

Pathfinder Inspection Report

August 2004

Inverclyde Council



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1. Introduction

The role of Communities Scotland

- 1.1 Communities Scotland is the executive agency for regeneration and housing, directly accountable to Ministers. Our aim is to work with others to improve the quality of life for people in Scotland.
- 1.2 The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 gives Communities Scotland the role of regulating Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) and the landlord, homelessness and factoring services of local authorities. Our purpose as a regulator is to promote quality, continuous improvement and good practice in these services, for the benefit of current and future tenants, and other service users. One way we do this is by inspecting RSLs and local authorities. Inspections provide an in-depth, independent assessment of an organisation, its service quality and its ability to improve. Our *Guide to Inspection* describes how we carry out inspections.

The standards we use

- 1.3 We have published Performance Standards with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA) and the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (SFHA). These standards set out our joint expectations for the performance of all social landlords and homelessness functions. Our inspection process assesses how well local authorities are meeting these standards. We tailor our inspection to take account of the local authority's role, the local context in which it operates and the standards the local authority has agreed with its own tenants and service users.
- 1.4 The Guide to Inspection and Performance Standards are both available on our website at <http://www.inspection.communitiesscotland.gov.uk>.

How we assessed performance

- 1.5 Our inspection of Inverclyde Council was focused specifically on the homeless service. Our inspectors asked three key questions about this local authority:
 - How good is the service we have inspected?
 - How well is the homelessness service being managed?
 - Is the homelessness service likely to improve?
- 1.6 To answer these questions inspectors:
 - spoke to the Council's service users, staff and elected members;

- asked other organisations that work closely with Inverclyde for their views;
- visited homes that it owns and manages;
- saw and tested first hand how well services were being delivered and how well the Council responds to its service users by doing things like shadowing and observing staff and sampling cases;
- checked key policies, publications and information for service users; and
- took account of the Council's self-assessment submission.

1.7 You will find more details about who we spoke to, the checks we carried out and the documents we reviewed in Appendix 1. Aspects of the Council's performance that we consider to represent particularly positive practice are highlighted in Appendix 2.

1.8 Following our assessment, we awarded a grade for the homelessness service.

1.9 This is what our grades mean:

| | | |
|---|-----------|---|
| A | Excellent | Major strengths |
| B | Good | Many strengths and some areas where improvement is needed |
| C | Fair | Some strengths, but with significant areas where improvement required |
| D | Poor | Major areas where improvement is needed |

1.10 We also assess the Council's likelihood to improve and we describe this as:

- excellent;
- promising;
- uncertain; or
- poor.

The inspection of Inverclyde Council

1.11 The inspection team for Inverclyde Council was led by Yvonne Summers (Inspection Manager) supported by Fiona Selkirk (Inspector) and Iain Fitheridge (Inspection Officer). Robbie Fraser (Inspector) assisted the inspection team as part of his training. We were on site at Inverclyde Council for four weeks over the period from 8 March to 14 April 2004. We would like to thank everyone involved in the inspection, particularly elected members, staff and service users for their time and co-operation.

1.12 This report presents our findings and recommendations. It is published, together with a summary, on our website at <http://www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk>. The Council must make the summary available to anyone that wants it, report our findings to tenants and other stakeholders and implement an improvement plan to respond to our recommendations and the issues raised in this report.

2. Context

Geography

- 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. As shown in the table below, its current population of around 84,000 is concentrated in the three main coastal towns of Greenock, Gourock and Port Glasgow.

| Population by settlement | Percentage |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|
| Greenock | 56% |
| Port Glasgow | 22% |
| Gourock | 13% |
| Kilmacolm | 5% |
| Wemyss Bay | 2% |
| Inverkip | 1% |
| Others | 1% |

Source: 1991 Census

- 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. These factors are highlighted below.

Population

- 2.3 The number of people living in Inverclyde has shown a continued decrease over the last 20 years, with current population having fallen around 17% during this period. This trend is forecast to continue, with a further 12% decrease in population by 2018. 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. As a result, Inverclyde has an above average percentage of people aged over 60 years. Housing quality is amongst the reasons given by people for leaving, including housing type, quality and tenure choice.
- 2.4 Whilst population numbers are in decline, household numbers are predicted to increase by 5.5% by 2014. This is mainly due to relationship breakdown and the trend of people choosing to live alone or settle down later in life. One and two person households make up over two thirds of all households in the area, with one-person households expected to increase to 41% by 2014.

Economic Factors

- 2.5 Inverclyde has low levels of economic activity, high levels of unemployment, high levels of benefit dependency and lower than average household incomes. Inverclyde's general unemployment rate in March 2003 was around 65% higher than the UK average, with localised unemployment rates in certain areas of Greenock and Port Glasgow being particularly high. Employment in Inverclyde relies heavily on a small number of large employers and, as such, is more susceptible to economic change. There is also a high level of part-time and short-term contracts in some sectors. Overall, employment is more reliant on the manufacturing sector than Scotland as a whole and many of the jobs are in lower skill areas.

Social Housing Supply

- 2.6 There has been a significant decrease in the supply of social housing in the area. Since the late 1970s the proportion of council housing has decreased from around two thirds to a quarter of all housing, with the current level being around 9,600 houses (of which, around only 8,300 are considered lettable by the Council). This decrease has been mainly due to an average of between 230 and 240 council houses being sold each year under Right to Buy (RTB) as well as the Council's active policy of demolitions, which has resulted in over 2,600 properties being demolished in Greenock and Port Glasgow to date. Over three quarters of these demolitions were of three apartment houses or larger. Over the same period there have been only marginal changes in the number of housing association properties.

Political Change

- 2.7 In April 2003 political control of Inverclyde Council changed from Scottish Labour to Scottish Liberal Democrat. Its 20 Councillors are made up of 13 Scottish Liberal Democrat, 6 Scottish Labour and 1 Independent. The Council has decided (subject to a ballot of tenants) to transfer all its stock to community ownership. This will mean that the Council will no longer be a landlord and an alternative social landlord will be responsible for managing a large proportion of housing in Inverclyde. The Council will still retain its statutory responsibility for dealing with homelessness. For this reason we have restricted our inspection to the homelessness service. This is the first time we have inspected the Council's homelessness service.

Homelessness in Inverclyde

- 2.8 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. In addition, research into hidden homelessness has identified that the current level of reported homelessness in Inverclyde may possibly be underestimated by as much as 20%.
- 2.9 Latest reported data shows the problem of increasing numbers of homeless applications in Inverclyde to be even more acute than shown in long term trend data. In 2002/03 the Council assessed 53% more homeless applications than in the previous year. This was the third highest growth in homeless applications of all Scottish councils and more than five times the national average growth of 9%.
- 2.10 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. Last year 59% of all applicants in Inverclyde were assessed as being in priority need in contrast to the national average of 57%.
 - There has been a change in the nature of homelessness, with young people having overtaken dependent families as 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.

Key Statistics¹

- 2.11 Inverclyde Council:
- received 655 homeless applications during 2002/03;
 - owns 9,600 properties (ranging in size from bedsits to four bedrooms) of which around 8,300 are lettable;
 - had an estimated 5,400 applicants on its housing waiting list on 31 March 2003;
 - relet approximately 2,100 houses during 2002/03;
 - had a vacancy rate of 6.9%, with around 639 empty properties at 31 March 2003;

¹ Source: Scottish Executive Statistical Bulletins, Audit Scotland's Performance Indicators 2002/03 and Inverclyde Council. Figures have been rounded.

- sold 283 of its houses through Right To Buy during 2002/03;
- charged an average weekly rent of £53.64 in 2003/04;
- had an annual rental income of approximately £23 million in 2002/03;
and
- evicted 14 tenants during 2002/03.

