



REPORT TO: COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE ON 24 JANUARY 2017

SUBJECT: HOUSING OPTIONS AND SUPPORT SERVICES ANNUAL REPORT 2015-16

BY: CORPORATE DIRECTOR (ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PLANNING AND INFRASTRUCTURE)

1. REASON FOR REPORT

- 1.1 This report provides Committee with the fifth annual report on the Council's housing options and housing support services.
- 1.2 This report is submitted to Committee in terms of Section III F (4) and (7) of the Council's Scheme of Administration relating to homelessness and exercising the Council's powers within the terms of the relevant legislation in relation to housing support.

2. RECOMMENDATION

2.1 It is recommended that the Communities Committee:-

(i) considers the fifth annual report of the housing options and support services; and

(ii) agrees that the next annual report of the housing options and support services will be presented to Committee.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The priorities for tackling and preventing homelessness in Moray are set out in the Moray 2026 Plan, the Corporate Plan, the Housing and Property Service Plan, the Local Housing Strategy as well as the Homelessness Strategy. Housing options is a key element of the local and national approach to homeless prevention. The Council's housing options and support services are currently structured around key homelessness themes which include providing advice and assistance, homeless prevention, transitional and tenancy sustainment as well as specialist support.
- 3.2 This is the fifth annual report relating to the Council's housing options and housing support services. The previous report for 2014/15 was presented to this Committee on 18 August 2015 (paragraph 15 of the Minute refers).
- 3.3 Although local authorities have a general duty under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 to provide advice and information to prevent homelessness, housing

options is not specifically defined within a legislative framework. Scottish Government policy has been for housing options to develop locally. From April 2014, local authorities have a duty to complete an annual statistical return (Prevent 1) which sets out all their housing options activities. This is used to monitor and evaluate housing option services across Scotland and sets out, where possible, how the performance of local authorities compares with the national context.

3.4 Following the Scottish Housing Regulator's 2014 report, "Housing Options in Scotland: A Thematic Inquiry":

- the Scottish Government has published (non statutory) housing options guidance; and
- a national training toolkit which has been developed nationally to assist local authorities in achieving greater consistency in training and service delivery.

4. **HOUSING OPTIONS**

4.1 Housing options is defined by the Scottish Government as "a process which starts with housing advice when someone approaches a local authority with a housing problem." Local authorities must take a holistic approach and offer advice and assistance which is specifically tailored to an individual's specific circumstances, with the aim of trying to prevent homelessness before it occurs.

4.2 Referrals to the housing options service are predominantly self-referrals but they can be made internally through the area housing teams, social work or other internal departments and partner agencies. There is also a legal requirement on other landlords and mortgage lenders to notify the local authority of any households who may be at risk of homelessness due to threat of eviction or repossession.

4.3 **APPENDIX I** provides analysis of the housing options and housing support activity that has taken place from 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016.

4.4 **Table 1** indicates that a total of 1,092 households contacted the Housing Options Team seeking advice about their housing situation. This compares with 1,233 the previous year – a reduction of 141 or 11.4%. This reduction is comparable with the national reduction of 13.5% and reflects a 4 % reduction in homeless cases both locally and nationally. Although housing options approaches nationally have fallen since March 2015, it is possible that this could be attributed to variances in data recording between local authorities. The Scottish Government's Housing Options Guidance published in March 2016 provides some direction on how Councils should record housing options and homeless approaches and this may help to address the problem. The guidance is due to be reviewed in March 2017.

4.5 **Table 2, 4 and 5** provides details of the age groups, house types and where the household was living prior to seeking advice. A brief summary shows that:

- Those aged 18 to 24 are more likely to seek advice (27.20%);
- This is closely followed by those aged 30 – 39 (22.53%);
- Single people continue to be the highest household type (64.1%);
- This is followed by single parents (19.51%);
- Young, single females are most likely to seek assistance;
- 47.8% were living with parents/family/friends at the point of contact;
- This is followed by those living in the private rented sector (16.58%).

Most of the above figures are in line with national trends and this demonstrates the pressures faced by most local authorities in Scotland in terms of dealing with and tackling homelessness.

4.6 **Table 5** gives a breakdown of the main reasons why applicants are approaching the Council for assistance:

- 24.7% cited dispute within the household/relationship breakdown (non-violent). This represents a 2% increase when compared with the previous year and is 11.8% higher than the national figure.
- 13.19% were asked to leave their accommodation;
- 12.45% were at risk of losing accommodation as a result of repossession; and
- 12.8% cited dispute within a household: violent or abusive (a 2% increase from 2014/15 and 6.8% higher than the national figure).

A proportion of all cases would have ended up making a homeless application and details of any increases regarding violence or abuse are highlighted to the Moray Domestic Abuse Partnership for monitoring and if necessary, further action.

