



**Scottish Housing  
Regulator**



# **Housing Options in Scotland**

## **A thematic inquiry**

May 2014

## About us

We are the independent regulator of social landlords in Scotland. We regulate around 180 registered social landlords (RSLs) and the housing activities of Scotland's 32 local authorities.

Our statutory objective is to safeguard and promote the interests of current and future tenants, homeless people and others who use services provided by social landlords.

We were set up by the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 and are accountable directly to the Scottish Parliament. Our [Regulatory Framework](#) explains how we regulate social landlords. You can download our Regulatory Framework and find out more about us on our website at [www.scottishhousingregulator.gov.uk](http://www.scottishhousingregulator.gov.uk).



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# Overview

## Introduction

1. This report provides a national picture of Housing Options, its effectiveness in preventing and alleviating homelessness, and the outcomes achieved for people seeking help from local authorities. Our inquiry included a review of national performance and statistical information, a survey of local authorities, on-site case studies of six local authorities, and discussions with key stakeholders and service users. The report identifies examples of positive practice.

## Housing Options and homelessness in Scotland

2. The recorded number of people applying for assistance because of homelessness has been falling since 2006/07, with a dramatic reduction since 2011: applications fell by 19% in 2011/12 and by a further 13% in 2012/13. The most recent quarterly homeless statistics published by the Scottish Government show that there were 8,007 applications for homelessness assistance between 1 October and 31 December 2013. This was 10% lower than in the same period in 2012.
3. Many have attributed the reduction in homelessness applications to a greater focus by the Scottish Government and local authorities on the prevention of homelessness, and in particular to the adoption of the Housing Options approach. The Scottish Government has reported that the most recent fall is mainly due to the impact of Housing Options and homelessness prevention strategies.
4. Through the Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003 the Scottish Parliament set the target that all unintentionally homeless people are entitled to settled accommodation from 31 December 2012. In 2010 the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) agreed key priorities to help local authorities achieve the 2012 target, including promoting and improving joint working and preventing homelessness where possible.
5. The Scottish Government and COSLA set up a joint steering group on the 2012 target to assess, inform and influence progress on these priorities. This group – now called the Homelessness Prevention and Strategy Group – recognised that homelessness prevention work, and in particular the Housing Options approach, is an important way for local authorities to meet the 2012 target. The Scottish Government describes Housing Options as:

*“a process which starts with housing advice when someone approaches a local authority with a housing problem. This means looking at an individual’s options and choices in the widest sense. This approach features early intervention and explores all possible tenure options, including council housing, RSLs and the private rented sector. The advice can also cover personal circumstances which may not necessarily be housing related, such as debt advice, mediation and mental health issues.”*
6. The Scottish Government has provided around £950,000 of enabling funding to support the development and delivery of Housing Options. One element of this support has been the establishment of five Housing Options Hubs to provide practitioners with a forum to benchmark and share good practice, commission research, provide training, develop tools, and share knowledge and understanding. The development of the Housing Options Hubs is positive and they provide a

collaborative vehicle for the development of innovative and improved practice in Housing Options.

## Main findings

7. The focus on prevention of homelessness and the promotion of a solutions-based, person-centred approach that provides people with genuine options is clearly an appropriate policy response. Housing Options is a new approach adopted only recently by local authorities; some are advanced in the implementation of their approach, some are at an earlier stage of implementation, and others told us that they are yet to fully implement Housing Options. Most local authorities are enthusiastic about the potential of Housing Options to give people good advice and genuine options and choices.
8. The Scottish Government and COSLA jointly published homelessness prevention guidance in 2009. This covers the advice and information that should be available locally to people and outlines new ideas for preventing homelessness. There is no other national guidance for local authorities to help them with the delivery of Housing Options. In March 2013 Shelter asserted that the absence of national guidance on Housing Options advice has resulted in “a gap [is] developing in some areas between strategic policy and frontline practice.”
9. Around half of all local authorities told us that there is a need for more guidance on the delivery of Housing Options. In particular, local authorities asked for greater clarity on how to operate effective Housing Options in the context of legislation on homelessness. This, in part, reflects the concern expressed to us through this inquiry and wider discussions with local authorities and other stakeholders that there is a tension between the application of Housing Options and the requirements of the current legislation on homelessness.
10. We saw that some people achieved good outcomes through Housing Options. We also saw that some had less favourable outcomes and that the outcomes for others were not known. The lack of a clear and consistently-applied recording of outcomes in Housing Options has been a major barrier to evaluating the success of the approach both locally and nationally. The Scottish Government introduced a mandatory data collection for local authorities on homelessness prevention and Housing Options on 1 April 2014. This is an important and timely development.
11. Where local authorities carry out early intervention work this is often good, particularly around managing rent arrears and working with owners who have mortgage arrears. However, we found that opportunities for prevention action are often missed.
12. Staff in some councils are working to targets for the reduction of homelessness applications as a performance measure for Housing Options. The use of reductions in numbers of homeless applications as a solitary measure of the success of Housing Options can introduce the risk of organisational behaviours that act against the achievement of good outcomes for people in need. We saw a number of examples where local authorities had targets in place and where people who were homeless were not being provided with appropriate advice and assistance in accordance with the homeless legislation.
13. We found that Housing Options has contributed to the reduction in the number of people having a homelessness assessment. We also found that the diversion of people from a homelessness assessment to Housing Options was not always appropriate. It is likely that in such cases this has resulted in an under-recording of

homelessness as a number of people with clear evidence of homelessness or potential homelessness do not go on to have a homeless assessment.