3. Inspection Grade

- 3.1 This is the inspection grade achieved by Inverclyde Council. An explanation of how this grade was awarded is set out on page 9.

| | | |
|--------------|---|---|
| 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> |
|--------------|---|---|

4. Homelessness

Overall assessment of homelessness

- 4.1 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.
- 4.2 Despite the strengths we identified 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 people are spending a considerable time in temporary accommodation and 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.
- 4.3 The Council is making real efforts to improve its homeless service and sees the involvement of service users as a central part of that process. On a day-to-day basis, staff are being responsive to the needs and views of service users as far as they are able. However, there are a number of key areas where the Council has not yet dealt with problems raised by service users in the past.
- 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.

| | |
|---|---|
| D | <p>The Council delivers a poor homelessness service with major areas where improvement is needed.</p> <p>The prospects for improvement in homelessness are promising.</p> |
|---|---|

Key findings on homelessness

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; and
- 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.

Context for homelessness

- 4.10 In addition to the broad context outlined in the last section, there are a number of additional factors relating directly to the homelessness service that we took account of during our inspection.
- 4.11 The housing service in Inverclyde has undergone a number of very significant changes over the last three years that have had a major impact on the way the service is delivered.
- 4.12 In 2001, the Council carried out a service review of homelessness and concluded that major changes were required to enable the Council to respond to current and future demands on the service. At that point, the temporary accommodation service was delivered by the Salvation Army on behalf of the Council. The Council decided to bring this part of the service in-house and took over the running of the Inverclyde Centre from April 2002.
- 4.13 Around a year later, responsibility for carrying out assessments of those presenting as homeless was transferred from generic housing staff based in area offices to specialised staff based in the Inverclyde Centre, in Greenock.

4.14 The Council now has a centralised, dedicated homelessness unit based at the Inverclyde Centre. The unit is currently divided into the following four teams covering ten members of staff and four managers.

- **Assessment Team.** Staff in this team interview applicants, carry out statutory assessments of homeless households, arrange emergency accommodation and assist homeless households to secure permanent accommodation.
- **Prevention Team.** This team works with groups and individuals at risk of being homeless, raises awareness of homelessness issues, provides housing information and advice, deals with individual cases to prevent homelessness and to help people leaving hospital, prison or care.
- **Accommodation Team.** This team manages all of the Council's temporary accommodation, including dealing with tenancy terms and conditions and the furnishing, decoration and repair of the properties.
- **Resettlement Team.** Staff in this team, work with people in temporary accommodation, offering support to prepare them for a permanent tenancy.

4.15 The above teams are supported by three members of staff who provide administration and reception services.

4.16 As part of the on-going process of change, the Council also recognised that the existing provision within the Inverclyde Centre was not suitable for all households to whom the Council had a duty to provide temporary accommodation. In the last year, the Council has begun to use a number of existing Council properties as furnished "scatter flats" to offer a wider range of options.

4.17 The Council has also just completed the first phase of a three-stage project to upgrade the Inverclyde Centre to provide better office space, a more accessible reception area, self-contained flats and improved facilities for disabled service users.

4.18 Most recently, a number of planned and unplanned changes were being made to the way the service is run while we were carrying out our inspection. These were due to the Council's decision, in December 2003, to restructure the Housing and Social Work Division in anticipation of the transfer of its housing to community ownership.

How good is the service?

Access

4.19 Although the Inverclyde Centre itself is reasonably accessible, homeless people are not always getting access to the service they are entitled to.

The Council is not always meeting its statutory obligation to provide temporary accommodation for homeless households who require it. During our shadowing of interviews during office hours, we saw two occasions where homeless applicants were told that no accommodation was available that day. Referrals were made to the Rough Sleepers Initiative (RSI) worker and Legal Services Agency (LSA) to further these applicants' cases. We were told by the Council's partners that their intervention often resulted in access to Council accommodation for applicants being secured, after this initial response.

- 4.20 We also saw evidence that people presenting to the Centre out of hours were not always provided with an interim assessment of their needs, advice and assistance or emergency accommodation. The details recorded in the 'night book', which amongst other things contains information on out of hours presentations, also showed a lack of referral of cases for a decision to appropriately trained officers. We saw 11 of these cases recorded over a 14 month period. The Council are aware of this situation and are taking action to improve the out of hours service.

Recommendation 1:

The Council must ensure that it can provide access to temporary accommodation to all homeless people, to whom it has a duty, including those presenting out of hours.

The Council should ensure that all staff likely to encounter homeless people clearly understand their role and that any applicant that claims to be homeless, or threatened with homelessness, is referred to an appropriate officer for assessment.

- 4.21 In terms of physical access the location of the office, alongside the temporary accommodation within the Inverclyde Centre, has some benefits. It allows vulnerable people to access the necessary accommodation and support services in one location. However, there are some potentially negative aspects of this. There was awareness that some vulnerable groups may be deterred from accessing the homelessness service due to the poor reputation of the Centre. This was borne out by feedback from service users.
- 4.22 The Council is in the process of improving accessibility to its offices for all service users through a programme of alterations and improvements, in line with the extended requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. This has resulted in easier access to a number of local offices and services, particularly for people with mobility or hearing difficulties. These

requirements are also being taken into account as part of the major upgrading work underway at the Inverclyde Centre.

- 4.23 Staff who deal with homeless presentations at the three area offices and sub offices either direct applicants to the Inverclyde Centre, or advise them to make contact via the freephone service located in the offices. However, these phones are located in places where applicants using them have to discuss confidential matters within earshot of other service users. In addition the list of telephone numbers beside the phone did not include the homelessness service.
- 4.24 Allocations and estates staff have adequate knowledge of the process for referring people to the homelessness service. However, reception staff are unable to provide the same level of help to applicants as they have a general lack of awareness of the referral process. Even the staff who are aware of the referral process are not recording initial presentations and not collecting information from those presenting at this stage. The Council, therefore, has no way of knowing if all those referred from area offices actually access the service.
- 4.25 Although numbers of applicants are increasing, official figures indicate that Inverclyde has a low proportion of homeless presentations for an area with its population (1.62% of households compared to the Scottish average of 2.08% in 2002/03)². We found that this could be due to under reporting of the number of people presenting as homeless under the previous appointments system. Over the period January to December 2003, 170 potentially homeless applicants, referred to the Inverclyde Centre for assessments, did not take up their appointment. These presentations were not subsequently recorded in the official figures. The Council has now changed this system and, as far as possible, provides immediate access to an assessment officer during office hours, without appointments. However, it is still not recording all contacts.

Recommendation 2:

The Council should ensure it records all contacts made at the Inverclyde Centre or at any other office where a homeless applicant could present, to ensure a consistent approach is taken to dealing with homeless applicants and to provide an accurate record of all homeless presentations.

The Council should also monitor whether the new access arrangements work better for service users.

² Source: Scottish Executive Statistical Bulletin Housing Series HSG/2003/5

Information and Advice

- 4.26 The Council generally has a good approach to the provision of information and advice and is meeting its statutory requirement to provide access to an independent advice and assistance service. The Council has commissioned this service from the Legal Services Agency (LSA). The LSA has achieved the appropriate HomePoint accreditation and provides a wide range of valuable services. These include a drop in and appointment service for a wide range of housing advice, an advice line, a free court advice desk at Greenock Sheriff Court as well as free representation at Greenock Sheriff Court as regards housing matters. The LSA provides the Council with reports on its service and how it is being used. These indicate that the LSA's service is working well.
- 4.27 One of the issues raised by service users in a survey carried out in 2002 was the lack of information provided by the Council about the services available to homeless people or those threatened with homelessness. We found that the quality and range of information now being provided for service users is better but still variable. The homeless service itself is fairly well publicised, with copies of the highly visible posters and postcards advertising the service appearing in a range of locations including council offices, libraries and health centres. However, it was not clear that there was a consistent process for maintaining the supply of these leaflets.
- 4.28 The Council is not as good at giving people information about how the service operates or what kind of help they can expect. The proposed Customer Service Standards produced as a result of the 2002 survey have never been fully implemented and service users are not aware of their existence.
- 4.29 There is a residents' handbook currently in draft which the Council intends to give to all residents in temporary accommodation. This will go a long way to improving this part of the service for this particular group.
- 4.30 We saw good information widely available about some other services that could help those facing homelessness, such as the Financial Fitness team, but we saw very little advertising or explanation of the independent information and advice service provided by the LSA.

