



RSL Guide to Housing Options

Draft - Sept 2016

Zhan McIntyre - SFHA Policy Lead

www.sfha.co.uk

Foreword

Thank you for reading the Guide for RSLs on the Housing Option Approach. This guide was developed to help housing associations and co-operatives across Scotland become more familiar and aware of the Housing Options Approach used across Scotland.

This guide complements the Housing Options Guidance published by the Scottish Government in March 2016.

SFHA have published this Guide as a working 'draft' document, and as such would like to add examples of good practice. If you have examples of good practice in your area, or case studies of how the housing options approach has helped your customers, please get in touch. Similarly, we would like to update the guidance based on actual experience of RSLs as the Housing Options Approach develops.

We will look to update the full document again in 12 – 18 months.

Zhan McIntyre zmcintyre@sfha.co.uk 29/09/16

Contributors / Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed to the development of this guide, and thanks are due to each and every one. Particular thanks go to

*Davidbookbinder Glasgow and West of Scotland Forum
Andrea Curley Rural Stirling Housing Association
Catherine Wilkie Wheatley Group and Member of the West Hub
Gail Gourley Trust Housing Association
Fin McElhinney, Queens Cross Housing Association
Colleen Rowan, Glasgow and West of Scotland Forum
Norman Fitzpatrick New Gorbals Housing Association
Kirsty Fotheringham New Gorbals Housing Association
Janie Preston Pineview Housing Association
Alex McGhie Scottish Government
John McShane Cadder Housing Association
Lynsey McKean Scottish Government*

Contents

Foreword	i
Contributors / Acknowledgements.....	i
RSL Guide to the Housing Options Approach	1
Introduction	1
From Homelessness ‘Alleviation’ to ‘Prevention’	2
What is the Housing Options Model?	2
Housing Options Principles for RSLs	4
Housing Options Hubs - Contacts	7

RSL Guide to the Housing Options Approach

Introduction

Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) have a long history of helping to tackle and prevent homelessness through re-housing homeless households, as well as 'wider action' activities and support that have helped individuals and communities. The role RSLs play in helping their local communities

For some years now, Local Authorities have adopted a 'Housing Options' approach to prevention and tackling homelessness. On the 2 March 2016, the Scottish Government published [Housing Options Guidance](#), which contains detailed information about the Housing Options approach and how this relates to Homelessness Legislation and the duties Local Authorities have in relation to helping people experiencing homelessness.

This RSL Guide to the Housing Options Approach (the Guide) complements the Scottish Government Housing Options Guidance, and has been developed to help registered social landlords across Scotland gain a better understanding of the principles and benefits of the Housing Options approach, and encourage them to get involved in the Housing Options activity in their regional Housing Options Hub if they are not already doing so.

RSLs are often in a relatively privileged position to identify and actively respond to tenants who present a potential risk, at an early stage through the on-going contact that housing officers have with the people in within their communities. Through this relatively privileged position RSLs are able to enable tenant(s) and/or their family members gain access to important services at an early stage often preventing the issue escalating and resulting in potential homelessness; this illustrates what the Housing Options approach can do, and why RSLs are so important to the success of this approach.

Housing Options should also be seen within the wider context of the Health and Social Care Integration and the role housing can play in the Health and Social Care Partnerships RSLs.

The purpose of this Guide is to help

- give an overview of the Housing Options approach;
- encourage RSLs to adopt a Housing Options approach and work more closely with their partners to get the best outcomes for customers and tenants.

For RSLs, the Housing Options approach offers an opportunity to update and modernise the applicant experience and journey through the allocation process for all customers, not just those at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness.

This Guide builds on "Preventing and Alleviating Homelessness Guidance" (SFHA 2010)¹, as well as current good practice within the Scottish social housing movement in relation to providing holistic advice and information services to people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

¹ <http://www.sfha.co.uk/sfha/homelessness-guidance-booklet/contents> SFHA members only

From Homelessness ‘Alleviation’ to ‘Prevention’

Although the Housing Options approach can be used to help all applicants, many households at risk of or experiencing homelessness will particularly benefit from this approach.

Prevention is always better than cure, and this is no different when dealing with homelessness.

Prevention of Homelessness Guidance² produced by the Scottish Government and COSLA in 2009 highlighted that it was not desirable or efficient just to ‘alleviate homelessness’ eg deal with homelessness once it had happened.

Rather, it was better for individuals and households, as well as more cost effective, to invest in homelessness prevention:

“alleviating homelessness is an expensive business both in monetary and societal terms; the principles of ‘spend to save’ are proven in respect of homelessness prevention.”

