

**Minutes of the  
Cross Party Group on Housing  
Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> November 2014, 1-2pm**

**Present**

Margaret McDougall MSP  
Patrick Harvie MSP  
Gordon MacDonald MSP  
Alex Johnstone MSP  
Alistair Cameron, Scottish Churches Housing Action  
Andy Young, SFHA  
Ashley Campbell, CIH  
Caroline Elgar, SAL  
Emma Dore, Shelter Scotland  
Iain McCreddie, Scottish Council for Development and Industry & Scottish Cities Alliance  
John Blackwood, SAL  
Leanne Blunsden, TIS  
Lynda Johnstone, TIS  
Moir Bayne, Housing Options Scotland  
Susie Fitton, Capability Scotland  
Tristan Compton, NLA

**In attendance**

Alastair Hackland, Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland  
Craig Sanderson, Link Group  
Graham Harper, Care and Repair Scotland  
Kathrine Sibbald, Audit Scotland  
Keith Anderson, Port of Leith Housing Association  
Lyssandra Golledge, Office of Maureen Watt MSP  
Michael Cameron, Scottish Housing Regulator  
Susan Napier, FRICS

**1. Welcome and apologies**

Margaret McDougall MSP opened the meeting of the Cross Party Group on Housing and issued the following apologies:

- Maureen Watt MSP
  - Lesley Baird, TPAS
- Robert Aldridge, Homeless Action Scotland  
Margaret welcomed Michael Cameron, Chief Executive, Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) to the meeting.

## **2. Minutes of previous meeting**

Minutes were approved with no matters arising

## **3. AGM**

### **3.1. Elections**

Convenor

The existing Convenor, Margaret McDougall MSP, stood down and the elections were led by Gordon MacDonald MSP.

Gordon MacDonald MSP nominated Margaret McDougall MSP for the position of Convenor and this motion was seconded by Alex Johnstone MSP.

At this point, control of the meeting was handed back to newly elected Margaret McDougall MSP.

Vice Convenor

Patrick Harvie MSP and Gordon MacDonald MSP both stood for the role of Vice-Convenor. Alex Johnstone MSP supported Gordon MacDonald MSP, Margaret McDougall MSP supported Patrick Harvie MSP. It was agreed that they would co-work the position of Vice-Convenor.

Secretariat

Margaret McDougall MSP reported that over the past year, TIS have been providing an excellent administrative service and proposed that they should continue in the role of Secretariat. This was seconded by Tristan Compton, National Landlords Association.

Treasurer

There is no requirement for the position of treasurer as the group has no monetary responsibilities.

## **4. Main Item: Thematic Inquiry into Housing Options and Homelessness Prevention**

- Michael Cameron, Chief Executive, Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR)**

Michael Cameron thanked the group for inviting him to attend the Cross Party Group on Housing meeting. The presentation handout is as follows:

### **Key points**

SHR's statutory objective includes protecting the interests of people who are homeless or may become homeless and others who use the services of social landlord.

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.”*

The SHR aimed to assess the success of the new Housing Options approach, its impact on statutory homelessness, and outcomes are for people seeking help from local authorities.

***Our main findings:***

- limited guidance
- until April, no consistent monitoring
- potential for tension with homeless legislation
- good outcomes for some, less so for others
- early implementation can be good but opportunities often missed
- targets
- under-recording of homelessness
- no comprehensive evaluation of policy

***Our recommendations:***

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.

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.

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.

## **Background**

SHR's statutory objective includes protecting the interests of people who are homeless or may become homeless and others who use the services of social landlord. The delivery and the sustained achievement of the 2012 target has been an important focus in the SHR's regulation of landlords for some years, and we recognise that Housing Options has been promoted as a key way to help landlords deliver on that target.

## **Purpose of thematic**

In undertaking this thematic inquiry the SHR aimed to assess the success of the new Housing Options approach, its impact on statutory homelessness, and what outcomes are achieved for people seeking help from local authorities. This was about getting a national picture on whether Housing Options is an effective way to prevent homelessness.

The SHR recognises that Housing Options is a relatively new approach adopted only recently by local authorities and that most are enthusiastic about it as a way to give people good advice and genuine choices. The principles and concepts of housing options are clearly positive.

## **Who?**

We identified 6 case study local authorities for visits and carried out 5 days on-site scrutiny in each of these. These were, North Ayrshire Council, Dumfries and Galloway Council, Fife Council, Falkirk Council, Moray Council and East Dunbartonshire Council. These gave us a geographical spread, different homeless service delivery types and one local authority from each of the homelessness hubs.

## **What?**

To do this thematic inquiry we began by undertaking analysis of national performance and statistical information a review of other research and studies in this area.

The inquiry included a mystery shopping of access arrangements at the case study local authorities. This was carried out by 6 tenant assessors. Tenant assessors are tenants of social landlords who work with the SHR in its scrutiny work.

Also included a survey of the remaining 26 local authorities based on the self-assessment submission the SHR drafted for the case study local authorities. This helped to ensure consistency across the inquiry. And the findings of any other housing options inquiries the SHR had fairly recently carried out.

In all the SHR carried out 280 case reviews and shadowing of interviews between July and October 2013. It also spoke to people using the services to get their views.

The inquiry also sought to gather and share good practice examples across the sector.

## **Findings**

Of the 280 Housing Options cases the SHR reviewed, 194 presented with clear evidence of homelessness or potential homelessness. Of these, 63 had their homelessness assessed. However, 122 were dealt with exclusively through Housing Options, including 16 people who were fleeing domestic violence. 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 26% had a recorded outcome of not known or lost contact with the authority.

