# Housing Options Guidance

**March 2016**

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# ANNEXES

# FOREWORD

In 2014, the Scottish Housing Regulator published its report; a thematic inquiry into the delivery of Housing Options in Scotland's local authorities. It made a number of key recommendations, one of which was that "the Scottish Government should provide enhanced guidance for local authorities on the delivery of Housing Options".

A number of local authorities had already been aware of, and been positively responding to, the need for Guidance. Encouraged further by the Regulator's findings, the Homelessness Prevention and Strategy Group (HPSG) formed a Housing Options Guidance Group to develop this Guidance.

The Guidance has been developed in consultation with COSLA, SOLACE, SFHA, ALACHO, Shelter Scotland and Homeless Action Scotland as members of HPSG. Together with the Scottish Government, COSLA and ALACHO, the Housing Options Guidance Group was joined by seven local authorities: Highland; North Ayrshire; North Lanarkshire; Perth and Kinross; Renfrewshire; Falkirk; and South Lanarkshire Councils and Scotland's Housing Network. I would like to thank all members of HPSG and the Housing Options Guidance Group for their joint work, partnership approach and determination in bringing this guidance to fruition.

I very much welcome this and believe this Guidance will be an invaluable tool for all local authority staff, including elected members. It also presents an opportunity to influence the culture of the whole organisation, not solely that of Housing Services. The Guidance has been enhanced further by the development of a training toolkit, which aims to complement and support much of the content. I would like to thank West of Scotland's Housing Options Hub for its unwavering commitment in pioneering such an invaluable tool and to the remaining Housing Options Hubs: South-West Hub; Tayside, Central and Fife Hub; East Hub; and North Hub for supporting and contributing to its development.

After a comprehensive process of consultation with local authorities, housing associations and voluntary sector organisations, the Scottish Government and COSLA are delighted to publish this Guidance to support the further development and embedding of Housing Options services in Scotland's local authorities and other relevant organisations.

**Margaret Burgess**
**Minister for Housing & Welfare**

I am very pleased to welcome this important Guidance on Housing Options which I hope will drive improvement in delivery across all local authorities in Scotland. Housing Options is about looking at an individual's options and choices in the widest sense and may involve exploring all possible tenure options. It can also cover other aspects of an individual's circumstance that may not be housing related but could impinge upon that individual's options in terms of access to housing which meets their needs.

Housing Options is also about intervening early and working closely with all relevant services which will assist individuals in their housing situation. It is a service which should be available to all who require it. Delivered effectively, Housing Options can help to avoid crises and prevent homelessness.

On behalf of COSLA, I would like to recognise and record my appreciation of the substantial efforts of all those who collaborated in the working group to produce this Guidance including officers from Scottish Government, COSLA, ALACHO, local authorities and Scotland's Housing Network. Thanks are also due to the West of Scotland Housing Options Hub for their invaluable work in developing a Training Toolkit which will support and complement this Guidance and also to the other Hubs who have supported this important work.

How Housing Options is delivered may differ from one local authority area to another, reflecting local circumstances, but in every area it should follow common core principles and practices. This Guidance is intended to reinforce those principles and effective practices and embed them across all levels in local authorities.

I am very happy to commend this Guidance to all local authorities, whom I hope will use it and the Training Toolkit to develop and improve the effectiveness and outcomes of their delivery of Housing Options.

**Cllr. Harry McGuigan**
**COSLA Spokesperson for Community Well Being**

## THE PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE HOUSING OPTIONS SERVICES

The Housing (Scotland) Act 1987, as amended, the homelessness legislation, provides the legal framework for homelessness and gives rights to homeless people and places duties on local authorities. The Code of Guidance on Homelessness is a statutory code issued by Ministers 'in relation to homeless persons and persons threatened with homelessness, a relevant authority shall have regard in the exercise of their functions to such guidance, Housing (Scotland) Act, s37(1). This Housing Options Guidance has not been issued as statutory guidance but is to be used as a tool for local authorities when developing their approach to Housing Options. It has no effect on the status of the legislation or the Code.

The Scottish National Standards for Information and Advice Providers continue to be the standards to which all advice must be given. This guidance does not change the role or status of the National Standards.

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Housing Options 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, RSL's and the private rented sector.

"The advice can also cover personal circumstances which 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).

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The detailed delivery of Housing Options is dependent on local circumstances. How Housing Options is delivered will legitimately differ from one local authority area to another. However, Housing Options should be founded on a number of principles that are common to its delivery throughout Scotland's local authorities. This Guidance is about those common principles and the overarching framework of Housing Options delivery.

The common principles on which all Housing Options service delivery are founded are:

**Appropriate Links between Housing Options and Homelessness**

The statutory right to make a homelessness application is unaffected by Housing Options. The local authority's homelessness duties are not diminished or undermined by Housing Options. If the local authority has reason to believe that an applicant is homeless or threatened with homelessness, they must conduct appropriate enquiries. This Guidance indicates how homelessness rights are maintained whilst

Options approaches are being explored, through robust record-keeping, monitoring of activities and outcomes and audit practice.

**A Supportive Organisational Culture**

The effective delivery of Housing Options is dependent on a supportive, reinforcing organisational culture. It is important that the whole local authority (elected members, senior managers, and frontline managers and team members) is engaged in this culture; this is referred to as the 'golden thread' of Housing Options delivery, and shows that it is not just the remit of housing services. The embedding of an Options culture is supported through appropriate training and development at all levels of the council, robust policies and procedures and appropriate performance management and reporting.

**Robust Policies and Procedures**

Effective Housing Options requires to be underpinned by robust and clear policies and procedures. Policy development will require to be done alongside the review and amendment of relevant existing policies and procedures where necessary, thus ensuring cohesion.

**A Well-Trained Workforce**

The success of Housing Options will be determined by investment in the knowledge, skills and understanding of not only officers delivering the service, but also managers and elected members. Led by the West of Scotland Housing Options Hub, a comprehensive Housing Options Training Toolkit of six modules has been developed to equip Housing Options teams with the required knowledge, skills and attitudes.

**Effective Partnership Working**

Staff responsible for Housing Options are required to advise on a broad range of housing issues, in addition to personal circumstances, healthcare, employment, education, personal income, etc. Collaborative working with internal council departments, health, Police Scotland, in addition to a host of private and voluntary sector organisations is therefore necessary in order that high quality advice and effective referral pathways are available. Housing Options teams should identify these resources, develop and maintain positive relationships and agree effective referral protocol arrangements.

**High Standards of Customer Service**

Housing Options should be delivered to high standards of customer satisfaction. Clear sets of service standards should be agreed and published. Attention should be given to the length of time that customers are required to wait prior to an Options interview or for the provision of follow-up services following an interview. Advice and information provided should be of a high-quality and attention should be paid to providing advice in formats that are accessible to the customer. Housing Options services should be subject to customer satisfaction surveying, at least to the same extent as other service provision.

## Preventative Services

The delivery of an effective Housing Options service is dependent on the ability of statutory and third sector organisations to recognise housing need and the potential difficulties being faced by individuals. It is also dependent on their ability to intervene at the earliest opportunity in order to avert crisis. It is in recognising that the issues that lead to homelessness are rarely solely about housing but rather a range of issues which impact on the individual's ability to either sustain or access accommodation. With sufficiently early intervention, it may be possible to support a customer to continue living in their current home. This option must only be pursued in situations in which there is full confidence, following a risk assessment process, that the customer will not be in danger by remaining there.

## Person-Centred Services

The starting point for the delivery of Housing Options services is customers' rights, needs and aspirations, as well as the local authorities' duties towards them. Whatever housing options are eventually pursued, this decision must be made by the customer, fully informed and fully supported by the Housing Options adviser.

## Holistic Services

Housing Options is about the delivery of sustainable housing outcomes. In order to deliver housing solutions, Housing Options must consider far more than just the housing needs of the customer. The sustainability of a housing outcome may require the input of other services to address wider issues such as health, or employment, or the development of independent living skills. Therefore the Housing Options service must consider and address all the relevant needs of the customer.

## Tenure-Neutral Services

Housing Options is holistic and comprehensive. It considers, advises on and supports the delivery of sustainable housing solutions in any sector: social renting; private renting; or home ownership dependent on the customer's circumstances.

## Links with Housing Support

Local authorities have a statutory duty to ensure homeless persons' support needs are met. This statutory duty does not extend to customers of Housing Options services who are not homeless. However, the successful application of Housing Options will often require an assessment for and the provision of housing support. It is good practice to respond to the support needs of a customer regardless of their statutory homelessness status.

**Fully Auditable Record-Keeping**

Housing Options must be underpinned by comprehensive and accurate record-keeping. This is important for the local authority but also for the customer in order that they are wholly aware of their full range of housing options. In particular, accurate record-keeping must evidence that the application of Housing Options approaches has not in any way undermined a customer's statutory homelessness rights. The use of mandates can be useful in such circumstances but must be used appropriately.

**Appropriate Performance Indicators**

The performance management of Housing Options services should focus on appropriate targets. For example, the delivery of sustainable housing solutions would be an appropriate performance indicator. Reducing levels of homelessness applications would not be an appropriate target and must not be applied as a measure in isolation of other contextual measures. Homeless applications may indeed increase as a result of the application of a Housing Options approach as more customers become better informed about their statutory homelessness rights.

# 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This Guidance has been published by the Scottish Government and COSLA in order to support the development of Housing Options approaches in Scotland's local authorities.

## 1.1 What is Housing Options?

1. Statutorily, Housing Options is regarded as providing advice under section 2 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. This states that:

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

2. The history of Housing Options has been an evolving story. Some Scottish local authorities have been early adopters leading the way. Housing Options is not an entirely new service. It is a successor to homelessness prevention and housing advice services within local authorities. The Options approach may have been introduced by local authorities over a number of years in an informal manner by staff learning of approaches being successfully adopted in other authorities and then trying them out in their own casework. Options has been adopted throughout Scotland's local authorities on an evolving basis rather than with a 'big bang'.

3. Housing advice and Housing Options are different in at least two key aspects:

   - the delivery of Housing Options is person-centred, i.e. it starts with, and is uniquely tailored to, the individual customer;
   - in particular, Housing Options is a holistic service. Facilitating a sustainable housing solution may require support other than the provision of decent housing. This may include focussing on employment support, support with educational needs, or addressing physical and mental health needs.

4. Housing Options services are, by their nature, diverse, but will commonly include the following:

   - housing advice;
   - health advice;
   - advice on aids and adaptations;
   - financial inclusion;
   - budget management support; and
   - employability support

   Examples of Housing Options services are discussed at section 3.8.

**1.2 Who is this Guidance for?**

1. Effective Housing Options services need to be embraced by the whole local authority, in order to successfully prevent homelessness and address broader housing needs. Staff working at the frontline, meeting customers and giving housing advice on a daily basis, will need a thorough and comprehensive knowledge of Housing Options approaches. Local authority senior managers will need to have an awareness of Housing Options and their role in meeting housing need to enable them to support frontline teams, to provide staff training and other necessary resources, to monitor service outcomes and to develop and maintain relationships with essential partner organisations. Regular reports should be made to the appropriate local authority committee, or other relevant committee, on the performance and outcomes of Housing Options and its role in addressing housing need.

2. This Guidance has been developed in order to support the development and embedding of Housing Options at all levels of local authorities. An effective Housing Options approach will be characterised by a 'golden thread' where there exists an understanding of Housing Options policy and practice and a consistency of approach from the frontline to the leadership of the local authority.

3. Housing Options might also be delivered by housing associations or voluntary sector organisations. Many housing associations are already known to be adopting this approach to their housing advice work. Although written specifically for Scottish local authorities, other organisations will find much of interest in this Guidance to support the development and implementation of these approaches within their own organisations and to better understand the practice as delivered by local authorities.

4. Most importantly of all, it is essential that the customer knows what a Housing Options approach entails, and what s/he can expect as a result of engaging with a Housing Options service. Although written specifically for the staff, managers and elected members of local authorities, this Guidance should be helpful in supporting the development of consumer guidance on Housing Options by local authorities and other agencies with an interest in housing advice.

**1.3 The Purpose of the Guidance**

1. Housing circumstances vary radically across Scotland, in terms of the characteristics of demand and housing markets. It would not be desirable to have a single unitary Housing Options service that could be applied universally throughout Scotland. Housing Options services require to reflect local circumstances.

2. This Guidance therefore is not prescriptive as to the detail of Housing Options services and how they should be delivered. These details need to be decided locally in response to local circumstances.

3. This Guidance seeks to establish the **principles** on which any effective Housing Options service should be based and the outcomes that any Options service should be seeking to achieve. It explains how Options should relate to other services, for example, homelessness and housing support and the range of advice that might be expected to be offered. It is intended to support the effective management of Housing Options delivery within local authorities.

