

South Ayrshire Council

Housing Advice & Information Strategy

Foreword by the Leader of the Council

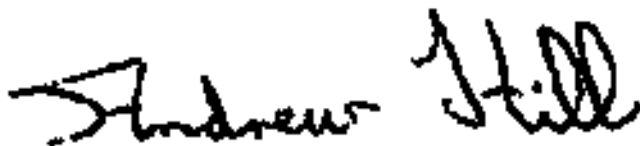
The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 imposes on local authorities new duties in relation to the provision of housing advice and information. Guidance from Communities Scotland suggests the development of a Housing Advice and Information Strategy as the best way of complying with these duties.

South Ayrshire Council's Housing Advice and Information Strategy has been developed following a review of housing advice and information provision in the Council's area and in consultation with a wide range of partners and service users.

By working in partnership with other advice and information providers this strategy aims to develop a co-ordinated approach to the provision of housing advice and information.

This Council is committed to working towards the prevention and alleviation of homelessness in South Ayrshire. Access to quality accurate advice and assistance is an important element in the prevention of homelessness and in enabling service users to make informed choices on their housing options.

This strategy will assist the council meet this commitment by ensuring that quality housing advice and information is freely available to all residents in South Ayrshire.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew Hill". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'H'.

Councillor Andrew Hill
Leader of the Council.

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. Strategic Context**
- 3. Current Provision of Housing Advice and Information in South Ayrshire**
- 4. Consultation**

Contents

- 5. Aims of the Strategy**
 - 6. Monitoring and Evaluation**
 - 7. Action Plan**
- Appendix I**

1. Introduction

Legislative Background

- 1.1 The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 provides the framework for a number of legislative changes in Scottish Housing. Part 1 Sections 1-10 of the Act include a number of new duties for local authorities and Registered Social Landlords with regard to homelessness and the allocation of housing.

Section 2 of the Act identifies how local authorities must ensure that advice and information about homelessness and the prevention of homelessness, or any service which may assist a homeless person or assist in the prevention of homelessness is available free of charge to anyone in the authority's area.

The general duty in Section 2 of the Act is accompanied by guidance, which identifies that local authorities have responsibilities on three levels:

- As a provider of information the Council must ensure that its information and advice services are delivered to the quality outlined in the Scottish National Standards for Housing Information and Advice Services.
- As a funder of services the authority must ensure that funding is sufficient to provide an adequate quantity of information and advice and that services are funded to a level where quality is assured
- As the strategic body the Council must plan for the provision of the range of information services, which are required to meet the identified need within the local authority's area.

In addition Local Authorities have a duty to provide advice and assistance to "intentionally" and non-priority need applicants as set out in the Homeless Person Advice and Assistance (Scotland) Regulations 2002 (SSI 20002 No414)

Draft Guidance from Communities Scotland suggests the development of an Advice and Information Strategy as the best way to ensure compliance with these duties.

HomePoint Scottish National Standards for Advice and Information Services

- 1.2 HomePoint was set up as a unit within Scottish Homes (now Communities Scotland) in 1993. The focus of their work is to improve the standard of housing information and advice in Scotland.

In 1995 they published the National Standards for Advice and Information. The standards were reviewed in 1999 and the latest edition published in 2003.

The Standards are backed up by a system of accreditation, which is awarded to organisations that can demonstrate compliance across all areas of the standards.

To support the implementation of the Scottish National Standards HomePoint have contracted a Standards Training Provider who offer a training package to enable staff within organisations to attain the necessary competencies in areas of housing law.

South Ayrshire Council is piloting the Scottish National Standards within the Council's Homelessness Service.

Staff within Homeless Services have received training to HomePoint Standard and training is being rolled out to all staff within the area housing offices.

An action plan has been developed to work towards achieving HomePoint Standards in Homeless Services with the aim of seeking HomePoint accreditation for the service. (for details of HomePoint National Standards see Appendix I)

What is Housing Advice and Information?

