homeless silver priority cases fortnightly or weekly if the applicant is vulnerable and continue to provide information and advice on bidding. However, the level of information and advice given varies and does not always fully take account of the particular circumstances and needs of the applicant. The Council intends to review this aspect of the operation of Choice as part of its strategic review of the policy to be carried out in spring 2006.
- 3.55 The Council makes a final offer outwith the Choice process to discharge its duty to people who are either not actively bidding through Choice or who do not, in the Council's view, bid realistically. The Council housed 50 people from the final offer list in 2004/05 (1.5% of people the Council had a duty to house), and at the time of our inspection there were over 60 people on the list. The Council generally uses properties which have received no bids when they were advertised or have been refused several times and some RSL vacancies for the final offer list. The number of such properties does not always meet the demand from the final offer list. When allocating from this list the Council gives priority to applicants in bed and breakfast accommodation. We found that the Council did not always take account of the circumstances and needs of the applicant when

- making a final offer and that there is no clear guidance for staff. The Council is aware of the weaknesses in the process and plans to review its approach.
- 3.56 The Council provides information on the offer process verbally and in leaflets. However, the offer letter that the Council sends to homeless people does not advise that the Council is discharging its duty under homeless legislation, that silver priority may be withdrawn if the offer is refused or of their right to appeal. This means that homeless people may not be fully aware of the consequences of refusing an offer or of the Council's responsibilities.
- 3.57 The Council has, for some time, been operating a number of local lettings plans* that it agreed with residents, these cover around 3% of the stock. The Council did not review them following the introduction of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. The lettings plans exclude applicants from being selected for some properties on the grounds of age. We also found that the Council applied age exclusions to other properties for housing management reasons. From April to October 2005, the Council advertised 13% of properties with age restrictions. We reviewed the outcomes of these lets and found that the percentage of homeless people allocated these properties was comparable to the overall outcomes for all lets.
- 3.58 The Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 as amended, prohibits landlords from taking account of a person's age when allocating general needs houses. The Council's approach does not comply with the terms of the legislation and is a significant weakness in its overall approach to letting its houses. We drew this to the Council's attention and it immediately stopped the practice of placing age restrictions on properties for management reasons. It also agreed to review its approved local lettings plans in consultation with residents and elected members.
- 3.59 The Council publishes its lettings policy which includes some information on homelessness. However, it does not publish all its rules on allocations to homeless people as required to do by section 21 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987. In particular the way in which homeless people with silver priority have to bid is not covered.

* see glossary

- 3.60 The Council had a duty to house 3,334 households in 2004/05 but only had 3,084 houses available from its own stock. The Council works with RSLs in its area through section 5 referrals and nominations to maximise access to permanent accommodation. It has referral agreements with all RSLs in the area for the use of its powers under section 5 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. In 2004/05 it made 169 referrals, of which 158 resulted in a let. The Council has agreed with RSLs that the nominations procedures should give priority to homeless people. This has resulted in the number of homeless people housed through nominations to RSLs increasing significantly from 25 in 2002/03 to 255 in 2004/05. Ninety six percent of all nominations made by the Council are homeless applicants. The length of time taken by an RSL to make an offer to a homeless person has reduced from 79 days in 2003/04 to 42 days in 2005/06. This is an excellent approach to maximising the availability of houses for homeless people.
- 3.61 The Council also has a duty to provide advice and assistance to people who are either not in priority need or are intentionally homeless to enable them to secure alternative accommodation. This group made up 28% of homeless applications in 2004/05. A key feature of the Council's policy is to agree a housing action plan at the initial assessment interview, a copy of which is given to the applicant, and to carry out a further interview to review progress. This is an excellent approach to providing tailored advice and support to homeless people looking for accommodation. We found that the Council's staff provide good information on housing options at the initial assessment interview. However, we also found that the Council did not always complete action plans and has an inconsistent approach to carrying out follow up interviews. The Council is aware of these inconsistencies and has plans in place to address this issue.
- 3.62 The private rented sector accounts for 14% of the housing stock in Edinburgh, more than twice the national figure of 6%. To maximise access to the private sector the Council partly funds a rent deposit scheme operated by one of its partners, which helped 105 homeless people to secure and sustain a tenancy in the private sector in 2004/05. Since September 2005, the Council has also helped 32 homeless people who were either not in priority need or were intentionally homeless, to secure accommodation through the Private Sector

Leasing Scheme. The operation of the Private Sector Leasing Scheme is discussed in more detail at paragraph 3.36 above.