4. A local authority should seek to establish that in its management and delivery of Housing Options, it is meeting and incorporating these principles. The detail of how services are delivered locally should be built on these principles and compliance measured through a self assessment audit framework.

5. The Scottish Government has expressed its intention that this Guidance will be reviewed annually.

**1.4 Structure of the Guidance**

1. The Guidance has three main sections: **Strategic**; **Operational**; and **Performance Management**.

2. The Strategic section is designed for elected members and senior managers to develop a good understanding of where Housing Options sits in relation to other local authority services. It identifies the support and leadership required from councillors and senior managers in order to ensure that Options services are effectively delivered and it establishes the core principles on which Options should be based.

3. The Operational section is aimed at the staff and managers of frontline delivery teams. It explores the specifics of Options service delivery, the broad characteristics of potential client groups, the range of options that should be available to clients, practical links with other services and the training that frontline staff will need in order to be able to deliver a comprehensive Options service.

4. Finally, there is a brief section on performance management, exploring how the outcomes of Options services should be measured, how continuous improvement should be embedded into monitoring and reporting activities and how this might be achieved in practice.

5. Whilst all local authority staff and elected members would benefit from a holistic understanding of the delivery of Housing Options throughout their organisation and would gain from absorbing all sections of this Guidance, it is recognised that there are time pressures in the real world. Therefore, each section has been designed to be used independently of the rest of the document, useful in its own right to the specific group of local authority members and/or staff for which it has been primarily been written.

6. At the end of each section is a **checklist**. These checklists are designed for the team manager or Options services delivery team members to work through as a self assessment exercise. They are as much to prompt consideration of an aspect of Housing Options service management and/or delivery as they are to generate 'hard' numeric answers. The process of self assessment will identify strengths and weaknesses in the planning, management or delivery of services. It will identify areas where there is a need for service improvement planning including the delivery of further staff training.

 Sitting alongside this guidance will be a detailed Training Toolkit which will cover everything staff need to know in undertaking a Housing Options role. There are references at various points throughout this Guidance to modules of the Training Toolkit where further information can be found. Look for this symbol.

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## 2.0   STRATEGIC

**2.1 Introduction**

1.  In order to deliver successful Housing Options, all tiers of management must be engaged in the process, with the culture and strategic direction being set by elected members and embraced across the entire organisation.

2.  This section is designed primarily for senior managers and elected members within Scottish local authorities, to appreciate their role in implementing the necessary ethos, values and principles needed in order to embed an effective Options approach within their organisation.

3.  This section highlights the essential elements that senior managers and elected members will have to consider and action in order for Options activities to be effective in addressing the needs of customers. This section covers:

    - links between Housing Options and local authorities' homelessness duties;
    - the principles of Housing Options, prevention and person-centred provision, and their fit with broader public sector approaches;
    - the performance management of Options;
    - the importance of committing to training and development; and
    - demonstrating commitment through robust policy and procedure documents.

**2.2 The Relationship between Housing Options and Homelessness Duties**

1.  In Scotland, local authorities must offer all unintentionally homeless people settled accommodation. The [Housing (Scotland) Act 1987](#), as amended, specifies the circumstances by which an individual is deemed to be homeless or threatened with homelessness and the duties that exist towards the homeless household.

2.  [Section 2 of the 2001 Housing (Scotland) Act](#) further requires that every local authority must ensure 'that advice and information about:

    (a) homelessness and the prevention of homelessness, and

    (b) any services which may assist a homeless person or assist in the prevention of homelessness,

    is available free of charge to any person in the local authority's area'.

3. Whilst the provision of Housing Options advice may prevent homelessness, Housing Options is broader than just a prevention tool. Options approaches and homelessness are related, but are not different aspects of the same thing and an Options approach is not necessarily a response to homelessness, for example:

- Housing Options may provide a **support and guide** to the statutory homelessness application: a person may be given advice on homelessness as part of a Housing Options interview, including how to make a homelessness application and what actions would be likely to follow;
- alternatively, Housing Options may provide a **broader range of alternative solutions** for those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness:  a homeless applicant can continue to consider their housing options for the duration of their homelessness and may at any time select an alternative option where the customer believes it best meets their housing need. An application made under homelessness legislation can be withdrawn at any stage and this may be an acceptable outcome;
- at times, Housing Options will provide an **up-stream preventative service** which stops a threat of homelessness from developing in the first place. For example, a customer experiencing difficulty in meeting their housing costs may be supported through money advice and energy efficiency advice to maximise their income and reduce their outgoings such that they can continue to afford their existing home.

## 2.3 A Focus on Prevention

1. In 2005/6, 60,662 homeless applications were made to Scottish local authorities, compared to 40,936 ten years earlier, a 48% increase. During the same period, the total supply of socially rented homes (let by local authorities and housing associations) fell from 767,000 to 613,000, a 25% fall.

2. The Scottish Government made a commitment in the [Homelessness Etc. (Scotland) Act 2003](#) to abolish priority need by 31$^{st}$ December 2012, meaning that all unintentionally homeless persons, not just certain defined categories, would have a right to permanent settled accommodation.

3. The [2011 Scottish Government's Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services](#), or Christie Commission, recognised ever-increasing demands across a range of public services and recommended that as a principle the emphasis of approach should be on prevention of need wherever possible, whilst continuing to ensure that appropriate safety nets were in place for the vulnerable, rather than continually meeting ever-increasing demand borne out of crisis situations.

4. Since then, local authorities throughout Scotland have been encouraged and supported to adopt preventative approaches to service delivery. Housing Options represents the preventative approach applied in its most holistic manner to homelessness. Housing Options seeks to prevent homelessness by putting in place solutions upstream of an approach being made in crisis circumstances.

5. Housing Options is the meeting of demand by the local authority without necessarily providing a permanent solution from within the resources of the Council itself i.e. a Council or indeed other social rented home. Sometimes solutions can be found in supporting continued occupancy of the current home, thereby reducing demand on scarce resources, whilst at the same time resolving accommodation issues for those affected.

6. Local authorities are by now familiar with a preventative approach to meeting need within their areas across a range of service demands and the principle of prevention should be well-known and embedded across councils' services.

7. In meeting an individual's need for housing, one of the key principles of Housing Options is broader engagement and finding solutions with partner organisations, rather than simply relying on in-house finite resources. These partner organisations might be located in other sectors (public, voluntary or private) or indeed within the Council itself, in the shape of colleagues in social work, community education, employability and other teams. It is essential that Housing Options, whilst led by housing professionals, is not seen solely as the responsibility of housing professionals to deliver. Other relevant local authority departments must be positively supportive of and actively engaged in the identification, planning and delivery of Housing Options services. The introduction of Health and Social Care Partnerships from April 2015 offers particular opportunities for joint working and problem solving to the potential benefit of housing applicants, and this is covered later in this guidance.

**2.4 Housing Options' Place within the Strategic Framework of the Local Authority**

1. The culture necessary to support an effective Housing Options approach is reinforced and embedded by training and the provision of information at all levels within the organisation. It is supported by the reporting of relevant performance information at all tiers of the organisation, including with elected members, and a performance management structure that supports service improvement through the appropriate scrutiny of performance reporting. This is the 'golden thread' of accountability for Housing Options that should run throughout the local authority from the councillors and committee reports to the frontline delivery of housing advice.

2. Elsewhere in this Guidance (sections 3.2 and 4.0), there are examples of training and performance management frameworks which support the embedding of a Housing Options approach through engagement at all levels of the local authority. The key principle to note here is that in order for Housing Options to be delivered effectively, it is essential that it is planned and managed in a context of a supportive organisational culture, which preferably is publicly and demonstrably promoted and endorsed by the leadership of the local authority.

3.  Developing and refining Housing Options services is an ongoing activity. Currently, local authorities' Housing Options services are at different stages of development. For some, a fully-developed Options service is still an aspiration. It is essential that those authorities have a clear road map of how they will achieve their aspiration, who will be involved, what will be required of them and when will the ambition of a holistic service offering be achieved. Whether services are still in development, or they are being reviewed, the checklists at the end of each section should be particularly useful in supporting these activities.

## 2.5 Opportunities Presented by Health and Social Care Integration

1.  In April 2015, Integrated Joint Health and Social Care Boards were established throughout Scotland with the aim of maximising collaborative effort and resources towards shared challenges. By April 2016, these Integration Boards must have agreed and begun to implement the planning and delivery of integrated services. These Joint Boards will have some housing related responsibilities, the provision of aids and adaptations as a minimum, but Boards may also choose to take responsibility for housing support and even homelessness services themselves. In terms of social care, the Integrated Boards will have responsibility for personal care and residential care.

2.  Integration will have a direct impact on the delivery of Housing Options. Whatever structures are adopted in different local authorities, and whatever functions it is decided to include in the scheme of integration, all the above functions are wholly relevant to the delivery of Housing Options.

3.  Housing needs are often compounded by circumstances relating to an individual's health and/or social care needs. The most recent release of the PREVENT1 data (referring to April 2014 to September 2015) has been published, where the Scottish Government monitors Housing Options activity. The underlying data for this period shows that, of those households who approached Housing Options Services, a fifth (20%) had a vulnerability of some kind. Of those approaches with a vulnerability, 19% had a mental health vulnerability. There were 12% reporting a drug or alcohol dependency; 14% reporting physical health issues, and 7% reporting an unmet need for housing/social work/health support.

4.  The links between health and homelessness have been understood for some time, as shown by the development of Health and Homelessness standards in 2005. This has recently had further analysis with research from the Scottish Public Health Network which has also confirmed the continuing extremely close relationship between homelessness, poor health and emergency admissions to hospital.

5.  Good working relationships between health and social care planners and providers, in the local authority, the health board and within the voluntary sector, are therefore essential to the effective provision of Housing Options. The scheme of integration will have a significant bearing on how good productive partnership working is planned and delivered.

6.  Good health and social care is central to the successful planning and delivery of Housing Options. The two must be closely related and must be planned and delivered in an integrated and coordinated fashion across local authority departments, and other partner organisations across the public, voluntary and private sectors. Advising on and providing appropriate aids and adaptations may lead to the continuing occupation of a home that would otherwise result in a housing need or, in extreme cases, homelessness. Similarly, accessing appropriate personal care may have a positive housing outcome. The provision of housing support, in all its broad range of forms, is critical to many customers being able to take on the responsibility of a home and being able to successfully sustain that home.

7.  A clear understanding of the division of responsibility for different levels of housing support is crucial to successful working relationships and housing outcomes. The practical integration of the roles of housing, social work and health is critical. Organisations and individuals need to be very clear who is responsible for what.

## 2.6 The Importance of Audit and Monitoring Practices

1.  The importance of Housing Options performance management reporting from the organisation's frontline to the council chamber is important in promoting a customer focussed, outcome led culture throughout the local authority that supports effective early intervention, prevention and joint working.

2.  It is essential that thorough records are kept of every customer dealt with through the Housing Options service, including records of every contact with customers, options considered, advice offered, decisions made and outcomes achieved, both short and long term. Self assessment and monitoring frameworks will be vital not only in demonstrating the effectiveness of a Housing Options approach over time but in protecting the rights of customers. This can support performance improvement and the planning of future services.

3. At the frontline, it is important for the individual officer to understand the impact of the services being delivered, including:

- there are no barriers to accessing Housing Options provision;
- people in housing need know how to access the service;
- customers are being helped effectively to resolve their housing need in a manner that is permanent and sustainable;
- services are being delivered effectively and efficiently;
- customers are satisfied with the services offered and the outcomes achieved; and
- customers know how to lodge a complaint should they not be satisfied and how any complaint will be resolved.

4. From a service planning point of view, it is also important to know the nature of housing needs that are being presented, the circumstances of households and the housing solutions that are working. This information should be reported at a relevant level of detail, collation and frequency throughout the organisation, up to committee level, to support performance improvement and strategic service planning activity. Choosing the right SMART indicators and collecting and reporting them at the right level of detail, frequency and complexity will be key to the successful embedding and continuous improvement of Housing Options service delivery

5. In order to verify the robustness of this performance reporting, it should also be supported by appropriate audit practices. Most high-performing local authorities will already have policies on audit practices and examples of robust self assessment checklists. The checking of performance data by an individual other than those with responsibility for the original data reporting is a critical element in producing data that is meaningful, reliable and trusted. Checks on an agreed proportion of data, file checks and follow-up interviews with Housing Options customers would all form part of a robust approach to the audit of data.

6. The above systems should be in place internally for the successful delivery and improvement of Housing Options services. There are also several external drivers of high quality data collection which will be helpful to local authorities in delivering continuous improvement.

