
Report To: Community Health & Care
Partnership Sub-Committee

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Subject: Homelessness Services

1.0 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To update members on progress made within all aspects of CHCP Homelessness Services since the implementation of the initial phase of service re-design on 30 July 2011
- 1.2 To provide a further update on collaborative work with external stakeholders and an outline of the next steps in the service re-design process.

2.0 SUMMARY

- 2.1 A new staffing structure was implemented within Homelessness Services on 30 July 2011. This was recognised as an important first step in the re-design of the service, and created an initial annual saving of £120,000.
- 2.2 The service is now run in two distinct strands, incorporating Assessment & Support, and Temporary Accommodation provision.
- 2.3 The service has in the past year received a favourable report from the Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR), and has entered into discussions with local Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) on enhanced joint working arrangements including the establishment of a 'one-stop-shop' for all housing and related issues in Inverclyde.

3.0 RECOMMENDATION

- 3.1 That the Sub-Committee note the contents of this report.

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4.0 SERVICE RE-DESIGN – PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

- 4.1 Following the staffing re-structure of Homelessness Services in July 2011, the service now operates in two distinct strands. The first of these strands is Assessment & Support. This strand delivers on the Council's commitment to homeless prevention as a priority activity, and to providing a one-to-one casework service to clients, who now benefit from having a single 'named' caseworker to whom they can refer throughout their contact with the homelessness service. This new approach has been instrumental in achieving a reduction in both homeless presentations (534 in 2010/11 to 440 in 2011/12) and repeat homelessness presentations (8.7% in 2010/11 to 7.2% in 2011/12)
- 4.2 On the 1st May 2012 the Assessment & Support team formally introduced housing options. This allows all clients to receive housing options information before proceeding to a homeless assessment if required. This allows clients to make informed decisions regarding their application and future housing. The improved recording process introduced to support housing options records that between 1st May 2012 and to the 30th June 2012, 247 cases presented to the service.
- 4.3 The Assessment & Support team now also provides a Homemaker service, which has proved to be an invaluable addition to the team in terms of ensuring that clients moving on to permanent tenancies, now do so with an enhanced level of support to assist them in overcoming early challenges to tenancy sustainment.
- 4.4 This team also provides an enhanced homelessness prevention service. They work alongside Education to provide information and presentation to school leavers. They carry out regular surgeries at Greenock and Low Moss prisons to assist new inmates retain their homes where possible and assist those due for release that may be facing homelessness. They carry out weekly visits to Inverclyde Women's Aid and are fully engaged in the Hospital discharge protocol.
- 4.5 The Assessment & Support Officers have been trained in family mediation and it is planned to implement this tool as a means of homeless prevention in August 2012. It is also intended to extend the work of the Section 11 process for those in threat of losing their homes from the owner occupied sector. At present contact is made with all referrals however, we do not experience a particularly good response rate from this sector. We are unable at present to provide an accurate figure on the take up rate of this part of the service and we will look to address this under the new process. Section 11 of the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003 gives local authorities early notice of households at risk of homelessness due to eviction. It places a duty on landlords and creditors to notify the relevant Local authority when they raise proceedings for possession.
- 4.6 In March 2012, CMT gave approval – pending acceptable Service Level Agreement – to allow the Homelessness Service's Rent Accounting system to be merged with that of Oak Tree HA, in order to provide a more accurate and robust form of rent accounting than what was made available following the loss of the Council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) at the point of stock transfer. This development has satisfied a requirement of internal audit and has proved to be another positive example of joint-working with key partners. Discussions have also now commenced with Oak Tree HA in terms of further enhanced partnership working that it is hoped will lead to a sharing of resources to assist in the turnaround of vacant properties used for temporary accommodation.
- 4.7 The staffing re-structure of the homelessness service, coupled with the formation of the Community Health & Care Partnership (CHCP), has also resulted in a strong consolidation of our Health & Homelessness service, and business support function.

This has facilitated a platform for excellent communication and patient/client referral processes within the wider CHCP.