- 1.3 The HomePoint Guidance provides a comprehensive definition of what comprises housing advice and information and the areas of law, which should be covered (see appendix I)

The Homelessness Task Force recommends that the range of issues on which advice should be provided include relationship counselling/mediation, financial advice, drug/alcohol advice, advocacy and action to manage neighbour disputes and tackle harassment.

The Homeless Persons Advice and Assistance (Scotland) Regulations (2002) prescribes the type of advice and assistance which must be provided, these should cover accommodation options, social issues and financial advice.

While the provision of housing advice has always been an important function of housing and homelessness services, legislation and guidance make it clear that the provision of housing advice and information requires to be much more wide ranging, pro-active and to focus on the prevention of homelessness.

It is recognised that a wide range of other statutory and voluntary agencies play an important part in the provision of housing advice and information. Local authorities have a strategic role in ensuring that there is a range of provision across all areas of housing advice and information throughout the local authority's area.

There is a requirement on Local Authorities to ensure that clients are advised of the availability of other independent sources of advice and information.



2. Strategic Context

The advice and information strategy feeds directly into both the Homelessness Strategy and the Local Housing Strategy.

The provision of effective housing advice and information is also an integral part of a range of other Council strategies and initiatives.

Local Housing Strategy

- 2.1 The Local Housing Strategy provides the strategic framework for the development of housing provision, policy and services over a five-year period.

Relevant are the following key objectives:

Objective 9 : High Quality Housing Management Services
Objective 9.1 : High Quality Homelessness Services

A priority within these objectives is to develop and improve the level and type of advice available in both homeless services and area housing offices through staff training and the development of an advice and information strategy.

Homelessness Strategy

- 2.2 The Housing (Scotland) 2001 Act imposes upon local authorities a corporate duty to carry out an assessment of homelessness in their area and to prepare and submit a strategy for the alleviation and prevention of homelessness. The primary aim of South Ayrshire's Homelessness Strategy is

“to prevent Homelessness occurring in the first place and to provide appropriate services and supports for those in the homeless system”.

The key objectives in relation to this strategy are:

Objective 2 : To develop an Advice and Information Strategy in accordance with HomePoint National Standards

Objective 3 : Develop an early intervention strategy for vulnerable people at risk of Homelessness

Objective 4 : Ensure that services provided to people who are homeless minimise the effects of homelessness on individuals and society.

Health and Homelessness Action Plan

- 2.3 All NHS Boards in Scotland are required to develop a Health & Homelessness action plan, which will link with Local Authorities Homelessness Strategies. Ayrshire & Arran NHS Board's action plan, which has been developed for South Ayrshire, sets out the need to ensure that homeless people have relevant information regarding access to health & social care.

Supporting People Strategy

- 2.4 The Supporting People Strategy has as one of its key objectives: "no homelessness or household breakdown through lack of support".

The provision of Housing Support funded through the Supporting People Budget has an important role in the prevention of homelessness. A vital element of Housing Support is the provision of quality housing advice and information.

Private Rented Sector Strategy

- 2.5 Local Authorities are required to ensure that advice and information on housing options include advice and assistance on accessing the private rented sector. Objectives contained in the Private Rented Sector Strategy will forge closer links with private landlords and improve information and access to this sector for those in housing need.

Pressured Areas

- 2.6 South Ayrshire is one of the most pressured areas in Scotland for housing. At present the Council owns only 20% of the total housing stock and RSL's just 2%. There are approximately 3,500 people currently on the Council waiting list and a turn over of about 850 houses per year. The provision of comprehensive advice and information on housing options across all sectors is vital to maximise choice and access to housing.

The Housing Advice and Information strategy also links with National Priorities in relation to equality issues and on tackling disadvantage to promote Social Justice.

3. **Current Provision Of Housing Advice and Information In South Ayrshire**

An independent review of housing advice and information in South Ayrshire was completed in March 2004. The research was asked to focus on the following areas:

- The current availability of, and nature of housing advice and information in South Ayrshire
- Whether the available services cover all the areas required in terms of Homelessness Legislation and in relation to HomePoint Guidance
- The quality and consistency of advice
- To identify where any gaps exist in current provision.

