Local Government and Communities Committee

Homelessness

Submission from North Ayrshire Council

Section 1 Housing Options and Homelessness Prevention

1. How do you feel housing options and homelessness prevention is working in practice? Are there examples of good practice?

Housing Options is an effective prevention tool if implemented and resourced effectively. It responds to the distinct needs and aspirations of a household in a way that homelessness cannot. This is because Housing Options is not a prescriptive process, instead there are varies pathways and options, which can be explored in order to meet a bespoke sustainable outcome.

There are four good practice examples of North Ayrshire Housing Options cases contained within Appendix 1.

2. How effective is the relationship between all the relevant agencies, including the health sector, and charities working on homelessness prevention?

The relationships are effective to a point. However as the prevention of homelessness is viewed as a ‘Housing’ function, there is no statutory obligation on other public sector bodies to work with Housing to improve homelessness outcomes. Often, potentially homeless and homeless households do not meet the criteria or level of vulnerability to qualify for services. There can also be structural barriers to accessing statutory services, as provision is often not sufficiently flexible or responsive to meet the needs of households at risk of homelessness.

There needs to be recognition that the prevention of homelessness is a statutory responsibility across the public sector, including commissioned services. Organisations need to be accountable and demonstrate how the prevention of homelessness fits in with their strategic planning, service modelling and staff training framework.

The Housing Options Training Toolkit, when available, should be utilised strategically across the Community Planning Partnerships to ensure a consistent understanding and response to Homelessness Prevention. However it cannot be the responsibility of housing services to drive this.

Good Housing Options provision will identify the needs of a household and work across the public and charitable sector to respond to these needs. However, it must be recognised that this is a labour intensive process, which requires services to be available.
3. What needs to happen to improve the delivery of housing options and homelessness prevention services and the outcomes achieved for service users?

As detailed above:

- The prevention of homelessness should be a strategic priority for all public sector bodies including commissioned services
- Prevention of homelessness should be evident in strategic planning, modelling and staff training
- There should be accountability for prevention of homelessness across the entire Public Sector, not just Housing
- Barriers to service access should be monitored and reported to better understand the needs of homeless people and the service response required.

4. What role should private sector housing provider’s play in preventing and responding to homelessness?

Private sector landlords through their registration process should have responsibility for tenancy sustainment and prevention of homelessness. The Section 11 notification process is already in place, however this could be extended to ensure landlords evidence all measures they have taken to prevent homelessness and support their tenants to retain their accommodation.

Section 2 Temporary Accommodation

5. What evidence is there of pressure on temporary accommodation in your area? Has this increased in recent years?

There is significant pressure on temporary accommodation, as the majority of households who become homeless require temporary provision.

The reduction in voids across the Council and RSL’s has resulted in an increased waiting time within temporary accommodation, impacting on the levels of accommodation required.

Over the last three years, during times of extreme pressure, the Council has increased the quota of allocation to Group 1 homelessness, in order to free up temporary accommodation. This is not sustainable in the longer term as it puts pressure on the housing waiting list.

6. How can homeless people’s experiences of temporary accommodation be improved? For example, how can the use of unsuitable accommodation be reduced or the length of time spent in temporary accommodation reduced?

The most important factor for homeless people is an offer of temporary accommodation within the area where they want to stay and have access to social networks. This is particularly important where there are children attending school or adults working and requiring access to transport or childcare.
North Ayrshire Council has never breached the unsuitable accommodation order.

However, the length of time a family are required to stay in temporary accommodation is very much driven by the area that they require to be permanently rehoused. There is a need to ensure that households are clear from the onset as to how long they will require to reside within temporary accommodation as a result of their area choices.

Ten years ago, North Ayrshire Council took the strategic decision that Bed and Breakfast would no longer be used as a form of temporary accommodation and, over a period of 6 months, created 100 dispersed furnished flats to facilitate this position. The process was effective in putting an end to utilising unsuitable accommodation. Unfortunately this model is becoming financially unsustainable due to Welfare Reform.

7. Do you have concerns about the funding of temporary accommodation? If yes, how should temporary accommodation be funded?