- 3.63 The Council recognises that it is under reporting the number of homeless people it houses and as a consequence may be over reporting the number of people it loses contact with or for whom it does not know their final outcome. We reviewed the figures for 2004/05 and found that it had lost contact or did not know the final outcome for 18% of homeless people who had an assessment decision. The Council has firm plans to improve the way it records and reports the final outcomes for homeless people.
- 3.64 The City of Edinburgh Council's performance in providing permanent accommodation to homeless people is fair. Since the introduction of Choice, homeless applicants have access to all areas and property types and the Council has increased the percentage of lets to homeless people and reduced the time it takes to make an offer. The Council has an excellent approach to working with RSLs to provide secure accommodation for homeless people. However, the Council does not always ensure that applicants are able to achieve suitable outcomes which take account of their individual circumstances and needs; the decisions it makes on some key areas in the operation of Choice lack transparency; and, it does not publish all its rules for allocating properties to homeless people. The Council is aware of many of these issues and responded positively to the areas for improvement we identified during the inspection.

Preventing homelessness

Local Authorities should work to prevent people from becoming homeless and to reduce the incidence of repeat homelessness.

- 3.65 The City of Edinburgh Council outlines its approach to preventing homelessness and repeat presentations through its five year homelessness strategy introduced in 2002. This includes an action plan with clear objectives on prevention, support, rough sleeping and integrated service provision. This approach is supported by the Council's "advice led" approach to delivering its homelessness service. In 2004/05 the Council provided advice on a range of housing issues to 2,490 people in addition to those that made homeless applications.

- 3.66 The Council recognised the increase in the level of repeat homeless presentations from 7.5% in 2002/03 to 10.7% in 2004/05 as an area of concern. However, over that period the Council had reviewed and improved the accuracy of its recording mechanisms and the upward trend is consistent with the national figures of 6.1% in 2002/03 and 9.1% for 2004/5.
- 3.67 The Council has made significant progress in sustaining tenancies and preventing homelessness from recurring. The percentage of homeless applicants still in tenancies 12 months after the Council has secured them permanent accommodation has improved from 50% in 2002/03 to 72% in 2004/05. This trend and level is comparable with other types of applicant.
- 3.68 The Council has introduced a wide range of initiatives to help sustain tenancies and to prevent homelessness recurring including:
- Neighbourhood Support Teams, providing a wide range of advice, assistance and information;
 - the Intensive Family Support Service (IFSS), for tenants subject to investigation for serious antisocial behaviour cases;
 - the Shelter Families' Project, which provides support and advice through the homeless process from application to settling into a new home;
 - a young persons service based at all local offices and a young persons worker for 16/17 year olds in the North Area Office;
 - post allocation visits to provide advice and collect information relating to support needs, possible vulnerability and alternative contacts;
 - assistance for rent arrears cases which includes a freephone advice number, in-court advisor funded through the Citizens Advice Bureau and, from January 2006, referral to specialist money advisors; and
 - mediation services for neighbour and family disputes.
- 3.69 The Council introduced a three year rent strategy in 2003/04 with a clear focus on arrears management and an emphasis on prevention and intervention. As a result the Council's eviction rate* has fallen from 1.84% in 2002/03 to 1.35% in 2003/04 and 0.81% in 2004/05. Although the eviction rate remains above the

* The eviction rate is the number of evictions, including post-decree abandonments, as a percentage of total housing stock.

national figure of 0.59% for 2003/04 this is a significant reduction. The Council has also reduced the number of Notice of Proceedings (NOPs)* it serves from 4,326 in 2002/03 to 1,440 in 2004/05 and the number of abandonments from 504 to 481 over the same period.

- 3.70 The Council has a positive and managed approach to the prevention of homelessness arising as a result of antisocial behaviour. We found a flexible and appropriate response to complaints with a good multi-agency approach for more complex cases. Good contact was also maintained with applicants and the Council referred over 65 cases to Victim Support for assistance in 2005.
- 3.71 The Council has a good approach to the development and provision of housing advice and information services. In 2003 it produced a departmental Housing Advice and Information Strategy. It has recently launched** an Edinburgh wide Housing Advice Strategy, which highlights the Council's well developed links with partner agencies and service providers across the city. The 2005 strategy outlines how the Council and its partners will develop and deliver access to a citywide multi-agency network of high quality advice and information services. The comprehensive action plan includes:
- training council staff to HomePoint standards;
 - promoting accreditation to National Standards across all service providers;
 - the Joint Training Initiative;
 - referral and signposting of services;
 - the mapping of services and service providers; and
 - the continuing development of the web-based Housing Options Guide.
- 3.72 The Council also provides directly, or supports through funding, a comprehensive range of services for rough sleepers. This includes 2 direct access hostels with 39 rooms, most of which are ensuite. The Council also makes referrals to a range of hostel accommodation and support services provided by voluntary organisations. The TAP provides a range of support and health services and the Cowgate Centre provides an overnight drop-in centre for rough sleepers. During the winter months the Council also works with other organisations to provide a

* see glossary

** The 2005 Advice and Information Strategy was launched in November 2005

range of additional facilities including soup kitchens and night shelters. This is an excellent approach to ensuring that rough sleepers can access the full range of services they need.