14. Housing Options is a recent development and to date there has been no comprehensive evaluation of the policy. The limitations in guidance and the absence of a comprehensive monitoring framework are important factors in considering how Housing Options has been implemented so far. The introduction of mandatory data collection for local authorities provides a basis for a national evaluation of the policy.

## Recommendations

15. The Scottish Government should:
  - » provide enhanced guidance for local authorities on the delivery of Housing Options;
  - » ensure that guidance provides clarity on how local authorities operate Housing Options effectively within the context of homeless duties and obligations; and
  - » use the recently introduced mandatory data collection for local authorities to evaluate the success of policy on Housing Options.
16. The Scottish Government and local authorities should:
  - » build on the work of the Hubs to further develop clear and supportive practice tools to help practitioners deliver Housing Options effectively.
17. Local authorities should:
  - » ensure all outcomes in Housing Options cases are recorded in accordance with the Scottish Government's recently introduced monitoring system;
  - » ensure that outcomes achieved through Housing Options are consistent, appropriate and meet people's needs;
  - » consider opportunities for early intervention and work to prevent homelessness;
  - » ensure that support assessments are given to people who need them;
  - » review any use of staff performance targets around reducing numbers of homeless applications to ensure these do not result in behaviours that act against the achievement of good outcomes for people in need;
  - » minimise the time people wait between initial contact and Housing Options interview;
  - » Support front line officers with appropriate training and clear guidance and procedures;
  - » ensure they complete a homeless assessment, while progressing Housing Options efforts, where there is clear evidence of homelessness or potential homelessness.
  - » have a consistent structure for Housing Options interviews to ensure that relevant and important questions are always asked;
  - » ensure that advice and information is given in a balanced and appropriate way;
  - » improve the quality of record keeping to ensure accurate records of discussions and outcomes and provide a timely record of discussions and actions for the service user; and
  - » implement a systematic and consistent system of audit of Housing Options work with the aim of improving service delivery.

## About this thematic inquiry

18. In carrying out this thematic inquiry we aimed to assess the success of the new Housing Options approach and its impact on statutory homelessness, particularly what outcomes are achieved for people seeking help from local authorities. We aim to provide a national picture on whether Housing Options is an effective way to prevent

and alleviate homelessness.

19. We drew our evidence for this thematic inquiry from:
  - » analysis of national performance and statistical information;
  - » a review of other research and studies in this area;
  - » the scrutiny of Housing Options delivery in six case study local authorities;
  - » a mystery shopping exercise by our tenant assessors;
  - » a survey of the 26 local authorities not participating in the case studies;
  - » the findings from our engagement and inquiries with local authorities in recent years; and
  - » feedback from discussions with a range of stakeholders.
20. While we analysed national performance and statistical information on homelessness, the absence of consistent and recorded data on Housing Options at the time of our inquiry means that we are not able to report and compare fully the performance of local authorities at a national level or within the case study authorities.
21. Through the case studies we examined the operational delivery of the six local authorities' Housing Options and prevention of homelessness. We carried out 280 reviews of Housing Option cases, including shadowing over 60 interviews by the local authorities with people seeking their assistance. The case study authorities are:
  - » Dumfries and Galloway Council
  - » East Dunbartonshire Council
  - » Falkirk Council
  - » Fife Council
  - » Moray Council
  - » North Ayrshire Council.
22. We have used the findings from the case studies at an aggregate level to inform our assessment of the success of Housing Options nationally. We have not reported on the performance of the case study authorities at an individual level, other than where we have identified positive practice; we provided each authority with detailed feedback following our on-site inquiry work.
23. The inclusion of findings from previous engagements and inquiries with local authorities allows us to present a broader picture of the Housing Options and prevention of homelessness work we have seen across Scotland in recent years.
24. Local authorities call their Housing Options advice and prevention work by different names. In this report we refer throughout to Housing Options.

# 1. Housing Options and homelessness in Scotland

## Homelessness policy in Scotland

- 1.1 Part II of The Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 (as amended by the 2001 Act)<sup>1</sup> sets out the powers and duties of local authorities in dealing with applications from people seeking help on the grounds that they are homeless or threatened with homelessness.
- 1.2 Section 37(1) of the Act requires local authorities to have regard to guidance issued by Scottish Ministers in the exercise of their homelessness functions. The Scottish Government's Code of Guidance on Homelessness provides practical guidance on how homelessness legislation and related policies should be implemented. The Code was last comprehensively reviewed in May 2005.<sup>2</sup>
- 1.3 Section 28 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 sets out that:

