



Brief for

Housing Information & Advice Strategy

July 2003

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. The Council's approach to housing information and advice will be set out as part of its Local Housing Strategy (LHS) and will have particular links with the draft Homelessness Strategy and Common Housing Register (CHR).
- 1.2. The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 emphasises the importance of the provision of quality advice and information as being crucial to the prevention of homelessness. As tackling homelessness is a key priority for Housing Services, it is essential to develop a Housing Information & Advice Strategy for Stirling that is much wider ranging than previous statutory homelessness duties. Specifically, Section 2 of the Act identifies how local authorities must ensure that advice on homelessness and the prevention of homelessness is available free of charge to any person in the authority.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1. The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 (section 2) requires that information and advice about homelessness and the prevention of homelessness is available free of charge to any person in the local authority's area.
- 2.2. Section 3 of the 2001 Act also amends the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 to prescribe that advice and assistance must be provided to homeless applicants who are not in priority need, or in priority need but found to be intentionally homeless.
- 2.3. Scottish Ministers have set out the types of advice and assistance in the Homeless Persons Advice and Assistance (Scotland) Regulations 2002.
- 2.4. The general duty in section 2 of the 2001 Act is accompanied by guidance which identifies that the local authority is responsible on three levels as follows.
 - As a provider of information, the Council must ensure that its information and advice services are delivered to the quality outlined in the Scottish National Standards for Housing Information and Advice Services.
 - As a funder of services, the Council must ensure that funding is sufficient to provide an adequate quantity of information and advice and that services are funded to a level where quality is assured.

- As a strategic body, the Council must plan for the provision of the range of information services which are required to meet the identified needs within the local authority area.
- 2.5. The Advice and Assistance duty as set out in the regulations, indicates that the areas of advice that must be provided should cover housing advice, financial advice, legal advice, or advice on specialist services such as bodies dealing with health and welfare.

3. LOCAL CONTEXT

- 3.1. The delivery of housing information and advice in Stirling is part of the wider development of an Advice Partnership. Strategic support for this exercise will be shared jointly between Housing Services (Strategy and Development) and Community Services (Advice Services).
- 3.2. The housing component of housing advice is structured as follows.
- Local area offices - with dedicated housing management staff operating out of 6 locations (i.e. Bannockburn, Fallin, St. Ninians, Raploch, Cornton and the Municipal Buildings in the city centre).
 - Council Headquarters at Viewforth - contains more specialist housing services such as housing benefit, income maximisation, private sector grants, aids and adaptations, capital projects and energy efficiency.
 - Secondary more limited service outlets – this includes Libraries, etc. at various locations such as Callander and Plean.
 - The Council’s centralised homelessness service located at Springerkerse House.
 - The Council’s new central youth housing advice centre “The Bridge” at Lower Bridge Street.
- 3.3. The wider delivery of advice has been grouped into two types - active and passive.
- 3.4. Active advice includes:
- specialist advice in areas such as mental health or welfare;
 - generalist advice such as provided by the voluntary sector, Citizens Advice, Off the Record; and
 - class action support to particular groups Council on Disability, Stirling District Association Mental Health, advocacy services, youth projects, Quality Action Group (learning disability), older peoples groups, Carers’ Centre.

- 3.5. Passive advice includes:
- public sector organisations with a specialist function, Health, Department of Work & Pensions, Inland Revenue, and other relevant agencies.
 - self-appointed interest groups such as hobby groups; and
 - virtual information such as Access Stirling, National Debtline, World Wide Web.
- 3.6. Within Community Services there is a project underway to develop a comprehensive database of informal and formal organisations that work within and beyond the Council area.
- 3.7. Stirling Council is also part of a national pilot to develop a Common Housing Register aimed at maximising access to housing. There are four social landlords initially involved in the exercise - Forth Housing Association, Rural Stirling Housing Association, Paragon Housing Association and Stirling Council.
- 3.8. The CHR process will focus upon processes, access issues, IT and also on delivering a consistent advice service. The CHR Housing Options Guide for Stirling will detail all services available and is due to be completed in September 2003.

4. ADVICE AND INFORMATION

- 4.1. In November 1999, the Council's Care Committee agreed to develop a strategy for information and advice to embrace the recommendations contained within the HomePoint National Standards. This is being progressed in parallel with development of the Local Housing Strategy.
- 4.2. In July 2002, the Council commissioned a Homelessness research paper from HCH consultants. In turn this findings of this research helped to shape the development of the Council's first Draft Homelessness Strategy which has been submitted to Communities Scotland and the Scottish Executive.
- 4.3. The HCH report highlighted a range of issues for the delivery of more effective advice in homelessness, including the need for:
- improving the quality and consistency of written information;
 - greater emphasis on applicant's rights;
 - more effective sign-posting;
 - developing clear independent advice; and
 - better co-ordination of data with linkages to an advice and information database.