7. The Scottish Government recently introduced the mandatory data return for Housing Options activity to be completed by local authorities, PREVENT1. The second tranche of data, covering the full year position for 2014/5, was published on 30 June 2015. A commitment has been made to a continuing regular publication of this data. As with all data sets, there are initial issues with interpretation and reporting, but, alongside the Government's monitoring of homelessness activity through its HL1 return, this will quickly become an invaluable resource in learning more about Housing Options activity and outcomes, and how this links with those looking for assistance via homelessness applications.

8.  The Scottish Housing Regulator is responsible for the monitoring and assessment of housing performance by Scotland's housing organisations. In its Scottish Social Housing Charter, the Government has specified the outcomes which the Regulator will regulate. Of the sixteen outcomes of the Charter, six are supported, if not delivered directly, by Housing Options. For example:

    '7.  people looking for housing get information that helps them make informed choices and decisions about the range of housing options available to them';

    and

    '12. homeless people get prompt and easy access to help and advice'.

9.  A significant milestone in the development of Housing Options services was the publication by the Regulator of their thematic study, *Housing Options in Scotland* in May 2014. In that report the Regulator raised a number of concerns relating to the practice and delivery of Housing Options services. This Guidance is one response to those concerns. Annex 1 contains the complete list of recommendations made in SHR's report and how they are addressed by this guidance. Alongside the Training Toolkit, this guidance should help ensure councils' Housing Options services are fit for purpose.

## 2.7 A Person-Centred Approach to Housing Options

There's more information about the skills necessary to deliver person-centred services in the Training Toolkit Module 1(6), Customer Empowerment and Delivering Person Centred Responses.

1.  Person-centred services place the customer central to decision-making about how the service they receive is designed and delivered. Originating from the perspective of people requiring support, this approach has now become broadly accepted throughout service delivery by local authorities and other public sector service bodies.

2.  Person-centred service delivery takes as a starting point the circumstances and needs of the individual. The first step is to achieve a comprehensive understanding of those circumstances and needs. Service provision is then tailored and delivered in such a way that is unique to that individual and their needs.

3. In a Housing Options context, this means that the customer is offered a broad and comprehensive range of options that represent genuine potential solutions to their specific housing need. The role of the service provider is to:

- provide the customer with their potential housing options;
- advise them of the benefits and drawbacks of each option; and then
- support them through the process of them taking the decision which they feel is right for them.

In a person-centred approach, the service provider does not simply make a decision for the customer. Ultimately that is their own responsibility, with appropriate support and with the underpinning of a rights-based homelessness service if that is the route the customer chooses.

4. A person-centred approach should result in positive outcomes for all concerned, not just the customer through achieving a sustainable outcome. Housing arrangements that are not sustained cause expense and upheaval for all parties. For a landlord, it causes the expense of preparing the property for re-let, the loss of rental income whilst the property is empty and the expense of securing another tenant. For the local authority housing service, it may result in added costs resulting from repeat approaches for advice and support, possibly a homelessness application under crisis circumstances with an unavoidable stay in expensive temporary accommodation. For the household, it can cause stress and upheaval, which will undoubtedly have a knock-on effect on health, educational attainment, employment sustainment and fracturing of social networks.

## 2.8 The Importance of Training and Development for Housing Options

1. Staff need to be adequately supported and trained to deliver an effective Housing Options service. The importance of high-quality staff development cannot be overestimated.

2. The areas of knowledge and expertise that may arise as part of an effective Housing Options conversation go beyond housing rights alone. If a staff member is adopting a person-centred approach, and the issue of a customer's mental health history arises, for example, in order to have a properly informed discussion around support, the staff member needs specific skills and attitudes in order to have that conversation in an effective manner.

 There's more information about the extensive communication skills necessary to successfully deliver a Housing Options interview in the Training Toolkit Module 1(4), Diagnostic Needs Assessment.

3. Local authorities must recognise that in order for their frontline staff and managers to embed the necessary culture and be successfully delivering Housing Options services, they are likely to require substantial investment in support and training.

4. The Scottish Government recognised this requirement from the outset and established and funded the five Housing Options Hubs from 2010 to identify challenges and to develop support resources and networking to support the introduction of Options approaches into Scotland's local authorities.

5. The training toolkit recognises and addresses in a structured and comprehensive manner the areas of competency needed on the part of frontline staff delivering Housing Options - see Section 3.2.

**2.9 The Importance of Clear Policies and Procedures Relating to Housing Options**

1. Given the largely incremental manner in which Housing Options has been adopted by local authorities, it is highly likely that only in some authorities will policies and procedures have maintained pace with these changes.

2. It is necessary for local authorities to develop and regularly review their Housing Options policies and procedures in line with the legislation, as well as local needs and demographics. Guidelines should include: why it has been developed; what is achieved by promoting a Housing Options approach; how its implementation and delivery is managed; and how its outcomes are recorded and reported.

3. Presenting Housing Options policies and procedures to the housing or other relevant committee ensures the appropriate corporate steer and ethos is shared across the entire organisation.

**Strategic - Checklist**

1. Housing Options services are delivered subject to a clear and robust set of policies and procedures.
2. All relevant staff, managers and elected members are clear about the links between Housing Options and homelessness and how these links operate in practice.
3. Housing Options services are focussed on as early intervention as possible and the prevention of housing crisis.
4. There is a demonstrable emphasis on the person-centred nature of Options service delivery.
5. Healthy, positive partnerships exist with relevant internal and external partners that support Options outcomes.
6. The opportunities to enhance Options outcomes through the integration of health and social care provision are recognised and maximised.
7. Appropriate training and development in Housing Options is accessed at all levels within the local authority, including by elected members.
8. Staff are aware of, and regularly benefit from, fully resourced training and development support for Options services.
9. Options performance data is reported appropriately at all levels of the local authority.
10. There is an emphasis on, and drive for, continuous improvement of Options services.
11. There are effective mechanisms in order for performance reporting to support service review and development.

## 3.0   OPERATIONAL

**3.1 Introduction**

1.  Whilst Options must be supported by the whole organisation, the service is delivered by frontline teams. This section is designed to support delivery of Housing Options in practice on a day-to-day basis.

2.  In this section, there is guidance on:

    *   relevant training to support frontline Options delivery;
    *   the practice interfaces between Housing Options and duties of homelessness and housing support assessment;
    *   ensuring that truly comprehensive Options services are being delivered to maximise the chances of delivering sustainable housing outcomes;
    *   ensuring that the needs of all client groups are being met;
    *   providing advice across all tenures;
    *   the development of mandates and pro-formas that support high-quality services.

3.  Teams and managers with responsibility for the provision of Housing Options advice should ensure that they have assessed their performance under these broad headings and that they are providing services of a high standard in all aspects.

**3.2 The Training Toolkit**

1.  A well-trained workforce is essential to the effective delivery of Housing Options services. Led by the West of Scotland Housing Options Hub, the Hubs have developed a Training Toolkit which addresses the core areas of training need arising from the delivery of a Housing Options approach.

2.  The Training Toolkit provides a range of training to address the needs of elected members through to frontline staff. The Toolkit is designed and structured to be used not only for local authority staff but to address the development needs of other stakeholders with an interest in Housing Options. The toolkit has six modules which demonstrate the breadth of knowledge and skills involved in delivering Options services.

**Module 1 – Introduction to Housing Options**
     Objective 1:  The Principles and Philosophy of Housing Options;
     Objective 2:  Strategic Framework for Housing Options;
     Objective 3:  Legal Framework for Housing Options;
     Objective 4:  Diagnostic Needs Assessment;
     Objective 5:  Assessing and Managing Risk;
     Objective 6:  Customer Empowerment and Delivering Person Centred Responses.

**Module 2 – Accessing Accommodation**
     Objective 1:  Homelessness Legislation and Rights;
     Objective 2:  Housing Access: Housing System Operation and Tenure Entry;
     Objective 3:  Housing Options: Rights and Responsibilities for Housing Tenures;
     Objective 4:  Promoting Informed Decision Making and Customer Choice.

**Module 3 – Maintaining Existing Accommodation**
     Objective 1:  Tenancy Sustainment;
     Objective 2:  Rights and Responsibilities for Each Tenure;
     Objective 3:  Mediation;
     Objective 4:  Promoting Independent Living;
     Objective 5:  Aids and Adaptations;
     Objective 6:  Repairs;
     Objective 7:  Antisocial Behaviour.

**Module 4 – Health and Wellbeing**
     Objective 1:  Children and Families;
     Objective 2:  Adult Protection;
     Objective 3:  Mental Health;
     Objective 4:  Addiction;
     Objective 5:  Physical Wellbeing;
     Objective 6:  General Health and Access to Services.

**Module 5 – Income and Affordability**
     Objective 1:  Budgeting and Financial Management;
     Objective 2:  Assessing Housing Affordability;
     Objective 3:  Managing Arrears;
     Objective 4:  Welfare Benefits and Income Maximisation.

**Module 6 – Employment and Training**
     Objective 1:  Strategic Skills Pipeline;
     Objective 2:  Assessing Readiness for Work;
     Objective 3:  Employability;
     Objective 4:  Strategic Framework for Enhanced Housing Options.

3. There are many ways of approaching the development of staff and this framework is not prescriptive with regards to the approach taken. But in considering any staff development programme in relation to Housing Options, it will be essential that councils consider the structure and content of this framework, given it is supported by the five regional hubs and the wealth of experience and knowledge that contributed to its development. It is hoped that training suppliers will be shortlisted by summer 2016.

4. At the present time, the training toolkit consists of the comprehensive programme shown above, identifying the training needs required to be covered in order to deliver a Housing Options service competently and a suite of resources to support delivery of the training. This programme is currently not accredited.

5. Some employers and some learners are keen to achieve accreditation as part of their learning and development activities. The Scottish National Standards for Information and Advice Providers offer the opportunity for accredited learning relevant to Housing Options. Achieving these standards whilst covering a training programme such as that detailed in the Housing Options Training Toolkit may be an attractive option. This will provide clear evidence of learning and achievement to consumers and regulators amongst others

**3.3 The Interface in Practice between Homelessness Legislation and Housing Options**

 Knowing when making an application of homelessness is the right course of action is covered in the Training Toolkit Module 2(4), Promoting Informed Decision Making and Customer Choice.

1. Housing, particularly social rented housing, is a scarce resource. Options is about adopting a creative and flexible approach to meeting a household's housing needs by considering the broadest range of practical solutions. This approach should ensure sustainable housing solutions whilst ensuring that public resources are used as effectively and efficiently as possible, but in a way that does not detract from an applicant's statutory rights or a local authority's statutory duties.

2. When someone approaches the local authority for accommodation, or for assistance in obtaining accommodation, and if the Local Authority has reason to believe an applicant is homeless or threatened with homelessness within 56 days, then the Local Authority has a statutory duty to investigate.  It should be noted that the local authority does not need the applicant's consent to make these enquiries as this is a statutory duty,  however they may require their cooperation and consent to undertake full and thorough investigations.  This duty to assess may be triggered following an initial assessment with the Homelessness Team, The Housing Options Team or equivalent, however regardless as to how the duty is triggered the local authority should:-

   - Record the application on the HL1 system;
   - Undertake the homelessness assessment / investigation;
   - Progress the homelessness application until the duty is discharged or the individual / household withdraws the application; and
   - Where appropriate, progress housing options.

3. Whilst applications of homelessness are governed by statutory rights and duties, homelessness applications can be processed *alongside* the application of Housing Options approaches (see paragraph 52 of the Prevention of Homelessness Guidance, 2009). Whilst enquiries are being conducted in regards to an individual's homelessness status, or whilst a homeless applicant is being rehoused, the full range of housing options, delivered in a person-centred manner appropriate to the applicant's circumstances, can be explored in the normal way, with the optimal outcome for an applicant in mind. Similarly if an application of homelessness is made during the course of exploring housing options with a customer, the Options process can continue whilst the homelessness application is processed in the normal way.

4. In any event, it is vital that, as part of the discussion of housing options, the customer is clear whether the local authority is making enquiries into the individuals homelessness status. The advisor must always ensure that the customer is clear as to their status as a homeless applicant, particularly if statutory homelessness rights have been discussed.

