

HOUSING DEPARTMENT INFORMATION AND ADVICE STRATEGY

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. In recent years there has been a shift towards a more customer-focussed approach towards service delivery that is based on local needs and preferences. The duty to develop housing and homelessness strategies and set out action plans has moved the role of housing advice up the agenda for local authorities.
- 1.2. Good, accessible housing information and advice is central to providing a service to those who most need it. It can play an important part in preventing homelessness and can help people make informed decisions about their housing options.
- 1.3. This strategy presents a framework for delivering housing information and advice service that is pro-active with the emphasis on prevention and early intervention. It takes into account existing provision, identifies improvement, new initiatives and sets a clear direction for the future.

2. NATIONAL CONTEXT

- 2.1. Recent national policy developments and changes in housing and homelessness legislation have a strong significance for the development of this strategy. There is an increased pressure on service providers to be clear about the quality of services and the outcomes they deliver and there is a greater focus on prevention of homelessness and housing problems.

2.2. Legislation

- Section 2 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 places a duty on local authorities to ensure that advice and information about homelessness, the prevention of homelessness and the provision of services, which may assist a homeless person, or prevent their homelessness, is available in their area.
- The Homeless Person Advice and Assistance (Scotland) Regulations 2002 places a duty on local authorities to provide advice and assistance to “intentionally” and non-priority need applicants.
- The Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003 places a greater emphasis on support services to ensure that recurring homelessness does not occur.

2.3. Modernising Government

Modernising Government represents a significant change in the public service environment. There is a need for every organisation to improve continuously and there is a growing demand from citizens to be treated as customers and to get the results they need. Implementing an information and advice strategy, based on best practice and the needs of the users, will help to achieve the goal more efficient and effective delivery of services.

2.4. Communities Scotland – Regulation and Inspection

The Housing Act 2001 created the new regulation system for both Local Authorities and Housing Associations, through Communities Scotland.

The new regulatory body is responsible for ensuring that standards and quality are maintained across all Social Housing in Scotland. To do this it has created Performance Standards against which all landlords will be assessed. The performance standards that deal with information and advice are:

GS3.2 Information and Advice

We provide or secure effective information and advice, in line with the national standards for housing information and advice services.

AS4.6 Information and Advice

We arrange free and effective information and advice services for homeless and potentially homeless people, based on the national standards for housing information and advice services.

2.5. **HomePoint**

HomePoint is the information and advice unit run by the regulator, Communities Scotland. HomePoint works to improve the standard of housing information and advice provision throughout Scotland. We will use key elements of HomePoint's work to develop our action plan:

- Scottish National Standards for Housing Information and Advice Services

The Scottish National Standards for Information and Advice provide a framework for defining what housing advice means. The standards are divided into six key areas: General management, Planning of Services, Accessibility and Customer Care, Providing the Service, Competencies and Resources. They are supported by a system of accreditation and a certificated adviser competency training package.

- Guide to Housing Options in Scotland

The HomePoint guide to housing options in Scotland gives information about provision of housing from local authorities and housing associations and provision for special needs groups.

- National Core Standards and Good Practice Guidance – Private Landlords

These national core standards provide a statement of good practice for letting property. Dundee is taking part in a two-year pilot using the guidance for its voluntary accreditation scheme. A tenancy agreement and management information pack are now available to landlords joining the Landlord accreditation scheme.

3. **LOCAL CONTEXT**

The provision of housing information and advice cannot be seen in isolation. It is influenced by many of our strategies, policies and plans. This strategy has direct links to the Local Housing Strategy and the Homeless Strategy. As a front-line service provider the Housing Department has always provided housing information and advice in a variety of forms and levels. Adopting a strategic approach will focus our provision so that it is more accessible and people are getting the right information and advice according to their need.

Local Housing Strategy

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 made it the responsibility of all local authorities in Scotland to produce a housing strategy. The overarching aim of Dundee's strategy is "to secure the best quality housing for Dundee's citizens". Our Information and Advice strategy will complement the LHS with reference to the strategic objective "Assist people with a housing need", in particular; "Provide support services to vulnerable people" and "Ensure equality of access to housing and related services".