The Homelessness Service now has direct access to health services in the form of an alcohol counsellor, drugs officer and community nurse. This allows all homeless clients to receive brief intervention information and this in turn has resulted in an increase in clients' access to appropriate health services.

- 4.8 The CHCP has established a Housing and Accommodation Group which will co-ordinate housing need in relation to clients of the wider CHCP with specific support needs. This group will have a strategic role and links directly with the Local Housing Strategy Steering Group who will monitor the progress of this group in their joint working with the local RSL's.

5.0 SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

- 5.1 The Scottish Government has set a national target that by the end of 2012, all individuals and households assessed as being homeless will be regarded as being in priority need, regardless of other circumstances. This was an ambitious target forming an integral part of the Scottish Government's drive to prevent and alleviate homelessness, and set out in legislation giving greater rights to homeless people – Housing (Scotland) Act 2001; and Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003.

- 5.2 Following a planned 3-year 'phasing-in' process, Inverclyde Council was able to formally meet this target on 1 April 2012, eight months ahead of schedule. This achievement was highly praised by influential homeless charity Shelter and highlighted in the local press. Shelter has since requested to share a joint platform with Inverclyde Council and to issue a joint media release to highlight the work of Inverclyde Council in order to further highlight this positive achievement.

- 5.3 A more recent policy driver from the Scottish Government has been the development of the 'Housing Options Approach' to homeless prevention. This approach has brought about significant positive outcomes elsewhere in Scotland and south of the border, notably in our neighbouring authority in North Ayrshire. This has led to the formation of regional 'Housing Options Hubs' of local authorities which seek to share good practice in housing options and homeless prevention work, and to seek innovative ways of tackling the causes of homelessness and its related issues.

- 5.4 Inverclyde Council is now a fully participative member of the Ayrshire & South Housing Options Hub, joined by North Ayrshire, South Ayrshire, East Ayrshire and Dumfries & Galloway Councils. The ongoing work of the Hub has proved to date be a positive experience, and has assisted Inverclyde Council in achieving the figures referred to at paragraph 4.1. Member Councils in the 'Hub' now intend to carry out a peer review process of each other's services to further enhance the joint learning and progression within the 'Hub'. It has also proved useful to closely share experiences and practices with colleagues in Dumfries & Galloway as a similarly stock-transferred authority

6.0 HOUSING OPTIONS LOCALLY AND 'ONE-STOP-SHOP'

- 6.1 One main feature of the development of the Housing Options approach locally is the development of a centrally-located 'one-stop-shop' to address all housing-related needs in Inverclyde – including all homeless prevention and assessment . This aim is now adopted as Council policy via the Local Housing Strategy (LHS), and has been strengthened by the public commitment by 3 local RSLs (Riverclyde Homes, Oak Tree Housing Association and Cloch Housing Association); as part of its development of a Common Housing Register (CHR) in Inverclyde and a move to a Choice-Based-Letting system of housing allocation as part of a common allocations policy. Larkfield Housing Association, as part of the wider Link Group has also expressed an interest in possibly joining this venture in the future.

- 6.2 Initial discussions with Oak Tree HA (soon to be merged with Cloch HA) have been extremely positive in this area, and an initial proposal to site the 'one-stop-shop' at Oak Tree HA's offices at High Street had been given approval in principle by CMT in March 2012. However, space restrictions at this site caused by changes in terms of the Oak Tree/Cloch merger indicate that this particular location is now unlikely to have sufficient space for the staffing numbers involved. The search for a more suitable central location has now commenced.
- 6.3 Alternative premises created by the 'one-stop-shop' arrangement will also help to facilitate the locational split of the Assessment & Support and Temporary Accommodation functions of the homelessness service, which is an essential part of the next phase of the service re-design, making the service more accessible to a wider range of clients, including the most vulnerable who may be reluctant at present to approach the Inverclyde Centre due to historical perceptions.