5. Where a person applies to a local authority for accommodation or for assistance in obtaining accommodation and the local authority has reason to believe that a customer may be homeless, the local authority is statutorily bound to 'make such inquiries as are necessary to satisfy themselves as to whether…[the applicant]…is homeless or threatened with homelessness' (Housing [Scotland] Act 1987). The customer may of course withdraw at any point turn down whatever assistance is offered as a result of them being determined to be statutorily homeless. The customer may perceive that they can achieve a housing solution more suited to their needs by pursuing a housing option other than that offered through the homelessness route. In such circumstances, the local authority should continue to work with the customer to endeavour to secure a sustainable housing option. To ensure transparency, it is imperative that a thorough audit trail is maintained, evidencing the advice that has been given and the choices made by the customer. Record-keeping of a robust standard is

extremely useful in reassuring managers and auditors that services are being delivered to the required standards in accordance with the legislation.
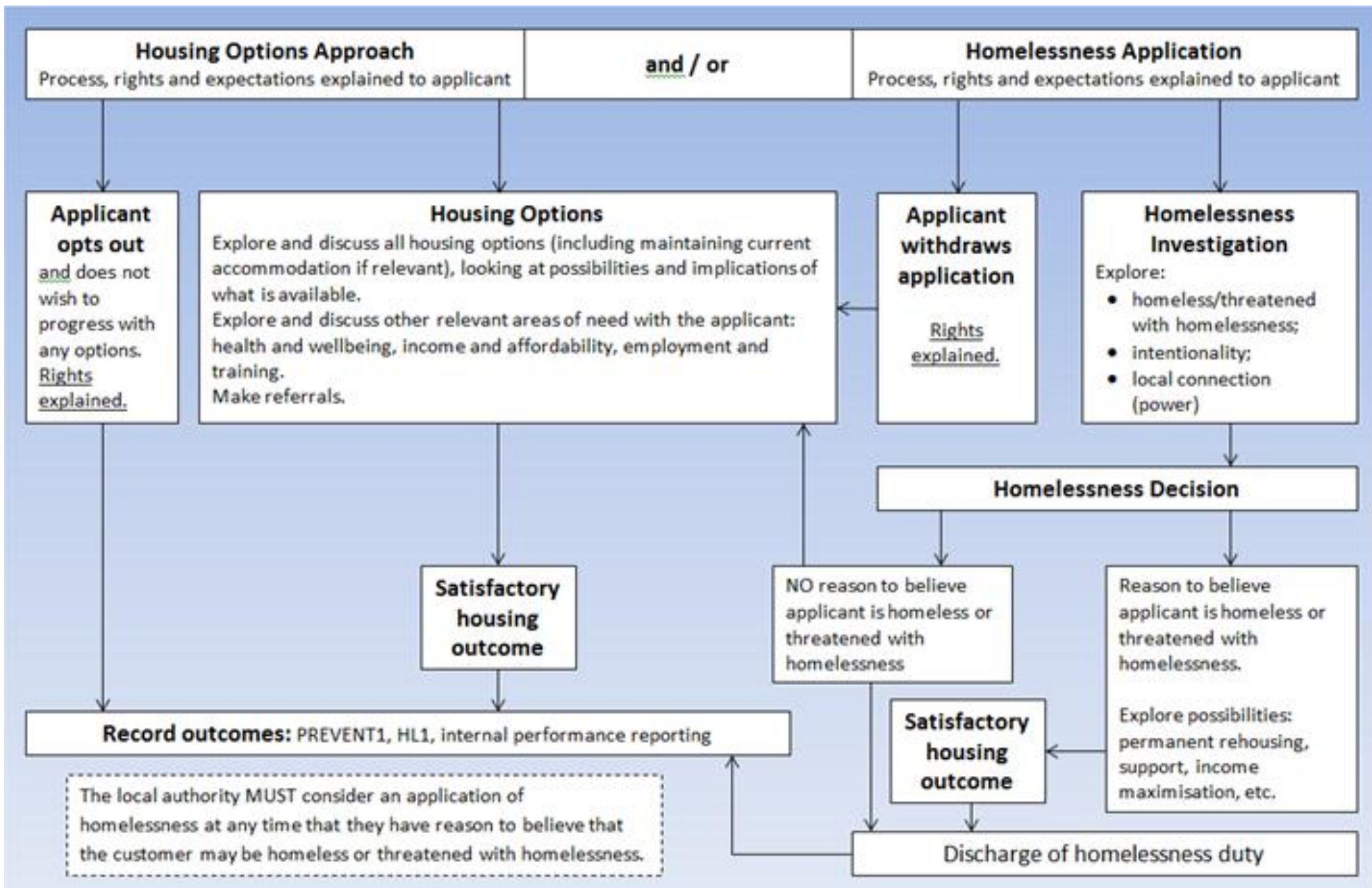
6. IT systems should be able to record the entire Housing Options journey, demonstrating transparency, from approach through to final outcome, including the interface with homelessness. However, IT must not be a barrier to Housing Options provision. The starting point for the design and delivery of Housing Options is the customer and their needs, not the systems and processes currently available within the housing organisation.

7. The Scottish Government's monitoring of homelessness and Housing Options activity, through HL1 and PREVENT1 returns respectively, is not mutually exclusive. Without exception, if section 28(1) of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 applies, i.e., that there is reason to believe that the applicant may be homeless, an HL1 return must be completed. If an individual wishes to not to proceed with a homelessness application:

   - an HL1 should still be completed and the assessment phase should record that the applicant withdrew the application prior to the assessment being carried out;
   - if the applicant then decides to proceed with a Housing Options approach, a PREVENT1 return should then be opened for that household.

8. The interface between staff with responsibilities for homelessness and Housing Options must be considered and managed carefully in order that customers' homelessness rights are maintained, and incidences of homelessness or threatened homelessness are being appropriately responded to, whilst effective Options services are being delivered.

9. Section 4.0 of this Guidance includes advice on appropriate performance frameworks for Options. While reductions in the numbers of homelessness applications may indicate the successful implementation of Housing Options, this is not an appropriate target for the measurement of Housing Options. A homelessness application should not be considered a failure of Housing Options, as this may be the most appropriate solution to a customer's housing need at that time. Homelessness applications may conceivably increase as a result of Housing Options, as more people become aware of their rights under the homelessness legislation. The focus of performance reporting of Housing Options should relate to the sustainment of solutions achieved, rather than whether that solution was achieved through a homelessness route or not.

**3.4 The Options/Homelessness Flowchart**

1. The flowchart, overleaf, based on work by Homeless Action Scotland, demonstrates the delivery of Housing Options services, relative to the delivery of homelessness services.

2. The flowchart indicates that a homelessness application may be made at any time. This would be triggered if the local authority had reason to believe that the customer was homeless or threatened with homelessness.

### 3.5 High Customer Service Standards

1. Housing Options should be delivered to the same high standards of customer service as any other service delivered by the local authority. Clear commitments should be made as to the standards of service that customers can expect and what minimum service outcomes they can expect.

2. Customers should be seen as quickly as possible and within reasonable timescales, which may in part be determined by the degree of urgency of the individual customer's housing need. Processes should be streamlined so that customers are not required to make multiple visits in order to access Options advice. Undue delays may lead to customers seeking out their own less sustainable housing solutions, contact being lost and ultimately repeat applications.

3. There should be clear equalities statements, indicating that services are person-centred and are responsive to the individual needs of customers.

4. Housing Options advice should be offered in a balanced manner. The decision is for the customer to make having been provided with comprehensive advice as to the practical options by the Housing Options adviser and provided with support to make the decision. The customer must not be led or unduly influenced by the adviser to favour one viable housing option over another.

## Housing Options Approach
Process, rights and expectations explained to applicant

## and / or

## Homelessness Application
Process, rights and expectations explained to applicant

---

**Applicant opts out** and does not wish to progress with any options. Rights explained.

**Housing Options**
Explore and discuss all housing options (including maintaining current accommodation if relevant), looking at possibilities and implications of what is available.
Explore and discuss other relevant areas of need with the applicant: health and wellbeing, income and affordability, employment and training.
Make referrals.

**Applicant withdraws application**
Rights explained.

**Homelessness Investigation**
Explore:
- homeless/threatened with homelessness;
- intentionality;
- local connection (power)

**Homelessness Decision**

**Satisfactory housing outcome**

NO reason to believe applicant is homeless or threatened with homelessness

Reason to believe applicant is homeless or threatened with homelessness.

Explore possibilities: permanent rehousing, support, income maximisation, etc.

**Record outcomes:** PREVENT1, HL1, internal performance reporting

**Satisfactory housing outcome**

The local authority MUST consider an application of homelessness at any time that they have reason to believe that the customer may be homeless or threatened with homelessness.

Discharge of homelessness duty

30

5. Advice must also be provided in a manner such that the customer is able to fully appreciate the implications of the options discussed. This requires particular skill on the part of the Housing Options adviser, to use language thoughtfully and appropriately, both for exploring customers' circumstances and for exploring viable housing options. It may require verbal advice to be supported with written literature. It may require time to be spent by the adviser appropriately checking the customer's understanding. It would require consideration of the use of language.

6. Minimum standards should be agreed and set to establish:

   - the timescales within which a customer should expect to attend a Housing Options interview following initial contact;
   - what level of service they can expect during and following an interview, for example, a written summary of the outcomes;
   - how promptly referrals to other agencies will be made, when appropriate;
   - what customer permissions are required, to share information, for example, and how these are secured and evidenced, etc.

7. Customers should know how they can make a complaint should they be dissatisfied with any aspect of the Options service or its outcomes, and how their complaint will be dealt with.

8. These standards should be published and made accessible to the Housing Options customer, by being included in literature, on reception noticeboards, being given to customers as part of the literature accompanying the interview, etc.

9. Performance against these standards should be monitored and reported to managers and elected members. There should be mechanisms to feed the outcomes of performance monitoring into continuous improvement activity.

## 3.6 Typical Housing Options Client Groups

1. Anybody with a perceived housing need, regardless of their circumstances, may benefit from a Housing Options appraisal. A customer engaging with Housing Options may not identify with any specific 'need group' on grounds of age or disability or any other circumstance.

2.  A number of key customer groups in terms of Housing Options approaches can be identified. Services should ensure that appropriate plans, liaison and referral arrangements are in place to address particular needs. These groups could include:

- people who have experienced family or relationship breakdown;
- young people;
- looked after young people;
- people leaving the armed forces;
- people being discharged from hospital;
- liberated prisoners;
- people fleeing abuse or violence;
- people with addictions issues;
- people with financial difficulties;

- people with mental health issues,
- refugees.

In many instances, customers will display more than one of the above need characteristics, and as such, might be considered as customers with complex needs.

3.  In general terms, Options might support the customer to maintain their current home, where that is an appropriate option, or Options would support the customer into a new home, as a result of a formal homelessness application where relevant and/or allocation from the housing list, or by accessing a private sector tenancy or owner-occupied home.

4.  A Housing Options assessment should include a person-centred assessment of housing support needs. Where it is identified that a customer has an underlying support need, services should be made available determined by the level of presenting need. (This is not the statutory housing support duty, which only relates to certain homeless households.)

5.  Threatened homelessness should be prevented where possible. Housing Options advice linked to early intervention should be available to reduce the risk of homelessness for key groups including young people leaving local authority care, people discharged from hospital, people leaving the armed forces and liberated prisoners. In addition to good quality Housing Options advice for such groups, inter-agency protocols and processes should be in place to maximise the opportunity for early intervention and prevention of homelessness.

o **Maintaining Customers in their Current Home**

6. A Housing Options approach may be of particular use to people seeking to **continue living in their current home**, rather than seeking rehousing. This option must only be adopted if there is total confidence that the customer is at no risk in remaining in the current home, but, for example, for young people experiencing relationship difficulties with family members, it is possible that mediation support could help to maintain relationships within the home such that the young person is able to remain there. The provision of support, in addition to or as an alternative to skilled mediation, to the young person and/or family members, may also help to maintain the family unit in their present home. Supporting a young person to remain in the family home is in many instances preferable to homelessness. However, alternative housing options for the future should be planned for and pursued. By ensuring a young person retains their social and support networks whilst pursuing future housing, it is more likely that these relationships will help support the young person within their own tenancy, maximising tenancy sustainment.

7. People of all ages who experience family breakdown may be able to be maintained in the family home through the opportunity to access mediation services. Referrals to relationship support services may be helpful in certain instances if the approach to the Housing Options service has been made at an early enough stage in the relationship breakdown. Again, relationship mediation must only be undertaken if there is full confidence following risk assessment that the individual is not at risk in the home environment.

8. Mediation is a skill that should be undertaken only if the staff member has been appropriately trained. The staff member should also be aware when it is appropriate to offer a referral to dedicated professional mediation support, such as the Scottish Centre for Conflict Resolution.

 Mediation skills and knowing when mediation is an appropriate response, and when it is not, are covered in the Training Toolkit Module 3(3), Mediation.

