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Housing Service

# Housing Options Policy

<b>Responsible Officer:</b>	Team Leader – Housing Management
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# Introduction

This policy document will detail how the national strategy of 'A Housing Options approach' will be delivered in Shetland, taking into account legislative requirements, the local housing market and effective partnership working.

A 'Housing Options' ethos evolved, on a National level, as Local Authorities considered ways in which to reduce homelessness, and meet the 2012 target, as laid down in statute under the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003. The legislation gave a commitment that all unintentional homeless applicants would be entitled to settled accommodation after 31st December 2012.

As a commitment to the implementation of 'Housing Options', the Scottish Government provided funding for 5 Geographic 'HUBS' to be created. Shetland is a member of the North & Island HUB, along with Orkney, Western Isles, Highland, Moray, Aberdeen City & Aberdeenshire Council. This forum provides an opportunity to share good practice, commission training, benchmark, and offer mutual support in the delivery of a successful Housing Options model.

Furthermore, the Scottish Housing Regulator commissioned a report into the effective delivery of Housing Options, and the relationship between Options and Homelessness. One of the key recommendations of the 'Housing Options in Scotland –A Thematic Inquiry' (2014) was the publication of Housing Options Guidance.

This guidance was subsequently produced, and then published in March 2016, and will form the backbone for not only this Policy, but also the manner in which Housing Options is delivered in Shetland.

## Policy Objectives

To provide a non-judgemental, professional, open, transparent housing advice service, where individuals are empowered to make informed choices and take ownership of their housing journey. This policy will support the objectives of the Local Housing Strategy, as detailed below:

'A choice of affordable housing options across all tenures that are warm & safe, energy efficient and in keeping with the Shetland environment, of good quality and in good repair, able to meet demand and the particular needs of households in inclusive and vibrant communities.' Shetland Islands Council Local Housing Strategy 2011 – 2016.

# Legislative framework & key National Documents

Housing (Scotland) Act 1987  
Housing (Scotland) Act 2001  
Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003  
Housing (Scotland) Act 2010  
Housing Options in Scotland – A Thematic Inquiry (Scottish Housing Regulator, 2014)  
Housing Options Guidance 2016  
The code of guidance on homelessness  
Scottish National Standards for information and advice providers - A Quality Assurance Framework 2009

## Links to other SIC Policies

Allocation Policy OP1  
Customer Service Standards OP3  
Customer Complaints OP4  
Homeless Policy OP5  
Prevention of Homelessness Policy OP7  
Tenancy Management Policy OP15  
Rent Recovery Policy OP17

All these Policies can be accessed at the Council's [Policy and Strategy Register](#).

## What is Housing Options?

The Housing Options Guidance offers the following explanation as to what Housing Options actually is:

‘a process which starts with housing advice when someone approaches a local authority with a housing problem. This means looking at an individual’s options and choices in the widest sense. This approach features early intervention and explores all possible tenure options, including council housing, Registered Social Landlords and the private rented sector.’

The advice can also cover personal circumstances that may not necessarily be housing related, such as debt advice, mediation and mental health issues. Rather than only accepting a homelessness application, local authority homelessness services will work together with other services such as employability, mental health, money advice and family mediation services, etc, to assist the individual with issues from an early stage in the hope of avoiding a housing crisis.’ (Scottish Government, Housing Options Guidance, 2016, p6).

# Who can receive Housing Options in Shetland?

In line with the Scottish Government definition, anyone approaching our Service with a Housing need can be eligible for a housing options interview. We have a duty Housing Officer available Monday to Friday, 9.00am – 5pm. If you are a tenant, or have a live housing application, you will have an assigned Housing Officer, and they will conduct an interview at a mutually agreeable time.

The options and advice will vary, depending on an individual's circumstances. Whilst the advice is tailored to individuals, there is recognition that there are groups who may receive advice that is more specific:

- Care Leavers
- Prison Leavers
- Elderly
- Under 25's

## What you can expect from a Housing Options Interview?

- A person-centred, outcome focussed approach, focussing on the wishes of the applicant
- A clear and structured interview
- An opportunity to bring along a friend or an advocate
- Good quality, consistent housing advice, setting out an applicant's options, including next steps
- Appropriate sign-posting and referrals to relevant agencies

All applicants will be given the time and space to discuss their housing need in a safe and confidential environment.

Housing Officers will walk through an assessment form with the applicant, collecting as much relevant information as possible. The information gathered will be used to help provide appropriate advice and guidance to support the applicant.

The applicant should come out of the interview with a clear understanding of their personal housing options. The Housing Officer will agree an action plan, and make a copy available to the applicant.

All interviews will be recorded using our Housing Management System, and will remain active whilst work is ongoing. Applicants will be provided with advice, as shown in the examples below:

- Short, medium and long term housing aspirations

- Support in liaising with landlords
- Support in accessing the private rented sector
- Support and advice on tenure rights, including any legal action by landlords
- Sign-posting to supporting agencies
- Information on rights under homeless legislation
- Support to submit a social housing application form

## Case closure

The Housing Service will close housing options cases, in the following circumstances:

- Where the enquiry has been dealt with, and all actions complete
- When a decision has been made in line with homeless legislation (housing advice to attain settled accommodation will continue whilst there is a live homeless application)
- Where there has been a significant change in circumstances, or change of address
- When there has been no contact with the applicant for a period of at least 2 months

On closing a case, the Housing Service will write out to the last known address to confirm the case has been closed, and to confirm the Housing Service will always be available for future advice.

