



**Scottish Housing  
Regulator**

**Report on inquiry into  
Housing Options and  
Homeless Service  
Dumfries and Galloway Council**

December 2019

## About us

We are the independent regulator of social landlords in Scotland.

### We safeguard and promote the interests of:

Around:

**600,000**

Tenants who live in homes provided by social landlords

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Around:

**123,000**

Home owners who receive services of social landlords

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Around:

**49,000**

People and their families who may be homeless and seek help from local authorities

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Over:

**400**

Gypsy/Travellers who can use official sites provided by social landlords

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### We regulate:

**188**

Social landlords

**156**

Registered social landlords

**32**

Local authorities

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### Our role:

To monitor, assess and report on social landlords' performance of housing activities and RSLs' financial wellbeing and standards of governance. We intervene, where we need to, to protect the interests of tenants and service users.

Our Regulatory Framework explains how we regulate social landlords. It is available on our website.



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# Dumfries and Galloway Housing Options and Homeless Service

## Summary

**This report sets out the findings from our inquiry into Dumfries and Galloway Council's work to improve its Housing Options and Homeless Service.**

## Main findings

- The Council started a large scale review of its Housing Options and Homeless Service in 2016. Since then it has significantly improved the service and has a clear plan to deliver further improvement.
- The Council and its Registered Social Landlord (RSL) partners have significantly increased the number of settled lets made to people who are homeless. This includes the allocation of newly built houses. The Council has put in place an effective process for referring people who are homeless to its partner RSLs for settled accommodation.
- The Council has reduced the number of people waiting longer than a year for an outcome, the time it takes to achieve an outcome, and the length of time people spend in temporary accommodation.
- The Council is working more effectively with strategic partners to improve outcomes for people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. Its new senior team demonstrates self-awareness and a clear commitment to improvement, both strategically and operationally.
- It is now easier for people to access the service, although the Council knows it has more to do to publicise the service and improve its reception process.
- The Council has improved its delivery of a person-centred housing options and homelessness service. However, it is not always taking a homelessness application when it has a duty to do so. This means that the Council is underestimating the homelessness need and demand in its area.
- The Council does not always make offers of temporary accommodation when it has a duty to do so. This is particularly the case in emergency out-of-hours situations.
- Some of the Council's temporary accommodation is not suitable for people's requirements. The Council is aware of this and is currently working to improve the type, location, quality, and void times of its temporary accommodation.
- The Council has reduced the costs of its temporary accommodation in response to comments from people who are homeless.
- The Council has an improved, person focussed process for assessing homelessness applications. This is characterised by strong partnership working with RSLs and support and advice agencies. This helps ensure a more positive approach to dealing with difficult and complex situations.
- The Council does not always keep an appropriate record of its assessment decisions and some decisions were contrary to the Scottish Government's Code of Guidance on Homelessness. It does not always meet its target to complete a monthly audit of 10% of homelessness assessments.
- The Council has improved how it keeps in contact with people who are homeless about the progress of their application. As a consequence the Council has reduced the number of people with whom it loses contact.
- The Council identifies that it has a duty to provide support for a high number of people who are homeless. In 2018/19, it identified support requirements for 82% of applicants compared to a Scottish average of 49% for this period.

## **Main recommendations**

The Council:

- Must always take a homelessness application when it has reason to believe that someone is homeless or threatened with homelessness.
- Must comply with its statutory duty to provide temporary accommodation.
- Must ensure its decisions comply with the Scottish Government's Code of Guidance on Homelessness and legislative requirements.
- Should focus its temporary accommodation improvement work on ensuring that its out-of-hours emergency provision includes properties for people with specific needs and ensure it is meeting the requirements of The Equality Act (Specific Duties) (Scotland) Regulations 2012.
- Should review how it publicises its service, update and extend the information on its website, including information about the service across the Council area. It should ensure that staff delivering its front line reception facilities are appropriately trained in line with the Code of Guidance.
- Should record the source of referrals and analyse this information to determine how it could improve access to its services.
- Should work with partners to meet the challenges of temporary accommodation and settled accommodation raised in the Council's Homelessness Strategy and its Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan (RRTP).
- Should ensure that its decisions are appropriately recorded and carry out a programme of regular and thorough audits of its assessments to ensure accuracy.