Recommendation 3:

The Council should ensure that good information is made widely available about all of the services and support agencies in its area that could provide assistance to those facing homelessness.

The Council should tell users of the service and all those involved in providing the services about the quality of the service the Council is aiming to provide.

- 4.31 The Council is making good progress in training the members of the Homelessness Team to the national standards for housing information and advice.
- 4.32 The Council has developed some excellent tools to support the provision of information and advice but is not using them as effectively as it could. It has developed a comprehensive Resource Directory that contains information on all of the services available for homeless people in the area and all of the agencies that provide them. This was developed in partnership with a network of other advice providers but is not currently being used to support the provision of its information and advice service. Another tool in development is a database of the housing options available in the area, although the timescale for completion of this work has been extended.
- 4.33 The Council is making particular efforts in relation to the provision of information and advice for young people. It has developed a good, well laid out and informative pack for young people taking up a tenancy. It includes details about rights and responsibilities as well as useful information on how to interact with the wider community. It also has information on useful contacts including the main agencies within the area.
- 4.34 Staff within the housing teams considered this a useful tool when signing up young people to first tenancies. At the time of the inspection there were no supplies of the pack in the offices we visited.

Recommendation 4:

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.

- 4.35 The Council is also using the Scottish Council for Single Homeless 'Streets Ahead' pack, which it has been a key partner in helping to

develop. This pack is currently available in the Inverclyde Centre and the Council is planning to use it as part of a Housing Education project to help prevent homelessness amongst young people. There is more information about this project in the 'Positive Practice' annex at the end of this report.

- 4.36 The recent changes to Council structures mean that the homeless service is likely to benefit from the work being done by the social work department's Public Information Officer. This will update and improve the range and quality of information publicly available on all of the services covered by the post, which now includes homelessness.
- 4.37 The social work department has been working over the last few months to improve the availability of information to service users in alternative formats and community languages and to ensure the availability of translation and interpreting services. Work was underway during the inspection to extend these activities to include the homelessness service.

Prevention

- 4.38 The Council has recognised the importance of prevention work and support in creating sustainable tenancies, particularly given the vulnerable client group the homeless service is dealing with. It is doing this well through the work of the prevention team, local agencies and some other sections of the Council.
- 4.39 The homelessness team provides support to:
- people who are at risk of homelessness;
 - people who have difficulty sustaining their existing tenancy;
 - tenants in prison and those people about to leave prison;
 - owner-occupiers; and
 - private landlords.
- 4.40 The homeless team and the area office teams work closely with a variety of agencies in the prevention of homelessness:
- A voluntary sector agency, Carr Gomm, provides continuing support to tenants who are having difficulty in maintaining their tenancies.
 - The Legal Services Agency is a crucial partner in dealing with cases where there are issues of rent arrears and homelessness.
 - Financial Fitness provides independent advice and information on welfare benefits and helps to maximise income for households.
 - A rent deposit scheme has been set up with the co-operation of a range of private landlords.

4.41 The Council is also working well with HMP Greenock and local hospitals to minimise the risk of homelessness for people coming out of prison or hospital, and with local RSLs to identify tenants who are at risk of losing their homes. At the moment, the Council is only contacted by the RSLs when a tenant has been served with decree and an eviction date has been set.

Recommendation 5:

The Council should work with RSLs to ensure it gets earlier notification of tenants who have been served with a Notice of Proceedings for Recovery of Possession.

4.42 The Council takes a well-managed approach to the resettlement of high-risk offenders. We saw good inter-agency planning, involving the homeless team, to address areas such as risk assessment, community protection and accommodation issues. The cases we saw were well documented and had a focus on the needs of both the offender and the wider community.

4.43 There are also aspects of the Council's housing management service and its work with other Council services that help ensure that tenancies are sustainable:

- The arrears procedure now includes homeless prevention measures at an earlier stage and signposting to both the prevention team and the LSA.
- The Council's Antisocial Investigations Team (ASIST) works to prevent families from becoming homeless by intervening at an early stage to resolve neighbour disputes.
- The Throughcare team within Children's Services, along with the Barnardo's Threshold Project, is providing a well-structured and coordinated approach to looked after and accommodated young people.

4.44 Despite the effort the Council is putting into this area, it is not in a strong position to assess the impact of its approach to prevention of homelessness as it does not record follow up information on outcomes or the results of referrals to other agencies.

Recommendation 6:

The Council should record, monitor and review the impact of its prevention work including the outcomes of all cases that are referred to other agencies.

Assessment Process

- 4.45 The Council treats people well when they conduct homeless assessment interviews. We found that applicants are treated in a sensitive and supportive way. This is a good aspect of the service and the seven interviewees we spoke to were satisfied with the approach taken.
- 4.46 We found serious weaknesses in the Council's approach to the homeless assessment process. In some cases poor quality decisions are being made which are leading to inappropriate outcomes for the applicants.
- 4.47 We reviewed 85 cases in total, through file checks and the HL1 statistics collected for reporting to the Scottish Executive, and found the following weaknesses in the way assessments are being carried out or recorded:
- In one case an applicant was assessed as not homeless, contrary to the available evidence.
 - In one repeat application the Council had reached different decisions each time, with no evidence of a change in circumstances.
 - In several cases the burden of proof was placed on the applicant, which does not comply with the Code of Guidance.
 - In 67% of cases there was insufficient information on file to allow us to see whether the decision taken was correct.
 - Some declarations were not signed to confirm that applicants had been warned of the penalties of providing false information.
 - In 89% of file checks there had been no quality control of the assessment process. Those that had been checked were mainly appeal cases.
- 4.48 Key factors influencing the quality of decisions being made are a lack of:
- effective staff training for new and inexperienced members of staff;
 - detailed guidance on the Council's assessment process;
 - good recording mechanisms for use during interviews;
 - support and supervision for assessment officers; and
 - an effective framework of monitoring and quality control.
- 4.49 The Council responded well to the issues we raised with it during the inspection about the quality of assessments and has already changed its

assessment process to take account of our comments. The Council has also committed to providing training on assessments for key staff.

Recommendation 7:

The Council should take action to address all of the weaknesses we identified in the assessment process to ensure that all homeless applications are dealt with in a fair and consistent way.

4.50 The Council issues decision letters in most cases although it was not clear that it was happening in all cases. The letters meet most legislative requirements. However, the quality of the letters could be improved in a number of areas:

- The letters do not inform applicants that they can seek independent legal advice on the decision if dissatisfied, as recommended in the Code of Guidance.
- They do not signpost applicants to the advice and assistance that can be provided by the LSA.
- They do not meet the requirement to explain how decisions have been reached. This means applicants assessed as non-priority or not homeless do not have sufficient information to appeal the decision.

Recommendation 8:

The Council should ensure that decision letters are sent out in all cases and that copies are kept on file. It should review the content of its decision letters to ensure they comply with all legislative requirements and the Code of Guidance.

Appeals

4.51 The Council's appeal process, for homeless applicants who are unhappy with decisions made by the Council, meets statutory requirements. The Council advises applicants that they have 21 days to appeal the decision reached and provides accommodation for the duration of any review. However, the Council has not set itself targets for responding to appeals.

4.52 Since April 2003 the Council has received 15 appeals, of which we reviewed eight. The Council was not able to provide details for the other seven. The original decision was upheld in only one of the cases we looked at. Five of the reviews overturned the original decision of non-priority on the basis that the applicants were vulnerable. Of the remaining two cases, one was not dealt with as the appeal request was

outwith the 21 day appeal period and the final appeal was not resolved due to losing contact with the applicant almost two months after the appeal request.

Recommendation 9:

The Council should set target timescales for dealing with appeals and make service users aware of them. It should also monitor and report on its performance against these targets.