9. Customers experiencing domestic abuse may in certain circumstances be maintained in their own home through the use of enhanced security measures and additional support. Whilst the safety of victims is paramount, maintaining them in their own home rather than relocation maintains existing local support networks, school attendance, and so on, and therefore can have net benefit. Again, this approach must only be adopted after a thorough risk assessment and where this is the option selected by the customer. (By definition, a person who is unable to occupy their home through fear of violence or threat of violence is statutorily homeless and a homeless application must be completed and a HL1 return made.)

10. In all circumstances in which the Housing Options adviser is discussing courses of action that include the customer remaining in their current home, the importance of ensuring that this does not place the customer at any risk cannot be overstressed. In such circumstances, it may well be appropriate for a referral to be made to a specialist support agency, particularly in circumstances involving children and young people.

 The importance of fully assessing risk is covered in the Training Toolkit Module 1(5), Assessing and Managing Risk.
Issues of domestic abuse and how they should be addressed are covered in Module 4(5), Physical Wellbeing.

11. The above are only a few examples where remaining at home may be the preferred option, where the customer may have a more positive housing outcome than if the first response had been to take a rehousing approach to their application. These applications may benefit from a holistic Options approach being adopted.

   o **Meeting the Needs of Customers with High Support Needs**

12. Many customers have specific circumstances that require **specialist knowledge** in order to fully provide advice as to their housing rights. People with addiction and mental health issues and refugees would be two very different examples of need groups whose support may require highly specialised responses. Staff delivering Options need to have a well-developed awareness of issues related to more complex need groups and how and where to access support. They would require knowledge of support and resources including those within the local authority and how to access these and appropriately make referrals.

13. The planning and delivery of **integrated health and social care** services could have a positive impact on the housing outcomes of certain need groups such as people being discharged from hospital, people with addictions issues and people with mental health issues.

14. Regardless of the formal approach taken locally to integration, Housing Options practitioners should ensure that they are talking to health and social care colleagues and that relevant services are joined-up and coordinated, for example:

   • supporting people leaving hospital with appropriate aids and adaptations and aftercare; or
   • responding to a homeless applicant's mental health or addiction needs with appropriate professional support, could make the difference between an individual maintaining a home or them being back in hospital.

   In order to be as effective as possible, Housing Options services must be delivered in close association with health and social care services.

15. For certain needs groups, highly specific **tailored approaches** have proven effective in securing appropriate rehousing and maintaining that home for the long term.

16. Many local authorities have developed working relationships with **prisons** in order to reduce the occurrence of homelessness on liberation. There are various ways that Options advice can have a positive impact, including:

   - tenancy sustainment, maximising options to secure a tenancy whilst a tenant is incarcerated. It may make more sense financially and in terms of disruption to the offender and the landlord for the home to be maintained in order to facilitate their release and rehabilitation into society;
   - where the tenancy cannot be maintained, making arrangements for securing furniture for future use and processing a housing application in preparation for discharge;
   - early identification of prisoner needs and aspirations to begin the resettlement process prior to discharge;
   - where options cannot be secured prior to liberation, accepting homelessness and other housing applications as early as possible whilst the prisoner is still in custody, and having accommodation arranged to minimise anxiety and disruption for the client, whilst accelerating the resettlement process and reducing the time spent in temporary accommodation.

17. Another example of a specialist provision successful in helping tenants with complex needs to maintain a home is Housing First. Supported by Turning Point Scotland, a number of Scottish local authorities have now successfully worked with individuals with addiction needs, mental health concerns, and in most cases, a long history of non- or erratic engagement with support services, to maintain tenancies. The approach is dependent on first providing the client with their own home, not necessarily dependent on their engagement with addiction programmes, as would often be the case in other approaches. Provision of a tenancy, alongside a tailored package of intensive support, including peers from comparable backgrounds, has to date had a high degree of success, as evidenced by the [Heriot Watt University evaluation of Turning Point Scotland's Glasgow Housing First project](#) published in 2013.

### 3.7 Housing Options Across Different Tenures

1. Housing Options should not be constrained by tenure. Housing Options must consider the circumstances of the customer, including their homelessness status where relevant, and explore various but appropriate housing options in the most comprehensive sense.

2. Individual customers' housing options will naturally be constrained by their circumstances, especially their financial circumstances. For some customers, housing options may be very limited, but for others their housing options may only be limited by their knowledge of options and how to engage with them more than their access to finance. For these reasons, it is important that Housing Options advice is 'tenure-neutral' and able to advise on social renting, renting a

home privately and owning your own home, as well as more specialised options such as supported accommodation or lodgings.

Advising on housing options appropriate to a customer's financial circumstances is covered in the Training Toolkit Module 5(2), Assessing Housing Affordability. Information on housing options across the range of tenures is available in Module 2(2), Housing Access: Housing System Operation and Tenure Entry.

o **Social Renting**

3. Social rented housing is a scarce resource. If the only offered solution to a demonstrable housing need was to add the customer's details to the council housing list or even nomination to local housing associations, there would be only limited impact on meeting overall housing need. Housing Options approaches require to be far more creative and far more flexible than this, if levels of housing demand are going to be meaningfully addressed. This is not to say that social housing does not continue to play an important role in meeting housing need, just that an awareness and use of other options is also going to be needed.

4. Six local authorities: Argyll and Bute; Comhairle nan Eilean Siar; Dumfries and Galloway; Glasgow; Inverclyde; and Scottish Borders have transferred their stock of council housing to housing associations. In these areas, effective relationships with other landlords, including housing associations, will be even more important in meeting housing need.

5. In local authorities around Scotland, progress has been made towards common housing registers, by which one list accessed by one application is used to allocate all available social housing in a local authority area, a convenient service for applicants who have only to complete one application in order to access all social landlords. In local authority areas where there is not yet a common housing register in place, there may be steps toward it, such as a single application form or a shared allocations policy, which will make applying for social housing more accessible for the customer.

6. In the absence of common housing registers, Housing Options staff will need full information on how social housing is accessed in their area. They may be required to support customers with applications, to provide information about chances of rehousing and to advise on how those chances might be maximised through their choice of area or property type. Options staff must be honest about a customer's chances of being rehoused by a local authority or housing association and explain clearly why, for many people, this may not be the most easily available choice, although this must not be done in such a way that dissuades customers taking this course of action if it is their choice.

7. In some local authority areas, some landlords, both council and housing association, have adopted choice based lettings systems for the allocation of social rented housing, by which available properties are advertised on a regular basis and interested customers submit bids. One concern with choice based lettings is that it may exclude vulnerable customers who have certain support needs, as it places more of the responsibility for a successful housing application on the individual customer rather than rely on the internal systems of the social landlord. Customers might be disadvantaged by their access to IT, their computer literacy, their reading literacy, their ability to complete multiple bid forms and so on. Housing Options staff must be aware of the possibility that customers from certain need groups may be disadvantaged by choice based lettings systems and be ready to provide support to overcome that disadvantage.

8. The promotion and management of mutual exchange processes is another effective Housing Options tool in assisting social rented housing to meet customers' housing needs and aspirations.

9. Promotion and guidance on subletting and lodging can assist social rented tenants in financial difficulty to consider different options of retaining their accommodation whilst providing housing for households looking to share accommodation. This can be further supported by clear policies on sharing accommodation.

   o **The Private Rented Sector (PRS)**

10. As the Right to Buy and demolitions have reduced the social housing stock, from 38% of the Scottish housing stock in 1993 to 24% in 2013, the private rented sector (PRS) has increased markedly from 7% to 15% of overall stock. As opportunities to be housed in the social rented sector have shrunk, the PRS has become more significant as a more available tenure.

11. For many customers of Housing Options, renting in the PRS will represent a genuine and appropriate choice. Dependent on customers' housing experience, the PRS may be a new option about which their knowledge is very limited and may not have been an option that they have previously considered. Certain aspects of renting from a private landlord will need to be explained fully and carefully to the customer to ensure that they are aware how renting privately differs from a social housing tenancy.

12. Customers considering the PRS must clearly understand the differences between social and private sector housing, including security of tenure and rental charges, including deposits. Additional information may be required around rights and responsibilities. Officers delivering Housing Options advice must consider affordability based on individual circumstances and advise on entitlement to housing benefit for private rented accommodation, considering the limitation of the shared room rate for individuals under the age of 35. For some customers, support may be required in order to complete and submit benefit applications.

Tenancy rights and responsibilities in different tenures are covered in the Training Toolkit Module 2(3), Housing Options: Housing Rights and Responsibilities for Housing Tenures.

13. Despite differences in security of tenure and rent levels, private renting also offers opportunities, relative to the social rented sector, primarily in relation to choice and availability. Options staff should be able to signpost customers for whom the PRS may be a viable option to local letting agents who are able to advise on current availability in the local PRS market. Many local authorities employ dedicated PRS access staff. There must be close liaison between these staff and staff responsible for delivering Options.

14. The boundary between social rented and private rented sectors is becoming increasingly blurred as many housing associations are now developing mid or market rent properties or even properties for sale. As with any other housing choice, the customer's financial options will need researching to establish what might be within their means, but mid-market and other flexible options should be borne in mind and discussed with the customer wherever they might be a viable option. Housing associations are developing such housing products in order to flexibly meet a range of identified need in their area and an allocation to a mid-market or other more affordable option for those who are able to afford it increases housing access. Options teams should be aware of opportunities for flexible renting within their areas, both current and planned, and should be including them as an option for many customers.

15. One of the significant barriers to accessing a PRS tenancy is the requirement for an upfront deposit. To an individual with little or no money, this can represent an insurmountable obstacle. Most local authorities, as well as other organisations, offer a range of rent deposit guarantee schemes. These schemes should be open to all customers as appropriate regardless of their backgrounds. Options teams should be aware of rent deposit guarantee schemes in their area and ensure that customers are put in touch with these schemes when appropriate.

16. Faced with limited housing options, especially for young people, some local authorities have explored options for allocating shared tenancies to people who previously may not know each other. This has been a common approach in certain circumstances, for example, certain types of supported housing and indeed is common among groups of young people, students or young professionals, seeking affordable accommodation in the private sector.

17. For a local authority Options team, this approach of shared accommodation could work in a social rented or private tenancy, but in those instances where it has been successfully tried, it has primarily been in PRS tenancies. Sustaining shared housing options brings with it additional challenges, especially in allocating shared tenancies to individuals who will be able to successfully live together not only in managing behaviours between the sharing tenants but also between the shared tenancy and neighbouring tenancies. However, house or flat sharing is an affordable option that works well for many, primarily young, people and there is no intrinsic reason why it shouldn't be a viable option for customers that approach Options teams in housing need.

18. Shared tenancies have been promoted as one solution over recent years and resources have been developed that support local authorities' application of this particular housing option. There are examples of the positive use of shared accommodation in averting homelessness. Options teams should consider its application wherever appropriate. See the Crisis report, *Sharing in Scotland: Supporting young people who are homeless on the Shared Accommodation Rate* [here](#).

   o **Home Ownership**

19. The Housing Options worker should be conducting a full investigation into the customer's financial circumstances and will very quickly establish as part of that process whether home ownership is likely to be an option at all. It may be that a customer has access to resources and/or is in work and is therefore able to consider purchasing a home with a mortgage but requires advice and support in order to start and/or see through that process. Buying a house, especially researching and taking on an appropriate level of mortgage debt, can be a daunting task. Customers, especially from certain need groups, may only be able to achieve this if they are appropriately supported.

20. For some customers, a housing need will have arisen because of a change in their health. Perhaps an advancing disability makes a previously suitable home increasingly impractical. Individuals with such health needs may have access to finance, may already live in the their own home, but will require advice and support to navigate their way through aids and adaptations as a means of making their current home liveable again, or move to a home more appropriate to their current and changing needs.

21. Home ownership options are becoming more flexible. Various options now exist that represent some form of mix between renting and owning. Examples include housing associations' shared ownership schemes and the Scottish Government's [Help to Buy](#) and [Low-cost Initiative for First Time Buyers (LIFT)](#) schemes. Housing Options teams should ensure that they remain conversant with what shared ownership/shared equity schemes are available at any one time and ensure that they include them as options in discussions with customers for whom they may represent a viable choice.

### 3.8 Examples of Options Activities

1. In this section of the Guidance, examples of various Options activities are listed. Some aspects of these activities may seem relatively complex, especially if the customer is reporting high support needs. However, this is far from always the case. Meeting the needs of an Options customer may be as straightforward as delivering some relatively limited advice, for example, on the availability of aids and adaptations, or accessing a home in the private rented sector.

o **Housing Advice**

2.  The provision of housing advice is broad in its scope. In particular, advice may
    be sought in relation to costs of housing. Options teams will commonly be
    approached for assistance by tenants or homeowners who are experiencing
    stress and potentially homelessness as they find themselves unable to meet
    housing costs. Dealing with rent or mortgage arrears may involve the Options
    advisor in discussing a wide range of steps to assist. With the customer's
    permission, this may involve contacting the landlord/mortgage provider in order
    to discuss potential arrears repayment plans that are affordable whilst
    maintaining the customer in their home. In extreme cases, part of the negotiation
    with the creditor may include a discussion of the consequences of the current
    tenant or owner being evicted and the consequent disadvantages of this to the
    creditor organisation themselves, including court costs, reletting costs, etc. In
    more complicated cases, Options teams may signpost the customer to specialist
    independent advice agencies.