## The Principles of Housing Options in Shetland

The Housing Options Guidance identified 13 defining principles that should be evident in a housing options approach. Each principle is noted below along with some local context.

### Appropriate links between Housing Options & Homelessness

Staff have extensive training and experience in homeless legislation, and will always advise someone if they could be considered as homeless in line with legislation. The decision to proceed to this assessment will always rest with the applicant, and they will never be dissuaded from doing so. Such is the size of the team, the same Officers will complete both Housing Options & homelessness interviews, ensuring a clear and consistent approach.

## **A supportive organisational culture**

Through existing policies, committee reports and multi-agency protocols, there is a genuine 'golden thread' to ensure the responsibility for sustainable housing options in Shetland does not rest solely with the Housing Service.

## **Robust policies and procedures**

This Housing Options policy will be supplemented with substantial staff guidance to ensure the service delivered to applicants is fair, consistent and person-centred. As with all Housing Service policies, there will be regular policy reviews and updates, as legislation and guidance evolves.

## **A well-trained workforce**

In addition to comprehensive inductions and internal training, all Housing Officers delivering the Housing Options Service complete Shelter Scotland's 'Housing Law Advice – Casework' distance learning module. This training equips Officers in the following five areas:

Housing issues  
Security of Tenure  
Homelessness  
Housing & Disrepair  
Finance

As a member of the North & Island Hub, Officers will benefit from the Housing Options Training Toolkit, a resource developed and used by every local authority in Scotland. The following six broad areas will be included as part of the toolkit:

- Introduction to Housing Options
- Accessing Accommodation
- Maintaining existing accommodation
- Health & wellbeing
- Income & affordability
- Employment, training & volunteering

## **Effective partnership working**

The Housing service will work in collaboration with a number of partner agencies to ensure outcomes are bespoke to the individual, even where there is no direct link to Housing. The following agencies frequently work in partnership with the Housing Service:

Housing Support Shetland  
Occupational Therapy – assessments to maintain independence in the home  
Family Mediation Shetland  
Community Mediation  
Citizens Advice Bureau  
Social Work  
Children’s Services  
Hjaltland Housing Association  
Shetland Befriending Service  
Substance Misuse Recovery Service  
Community Mental Health Team  
Environmental Health  
Salvation Army

## **High standards of Customer Service**

### [Housing Policies](#)

Reiterate the desire to be an approachable, available service where there is a strong, trusting relationship between Housing Officer and applicant.

## **Preventative services**

By working in partnership with the agencies listed above, the ability to prevent situations reaching crisis point should be maximised. Through Housing Options interviews, Officers will be able to complete an options appraisal, bespoke to the individual, which should enhance prevention of homelessness.

## **Person-centred services**

Housing Officers will not guide applicants down a certain route, but will be clear in setting out options, and the associated implications for each. The advice will not benefit the service, but focus solely on improving the lives and living conditions of the applicant. The Housing Service will follow up all Housing Options Interviews with a ‘this is what we discussed’ letter, detailing the options discussed.



## **Holistic services**

Through Housing Options Interviews and Housing Support Assessments, the greater needs of the applicant will be considered, in recognition that a Housing need rarely sits in isolation. The Understanding You and GIRFEC processes, of which the Housing Service is involved, will ensure the overall needs of the applicant is considered.

## **Tenure-neutral services**

The Housing Service will offer Housing Options interviews across all tenure types. It is important to acknowledge any applicant could be at risk of homelessness, including owner-occupiers, and this is where early intervention could make a real difference in outcomes for applicants. Providing a service across all tenures is especially important in sensitive cases, such as domestic abuse and harassment.

## **Links with Housing Support**

Housing Support Shetland is based within the Housing Service, and there is therefore a strong working partnership, which is very accessible. Whilst there is a statutory duty to provide Housing Support to unintentional homeless applicants, there is a recognition those threatened with homelessness may also benefit from this support. Housing Support Shetland will accept referrals for anyone who may be at some risk of homelessness, and will then provide a short-term intervention service to assist the applicant where they can.

## **Fully Auditable record-keeping**

All Housing Options Interviews are recorded in a standard application form, and then replicated in electronic form on our Housing Management System. The data collected is then used to provide statistical analysis for the Scottish Government. All applicants will receive a summary of their housing options interview, and be provided with an action plan to assist them in meeting their own housing aspirations.

## **Appropriate performance indicators**

National statistics are collated on a quarterly basis, and the annual report on housing options outcomes will form part of the performance analysis. Whilst it is important to ensure reducing homeless presentation figures does not always equate to successful housing options interviews, the number of those presenting as homeless will be monitored.

For further information please contact us at:

Shetland Islands Council  
Development Services  
Housing  
8 North Ness Business Park  
Lerwick

Telephone: 01595 744360  
Freephone: 0800 212 829  
Fax: 01595 744395

Our office is open  
Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm  
We are open during lunchtimes

In an emergency out with office hours please contact:

Homelessness: 01595 695611  
Council House Repairs: 01595 693972

Available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year

Email: [housing@shetland.gov.uk](mailto:housing@shetland.gov.uk)  
Website: [www.shetland.gov.uk/housing](http://www.shetland.gov.uk/housing)

Information on the various housing options available in Shetland can be found online in the Housing Options Guide at [www.shetland.gov.uk/housing-options](http://www.shetland.gov.uk/housing-options).

This Policy and other housing information can, on request, be made available in Braille, on tape, in large print and in different languages. For further information please telephone Housing on 01595 744360, or email [housing@shetland.gov.uk](mailto:housing@shetland.gov.uk).