Good examples of prevention work were primarily around early intervention for rent arrears or for people falling behind with mortgage payments.

The report was anonymous but local authorities who had demonstrated positive practice examples were named.

The thematic inquiry report was published on 9<sup>th</sup> May 2014 and was generally welcomed across the sector. As mentioned above, the report contains recommendations both for local authorities and the Scottish Government.

The SHR has carried out some follow-up work with the local authorities and has spoken at a housing options and allocations conference, ALACHO, SHBVN and the Scottish Government. The SHR has also fed into the next round of ICI Committee discussions.

## **SG Response**

Following publication of the thematic inquiry report, the Scottish Government set up a Housing Options Guidance Group. In addition to representation by the Scottish Government, membership of this group includes ALACHO, COSLA and 7 local authorities; these are North Ayrshire Council, Highland Council, Perth and Kinross Council, Falkirk Council, South Lanarkshire

Council, Renfrewshire Council and North Lanarkshire Council. The SHBVN is also involved in an advisory capacity.

The group has met 3 times to date and has already produced a draft version of Housing Options Guidance which is currently out for consultation with group members. Following this the Guidance will be circulated more widely for comment. The draft has been developed to address the recommendations made in the thematic inquiry report and the Guidance itself meets one of our main recommendations.

**The following discussion took place:**

Alastair Cameron, Scottish Churches Housing Action acknowledged that the person centred approach to housing options is favourable, however people with multiple needs presenting as homeless do not always benefit from the housing options approach. The study highlighted that in the absence of a clear monitoring framework it was difficult to determine specific needs.

The SHR have been engaged in the process of Housing Options Guidance, which is being led by the Scottish Government involving ALACHO, COSLA, 7 Local Authorities and SHBVN in their advisory capacity. The meeting noted that the private sector and Shelter are not involved in the Housing Options Guidance Group. Michael Cameron stated that he hopes it reflects the SHR findings and picks up on their recommendations to build into a future thematic enquiry programme.

With reference to the diversionary approach within housing options, the SHR noted that a single person with complex needs presenting to a local authority with no where to stay was processed through the housing options route rather than being offered immediate temporary accommodation and their needs met. This approach achieved positive outcomes for some, but not others, as Local Authorities statutory duties were not always implemented at the time.

Patrick Harvie MSP joined the meeting at this point.

The meeting agreed that it is essential that training sits alongside the guidance. It was highlighted that some Local Authorities provide extensive housing options training, however this is patchy in other housing providers. Training in early intervention is good however staff should be made aware of missed opportunities. For example, at the initial assessment point, a presenting homeless person has been provided inappropriate advice to their personal circumstances, and therefore guidance training is critical. The thematic study was not able to quantify specific evidence regarding this issue. Reference was made to page 17 of the thematic study report which refers to research within the study.

As part of the customer involvement in self assessment and scrutiny agenda, TIS are working with a range of landlords who have adopted mystery shopping approaches to the assessment of landlord services. This has included scrutinising customer service standards and the quality of advice provided by front line staff to mystery shoppers presenting as homeless or seeking advice on behalf of someone else. The thematic study findings are concurrent with mystery shopping research.

It was raised that the housing options as an approach is an appropriate approach however challenge lies in the lack of housing options available. i.e. the lack of social housing and affordable renting opportunities within the private renting sector. Concern was raised that Glasgow and Edinburgh Local Authorities have, at time, been in breach of their statutory duties as homeless people sleeping rough have been turned away due to lack of appropriate accommodation.

The meeting agreed that it is essential that the SHR take an active role in ensuring accurate recording within homelessness. Every year information from the Annual Return on the Charter, and other intelligence will be used to identify and engage with Local Authorities and Registered Social Landlords. It is fully anticipated that future thematic studies will focus on different homelessness areas. In the future a study will take place to plot the progress on the current recommendations.

A closing point was made that future requirements should ensure that all housing options are familiar to, and understood by, those providing advice.

Margaret thanked Michael Cameron for his presentation.

## **5. Cross Party Group Business**

TIS provided a paper with future topic suggestions.

Patrick Harvie MSP suggested that when the outcome of the Smith Commission process is known, specifically the agreement on housing benefit, this information could be provided to the group for discussion.

Tristan Compton, NLA, suggested that following the tenancy reform consultation the group may decide to discuss the outcomes in the first half of next year.

Keith Anderson, Port of Leith Housing Association suggested looking at the recommendations from the RICS Housing Commission report, the Scottish Government Housing Conference restatement of national housing priorities for the next 3-5 years which he thinks will be published in March/April 2015 and the Shelter Commission on Housing and Wellbeing which also may be completed by April 2015. These are potential topics for the May 2015 meeting.

It was agreed that for the January 2015 meeting, two appropriate speakers from the list of possibilities, would be invited to present.

In addition a joint meeting with SPREEE is still to be convened.

## **6. AOB**

The Cross Party Group on Architecture and the Built Environment invited members to attend their meeting on the 9<sup>th</sup> December, 5:30-7:30pm, which is addressing new builds. It was agreed that the Secretariat of the group would be thanked for the invitation and TIS would circulate an email with further details.

## **7. Date of next meeting and close**

- 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2015, 1-2pm

The meeting was closed at 1:45pm, Margaret McDougall MSP thanked all for attending.