*"If a person ("an applicant") applies to a local authority for accommodation, or for assistance in obtaining accommodation and the authority have reason to believe that he may be homeless or threatened with homelessness, they shall make such inquiries as are necessary to satisfy themselves as to whether he is homeless or threatened with homelessness."<sup>3</sup>*
- 1.4 The legislation requires a local authority to provide temporary accommodation to people who need it where it has reason to believe they are homeless or are threatened with homelessness. This duty also applies during investigations leading to a determination on an applicant's homelessness.
- 1.5 The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 placed a statutory requirement on local authorities to prepare strategies for preventing and alleviating homelessness. Local authorities are no longer required to submit separate homelessness strategies to Ministers covering their activity to prevent homelessness, but include these in their broader Local Housing Strategy.
- 1.6 Through the Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003 the Scottish Parliament set the target that all unintentionally homeless people are entitled to settled accommodation from 31 December 2012, and the appropriate legislation was amended on that date. The Scottish Government had the 2012 target as one of its 45 National Indicators in "Scotland Performs". It reported in June 2013 that this target had been achieved and that local authorities and their partners had seen fewer people reaching the point of homelessness because of their prevention work.<sup>4</sup>
- 1.7 The Scottish Parliament also passed secondary legislation on housing support regulations. These accompany the statutory housing support duty which commenced on 1 June 2013, and require local authorities to assess where appropriate the housing support needs of homeless applicants to whom they have a duty to secure settled accommodation.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1987/26/part/II>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/53814/0012265.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1987/26/section/28>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/Housing/homeless/activity/homelessness-prevention-and-strategy-group>

## Housing Options and homelessness

1.8 In 2010 the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) agreed key priorities to help local authorities move towards achieving the 2012 target. The priorities include:

- » promoting and improving joint working;
- » preventing homelessness where possible;
- » working together to maximise access to housing association and private rented sector housing; and
- » investing in the appropriate areas.

1.9 A joint Scottish Government and COSLA steering group on the 2012 target was set up to assess, inform and influence progress on these priorities. The joint steering group – now called the Homelessness Prevention and Strategy Group – recognised that homelessness prevention work, and in particular the Housing Options approach, is an important way for local authorities to meet the 2012 target.

1.10 Housing Options has been encouraged by the Scottish Government as a policy approach for local authorities to prevent homelessness and meet the 2012 homelessness target to abolish priority need and ensure that all unintentionally homeless people are entitled to settled accommodation.

1.11 The Scottish Government describes Housing Options as:

*“a process which starts with housing advice when someone approaches a local authority with a housing problem. This means looking at an individual’s options and choices in the widest sense. This approach features early intervention and explores all possible tenure options, including council housing, RSLs and the private rented sector.*

*The advice can also cover personal circumstances which may not necessarily be housing related, such as debt advice, mediation and mental health issues. Rather than only accepting a homelessness application local authority homelessness services will work together with other services such as employability, mental health, money advice and family mediation services etc to assist the individual with issues from an early stage in the hope of avoiding a housing crisis.”<sup>5</sup>*

1.12 Housing Options promotes a person centred, customer focused approach. In its 2011 report, “Housing Options in Scotland”, Shelter said that:

*“The best approaches [in delivering a housing options approach] successfully combine legal entitlements with genuine options and informed advice and support.... All information about options must be transparent and easy for clients to understand and aim to empower people to make the right choices for their own situation. This means investment in officers’ training, good processes and strong partnerships with local organisations and service providers to ensure that housing solutions are sustainable”.<sup>6</sup>*

1.13 The Scottish Government’s most recent homelessness prevention guidance, issued jointly with COSLA in 2009, covers the advice and information that should be available

<sup>5</sup><http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/BuiltEnvironment/Housing/homeless/HomelessnessPrevention/hubs/options>

<sup>6</sup>[http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/366607/Shelter\\_Scotland\\_Housing\\_Options\\_Paper\\_FINAL\\_July\\_2011.pdf](http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0010/366607/Shelter_Scotland_Housing_Options_Paper_FINAL_July_2011.pdf)

locally to people and outlines some new ideas for preventing homelessness not previously covered in its *Code of Guidance on homelessness*.

1.14 Importantly, the guidance states that:

*“... if the applicant is homeless at the time of interview or threatened with homelessness within two months, a homelessness application should also be completed. Efforts to prevent homelessness should then progress alongside the routine administration of the homelessness application, particularly where a diagnostic assessment indicates that a real opportunity exists to prevent it.”<sup>7</sup>*

1.15 Beyond this guidance from 2009, there is no other procedural guidance for local authorities to assist them with the implementation of Housing Options. This was raised by Shelter in a 2013 briefing paper:

*“The Scottish Government has not defined national objectives or produced national guidance for the ongoing development of Housing Options advice. It is therefore unsurprising that a gap is developing in some areas between strategic policy and frontline practice.”<sup>8</sup>*

1.16 In order to assist local authorities promote a Housing Options approach to the prevention of homelessness, the Scottish Government has funded and promoted the setting up of five Housing Options Hubs. Each Hub includes a group of local authorities, generally from a particular area of Scotland; Ayrshire and South East, North and the Islands, Tayside, Fife and Central and West. Each of the 32 local authorities in Scotland is a member of one of the five Hubs. The Hubs offer an opportunity for front-line practitioners and strategy colleagues to come together to benchmark and share good practice, commission research, provide training, develop tools, and share knowledge and understanding.

1.17 The Local Authority Housing Hubs Evaluation<sup>9</sup> was published on 31 May 2012. The research, carried out by Ipsos MORI on behalf of the Scottish Government/COSLA 2012 Joint Steering Group, showed that the Housing Options Hubs have positively progressed the development of the Housing Options approach and assisted local authorities to work together on joint projects and the sharing of best practice.