The research was based on desk-top analysis of existing information, telephone consultation with service providers, questionnaires completed by Housing Managers and exit surveys and telephone interviews with service users. The main findings of the review are summarised below.

Service Provision

- 3.1 In general the research found that there was a broad range of housing advice and information available in both statutory and voluntary sectors. They found provision for most of the groups identified by the Homelessness Task Force as priorities for housing advice, and that all the areas of housing advice, identified by HomePoint, were covered by the different providers.

Gaps found in current provision include the lack of provision of out-of-hours service and difficulties for working people in accessing information, although the research acknowledges that South Ayrshire Council does have a good web site with detailed information on housing options and services.

Insufficient provision was found for people in rural areas, non-violent relationship breakdown, anti-social behaviour and advice and support for those with drug problems.

Homelessness Prevention

- 3.2 The research found housing advice focused on Homeless Services and as a result the emphasis is reactive rather than preventative. Although a good deal of housing advice and information is provided through the area housing offices, without a dedicated, advertised housing advice service it is difficult to assess the impact of this service on homelessness prevention.

Current action to prevent homelessness includes the introduction of Housing Support Workers by SAC. The “My own home” starter packs developed by STEP Project and the Throughcare Youth Support Team: The work being done in schools with the Youth Homelessness Video and supporting material: A programme of Joint Homelessness Prevention Training delivered to Council staff and voluntary agencies: The Provision of a housing advice service at Ailsa Hospital and development of a hospital discharge protocol: A housing advice service is provided in Bowhouse prison in partnership with East Ayrshire Council.

Staff Training

- 3.3 The review found wide variation in training on housing related issues within the voluntary sector dependant on whether housing advice was a large part of their remit and the size of the organisation. However, adequate training was available to voluntary organisations on a wide range of housing related issues through SAC Joint Homelessness Prevention programme, Women’s Aid, Ayr Housing Aid Centre, Ayrshire & Arran NHS and Addiction Training Forum.

Housing Services has a dedicated officer responsible for co-ordinating staff training requirements. In addition staff within Homeless Services have completed HomePoint Standards training at level 1 & 2, and this is currently being rolled out to staff within area housing offices.

Referrals/Networking

- 3.4 The majority of providers felt that communication between providers was good and most were involved at some level in formal networks including South Ayrshire Homelessness Forum and the Youth Housing Support Group.

Most respondents felt that referrals worked well although it was recognised that there is a need for referral arrangements to be formalised and mechanisms put in place for monitoring the advice and information provided by agencies.

User Satisfaction

- 3.5 A satisfaction survey was carried out. Of those interviewed 90% had contacted the area office about a general housing issue and 10% were presenting as homeless. Respondents had contacted the offices for a range of reasons with over half having contacted the council on that issue on previous occasions.

Respondents were largely happy with the advice and information provided and the way they are dealt with by staff. For example, 78% said that they were given good advice by staff and 78% that the information given was helpful, 84% said that staff listened and clearly understood their situation, 70% said that staff explained clearly what the service could do to help them.

A lack of awareness was found among service users of the other services and organisations in South Ayrshire which could help them with housing related problems.

Future Demand

- 3.6 Legislative changes brought about by the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and the further changes contained in the Homelessness Etc (Scotland) Act 2003, (for example, the extension of the priority need category, abolition of local connection and use of SSSTs for those found to be intentionally homeless) will inevitably have an impact on demand for advice services across all providers. An increase in referrals was reported by one organisation working with single homeless people.

An increasing demand was identified for money advice services due largely to the impact of the Debt Arrangement (Scotland) Act 2002.

The Tenements (Scotland) Bill 2003 and proposed legislation as a result of the consultation "Maintaining Homes, Preserving Houses" will lead to an increasing demand for advice and information from the private housing sector.

The Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003 contains a social inclusion element, which will impact on the advice and support requirements.