4.7 **Tables 6a and 6b** provide details around vulnerability. Multiple reasons can be given in answer to this question. 51.28% did not consider themselves to be vulnerable at the point of contact. Of the 48.72% who did, 28.57% stated vulnerability due to financial difficulties/debt/unemployment. Mental health (20.89%) and physical health reasons (13.61%) also remain prevalent. 7.48% cited lack of support while 9.72% cited difficulty managing on their own. These reasons show that homelessness is not simply a housing issue but is reflective of a range of issues that often as a consequence lead to a person losing their accommodation.

4.8 **Tables 7a and 7b** give details of the main actions taken by the housing options team during the year to help people in housing difficulties. 33.38% received general advice and tenancy rights, while 30.53% also were informed of their rights in relation to the homeless legislation.

4.9 **Table 8** provides details of individual outcomes following a housing options interview:

- 43.96% made a homeless application (national average 36%);
- 22% remained in their current accommodation (national average 21%);

- 9.31% moved in with friends or relatives;
- 6.18% secured accommodation in the private rented sector;
- 13% secured their own alternative accommodation;
- 4 households (0.4%) embarked on home ownership; and
- the remainder secured a local authority/Registered Social Landlord (RSL) or voluntary organisation tenancy. This is reflective of the national picture.

- 4.10 **Table 9** details approaches for assistance by the ethnicity of the main applicant. This data is currently unreliable due to a system error with the common housing register which is in the process of being fixed.
- 4.11 **Tables 10a and 10b** highlight the length of time that housing options cases remain open. Only 35% of cases were closed within 28 days and 16% within 2 weeks. The majority of cases (65%) were open for more than 29 days after the initial approach. This shows that the Housing Options Teams are dealing with cases over a prolonged period of time and that there is on occasion, no easy solution housing solution for some clients.
- 4.12 **Table 11** identifies that 7.07% of all housing options cases were repeat approaches. This is in the lowest third of all local authorities and compares favourably to the national average of 15%.

5. **Section 11 Referrals**

- 5.1 Section 11 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2003 places a duty on creditors and landlords to notify the relevant local authority when they initiate legal proceedings to repossess a property (this excludes local authority landlords). The purpose of the notification under Section 11 aims to ensure that local authorities are alerted at an early stage to households in their area who may be at risk of homelessness.
- 5.2 The Scottish Government ceased to collect or report on Section 11 data from 1 April 2013 but, for the purposes of the annual report, this will continue to be reported to Committee.
- 5.3 In 2015/16, 79 section 11 notifications were received – an increase of 2 from the previous year. Of these, 47 were from RSLs, 8 from private landlords and 24 from mortgage lenders. The Housing Options Team attempted to make contact with all households. 56 (70.89%) did not respond to the contact. 23 cases (29.11%) were already engaged with the housing options service. Of these, 15 were able to remain in their property, 4 went on to make a homeless application, 2 secured local authority accommodation, 1 moved in with family/friends and 1 lost contact.

6. **HOUSING SUPPORT AND TENANCY SUSTAINMENT**

- 6.1 The Council's Housing Support Service help people aged 16 and over to live as independently as possible in the community, regardless of the type of accommodation they live in. This service can be provided in a person's home, in temporary accommodation or in other forms of supported accommodation. The main aim of housing support is to help people manage and sustain their own tenancy or to help them transition to a more suitable tenancy. Individuals also receive assistance to claim welfare benefits, complete relevant forms, manage household budgets and advice on keeping properties safe and secure. All housing support services are required by law to be registered with the Care Inspectorate
- 6.2 Housing support data is held internally and allows an analysis of the housing support activity from 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016.
- 6.3 A total of 539 households were referred for housing support. This is a slight decrease of 5.3% from the 569 referrals in the previous year. An average of 190 households receive housing support each month.
- 6.4 **Table 12** shows the original source of the referral. The majority of these (78.48%) were internal referrals made from within all of the different housing and area teams. 14.66% were self-referrals. The remaining 6.86% was made up of small numbers of referrals from social work, RSL's, Benefits, Moray Women's Aid, Drug and Alcohol or family and friends.
- 6.5 **Table 13** highlights that the majority of people who received housing support were single (68.83%). Those aged 25 to 59 (50.28%) were the most likely to require support followed by those ages 18 to 24 (36.36%). The service supported 91 households with children compared to 104 the previous year, a decrease of 12.5%.
- 6.6 **Table 14** provides details of the type of tenure occupied at the time support was being received. Nearly half (49.54%) were living in a Moray Council tenancy. 17.63% were living in RSL tenancies and 16.14% were living in temporary homeless accommodation. A smaller but significant number (2.78%) were living in the private housing sector which highlights that housing support is not just a social housing issue. The number referred for support while in prison has doubled from 5 in 2014/15 to 10 in 2015/16.
- 6.7 **Table 15** provides a breakdown of Council tenants referred to the housing support service by the Area Housing Teams for help with rent arrears. During the year, a total of 226 referrals were made compared with 193 in the previous year – an increase of (17.1%. Of the 226 referrals made, 80 cases (35.4%) were stabilised and 37 (16.37%) have support ongoing to assist in stabilising the rent arrears.
- 6.8 **Table 16** details the primary reasons for providing housing support. The main reasons cited were financial/ literacy/correspondence issues (45.64%), an increase of 14.18% compared to 2014/15. Lack of life skills is next (33.95%)

followed by Addictions to substances or alcohol (12.80%) and mental health problems (7.24%). The last two reasons have seen a reduction from the previous year's figures.