# Dumfries and Galloway Housing Options and Homeless Service

1. This report sets out the findings from our inquiry into Dumfries and Galloway Council's Housing Options and Homeless Service. This work is part of our wider engagement with the Council on the services it provides to people who are homeless, or threatened with homelessness.

## What we did

2. We looked at four broad areas of service delivery:
  - access to the service generally and to a homelessness application. This includes the Council's delivery of Housing Options and its work to prevent homelessness;
  - access to, and quality of, temporary accommodation;
  - the Council's assessment of homelessness applications; and
  - outcomes for people who are homeless.
3. We:
  - reviewed statistics from the Council's homelessness returns to the Scottish Government and its Annual Returns on the Charter (ARC);
  - reviewed the records of seventeen Housing Options cases and thirty homelessness cases;
  - shadowed the Council's housing options and homelessness interviews with service users;
  - discussed with service users their experience of using the service;
  - spoke to operational officers and senior staff;
  - attended a homelessness forum meeting with the Council's strategic partners;
  - visited some of the Council's temporary accommodation units, its emergency out-of-hours Bed and Breakfast facility in Dumfries, and a dispersed furnished flat;
  - met with the Council's partner RSLs and officers of other strategic partners such as health services, criminal justice, welfare services, and prisons;
  - assessed the effectiveness of the Council's new homelessness case management system;
  - reviewed strategy documents including the Council's Homelessness Strategy and its RRTP; and
  - reviewed its policies, processes and procedures.

## Context and Background

4. Dumfries and Galloway Council is the third largest region in Scotland covering 6,426 square kilometres. The population is 149,670, 2.8% of the population of Scotland. The largest town is Dumfries with a population of 39,240 followed by Stranraer and Annan. Dumfries and Galloway is mostly rural and more than half of the population live in areas classed as remote rural or rural locations.
5. The Council's Housing Options and Homeless Service is delivered from offices in Dumfries, Stranraer, Kirkcudbright and Annan.
6. The number of homelessness applications the Council has taken has increased from 635 in 2014/15, to 910 in 2018/19. In 2018/19, the Council assessed that it had a duty to provide settled accommodation for 677 households (74%) .

7. The Council does not have any houses of its own and relies on its RSL partners and the private sector to provide both temporary accommodation and settled accommodation for people who are homeless.
8. We have been engaging with the Council since 2013/14 after we examined its operational delivery of Housing Options during our Housing Options in Scotland thematic [inquiry](#). At that time we found a number of significant weaknesses in the Council's Housing Options and Homeless Service:
  - it was not person-centred, and it did not tailor advice to a person's needs;
  - it did not always assess people as homeless, or threatened with homelessness, when they were;
  - it lost contact with significant numbers of people using the service; and
  - it did not keep good case records and did not audit cases to ensure consistency in dealing with homelessness applications.

Between 2013/14 and 2015/16 the service was very slow to improve. The Council attempted to restructure the service but with few positive outcomes for people who are homeless.

9. In 2016, the Council commissioned an independent review of the service in response to our increasing concerns about the Council's capacity to improve. The review found significant areas of weakness and failures across the service. The Council accepted the findings and agreed a plan containing fifty two recommendations for improvement. Since 2016 the Council has increased its resources to the service, made significant changes to staffing, funding, partnerships and strategic direction and it has introduced a new case management system. More recently the Council's Communities Committee has had responsibility for monitoring progress and oversight of the implementation of the plan.