The Council has significant concerns about the funding of temporary accommodation and believe that the Housing element of Universal Credit needs to be safeguarded.

There is a real risk that as rental income from temporary accommodation is reduced, other services will need to be cut. In the current financial climate, Local Authorities have to make significant efficiency savings. As Health & Social Care and Education are largely protected, the burden is being carried by the other General Fund services. Therefore prevention services, commissioned services and anything which is non-statutory including Housing Options, is at risk. Should these services be cut, there will be a significant increase in homelessness.

Section 3 Permanent Accommodation

8. How do social landlord's allocation policies prioritise applications from homeless households and how does choice based lettings work in practice?

The Council does not operate Choice based lettings.

North Ayrshire Council has a Common Housing Register and allocations policy, with homeless households having equal access to a percentage of allocations across public sector housing.

Homelessness is what we classify as Group 1 of the letting plan, with homeless people currently being allocated 25% of all vacant stock.

This works well for our clients; it is a seamless process, with no barriers.
Section 4 Multiple and Complex Needs

9. What more could be done to ensure that the needs of homeless people with multiple and complex needs are adequately supported? Are there examples of good practice?

There needs to be:

- A shared responsibility and joint working, specifically between the Local Authority and the Health and Social Care Partnership to identify and respond to the needs of households with complex and multiple needs
- Flexible responsive services, which are outcome focussed.
- ‘Stickibility’, services cannot operate ‘three strikes and you’re out’ policies for non attendance.
- A shared understanding and response to the needs of this client group.

10. What scope is there for improved joint working with all agencies and groups supporting those with multiple and complex needs, which would also include the health sector?

See question 11 and 12

11. How can access to general health services, including preventative health services, be improved for homeless people?

The reprioritisation of the health and homelessness standards, with a revised focus on updated health needs assessments, is required.

The role of Public Health needs to be emphasised. Across the three Ayrshire LA’s we have Health and Homelessness nursing staff focussing on the health needs of homeless people. Homeless people need to be identified as a vulnerable group for health practitioners.

Some of the following are key:

- Every homeless household should be registered with a GP as a priority on book in to temporary accommodation
- Homeless information sessions within GP clinics for receptions staff as well as GP’s to break down barriers and contact points for surgeries to facilitate good joint working
- Homeless people are included in all screening programmes (Cervical/Bowel/mammogram’s etc.) This needs to be brought into temporary accommodation to ensure the opportunity is not missed.
- Health visiting services linked to temporary accommodation to ensure that pregnant homeless women receive enhanced care and follow up.
- Sexual health promotion and C cards must be brought into temporary accommodation.
- Good nutrition and cooking skills need to be developed. In North Ayrshire we previously had funding to provide homeless people with three pieces of fruit,
breakfast cereal and milk every day, instilling the need for a healthy nutritious breakfast
- Access to dental care and podiatry services
- Sessions of safety in the sun, access to smoking cessation facilitated.
- Blood born virus nurse attending temporary accommodation
- Direct access referrals into Mental Health and Addiction services with named staff working jointly with Housing Support staff to plan recovery pathway.

12. What role could the “housing first” model play in improving outcomes for homeless people with multiple and complex needs?

North Ayrshire Council are currently piloting Housing First, targeting the needs of households involved in repeat offending who have complex and multiple needs with a view to reducing reoffending, repeat homelessness and improving tenancy sustainment and recovery.

Section 5 Rough Sleeping

13. How has the pattern of rough sleeping changed in your area? For example, is the number of rough sleepers increasing or have the characteristics of rough sleepers changed? What are the reasons for this?

There has been no change in rough sleeping over the last 10 years. The Council has very low incidences of rough sleeping as the result of the approach to provision of temporary accommodation and proactively responding when people are at risk.

14. What type of accommodation is offered to rough sleepers?

Supported hostel accommodation or dispersed furnished accommodation, dependant on the needs if the individual.

15. What type of approaches can contribute to the reduction of rough sleeping and achievement of sustainable housing solutions for rough sleepers?