1.18 A number of stakeholders have raised concerns recently around the interaction of Housing Options and homeless legislation. In 2013 Shelter said:

*“Despite the recent drop in homeless application numbers being attributed to the success of Housing Options advice, more analysis is required to understand the interaction between prevention advice and statutory homelessness. Given the recession, pressure on social housing and ongoing welfare reforms, it is unlikely there is a downward trend in the level of housing need. It is critical therefore, that changes in services result in the best possible outcomes for individuals and not the gate-keeping of services.”<sup>10</sup>*

1.19 Local authorities told us that pressure on housing supply was an important factor in determining their Housing Options approach. Some local authorities told us that the levels of current housing allocations to homeless applicants were unsustainable in future years. The issue of housing supply was raised by Audit Scotland in its 2013

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/06/08140713/0>

<sup>8</sup> What are my options? Delivering a person centred housing and homelessness advice service in Scotland - Shelter Scotland, March 2013

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/05/7209>

<sup>10</sup> [https://scotland.shelter.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/643874/Shelter\\_Scotland\\_Housing\\_Options\\_Paper\\_2013\\_FINAL\\_FINAL.pdf](https://scotland.shelter.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/643874/Shelter_Scotland_Housing_Options_Paper_2013_FINAL_FINAL.pdf)

report Housing in Scotland<sup>11</sup>; the Scottish Government responded to the findings of the Audit Scotland report in its submission to the Parliament's Public Accounts Committee<sup>12</sup>.

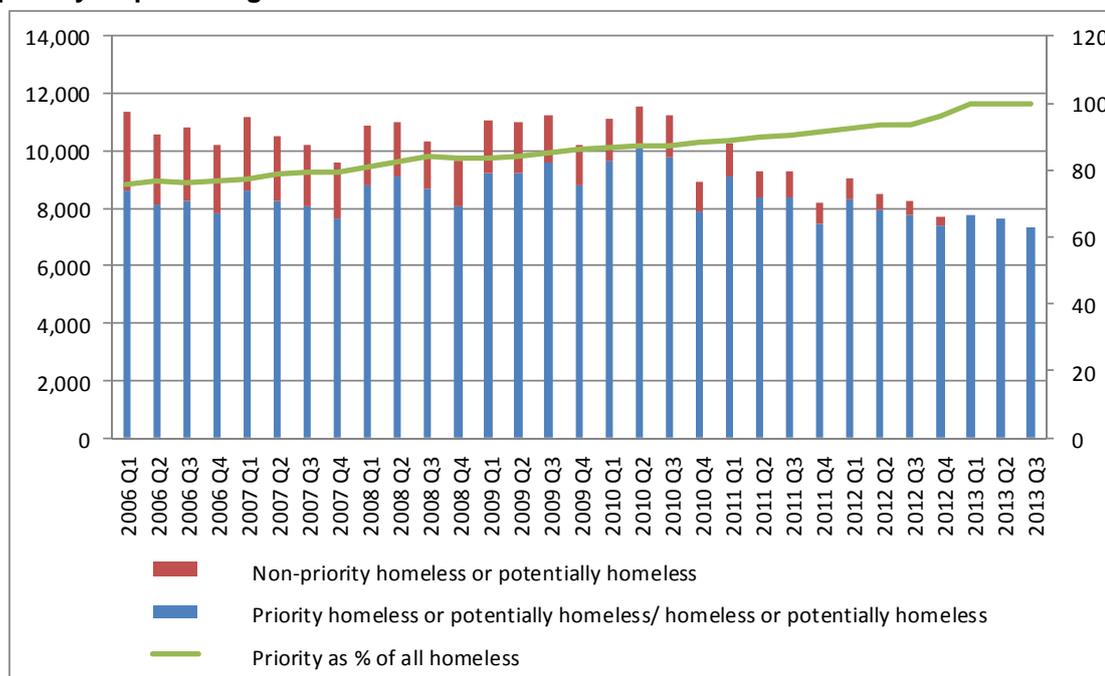
1.20 The Scottish Government has developed the Scottish National Standards for Information and Advice Providers<sup>13</sup>. It promotes these as a way of improving the standard of information and advice provision across the country. Organisations can become accredited under the National Standards if they can demonstrate that they meet the quality level defined by the standards and provide an efficient and effective service. Accreditation audits have been carried out by an external contractor.

## Homelessness in Scotland

1.21 Homelessness figures in Scotland have dropped since 2006/07, and dramatically so since 2010/11. This has, in part, been attributed to the introduction and implementation of a housing options approach.

1.22 Scottish Government published statistics show that homeless applications across Scotland have decreased by 30% since 2009/10, priority need decisions have dropped by 20%, and the number of people local authorities found to be homeless has fallen by 29%. All three of these categories show marked decreases since 2010/11, with overall numbers of homeless applications dropping by 17,384 across Scotland. Chart 1 below shows the trends in the number of applications assessed as homeless and assessed as in priority need. In 2012/13 councils assessed just over 30,000 people as homeless and 96% of these as in priority need.