3.73 In addition to the various services and strategies outlined above the Council also provides or has referral arrangements for a range of other prevention and resettlement initiatives including:

- an in-school housing education programme for 14 and 15 year olds provided by Move On and funded by the Council;
- furniture initiatives including core furnished tenancies and links with the Edinburgh Furniture Initiative and Fresh Start; and
- a private sector team which can give advice and assistance on renting in the private sector.

3.74 The City of Edinburgh Council has a good approach to preventing homelessness. A good range of general and specific support and outreach services are available including specific provision for rough sleepers. In addition the Council's advice and information strategies have developed and are continuing to promote links with partner organisations to comply with its statutory duties on providing access to information and advice.

Responsiveness to homeless people

Local authorities should place homeless people and those threatened with homelessness at the heart of their work to prevent and alleviate homelessness. They should treat them with respect and be responsive to their views and priorities.

3.75 The Council has a strong customer focussed approach to working with homeless people and has responded positively to the recommendations of the Homelessness Task Force relating to service culture. All the Council's staff take part in customer care training and it is a key part of the staff performance review system. Service users and partner organisations we spoke with were positive about this aspect of the Council's service.

3.76 This customer focus is reflected in the "advice led" approach to service delivery, focusing on finding housing solutions for all those that contact the service, not just those who make a homeless application. To achieve this, Council staff use

advice interviews to agree a housing action plan which sets out the options open to an individual and the actions they need to take. The plan includes actions to be taken by the Council, the advice given and any referrals to other agencies. The Council also provides a number of services developed to address the needs of particular client groups including:

- The Access Point for rough sleepers;
- outreach services in local hospitals and HM Prison Edinburgh;
- young persons support workers in area teams;
- young persons housing officer in the North Team;
- young persons information and advice worker in the Housing Options Team;
- service for women experiencing violence or abuse; and
- women-only hostels.

3.77 The Council has published a set of customer service standards across all homelessness teams. It measures its performance against these standards for each team and for the service as a whole and reports on the outcomes to service users. This is an excellent approach to reinforcing the positive service culture for staff, making clients aware of the service they can expect and for ensuring a consistent quality of provision.

3.78 We found that the Council does not always give applicants who do not speak English as their first language appropriate support to assist them in the bidding for properties through Choice. We drew this to the Council's attention and it provided an analysis of the outcomes for people who had received interpreting services which indicated that the quality of outcomes may be less good for this group. The Council has now put in place plans to address this issue.

3.79 Local authorities have a duty to notify people who apply for assistance of their right to have decisions on their applications reviewed and, where requested, to carry out such a review. The Council accepts such appeals in writing, verbally or from third parties acting on behalf of homeless people. It also hears appeals made outwith the statutory period of 21 days. In 2004/05, 42% of all appeals were received outwith 21 days. The Council advises people of their right to appeal in decision letters and duty discharge letters and has also drafted a leaflet

to publicise its appeals process. However, there are weaknesses in the way it promotes appeals, we found that:

- the Council does not always advise people of their right to appeal during homeless assessment interviews;
- it does not publicise the right to appeal in reception areas or interview rooms; and
- the Council's offer letters to homeless people on permanent accommodation does not contain full details of the right to appeal.

3.80 In 2004/05, the Council received 189 appeals; 53 (1%) of assessment decisions were appealed, 17 (32%) of which were successful; and, 136 (8%) offers of permanent accommodation were appealed, 53 (39%) of which were successful. We found that the Council had considered additional information presented by appellants however, we also found that it did not always fully record the issues considered during the appeal and that letters advising applicants of the outcome did not always fully explain the decision. The Council uses issues arising from appeals during one to one supervision with staff to help improve service delivery. This is a good approach, however, it does not evaluate or report the outcomes of appeals on a service-wide basis.

3.81 The Council has a corporate complaints policy which is publicised in leaflets which are widely available. Complaints made about the services provided by the Access Point, the Housing Options Team and the Temporary Accommodation team are monitored separately however, the Council is unable to identify and analyse complaints about the homelessness service in local offices. This limits the Council's ability to use this information to improve the homelessness service.

3.82 The Council has taken positive steps to seek feedback from people using the homelessness service. It involved service users in the development of the homelessness strategy and plans to involve them in the review of the strategy. The Council also has a comprehensive customer research programme which links to the objectives set out in its homelessness strategy and its service standards. It carries out a number of surveys, for example:

- hostel residents and ex-residents survey;

- customer journeys* from HOT and TAP;
- exit surveys*;
- mystery shopping*;
- and prison outreach service evaluation.

