Local Government and Communities Committee

Homelessness

Submission from Falkirk Council

Housing Options and Homelessness Prevention

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

Housing options are considered to work well in Falkirk, as the area has a diverse housing market which is more affordable than many other local authority areas. This gives a wider choice of rehousing options within the private and social sectors for clients. Housing options and prevention work in some local authority areas are however restricted due to higher property values and rents.

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

Positive relationships have been developed within the health and third sector to assist in the delivery of housing options particularly with the increase in homeless clients presenting with complex needs and requiring additional support. The challenge for local authorities is the coordination of approaches undertaken by the various stakeholders. It is considered that there is a need for specialist housing options advice for those coming home from hospital or requiring alternative housing options when their home cannot be adapted.

- What needs to happen to improve the delivery of housing options and homelessness prevention services and the outcomes achieved for service users?

There needs to be clarity about the distinction between housing options routes and routes to homelessness. Current guidance is considered to be inconsistent. Further consultation surrounding the delivery of housing options would assist in determining what methodology would be the best for service delivery. Once this path is determined then the necessary changes required within homeless legislation to reflect this should be implemented.

- What role should private sector housing providers play in preventing and responding to homelessness?

Private sector housing providers should be encouraged to assist local authorities to offer good quality and affordable housing. Welfare Reform and LHA rates are also a barrier to the private sector being fully utilised – especially from applicants under 35 years.
Temporary Accommodation

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

  Homeless presentations have increased slightly over the last year, as has the pressure on our temporary accommodation. Our experience is that our clients are presenting with higher support needs and multiple/complex needs that we need to address through housing support.

- **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?**

  People’s experience of temporary accommodation can be improved in a number of ways. In Falkirk, temporary and mainstream accommodation is maintained to the same standard. Reducing the time to be rehoused and the time spent in temporary accommodation needs to be tackled simultaneously through an effective allocations policy; an effective voids process to ensure that temporary accommodation properties go back into the letting pool as quickly as possible and intensive tenancy support to ensure that applicants get help to sustain their tenancies. In Falkirk there has been an improved turnover of our temporary accommodation since the introduction of our choice based letting system. On average our homeless applicants are now being rehoused within 6 months.

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

  Yes. Whilst we have been notified of our allocation of funding following the abolition of the DWP management fee for temporary accommodation, the appropriateness of the level of fund has not been tested in real terms. The ongoing increases in arrears and in particular temporary accommodation in local authority areas that has had full UC roll-out, highlights the need for local authorities to receive payments direct to ensure that temporary accommodation stock is sustainable.

Permanent Accommodation

- **How do social landlord’s allocation policies prioritise applications from homeless households and how does choice based lettings work in practice?**

  Falkirk has a choice based letting system. Since its introduction we have seen improvement in how we are able to prioritise our homeless applicants. This has been underpinned by close case management and tenancy support. It also has an effect on the turnover of our temporary accommodation stock. Under our choice based lettings system, homeless applicants are prioritised to reflect their urgent housing need but the system still enables them to
participate in the scheme in a similar way to all other applicants. On average homeless applicants are rehoused within 6 months.

Multiple and Complex Needs

- 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?

Homeless applicants with multiple and complex needs require intensive support. This does not necessarily need to be within an accommodation based setting but does need to be linked to accommodation. Our housing support model offers temporary accommodation from a limited period which is converted into a SSST with continued support. Once we are confident that the applicant is stable and can sustain a tenancy then an offer of permanent accommodation is sought. A tailored package of housing support is provided to support the transition period and help sustain the tenancy moving forward.

- 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?

A multi agency approach must be pivotal to the delivery of support to those with complex and multiple needs.

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

Close links with health are important to the delivery of preventive health services. Projects such as ‘Smile for Life’ and ‘Keep Well’ provide access to services for many. We have a close relationship with our postnatal and health visitor teams and work in partnership to ensure that any clients entering temporary accommodation are offered a continuity of care during an unsettled period.

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

A housing first type model of support for complex and multiple needs has proved successful within the Falkirk area. The majority of clients successfully move onto sustainable accommodation.

Rough Sleeping

- 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?
Our numbers have decreased due to a dedicated Rough Sleepers support officer and funding/close working arrangements with our local soup kitchen. Our dedicated post has also developed unique relationships with our town centre retailers to ensure that we are aware of any possibility of rough sleeping. The type of individual at risk of rough sleeping has however not changed. They continue to be single males who have complex and multiple needs and have often been affected by benefit sanctions.

- **What type of accommodation is offered to rough sleepers?**

  As mentioned above rough sleepers often have multiple and complex needs – our model of supported accommodation for this group provides the best option for these clients to ensure that they get the intensive support that they require.

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

  A dynamic and flexible approach is required that has good working relations with public, health and third sector services. Building relations with clients is essential, as many rough sleepers cannot see how they can move on from their situation. Peer Support can also be invaluable.

**Other**

- **What are the reasons behind why people become homeless?**

  Annual trends consistently show “asked to leave home” and “relationship breakdown” as the main reasons

- **What data is used to measure homelessness numbers in a particular area?**

  Homeless is measured through HL1 reporting and through our allocations policy. We also use GIS mapping to pinpoint areas of high homelessness.

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

  We have strategic and operational groups with social work and health services to ensure that we are able to meet the needs of clients.

  Falkirk has also reviewed its front line service delivery approach and has developed a hub model to provided dedicated services to our most vulnerable citizens.

- **Are there any problems with people accessing their housing and homelessness rights? If yes, how can access be improved?**
We provide a front line service during working hours in various locations throughout the Falkirk area and an emergency homeless standby service outwith normal working hours. Information leaflets and advice is available online and in most public offices.

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

  The welfare benefits system still proves to be a fundamental issue. Young people in particular are disadvantaged through a number of streams including the benefits system.

  More pro active planning where possible is more beneficial rather than requesting housing at the point of crisis.

- **Are there any other issues relating to homelessness which you wish to bring to the attention of the Committee?**

  No recourse to public funds applicants has a significant strain on local authority budgets.