**Chart 1: Total number of people assessed as homeless by priority and non-priority, and priority as percentage of all homeless**



Source: Scottish Government Annual Homelessness Publication – Tables and Charts 2012-13

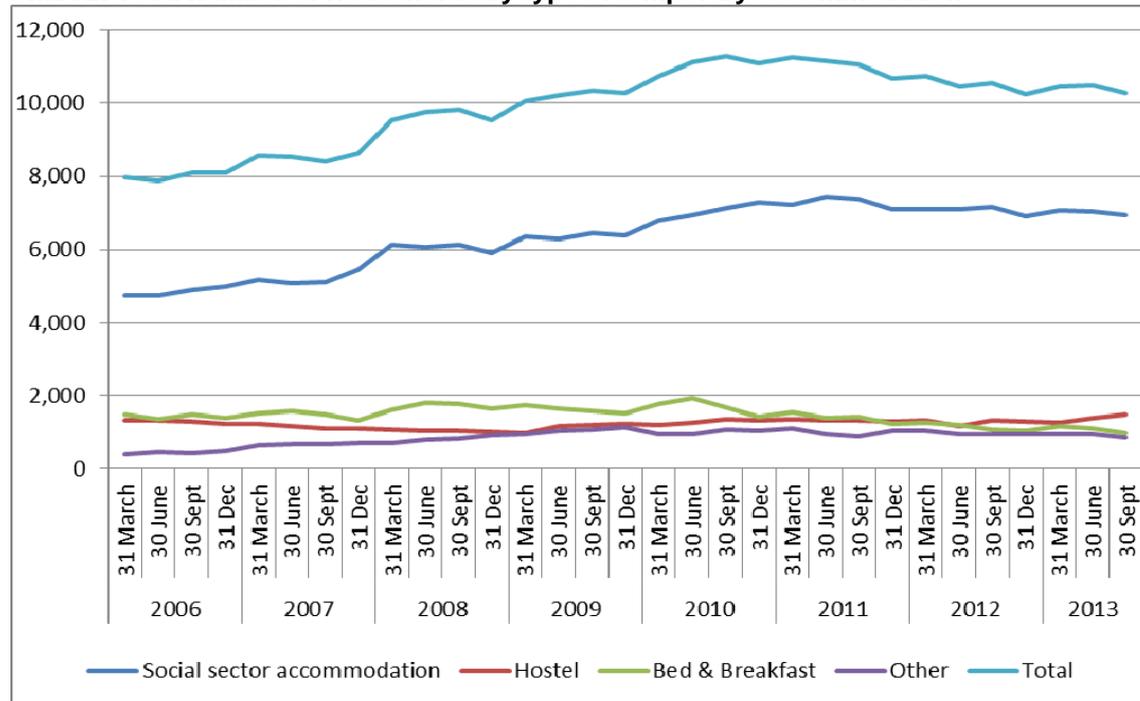
<sup>11</sup> [http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/docs/local/2013/nr\\_130711\\_housing\\_overview.pdf](http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/docs/local/2013/nr_130711_housing_overview.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4\\_PublicAuditCommittee/SG\\_Comm.pdf](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_PublicAuditCommittee/SG_Comm.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Scottish National Standards for Information and Advice Providers

1.23 Local authorities' use of temporary accommodation for homeless people has reduced overall. National statistics on temporary accommodation show a general decrease in the quarterly figures from a peak of 11,264 households during 2010/11 to 10,283 households in September 2013. Some local authorities told us that this is, in part, because of their housing options approach, while others said that it is too soon to conclude that. Chart 2 below shows the trends in the provision of temporary accommodation by type.

**Chart 2: Total number of households by type of temporary accommodation**



Source: Scottish Government Annual Homelessness Publication – Tables and Charts 2012-13

## 2. Housing Options and prevention work

***“Local councils perform their duties on homelessness so that: homeless people get prompt and easy access to help and advice; are provided with suitable, good-quality temporary or emergency accommodation when this is needed; and are offered continuing support to help them get and keep the home they are entitled to.”***

**Scottish Social Housing Charter, Outcome 12**

- 2.1 The Scottish Government introduced a mandatory data collection on monitoring homelessness prevention and housing options on 1 April 2014. This is an important and timely development. However, currently there are no nationally-available or comprehensive statistics on the outcomes people achieve through Housing Options. The lack of clear and consistently-applied recording of outcomes in Housing Options has been a major barrier to evaluating the success of the approach both locally and nationally.
- 2.2 It is important for local authorities to know the outcomes they achieve to understand the effectiveness of their Housing Options and prevention of homelessness work. These outcomes should be appropriate to an individual’s circumstances and sustainable in the longer term to avoid the recurrence of homelessness and housing difficulties. A number of local authorities from our case studies and previous inquiries told us that monitoring of outcomes is an area where they need to improve, some told us they were awaiting the introduction of the Scottish Government’s monitoring framework, and others have progressed temporary recording methods.
- 2.3 Of the 280 Housing Options cases we reviewed, 194 presented with clear evidence of homelessness or potential homelessness, 51 had housing difficulties but were not at that time threatened with homelessness, 28 were seeking information and advice on their prospects of getting their own home, and seven cases had no information recorded on their circumstances. In many of these cases the local authorities had not consistently recorded the conclusion of the Housing Options work. This has prevented us from doing a meaningful analysis of the outcomes across all the review cases.
- 2.4 We saw some good examples of early intervention work to prevent homelessness, particularly in cases involving people with private sector tenancies and those who own homes. Local authorities were able to offer advice and make referrals to other agencies, including the local authorities’ own benefits services, and to Mortgage to Rent schemes for owners in financial difficulties. However, we found that early intervention work is limited and we identified missed opportunities for prevention action.

### **Positive practice**

Falkirk Council uses its Debt & Welfare Advice Team to work with owner occupiers who are in mortgage arrears and threatened with eviction. It uses the Scottish Government’s Mortgage to Rent scheme to convert mortgages to rent. This prevents an eviction and potential homelessness from taking place.