3.83 The Council reports the outcomes of its research and we found good examples of this information being used to monitor trends and improve service delivery. This is an excellent approach to measuring and responding to service user views. However, at the time of our inspection the Council did not have a systematic approach to feeding the customer research into the improvement process. The Council was aware of this and had started work to address the issue.

3.84 The City of Edinburgh Council has an excellent approach to placing the needs and interests of homeless people at the heart of the work of the service. The culture of the service is strongly focussed on meeting the needs of homeless people. It has an excellent customer research programme and takes account of the views of service users in both strategic planning and service improvements. There are some weaknesses in the way it uses its appeals and complaints procedures to help improve service delivery and evidence that some applicants may not be given sufficient support to effectively bid for housing. The Council responded positively to our early findings and has put in place plans to address all the areas for improvement we have identified.

Working with partners

Local authorities should work corporately and co-operate with other organisations, to ensure that the needs of homeless people are met quickly and appropriately.

3.85 The Council works well with a wide range of partner organisations both in planning and delivering services to homeless people. The Homelessness Planning Group (HPG) meets monthly and is responsible for the development and delivery of the homelessness strategy. The HPG is well attended, members include Shelter, Lothian and Borders Police and NHS Lothian. Many external partner agencies who provide services to homeless people are members of two umbrella forums, the Lothian Homelessness Forum (LHF) and the Housing

* see glossary

- Support Interest Group (HoSig), and two representatives from each forum are members of the HPG. In addition, the Council supports a practitioners forum, which meets quarterly and is open to those working with homeless people in the voluntary sector to share experiences and working practices.
- 3.86 The Homelessness Planning Group, has established a number of subgroups with a wider membership than the core HPG. This ensures that relevant agencies and partners are fully involved in developing the service. The Council has made excellent use of these groups to promote improvements in service delivery; for example, by establishing an equalities subgroup and surveying all the partner organisations to identify service gaps and training needs.
- 3.87 The HPG report on an ad-hoc basis to the Homelessness Forum which brings together two elected members of the Council's Executive, one from Community Safety and Housing and another from Health and Social Care and representatives of key partner organisations. Although meetings are ad-hoc, the Homelessness Forum is seen as a significant route to ensuring homelessness issues are considered by elected members.
- 3.88 We found that the Council regularly consults with its partners and their participation is an essential and integral part of the Council's work on homelessness. As part of its preparation for our inspection, the Council reviewed the effectiveness of its homelessness services by surveying a number of stakeholders. The initial survey report indicates that stakeholders view partnership working with the Council as a strength, and this is supported by our own feedback from third parties.
- 3.89 In January 2004, the Council established a Joint Training Initiative with the objective of providing free training opportunities for voluntary sector workers across the homelessness sector as outlined in the homelessness strategy 2002-2007. A review of this initiative is currently underway and due to be completed by spring 2006. In addition to external partner organisations being on the steering group undertaking the review, the review process will include the gathering of voluntary sector agencies' views through questionnaires, focus

- groups and interviews. This is a good approach to reviewing the initiative with partners.
- 3.90 In partnership with other agencies, the Council has developed an innovative approach to providing services to those sleeping rough in Edinburgh. The Access Point was established in 2000 as a one-stop shop where rough sleepers can access housing, social work and health services. Partner agencies we spoke with described it as an excellent facility and those agencies working within TAP felt that it was an effective way to work together to improve services for rough sleepers.
- 3.91 The Council has a strong corporate commitment to ensuring that Council services work together in service delivery. Staff in the homelessness teams work well with those in other parts of the Council including those providing services for “looked after children” and the Criminal Justice social work service. The Council is working particularly well in the delivery of services and solutions for young people across the City and those who had been “looked after” by the Council. This is supported by a good approach to providing information on housing issues in the Council’s schools. Third parties told us that joint working and communication are particularly strong with officers in the local area teams’ young persons service and the two Young Persons Housing Advice Officers in the HOT team.
- 3.92 The Council is excellent at working with both external and corporate partners in planning and delivering services for homeless people. Staff at all levels see partner organisations as a key element of the service. Communication with its partners is good and the Council has a positive approach to involving and supporting other agencies in the development and provision of services for homeless people.

Is the service managed for improvement?

Performance management

Local Authorities should have clear objectives, standards and targets for their homelessness service, should monitor achievement of these, and should work to continuously improve services.