Understanding the needs of people at risk. We have recognised that for some people there is a real fear of hostel provision, shared living or independent living. We are careful to understand a persons concerns and will respond as follows:

- Show pictures of our accommodation or testimonials from others, including levels of satisfaction.
- Facilitate a supported visit to accommodation with staff briefed to respond to concerns
- Discuss the support which will be put in place to assist
- Where location is a barrier, we will offer assurance that as soon as a placement within the persons preferred area is available they will be moved.

Another key consideration is wide promotion of how to access services including out of hours provision.
Section 6 Other

16. What are the reasons behind why people become homeless?

Relationship break down and chaotic lifestyles are predominately the issues.

In North Ayrshire the complex needs of the client group, often resulting in incarceration, repeat homelessness and violence (both as a victim and perpetrator), are a significant factor.

Worryingly, we are now experiencing second and third generation homelessness as the trauma and often-chaotic lifestyle of parents impact on children. More needs to be done by partner agencies to understand the impact of homelessness and to deliver support to children experiencing homeless.

17. What data is used to measure homelessness numbers in a particular area?

The Local Authority is able to disaggregate the HL1 data to analyse homelessness on a geographic basis, there has been little change in the demographic over the last 10 years.

18. Can you give examples of best practice of effective strategic coordination of services to ensure there are no gaps or overlaps in homelessness services?

See above comments on Housing First.

The Council undertakes a strategic overview of homelessness to inform the LHS on a five yearly basis. Detailed statistical analysis, research and consultation help inform the priorities and service provision for the five years to come.

In addition the Council undertakes a service provision review to inform the commissioning of services every two years. The purpose of this is to ensure that we commission services which responds to the needs of our service users. During our last commissioning preparation exercise, we combined contracts and removed duplicate services to ensure clarity in service provision whilst identifying efficiencies.

The Council has a homeless service user empowerment and communication working group who inform service provision and identify where there are service gaps or areas of practice which could be more effective.

We also undertake monthly performance analysis, benchmarking ourselves against other Scottish Local Authorities and horizon scanning for best practice locally, nationally and internationally.

The South West of Scotland Hub share best practice and discuss areas of concern in an effort to continually deliver consistent high quality provision. We share any research, services or practices which we find to be effective.
The North Ayrshire Alcohol and Drugs Partnership are in the process of developing and commissioning new service models and have included partners from across the CPP to inform the model, therefore ensuring our shared needs are responded to.

19. Are there any problems with people accessing their housing and homelessness rights? If yes, how can access be improved?

The Council sign posts every Homeless customer to the type three accredited Community Housing Advocacy Project. Approximately 90% of customers are supported by this group to exercise their right to review, where a negative decision has been made on their homeless application.

20. What are the barriers to providing homeless people with sustainable housing solutions and how can these barriers be addressed?

Access to housing within people’s geographic area of choice is difficult as households predominately want to stay within areas where there are particular pressures on housing stock.

A high proportion of homeless people do not complete the homeless process, choosing instead to return to previous accommodation or go and stay with friends and family.

Many of our homeless applicants are incarcerated whilst homeless, or have outstanding warrants, which are then invoked on resettlement, resulting in loss of tenancy.

There are a number of households who do not want permanent housing, they do not want the responsibility of a tenancy and will choose to end their homeless application prior to resettlement and come back in at a later date, or will not actually move into a new tenancy.

There is not one solution or service provision which meets all of the needs of homeless households. Instead, service provision and resettlement outcomes require to be flexible enough to respond to the needs of homeless people. For many a permanent home within the area of choice is sufficient, for others housing first with wrap around support may be the answer.

Services must work together to understand the housing and support needs of individuals and continue to work together to identify and facilitate a sustainable outcome.

21. Are there any other issues relating to homelessness which you wish to bring to the attention of the Committee?
Appendix 1

Case example 1

Couple attended Housing Advice Team on 20/02/17. They had been served a notice to quit their 4 bedroom private let by 29/04/17. The couple have 3 children all of whom attend local schools. Couple advised of Housing Options as follows:

Homeless application – statutory rights under homeless legislation, decision making process, provision of temporary accommodation, types of accommodation available and costs, area choice, offer process including potential waiting times and appeal.