3.  In certain mortgage arrears cases, it may be appropriate to refer owners in
    arrears with repayments to the Scottish Government's Home Owners' Support
    Fund (Mortgage to Rent and Mortgage to Shared Equity schemes). These
    schemes may enable an owner to remain in their home whilst changing tenure
    from owning to rent. Housing Options teams should have information relating to
    these initiatives available to discuss with relevant customers.

4.  Tenants' right to repair is another area of housing advice that an Options team
    may need to provide, usually for customers who consider they are living in
    unsuitable accommodation, as a result of being unable to get repairs done by
    their landlord. The response by the Options advisor would certainly be to advise
    as to their repairing rights, but also could take up the customer's concerns
    directly with the landlord or letting agent. There are a number of options open to
    the tenant, including bringing a case before the Private Rented Housing Panel or
    taking the landlord to court. Housing Options staff need to be able to advise on
    tenancy rights related to repairs and condition and may be called upon to
    support the tenant in taking action against the landlord.

5.  Care and Repair Scotland may be of assistance to Options teams in meeting the
    repairing needs of older and disabled homeowner customers.

6.  For homeowners, one solution to housing need may be to carry out conversions,
    extensions, etc, to the property. Local authority schemes of assistance exist to
    support homeowners with repairs, adaptations work, etc. Through these
    initiatives, homeowners can access loans and grants, advice and support for
    work on their home. Options teams require to be aware of the local authority
    Scheme of Assistance in their area and how it can support housing need and be
    ready to advise homeowner customers appropriately.

Training Toolkit Module 3(6), Repairs, contains much more information on
repairing rights across all tenures.

o **Health Advice**

7. A customer reporting a housing need may approach with a straightforward housing issue or they may exhibit a complex mix of multiple needs that are compounding to cause the individual stress and difficulty, only part of which relates to their housing circumstances.

8. It is entirely possible that a customer may make an approach related to a housing need that is derived wholly from health reasons. The current accommodation has become unsuitable because of some change in the customer's health circumstances. But it is far more likely that an individual will approach with a housing need and health need as well as multiple other needs. It may necessary to sort out housing issues from health and other issues that contribute to a person having multiple and complex needs.

9. Options teams require to have robust links with health and social care teams and other voluntary sector support agencies in their areas. Options advisers should be able to appropriately refer their customers to health and social care services as part of meeting housing need and the broader complex of issues. If a vulnerable customer is allocated a new home, and their underlying mental health or addictions issues are not addressed, it is highly likely that the housing solution will not be sustained and that the individual will be vulnerable to homelessness.

 For much more information about health advice and Housing Options refer to the Training Toolkit Module 4(3), Mental Health and 4(4), Addictions.

o **Aids and Adaptations**

10. One specific aspect of health-related housing advice is related to the provision of aids and adaptations that might enable a customer to remain in their own home rather than seeking to move. Local authority social work services have responsibility for the assessment and funding of aids and adaptations, soon to be incorporated into the newly integrated Health and Social Care Boards, but the Housing Options customer may require advice on what may be available. The customer may also require support in accessing aids and adaptations.

11. The charity, Housing Options Scotland, exists to support people with a housing need arising from disability or old age.

 There's a section of the Training Toolkit about the legislation related to, and the provision of, Aids and Adaptations across all tenures, Module 3(4).

- o **Financial Inclusion**

The Training Toolkit has several modules focussing on the provision of financial advice as part of Housing Options. For example, refer to Modules 5(3), Managing Arrears and 5(4), Welfare Benefits and Income Maximisation.

12. As well as advocating on behalf of a tenant or homeowner who finds themselves in arrears, income maximisation is a complementary approach to situations of debt and must be part of the Housing Options team's workload and expertise. Being able to appropriately refer customers to agencies able to provide more specialist welfare advice is also an important role of the Housing Options adviser.

13. Having a good understanding of the benefits system is essential for the Housing Options adviser. Supporting customers to apply for benefits to which they have an entitlement and advocating on their behalf with the local authority housing benefits team or Department for Work and Pensions in cases of dispute can be a large part of Housing Options work. The value of the intervention can be an important contributor to ensuring that people experiencing benefit stress are able to maintain their home or access suitable housing.

14. Changes to welfare and especially the current rollout of Universal Credit make this a changing environment in which the adviser must maintain their knowledge and ability to respond to need or know how best to signpost to other services.

15. Responses to benefits issues sometimes require more than just welfare advice. For example, the under-occupancy penalty, or bedroom tax, might evoke advice and responses related to moving to a smaller home or taking in a lodger, as much as the welfare advice aspects of the bedroom tax themselves.

16. Outwith DWP benefits and housing benefit paid by local authorities, Housing Options advisers should also be aware of other sources of assistance, such as the Scottish Government welfare schemes, Crisis Grants and Community Care Grants which are payable under the [Scottish Welfare Fund](#) scheme. Crisis grants are payable in the event of a flood or fire or other emergency. Discretionary Housing Payments, funded by the DWP, the Scottish Government and local authorities, are also an important support, available to supplement the incomes of those in receipt of housing benefit to cover, for example, bedroom tax deficits.

17. Other loans and grants, either in money or in kind, are often available from voluntary agencies locally, for example, for the setting up of a new home with white goods, carpets and furniture.

18. A good working knowledge of all welfare payments and knowing how to access more specialist benefits knowledge when necessary, is essential to the Housing Options adviser and critical to the successful rehousing of applicants and to the effective sustainment of tenancies.

- o **Budget Management**

 The Training Toolkit includes a module, 5(6), focussing on Budgeting and Financial Management.

19. Many of the households that approach a Housing Options service will be on limited incomes. Budgeting for housing costs, utility bills, food and living costs in these circumstances can be challenging for such households.

20. The Housing Options worker should be able to discuss a customer's budget and provide the customer with the necessary skills to ensure that housing payments are regularly scheduled alongside all other essential outgoings. This is an invaluable contribution to maintaining that individual's home and prevents future homelessness.

21. Many customers to Housing Options services will require support in order to achieve skills for independent living. For example, young people or people with certain disabilities may never have lived independently, or had to take responsibility for their own finances, therefore will require support to develop budgeting skills in order to be able to manage their own home. Housing Options services will need to support such customers as appropriate and signpost on to longer term support services.

- o **Employability Support**

 The whole of the Training Toolkit Module 6 focuses on Employment and Training Advice as a means of supporting customers into sustainable housing solutions and especially Objective 3 which focuses on Employability specifically.

22. It is recognised that income level can restrict housing options. Staff delivering Housing Options advice are in a position to provide customers information, signposting to local services who can work to develop their skillset, engage in employment support and develop career options that will support the customer's housing and other life aspirations.

23. Local authorities, the national skills body, Skills Development Scotland, Jobcentre Plus, and various supported initiatives run by voluntary sector agencies all offer programmes to support employability for people who experience additional barriers to work.

### 3.9 Housing Options and Housing Support

1. The Housing (Scotland) Act 1987, as amended by the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010, places a duty on local authorities to conduct a housing support assessment for applicants who are unintentionally homeless or threatened with homelessness and that they have 'reason to believe' need housing support. Housing support services are outlined in regulations as:

   (a) advising or assisting a person with personal budgeting, debt counselling or in dealing with welfare benefit claims;
   (b) assisting a person to engage with individuals, professionals or other bodies with an interest in that person's welfare;
   (c) advising or assisting a person in understanding and managing their tenancy rights and responsibilities, including assisting a person in disputes about those rights and responsibilities; and
   (d) advising or assisting a person in settling into a new tenancy.

2. Housing support services are further defined by the 2010 Act as including "any service which provides support, assistance, advice or counselling to an individual with particular needs with a view to enabling that individual to occupy, or to continue to occupy, residential accommodation as the individual's sole or main residence".

3. The legislation is very clear that this duty, to assess for and meet housing support needs, extends only to those who are found to be homeless or threatened with homelessness. Therefore, this statutory duty would not be immediately applicable to everyone who approached Housing Options services, as these services seek to meet the needs of customers beyond those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.

4. It is noticeable, however, that many of the housing support services, as defined by the Housing Support Services (Homelessness) (Scotland) Regulations 2012, above, are not very different from many of the activities that were described as being central to the Options approach in the previous section. Budgeting advice, welfare benefits advice, housing advice, etc., and *the overall goal of housing support*, defined in paragraph 2. above, is virtually indistinguishable from the purpose of Housing Options to prevent homelessness and to deliver housing solutions that are sustainable in the long term.

5. The Housing Options assessment should incorporate a determination of an individual's housing support needs. Where support needs are identified, referral pathways must be in place to ensure people can access the services they require. This must be clearly documented.

 The provision of housing support as part of Housing Options is covered in the Training Toolkit at Module 3(4), Promoting Independent Living.

### 3.10 Proformas, Protocols and Other Resources

1. Whilst statutory homelessness rights are consistent throughout Scotland, Housing Options advice will vary dependent on: the circumstances of the individual; the housing market circumstances prevailing within the area at the time; broader factors such as the nature of the local economy; geography; access to healthcare; the role played by the voluntary sector locally; and a host of other factors. For these reasons, Housing Options cannot be prescribed. What works well in a large urban authority would not necessarily work as well in a small rural local authority.

2. Whilst the approach to Housing Options will differ in response to the diverse housing market and provision of services across Scotland, there are key standards, values, recording and monitoring criteria which should be in place within each local authority. It is for this reason that the 32 Scottish local authorities, supported by the Scottish Government, have developed, commissioned and funded the Housing Options Training Toolkit thereby supporting a nationwide quality standard covering the attitudinal, knowledge and skills requirements of Housing Options workers. The PREVENT1 monitoring framework, as it develops, will also allow local authorities to process benchmarking, ensuring that the standards delivered produce the best sustainable outcomes for people in housing need.

3. Below is a summary of some Housing Options process commonalities across Scotland, that local authorities should consider when reviewing and developing their service:

   - approaches to the service, including appointments, lost contacts management;
   - the assessment of the customer's circumstances including the information collated,
     reason for approach, family composition, current tenure, linkage with other services, etc;
   - consideration of status with regards to homelessness;
   - the approach to the assessment of support needs;
   - review of the various options in broad terms and how appropriately they might
     support an individual customer;
   - recording of advice provided, actions taken and referrals to other agencies;
   - staff checklist information;
   - customer declarations and mandates;
   - outcomes and sustainment;
   - monitoring and review framework; and
   - quality assurance.

4. Given the commonality in application of Options approaches throughout Scotland, it might be expected that supporting resources would apply similarly across local authorities, and that these could be usefully shared through the Hubs network. Many local authorities have developed forms which support the gathering of relevant, comprehensive information from customers, and support

the team member in ensuring the right information is gathered in the most appropriate order. Notes alongside the application form ensure that the member of staff is aware why information is being requested, in order to fully explain to the customer, and appropriate responses to certain items of key information, for example, whether the individual is homeless or threatened with homelessness, are asked and recorded.

5.   Some authorities have developed short mandate forms for the customer to complete in circumstances where they have independently taken the decision to withdraw a homelessness application. The form must explain that this in no way reduces their statutory right to make a homelessness application at any time in the future, including during the course of the present Housing Options application, assessment and conclusion.

6.   Housing Options teams should develop protocol arrangements internally and in association with partner organisations for the effective delivery of Housing Options. These protocols should include:
   •   how, when and under what circumstances referrals are made;
   •   how performance or outcomes are monitored and reported; and
   •   how arrangements are reviewed.

These protocol documents should be clear and unambiguous but would by their nature be tailored to suit local circumstances and local needs and could therefore be potentially quite different in their form and content.