- 3.93 The Council sets out the objectives for the homelessness service in its Housing Service Plan and homelessness strategy. More specific service delivery outcome targets are also set out in the Council's local outcome agreement* with the Scottish Executive. These documents provide a good overview of service development objectives and outcomes for key aspects of the service. Progress in implementing these plans is monitored by the Council's Homelessness Planning Group and its subgroups. The Council uses its ICT systems well to support the work of these groups by providing a range of excellent performance and outcome information both from its own services and those commissioned through partners.
- 3.94 The Council does not have in place a specific service delivery and development plan for its homelessness services. As a result it is not actively prioritising service improvements or ensuring that the process is effectively co-ordinated and monitored at a service wide level.
- 3.95 The Council has made good progress in achieving the objectives set out in its homelessness strategy and has recently begun work through the Homelessness Planning Group to review the strategy with a view to publishing a new version in 2006. A significant part of this review will be how the Council will implement the abolition of priority need by 2012.
- 3.96 The Council has, over the last three years, set a number of targets for reducing its use of bed and breakfast establishments and developed a number of initiatives to expand the supply of directly provided temporary accommodation. This includes the innovative private sector leasing scheme launched in 2005. Growth in demand for temporary accommodation over the same period has meant that the Council has not achieved any of these targets.
- 3.97 The Council provides staff with a range of procedure documents to guide them in carrying out their duties. We found that staff are clear about what they should be achieving and performance monitoring and management is well developed across all areas of the Council's service. The Council's HIS system has been developed to support this and performance information, including service user

* see glossary

- feedback, is used at all levels of service management. The Council also has a number of internal groups at which staff can discuss service delivery and best practice.
- 3.98 The Council has developed its ECHO outcome monitoring system to record and report outcomes from services it commissions through partner organisations. This system ensures that the Council has access to the information it needs to manage these contracts and assess the effectiveness of these services. Overall the Council has excellent information on performance and outcomes and we saw only a very small number of gaps in its systems.
- 3.99 We saw a number of good examples of service improvements being developed in response to problems identified through the Council's performance management system and as a result of service user feedback. The Council has good arrangements for auditing decisions and service outcomes and it has a good understanding of the outcomes it is achieving.
- 3.100 Performance reporting to the Housing Senior Management Team, the Council's Corporate Management Team and the Council's Executive is well developed and provides a good overview of the service's performance. The Council is developing these arrangements further with the introduction of a "balanced scorecard" reporting framework. The Council's Scrutiny Panels have also looked at a number of areas of the service.
- 3.101 The Council has a strong commitment to continuous improvement at all levels of the homelessness service and has an excellent track record of identifying and acting to address areas for improvement. It responded positively to the feedback provided during the inspection process by developing an action plan to address the areas for improvement that we identified as a first step to developing a comprehensive service development plan.
- 3.102 The City of Edinburgh Council's approach to performance management is excellent. The Council has made good progress in implementing its homelessness strategy. It sets standards for all areas of its service and has excellent systems in place for measuring performance against these and outcomes for service users. The Council has a strong commitment to continuous

improvement and has put in place measures to address all the areas for improvement identified during this inspection.

Resource management and efficiency

Social landlords should procure homelessness services in a way that takes account of quality and should manage the cost of their services effectively.

- 3.103 The overall cost to the Council of providing homelessness services has risen by 57% over the last 3 years to £13.75m. In particular the Council has seen a significant rise in the cost of bed and breakfast provision in 2004/05 due to an increase in the number of people presenting and requiring temporary accommodation and the rise in the average length of stay in temporary accommodation of all kinds.
- 3.104 The Council is aware that bed and breakfast accommodation is more expensive and offers less value for money than other types of accommodation. It uses regular monitoring reports to track expenditure and variances to control the overall budget. In addition the Council has now set a fixed daily rate significantly below the established charge for all bed and breakfast placements. This has had the immediate effect of reducing the cost of this type of accommodation and is a good approach to securing best value.
- 3.105 The Council ensures that it maximises its income through the receipt of housing benefit. People who are eligible for housing benefit make claims on the day they are placed in temporary accommodation. The Council's staff help them fill in the forms and ensure that they provide any further information that is required. It monitors performance at collecting housing benefit which has improved over the last year from 89% to 93% of possible income recovered. The Council also has a well-staffed and effective warden service that is able to turn round its flats quickly, when they become empty. This ensures that the best use is made of the flats.
- 3.106 The Council has not carried out any best value reviews of its homelessness services for over five years and has done very little internal audit work over this period. At the time of our inspection, the Council had no plans in place to carry out a best value review of the service. We raised this with the Council and it has

now included key elements of the service in its audit plan and is developing plans to carry out a best value review of the service.