## **Main Findings**

10. The Council has made significant improvements, both strategically and operationally, to its Housing Options and Homeless Service. Overall it has:
  - improved outcomes for people who are homeless, and for people whose homelessness can be prevented by early intervention;
  - increased resources for the service, including assistance from corporate improvement teams;
  - established a new senior team which demonstrates self-awareness and a clear commitment to improvement both strategically and operationally;
  - developed and introduced a specific Homelessness Strategy and set up a homeless forum with partners and stakeholders to inform service improvement;
  - developed and implemented a number of improvement plans, strategies and procedures;
  - developed a strong service user focus;
  - introduced a new case management IT system;
  - reviewed its temporary accommodation provision and reduced the cost for people who are homeless; and
  - improved its relationships with a range of partners, including local RSLs.

## Access to the service and a homelessness assessment

11. The Council publicises its Housing Options and Homeless Service through its website. This contains limited and sometimes outdated information on the service, including its out-of-hours emergency arrangements. The Council does not publicise service standards and appointment time targets. The Council has a poster which explains the service standards but has not circulated it to partner agencies or taken steps to ensure it is displayed in relevant places. We are aware the Council has now taken steps to improve its approach to how it publicises its service.

### Recommendation:

- The Council should review how it publicises its service, update and extend the information available on its website, including information about the service across the Council area.

12. The Council accepts referrals to its Housing Options and Homeless Service from a range of advice agencies and all RSLs operating in the area. However, it does not record the source of referrals so it does not know how effective its referral arrangements are.

### Recommendation:

- The Council should record the source of referrals and analyse this information to determine how it could improve access to its service.

13. The Council set targets to interview people who are homeless on the same day they present to the Council and to interview people threatened with homelessness within one day of their presentation. It meets these targets in approximately 65% of cases across all its offices. This figure includes circumstances where the person requests an appointment out with the Council's target times. The Council understands that it has work to do to improve its performance in this area.

14. The Council offers access to interpreting and translation services and it has adapted offices to allow access for disabled people, although some interview rooms are small. We are aware that the Council has plans to move to new offices this year. These will have improved access and interviewing facilities.

15. The reception service in the Dumfries office is run by Revenues and Benefits staff who have not received specific training in homelessness, or the prevention of homelessness.

### Recommendation:

- The Council should ensure that staff delivering its front line reception facilities are appropriately trained in line with the Code of Guidance on Homelessness requirements and any relevant updates.

16. The Council has significantly improved its approach to assessing homelessness applications since 2016/17. It now provides a person-centred approach giving people who are homeless advice tailored to their needs. Staff demonstrated improved levels of technical knowledge of the homelessness legislation and work hard to find solutions to prevent homelessness for people, especially those with arrears. This focus on prevention does mean that the Council does not always complete a homelessness assessment for all when it has a duty to do so. We found this in 10 of the 17 Housing Options cases we reviewed. This means that people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness are not getting access to the service and support to which they are

entitled, that the Council is underestimating the extent of homelessness in the area and therefore, it is unable to accurately reflect need and demand in its strategic plans.

**Recommendation:**

- The Council must always take a homelessness application when it has reason to believe that someone is homeless or threatened with homelessness in accordance with its statutory duty under Part II of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987.

17. The Council is also considering a number of new prevention initiatives. These include the introduction of:

- a family mediation service to help prevent young people from becoming homeless;
- a review of repeat homelessness cases to help develop actions to address the underlying issues;
- prevention improvement work with its internal and external partners; and
- additional resources focussed on prevention and Housing Options.

**Positive practice**

The Council introduced a Welfare and Housing Options team in March 2018 to improve tenancy sustainment and prevent homelessness. The Council reported that as at end of April 2019 the team had received 441 referrals, had supported 316 customers who were experiencing financial difficulties, and had prevented 56 evictions.