7.0 SCOTTISH HOUSING REGULATOR (SHR)

- 7.1 Following the cyclical inspection of the Homelessness Service in 2008, the Council was required to submit an improvement plan in order to progress any issues where it was noted that further improvement could be achieved. The SHR subsequently sought a detailed self-assessment after a period of 3 years, and this was submitted by Inverclyde CHCP in September 2011.
- 7.2 The SHR has advised the Council that it is assured of the progress being made by the homelessness service, and as a result has noted its overall assessment of the service as 'green'. This assessment will now be fed into the broader Assurance and Improvement Plan (AIP) which is prepared for each local authority by the various regulators of statutory services.
- 7.3 There is now no further planned inspection activity in relation to Inverclyde's homelessness service, however the SHR has noted its intention to 'keep a watching brief' on the situation regarding the number of lets made by local RSLs to homeless applicants, which is yet to reach the target set within Inverclyde Council's recently published Local Housing Strategy of 50% of all voids being made available to homeless clients.

8.0 FUTURE CHALLENGES

- 8.1 The ongoing development of the homelessness service, especially over the past year since the implementation of the staffing restructure has overall been a positive experience and has created a firm platform upon which to move forward to the next phase. The service is now in a strong position in which it can play a key part in the creation of a comprehensive and holistic approach to housing and related matters in Inverclyde.
- 8.2 Access to permanent housing remains a challenge with only 172 clients accessing social rented housing in 2011/12. However this has been incorporated into the Local Housing Strategy with a request that RSL's make 50% of their voids available to homeless clients. This is still under discussion however the request is comparable with other local authorities' access to social housing for homeless clients.
- 8.3 Future challenges to the service in the year ahead will undoubtedly centre on the welfare reform agenda, including the introduction of Universal Credit to vulnerable households and changes to Housing Benefit rules. A number of the proposals increase the likelihood of shortfall of rent leading to rent arrears and eviction, and the possibility of an increase in homeless presentations. Increases in non-dependant deductions could lead to friction between the tenant and non-dependant, who is usually a family member. This could also result in further demands on homelessness services. It is unlikely that there will be enough tenancies in houses in multiple

occupation to meet the demand arising from the single room rent being applicable to people up to the age of 35. This is already giving concern to RSLs who have substantial demand for housing from younger, single people who make up a large proportion of newly forming households in the Inverclyde Council area.

- 8.4 As a stock-transferred local authority, Inverclyde Council, in common with the 5 other Scottish local authorities that have undergone wholesale stock transfer, is particularly disadvantaged over the changes in Housing Benefit rules introduced in April 2011. The inability to utilise self-owned housing stock for temporary homeless accommodation means that stock-transferred local authorities largely depend on housing association stock for the provision of temporary accommodation. The new housing benefit rules limit the amount that can be claimed on Housing Benefit for temporary accommodation in housing association stock to 90% of the Local Housing Allowance (LHA), plus a maximum of £60 per week on service charges. For the financial year 2011/12, Inverclyde Council charges clients the full Housing Association rent plus a service charge of £137.71. This provides an indication of the significant shortfall in income generated via this source, which is now embedded within the Council's benefits budget, and in the financial year 2011/12, amounted to a sum in the region of £250,000.
- 8.5 Youth homelessness also continues to provide a real challenge in terms of lack of suitable supported accommodation. It is hoped that this may be addressed via the work of the Housing & Accommodation Sub-group within the CHCP.
- 8.6 The ongoing dialogue with the SHR will continue to be an issue that will require a robust engagement with RSLs within the agreed parameters set out in the LHS to ensure that a sufficient number of lets are made available to homeless households.

9.0 PROPOSALS

- 9.1 Members note the progress made in the past year since the implementation of the first phase of the re-design of Homelessness Services.
- 9.2 Members acknowledge positive engagement with SHR, Scottish Government, and other external stakeholders, and subsequent improvement in outcomes for homeless families in Inverclyde.
- 9.3 Members note on-going discussions with the RSL's on the development of the 'one-stop-shop' in Inverclyde.

10.0 IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 Legal: There are no legal implications contained within this report, other than the Council's ongoing statutory responsibilities in terms of homelessness legislation.
- 10.3 Equalities: The re-design of Homelessness Services has recently been subject to a positive Equalities Impact Assessment.