- 3.107 The Council has in place a significant range of support and advice services procured* from voluntary sector organisations. The Council procures these services through a number of different routes including competitive quality/cost led tendering. The Council is good at monitoring these projects and for ensuring that they are achieving appropriate outcomes for homeless people.
- 3.108 The City of Edinburgh Council's approach to resource management and efficiency is good. The Council has good procedures in place to procure and monitor the wide range of support services it uses and has taken effective action to control the cost of bed and breakfast. However the Council has not reviewed the service to ensure that it provides best value.

Public reporting

Local authorities should give stakeholders and service users the information they need about the homelessness service, its plans and performance.

- 3.109 The City of Edinburgh Council publishes a wide range of performance information for its homelessness service through its website and displays this on the plasma screens and posters in its public reception areas. This information covers assessment outcomes, waiting times, case-length and service user satisfaction. It also has firm plans in place to publish the balanced scorecard for the homelessness service. The information is up-to-date and reflects key aspects of the services being delivered.
- 3.110 The Council's approach to public reporting on its homelessness services is good. A wide range of information is published and made available to stakeholders and in locations where service users are likely to see it.

Grade and overall assessment of homelessness services

- 3.111 Our overall assessment is that the City of Edinburgh Council's homelessness service is excellent. We found that the service as a whole is characterised by

* see glossary

strengths and we found only a small number of areas where improvement is needed.

3.112 The Council actively promotes a strong customer focus across the service. Its “advice led” approach ensures that the overall service is clearly focused on finding solutions to the housing problems of all people who apply to it for help.

We found particular strengths in:

- strategic planning;
- assessment decision making;
- preventing homelessness and sustaining tenancies;
- gathering and using service user views in service improvements;
- working with both internal and external partners;
- performance management and measuring service outcomes; and
- the provision of specialist services for rough sleepers.

3.113 We found some areas for improvement particularly the need to ensure that sufficient temporary accommodation is available to meet demand out of hours and to improve the recording of assessment decisions and access to hostel accommodation. The Council also needs to reduce the number of people placed in bed and breakfast establishments and to ensure that people, particularly those whose first language is not English, are fully supported in bidding for houses through the Choice system.

3.114 The Council has a well developed approach to continuous improvement. It has a good track record of innovation in service delivery, achieving improvements and partnership working and has responded strongly to the recommendations of the Homelessness Task Force. In particular the Council has put in place a wide range of measures that support a culture of assistance rather than gate-keeping, and ensured, through its customer research and performance management systems, that it has a full understanding of how the service works at all levels. Partner organisations also play an important role in planning and delivering services. The Council has shown a willingness and capacity to tackle the areas of weakness we have identified in this inspection, it accepted all of our early findings during the inspection and took immediate action when this was necessary and appropriate.

4. Areas for Improvement Action

- 4.1 These are the key areas that need to be targeted for improvement action. They are broadly in order of priority.
- 4.2 The Council should:
- ensure that there is sufficient temporary accommodation available out of hours to fully meet the Council's statutory duties and monitor demand for and referrals to direct access hostels accurately;
 - take account of all the areas for improvement identified through this inspection in its strategic review of Choice and ensure that improvements to the support provided to vulnerable people bidding through Choice are prioritised as part of that review; and
 - put in place a medium-term plan for a sustained reduction in the level of use of bed and breakfast establishments.

5. Next steps

- 5.1 This report highlights our findings following this housing inspection. We expect all organisations to respond effectively to our recommendations using their own improvement planning processes. We ask organisations that receive fair or poor assessments overall in their housing management, property maintenance or homelessness services, to submit an improvement plan to us within eight weeks of the publication of this report. We do not require the City Of Edinburgh Council to submit an improvement plan.
- 5.2 If you would like to find out how the Council is responding to the findings in this report you should contact:

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23 Waterloo Place
EDINBURGH
EH1 3BH

Telephone 0131 529 7047
Email david.lyon@edinburgh.gov.uk

Sources of Evidence

Groups and third parties consulted

- 25 local housing associations
- 4 local authorities
- Scottish Executive Homelessness Team
- Scottish Executive Antisocial Behaviour Unit
- HomePoint
- Communities Scotland Tenant Participation Team
- Audit Scotland
- Scottish Public Service Ombudsman
- NHS Lothian
- Shelter
- Shelter Families Project
- 4 Citizen's Advice Bureaux
- Edinburgh Women's Aid
- SACRO
- Edinburgh Cyrenians
- 32 voluntary sector agencies

Interviews/meetings

- Councillors
- Tom Aitchison, Chief Executive
- Mark Turley, Director of Housing
- Senior and front-line staff of Care Housing
- Senior and front-line staff of Housing Management
- Through Care and After Care Manager and Senior Officer, Social Work Services
- Contracts and Compliance Development Manager, Social Work Services
- Emergency Service Team Leader and Emergency Controllers
- Management Accountant
- HMO team
- Assistant Services Manager, Criminal Justice