Key Issues

- 3.7 Key issues highlighted in the research, which require to be addressed by this strategy include the following:
- Services can no longer be mainly reactive but should be pro-active and focused on prevention and early intervention. Improvements are required to arrangements for the early identification of homelessness and targeting of advice to those at risk of homeless.
 - Legislation and guidance requires Local Authorities to monitor the provision of advice and information. Therefore it will be necessary to develop a robust model for recording and monitoring the service.
 - There is a need to improve access to housing advice services by developing access points, signposting mechanisms and by marketing advice and information services.
 - There is a need to improve communication and strengthen the networks between housing advice providers and to ensure that all staff are kept updated on legislation and service provision.



4. Consultation

South Ayrshire Council is fully committed to the consultation process and have consulted with a wide range of stakeholders in the development of this strategy.

- In 2002, as part of the South Ayrshire Homelessness Strategy Research, interviews were conducted with service users regarding the provision of advice and assistance by the Council's Homelessness Service.
- A Homelessness Prevention Seminar held in March 2002, and consultation with council staff, raised the issue of the importance of staff training in the provision of advice and information. As a result a programme of joint homelessness prevention training was introduced.
- Interviews were conducted by consultants carrying out the review of advice and information with council staff, voluntary providers and service users.

Following the preparation of the Draft Housing Advice and Information Strategy consultation took place with a variety of different interest groups.

Housing Staff: Issues raised include the need for access to information resources to enable comprehensive advice on a range of housing issues to be given and the provision of training on the range of provision by other statutory and voluntary agencies

Social Work Staff: Staff within the Welfare Rights/Enquiry & Information Team deal with a range of housing advice issues and identified the need for better communication and joint working between staff in Housing and Social Work.

Tenants and Residents Forum: Identified the need for wider advertising of services, improved private interview facilities and the provision of interactive information points in area offices.

Private Landlords Forum: Highlighted the need for better communication and exchange of information between SAC and private landlords.

Registered Social Landlords: work is continuing on the development of a Common Housing Register and the provision of comprehensive housing advice and information will be an integral part of this.

Service Users: Issues raised as a result of focus group meeting and completed questionnaires included: lack of information on where to go for advice and information and the need for direct, confidential access to Homeless Services.

In addition consultation has taken place with a wide range of other Housing advice and information providers and an Advice and Information Partnership Group is being formed to continue their involvement in the development and implementation of the strategy.

5. Aims Of The Strategy

Strategic Objectives -

- To improve the delivery of Housing Advice and Information within the Housing Service
- To improve access to quality housing advice and information
- To effectively record and monitor the provision of housing advice and information.
- To prevent homelessness through early intervention and identification of those at risk of homelessness
- To improve communication and joint working arrangements with other providers.

Details of how these objectives will be met is contained in the following action plan.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The way we will meet the objectives contained in this strategy are set out in the attached action plan as specific actions detailing lead officers and timescale for completion.

Progress will be monitored in the following way:

- Progress on the strategy will be monitored within the overall monitoring and evaluation framework of the Homelessness Strategy.
- The Homelessness Strategy Working Group will receive progress reports twice yearly in April and September.
- The Advice and Information Partners Group will monitor and take forward specific actions.
- The strategy will be evaluated against the criteria set out in the HomePoint Standards for Housing Advice and Information.
- The strategy will be posted on the Council's website and will give the opportunity for feedback.
- Progress will be monitored against feedback received from service users and partners.
- The development of a newsletter will detail progress and provide the opportunity to receive feedback from providers and service users.
- On-going consultation and development of the strategy will develop the criteria for evaluating the impact of the specific actions contained in the action plan.