**Operational - Checklist**

1. Housing Options are delivered in such a way that the homelessness rights of customers are in no way diminished or undermined and this can be evidentially proven.
2. Options services are responsive to the needs of the customer and are delivered flexibly.
3. The needs of *all* client groups are met equally and fully.
4. High quality comprehensive Options advice is available on demand.
5. The range of Options services on offer is comprehensive and meets the holistic needs of clients.
6. Options advice is genuinely cross-tenure and of an equally high standard relative to all tenures.
7. Staff are aware of, and able to make productive client referrals to, specialist advice whenever necessary.
8. Protocols exist for referrals to specialist agencies and other organisations.
9. Productive working relationships exist between Options staff and local housing providers, including housing associations and private rented sector providers such as letting agents.
10. Productive working relationships exist between Options staff and relevant colleagues in health and social care.
11. Productive working relationships exist between Options staff and other relevant institutions such as prisons.
12. Staff are clear on the statutory nature of housing support assessment and provision, and how support can be provided to Options customers who are not homeless or threatened with homelessness.
13. High quality, effective housing support is provided to clients wherever it would aid housing sustainment.
14. Training, based on the structure of the Toolkit, is being accessed by Options staff.

## 4.0 QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORKS FOR HOUSING OPTIONS

### 4.1 Introduction

1. Evidencing that high quality Options services are being delivered and that genuine positive differences are being made in peoples' lives is essential to the good management and improvement of Options services. There are statutory responsibilities to report performance outcomes to the Scottish Government and the Scottish Housing Regulator. Monitoring and reporting performance outcomes and acting on that information and publishing outcomes is a prerequisite of delivering more focussed, effective services.

2. This section covers:

   - appropriate performance frameworks for the monitoring of Options services;
   - the value and importance of effective customer feedback mechanisms;
   - the role of auditing in ensuring that performance reporting is dependable; and
   - acting on performance reporting in order to achieve continuous improvement in service delivery and outcomes.

### 4.2 The Importance of Outcomes Frameworks

1. The Scottish Government has been collecting mandatory data related to the delivery of Housing Options services, PREVENT1, since 2013/4. The second and most recent publication of this data was in June 2015 and the Government have committed to the regular publication of data. In addition to the mandatory return of data by local authorities, they have also extended the opportunity to housing associations to record their Housing Options activity through PREVENT1 returns.

2. As more tranches of data are published and a time series established, PREVENT1 will become increasingly valuable in providing information about: Housing Options activity across Scotland; the circumstances of customers; the types of Options activities undertaken by different organisations; links between Options activity and homelessness; and the outcomes of Options activity.

3. As data emerges demonstrating the outcomes for Housing Options customers measured against activity, referrals and advice, local authorities will have the ability to review the performance of local services in order to plan and deliver integrated early intervention and prevention activities. However the mandatory PREVENT1 reporting of data is not sufficient for local authorities to fully evaluate local performance.

4. A robust performance management framework and culture across services will assist local authorities to demonstrate the delivery of a successful outcomes focussed Housing Options provision, giving senior managers and elected members confidence in the approach and service delivery.

5.  The primary focus of performance reporting should be on the preventative outcomes achieved, alongside the reporting of the circumstances of Housing Options customers and satisfaction levels; and the volumes of Options activities delivered.

6.  The West Hub has developed a performance reporting framework for its organisations' Options activities and outcomes. This framework has four overarching Outcomes, each of which is evidenced by a number of indicators. The four Outcomes are:

    1.  incidence of housing crisis reducing;
    2.  more successful operation of housing lists;
    3.  delivery of sustainable housing solutions; and
    4.  maximisation of existing resources.

7.  The performance management and reporting of Housing Options is not straightforward, primarily because many of the factors that have a direct bearing on Options customers and their housing needs are outwith the control of the Options teams. The national and local economy for example, supply and demand within local housing markets. Further, it is not always possible to draw a direct connection between the delivery of Options services and the housing outcome achieved by or on behalf of the customer. This is because of all the other factors, negative and positive, that have a bearing on housing circumstances. Nevertheless, the performance management of Housing Options services is an essential aspect of continuous improvement in service delivery and identifying and learning from best practice.

8.  The clear, measurable, positive outcomes of Housing Options services fall broadly into three categories:

    -   numbers/percentages of successful housing outcomes (current home maintained or new home accessed by the customer);
    -   the sustainment of those outcomes over time; and
    -   the satisfaction of the customer with those outcomes and with the delivery of the Options service itself.

    Performance management frameworks should focus primarily on these broad outcomes and the measures of success which can be evidenced in support of claimed outcomes.

**4.3 Customer Feedback Mechanisms**

1.  Housing Options is no different to any other service offered by the local authority in that it should be subject to customer satisfaction monitoring.

2.  There should be a structured approach to gathering data related to satisfaction with the Housing Options service. This may involve seeking views immediately following the Options interview, or asking views at some later time, or indeed as part of the regular large scale survey of tenants, as required by the Regulator. The principle that Housing Options customers are asked their satisfaction with their service is more important than how that task is approached.

3.  Customer satisfaction should clearly relate to the outcomes achieved through the Options process, and also to the process itself. The survey questions would require to establish whether the customer felt that they had received a satisfactory level of service, as well as a satisfactory outcome.

4.  The outcomes of these survey activities should support performance reporting and performance improvement within the organisation. Survey outcomes should be reported appropriately to senior managers and elected members and there should be a clear mechanism for that survey data to feed into and positively influence performance improvement activity.

**4.4 The Audit of Housing Options**

1.  Whilst performance data is useful, this is not the only factor in continuous improvement activity. Any system of performance reporting should be supported by an accompanying programme of audit activity.

2.  Auditing of performance should be an ongoing, continuous activity. It need not be onerous. The normal level of audit activity should be agreed, but need not remain constant in all circumstances. It may be decided that there should be a specific focus of auditing to consider a specific area of Options that may be cause for concern. The approach to auditing performance reporting needs to be responsive and flexible.

3.  Auditing should at the very least check the data being provided in relation to Options activity, but auditing should go beyond this and check the quality of service delivery and the outcomes achieved. The audit process should check file documentation for accuracy and completeness and if necessary undertake further checks with staff members. Audit processes should as a minimum seek to check that:

- all relevant information was gathered from the customer and recorded accurately;
- all relevant housing options were discussed and explored sufficiently with the customer;
- all appropriate checks were carried out and recorded appropriately, for example, in relation to homelessness and housing support assessments;
- all internal performance protocols and standards were observed and adhered to; and
- a satisfactory solution was secured that was sustainable and satisfactory for the client.

4. The outcomes of audit activities should be reported to all relevant staff ensuring that lessons are learned, actions agreed and practices improved wherever possible.

5. Audit checklists and structures have been developed by many authorities, for example, North Ayrshire Council, and are essentially transferable in their emphasis on the principles of Housing Options and how they are applied to individual customer's circumstances.

**4.5 Continuous Improvement in Housing Options Policy and Practice**

1. Benchmarking of performance data leads to performance improvement through the identification of those approaches that are working most effectively. Benchmarking can operate successfully within an organisation, comparing the performance of different teams or Options approaches, for example, or can be applied to different organisations' performance. The purpose is to identify the most effective application of approach and then to learn from that approach, its planning, management and delivery, as to what is more effective. The identification of best practice, the dissemination of learning and the overall raising of standards in performance is the ultimate goal of performance management and benchmarking. This is already a core activity of the five Housing Options Hubs. Benchmarking organisations such as SHBVN support and promote this activity across local authorities and housing associations nationally.

2. The outcomes of Options monitoring should have a direct bearing on the performance management of all relevant services within the local authority and within partner organisations. Beyond the Options service itself, this includes the local authorities' own policies and practices on allocations, for example, but would also extend to housing associations, and providers of support in the statutory and voluntary sectors.

3. Alongside performance management and benchmarking, self assessment of service quality is an invaluable tool in improving performance standards. Carrying out a self assessment exercise empowers continuous improvement activities by informing the service delivery staff and managers of the strengths and weaknesses of their current delivery model, identifying areas of service delivery or planning that would benefit from review and helping to focus the investment of resource aimed at improving service delivery. Applying these resources, in the comprehensive manner of a full self assessment exercise or with a light touch as a brief checklist review, can be invaluable as a means of performance improvement. SHBVN has developed a framework for the self assessment of Housing Options services.

> **_P_erformance Frameworks - Checklist**
>
> 1. Data on Housing Options activities and outcomes is comprehensively and accurately recorded.
> 2. Accurate, robust data is provided to Scottish Government through the PREVENT1 return.
> 3. Performance data is reported appropriately at all levels of the organisation.
> 4. Audit practices contribute to the robustness of data reporting and to the improvement of Options service delivery.
> 5. Performance reporting feeds into and supports continuous improvement activity.
> 6. Service managers are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of their Options service delivery and are actively seeking to address weaknesses and build upon strengths.
> 7. There are opportunities for staff to exchange best practice and learning within the organisation and with peer organisations.

# ANNEXES

## ANNEX 1 – Checklist of SHR recommendations and references in guidance

| Recommendation | | Section | Evidence |
|---|---|---|---|
| | The Scottish Government should: | | |
| 1 | provide enhanced guidance for local authorities on the delivery of Housing Options | 1.4 (paras. 2 – 4) | |
| 2 | ensure that guidance provides clarity on how local authorities operate Housing Options effectively within the context of homelessness duties and obligations | 2.2, 2.9, 3.3, 3.9 | Based on the flowchart, which recommends an initial assessment to determine if there's a reason to believe the customer is homeless or threatened with homelessness, an HL1 needs to be opened. If the person chooses not to continue with the application then they can withdraw it. |
| 3 | use the recently introduced mandatory data collection for local authorities to evaluate the success of policy on Housing Options | 2.6, 4.0 | "Success" needs to be defined. Would suggest here that elements might include:<br>• The incidence of housing crisis reduces;<br>• Housing list operates more effectively;<br>• Homelessness presentations fall **where appropriate** – (it should become apparent fairly quickly if certain groups are being served well under Housing Options. Reasons for homelessness and the profiles of the local clients will help to identify where appropriate options are not available); |

| Recommendation | | Section | Evidence |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | • Repeat homelessness levels should fall; <br> • Customer satisfaction levels are high – the use of standardised survey questions will assist in drawing comparisons; <br> • The range of options to meet locally identified needs is being improved through clearly defined action planning and improvements can be quantified; for example, more households access alternative tenures where there are shortfalls in social rented housing; <br> • The accessibility of the Private Rented Sector is improving with measurable improvements in sustainability in the sector; <br> • Staff feedback indicates that they feel supported and motivated to deliver quality services |
| | The SG and local authorities should | | |
| 4 | build on the work of the Hubs to further develop clear and supportive practice tools to help practitioners deliver Housing Options effectively | 3.2, 4.2 (para. 6.) | The Hubs have developed the Housing Options Training Toolkit and a performance reporting toolkit which should be considered and used alongside this Guidance. |
| | Local authorities should: | | |
| 5 | Ensure all outcomes in Housing Options cases are recorded in accordance with the SG's recently introduced monitoring system | 2.6 (para. 7.), 4.2 (paras | All local authorities are using PREVENT1 |

| Recommendation | | Section | Evidence |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | 1. – 3.) | |
| 6 | Ensure that outcomes achieved through Housing Options are consistent, appropriate and meet people's needs | 2.7, 3.5, 3.6 | Appropriate advice meeting people's needs is dependent on services being person-centred. Also having knowledge of a wide range of client groups. A product also of investment in staff training |
| 7 | Consider opportunities for early intervention and work to prevent homelessness | 2.3 | Case study examples illustrate the up-stream prevention work being undertaken to limit the damaging effects of homelessness. |
| 8 | Ensure that support assessments are given to people who need them | 3.9 | Options assessment should include the assessment of support needs. |
| 9 | Review any use of staff performance targets around reducing numbers of homeless applications to ensure these do not result in behaviours that act against the achievement of good outcomes for people in need | 3.3 (para. 9.), 4.2 (para. 8) | Performance framework examples referenced. |
| 10 | Minimise the time people wait between initial contact and Housing Options interview | 3.5 | Options should be delivered to the same high standards as any other customer services. Reasonable timescales for responding to customer approaches should be published |
| 11 | Support front line officers with appropriate training and clear guidance and procedures | 2.8, 2.9, 3.2 | Guidance and procedures for staff. |
| 12 | Ensure they complete a homeless assessment, whilst progressing Housing Options efforts, where there is clear evidence of homelessness or potential homelessness | 2.2 (para. 3.), 3.3 (paras. 2. – 5.) | Also 3.4 – Flowchart Housing Options in no way diminishes or undermines customers' homelessness rights. If a homelessness application is made, this must be considered at the same time as providing Options advice. |
| 13 | Have a consistent structure for Housing Options interviews to ensure that relevant and important questions are always asked | 2.9, 3.10 (paras. | Checklists and interview forms. |

| Recommendation | | Section | Evidence |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | 2. – 5.) | |
| 14 | Ensure that advice and information is given in a balanced and appropriate way | 3.5 (paras. 4. – 5.) | Options advice must be provided in such a way that a fully informed decision can be taken by the customer, with the appropriate support of the Options adviser. |
| 15 | Improve the quality of record keeping to ensure accurate records of discussions and outcomes and provide a timely record of discussions and actions for the service user | 2.6, (para. 2.), 3.3 (para 5.), 3.5 | Robust record-keeping is essential for the monitoring of service activities and outcomes, performance improvement and also for evidencing options discussed and taken. Customers should be provided with a written record of outcomes. |
| 16 | Implement a systematic and consistent system of audit of Housing Options work with the aim of improving service delivery | 2.6, 4.4 | Examples of operational performance monitoring frameworks, including audit procedures. |

**Annex 2 - Case Studies**

**1. 69 Year old, Owner Occupier**

Owner Y contacted the Housing Options Team to explain she had sold her property and had a date to leave. She also advised she had applied to various housing associations without an offer of immediate rehousing. She was very emotional and advised her husband had recently passed away. She was evidently struggling and seemed confused. She had no support from family or elsewhere to help her.