Prevention of Homelessness Guidance (2009) p. 4

While homelessness prevention is a corporate responsibility, to be successful, it must be embraced by all parts of the local authority and, where relevant, their local partners, which includes RSLs and Health Services.

Recommendations made in the [Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services](#), often referred to as the Christie Commission, highlighted that public services needed to refocus on **prevention** of need, while ensuring appropriate safety nets for vulnerable people.

What is the Housing Options Model?

Housing Options is not a completely new concept, and has been part of the Scottish housing landscape for some years.

‘Housing Options’ is the term given to the provision of person-centred, good quality, robust advice and information about local housing, with a focus on getting the right solution for the people involved from the range of tenures and housing providers available in the local area, or by resolving a problem in someone’s existing housing.

From a legislative perspective, the Scottish Government defines Housing Options as

“a process which starts with housing advice when someone approaches a local authority with a housing problem.....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

² <http://www.gov.scot/resource/doc/274719/0082198.pdf>

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.”

The Housing Options approach can be used to help existing tenants to access the appropriate supports to help them sustain their tenancy.

Housing Options services are, by their nature, diverse, but will commonly include the following:

- housing advice;
- health advice;
- advice on aids and adaptations;
- financial inclusion;
- budget management support; and
- employability support.

In meeting an individual's need for housing, one of the key principles of Housing Options is broader engagement and finding solutions with partner organisations.

These partner organisations might be located in other sectors (public, voluntary or private) or within the local authority, including but not restricted to social work, community education, employability and other teams.

As mentioned above, Housing Options is more than just about dealing with imminent homelessness; Housing Associations and Co-operatives are also finding it is a useful approach to helping new and existing customers make the right choices about their housing prospects, and get them into a tenancy that works well for them.

As an approach, it can enable RSLs to use their relatively privileged position to help tenants gain access to important service early, helping to prevent unfavourable outcomes.

The Housing Options approach can also be used as shared method to help deliver better joint working between Health and Social Care Partners.

Housing Options also has benefits for Housing Associations and Co-operatives; by investing a bit more time at an initial Housing Options interviews, there can be added value in terms of housing management efficiencies including increased tenancy sustainment, improved void management and better rent loss/recovery.

Many Housing Associations and Co-operatives already offer this kind of service, and are well-placed within their communities to carry out or contribute to a Housing Options approach.

Housing Options Principles for RSLs

You may feel that you already offer some sort of Housing Options service, such as helping your applicants understand their opportunities and realistic chances of being allocated particular house types in particular areas.

While you may not have the same level of resources as local authorities, there are simple things that organisations like yours can do to help embed the Housing Options approach across the housing sector. This can help improve tenancy sustainment as well as securing better outcomes for vulnerable people and their families.

Take time to understand and meet each person's circumstances, needs and choices.

Checklists are helpful, but the purpose of an interview is to find out what the person is concerned about and ascertain the best advice and information to provide leading to the best possible outcome.

This requires good interview skills, coupled with an ability to diagnose what the key problem or issue is. For example, a young person living at home but seeking housing may in fact benefit from mediation services if the key problem is a household rift which can be eased by mutual understanding and compromise.

Make referrals to specialist support if a person needs it

Once a person's needs and choices are understood, referrals to other services become crucial. One of the most important services is Welfare Advice and this may be available in-house, or via a referral system.

Efforts to assess the risk of tenancy failure (often referred to as pre-tenancy work) are increasingly being undertaken by housing associations. Determining financial and other vulnerabilities is an important part of housing options work, as this information is vital in deciding what options are realistically available to a person.

The interviewer also needs to have the confidence to advise a person of the likelihood of their aspirations being met. As understandable as the need is to allow people to express their choices and aspirations, it is important that the person is aware of the likelihood of those choices and aspirations being met and what the alternatives are if the 'first choice' is unlikely to be available. Providing good quality advice and information helps people modify their expectations.

When an applicant confides that they are threatened with homelessness within 2 months, a Housing Association or Co-operative could make that applicant aware of their right to go to their local authority to make a homeless application if they wish. However, some households may be reluctant to approach their local authority and RSLs have a good track record of addressing such need directly when possible.

Work within the Charter and the National Standards

Adopting a Housing Options approach to helping customers will contribute towards compliance in relation to Scottish Social Housing Charter Outcomes 7, 8 and 9, which relate to housing options advice and information.

Social landlords work together to ensure that:

- People looking for housing get information that helps them make informed choices and decisions about the range of housing options available to them;
- Tenants and people on housing lists can review their housing options.

Social landlords ensure that:

- People at risk of losing their homes get advice on preventing homelessness.

Outcome 11 relates to tenancy sustainment, which is linked to good advice and information:

Social landlords ensure that:

- Tenants get the information they need on how to obtain support to remain in their home; and that suitable support is available including services provided directly by the landlord and by other organisations.