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Action Plan

OBJECTIVE	ACTION	LEAD	RESOURCE	TIMESCALE
Improve the delivery of housing advice and information within the Housing Services	Introduce Housing Option Interviews to provide a pro-active approach to people in housing need	Housing Service	Housing Service	April 2005
	Develop a comprehensive data based information resource for staff advising on Housing options.	Housing Service Gordon Brown	Housing Service	April 2005
	Develop an information resource for staff on services provided by other housing advice providers and routes for referral	Emma Cassidy	Housing Service	March 2005
	15 Housing staff per annum trained to HomePoint standard.	Derek Mitchell/Michael Alexander/Emma Cassidy	Housing Service/Homelessness Strategy	On-going
	Implement the HomePoint National Standards for Advice and Information within the Homelessness Service.	Emma Cassidy/Derek Mitchell	Homelessness Strategy	September 2005
	Consider the creation of a Housing Advice and Information Officer post within Housing Service	Housing Service	Housing Service	April 2005
	Establish integrated access points to housing advice and information within Housing Service.	Housing Service	Housing Service	April 2005

OBJECTIVE	ACTION	LEAD	RESOURCE	TIMESCALE
Improve access to quality housing advice and information	To develop a reception area and confidential reception service for clients to Homeless Services	Derek Mitchell	Housing	April 2005
	Carry out a feasibility study into the provision of an out-of-hours information service	Housing Service	Housing Service	March 2006
	Examine ways of improving access to information for those with a sensory impairment.	Emma Cassidy	Homelessness Strategy	June 2005
	Develop a statement of service standards for housing services	Tom McFadzean	N/A	April 2005
	Develop guidelines for housing staff on the use of interpretation services and services for those with a sensory impairment.	Catherine King	N/A	March 2005
	Examine further opportunities to extend outreach services to the wider community	Housing Service/ AHAC	Scottish Executive	On-going to March 2006
	Continue to develop, update and promote the Housing Option Guide	Emma Cassidy	Homelessness Strategy	Ongoing
	Develop and implement a publicity and marketing plan for Housing Advice and Information Services	Emma Cassidy/ Lisa Meahan	Homelessness Strategy	May 2005

OBJECTIVE	ACTION	LEAD	RESOURCE	TIMESCALE
Improve access to quality housing advice and information	Ensure the availability of a comprehensive range of housing advice and information leaflets.	Emma Cassidy/Lisa Meahan	Homelessness Strategy/ Housing Service	Ongoing
	Improve access to information on the private rented sector as part of the Voluntary Landlords' Accreditation Scheme	Private Sector Liaison Officer	Scottish Executive	April 2005
	Provide access to comprehensive advice and information on all social rented housing providers as part of the development of a CHR	CHR Co-ordinator	Scottish Executive	March 2006
	Ensure that service users are informed of their right to seek independent advice, through inclusion in decision letters, advice leaflets and service statement.	Emma Cassidy/ Lisa Meahan/ Tom McFadzean	Homelessness Strategy	March 2005
	Improve access to information on Tenants and Residents Groups, through web site and advice leaflets	Tenant Participation officer	N/A	March 2005
	Improve access to information on Local Members' surgeries through web links and advice leaflets	Emma Cassidy	N/A	March 2005
Effectively record and monitor the provision of Housing Advice and Information	Develop a Customer Service Data system for recording and monitoring advice and information provision.	Gordon Brown/ Lynne Wilson/ Derek Mitchell	Housing Services	March 2005

OBJECTIVE	ACTION	LEAD	RESOURCE	TIMESCALE
Effectively record and monitor the provision of Housing Advice and Information	Work with partners to develop an effective means of recording the progress and outcome of referrals	Housing Services/ Emma Cassidy	N/A	April 2005
	Develop effective methods of obtaining and recording user feedback	Lisa Meahan/ Emma Cassidy	Housing Service.	June 2005
	Develop an effective method of obtaining feedback from partners	Catherine King/ Emma Cassidy	Housing Service	March 2005
Prevent homelessness through early intervention and identification of those at risk of homelessness	Develop protocols and joint working arrangements with other housing advice providers to ensure early identification of those at risk of homelessness.	Tony McGuigan/ Emma Cassidy	N/A	June 2005
	Provide training to reception staff in early identification of homelessness and in procedures for dealing with homeless clients.	Emma Cassidy/ Liz Copeland	Homelessness Strategy	June 2005
	Continue programme of Joint Homelessness Prevention Training	Emma Cassidy	Homelessness Strategy	On-going to 2006
	Extend access to Mediation and Relationship Counselling	Emma Cassidy	Housing	March 2006
	Continue programme of Homelessness education to Secondary Schools	Eibhlin Corrigan	Homelessness Strategy	On going