Concerned that the elderly woman would not follow up on the advice provided, it was agreed if no contact had been made by the middle of the following week, a visit would be made to the property.

On approaching one of the housing associations Y had applied to, they confirmed that due to the change in her circumstances, they would be able to select the woman for an offer of housing.

Having signed up for the property, there was concern on the part of both the Housing Options team and the housing association about the applicant's ability to move house and deal with the physical and financial upheaval without any support. A Housing Support Co-ordinator agreed to allocate Y support with the move when a referral was received from the housing association which was subsequently coordinated by the Options Team.

A follow-up contact was made with the housing association approximately two months later. The applicant had successfully moved into the new tenancy, was appreciating attending a memory clinic and was being appropriately supported in her new tenancy.

**2. Youth Homeless Prevention Mediation Outcome**

Customer F is a 20 year old female who presented as homeless. The reason for presentation was a breakdown in the relationship with mum. It should be noted that F was also homeless two years previously and had been housed in supported accommodation before moving into her own furnished tenancy. This failed within a year and mum had taken her back into the family home. F and her mum confirmed that she would struggle to sustain any tenancy. F has some learning difficulties and struggles with the skills needed for living independently. Both parties agreed to mediation as a way to help repair the relationship and support F through the homelessness application process.

A mediator met with both parties individually and then set up joint mediation session. At the individual sessions, information was disclosed to the mediator about the extent of issues F was trying to deal with. Mum has been the only person she has opened up to about her problems. Mum allowed her daughter to return home prior to the joint mediation session on the understanding they both see the process through.

Joint mediation session undertaken, this was very successful and an agreement was made between mum and daughter on the practical issues that were causing friction

within the household. F was allowed to have her boyfriend stay at weekends and would be treated more like an adult in the house. F in return will treat the family with more respect, let mum know where she is and when she is returning. F will take more responsibility around the house and help mum with chores. It was also agreed the daughter should find something to occupy her day instead of being about the house. Further sessions arranged were less formal and were held at the family home. The Options Team continued to work with the family and both F and mum continued to be very open and honest. The relationship continued to improve with mum being less stressed in the house although in a small three bedroom flat, it continued to be difficult with three people of adult age, including F's brother, to get personal space and privacy. Mum applied for a larger property but due to the rehousing policy, only received low priority and could be waiting a long time for any move.

The outcomes of the case were that:
- F was referred into the youth employability service to help with barriers into employment and to fill her day, supported with literacy issues and is currently on training and hoping to get a placement in near future;
- as mum is now supportive of her daughter and fully intends to have her remain in the family home, the Options Team drafted a letter of support to request higher priority for housing for the household;
- following successful priority award, the Options Team contacted allocations and secured a four bedroom new build tenancy for the family, a front/back door town house which will allow F to have a quiet area;
- a referral was made to the money advice team who assisted in successfully applying for a Community Care Grant, to pay for new carpets, cooker and suite for moving in. They also looked at maximising the family income;
- the family is now resettled and sustaining the tenancy together as family. F is continuing to engage with services provided and mum has seen a vast improvement in F's confidence and mood. F is hoping to get full-time employment and have a career working with older adults;
- F now helps with domestic chores round house. Her social skills have improved. F now feels she is being treated as an adult and feels respected.

### 3. Youth Threatened with Eviction

C was threatened with eviction from her housing association flat due to substantial arrears. She had failed to engage with the housing association despite their best efforts to contact her.

Upon contacting the Housing Options Team, it became apparent that C had a history of severe mental health disorders and that she had not been managing prescribed medications appropriately. Consequently, she had not been applying for housing benefit; she had fallen behind in her studies through non-attendance at college, although she was managing to maintain a small part-time job. C was in receipt of no support, as the family relationship had previously broken down. She had become increasingly isolated.

Through the provision of appropriate housing support, C was able to re-engage with medical services and bring her mental health into better management including the use of alternative treatments. Housing benefit issues were resolved such that a substantial proportion of the outstanding debt was able to be repaid. A referral was also made to a befriending service in order to address issues of isolation.

As the housing association landlord was proceeding with eviction albeit that this was delayed for five months, this time allowed the Housing Options team time to work with C to find an appropriate private sector let. Mediation had supported a reengagement with C's mother, such that she was prepared to contribute towards rental payments, and a Discretionary Housing Payment was secured to fund the deposit. Moving costs were met through a Community Care Grant.

A referral to the employability service also means that the customer is now engaged in a hospitality course which is closely matched with her career ambitions. She is maintaining excellent attendance on her new college course.

**ANNEX 3 - Current statutory guidance covering Housing Options**

1.  The [Housing (Scotland) Act 1987, section 31](#), states that:
    '(1) where a local authority are satisfied that an applicant is homeless (2)… they shall… secure that permanent accommodation becomes available for his occupation.'

    If the circumstances mean that the requirements of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 are such that a homelessness application should be made, then that is one of the housing options that must be explored with the household. Housing Options is about widening choice for a household, not about gate-keeping homelessness applications. Housing Options is not about undermining people's statutory homelessness rights.

2.  [Section 2 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001](#) states that:

    (1) every local authority must secure that advice and information about:

    > (a) homelessness and the prevention of homelessness, and
    > (b) any services which may assist a homeless person or assist in the prevention of homelessness, Is available free of charge to any person in the authority's area.

3.  [Section 2 of the Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003](#) removed the priority need test, meaning local authorities have a duty to rehouse *all* people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness:

    "From such day as the Scottish Ministers may by order made by statutory instrument appoint [subsequently set as 31 December 2012], the question whether an applicant has a priority need is to be left out of account in determining the duties of a local authority under:

    (a) section 31 (duties to persons found to be homeless), and
    (b) section 32 (duties to persons found to be threatened with homelessness),of the 1987 Act."

4.  Against this background, the [Code of Guidance on Homelessness](#), the statutory guidance attached to the legislation, was revised in 2005 to reflect the changing environment around homelessness. The Code of Guidance addresses prevention, housing advice and Housing Options.

    Paragraph 3.17 states, "all services should ensure that they are promoting and practising values which deliver responsive and personalised services. Staff should ensure that accommodation and services are offered on the basis of a thorough assessment of the applicant's needs and that these needs are assessed in a holistic fashion. The emphasis should be on finding sustainable solutions – not on a rigid application of the legislation which does not take into account the individual circumstances of the household (although an individual's entitlements should never be undermined)."

Paragraph 4.4 states, "local authorities have a duty to provide good quality housing advice on a range of housing options of which accessing local authority or housing association accommodation via a homeless application is one…at all times, staff must be aware that should an individual wish to make a homeless application, they are within their rights to do so, and housing staff must accept that application. Staff should ensure that applicants are aware of their legal rights or where they may receive information on these."

5. The Scottish Government and COSLA produced Prevention of Homelessness Guidance in 2009. This also addresses Housing Options work.

   Paragraph 50 states, "Housing Options work has an important and valuable contribution to make to homelessness prevention activity. There has been growing recognition of the potential value of providing a range of options where people make enquiries about housing. John Hills' review of social housing published in 2007 highlighted the success of the 'Housing Options approach' in preventing homelessness. To achieve most benefit from this approach, people should be assisted to understand the range of potential options available to them and their family if appropriate, in their area and based on their personal circumstances, at the earliest opportunity."

   Paragraph 52 states, "Decisions about the most appropriate use of the "Options" approach when an applicant contacts a council to make a homelessness application need to be balanced with the legal duty to respond to the application. It may be entirely appropriate to offer a Housing Options interview as a precursor to completion of a homelessness application; however, if the applicant is homeless at the time of interview or threatened with homelessness within two months, a homelessness application should also be completed. Efforts to prevent homelessness should then progress alongside the routine administration of the homelessness application, particularly where a diagnostic assessment indicates that a real opportunity exists to prevent it."

6. The legislation which established the housing support duty (Section 158 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010) states there is a duty on local authorities to conduct a housing support assessment for applicants who are unintentionally homeless or threatened with homelessness and that they have 'reason to believe' need the housing support services prescribed in regulations. Housing support is defined as including 'any service which provides support, assistance, advice or counselling to an individual with particular needs with a view to enabling that individual to occupy, or to continue to occupy, residential accommodation as the individual's sole or main residence'. Housing support services, as prescribed by the 2010 Act, were further defined in Housing Support Services (Homelessness) (Scotland) Regulations 2012:

(a) advising or assisting a person with personal budgeting, debt counselling or in dealing with welfare benefit claims;

(b) assisting a person to engage with individuals, professionals or other bodies with an interest in that person's welfare;

(c) advising or assisting a person in understanding and managing their tenancy rights and responsibilities, including assisting a person in disputes about those rights and responsibilities;

(d) advising or assisting a person in settling into a new tenancy.

The provision of housing support can be an important part of preventing homelessness and repeat homelessness. Following the provision of a tenancy, it will be important that the tenancy has the best possible chance to be sustained. The housing support duty for local authorities covered by the regulations and the guidance are important tools in addressing homelessness in Scotland.

**ANNEX 4 - Development of Housing Options in Scotland**

1   The [Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003](#) introduced a new duty on local authorities, that by 31 December 2012, all unintentionally homeless households would be entitled to settled accommodation.

2   Following a [Ministerial statement](#) in 2005, setting an interim target in 2009 to show progress towards achieving the 2012 target, and in order to facilitate the ability of local authorities to meet this new duty, a Scottish Government/COSLA 2012 Steering Group was set up. It included the Housing Minister, the COSLA spokesperson, SOLACE, SFHA and ALACHO. It was chaired by a COSLA elected member.

3   This Group met to determine the extent of homelessness and to explore how best homelessness could be prevented. The Housing Options approach was seen as having merit to be fully introduced in Scotland; some local authorities were already implementing this approach. A conference was held in 2010 which showcased Housing Options and the Scottish Government committed resources to support its development in Scotland.

4   After a series of meetings across Scotland, five local authority led Housing Options "hubs" were established in 2010. All 32 local authorities are a member of a hub. The hubs were awarded grants to undertake joint training, commissioning joint research, developing joint approaches to prevention, benchmarking and sharing practice. These are supported by quarterly seminars which bring the hubs together to discuss their own developments, receive a Scottish Government update, discuss topical issues of the day and enable other organisations access to the hubs to explain their work and the benefits they can offer. An annual conference with a wider invitation list is also held to promote prevention across all interested organisations.

5   The approach to prevention is welcomed by local authorities and other stakeholders. This is having an impact on the official statistics, showing a reduction in applications and assessments – see figure. This focus on prevention builds on the [Code of Guidance](#) and the Scottish Government and COSLA's statutory [guidance for local authorities on preventing homelessness](#). The hubs work together to share best practice, have developed joint training, commissioned research on their local areas and work together to improve the focus on the prevention of homelessness and the sustainability of the outcomes for homeless people. The development of Housing Options has recognised that local authorities and their partners operate in their local contexts with local challenges. Consequently, it was important that locally tailored services developed sufficiently before the development of broader guidance.

6   The [Official Statistics on the Operation of the Homeless Persons Legislation in Scotland: 2013/14](#) states: "the reductions are a consequence of a major Scottish wide approach to prevent homelessness. Through this, councils have been developing services, generally described as 'Housing Options services' in which staff assist households to consider the range of options available to address their housing needs. For example, councils might provide mediation services to assist in resolving disputes within the household, or they might assist households to secure a private let by guaranteeing the rent deposit. As a consequence, some of the households who might previously have made a homelessness application will now have their housing needs met without first becoming homeless or being threatened with homelessness."

7.   Following the achievement of the 2012 homelessness target, the Scottish Government/COSLA Joint 2012 Steering Group was renamed the Homelessness Prevention and Strategy Group. It was expanded to include Shelter Scotland and Homeless Action Scotland. It had the role of overseeing the development of this guidance.