

**Shetland Islands Council**

**Housing Service**

**Advice and Information Strategy**

**2009 - 2012**



**Housing Service  
Executive Services  
Shetland Islands Council**

**August 2009  
Version 1.**

## **1. Background**

It is our view that the right housing information needs to be available at the right time and should be provided in the right way.

We recognise that being able to access good information is an essential tool in the early intervention that agencies can often provide in helping to prevent a housing crisis.

In our local authority area, with increasing housing demand and diminishing social rented stock, we must continue to work together to help our customers explore all reasonable housing options open to them.

Our customers have the right to access good quality information from a range of sources and agencies, as well as having a responsibility to make best use of the information available to help them make the best housing decisions for their circumstances.

As well as directly assisting customers, good quality housing advice and information can also fulfil a wider educational role. In our small rural area homelessness is mostly hidden, often leading to a lack of awareness and understanding that homelessness is a reality locally.

We see this strategy as an opportunity to provide information to our communities whilst helping to build a culture of understanding and informed debate of the true extent of homelessness and all associated issues.

This strategy will improve the consistency and accessibility of housing information as well as formalising some service standards across partner agencies.

The implementation of this strategy will help to achieve the continuous improvement that all partner agencies are committed to.

## 2. Legislative Context

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 placed a number of new duties on local authorities, one of which was to carry out an assessment of homelessness and publish homeless strategies that set out how the authority will prevent and tackle homelessness over a five year period.

Being able to provide housing advice and information through a range of methods and local agencies is an important element in both preventing and alleviating homelessness.

**Shetland's Homeless Strategy is available to view online at [www.shetland.gov.uk/housing/StrategyDevelopment.asp](http://www.shetland.gov.uk/housing/StrategyDevelopment.asp)**

This document is being reviewed and updated, and will in future form a part of the wider Local Housing Strategy currently being developed.

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 details other responsibilities in relation to housing advice and information, which are:

- (1) every local authority must secure that advice and information about –
  - (a) homelessness and the prevention of homelessness, and
  - (b) any service which may assist a homeless person or assist in the prevention of homelessness,is available free of charge in the authority's area.

The Homeless Persons Advice and Assistance (Scotland) Regulations 2002 set out the types of advice that local authorities should provide, and these are attached as **Appendix 2**.

We will also ensure that legislation concerning equal opportunities, equality and diversity are fully applied through this Strategy. It is an underpinning principle that all clients will be treated equally regardless of their age, ability, race, religion, gender or sexual orientation.

## 3. What is Housing Advice?

It is recommended good practice that housing advice and information services should satisfy Homepoint's National Standards, and through this strategy we will work together to achieve accreditation in the Scottish National Standards for Housing Advice and information, which are defined as: :

- **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 courts**

- **Referral where appropriate**
- **Enabling or empowering individuals to take action on their own behalf**

#### **4. Homepoint Scottish National Standards for Advice and Information Services**

Homepoint originally published the above standards in 1999 and these were last updated in 2006. The Standards are backed by a system of accreditation that is awarded to organisations that demonstrate compliance across all areas of the standards.

Training staff to the relevant National Standard level ensures staff have the necessary skills to reach the competencies required for a service to be accredited in providing housing advice and information.

#### **5. Purpose of the Strategy**

Shetland Islands Council's Housing Service has the strategic responsibility for ensuring accessible, comprehensive and high quality housing advice and information is available.

Because of Shetland's small communities, it is widely established accepted that all agencies work well together and many informal networks are in place that ensure customers are routinely directed to good sources of advice and information on any subject. This working practice is something we believe can be further enhanced through formalising the provision of housing advice and information across all partner agencies using the National Standards.

We also want to ensure we are able to maintain and evidence these standards through successful recording and monitoring of housing advice and information provision.

#### **6. How the Strategy has been developed**

This strategy has been researched and developed by a subgroup of the multi agency Housing Strategies Steering Group which oversees and monitors all housing strategies. The subgroup included representatives from:

- Shetland Islands Council Housing Service
- Hjaltland Housing Association
- Shetland's Citizen Advice Bureau
- Advocacy Shetland
- Shetland Tenants Forum

The subgroup's first task was to carry out an audit of locally provided housing advice and information. The key findings of the audit are summarised below.