Members of staff involved with giving advice and information need to be competent in their understanding of homelessness and housing legislation in order to adequately advise in these areas.

The National Standards for Information and Advice Providers sets out a quality assurance framework for agencies involved in providing advice and information, including housing information. Some organisations choose to become accredited to the National Standards, and more information on how to obtain this is available [online](#).

Whether or not you decide to achieve accreditation via the Standards, signposting is not about handing someone a list of addresses; it is about offering options which can either be pursued via an active referral, or an arrangement made to check how the person has progressed. To be clear, this means that the relevant RSL officer is responsible for completing and progressing the referral to any appropriate agency.

Make best use of resources

Different RSL's currently offer different levels of housing advice and information. Very small community based organisations may not be able to offer the full housing options service to everyone who asks for it, but having referral arrangements in place with agencies who can do so would be best practice.

The volume of housing queries will vary, dependent on geographical location, customer base and size of the organisation. Also, some organisations will receive

more telephone queries than in person and vice versa. You will know yourself if developing a drop in/appointment or home visit service will be appropriate for your organisation.

Provision of advice and information should ideally be available to all who need it. However, as your services are funded by rents, your focus will rightly be on the advice and information required by your own customer base, i.e. mainly tenants and applicants.

An advantage of forming good working links with others is the opportunity for awareness-raising, which can help remove barriers and clear up misunderstanding about what each service can and cannot do.

Consider how your Policy Framework can work for Housing Options

The next time you review your policy framework, take the opportunity to make it reflect the Housing Options approach. For example, you could set out that at a 'pre-application stage' prior to accepting a housing application, you will discuss

- Current housing situation and future housing aspiration
- Support needs
- Likelihood of being allocated a home
- Impact of welfare reforms and under-occupation penalties on affordability
- Alternative tenure options
- Debt and other financial pressures.

The purpose of this would be to achieve suitable outcomes for the individual's housing situation.

Another example could be how your organisation might 'prevent homelessness' by outlining categories of households who could be awarded a priority for housing, eg

Tied Housing:	Priority given to those who are given notice to quit through no fault of their own
Armed Forces	Priority given to those with a Certificate of Cessation of Entitlement to Occupy Service Living Accommodation
Relationship Breakdown	Priority given to those at risk of homelessness resulting from a relationship breakdown
Management Transfers	Priority given as a preventative measure of last resort to avoid homelessness
People Leaving Prison	Priority given to those in prison with a liberation date, if it will help prevent a homelessness presentation and help prevent re-offending

Housing Options Hubs - Contacts

There are five regional Housing Options Hubs across Scotland, which are led and operated by local authorities.

These groups were set up by the Scottish Government to help promote and embed the Housing Options approach. The Hubs work together to share best practice as well as commission joint training and research. A Housing Options Training Toolkit is currently under development and this will be a powerful resource when it is available [will update with review of Guide].

If you are not already in touch with your regional Housing Options Hub, it may be worthwhile making contact to find out about any training or events you may be able to participate in jointly. Some Hubs have or are in the process of developing a 'Hub' website that will detail housing options, and it might be worth exploring if this could be a resource that you could use and alert your tenants and other customers to.

Table 1 Housing Options Hubs at June 2016

Ayrshire and South Hub		
Lead Authority: North Ayrshire Council		
Contact: Sheelagh Campbell sheelaghcampbell@north-ayrshire.gov.uk mailto:	North Ayrshire Dumfries and Galloway	South Ayrshire East Ayrshire Inverclyde
East Hub		
Lead Authority: East Lothian Council		
Contact: Mike Lloyd East Lothian Council mlloyd@eastlothian.gov.uk 01620 827 816	City of Edinburgh East Lothian Midlothian	Scottish Borders West Lothian Falkirk Council
North and Islands Hub		
Lead Authority: Highland Council		
Contact: Hilary Parkey hilary.parkey@highland.gov.uk	Highland Moray Aberdeen City Orkney Islands	Aberdeenshire Shetland Islands Eilean Siar
Tayside, Fife and Central Hub		
Lead Authority: Perth and Kinross Council		
Contact: Elaine Ritchie eritchie@pkc.gcsx.gov.uk	Perth and Kinross Clackmannanshire Dundee City	Argyll and Bute Fife Angus Stirling
West Hub		
Lead Authority: East Dunbartonshire		
Contact: Sharon Mayes Sharon.mayes@eastdunbarton.gov.uk Cc cfrew@ghn.org.uk	East Dunbartonshire East Renfrewshire Glasgow City North Lanarkshire Renfrewshire	South Lanarkshire West Dunbartonshire Glasgow Housing Association (GHA)