Reality checks

- Observation of meetings of the Homelessness Planning Group, the Lothian Homelessness Forum and Housing Support Interest Group, the Practitioners Forum.
- Observation of front reception areas at Waterloo Place and area offices
- Observation of information and advice provided to service users
- Observation of Homeless Team meeting in the West area office, The Access Point team meeting, The Access Point Housing team meeting, Senior Officers Forum.
- Review of homeless assessments and appeals
- Shadowing the homeless out of hours service
- Shadowing of interviews with homeless people
- Shadowing of support visits and temporary accommodation visits
- Shadowing of allocations
- Visits to temporary accommodation
- Review of arrears cases
- Review of antisocial behaviour cases
- Review of complaints
- Review of housing list applications and allocations

- Review of information for applicants and tenants
- Case reviews

Key documents reviewed

- City of Edinburgh Council's inspection submission
- Corporate and departmental plans and performance reports
- Local Housing Strategy
- Homelessness Strategy and updates
- Advice and Information Strategy
- Year Rent Collection Strategy
- Relevant policies and procedures
- Outcome reports for homelessness and housing management
- Minutes of meetings and associated reports
- Allocation policy, application form and guide to policy
- Protocols with other agencies, including section 5 protocols
- Council Newsletters, posters and leaflets
- Council's website

Examples of Positive Practice

These are areas we would highlight as working particularly well, taking account of the organisation's operating context:

Customer journey research

The customer journey research focuses on the experiences of service users in TAP and HOT. It compares customers' experiences with their expectations at different stages in their journey. Customers are asked to think back to their initial contact with the homelessness service and are also asked about their current views and concerns. Some of those interviewed have tenancies while others are at earlier stages of their journey. The research measures the difference between what the customer expects from the service and what they actually receive and it examines whether, and how, their expectations change over time.

Performance management and public reporting

The Council has developed a comprehensive system for managing and reporting on the performance and outcomes from its service and those provided by partner organisations. It uses its own Homeless Information system (HIS) to monitor and report on the performance of its own services. Partner organisations provide details of the outcomes from the services they deliver through the Edinburgh Common Homeless Outcomes (ECHO). The information available from these systems covers all the key areas of service delivery. Performance targets are set using a wide range of information including best practice and service related risks for the Council and homeless people. Information from these systems is made available to elected members, partner organisations and Council staff at all levels and is reported and reviewed as part of the service improvement process.

The Council has also published customer standards for its service and monitors and reports performance against these to service users, Council staff and partners. This information and the results of a range of targeted service user satisfaction studies is also used in performance management and service improvement.

The Joint Training Initiative

One of the objectives identified in the Council's homelessness strategy 2002-2007 was to "improve joint working between services". The Joint Training Initiative (JTI) was set up by the Council in January 2004 to facilitate access to free training for both statutory and voluntary sector agencies delivering services to homeless people.

In addition to the courses, one of the key aims of the JTI was to produce opportunities for those working with homeless people to learn about other agencies and encourage partnership working across the city.

There are 3 cycles of training covering around 15 different courses in a year including;

- an introduction to Edinburgh services;
- an introduction to Housing Options;
- an introduction to Welfare Benefits;
- conflict management;
- motivational interviewing; and
- domestic abuse.

The Council reported that around 70 agencies had participated in the initiative to date. Currently the initiative is undergoing a comprehensive review to see how effective it is. The review includes asking partner agencies and service users their views on how effective the initiative has been. However, the development of an introductory training package on the Scottish National Standards for Housing Information and Advice Services has already been identified within the objective to raise awareness of the National Standards and their relevance within the 2005 Edinburgh Housing Advice Strategy Action plan.

The Access Point

The Access Point (TAP), was established in 2000, as a collaboration between NHS Lothian and the Council's Housing and Health and Social Care Departments. The project incorporates the Edinburgh Homeless Practice and operates over sites at Leith Street and the Cowgate Clinic. TAP provides a single access point to housing, health and social work services, including specialist assistance around substance misuse and mental health. The core client group is for those people who are sleeping rough or at high risk of doing so and who may have complex needs including drug, alcohol or mental health problems. One of the main strengths is the approach of staff from all the agencies, working at ensuring good communication and developing understanding between agencies in order to provide a customer focused approach to service delivery.

Advice and Information Strategies 2003/2005

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 included a statutory duty for councils to provide free advice and information to homeless people. The Council's 2003 strategy demonstrates how to involve and develop the role of partner agencies in the improvement of advice and information provision. The 2003 strategy was developed and delivered through a multi agency working group that had clear objectives and a comprehensive action plan with SMART^{*} criteria.