## Temporary accommodation

18. The Council depends on its RSL partners to provide temporary accommodation. RSLs operating in the Dumfries and Galloway area lease 72 furnished properties to the Council for temporary accommodation, and the Council uses 71 furnished properties leased from the private sector. The Council owns a number of hostels and it can access rooms in a Bed and Breakfast facility in Dumfries for out-of-hours emergency accommodation.

19. The Council has not always provided temporary accommodation when it had a duty to do so. The Council told us this was at least in part due to the supply and location of suitable temporary accommodation.

20. The Council's out-of-hours emergency provision is limited and is not suitable for families or people with restricted mobility. The Council is aware of this and is working to improve the supply of this type of accommodation.

21. In October 2019, the Council told us that it had introduced new out-of-hours emergency accommodation provision in the form of flats in Dumfries and Stranraer and it no longer uses Bed and Breakfast accommodation. The new flats are within the Council's current support accommodation provision. These flats will constitute the main accommodation for its out-of-hours emergency provision with back up support being provided through local hotels. Both are mobility accessible and the flat in Stranraer is also wheelchair accessible.

22. New protocols have been agreed with providers which include an initial risk assessment for anyone being placed the accommodation.



**Recommendations:**

The Council:

- must make an offer of temporary accommodation to people who apply as homeless in accordance with its statutory duties in the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987; and
- should focus urgently on ensuring that its out-of-hours emergency provision includes properties for people with specific needs and that it is meeting the requirements of The Equality Act (Specific Duties) (Scotland) Regulations 2012.

23. In 2018/19, the Council reported that 590 households entered temporary accommodation, up 50 on the previous year. It reported that in 2018/19 households spent an average of 107 days in temporary accommodation, down from 126 days in 2016/17.
24. In 2017/18, the Council reviewed its temporary accommodation provision. This included research, benchmarking, consultation and engagement with service users. The review highlighted a number of areas where improvement action was required, including the Council's:
- temporary accommodation portfolio;
  - charging structure and income; and
  - understanding the demographics of people in temporary accommodation.

**Positive practice**

The Council introduced an affordable charging model which aligns with its Anti-Poverty Strategy and has reduced rent levels in temporary accommodation to make them more affordable for people who are homeless.

25. The Council has taken a number of actions in response to this review. It has:
- introduced a temporary accommodation policy;
  - reduced its very high void levels from 35% in 2016/17 to 29% in 2018/19;
  - begun to re-profile its temporary accommodation, moving away from the private sector and increasing RSL provision; and
  - introduced a formalised private sector leasing scheme to provide a consistent approach across the Council area.
26. The Council's comprehensive RRTP sets out its future vision for temporary accommodation over the 5 year life of the plan. Through working effectively and efficiently with its partner organisations the Council has set an ambitious target to reduce the number of dispersed furnished properties it requires by 30% and it intends to cease using shared accommodation. It is aiming to reduce the time spent in temporary accommodation to 60 days by 2024.

**Recommendation:**

- The Council should review the targets set out in its RRTP to significantly reduce its temporary accommodation requirements, considering both its underestimation of homelessness applications and increasing use of temporary accommodation.

**Assessment**

27. The Council reported that in 2018/19 its performance in meeting the Code of Guidance on Homelessness recommended 28 day target for completing homelessness assessments had improved from 91% in 2016/17, to 98%.