OBJECTIVE	ACTION	LEAD	RESOURCE	TIMESCALE
Prevent Homelessness through early intervention and identification of those at risk of homelessness	Extend access to Leaving Home information to young people, through the development and distribution of an advice leaflet and poster	Emma Cassidy	Homelessness Strategy	March 2005
	Improve access to information and support services for Homeless people with substance abuse problems	Eibhlin Corrigan/ Emma Cassidy	Scottish Executive/ Supporting People	Feb. 2005
Improve communication and joint working arrangements with other providers	Establish a multi-agency advice and information forum	Emma Cassidy	Homelessness Strategy	Feb. 2005
	Develop a Service Level Agreement with Ayr Housing Aid Centre	Emma Cassidy	N/A	January 2005
	Agree formal referral procedures/ protocols with other housing advice providers	Emma Cassidy	N/A	March 2005
	Examine opportunities to improve contact and joint working between Housing and Social Work teams through the development of joint protocols .	Tony McGuigan	N/A	June 2005
	Establish a newsletter to ensure that all housing advice providers are kept updated on changes to legislation and service provision.	Advice and Information Forum	Homelessness Strategy	June 2005
	Examine ways of joint working and information sharing between housing service and private landlords as part of the landlord voluntary accreditation scheme.	Private Sector Liaison Officer	Scottish Executive	April 2005

Scottish National Standards and Good Practice Guidance For Housing Information and Advice Services

The HomePoint Guidance was first published 1995 and revised 2001, the latest version was issued March 2003.

The Standards

The standards are divided into six key areas:

- General Management
- Planning of Services
- Accessibility and Customer Care
- Providing the Service
- Competencies for Staff and Agencies
- Resources

Each of the standards is followed by a set of 'indicators' that highlight the evidence services will need to provide to demonstrate compliance with the Standard.

Defining Information and Advice

The Guidance states that advice is likely to comprise some or all of the following components:

- Listening to clients
- Diagnosing the problem
- Giving information
- Advising on the options available
- Taking action on behalf of clients
- Negotiating on their behalf
- Representing clients' cases at tribunals and court
- Referral where appropriate
- Enabling or empowering individuals to take informed action on their own behalf

These activities have been broken down into three principal categories or types of intervention:

Type I – Active Information, Signposting and Explanation

This refers to activities such as providing information, either orally, or in writing, signposting or referring the user to other available resources or services and the explanation of technical terms or clarification of an official document such as a tenancy agreement or a possession order.

Type II - Casework

This work will include: A diagnostic interview where the problem and all relevant issues are identified. Making a judgement as to whether the client has a case that can be pursued. Once this has been established activities may include:

- Setting out an individual's options or course of action
- Encouraging users to take action on their own behalf
- Providing practical aid with letters or forms
- Negotiating with a third party on users behalf
- Support to users in making their own case

Type III - Advocacy, Representation and Mediation

- Advocacy and Representation: where the advisor may prepare a case for the user and represent or speak on their behalf at a tribunal or court
- Mediation: where the advisor may act on behalf of the user by seeking to mediate between the user and a third party.

Area of Housing Law

The Guidance identifies 19 areas of housing law, which come under the remit of housing advice and information these are:

- Housing Benefit
- Discrimination in Housing
- Harassment and Illegal Eviction
- Homelessness: Priority Need
- Homelessness: Non-Priority
- Mobility and Transfer
- Rent Arrears
- Mortgage Arrears
- Rent: Private Sector
- Security of Tenure
- Housing Options: General
- Housing Options: Local Authorities
- Housing Options: Registered Social Landlords
- Housing Options: Private Rented Sector
- Housing Options: Owner Occupation
- Relationship Breakdown
- Repair and Improvement Grants
- Disrepair: Public Sector
- Disrepair: Private Sector & Housing Associations



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