The 2005 Housing Advice and Information Strategy launched in November highlights how this approach now well established, is working towards providing further access and improvement to a citywide multi agency network of high quality advice and information of housing services.

Section 5 referrals and nominations procedures

The Council has agreed with RSLs that the nominations procedures should give priority to homeless people. The Council has 50% nominations rights to RSL vacancies and, under the Section 5 Protocol the Council uses half of these nominations for section 5 referrals. As a result, in 2004/05 the Council housed 158 homeless people through Section 5 referrals. It also allocated 96% of the remaining nominations to homeless people. This is an excellent approach to maximising the choice of homeless applicants and providing better opportunities to meet homeless households' needs.

Core furnished tenancies

Using a mixture of Furnished Tenancy Grant, Homelessness Strategy Funding and service charge income the Council have set up the Core Furnished Tenancy (CFT) scheme. If a homeless household is offered a new home and needs help with furniture they can ask to be referred for a Core Furnished Tenancy. The Furnished Tenancy

* see glossary

project will make arrangements to furnish the new home and people can choose 3 out of the following 5 essential items.

- Bed(s) - to meet household size
- Cooker - 1
- Fridge - 1
- Floor coverings - All rooms
- Curtains - All rooms

Other items of furniture and household equipment not included in the CFT scheme can be sourced from Edinburgh Furniture Initiative and Freshstart (both funded by the Council).

The CFT service charge is £8.05 per week. The total cost of creating a CFT is recouped over 5 years, the level of service charge is set at a low level to allow people who are on benefits or working to access the scheme giving a greater opportunity to sustain a tenancy. The Service Charge income is re-invested allowing for the ongoing provision of CFTs. To date 1058 formerly homeless households have made use of the Core Furnished Tenancy Scheme.

Glossary

Charter Mark	Charter Mark is a Government award scheme which recognises and encourages excellence in public service delivery.
Choice based lettings	A lettings scheme which allows people to apply for advertised vacancies. The successful applicant is the person with the highest priority for the property which they have bid for.
Common housing register (CHR)	A register of all applicants for social housing used by two or more landlords within an area.
Customer journey	The stages that service users go through when using a service. Customer journey research uses service user's experience of each stage to test the quality of the service.
Exit survey	Technique used to gather information on the quality of customer service. Service users are interviewed immediately after they have used a service to record their views on the service they received.
HomePoint	<p>A department of Communities Scotland that supports providers of housing information and advice services.</p> <p>HomePoint has broken down advice activities into three types:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Type I active information, sign-posting and explanation.• Type II casework.• Type III advocacy, representation and mediation.
House of multiple occupation (HMO)	A house of multiple occupation (HMO), is a property that is shared by three or more tenants who are not members of the same family. HMO landlords must have a licence from the council, to ensure that the property is managed properly and meets certain safety standards.
Housing list	A list of applicants for housing which is used by the local authority to allocate its housing stock.
ICT system	Information and communication system.
Investors in People (IIP)	The Investors in People Standard is a business improvement tool designed to improve an organisation's performance through its people.
Local lettings plan	A specific set of rules within the main allocations policy designed to meet the particular needs of a local community.

Local outcome agreement	A funding agreement between a local council and the Scottish Executive. The agreement sets out details of project specific funding provided by the Scottish Executive, how the Council will use the money and what service outcomes will be achieved over the funding period.
Mystery shopping	Technique used to gather information on the quality of customer service. Assessors contact the service anonymously and record the quality of the response they receive.
Notice of Proceedings (NOP)	The formal notice provided to tenants informing them that their landlord is taking legal proceedings to seek a court order for recovery of possession of a property.
Performance Standards	Housing standards for all social landlords in Scotland.
Procurement	The way an organisation obtains services or materials from other organisations or agents.
Registered social landlord (RSL)	A landlord providing social rented housing that is registered and regulated by Communities Scotland.
Right to Buy	Many Scottish secure tenants have the right to buy their property at a discounted price subject to length of tenancy.
Section 5 referral	Under Section 5 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 a local authority can request a registered social landlord which has accommodation in its area to provide accommodation to homeless people. This request is known as a Section 5 referral.
Shadowing	An inspection technique that involves accompanying and observing staff while they carried out their day-to-day tasks.
SMART criteria	Performance management acronym for: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time bound.
Tenancy agreement	Legal document or contract between landlord and tenant setting out the rights and responsibilities of each.
Tenure	The method by which a person occupies a property i.e. tenant, lodger, owner-occupier.
Void	A property without a tenant. Voids occur in the period between one tenant leaving and another taking over the tenancy.

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