- 2.5 Local authorities have introduced effective referral schemes to help vulnerable people successfully move on from institutional care for ex-offenders, people discharged from hospitals and looked-after children. Some schemes applied to specific groups of people, for example ex-armed services personnel.

- 2.6 We saw that some people got settled accommodation outcomes that they were satisfied with through Housing Options, in a local authority or RSL house let through the mainstream housing list or in a house in the private sector. For many of them this was a positive outcome. However, in some cases this was achieved by encouraging the person to accept a difficult to let local house away from their support networks; the Scottish Government's *Code of Guidance on Homelessness*<sup>14</sup> discourages this practice as it can have a negative impact on the sustainability of the tenancy. We also found examples of:
- » cases where there was no improvement in the person's housing circumstances, despite the Housing Options and prevention of homelessness work;
  - » people waiting long periods living care of friends and relatives or sleeping rough where the local authority had not initiated a homeless assessment;
  - » incorrectly recorded outcomes; and
  - » people with the same circumstances being dealt with differently, sometimes by the same officer.
- 2.7 We recommend that local authorities:
- » ensure all outcomes in Housing Options cases are recorded in accordance with the Scottish Government's recently introduced monitoring system;
  - » ensure that outcomes achieved through Housing Options are consistent with available guidance, appropriate and meet people's needs; and
  - » consider opportunities for early intervention and actions to prevent homelessness.

***“Social landlords ensure that: tenants get the information they need on how to obtain support to remain in their home; and ensure suitable support is available including services provided directly by the landlord and by other organisations.”***

**Scottish Social Housing Charter, Outcome 11**

- 2.8 From June 2013 local authorities must carry out support assessments for people who are unintentionally homeless. This duty had just been enacted when we conducted the on-site phase of our inquiry. We saw local authority interviews with people seeking assistance during which support needs assessments were completed for people going through Housing Options, but also many where there was no or only brief discussions about support needs.

**Positive practice**

East Dunbartonshire Council offers the same support needs assessments to those who make homeless applications and to those who go through its Housing Options process. It uses the same pro forma for both types of applicant.

- 2.9 Some local authorities use a mediation approach to attempt to resolve relationship breakdowns that result in homelessness, particularly with young people whose parents are asking them to leave home. Independent and voluntary mediation, conducted by trained mediators, can deliver good and sustainable outcomes. We saw some positive outcomes result from this approach. Some of what was described as mediation was in fact protracted discussions between the local authority and parents about the likelihood of the young person being allowed to stay; third parties

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/274719/0082198.pdf>

we spoke to expressed some concerns that this approach could further damage relationships between the young person and parents, particularly where the young person has complex needs.

**Positive practice**

Falkirk Council uses trained and experienced family mediators to deliver its mediation service. It uses a range of publicity material to advertise this service which promotes mediation at the early stages of family difficulties prior to people leaving home.

- 2.10 The use of reductions in numbers of homeless applications as a solitary measure of the success of Housing Options can introduce the risk of organisational behaviours that can act against the achievement of good outcomes for people in need. We saw that staff in some councils were working to targets for the reduction of homelessness applications as their principal performance measure for Housing Options, rather than a measure of the success of the outcome for the individuals concerned. We saw a number of examples where local authorities had targets in place and where people who were homeless were not being provided with appropriate advice and assistance in accordance with the homeless legislation.
- 2.11 We recommend that local authorities:
- » ensure that support assessments are given to people who need them; and
  - » review any use of staff performance targets around reducing numbers of homeless applications to ensure these do not result in behaviours that act against the achievement of good outcomes for people in need.

***“Social landlords perform all aspects of their housing services so that: every tenant and other customer has their individual needs recognised, is treated fairly and with respect, and receives fair access to housing and housing services”***

***“Local councils perform their duties on homelessness so that: homeless people get prompt and easy access to help and advice.”***

**Scottish Social Housing Charter, Outcomes 1 & 12**

- 2.12 The effectiveness of the initial contact between local authorities and people seeking help is an important factor in determining the quality of information a person gets, what action follows and what outcome is achieved. Local authorities have a range of different ways for people to access their Housing Options and homelessness services.
- 2.13 To test initial telephone contact our tenant assessors carried out mystery shopping with the case study authorities with generally positive outcomes, including most resulting in a suitable appointment being made and the callers being dealt with sensitively and in a customer-focused way. We also found that:
- » some were not directed to the homeless service;
  - » some had to hold for lengthy periods before being helped; and
  - » two were given homelessness decisions solely on the basis of the phone conversation.

**Positive practice**

East Dunbartonshire Council deals with initial contacts in a sensitive, customer focussed way and were given appropriate appointments that met their needs.

- 2.14 Local authorities have changed the way they deliver homelessness services following the implementation of Housing Options. This can affect accessibility, and we found that it is not always clear how initial contacts are dealt with and how they are followed up.
- 2.15 We saw that for those case study local authorities who record the data about 23% of people lost contact, either before or after initial Housing Options interviews; the level is increasing for some local authorities. This can result from the length of time between initial contact and a Housing Options interview: in one local authority it took up to 32 days for an interview following initial contact and 34% of Housing Options appointments were not kept. From our survey we found that some local authorities do not know the levels of lost contact for Housing Options, while for others lost contacts ranged from 2% to over 40%.
- 2.16 Clear policies and procedures, together with effective training, are important to support officers to deliver Housing Options effectively. We found that Housing Options procedures and strategic documents generally set out well the advice which officers should give people during interview and provide a good outline of the services which may help people in the specific local authority area. We also found a lack of clarity in some of the guidance and in definitions around homelessness.
- 2.17 Most local authorities have changed officers' roles and responsibilities with the introduction of Housing Options and through a greater focus on prevention work. Officers in two of the case study local authorities told us that they were unsure of their new roles and not clear about what they were trying to achieve. We found that homelessness officers generally received training on Housing Options service delivery, but that this was not always the case for initial reception staff.
- 2.18 The Scottish Government's definition of Housing Options promotes the consideration of the widest range of options and choices to address a person's housing needs and aspirations. We saw that local authorities' officers are generally enthusiastic about the Housing Options approach and are working hard to deliver different options for people. However, we saw that local authorities generally discuss a broadly similar, but relatively narrow, set of Housing Options with people who approached them for assistance. These options related mainly to:
- » private rented sector and rent deposit schemes;
  - » social rented sector and specific schemes such as mortgage to rent;
  - » remaining in people's current accommodation; or
  - » pursuing a homeless application.
- 2.19 We also found that in most of the cases we reviewed local authorities did not actively work to achieve an outcome for a person seeking their assistance and relied on signposting and the individual achieving the outcome for themselves. Most local authorities recognise that Housing Options services are new and relatively under-developed at this time.
- 2.20 The 2009 homelessness prevention guidance issued jointly by the Scottish Government and COSLA makes clear that local authorities should complete a

homeless assessment for any person who is homeless or threatened with homelessness at the time of a Housing Options interview and that that should progress alongside efforts to prevent homelessness.

- 2.21 Most local authorities told us that their reception procedure is to give a Housing Options interview in the first instance; a smaller number told us they give people a homelessness interview; and one told us it gives a homeless interview only to people who present as roofless. However, in shadowing interviews we found that officers were often unclear on when they should initiate a homelessness assessment, on what advice they should give people in different circumstances, and on what information to use to decide if Housing Options or a homelessness assessment was appropriate.
- 2.22 Of the 194 Housing Options cases we reviewed that had clear evidence of homelessness or potential homelessness, 63 had their homelessness assessed. However, 122 were dealt with exclusively through Housing Options, including 16 people who were fleeing domestic violence; these outcomes are not consistent with the 2009 guidance. It was not clear how the remaining nine had been handled. Of the 122 clear homeless cases which had outcomes recorded, 24% resulted in a local authority or private sector tenancy, 50% did not secure accommodation and 25% had a recorded outcome of not known or lost contact with the authority.
- 2.23 These findings demonstrate that Housing Options has contributed to the reduction in the number of people having a homelessness assessment. It also demonstrates that, while we saw that some have had an appropriate outcome through Housing Options, the diversion of people from a homelessness assessment to Housing Options is not always appropriate. It is likely that this has resulted in an underreporting of homelessness. The assessment of homelessness and Housing Options together – as recommended in the 2009 Scottish Government and COSLA guidance – would have resolved the weaknesses in many of the cases we reviewed. It is likely, however, that the wider adoption of this practice would result in an increase in recorded and reported homelessness, at least in the short term.
- 2.24 Although some service users get housing outcomes that meet their needs, outcomes in general are often unclear or are not being accurately recorded. We saw some instances where local authorities had recorded advice to contact local letting agents or to continue waiting for social housing as securing accommodation or preventing homelessness. In other instances there is no measurable change to people's housing circumstances as a result of the Housing Options process.
- 2.25 A number of local authorities told us they would welcome further clarity on how Housing Options fits with their responsibilities on homelessness, and they recognised that there may be gaps between current practice and the Code of Guidance on Homelessness. This, in part, reflects the concern expressed to us through this inquiry and wider discussions with local authorities and other stakeholders that there is a tension between the application of Housing Options and the requirements of the current legislation on homelessness. We saw that local authorities are working well together through the Hubs to develop diagnostic tools to help them deal with initial contacts.
- 2.26 We recommend that local authorities:
- » minimise the time people wait between initial contact and Housing Options interview;

- » support front line officers with appropriate training and clear guidance and procedures; and
- » ensure they complete a homeless assessment, while progressing Housing Options efforts, where there is clear evidence of homelessness or potential homelessness.

***“Local councils perform their duties on homelessness so that: homeless people are provided with suitable, good quality temporary or emergency accommodation when this is needed.”***