- 4.53 Our review of these appeal cases also highlighted the impact of the weaknesses in the assessment process, particularly the lack of investigation into the potential vulnerability of clients.
- 4.54 The Council publicises the appeal process through the homeless decision letters and the bookmark leaflet that explains the Homeless Assessment Interview. However, there a number of areas where the Council is not doing enough to inform applicants about their right to appeal, for example applicants are not advised of their right to appeal during their homeless assessment interview or when offers of temporary accommodation are made. The right to appeal is not publicised in reception areas or interview rooms. Decision letters could include more information on the appeals process including when they can expect a response from the Council.

Recommendation 10:

The Council should ensure that the right to appeal is widely publicised including during homeless assessment interviews and when offers of accommodation are made.

- 4.55 The Council's decision letters on the appeal process contain more information than the original letters on the outcome of assessments, outlining the conditions applying to priority need. These could be further improved by the inclusion of details on the applicant's right to seek a judicial review.

Temporary Accommodation

- 4.56 The provision of temporary accommodation in Inverclyde is getting better. This process of improvement was widely acknowledged by everyone we spoke to, and was supported by feedback from service users who had previous experience of the service.

4.57 However, at the present time, there are a number of key aspects of the provision of temporary accommodation, particularly within the Inverclyde Centre, which require further substantial improvement.

4.58 The table below shows the Council's performance in the provision of temporary accommodation for the three years to 2002/03.

| | Inverclyde Council | | | Scotland |
|--|--------------------|---------|---------|----------|
| | 2000/01 | 2001/02 | 2002/03 | 2002/03 |
| Number of homeless households assessed as in priority need | 323 | 258 | 420 | - |
| Number of homeless households in priority need per 10,000 | 82.6 | 68.8 | 106.4 | 127.5 |
| Number of homeless households provided with temporary hostel accommodation | 187 | 131 | 79 | - |
| Average length of stay for homeless households in temporary hostel accommodation | 62 days | 76 days | 52 days | - |
| Number accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation | 1 | 0 | 42 | - |
| Percentage accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation | 0.0% | 0.7% | 28.8% | 36.7% |
| Average length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation | 0 days | 2 days | 14 days | 26 days |
| Number accommodated in Council furnished accommodation | 0 | 21 | 25 | - |
| Percentage accommodated in Council furnished accommodation | 0.0% | 13.7% | 17.1% | 25.6% |
| Average length of stay in Council furnished accommodation | 0 days | 88 days | 97 days | 142 days |

Source: Audit Scotland's website – Performance Indicators 2002/03 Compendium.

4.59 Since April 2003 the number of homeless applications in Inverclyde has continued to rise. This combined with the changes in the duties placed on the Council has seen an increase in the number of households placed in temporary accommodation.

- 4.60 Changes made to the service in Inverclyde since the end of 2002/03 will have a significant impact on performance in respect of temporary accommodation. The Council currently has 30 places in the Inverclyde Centre and this number will continue to reduce as the work to upgrade the Centre progresses. However, in the last year the Council has increased the use of its own properties as temporary furnished accommodation. There are now 80 of these 'scatter flats' in use. Very few people are now being offered bed and breakfast accommodation.
- 4.61 However, the Council is still not able to respond fully to the demand for temporary accommodation. As described in the 'Access' section of this report, we saw a small number of cases where the Council was not able to offer temporary accommodation of any sort to people to whom it had a duty.
- 4.62 The introduction of the 'scatter flats' has been a very popular development with service users. The properties that are being used at present are almost all in high turnover areas of Port Glasgow and Greenock. There is a fairly high concentration of 'scatter flats' within certain locations and this has led to some management problems. The Council is intending to address these problems in the short term through the development of 'staff flats' within some locations while in the longer term looking to reduce the concentration in these areas as the flats are replaced as part of a rolling programme. However, it was not clear that this was being done on a planned basis as described in the 'Planning' section below.
- 4.63 The Council accepts that the physical condition of the accommodation within the Inverclyde Centre is of poor quality and is undertaking renovation work to improve the flats to meet current and proposed legislative requirements as well as service user expectations. The physical quality and the facilities available in the 'scatter flats' are considerably better than the Inverclyde Centre. However, the internal quality of the flats and their fixtures and fittings is variable.

Recommendation 11:

The Council should establish a consistent letting standard for temporary accommodation and should provide information to homeless households on the standard of accommodation and services they can expect.

- 4.64 There are aspects of the management of temporary accommodation that require to be addressed. We found that the Council does not always take account of the needs of households when allocating temporary accommodation. As a result we found instances of inappropriate use of

accommodation for families with children, those with current or previous drug dependency and other households with particular needs.

- 4.65 The Council does not have a set of established house rules for residents and staff within the Inverclyde Centre. As a result residents are not clear about what is expected from them and staff are not clear about what action can be taken in specific circumstances. The new residents' handbook could be used as a way of providing clear guidance on this issue.

Recommendation 12:

The Council should ensure that clear guidance is issued to staff and residents on how the Inverclyde Centre operates and on standards of acceptable behaviour.

- 4.66 The Council's rental charge for its temporary accommodation varies from £225.05 per week within the Inverclyde Centre to £100.65 for a 'scatter flat'. This is in addition to the basic level of rent charge on the HRA rent system.
- 4.67 Our review of closed case files found that people are spending a considerable time in temporary accommodation. Since their introduction, the average time spent in scatter flats was 111 days. At least 15 current residents have been in temporary accommodation for over a year. Of these, nine have received no offers of permanent accommodation. The length of time that people are staying in temporary accommodation is a result of the process for considering them for allocations of permanent accommodation.
- 4.68 The Council provides good support to people who are allocated temporary accommodation via the resettlement officers. Although the kind of support varies according to the individual's needs this can include:
- safety and security;
 - housecare;
 - managing money;
 - lifeskills;
 - assistance in accessing training and employment opportunities;
 - encouraging people to maintain family and other social networks; and
 - advice on practicalities of permanent accommodation, including referral to other support agencies to help people maintain a tenancy.
- 4.69 The Council would like to continue to provide this support once residents have been allocated permanent tenancies but in practice this is not

happening, due to resource constraints. Service users have expressed some concern about this, but since the Council is not monitoring outcomes it is not able to see if this has impact on the long-term sustainability of tenancies.

- 4.70 We found that the resettlement officers provide an invaluable service and maintain close contact with residents of temporary accommodation provided by the Council. However, resettlement workers do not work with those who are not provided with temporary accommodation or those placed in bed and breakfast accommodation. We found that of 74 priority homeless cases that did not go into temporary accommodation, only 5 received support.

Recommendation 13:

The Council should ensure that resettlement support is provided to homeless applicants on the basis of their assessed needs regardless of accommodation type.

Permanent Accommodation

- 4.71 The Council does not collate or analyse information on the outcomes being achieved for homeless applicants. We have had to do our own analysis of basic data from a variety of sources across the Council, to identify the outcomes for homeless people.
- 4.72 On the basis of the information we collected, we found that a significant number of people assessed as priority homeless are not getting access to the permanent housing they need:
- The Council assessed 311 people as being homeless and in priority need for the period April 2003 to March 2004.
 - The Council had outcome information for 143 of those priority cases of which only 79 had been made offers of permanent accommodation (55%). Our own detailed file checks supported this finding.
 - The information from the allocations system for the same period showed 194 allocations to homeless households, which indicates that 62% of all households assessed as priority homeless are being housed by the Council.
- 4.73 The failure to properly collect or analyse monitoring information on outcomes means that the Council does not know what is happening to those assessed as priority homeless who are not getting permanent accommodation and, as a result, it cannot be sure that it is discharging its statutory duty to these households.

