

## Local Government and Communities Committee

### Homelessness

#### Submission from Fife Council

##### (1) Housing Options and Homelessness Prevention

Since the introduction of our prevention services in 2011, we can see a reduction in the number of households opting not to choose to make a homeless application to the local authority.

When the housing options approach was first introduced we saw 35% of all customers who approached and did not submit an application for homeless. Last year end this reduced to only 20%.

I think we need to continue with the housing options approach and allowing customers to make an informed choice once presented with good quality housing advice about the options available to them. Our staff can do this better once the training tool kit has been launched and all levels of staff have access to advice. Any updates to the housing options guidance will also be welcomed.

32% of our prevention customers make contact when they are at crisis point, reducing the options available to them. If we can offer advice and assistance to customers at an earlier stage, there may be more choice available to them as to the outcome. At the moment the majority of these customers make an application for homelessness. This figure increased from 28% the previous year.

13% of our customers are referred to the private rented sector but we have seen a reduction in successful outcome in this sector too. Half of customers referred are successfully housed into the private rented sector. We have general feedback from customers wishing to leave the private rented sector as they feel they do not have security of tenure and that rents are not affordable for them. This will be further affected by the changes to welfare benefits i.e. LHA rates and caps.

Good practice is shared at the housing options hub meetings and this is good opportunity to share ideas amongst local authorities. It allows us to also look at ways of working. The Tayside, Fife and Central hub have devised a customer audit which allows us to receive feedback from users of our service and engage with them to tell us how we can improve.

In Fife, we have a good relationship with the voluntary sector. We work closely with health services and have our prevention of homelessness group chaired by Neil Hamlet, Public Health Consultant. There is an opportunity to build on the work within the health and social care partnership. We perhaps needs to focus more on sustainability and improve the outcomes for those customers who wish to remain in the current home. Better and continued partnership working would improve this.

## **(2) Temporary Accommodation**

It is evident in 2015-17 that demand for temporary accommodation has reduced but the number of children in temporary accommodation has increased. In 2015/16 there was 1292 children in temporary accommodation in Fife and this increased to 1478 in 2016/17. The benefit cap is one of the reasons for this trend as the private sector is no longer an option for larger families. This puts more pressure on the Council's resources and the need for larger sized properties.

A recent independent survey carried out in Fife showed that 90.36% of customers were satisfied with the overall quality of temporary accommodation. Fife has taken the decision only to use B&B in an emergency and when all other options have been exhausted. In 2015/16 the number of days spent in B&B accommodation was 8,806. This was reduced in 2016/17 to 168 days. The length of time spent in temporary needs to be reduced by focusing on prevention so that solutions are found for customers before they find themselves homeless. It will also be important to increase the efficiency of the flow-through temporary accommodation as this becomes a more expensive resource.

The main concerns about the future funding of temporary accommodation are that introduction of the LHA cap will mean in Fife that over the 3-year period, we will only have a third of the income stream from housing benefit that we have relied upon until now to run homeless and temporary accommodation services. Although the additional general revenue grant from the Scottish Government towards homeless prevention following the ending of temporary accommodation management fees is welcomed this will not fully mitigate against the projected deficit in income. It will not be possible to rely on the same levels of housing benefit to fund temporary accommodation in the future and services will need to be resigned on this basis.

It is inappropriate for the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate to be applied to supported accommodation. A new Supported Housing Allowance, banded to reflect the actual cost of provision in the sector, should be introduced instead. It is a concern that the Government's proposed reform could lead to a serious shortfall in the availability of supported housing in the future.

## **(3) Permanent Accommodation**

Fife Council has a quota system for housing allocations. This has been increased in 2017/18 for homeless applicants to 45% of total allocations. RSLs who we work closely with are required to make 35% of their allocations to homeless applicants. Choice based allocations is being considered in Fife and this is still at the development stage.

#### **(4) Multiple and complex needs**

Repeat homelessness has increased in Fife and it recognised that these cases often have multiple and complex needs. A fresh approach is required to target this area and this can only be achieved by working in partnership. An example of joint working includes an intervention project with two specialist staff members to be based in A & E at the Victoria Hospital Kirkcaldy who will work closely with hospital staff to engage patients who are identified as having insecure housing. Workers will follow a five-stage process to engage with the patient, undertake an immediate crisis response, work with them to identify key goals, put this into action focused on helping the person to develop skills and resilience, and finally support them to move on.

#### **(5) Rough Sleeping**

Rough sleeping is not a significant problem in Fife and due to a recording issue this has been over reported in recent years. In terms of hostel provision we directly manage 5 which provides 50 rooms across Fife for emergency accommodation. We also fund 72 rooms across 4 hostels managed by the voluntary sector. A service level agreement is also in place with two of our partners to provide 9 spaces which are often used out of hours as part of a diversion initiative.

#### **(6) Other**

We see many larger households on our homeless list, and find it difficult to provide permanent housing quickly, due to the size of property required. Other social housing providers should also be encouraged to allocate more properties to homeless households.

We analyse data submitted to Scottish Government from our HL1 and Prevent 1 systems.

Data from HL1 suggests that the majority of our customers have presented from the parental/family home as being asked to leave, there are a large number of these customers who also indicate that they have financial difficulties.

The data from Prevent 1 system suggested again that the customer has presented from the family/parental home. These customers are generally single males between the ages of 18-39. As well as financial difficulties, they are also experiencing mental health issues. In the last year there has been an increase in homeless applicants from the private sector. This is likely to be linked to the benefit cap as the private is no longer an option particularly for larger sized families. The stats inform us that the majority of these customers have an outcome of having submitted a homelessness application. Many customers remain in their current accommodation, awaiting an offer of social housing but we do lose contact with a high number of customers from our prevention service.

In Fife, we have a good relationship with the voluntary sector. There is a Public Social Partnership (PSP) consisting of the Council and 12 voluntary sector partners who are commissioned to provide homelessness services. We also work closely with health services and have our prevention of homelessness group chaired by the Public Health Consultant. There is an opportunity to build on the work within the health and social care partnership. We perhaps needs to focus more on sustainability and improve the outcomes for those customers who wish to remain in the current home. Better and continued partnership working would improve this.

Homeless applicants are advised of their rights at the assessment stage and correspondence issued advises of the appeals process. Fife Council also funds one of our voluntary sector partners to provide tier 3 advice which includes advocacy type work to assist homeless applicants.

The main barrier to providing sustainable solutions is availability of housing stock and lack of turnover of larger sized properties. Fife Council is committed to an ambitious building programme as has achieved its phase one target of 2,700 new builds by May 2017. Through allocations chains Fife Council is able to help on average 2.4 households per new build property.