#### **Scottish Social Housing Charter, Outcome 12**

- 2.27 We saw that the availability of temporary accommodation and the information about temporary accommodation given by local authorities during Housing Options interviews strongly affected people’s choices within the Housing Options process. The location, cost, type and accessibility of temporary accommodation were important factors in whether people chose to pursue a homelessness assessment. We saw local authorities provide clear information and ensure that people can access temporary accommodation when they need it. However, we also saw that advice and information on the limited choice available and the potentially lengthy period of stay was sometimes provided in a way that discouraged the person from pursuing the provision of temporary accommodation.
- 2.28 Local authorities provide temporary accommodation to some people who go through Housing Options only. We saw that this created some confusion amongst staff and applicants about their homelessness status. We also found from our case reviews that 46 people who were being taken through Housing Options were not provided with temporary accommodation despite an evident need; a small number were sleeping rough as a consequence.
- 2.29 In part 1 we set out the reduction in local authorities’ use of temporary accommodation from a peak in 2010/11. In this inquiry we did not always see effective strategic planning by local authorities around the level of required accommodation, and we found that some local authorities have actively reduced the provision of their own properties for temporary accommodation. It was not always clear how these decisions related to the level of demand for temporary accommodation that was evident in local authorities’ recorded information on homeless and Housing Options cases. For some local authorities this has reduced the availability and choice of temporary accommodation, and may make it more difficult to meet the needs of people in future.
- 2.30 We saw examples of Housing Options interviews that were well handled and provided comprehensive advice, with some local authorities delivering good quality housing prospects information which took account of the individual’s personal circumstances. We also saw that other interviews lacked a clear and consistent structure to ensure that all relevant information was obtained to establish people’s circumstances, and did not always ensure that people got sufficient information to help them make informed choices. We also found that:
- » sometimes information was given in a leading way;
  - » some local authorities asked people to sign a declaration that they did not want to make a homeless application, sometimes before any interview took place;
  - » some information given was factually incorrect and poor advice; and
  - » the recording of information was under-developed and poor in many cases making it difficult to understand why a particular housing option had been recommended.

**Positive practice**

Moray Council delivered a comprehensive housing options interview, which featured good advice and information which was well-balanced, factual and relevant to the person and their circumstances.

- 2.31 Some local authorities produce letters or plans following a Housing Options interview. These are shared with the service user. We saw that the information contained in these letters or plans is often generic and is not an accurate reflection of the discussions that have taken place. Service users we spoke to told us that these documents are not always clear about what will happen next or what actions they and the local authorities have agreed to take. We also saw that it can take the local authorities up to a month to issue these and that during this time people's circumstances may have changed. Some local authorities do give service users a record of their interview, setting out what happens next and what both parties have agreed to do. This is positive and is consistent with *Code of Guidance on Homelessness*.
- 2.32 Most local authorities audit their Housing Options cases, with audit samples ranging from 5% to 100%. Such audits help local authorities to ensure decisions are correct, consistent and in line with policy. We saw some examples of regular and consistent casework audit. We also carried out a number of case reviews of audits and found that some had not picked up a number of issues such as the lack of recorded information, factually incorrect and poor housing advice being given, and inaccurate recording of interviews. We also saw that the findings were not always used in the broader evaluation of Housing Options or to improve services.
- 2.33 We saw that some local authorities are evaluating their Housing Option services, and have produced plans for improvement action. This is positive. We also saw that a number have recommended roll-out of Housing Options more widely to all applicants for housing, including existing tenants. We saw some local authorities dealing with existing tenants' housing needs through Housing Options although it was not always clear that was the most appropriate response or had achieved a successful outcome.
- 2.34 We recommend that local authorities:
- » have a consistent structure for Housing Options interviews to ensure that relevant and important questions are always asked;
  - » ensure that advice and information is given in a balanced and appropriate way;
  - » improve the quality of their record keeping to ensure accurate records of discussions and outcomes;
  - » produce a timely record of discussions and actions for the service user; and
  - » implement a systematic and consistent system of audit of Housing Options work to improve service delivery.

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## Glossary

<b>Active Casework</b>	Where officers have responsibility for working with particular service users on a longer-term basis and assisting them to find resolutions to their particular circumstances.
<b>Audit of Cases</b>	The process where organisations check casework to ensure that decisions are correct, consistent and have been made in line with policy.
<b>Homeless</b>	You may be homeless if: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>» you have no home in the UK or anywhere else in the world where you and your family can live together, or</li><li>» you have no rights to live in the place you currently stay, or</li><li>» the place where you are currently living is unsuitable or unsafe</li></ul>
<b>Lost Contact</b>	Where the local authority loses contact with the service user. This can be at any stage of the process.
<b>Mortgage to Rent</b>	Where a person is in danger of having their home repossessed, the Scottish Government's mortgage to rent scheme could allow them to remain in their home as a tenant.
<b>Mystery Shopping</b>	An inquiry technique which involves testing services by contacting the organisation delivering them using a common scenario to gauge their responsiveness.
<b>Not Intentionally Homeless</b>	Where a local authority determines that a person is not homeless by their own choice
<b>Priority Need</b>	To be in 'priority need' a household had to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>» a pregnant woman</li><li>» dependent children</li><li>» someone vulnerable as a result of old age, mental illness or handicap or physical disability or other special reason</li><li>» someone homeless or threatened with homelessness as a result of an emergency such as flood, fire or other disaster</li></ul> On 31 December 2012, priority need was abolished by the Scottish Parliament and all local authorities now have to provide 'settled accommodation' to anyone who is not intentionally homeless.
<b>Referral Schemes</b>	A system where a local authority passes on a service user with particular needs to a partner agency for appropriate assistance.
<b>Registered Social Landlord (RSL)</b>	A landlord (housing association, housing co-operative, housing partnership) providing or managing social rented housing that is registered and regulated by the Scottish Housing Regulator.
<b>Scotland Performs</b>	This scheme measures and reports on progress of Government in Scotland in creating a more successful country, with opportunities for all to flourish through increasing sustainable economic growth.
<b>Settled Accommodation</b>	The offer of permanent accommodation as defined by the legislation. Secure, medium to long term accommodation.
<b>Shadowing</b>	An inquiry technique that involves accompanying and observing officers while they carry out their day to day tasks.
<b>Support Assessment</b>	A statutory assessment of homeless people's support needs.
<b>Temporary Accommodation</b>	Provision of accommodation for a temporary basis only.