Audit Area	Methodology	Key Findings	Subgroup Notes
Housing Service audit	Five separate one-week audits of Housing Service (front office and estate management) recording the types of housing enquiry received.	<p>Over 2200 enquiries were received in the audit period the nature of the enquiries were split as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Repairs or keys – 58%.</li> <li>Housing Applications and social/medical applications – 21%.</li> <li>Grasscutting – 5%.</li> <li>Finance issues – 4%.</li> <li>Homelessness – 4%.</li> <li>Environment (street lighting, pavements, neighbourhood disputes) – 3%.</li> <li>Tenancy issues (terminating tenancy, mutual exchange etc) – 2%.</li> <li>Right to Buy – 2%.</li> <li>Legal issues – 1%.</li> <li>Garage lets – 1%.</li> </ul>	<p>A separate review of technical and repairs service was underway during the audit period which recommended changes to the repairs reporting and information service. Advice and information relevant to repairs will be incorporated in to future updates to this strategy once the outcomes and any changes from the review have been implemented.</p> <p>Ensure information on these subjects is readily available and included within the strategy.</p>
Local Agencies audit	Questionnaires, visits to local offices and face-to-face interviews with a wide range of local service providers, voluntary and statutory agencies.	<p><b>Types</b> of housing information external agencies would find useful:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contact details/direct dial numbers for Housing staff – 30%.</li> <li>Homelessness – 20%.</li> <li>Housing Options – 10%.</li> <li>Allocation Policy – 10%.</li> <li>Noise Pollution – 10%.</li> <li>Anti Social Behaviour – 10%.</li> <li>Life skills (paying bills, claiming benefit etc) – 5%.</li> <li>Reporting Repairs – 5%.</li> </ul>	<p>Review the publicity of housing service and contact details.</p> <p>Ensure information on these subjects is readily available.</p>

		<p><b>Most Useful format</b> for receiving housing information:</p> <p>Leaflet – 50%.  Small information cards – 17%.  Fact Sheets – 17%.  Internet – 11%.  Posters – 5%.</p>	Agree methods of advice and information delivery
Housing Surveys	Review relevant information from existing housing questionnaires (homelessness, tenant satisfaction, housing applications, housing internet).	<p><b>Key findings from housing surveys:</b></p> <p>Satisfaction levels with advice and information received are high overall.  Need for improved Housing Officer contact details.  Need to improve record of information given at homeless interview.</p>	Consider at option appraisal.
Policy and Strategy review	Housing Policy Guidance Note 21. LHS ADP. Homeless Strategy.	<p><b>Housing Policy Guidance Note 21 – Updating Publicity and Information Materials.</b></p> <p>Methods of checking and updating publicity and information used in the housing service. Includes internet pages, posters and leaflets.</p>	Use PGN21 as an operational tool to ensure the range of information resources to be updated, checked and distributed by the SIC are communicated to the relevant agencies.
Regulation and Inspection	Communities Scotland's Regulation and Inspection carried out during 2007.	<p><b>Comments from Inspection Report, December 2007.</b></p> <p>Structured training programme required to keep staff up to date in housing advice and information is required (ref 6.12).  Strategic approach to housing advice and information required (ref 6.16).  Examples of positive practice include using the internet to provide information to Shetland's remote communities, public access PCs and the Housing Options Guide (ref Appendix 2).</p>	Use Homepoint National Standards as the recommended training programme to ensure staff are fully trained and informed of the appropriate standards.

Following analysis of the housing information audit, a range of themes and options emerged, which were then taken through an option appraisal process by the Housing Advice and information Subgroup. These formed the Action Plan which is attached as **Appendix 1**.

## 7. Aims of the Housing Advice and information Strategy

As part of the strategic development, the multi agency subgroup developed aims that the strategy should strive to achieve. These were agreed as:

- Meet legislative requirements to provide advice and information services.
- Improve the delivery of quality housing advice and information.
- Improve access to quality housing advice and information.
- Achieve agreed quality standards for providing housing advice and information.
- Improve communication and joint working arrangements with other providers.
- Effectively record and monitor provision.

## 8. Quality Standard Principles

In order to achieve a high standard of housing advice and information, we have defined quality standard principles that partners have signed up to. These demonstrate how we aim to ensure high standards across all partner agencies involved in providing housing advice and information.

We will **listen** to our clients and respect the principles of **confidentiality**.

We will **provide information** that is tailored to an **individual's needs**, taking into account the most convenient routes to **access services**.