Private Sector – Couple were advised of the assistance through the Rent Deposit Guarantee scheme to secure another property in the private sector. Couple did not want to consider this due to the lack of security of tenure.

Common Housing Register (CHR) – The North Ayrshire Housing Register was explained, detailing the points and groups. As the couple had been served with a Notice to Quit, once validated they would be entitled to insecurity of tenure points. The points are awarded in an effort to prevent homelessness from occurring.

As the family are threatened with homelessness within 2 months a homeless application was processed, however the couple also wished to pursue the CHR. Homeless application and housing options case ran concurrently.

Outcome

On 04/05/17 the family were offered and accepted housing through their CHR that meets their needs. Couple will remain in their private let until they sign for their tenancy. This has prevented the family from becoming homeless. Had the family pursued homelessness only it would have taken anything up to 12 months to be rehoused and the offer may not have been within their preferred area of choice.

Case example 2

22/04/16 - Sixty five year old male, marriage had broken down and was staying temporarily with a friend. Explained all options such as homeless, Rent Deposit Scheme and CHR. Client made a homeless application whilst staying with his friend.

Due to the client’s age he was able to be considered for sheltered and amenity properties and rehousing for this type through homelessness was deemed the quickest route.

Outcome

Housing Options Officer called all Housing providers to ascertain if any amenity or sheltered properties available for allocation, resulting in an offer. On 27/04/16 client signed for an amenity bungalow.
Case example 3

21/04/17 – pregnant female approaches office with a notice to quit to leave her property 21/06/17. She was advised of her options:

Homeless application – statutory rights under homeless legislation, decision making process, provision of temporary accommodation, types of accommodation available and costs, area choice, offer process including potential waiting times and appeal.

Private Sector – Client advised of the assistance through the Rent Deposit Guarantee scheme to secure another property in the private sector. Client wished to consider this option.

Common Housing Register (CHR) – The North Ayrshire Housing Register was explained, detailing the points and groups. As the client had been served with a Notice to Quit, once validated they would be entitled to insecurity of tenure points. The points are awarded in an effort to prevent homelessness from occurring. Client assisted to complete an online application.

As the client is threatened with homelessness within 2 months a homeless application was processed, however client’s preference was to pursue RDS. Homeless application and housing options case ran concurrently.

Outcome

12/05/17 – Client moved into new private let through RDS utilising her Housing Options application.

Case example 4

14/10/16 – Couple attended office as they had been served with a NTQ due to rent arrears. Couple claimed that the arrears accrued due to an issue with Housing Benefits and they had applied for a benefit backdate.

Homeless application – statutory rights under homeless legislation, decision making process, provision of temporary accommodation, types of accommodation available and costs, area choice, offer process including potential waiting times and appeal. As the family are threatened with homelessness within 2 months a homeless application was processed. Homeless application and housing options case ran concurrently. Couple were assessed as intentionally homeless as the property proved to be affordable.

Private Sector – Couple were advised of the assistance through the Rent Deposit Guarantee scheme to secure another property in the private sector. Couple did not want to consider this at that time.

Common Housing Register (CHR) – The North Ayrshire Housing Register was explained, detailing the points and groups. As the couple had been served with a Notice to Quit, once validated they would be entitled to insecurity of tenure points.
The points are awarded in an effort to prevent homelessness from occurring. Couple had an existing application and did not want to expand on their area choices etc. at that point.

Retaining current accommodation - Officer spoke to the landlord and negotiated extra time to try and resolve the situation. Landlord agreed that if a benefit backdate was received and couple made and maintained an arrangement for the remaining balance he would cancel the NTQ. Couple were referred to Benefit Take Up Officer who assisted with the backdate.

**Outcome**

30/11/16 – Benefit backdate received covering 50% + of the arrears. Landlord agreed to delay NTQ to allow for a repayment arrangement. 23/01/17 Officer contacted landlord who confirmed that repayment arrangement being met. No further action, both homeless and advice case closed.