- 4.74 The Council is making positive efforts to improve the process for the provision of permanent accommodation to homeless households. Staff from the homeless team and the area offices are meeting regularly to follow through individual cases and work towards positive outcomes for these households.
- 4.75 The Council has arrangements in place to ensure that homeless households get reasonable access to RSL properties as they become vacant. These are working well.
- 4.76 The Council operates a separate housing list for homeless people to whom it owes a duty to secure permanent accommodation. The Council allocates permanent properties to homeless people in a different way to other applicants of housing although this approach is not set out in any published policy. Inverclyde Council is obliged under section 21 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 to publish its rules on the allocation of its housing, including those rules which it applies to homeless people.
- 4.77 There are no policy or procedural guidelines for staff on how to decide who to allocate vacant properties to. Allocations are therefore being made on the basis of discretionary decisions by individual members of staff, drawing names from the different housing lists. There was, however, a general consensus amongst staff that we spoke to that homeless households are given the same access to housing as those first time applicants on the waiting list. It was reported that homeless applicants are not given access to high demand properties. These are largely restricted to transfer applicants or those with high levels of medical need. The outcomes information we collected supports this.

Recommendation 14:

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.

How well is the service managed?

- 4.78 In this section, we pull out some of the key things that we think have an impact on how well the Council's homelessness service is managed. These include how plans are implemented, how performance is monitored and managed, systems in place to help staff deliver the service, and how well resources are used.

Planning and priorities

- 4.79 The Council has the basic elements in place of a sound planning framework for the homelessness service, although, with the reorganisation of housing services, this framework is now in transition. Along with the Council's Homelessness Strategy, which has been revised to take account of the comments received from the Scottish Executive, staff also produce Service Plans for both housing and social work. Given the range of areas that these Service Plans have to cover, they are quite high level documents and so it is the Homelessness Strategy, and the integrated Action Plan, that is the key driver for how the homelessness service is developed and delivered on the ground.
- 4.80 The Action Plan includes a wide range of SMART³ targets and objectives aimed at improving the homelessness service. The responsibility for monitoring progress against these lies with the multi-agency Homelessness Partnership (now Steering Group) that developed the Strategy. During the inspection, the Council was in the process of making some changes to the running of the group to improve leadership and communication.
- 4.81 The Council is successfully implementing a number of aspects of the strategy including:
- the development of a range of temporary accommodation units;
 - introducing a health visitor surgery at the Inverclyde Centre;
 - holding a twice weekly surgery in HMP Greenock;
 - developing arrangements with local hospitals for a planned approach to the release of patients;
 - implementing a joint training agenda with other members of the Steering Group; and
 - commissioning an independent information and advice service.
- 4.82 The Council recently recognised that some of the timescales were slipping and took action to step up the role of the Steering Group to drive the implementation process forward.
- 4.83 Frontline staff have had little structured involvement in the development of key priorities for their service so far. However, we found that the more established staff are well aware of the challenges they are facing and the priorities for action. Staff also feel that their informal comments on the direction and delivery of the service are taken on board. This should continue to improve with the dissemination of the Strategy and Action

³ Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timebound.

Plan, and we saw indications of increasing staff involvement at this implementation stage.

- 4.84 Elected members have also had little involvement in developing the planning framework, beyond their formal consideration and approval of the Strategy and Service Plans. However, the regular reports put forward by staff on the changes taking place in the homeless service have contributed to broader ownership of the process. The corporate commitment to the service is indicated by the level of funding which has been approved over a number of years to upgrade the facilities and maintain the staffing level of the service at a time when the Council is making cuts to other areas of service.
- 4.85 Although the Action Plan gives the Council a good basis for measuring progress against the Strategy, the limited number of quantitative targets set for the homelessness service restricts the Council's ability to assess the impact that the implementation of the Strategy will have on the quality of the service it is delivering.
- 4.86 The Council recognises in the Homeless Strategy the need to provide a range of temporary accommodation for families, young people, and those with alcohol, drug and mental health issues. The Council is taking action to respond to this need, as outlined above. However, this action is not part of a structured approach based on a full assessment of the demands being faced. The Council does not have robust needs analysis of how much and what type of accommodation is required to meet current and future requirements or good information on where the current gaps in provision are.
- 4.87 The Council acknowledges that it does not currently have good links with organisations representing equalities groups in relation to homelessness issues. However, it intends to make use of established networks within the social work service to help establish these contacts.

Recommendation 15:

The Council should develop a more strategic approach to the provision of temporary accommodation based on a sound analysis of current and future needs.

Performance management

- 4.88 Performance management is recognised by the Council as an area of weakness. The Council accepts that the collection of performance information is underdeveloped across the housing service, including

homelessness. This is partly explained by the limits of the Council's existing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) system, which is out of date and unable to respond effectively to the complex and expanding needs of a unitary authority like Inverclyde. An upgraded ICT system was being introduced to some parts of the housing service during the inspection but is not due to be in operation in the homeless service for some time. In addition, we saw very little evidence of a culture of performance being established in the parts of the service that we examined.

- 4.89 We found that staff in the homeless service are highly motivated and committed to providing a better service. The absence of an effective performance management framework makes this task more difficult. Within the homelessness service, we found very poor collection and monitoring of basic quantitative information such as the time spent by residents in temporary accommodation, the time taken to complete assessments or the number of assessments being taken to appeal.
- 4.90 The Council has set itself targets in certain areas. In relation to homeless assessments, staff are working to an informal target of seven days, although this is not being routinely monitored. It is also considerably shorter than the 28 days recommended by the Code of Guidance. Our review of cases found that staff were completing assessments in an average of 24 days.
- 4.91 There is no monitoring at a service level of the outcomes for homeless applicants and, at the time of the inspection, there was no monitoring or verification of the quality of service being delivered by staff or by agencies delivering services on behalf of the Council.
- 4.92 These are serious weaknesses that make it very difficult for the Council to be aware of how good its existing service is, to identify problems, to take corrective action and to see what, if any, impact is being made by the major changes the service is continuing to undergo.
- 4.93 The Council has recognised this and responded before the end of the inspection by introducing improvements to quality control arrangements in some areas to enable it to better identify and remedy problems at an early stage.

Recommendation 16:

The Council should set realistic targets and 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.

- 4.94 Although we found good informal relationships between operational managers and their teams in the homelessness team, there is no system for frontline staff to meet with their managers on a one to one basis to discuss workload or performance issues. As a result, there is a lack of accountability for performance or service quality at an individual and team level. These drawbacks have been recognised within the service and staff are examining existing models of supervision and development operating in other parts of the Council with the intention of piloting the system with managers.
- 4.95 Although we found high levels of staff morale and commitment across the teams, we consider that these weaknesses in staff support and management are having a negative impact on the service being delivered, as seen in earlier parts of the report.
- 4.96 As highlighted above, the Council has previously asked service-users for their views of the homelessness service, as part of a survey carried out by the Tenant Participation and Advisory Service in 2002. The outcomes from this survey are discussed in the Continuous Improvement section below. The Council has recently commissioned a consultant to carry out a review of the current service, which also includes the collection of feedback from recent users of the homelessness service, along with the views of staff and partners of the Council. The objectives of the project are to identify the impact of the changes that have been made so far and to inform future action. Some of the views expressed by service users have been incorporated into this report.
- 4.97 The staff working in the homelessness service also receive more informal feedback as part of their ongoing contact with service users. This has led to a good understanding of the needs and demands of the people using the service at an anecdotal level, and we saw clear indications that the service is being geared to meeting these needs, as far as existing resources allow.
- 4.98 There is no formal process for capturing or recording this kind of feedback although some issues are picked up through the Service Manager's fortnightly meetings with the Assistant Managers. This makes it difficult to quantify some of the problems being raised, to take a systematic approach

to dealing with matters of concern or to monitor the impact of any action taken.

Recommendation 17:

The Council should improve the collection and recording of both formal and informal feedback from service users and should clearly demonstrate to service users how this information is being used to improve its service.