Homelessness Strategy

Dundee's Homeless Strategy focuses on supporting homeless people with a range of needs. There is a strong emphasis on making the homeless service more accessible and improving preventative measures to reduce homelessness occurring and reoccurring (repeating). This strategy will help to contribute to the achievement of the Homeless Strategy's aims and objectives.

Common Housing Register

The Scottish Executive introduced the legislative basis for Common Housing Registers in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, section 8. Dundee City Council and ten local housing associations are working in partnership to develop a CHR for the Dundee area. This will mean that anyone seeking housing within the Dundee area can access a range of housing options through a single point of contact. Provision of information and advice is an essential component of a CHR and can ensure that the applicant is able to make informed choices depending on their needs and preferences.

Housing Standards and Equal Access to Services

The Housing Department is committed to providing quality services with equality to all. It is important to us that we provide services in a way that are sensitive and responsive to the needs of groups and individuals, and that is fair and consistent.

We have made a commitment to customer care and have set some clear guidelines on how employees should treat all our customers. We have created a Staff Charter, Customer Care Standards, Homelessness Service Standards, Owner Services Standards and a Code of Conduct for Contractors, that let customers know what they can expect from us and also lets employees know what is expected of them. The Customer Care Standards have been reviewed and are to be replaced by Housing Services Standards.

While services are delivered to individuals, we ensure that the development of our information and advice services is responsive to the needs of particular groups within our community. We will ensure this strategy is developed and implemented in compliance with the council's Equalities Policy. An Equality Impact Assessment will be carried out on the strategy and items contained in the action plan will be equality proofed as they are developed.

4. MISSION STATEMENT

All people in housing need in Dundee will be able to access current, high quality information and advice to help them resolve their housing problems and prevent their situation reaching crisis point.

5. **AIMS OF THE STRATEGY**

- To prevent homelessness and repeat homelessness.
- To provide value for money and high quality housing information and advice services.
- To ensure equality of access and outcomes for all.
- To promote a wide range of housing options.

6. **CURRENT SITUATION**

Information and Publicity

A wide variety of information is available in leaflet and booklet form. They are also published on the council web site. All housing publications are available in community languages, large print, Braille and audiotape, on request. Posters and flyers are produced to publicise new initiatives e.g. the freephone Homeless Advice Line. The Housing Department recognises that communication and marketing have a role to play in the success of the strategy. We have a dedicated officer responsible for coordinating all communication and marketing activities including: developing promotional materials – leaflets, brochures and posters, finding new ways to facilitate better internal communications between staff; providing content for internet and intranet pages, organising promotional and publicity activities.

Point of Contact

The Housing Department provides housing information and advice services at all its outlets. The method of delivery and type of information and advice provided will vary depending on the customer's needs.

All our District Housing Offices and Headquarters Offices have reception/waiting areas with private interview rooms. Depending on their functions each office deals with a range of enquiries e.g. housing options, tenancy issues, repairs, antisocial behaviour. A duty officer is available to support front-line staff. Each District Office has a Benefits Adviser who is available to give advice to staff and tenants.

Homelessness Service

Our homeless reception centre, the Lily Walker Centre can provide assistance and advice 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Homelessness Advice and Development Officer: The post was created in March 2004 to lead the development and promotion of a comprehensive advice service to meet the Council's statutory legal obligations to homeless persons. In addition, the post was also created to assist in the production, review and update of existing written procedures as well as leading the introduction of new procedures as required to fulfil increased duties contained within the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and Homelessness etc Act 2003.

The post has also taken a lead role in the implementation of the National Housing Advice HomePoint standards for the Homeless Service. This involves being the Service Coordinator supervising and training staff to achieve the individual standards required as well as accreditation for the Homeless Service.

Antisocial Behaviour Team

The Housing Department operates an Antisocial Behaviour Team to provide advice and assistance to tenants of council properties, housing associations, private lets and owner-occupiers. The main emphasis of the team's work is to prevent antisocial behaviour from happening. The team works directly with clients and provides practical advice and information to resolve disputes and complaints. In a further expansion of the service, an Antisocial Behaviour Advice Line has been set up. The freephone line is staffed by trained staff to provide advice and support to residents who are disturbed by the behaviour of their neighbours or other people in their community. The freephone number is available for everyone in the community, not just Council tenants.