28. The Council keeps people who are homeless well informed of the progress of their application. This has contributed to a significant reduction in the number of people with whom the Council loses contact whilst waiting on settled accommodation from 11.7% in 2016/17 to 6.3% in 2018/19.
29. The Council's officers are sensitive to the needs of people who approach the Council for assistance. It offers same sex interviewers and encourages people to have friends, relatives or advocacy services attend interviews with them. Service users that we spoke with were pleased with the service they received and felt that they had been given enough information about the homelessness process.
30. The Council has strong partnership working with its RSL and internal partners and an effective approach to dealing with difficult and at times complex situations. This was especially evident in partnership working around rent arrears and eviction cases.
31. Overall, the Council records its assessment and decisions well in most cases, although not in all. In eight of the thirty cases reviewed the homelessness assessment decision was not supported by the casework records, and we found some 'Not Homeless' decisions were made contrary to the Code of Guidance.
32. The Council set itself a target to audit 10% of all assessment decisions each month to monitor and improve the quality of its decision making. However, the Council told us that due to work pressures and a change in personnel it had not met this target.
33. The Council carries out assessments on support requirements for people who are homeless. It reported that in 2018/19 it identified that 82% of people it assessed as homeless had at least one support need identified, compared with a Scottish average of 49%.

#### **Recommendations:**

The Council should:

- ensure that its decisions are supported by its casework notes and Code of Guidance on Homelessness recommendations; and
- carry out a programme of regular and thorough audits of its assessments.

#### **Outcomes**

34. The Council has no houses of its own and relies on its RSL partners to secure settled accommodation for people who are homeless. To help it do this the Council operates a Common Housing Register (CHR) with 4 RSL partners: Dumfries and Galloway Housing Partnership, Home Group (Scotland), Irvine Housing Association and Cunninghame Housing Association. This offers a single point of contact for applicants, a shared application form (online or paper) and a single database of all applicants seeking housing.
35. In 2016/17, the Council's RSL partners agreed to a voluntary quota system for allocations to homeless people on the understanding that referrals under section 5 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 could be used by the Council.
36. The Council and its RSL partners have worked together effectively to significantly increase the number of lets to people who are homeless. In 2018/19, Dumfries and Galloway Housing Partnership and Loreburn collectively allocated 439 homes to people who are homeless, up from 209 in 2015/16. This is 36% of all lets by these landlords in

2018/19. Both landlords have agreed an ongoing target to allocate 40% of their lets to people who are homeless.

37. Loreburn Housing Association has now withdrawn from the CHR, however it has an automated bidding process for people who are homeless using its Choice Based Letting system. It has increased its allocations to homeless people from 16% in 2015/16, to 32% in 2018/19.
38. The Council's approach to securing settled accommodation from its RSL partners maximises the opportunities for people who are homeless people to be housed and includes lets of new build homes. As a result the Council has reduced the average case durations from 33 weeks in 2016/17, to 20 weeks in 2018/19.
39. The Council and partner RSL's have reduced:
  - the number of people waiting longer than a year for an outcome from 81 in 2014/15, to 0 in 2018/19; and
  - the length of time people spend in temporary accommodation from 126 days in 2017/18, to 107 days in 2018/19.
40. The Council meets monthly with its RSL partners to resolve complex cases and help to ensure consistency in allocations to people who are homeless. These meetings between the Council and each RSL also allow the Council to raise queries and help to manage relationships. The Council also maintains an interest on the CHR Board, helping to focus strategic policy on people who are homeless.

#### **Positive practice**

The Council is achieving good outcomes through strong partnership working with the Scottish Prison Service. Prisoners have homes provided for them on discharge without the requirement for temporary accommodation.

41. In most cases the Council advised people of their right to request a review of their homelessness assessment decision and their offer of settled accommodation. However, it did not always advise people of their right to request a review on offers of temporary accommodation.

#### **Recommendations:**

The Council:

- must advise people of their right to request a review of their homelessness assessment decision, offer of temporary accommodation and settled accommodation.
- should include checking on this in its monthly audit of cases.

#### **Next Steps**

42. Dumfries and Galloway Council's Housing Options and Homeless Service has improved across a number of areas. We will continue to engage with it as it implements its plans to increase the pace of further improvement actions. We set out our engagement with landlords in our published Engagement Plans and discuss the performance of local authority landlords within the Shared Risk Assessment.
43. The Council should review and update its improvement plans to take account of our recommendations. We are confident the Council has the commitment, capacity and structures in place to help support further improvements.



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