

Pathfinder Inspection Report

Summary

August 2004

Inverclyde Council



The role of Communities Scotland

- 1.1 Communities Scotland is responsible for the inspection of all Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) and the landlord, homelessness and factoring services of all local authorities. We inspected Inverclyde Council's homelessness service in March and April 2004. This summary report sets out the main findings from our inspection.

Inverclyde Council

- 2.1 Inverclyde is one of Scotland's smallest local authority areas. It lies 20 miles west of Glasgow stretching along the south bank of the Clyde Estuary. Its current population of around 84,000 is concentrated in the three main coastal towns of Greenock, Gourock and Port Glasgow.
- 2.2 There are a number of social, economic and demographic factors that have an effect on the Council's current provision of homelessness services and pose significant challenges for long-term regeneration within Inverclyde.
- 2.3 The number of people living in Inverclyde has declined over the last 20 years and this trend is forecast to continue. The sharpest population decline has been experienced by the core towns of Greenock and Port Glasgow with the decline being mainly amongst young and economically active people. Whilst population numbers are in decline, household numbers are expanding. This is mainly due to relationship breakdown and the trend of people choosing to live alone or settle down later in life.
- 2.4 Inverclyde has low levels of economic activity, high levels of unemployment, high levels of benefit dependency and lower than average household incomes. Employment in Inverclyde relies heavily on a small number of large employers and, as such, is more susceptible to economic change.
- 2.5 There has been a significant decrease in the supply of social housing in the area mainly due to the Right to Buy (RTB) as well as the Council's active policy of demolitions.
- 2.6 In April 2003 political control of Inverclyde Council changed from Scottish Labour to Scottish Liberal Democrat. The Council has decided (subject to a ballot of tenants) to transfer all its stock to community ownership. However, the Council will retain its statutory responsibility for dealing with homelessness.
- 2.7 Over the last ten years homeless applications in Inverclyde have more than doubled, with the Council now receiving about 655 applications per

year. The scale of this increase is far greater than the general trend across Scotland, where the increase has been 21% over the same period.

2.8 In addition to an increasing number of applications there are other factors that affect the Council's provision of homelessness services:

- A high proportion of applicants in Inverclyde are assessed as in priority need.
- Young people are the largest single group of priority need applicants.
- Three quarters of applicants are single.
- Four out of five homeless applicants in Inverclyde have 3 or more health problems in addition to being homeless. Many of these include drug or alcohol dependencies.

Inspection Grade

3.1 This is the inspection grade achieved by Inverclyde Council.

Homelessness	D	<p>The Council delivers a poor homelessness service with major areas where improvement is needed.</p> <p>We consider that prospects for improvement in the homelessness function are promising.</p>
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Homelessness

4.1 This section summarises how the Council is responding to the needs of people who are homeless or may become homeless. It also looks at what the Council is doing to help prevent homelessness occurring.

4.2 Inverclyde's homelessness service is delivered by highly motivated and dedicated staff who have a very customer focused approach to the assessment, accommodation and resettlement of homeless people. The Council also works particularly well with relevant partners and agencies in trying to prevent people from becoming homeless.

4.3 Despite these strengths we have awarded the Council's homelessness service a D grade because of a number of serious weaknesses in the outcomes for service users. The most important of these is the Council's failure to provide temporary accommodation to some homeless households to whom it has a duty. We also found that relatively few priority homeless households are successfully getting permanent

accommodation. In addition, assessments are not being properly carried out in a significant number of cases resulting in a high proportion of successful appeals against the Council's decisions on priority status.