An Education & Development Officer was appointed on 1st June 2006; this post is funded by the Scottish Executive until March 2008. Main duty is to assist the ASB Co-ordinator in developing new initiatives and to develop and deliver training to the ASB Team, Housing Associations, the Police, Area Office based staff and any other agency involved in tackling antisocial behaviour in our communities.

Housing Support Service

The Housing Support Team offers a range of support services designed to allow vulnerable individuals and families to sustain occupancy within the community. The provision of information and advice is a key element of the service. The type and level of information and advice is assessed then agreed with each individual client. A follow up service is also provided to encourage sustainable tenancies.

Tenant Involvement and Participation

Our Tenant Participation Officers encourage tenants to put forward their opinions and views to influence the quality and provision of housing services. This high level of involvement and participation ensures that our services are delivered in a way that meets people's needs. We also have a long established working relationship work with the DFTA (Dundee Federation of Tenants' Associations). Members of the association are involved in the development of day to day services, policies, plans, rent setting and agenda setting. We are looking at ways of encouraging wider consultation, in particular with minority and disadvantaged groups.

Energy Advice

The Dundee Energy Efficiency Advice Project (DEEAP) is based in the Housing Department. The aim of DEEAP is to provide a service throughout the city advising householders on fuel tariffs, how to reduce bills, energy efficiency measures, advocacy work resolving individuals debts with energy suppliers, and other advice and referral work.

7. PRIORITIES

Contact Centre Development

To make it easier and make it more efficient for customers to deal with the Housing Department, we have opened two new customer Contact Centres for:

- Letting Houses
- Rents

- We are also looking at ways to improve customer contact for Capital Contracts and Owner Services.

Each of these contact centres will provide a comprehensive service for their specialised function as well as giving basic guidance advice and signposting for other housing and council wide services. Delivering these services effectively will require specific actions within our information and advice strategy.

These actions will be:

- To provide training on Information and Advice to HomePoint standards for Information and Advice Officers.
- To review written advice and guidance on making best use of the contact centres.

Common Housing Register

- The development and eventual implementation of the Common Housing Register should greatly improve access to housing. However information and advice across landlords will have to be reviewed and co-ordinated much more closely than before.

Specifically we will need to:

- Develop a common application form which is accessible and easy to complete for all applicants.
- Guidance on applying for social rented housing will have to be reviewed and made accessible and easily understood for all applicants.
- Information on availability of housing and choices available to applicants will need to be consistent and good across all landlords.
- The scope of joint training on HomePoint standards across all landlords will need to be assessed.
- A Housing Options database will be discussed and developed for use by all social landlords in the City.

Information Resources

For the strategy to be successful information needs to be current, up to date and appropriate to customers needs. We will take account of access issues and will use a range of methods to communicate with vulnerable groups.

We are identifying improvements to existing provision to make it quicker for staff to source the information people are looking for:

- The council's website was relaunched in June 2007. The amount of housing information has increased and more forms will be available online.
- We are reviewing our staff intranet so that it can be used as the main source of current information. It will contain policies, procedures and guidance on all of the work of the department.

- We will ensure that staff are aware of the existence of the website and intranet and that they have skills required to search the sites for information.
- A Housing Options Guide will be designed using the HomePoint template and guidance. It will be available on-line and will be supported by Information and Advice folders at all points of contact.
- We are developing a communication strategy to raise public and staff awareness of what information and advice services are available.
- We have assisted in the development of a 'Welcome to Dundee' booklet aimed at migrant/incoming workers.
- We will develop guidelines on the use of translation and interpretation services for those customers with community language requirements.

8. **TRAINING/EDUCATION**

Training has a critical role to play in developing and sustaining the quality of the housing information and advice service.

- Our training strategy focuses on core housing skills with personal development within the framework of performance management.
- Priority is given to training on changing work practices, new legislation, new policies and revised procedures.
- All new employees follow an induction programme to help them fit into their job and make them comfortable with their new duties as soon as possible. This period is used to identify future training needs.
- We arrange joint training with other departments and organisations to maximise partnership working.
- The Education and Development officer will be delivering training sessions in schools as part of the HEY (Housing Education for Youth) Project and arranging awareness raising events for the 12-15 age group.

