

Practitioner article

Adopting a housing options approach to homelessness interviews in Argyll and Bute

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Shelter

Adopting a housing options approach to homelessness interviews in Argyll and Bute

Myra MacDonald explains the role of Argyll and Bute Council's Community Support Homeless Service in preventing homelessness by helping tenants and home owners remain in their homes if at all possible, and examines the challenges of delivering an effective housing options service in a rural area.

Introduction

As everyone who is involved in housing or homelessness knows, helping people to retain their accommodation is vital in preventing distress and upheaval to individuals and families.

In addition to the obvious advantages to anyone who has found themselves at risk of homelessness, there are also benefits to local authorities who are already struggling to find both temporary and permanent accommodation for homeless applicants.

People who feel that they are at risk of losing their current accommodation are encouraged to contact Argyll and Bute Council Community Support Homeless Service, who will assess their situation and do everything that they can to help them hold on to their home.

Why was a housing options interview approach adopted?

There are real benefits to households who are able to retain their settled accommodation. As well as minimising disruption to personal, social and educational arrangements for family members, preventing homelessness helps people avoid the stigma that is often associated with the situation.

We decided to adopt an approach that is customer focused and ensures that individuals and families are fully aware of their rights as tenants or owner-occupiers, and are empowered to remain in their homes if that is the best and most appropriate solution.

Another benefit is to assist and educate landlords who were previously unaware of their responsibilities and rights, and to provide the foundations on which to build an informed and responsible private sector rentals market. There appear to be a large number of landlords who genuinely do not understand that informal arrangements still have a legal status, and that a minimum notice to quit period applies.

Operating a housing options approach in a rural setting

The geography of Argyll and Bute can cause some difficulties. While Community Support Homeless Service personnel are available face-to-face in Campbeltown, Lochgilphead, Oban, Dunoon, Rothesay and Helensburgh, it has been a challenge to provide services to the many islands and remote mainland areas within the local authority area.

Telephone inquiries, housing options assessments and, when necessary, full homeless applications can be taken by phone.

In addition, Argyll and Bute Council funds an independent telephone helpline to provide help on all housing related enquiries, as well as advice on homelessness crisis and avoidance. The helpline is staffed by the Bute Advice Service, which is based on the Isle of Bute, but is available to everyone in Argyll and Bute. The service is free to people calling from landlines, and is well publicised throughout the area.

The Guide to Housing Options in Argyll and Bute

The Guide to Housing Options in Argyll and Bute is available on the council website and in hard copy in each of the area housing offices, in libraries and other locations.

The Guide brings together a comprehensive range of information relating to potential housing solutions for people already living or working in the area or for those who wish to do so. It is designed to be an easy-access reference resource for agencies and individuals providing housing-related information and advice, as well as a brief guide for the general user to specific services available in their locality, with a directory of contacts who can provide further specialist advice.

The Guide aims to cover the spectrum of potential housing situations, from those who find themselves without a home, for whatever reason, through the tenant or landlord in the public and private sectors, to those who occupy or are seeking to purchase their own home.

This guide has been developed by Argyll and Bute Council in partnership with HomePoint, the information and advice service of the national housing agency Communities Scotland. Other agencies and individuals have also supplied information and supported the production of this guide, including those local and national housing associations operating within Argyll and Bute.

How the housing options/advice approach works

Community Support Homeless Staff gather information about an at-risk household's circumstances and assess what action is most appropriate, and whether homelessness may be prevented.

As well as basic information – name/s, current address, current tenure, etc – we record whether advice is sought and given on:

- security of tenure (local authority, registered social landlord, private sector)
- rent arrears (LA, RSL, private sector)
- housing/council tax benefit
- mortgage related issues
- housing options/access to housing – including rent deposits
- discrimination and/or harassment
- relationship breakdown related to housing issues
- disrepair
- repair and improvement grants
- Women's Aid
- other issues.

If an enquirer is homeless, or is at risk of becoming homeless within two months, they are encouraged to complete a full homelessness application with a member of staff.

Any action that is taken to help the household to retain their accommodation is also recorded.

All housing options are discussed with applicants and enquirers at interview and advice and information is given on private and public sector options, rent deposits, benefits and so on.

Local homelessness teams maintain up-to-date information on accommodation available in their area and are happy to assist in liaison with landlords and any other agencies, if needed.

Monitoring arrangements

As with all homelessness prevention work, the full impact is not easily quantifiable and is in danger of being hidden by the increased obligations of local authorities to homeless households following the abolition of priority need in 2012.

Argyll and Bute Council sees it as vital that we seek to prevent homelessness where it is reasonable to do so and are able to provide evidence that we have been effective in helping potentially homeless households to remain in their own homes.

At the moment our housing options approach and the associated recording system is in its infancy, and we do not currently have enough evidence to prove that there is a significant increase in homelessness prevention.

However, we are implementing a robust performance management system to monitor the service and inform future planning.

Monitoring arrangements from April 2007

The Scottish Executive has revised the statistical reporting requirements for homelessness, effective from April 2007. The revisions include improved reporting by local authorities on the actions taken by them to prevent homelessness.

Recording of prevention work has been incorporated into the pro-forma that Argyll and Bute is currently piloting to gather the information into our case recording and management system, and we will soon be in a position to evaluate properly the impact of homelessness prevention.

The information gathered during an advice and assistance/prevention of homelessness interview can, if necessary, form the basis of a full homeless application. It will be simple to monitor and assess how many advice enquiries then result in a full application. In short, we will easily be able to see how effective the assistance we give is and will be more informed in planning additional preventative services and support.

Service users evaluation

When the housing options interview process is fully implemented, we intend to issue enquirers with a service satisfaction questionnaire to see if the advice and assistance provided to them at the time of their inquiry has indeed enabled them to continue to occupy their home successfully.

Avoidance of gate-keeping

There is a danger that a housing options assessment might be seen as an attempt to prevent people from seeking assistance and accommodation under homelessness legislation.

Probably the most important element in avoiding any likelihood of this happening is the commitment of staff members to the process.

All members of the Argyll and Bute Homeless Service team have completed Homepoint Housing Information and Advice to Type Two level. This has proved invaluable in increasing staff understanding of housing law and also in boosting confidence to deal with difficult situations.

All personnel involved in delivering a service to homeless or potentially homeless people in Argyll and Bute have access to the Shelter Legal advice website and have attended Shelter's Introduction to Homelessness training course. Team leaders have also attended the Shelter two day advanced course on homelessness.

It is imperative that team members fully understand that anybody who wants to apply as homeless or threatened with homelessness must be assisted to do so.

Our commitment to staff development is evidenced by plans to achieve Investors in People accreditation.

Further information

Although our housing options approach is in its early stages, we are hopeful that this method will prove to be as useful and empowering to service users as early indications suggest.

If you would like any further information, or an update at any time in the future about how this approach is progressing, please send an email to practicescotland@shelter.org.uk in the first instance.