- 4.99 The Council operates a corporate complaints process which should cover all services, although there is no monitoring or reporting of complaints received or their outcomes. A set of leaflets explains the procedures to be followed by complainants or by staff receiving complaints. These are currently being updated to reflect new developments so they were not widely available during the inspection. There are also separate guidance procedures for homelessness staff.
- 4.100 We did not look at the operation of the formal complaints process in any detail during the inspection as almost no formal complaints have been recorded about the homeless service. The Public Services Ombudsman has not received any complaints relating to the homeless service in the last three years.
- 4.101 Any concerns raised by users of the homeless service are treated either as a request for a service or as an informal complaint. In either case, staff try to resolve the matter immediately, without recording anything in writing. While this is in line with the staff procedures, as with the issue of service user feedback above, the lack of any recording makes it impossible to monitor patterns in the issues being raised or to check that things are indeed being resolved to the complainant's satisfaction at this initial stage.

Recommendation 18:

The Council should record all complaints or issues raised by users of the homeless service and monitor the outcome of action taken to resolve these matters.

- 4.102 The Council recognises that it is not collecting adequate monitoring information to assess who is using its homelessness services and the information that is collected may not be accurate. We found very few cases where ethnic monitoring forms had been completed and kept on file. In one of the two cases we saw where applicants were identified as belonging to an ethnic minority, the ethnicity information recorded on the

form did not fit with the information on file provided by the applicant. The Council is not monitoring use of the service by other equalities groups.

Recommendation 19:

The Council should ensure that equalities monitoring information is routinely collected from those approaching the homelessness service and that staff receive the necessary training to carry out the process. The results of monitoring should be reported and used by the Council to inform future action where necessary.

Continuous improvement

- 4.103 As outlined in the context section of this report, the homeless service in Inverclyde has undergone a major programme of change over the last two years. These changes have been undertaken because the Council recognised that the previous approach was not meeting expectations of service quality and that it would not be capable of responding to rising demand or planned legislative change.
- 4.104 The feedback we have received from everyone we spoke to; staff, partners and service users, supports the view that the service is working better than it did in the past and that it is continuing to improve. This is confirmed by the initial feedback from service users as part of the Council's current review of the service. We also saw changes being put in place during the inspection that reinforced this commitment to continuous improvement. As recommended above, a basic set of quantitative performance indicators developed around the key priorities for the service would allow the Council to track its progress.
- 4.105 We recognise the difficulties that all local authorities face in encouraging service users to contribute to the development of their homelessness services. We are also aware that very different, and often more informal approaches than those taken with permanent tenants, are likely to be appropriate. However, we found that the Council could do more to directly include service users in developing or improving its homelessness service and could make better use of the information it does get about service user views.
- 4.106 The TPAS survey in 2002 reported a range of positive things about the homelessness service. It also resulted in a range of recommendations for improvements in the homelessness service. Several of the most important issues have been dealt with or are being addressed through the changes the Council has made to the way that the service is being run, as we explain above. These include providing alternative forms of temporary

accommodation for families, the provision of private interview facilities and the on-going improvements to the facilities offered in the Inverclyde Centre.

- 4.107 However, we found that some of the key things highlighted in the TPAS report are still areas where the Council could improve its services to those applying as homeless. These include the provision of information about the homeless service, the quality of assessments and the provision of support for people moving into permanent accommodation.
- 4.108 One of the primary objectives of the survey was to help the Council to draw up standards for its homelessness service. As reported above, the resulting Customer Service Standards for the homelessness service were not implemented.
- 4.109 The consultancy project currently underway to review the service will help the Council to see the impact of the changes that have already been made and to identify further areas for improvement. However, the results will have to be followed up with action to maximise the benefits from the work.

Recommendation 20:

The Council should ensure that it makes full use of the outputs from the service review by using the results to:

- inform future strategic and operational priorities;
- draw up a planned programme of work for the service with responsibilities clearly allocated and resources identified; and
- implement the plans within an agreed timescale.

Information management

- 4.110 As discussed above, we found major weaknesses in the way the Council records and holds information, which meant that the Council was not able to provide us with meaningful information about outcomes for homeless people. The out of date ICT system continues to restrict the effective management of information but the Council has developed a number of local databases to help fill the gaps. However, these are not being used to their full potential to help staff see what impact their work is having.
- 4.111 The homeless service has a complex system of multiple records, both paper and electronic, for each applicant or service user. This makes it difficult to take an integrated approach and increases the potential for duplication or communication difficulties in dealing with individual cases.

Some work has been started to centralise these files but, at the time of the inspection, this was at a very early stage.

- 4.112 The files for properties used as temporary accommodation are also poorly kept. We found that six out of the forty-one files we checked did not contain a copy of the occupancy agreement and there were no admission forms for sixteen of the resident households. Other files contained incomplete admission forms or incorrect details of the rent figure for the property. We found no records on files that tenants had been informed of rent increases for the properties and no repairs checklist confirming that gas and electrical safety checks had been carried out.

Recommendation 21:

The Council should review the information it holds on file to ensure that all available information relating to a household, and any property they are occupying, is available to all members of the homeless team.

Accountability

- 4.113 The Council does not publish, or otherwise report, very much about the performance of its homeless service, largely because it does not collect very much formal performance information, as highlighted above.
- 4.114 Elected members receive regular financial monitoring reports on the Housing Revenue Account, which include information about the homeless service. They are also regularly updated on the context, the challenges facing the service and the changes being made to the delivery of the service in response, but the reports do not include information on how the service is performing.
- 4.115 The only information on performance that is regularly made available to senior staff at a service or corporate level is the statutory indicators, so it is not clear how this service is being held accountable at a corporate level. There is no reporting of performance information to service users or other stakeholders.

Policies and procedures

- 4.116 There is very little written guidance available for new or existing staff on what is expected of them in delivering a day-to-day service. To date, the Council has not had a structured system for developing or reviewing policies or existing practice. The Council has begun to develop a suite of policies and procedures for the homelessness service but very few of these have been finalised or implemented yet. The relatively small,

centralised nature of the team makes it possible for newer staff to get advice and guidance from their more experienced colleagues but, given the speed of change within the service, this is resulting in additional staff pressure in a situation of already stretched resources.

- 4.117 The shortage of written information means that service users do not know what they can expect from the service and staff do not know clearly what is expected of them. This has already resulted in problems for the service in managing performance failures.

Recommendation 22:

The Council should take a planned approach to developing a comprehensive framework of policies and procedures, which involves both frontline staff and relevant partners, and which clearly sets out the outcomes or objectives the Council wants to achieve.

The Council should ensure that relevant training is provided for staff to ensure effective implementation of new policies and procedures.

- 4.118 The Council has a Housing Services Equalities Policy which, when it was approved in September 2003, also covered the homeless service. This policy sets out the Council's commitment to ensuring that its services are equally accessible to everyone, to setting targets and to monitoring its own performance in relation to equality. However, no target setting or monitoring has been introduced in the homeless service.

Managing its resources

- 4.119 Inverclyde Council deals with the budgeting, funding and accounting for the homelessness service under the heading of the Housing Revenue Account, unlike many local authorities who place this corporate service under the heading of the General Fund. However, the costs of providing the service are entirely met from Housing Support Grant, funding for specific initiatives from the Scottish Executive and the charges made to residents in the Council's temporary accommodation.
- 4.120 The Council's commitment to the homelessness service has been demonstrated by the maintenance of staffing levels within the service in the context of staffing reductions in many other parts of the Council.
- 4.121 The homelessness service does not have service level agreements in place, either as a stand alone service or as part of the broader housing or social work services, with the other internal council departments that provide it with services eg finance or personnel. As a result there is no

clear framework that sets out the standards of service that the homelessness service can expect from these sections or the financial basis for the central recharges they make to the homeless service.

Recommendation 23:

The homelessness service should develop service level agreements with internal service providers to ensure that it achieves best value for its central recharges.

