

Practitioner article

Preventing homelessness, sustaining tenancies

Written by **Suzie Scott**, Policy Manager, Glasgow
Housing Association

May 2009

www.shelter.org.uk

© 2009 Shelter. All rights reserved. This document is only for your personal, non-commercial use.
You may not copy, reproduce, republish, post, distribute, transmit or modify it in any way.

This document contains information and policies that were correct at the time of publication.

The views expressed in the article are those of the author and not necessarily those of Shelter.

Shelter

Preventing homelessness, sustaining tenancies

Suzie Scott discusses the development and implementation of tenancy sustainment measures at Glasgow Housing Association in response to a considerable tenancy failure rate.

Glasgow Housing Association

Glasgow Housing Association (GHA) is committed to working in partnership with the council and other agencies to prevent homelessness and help people sustain their tenancies. Our vision is to ensure that being homeless is an event in someone's life and not a way of life

GHA was formed after a stock transfer from Glasgow City Council in 2003. It inherited over 80,000 properties, many of which were unmodernised and in poor condition and had some of the highest rents in Scotland.

Tenancy failure

Research carried out by Heriot-Watt University

[\[http://www.gha.org.uk/content/mediaassets/doc/full_tenancy_sustainment.pdf\]](http://www.gha.org.uk/content/mediaassets/doc/full_tenancy_sustainment.pdf) found that almost of quarter of our new tenancies in 2003-04 failed within a year. Contrary to expectations, the main group of people who ended their tenancy early were not young tenants, but instead were people aged 25 to 45. Tenants who had been re-housed through the waiting list had similar rates of early termination to those who had been referred by Glasgow City Council as homeless. The researchers found that the main risk factors were:

- lack of choice in allocation
- dissatisfaction with property condition
- lack of furniture
- debt problems
- lack of support.

Apart from the social costs to individuals of a failed tenancy, there were also significant costs to both GHA and the Glasgow Homelessness Partnership. Early termination cost GHA £1,328 in repairs, security and lost rents and the Homelessness Partnership had the costs of processing repeat homelessness applications.

Tenancy Sustainment Strategy

The Tenancy Sustainment Strategy

[\[http://www.gha.org.uk/content/mediaassets/doc/TenancySustainmentStrategy2007.pdf\]](http://www.gha.org.uk/content/mediaassets/doc/TenancySustainmentStrategy2007.pdf)

developed to tackle the problem of failed tenancies was drawn up in consultation with the council and voluntary agencies in the city. There were several city-wide joint events for housing officers, homelessness caseworkers, staff from Community Health and Care Partnerships, and voluntary agencies to discuss the way forward. We also carried out extensive consultation with tenant groups and surveyed all tenants for their views.

There is no quick fix way to help people stay in their homes. The strategy recommended action on a number of key areas including:

- giving tenants more choice in lets
- developing a new letting standard
- improving housing support
- increasing the range of furniture options
- improving access to financial advice
- better information sharing between agencies
- increased joint working between agencies.

It has taken time to make some of the changes, to ensure that we got them right.

A pilot of GHA homechoice, the new choice-based letting system began in the west of the city in March 2009 to test whether customers felt that this new system improved their housing choices. After a pilot in the south and west of the city, the new letting standard started city-wide in April.

Homelessness

In relation to homelessness, we have:

- A published policy on homelessness.
- Supported and adopted the Homelessness Duty Protocol, which sets out joint working arrangements between Glasgow City Council (GCC) and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs).
- Supported the development of a range of Statements of Best Practice on care leavers, domestic abuse, child protection and preventing homelessness.
- Developed a Resource Directory, providing details of support and advice agencies, as a tool for staff and tenants.

We support a number of voluntary projects such as Fab Pad, which works with younger tenants in home decoration and design and Starter Packs Glasgow, which provides basic furnishing and household goods for new tenants. We have also developed links with furniture recycling projects.

We have no statutory duty to produce a Homelessness Prevention Strategy, however we have chosen to do so. We recognise that organisations with a clear strategy have closer links with a wider range of agencies than those with no strategy.

We have established a new Housing Support section, which co-ordinates joint work with the Glasgow Homelessness Partnership and provides services to a range of tenants including sheltered housing and furnished lets.

Rent and debt

We have also produced a Rent Payment Strategy. This followed a comprehensive review of our procedures for dealing with people in rent arrears. We have moved from a process driven by legal action to one focused on early preventative action, beginning before the start of a new tenancy. Personal contact is strongly encouraged and legal action is a last resort.

We aim to ensure that new tenants have their Housing Benefit entitlement sorted out by the time that they sign their tenancy agreement and we are working closely with the GCC Housing Benefit section to ensure that claims are processed smoothly.

GHA also support credit unions and provided start-up funding for Scotcash, which offers affordable loans to people who can't get credit elsewhere. We have expanded our welfare benefits service and we are helping front-line staff to provide better advice by supporting them to study for the National Information and Advice Standards.

We aim to keep our rents affordable. We have kept our rent increases low in line with promises to tenants. Our average rent is now very similar to average rents for other housing associations in Glasgow and considerably lower than rents charged by some associations. We are planning to restructure our rents in 2011 and will begin a large scale consultation exercise on this later in 2009.

Is it working?

It is early days, but we think that our comprehensive approach is having an effect:

- Early tenancy terminations have dropped from 24 to 18 per cent of new lets.
- The number of notices seeking possession that we serve has dropped dramatically.
- Rent arrears have reduced from 5.14 per cent of the debit in 2007/08 to 4.05 per cent (a reduction of over £2 million).

Over the next year, we hope to improve even further. We recognise that joint working with partners, both statutory and voluntary partners, is crucial to success.

Further information

You can find out more about GHA at: <http://www.gha.org.uk>

If you would like any further information, please send an email to **practicescotland@shelter.org.uk** in the first instance.