We will promote a sense of **respect** and **empowerment** and our services will be **impartial** and **non judgemental**.

## 9. How we will achieve these aims

Our action plan (**Appendix 1**) provides full details of the aims and the actions we will take to help achieve these aims. The monitoring of this action plan will help us to measure the changes we are making and demonstrate the accomplishment of our aims.

## 10. Key Sources of Housing Advice and information

There are a range of key sources of housing advice and information in use, and these will be actively promoted as part of the strategy implementation (more details in the Action Plan at **Appendix 1**).

Levels of internet use in Shetland are generally higher than the Scottish average. The Scottish Household Survey<sup>1</sup> finds 52% of households in Shetland have access to the internet at home, compared to a 44% Scottish average. Shetland's Your Voice<sup>2</sup> survey recorded 82% of respondents locally who have access to a personal computer at home.

Shetland's unique geography and dispersed rural and island communities lend themselves to the use of the Internet as a preferred means of distributing up to date information, available for access throughout Shetland at any time.

We will promote the Internet as a method of ensuring up to date housing information is accessed. To support this, public access PC's are provided at the offices of SIC Housing, the Shetland Tenants Forum and at Hjaltland Housing Association. This means that the latest information from the Internet can be accessed at a range of locations and through local support networks and partner agencies.

Of course, we recognise the internet is only one method of providing housing information, and to ensure an equitable level of access, we also provide information in other formats and our action plan details new formats we are looking to investigate.

As we implement this strategy we are aware that information gaps will be identified, and all partners are committed to taking steps to rectify these as quickly as possible.

The key sources of housing advice and information to be promoted are outlined in **Appendix 3**.

## 11. Access for All

To ensure the success of delivering housing advice and information, it is essential that we provide a range of format and delivery options that suit a wide range of preferences and requirements.

We recognise the importance of having staff in partner agencies that can provide a broad range of assistance. They can access information on behalf of a client, print or explain leaflets or arrange specialist support to meet particular language or access needs.

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Household Survey, 2005 data.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.shetland.gov.uk/consultation/documents/SpringReport2007.pdf>

Staff are empowered to assist clients and arrange access to other services on an individual basis, with the aim of ensuring the particular needs of each client are met to the best ability of each agency.

## **12. Links with Other Relevant Policies and Strategies**

The Local Housing Strategy (LHS) is the overarching housing strategy, that considers how the local housing system operates, and how, with partners we want to improve housing across all tenures over a 5-year period. The first LHS was produced in 2005 and an updated version will be created in 2009.

Other housing strategies currently exist that focus on particular housing related topics, including the Fuel Poverty Strategy, the Homeless Strategy, the Tenant Participation Strategy and the Supporting People Strategy.

All housing strategies will be subsumed in to the future LHS. Providing good quality advice and information is a key part of all housing strategies, and we will work to ensure good links between all relevant strategies and policies are maintained.

## **13. Best Value**

Local Authorities are required to secure best value under the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, and Local Authorities must ensure continuous improvement in their general performance. This strategy will help to deliver best value in housing advice and information by raising the quality and consistency of housing advice and information and ensuring this is available from partners in a range of accessible formats.

## **14. Consultation**

The Local Authority Housing Service has in place a number of established consultation methods including an annual survey schedule that engages all client groups. The wide distribution of these surveys will ensure clients of all partner agencies have an opportunity to be involved.

The subgroup who developed the Strategy have consulted with the overarching multi-agency Housing Strategies Steering Group, the Council's Services Committee and Shetland Islands Council.

## **15. Monitoring and Review**

The multi agency partner subgroup that developed the strategy will continue to monitor its success through the Action Plan. Progress will be reported to the multi agency Housing Strategies Steering Group and onwards to the Housing Advice and information subgroup.

## **16. Timescale**

This strategy covers a three year period, 2009-2012, and will be reviewed annually within this timeframe.

## **17. Action Plan**

The actions that we will take in the first year of this Strategy (2009/10) are attached as **Appendix 1**. Future action plans will be produced annually and will be published online.

## **17. List of Appendices**

- Appendix 1 Housing Advice and information Strategy Action Plan.
- Appendix 2 Homeless Persons Advice and Assistance Regulations.
- Appendix 3 Key Sources of Advice and information - Shetland Islands Council Housing Service Policy Guidance Note 21.