4.122 The energy and commitment that we saw from frontline staff is an important resource for the Council in its efforts to improve its homeless service. However, we found a number of weaknesses in the systems and structures available to support these staff in achieving the desired improvements. These include:

- a lack of written policies and procedures;
- very little formal monitoring of performance or outcomes;
- no service-specific induction training for new staff;
- no formal staff supervision or appraisal process; and
- a lack of quality control mechanisms.

Recommendation 24:

The Council should ensure that it provides the necessary systems and support that its staff need to do their job effectively and deliver a good quality homelessness service.

4.123 Staff in the homelessness service are not receiving enough of the right kind of training to allow them to do their jobs properly. Staff were provided with specialised training at the point that the new centralised service was introduced. However, a number of new staff have joined the team since then. Changes have also continued to occur in the way the service is delivered and current training arrangements have not been able to keep up.

4.124 The Council is aware of the need to provide further training for its staff in this service. There is a comprehensive system in place for identifying and providing training in operation in the social work department and arrangements were being made during the inspection to ensure that the homelessness team was incorporated into these systems.

Recommendation 25:

The Council should work with its staff in the homeless service to identify the priorities for further training to support service delivery and should make use of all appropriate systems and resources to ensure these needs are met.

- 4.125 Corporate training courses are available for staff on equalities issues although there is no formal monitoring of who has attended. Both the housing service and the social work department in Inverclyde have developed their own training on equalities, but partly due to the level of staff turnover in the homeless service, a number of staff have not yet received any training on this subject. Further training is scheduled for later this year.

Recommendation 26:

The Council should monitor the provision of training on equalities to ensure all staff dealing with homeless people receive the necessary training within a reasonable timescale.

- 4.126 As discussed above, the Council has recognised that its existing ICT systems are inadequate to meet its requirements. It is expected that the new system being introduced will allow improved performance monitoring and better communication between teams and departments. Within the homelessness service, some staff were only just getting their own computer at the time of the inspection so the infrastructure is now being put in place to support improvements in the future.
- 4.127 The Council's Standing Orders, Standing Orders in Relation to Contracts and Financial Regulations between them set the framework for the procurement of goods and services and the appointment of contractors. The Council followed this framework in appointing the contractors and consultants to carry out the first phase of upgrading the Inverclyde Centre. The framework could be improved by including clear guidance for staff on the criteria to be considered when selecting firms from the overall approved list to be on tender lists for specific projects.
- 4.128 The homeless service currently has a budget of £130,000 per annum for the purchase of furniture for temporary accommodation properties. The Council does not have a contract in place for the provision of this furniture. Instead, both individual replacement items and complete sets of furniture for new lets are purchased as required, throughout the year, from a small number of local suppliers. In acting as it has, without tendering the supply

of these goods, the Council breached its Financial Regulations and cannot demonstrate that it has achieved value for money.

Recommendation 27:

The Council must ensure that it always follows its Financial Regulations, statutory duties and good practice when procuring goods and services. It should provide support to staff to ensure that they understand their responsibilities.

How likely is the service to improve?

4.129 We consider that Inverclyde's homelessness service is likely to improve because:

- The Council is clearly committed to improving the service it delivers and has a good track record in seeing through difficult changes.
- The Council is actively seeking service user views on its service.
- The Council is already reviewing its homelessness service with the intention of making improvements where these are needed.
- In future, the homelessness service will be able to take advantage of its closer relationship with the social work department by building on the established systems that department already has in place.

4.130 The factors pulling against improvement include:

- the weaknesses in monitoring information and systems to allow the Council to identify the scale of problems and see how its performance is changing;
- the range of areas requiring improvement;
- the weaknesses in support systems for staff implementing improvements; and
- the limited support structures outwith the Division for improvements.

4.131 On balance, we consider that the prospects for improvement in the homelessness service are promising.

APPENDIX 1

Groups and third parties consulted

- Audit Scotland
- Barnardos Threshold Project
- Bield Housing Association Ltd
- Carr Gomm
- Communities Scotland Tenants Participation Development Unit
- Federation of Inverclyde Tenants/Residents Associations (FITRA)
- Financial Fitness Resource Team
- Inverclyde Advocacy Service
- Inverclyde Regeneration Partnership
- Inverclyde Women's Aid
- Kirk Care Housing Association Ltd
- Legal Services Agency
- NHS Argyll & Clyde
- Oak Tree Housing Association Ltd
- Port Glasgow Housing Association Ltd
- SACRO, Safeguarding Communities - Reducing Offending
- Scottish Executive Development Department
- Scottish Public Services Ombudsman
- Social Work Service Planning

Interviews/meetings held

We held discussions with the following groups within the Council:

Homeless Team

- Accommodation staff
- Assessment staff
- Assistant Managers for Assessment/Prevention, Furnished Accommodation & Resettlement
- Group discussion with Homeless Team staff
- Homeless Services Manager
- Prevention staff
- Reception staff
- Resettlement staff
- Rough Sleepers Initiative staff

Port Glasgow Area Team

- Admin & Finance staff
- Area Managers

- Allocations Officers
- Assistant Area Managers
- Estate Officers
- Receptionists

Greenock West and Gourock Area Team

- Admin & Finance staff
- Area Managers
- Allocations Officers
- Assistant Area Managers
- Estate Officers
- Receptionists

Greenock East and Central Area Team

- Admin & Finance staff
- Area Managers
- Allocations Officers
- Assistant Area Managers
- Estate Officers
- Receptionists

Councillors

- Alan Blair (Scottish Liberal Democrat)
- Sandy Nimmo (Scottish Liberal Democrat)
- Campbell Snoddy (Scottish Liberal Democrat)
- Stephen McCabe (Scottish Labour)

Staff in other Council departments:

- ASIST (Anti Social Behaviour Investigating Team)
- Chief Executive
- Community Drugs Team
- Community Mental Health Team
- Director of Social Work
- Head of Finance and Administration
- Head of Housing
- Head of Legal and Support Services
- Head of Personnel Services
- Principal Officer Policy and Grants
- Project Architect for Inverclyde Centre
- Public Information Officer
- QS Manager

- Service Manager, Strategic Services (Social Work)
- Supporting People Manager
- Throughcare Team

We also observed the following meetings:

- Allocation/accommodation meeting
- External Agencies meeting, HMP Greenock
- Homeless Strategy meeting

Reality checks

- Allocation file checks
- Anti-social behaviour file checks
- Assessment file checks
- Contract for refurbishment of Inverclyde Centre File Checks
- Disability Discrimination Audits
- Evictions file checks
- High Risk Offenders file checks
- HL1 records file checks
- Homeless assessments file checks
- Local Area checks for Information and Advice in Public Areas
- Personnel file checks
- Rent arrears file checks
- Resettlement file checks
- RSI file checks
- Shadowing Assessment interviews
- Shadowing Furnished Accommodation during visits/Inspections of Scatter Flats & Inverclyde Centre Flats
- Shadowing prevention interviews
- Shadowing resettlement interviews
- Temporary accommodation file checks
- Temporary Accommodation Rent Arrears file checks
- Tenancy Sign ups of temporary & permanent Accommodation

Key documents reviewed

- Inspection Submission

Guiding Standards

- Absence Control Procedures
- Absence monitoring Returns
- Audit Committee Role - Members' Handbook
- Best Value Service Review into the Homelessness Strategy Service

- Communication within the Council: Standards designed to improve communications with the Council's Customers
- Communication within the Council: Standards designed to improve internal communications
- Complaints Procedure – “How Your Complaint is Being Dealt With”
- Customer Feedback Form
- Customer Feedback Staff Guidance notes
- Definition of Formal/Informal Complaint
- Equalities in Practice Case Study Report
- Health Improvement Committee Papers
- HomePoint Training Schedule
- Housing Revenue Account Papers
- Housing Services Equalities Policy
- Housing Services Staff Guidance Procedures: Complaints
- Inverclyde Council Financial Regulations
- Inverclyde Draft Supporting People plan 2003-2008
- Public Information and Communication Strategy
- Public Performance Reports 2001-2002 & 2002-2003
- Policy & Strategy Committee Meeting papers
- Race Equality Scheme 2002-2005
- Race Equality Scheme Action Plan 2003/2004
- Service Plan 2002-03 Social Work and Housing Services
- Social Work and Housing Committee papers
- Social Work Services Service Plan 2003/2004
- Social Work Services Induction Programme
- Staff Supervision Policy & Practice Guidelines
- Standing Orders of the Council and Scheme of Administration
- Timetable for Implementation of Housing Management Information System
- Training Needs Analysis carried out by the Chartered Institute of Housing
- Training Papers from session delivered by Shelter on Homelessness
- Training Plans 2002–2003 and 2003-2004
- What do you think? A guide to making your views known about your Council