9. **SIGNPOSTING AND REFERRAL**

We recognise that not all agencies provide the same type of service, and that there is a variety of levels of information and advice. Some agencies may provide a signposting service; some may provide services that require the client to be referred to them. It is important that agencies know contact details and each others' referral procedures so that clients are clear about what is available.

10. **MONITORING/PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT**

- Action plan has targets and milestones that will be monitored on the Strategic Planning Monitoring Database.
- HomePoint Standards

- Customer Satisfaction Surveys
- Complaints

11. **EVALUATION/REVIEW**

- The strategy will be evaluated by auditing the performance measures and analysis of the monitoring data.
- The evaluation of the strategy will be included in the service level agreement for the Common Housing Register.
- The strategy will be evaluated every two years.

Action	Outcome	Responsibility	Resources	Timescale
Customer Contact				
Implement Customer Contact Centres:	Better management of services		Housing Revenue Account	
Letting		Letting Contact Centre Manager		Complete
Rents		Rent Contact Centre Manager		Complete
Capital Contracts		Investment Manager		Clean team to comence Feb 08
Develop "prospects information" for CHR	Consistent prospects information delivered by all RSL's and Council	CHR Working Group	TBC/Scottish Exec Grant/HRA/HA contributions	Aug-08
Review Customer Care Standards	New Housing Service Standards developed in consultation with staff, RTOs, public.	Quality and Performance Unit	HRA	Complete
Written Information				
Review all advice and information leaflets every two years or subsequent policy/operational change	All information leaflets/sources are up to date	Quality and Performance Manager and Service Managers	HRA/Non-HRA	Every 2 years minimum - next review 2009
Review Council's website	New up-to date web site containing links to information and advice sources available to all citizens	Quality and Performance Unit	HRA	Complete
Develop Housing Options Guide	HOG operational for all RSL's and Council through Council Website	Quality and Performance Unit	HRA	Complete
Review Housing Intranet site	New up-to date site containing links to information and advice sources available to all staff	Quality and Performance Unit	HRA	Complete
Training				
Implement new induction process and Training and Development Review	Staff are informed and have the skills to do their jobs	Quality and Performance Unit/ Service Managers	HRA	Complete
Provide training on Homepoint Standards	Staff trained to HomePoint standards	Quality and Performance Unit/Service Managers	HRA	Apr-08
Homelessness Prevention				
HEY Project	Housing awareness and homelessness advice delivered to secondary school children, college students and local youth groups	Youth Housing Group	Multi-agency funding via existing resources	Ongoing on annual basis
Financial Inclusion Officer	To promote social and financial inclusion for homeless/potentially homeless clients, care leavers and prison leavers by providing living skills support and financial advice to ensure clients can sustain a tenancy	Homeless service	Financial Inclusion Strategy group	Funding until March 2009
Youth Sport Development	Social inclusion project providing access to sporting activities for homeless and potentially repeat homeless clients.	Youth Housing Group	Leisure and Arts Dept. funding	Ongoing
Supported Tenancy Initiative	Early intervention to prevent young people losing their tenancy through antisocial behaviour. Advice work for young people of 12+.	NCH, Homeless Service, Antisocial Behaviour Team.	ASBT funding	Aug-09
Youth Strategy	Ongoing consultation with young people to link in with the Homeless Strategy 2008-2012.	Homeless Service, NCH and other voluntary organisations.	Homeless Task Force Funding	Sep-08
Homeless in Dundee - range of publicity materials	Provision of advice on homelessness, services available, application, legal rights and prevention measures	Homeless Service/Quality and Performance Unit	HRA	All info. Reviewed and updated Aug 2008.
Homeless Agency Directory	Local agency contact information resource for staff/workers.	Homeless service	HRA	Complete
Monitor and Review				
Customer Satisfaction with:	Analysis of customer feedback through CSS and complaints to demonstrate improvements in levels of satisfaction	Quality and Performance Unit/Service Managers		Annual Surveys
Customer Care				
Information and Advice				