- 4.4 Although the Council has a public commitment to equality within the homeless service, it still has a considerable amount of work to do in this area.
- 4.5 The Council does not have a good performance monitoring system and is not making enough information about the performance of its homeless service publicly available.
- 4.6 However, the Council is aware of many of these weaknesses and we saw a pattern of on-going improvement in the service. During the inspection we saw further positive changes to the Council's delivery of its homelessness service and so we consider that its prospects for improvement are promising.
- 4.7 These are the areas in the homelessness service that are working well:
 - ✓ The existence of the homeless service and how to contact it are well publicised.
 - ✓ The homeless service is responsive, on a day-to-day basis, to the needs of the people using the service.
 - ✓ The Council is making good progress in training the members of the Homeless Team to the national standards for housing information and advice.
 - ✓ It is making particular efforts in relation to the provision of information and advice for young people.
 - ✓ The Council is working effectively in partnership with external agencies and organisations.
 - ✓ The Council and its partners are successfully implementing a number of aspects of the homelessness strategy.
 - ✓ There is a strong emphasis from the Council and its partners on the importance of prevention leading to a range of good work in this area.
 - ✓ The Council is providing a wider range of temporary accommodation.
 - ✓ The Council provides good support to people who are allocated temporary accommodation.
 - ✓ The Council receives very few formal complaints about the service it provides for homeless people.
 - ✓ Elected members are kept up to date with developments relating to the homelessness service.
 - ✓ The Inverclyde Centre and other Council offices are being upgraded to improve the physical accessibility of the homelessness service.
 - ✓ The Council is committed to continuous improvement and is proactively working to improve the services it provides for homeless people.

4.8 These are the areas of the homelessness service that could work better:

- Ensuring that temporary accommodation is always provided for homeless people who are roofless.
- Ensuring that assessments of homeless applicants are always carried out properly.
- The operation of the out of hours homeless service.
- Ensuring that the needs of households are taken into account when placing them in temporary accommodation.
- The collection of basic performance information to allow the Council to assess the quality of its homelessness service.
- The Council's information about outcomes for homeless people.
- The Council's development of its temporary accommodation and its assessment of need and gaps in current provision.
- The provision of information on how the homeless service operates or the kind of service that homeless people can expect.
- The collection and recording of feedback from service users on their views of the service they receive.
- The recording of all homeless presentations outwith the Inverclyde Centre.
- The provision of written guidance and other support for staff to help them to do their jobs effectively.
- The development of service level agreements setting out what the homeless service expects from the departments, agencies and others who provide it with services or deliver services on its behalf.
- The Council's approach to equalities in the homelessness service, in relation to training, target setting and monitoring.
- The Council's compliance with its own Financial Regulations in the procurement of furniture for temporary accommodation.
- Arrangements for telling service users, elected members or other stakeholders how well the homelessness service is performing.

4.9 These are our key recommendations. They are broadly in order of significance:

- ❖ The Council must ensure that it can provide access to temporary accommodation for all homeless people, to whom it has a duty, including those presenting out of hours.
- ❖ The Council must publish a policy with its rules for allocating houses to homeless people to whom it has a duty to provide permanent accommodation and should monitor and report outcomes for homeless people.
- ❖ The Council should take action to ensure that all homeless applications are investigated and assessed in a comprehensive, fair and consistent way.

- ❖ The Council should put in place a comprehensive monitoring and performance management framework to allow it to assess how good a service it is providing to homeless applicants and to respond effectively to improve that service.
- ❖ The Council should establish a consistent letting standard for temporary accommodation and should provide information to homeless households on the standard of accommodation they can expect.
- ❖ The Council should improve the information available on the range and standards of service that homeless people can expect to receive from them or their agents.
- ❖ The Council should develop a strategic approach to the provision and development of temporary accommodation.
- ❖ The Council should ensure that resettlement support is provided to homeless applicants on the basis of their assessed needs regardless of accommodation type.
- ❖ The Council should make better use of all of the resources it has available to support staff and partners in delivering good quality information and advice.
- ❖ The Council should ensure that it improves equalities monitoring in the homelessness service and provides adequate training on equalities for all staff likely to encounter homeless people.
- ❖ The Council should put in place systems to collect, record and use feedback from service users on a regular basis.
- ❖ The Council must ensure that it complies with its Financial Regulations and gives due consideration to best value in all future procurement of goods and services for the homeless service.
- ❖ The Council should provide regular reports to all interested parties on how well its homeless service is performing.

Inspection Report

- 5.1 Any one can ask for a copy of the full inspection report. All reports are on the Communities Scotland web site at <http://www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk>.
- 5.2 This summary can also be made available on tape, in Braille, MOON, large print and community languages. For information please contact Janette Campbell on 0131 479 5162 or email janette.campbell@communitiesscotland.gsi.gov.uk.
- 5.3 We have asked Inverclyde Council to produce an improvement plan within eight weeks of publishing the inspection report to show how it intends to respond to all our recommendations. We will agree the plan with the Council. We will liaise regularly with the Council and track progress in improving all the inspected services until the next scheduled inspection, which will take place within five years.