Housing Management

- A Guide to Housing Options: Council Housing for General Needs
- "A Place of my own" a young tenant information pack a step by step guide to setting up home
- Building Strong, Safe and Attractive Communities: Inverclyde's Anti Social Behaviour Multi Agency Working Group
- Financial Fitness Resource Team Annual Report 2002-2003
- Housing Allocation Policy Information
- Housing Management Team Minutes of Meetings
- Housing Service Plan 2003-04 Social Work and Housing Services

- Inverclyde Housing Market Analysis
- Inverclyde Local Housing Strategy
- Inverclyde Zero Tolerance Working Group: Summary Report and Action Plan 2002/2004 - "Developing a needs led approach to Domestic Abuse"
- Rent Arrears Policy
- Rent Arrears standard letters

Homelessness

- Allocations Meeting minutes
- Brief for review of Inverclyde Councils Homeless Service
- CONTACT Newsletter
- Copy of Section 5 protocol with RSLs
- Customer feedback forms for Temporary Accommodation
- Customer Service Standards
- Day and Night Books
- Definition of Homelessness to be used in Inverclyde Council's Homelessness Strategy
- Drug and Alcohol Abuse Procedure
- Equal Opportunities procedure: A guide for staff in contact with homeless persons
- External Agency Referral Form
- Guidelines on Asking Clients to Leave
- Guidelines on Risk Assessment
- Guidelines on Fire Safety
- Harassment and Bullying Procedure
- Health and Homelessness in Inverclyde Minutes of Meetings
- Hidden Homeless in Inverclyde – Report by Scottish Churches Housing Agency
- Homelessness Assessment Policy & Operational Procedure
- Homelessness Strategy Steering Group – Minutes of Meetings
- Homeless Decision Letters
- Homeless Referral Form
- Homeless Team - Guidelines for Pre-Assessment Arrangements
- Homeless Team Minutes of Meeting
- Homeless Team Remit & Structure, job descriptions & person specifications
- Housing advice records
- Housing Benefit Claim Form for Prisoners
- Housing Support Assessment
- Hypodermic Needle and Sharps Procedure
- Information and advice leaflets/Publicity materials
- Inverclyde Centre Brief for Adaptations and Improvements
- Inverclyde Centre Building Brief 2002
- Inverclyde Centre - External Structural Survey

- Inverclyde Centre: Staff Safety
- Inverclyde Counselling Service Leaflet
- Inverclyde Homeless Strategy & Action Plan 2003 - 2006
- List of properties used as temporary accommodation location, size and type
- Management Agreement between Inverclyde Council & RSL for housing homeless persons who may have support needs
- Prevention Referral Form
- Prison Liaison Meeting Minutes
- Quality Assurance/Exit Questionnaire
- Request for Temporary Accommodation
- Resettlement & Support Team Aims & Objectives
- Resettlement Team Minutes of Meeting
- Rough Sleepers Initiative (RSI): Service Aims, Referral Criteria & Principles
- Staff Guidelines on Interviewing
- Starter Packs Inverclyde (Scottish Churches Housing Agency) Minutes of Management Group
- Temporary Accommodation Scatter Flats Minimum Specification
- Tenancy Agreement to Occupy Temporary Accommodation
- Warnings Procedure For those breaking temporary accommodation agreement

APPENDIX 2 - Key Examples of Positive Practice

These areas are working particularly well, taking account of the Council's operating context:

Inverclyde Housing Rights Project

The Council has agreed a contract with the Legal Services Agency to provide an independent information and advice service. This project is particularly aimed at preventing homelessness and meets the requirement for the provision of type III services of the national standards for information and advice. The project provides a service five days a week that includes:

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

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

Young Persons Task Group

The Council's homeless team is part of a multi disciplinary task group set up to take an overview of housing for young people in Inverclyde. The team's remit includes identifying key issues of importance for young people regarding their housing, monitoring key strategic documents for their impact on young people, influencing strategies and action plans as well as being a forum for debate.

The group was instrumental in developing and obtaining funding for the Streets Ahead Information Pack and associated training. In addition to the pack the Council has its own Resource Directory that provides local information. The pack has been distributed to the Inverclyde Centre, Careers Scotland and Youth Network. The Council envisages that the next stage will be to roll it out as part of a Housing Education project. The task group now has a guidance teacher on board and presentations have been given to three out of the eight secondary schools within the area. It is intended that the pack will be incorporated into lesson plans with school guidance staff also giving it out to target groups of pupils considered at risk of homelessness.

The work of this group is now moving forward to the setting up of a Young Tenants' Group and, although this is still in the early stages, the approach being taken shows the enthusiasm and commitment of staff to achieving its aims.

HMP Greenock, Prison Surgery

The Council has been providing an information and advice service at HMP Greenock since July 2003. Prevention Officers provide a twice-weekly surgery for prisoners who hold council tenancies and those that will need accommodation on being released from prison. Through the work with prisoners who are existing tenants they try to help them to manage their tenancies in relation to security of their property, housing benefit and rent arrears issues.

In their work with people who are due to be released from prison they provide advice about housing options, and referrals to other agencies to try and avoid people becoming homeless. The Council has good record keeping for its work with prisoners, in particular the Housing Advice Record proforma and the information checklist that is used to update housing benefit on tenants' current circumstances.

The Council also works well in partnership with other agencies in the approach it takes to prisoners. It attends quarterly meetings of an external agencies group that includes a network of prison and housing agencies; the Social Inclusion Manager from the Scottish Prison Service, representatives from Cranstoun, Social Work and APEX (an employment & education organisation). This group is working to improve the access to their services, the information sharing and the referral of individuals between them.

Glossary

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| Best Value | A legal requirement on local authorities to provide the services that people want and at the right quality and cost. |
| Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) | The membership body for local authorities in Scotland. |
| HomePoint | A department of Communities Scotland that supports providers of housing information and advice services. |
| Housing list | A list of applicants for housing that is used by the Council to allocate its housing stock. |
| Housing Revenue Account (HRA) | The budget a local authority has from rental income for managing and maintaining its houses and housing services. |
| Public Services Ombudsman | The independent body appointed to investigate individual complaints against local authorities and other public bodies. |
| Performance indicator | A measure of how a local authority is achieving its objectives. Performance Indicators can be compared with a pre-set standard (a benchmark) or with other organisations. |
| Procurement | The way an organisation obtains services or materials from other organisations or agents. |
| Right to Buy | Many Scottish secure tenants have the right to buy their property at a discounted price subject to length of tenancy. |
| Registered Social Landlord (RSL) | A landlord providing social rented housing that is registered and regulated by Communities Scotland. |
| Scottish Secure Tenancy (SST) | The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 establishes the Scottish Secure Tenancy as the tenancy for all tenants of social landlords in Scotland. |

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| Service level agreement (SLA) | An agreement between departments within an organisation or between partner organisations that defines the type and level of service they will provide. |
| Shadowing | Accompanying and observing staff while they carried out their day-to-day tasks. |
| Standing orders | Rules drawn up by an organisation that set out the basis on which business should be conducted. |
| Statutory Performance Indicator (SPI) | Indicators of local authorities' performance that are published by the Accounts Commission for Scotland. |
| Sustainability | Improving the economic, social and environmental circumstances of the wider communities to create and maintain communities where people positively want to live. |
| 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. |