- 6.9 **Table 17** shows outcomes and reasons for support ending. 52.52% came to a natural conclusion; 25.99% either did not engage or declined the service; 9.81% returned to family and friends and 11.68% seen their support end due to eviction, prison, death or leaving temporary accommodation.
- 6.10 **Table 18** illustrates the variances in the length of time that support is required:
- 16.98% receiving support of up to one month
 - 17.51% of cases received support of up to 3 months
 - nearly one quarter received support for up to 6 months (24.14%)
 - nearly one third received a service of up to 1 year (32.10%)
 - only 9.28% required support lasting over one year
- 6.11 At 31 March 2016, 162 cases were still open and receiving support.

Syrian Refugees

- 6.12 During 2015/16, support was also provided to Syrian refugees who moved into Moray as part of Syrian Vulnerable Person Relocation (VPR) Scheme, run by the UK Government. The scheme helps those in greatest need by offering protection and support in the UK. A Housing Support Worker is seconded to work with these families and they work in partnership with specialist support providers as well as health professionals to ensure that the needs of the family are met.

7. EXTERNAL SUPPORT PROVIDERS

- 7.1 The Council has three housing support contracts which include two external support providers to deliver housing support in a residential setting. The quality of these services is monitored quarterly. Managers from the Council and the respective service providers meet to discuss ongoing operational issues, to agree service outputs and to highlight any areas of concern or good practice. The three contracts include:-

Marleon House, Elgin

This accommodation has 10 units of temporary accommodation for single women/women with children who have been subjected to, or are at risk of, domestic abuse. The contract with Moray Women's Aid has been extended to 31 March 2017 and Officers are currently reviewing this service to decide how best this can be provided in future years.

Covesea Road, Elgin

This accommodation has 10 units of shared accommodation for young people aged 16 to 24. The provider is Safeguarding Communities – Reducing Offending (SACRO) which is a national community justice voluntary organisation. A new three year contract commenced 1 July 2016 (with the option to extend for one year plus one further year).

Guildry House, Elgin

This accommodation has 10 units of shared accommodation and is also managed by SACRO. There is no age or gender restriction. The service provides support for those with addictions. A new three year contract commenced 1 July 2016 (with the option to extend for one year plus one further year).

- 7.2 During 2015/16 Marleon House, Elgin accommodated 32 women and 36 children. Covesea Road, Elgin accommodated 33 single young people and Guildry House, Elgin accommodated 27 single young people with addiction issues.

8. IMPACT OF SUPPORT TEAM

- 8.1 The positive impact of the Housing Support Service has been validated by the Care Inspectorate in their recent inspections:
- 8.2 On 18 February 2015 the homeless hostels were inspected and graded overall as “very good”. This highlights the key role which the housing support team continues to play in supporting vulnerable tenants within their own temporary or permanent homes and enabling them to sustain their tenancy or support them through transition into a new tenancy.
- 8.3 A validation inspection of the Council’s Housing Support Service to test how well the service has performed, and where necessary recommend new ideas, took place during February 2016. This service has also been graded overall as “very good” by the Care Inspectorate.

9. SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS

(a) Moray 2026: A Plan for the Future and Moray Corporate Plan 2015 – 2017

Moray 2026 and the Service Plan (Priority 2) identify the need to tackle homelessness. Housing options seeks to reduce homelessness and prevent homelessness where possible to help those at risk of losing their home. This promotes healthier citizens and adults living healthier, sustainable independent lives safeguarded from harm.

(b) Policy and Legal

The legislative framework for homelessness is contained within the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987, as amended.

(c) Financial implications

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

(d) Risk Implications

There are no risks immediately arising from this report. There will be potential risks to the Council should the level of homelessness presentations increase in the future, which will result in pressure on temporary and permanent housing stock.

(e) Staffing Implications

There are no staffing issues arising from this report.

(f) Property

There are no property issues arising from this report.

(g) Equalities

There are no equalities issues in this case.

(h) Consultations

Consultation on this report has taken place with the Head of Housing and Property, Principal Accountant (Deborah O'Shea), the Legal Services Manager, the Committee Services Officer (Lissa Rowan) and Managers within the Housing Service who agree with this report.

10. CONCLUSION

- 10.1 This report provides the Communities Committee with an annual report outlining the work of the housing options and housing support services during 2015/16. It identifies the positive impact of this work on tackling homelessness in Moray.**

Author of Report: Emma Armit, Senior Housing Officer (Policy)

Background Papers: With authors

Ref: