

Stirling Tenants Assembly

Tenant Led Inspection Report

On

Stirling Council's Homeless Service



Winners of the TPAS 'Good Practice in Tenant Participation' award 2007

Supported by:



Part 1. Background and Methodology

1 Introduction

1.1 This report has been compiled for Stirling Council Housing Services. The purpose of this report is to provide feedback on the recently completed tenant-led inspection of the Council's services for homeless people. The inspection was organised by the Tenant Led Inspections group and supported by Stirling Tenants Assembly and Stirling Tenants Project. Stirling Council gave permission for the inspection to go ahead. All staff and service users taking part were briefed in advance regarding the purpose, method and dates of the inspections. Stirling Council provided funding for the inspection.

2. Background and Context

2.1 This is the third inspection which tenants in Stirling have carried out.

2.2 The purpose of the inspection is to see whether the service is running as it is intended to. Inspections aim to identify whether practice reflects policy and also to identify where aspects of the service could be improved. Findings are fed back to service managers as part of the formal consultation process.

2.3 Tenant Inspectors had been interested in looking at the homeless service as the focus for one of their inspections. The Regulation and Inspection team from Communities Scotland had inspected Stirling Council's homeless service in May and June 2004. The inspection grade received was a 'C' and a number of recommendations for improvement were made. The inspection made by Communities Scotland highlighted the areas of the service that they felt were working well and those that were not working well. These are stated below:

3. Key findings on homelessness

3.1 These are the areas in the homelessness service that are working well:

- The Council has a good approach to help people who do not speak English to access its homeless services.
- Homeless people are interviewed quickly by the Council.
- The Council's support worker actively engages with people who may not normally access its homeless services.
- The Council is making good progress to achieve the national standards for housing information and advice.
- The Council provides good information, advice and support to young people.
- The Council has a number of positive initiatives to help prevent homelessness.
- The Council minimises lengths of stay in Bed and Breakfast accommodation for families with children.
- The Council's temporary accommodation is of a good standard.
- There is strong corporate ownership of the Council's homelessness strategy.

- The Council is good at collecting and reporting information on its performance in some key aspects of its homeless services.
- The Council has initiated a very good approach to collecting the views of users of its homeless services.
- The homeless service has been supported well by the Council's corporate procurement team.

3.2 These are the areas of the homelessness service that could work better:

- The Council is underreporting the incidence of homelessness and the number of people it loses contact with.
- The homeless services do not have a strong rural focus.
- Tenants evicted by the Council are not always accessing its homeless services.
- The Council's assessment of homeless applications is more characteristic of a system designed to ration people's entitlement than to find solutions to people's housing and related needs.
- The Council does not always provide homeless people with clear decision letters.
- The Council is increasingly reliant on Bed and Breakfast accommodation and out-of-area placements.
- The Council's provision of temporary accommodation alternatives to Bed and Breakfast is inadequate.
- The Council limits choice for homeless people in the provision of permanent accommodation and does not always fully consider their needs.
- The Council does not yet have a comprehensive framework of policies and procedures, service standards and targets, and performance monitoring and reporting for its homelessness services.
- While the Council has a good system for identifying the training needs of homeless staff, it is less effective at providing the required training.

3.3 These are Communities Scotland's key recommendations. They are broadly in order of significance:

- The Council should change its approach to the allocation of permanent accommodation to ensure that it fully considers homeless people's needs and improves their level of choice.
- The Council should ensure that its homeless services are structured and delivered in a way that identifies and meets the needs of homeless people in rural areas.
- The Council should ensure that its assessment of homeless applications is conducted in a way that is always focused on the needs and circumstances of the individual homeless person.
- The Council should set clear targets for early reductions in its use of bed and breakfast accommodation. To achieve this it should increase the supply of temporary accommodation alternatives to Bed and Breakfast establishments.
- The Council should progress its proposed development of a comprehensive framework of service standards, and build on its current approach to monitoring and reporting its performance in homelessness to ensure that it covers the full range of its activities.

- The Council should ensure that all staff are now following procedures requiring them to interview tenants at the initiation of court action to ensure that these tenants receive appropriate advice and assistance.
- The Council should ensure that applicants are always made aware of their right to appeal homeless decisions.
- The Council should ensure that it is providing, or facilitating access to, the training its staff need to deliver its homeless services.
- The Council should record all applications for assistance from initial approach to enable it to know and accurately report homelessness.

The above is an extract from the full report, which can be viewed at:

(www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk/stellent/groups/public/documents/webpages/cs_008292.pdf)

4. Structure of the report

4.1 This report outlines the inspection methods used by the tenant inspection team and sets out their findings. It identifies any common themes found during the inspection process. The report establishes whether practice reflects policy within Stirling Council homeless services. Recommendations will be made on areas that could be improved and areas of good practice will be highlighted also. The report format reflects that there were two separate parts to this inspection. Tenant Inspectors looked into mainstream homeless services and also looked separately at the services provided for young people who find themselves faced with homelessness.

5. Methods

5.1 The methods used in this tenant inspection consist of:

- Visits to Bed and Breakfast and temporary accommodation
- Interviews with staff within the homeless service.
- Interviews with individuals who have used the homeless service

5.2 The Council considered that all the changes and recommendations stated in the report by Communities Scotland would be in place by December 2006 so the tenant Inspection team began their inspection in early 2007.

5.3 In preparation for carrying out the inspection, Tenant Inspectors met with Stirling Council's Homeless Services Manager who gave the inspection team a background to the service and suggested areas to inspect such as those which Communities Scotland had suggested needed improvement.

5.4 An additional meeting was held before the inspections began with an independent housing consultant who shared her knowledge on housing issues with the inspection team and helped them to highlight areas to focus on in their inspections.

5.5 All comments have been treated in the strictest confidence. Feedback is not attributable to individual staff or users of the homeless service. Instead, it is used to

demonstrate current practice and highlight areas where the service is doing well and also those where there is room for improvement. In addition all members of the inspection team have signed an appropriate code of conduct agreement and have received full training on tenant –led inspections. The tenant volunteers involved in this inspection were all experienced in the inspection process as they had all completed previous inspections.

6. Selecting a tenant inspection team

6.1 All Stirling Council Tenants were invited to become a tenant inspector. Adverts were placed in Stirling Council's open door magazine, the Stirling Tenants Assembly newsletter and publicised at STA conferences.

6.2 All tenants that volunteered to take part in the inspections were asked to complete an application form. The form was used to find out a bit more about tenants. It included their reasons for wanting to become Tenant Inspectors, their existing skills and the times they are available for training and carrying out inspections. No new volunteers came forward between the last inspection and this one. Therefore all Tenant Inspectors taking part in this homeless inspection had previous experience of Tenant-Led Inspections. This meant that training was not required as part of this particular inspection.

6.3 Tenant Inspectors complied with the code of conduct that they had agreed upon for previous inspections. It had been stressed since Tenant Led Inspections first began that Tenant Inspectors would behave professionally with everyone involved in the inspection and stick to the agreed area of inspection.

7. Identifying areas of Homeless Service as a focus for the Inspection.

7.1 It was agreed that there would be a separate area of focus for youth homelessness since there is a separate service for young people provided by Loretto Care called 'The Bridge Project' at Lower Bridge Street in Stirling. This would be looked at by two of the inspectors only. The findings from both the young people's service based at 'The Bridge' and the 'mainstream' homeless service based at Springkerse House would be looked at as part of the whole inspection report.

7.2 The Inspection process was as follows:

- Inspection of temporary accommodation; both Bed and Breakfasts and self contained flats and the crisis accommodation provided at The Bridge Project
- Interviews with members of staff from both the youth service based at 'The Bridge' and with staff from Springkerse House.
- Interviews with people who have used the services both the Bridge Project and the Springkerse House mainstream homeless service only.

Part 2- the Inspection

The Inspection team were Donald Budge, Philomena McClung, Michael Griffiths, Mary Rainey and Alexander Lamb.

1. Visits to Bed and Breakfast and Temporary Accommodation.

1.1 Tenant Inspectors were shown two examples of Bed and Breakfast accommodation and two self-contained flats/bedsits for single people.

1.2 The Bed and Breakfast accommodations viewed were those, which had been awarded the tender to provide, Bed and Breakfast accommodation for homeless people.

1.3 Both Bed and Breakfasts were in the village of Cowie where there are a range of local convenience stores, a post office, a pharmacist and some take away food establishments. There is also a primary school in the village should homeless families require to send their children there. There are two bus services that run regularly between the village and central Stirling.

1.4 Both Bed and Breakfast premises that were visited were found to offer a good standard of accommodation. Both were of a high standard of cleanliness and the household decoration look fairly new, as did the furniture.

1.5 Bed and Breakfast Accommodation 1: This provided residents with their own fridge and kettle in the rooms, there is a microwave on the landing by the rooms for residents use if they wish to make hot food. The bathroom is shared. There is a television provided for each bedroom.

1.6 There were bedrooms suitable for different numbers of occupants so that families could stay here. Tenant Inspectors were concerned that the number of beds in a room meant that homeless people were expected to share rooms. The person who showed the team round said 'well if too many people need a bed then they have to be put together'. A member of Stirling Council staff who accompanied Tenant Inspectors on the day gave assurances that these rooms with several beds were for families who need accommodation and that individuals would not be expected to share. It was unclear from the comments made whether the Bed and Breakfast owners were aware of these rules. Though the manager of the Bed and Breakfast was not there at the time and a relative instead was there to show inspectors around.

1.7 Smoking was only allowed outside the premises. This was the only rule that was highlighted although we were told that on occasion residents had to be requested to tidy up their rooms.

1.8 Bed and Breakfast 2: The manager showed us round and spent some time chatting with the team. This house only provides accommodation for single males and all rooms have only got one bed in them.

1.9 Each room has its own television and kettle, each resident has a wardrobe which locks and they can keep their valuables in. All rooms had en suite bathrooms.

1.10 The residents also have access to a lounge/kitchen and conservatory (these are locked up at night) residents are free to use the microwave, grill and kettle in the kitchen and to store items in the fridge and freezer.

1.11 The accommodation was very clean and comfortably furnished. The inspectors all found it to be very comfortable and homely. The lounge space is quite large and there is Sky television there if residents want to watch that.

1.12 Toothbrushes, toothpaste, shampoo and soap/shower gel is provided for residents to use.

1.13 The landlady said she was very strict about the rules though they seemed fair. There is a curfew that is later at weekends than during the week, but she is flexible around bus times etc. Residents are allowed one night out per week, they choose whether to go on Friday or Saturday.

1.14 Smoking is allowed outside or in the conservatory as long as there is not anyone who objects. But other shared rooms are kept smoke free.

1.15 Bedsits at Springkerse House: Tenant Inspectors saw two of these flats. They were identical except for their décor as residents bring their own things such as televisions and pictures for the walls. These apartments are self-contained units where tenants have their own kitchen and bathroom. There is a separate laundry and tokens can be bought for this at the reception.

1.16 The complex has secure door entry using a swipe fob to get through the main entry door and there are keys for each individual apartment.

1.17 The inspection team visited two single person apartments but there is also a family flat and two ground floor flats that are adapted for people with disabilities to use. These flats were in a good state of repair and although basic the furnishings were in good condition. Kitchen utensils and a 'welcome pack' containing cleaning materials are provided.

1.18 This accommodation is near two budget supermarkets and easily accessed by public transport, it is a ten to fifteen minute walk from the town centre.

1.19 Tenants are responsible for cleaning their flats themselves though they are inspected and there is a standard that is expected of them.

2. Staff Interviews at Springkerse House

2.1 The same questions were asked to all of the members of staff. The purpose of asking the same questions to each of the people who were interviewed was to facilitate discussion with the hope that these questions were suitably designed to lead to in-depth answers. Asking each person the same question was also designed to make it possible to spot inconsistencies across the service and therefore highlight areas where staff need

more input. It also allowed the Tenant Inspectors to learn more about the service and the range of support that is provided.

2.2 Tenant Inspectors interviewed five members of staff working at Springkerse House. Springkerse House is the base for the homeless service, which deals with all frontline enquiries, homeless applications, and offers advice and support to people making homeless applications and on the waiting list for permanent accommodation.

2.3 Questions and collected answers:

1. Under what circumstances would you record an incident as homelessness?

Whenever a person presents themselves as homeless the staff take the case on or can give advice if that is all that is required. Every case is taken on its merit. When a person phones through to the front desk an appointment is made with a caseworker who carries the case forward.

2. How do you carry out your enquiries to assess homelessness, priority need etc?

Assessments are done through the accommodation office. Benefits and bank account statements or a national insurance number are required for assessment. Individuals are also asked what the circumstances under which they became homeless are.

There are four 'hurdles' 1. Homeless, 2. Priority, 3. Intentional and 4. Local connection but this last one is being phased out. Situations can be that parents have asked their son/daughter to leave or a person has split up with a partner. Certain issues such as age and if the person is a medical priority are taken into account. If someone is fleeing from an abusive situation at home then staff do not check this with the (alleged) abuser. Each person is assigned a caseworker and it is the caseworker's responsibility to assess the case on its merit. If a person wishes to appeal a decision then the appeal is heard by the service manager.

3. a) Do you have access to the right information in order to advise people of the rules and regulations surrounding homeless applications?

b) What do you refer to?

A range of documentation is used by staff to keep them up to date with homeless policy, they can refer to the Housing Act, the Scottish Executive's Code of Guidance and the LSA (Legal Services Agency) book.

4. Who is notified when a tenant is threatened with eviction?

Anybody facing eviction will be put in contact with all relevant agencies who may be able to support them. The homeless unit is often informed in advance of an eviction; they receive copies of the letter of eviction. Pre-eviction visits can be arranged to see if any assistance can be offered to the individual at that stage. No accommodation will be arranged for the person until they are actually made homeless, however the homeless officer does liaise with the housing officer.

5. What steps do you take to help people avoid eviction?

The Housing Officer will meet with a person threatened with eviction and offer advice to help to find a solution to the matter; they may be recommended to go to the Rent Officer and try to come up with a payment plan to sort out rent arrears.

6. Does the Council have a Welfare Rights Officer?

Referrals can be made from Springkerse House to the Welfare Rights Officer who is based at Viewforth. Additionally individuals can be recommended to go to visit the Citizens' Advice Bureau.

7. What is being done to improve the rural focus of the homelessness service?

Rural Housing associations are making more of their accommodation available. A proportion of their houses are made available for homeless accommodation. Homeless service staff have been working on improving contacts with rural housing associations so that each side is aware of the other's work and the responsibilities which they have towards homeless people.

8. What happens if someone is seeking advice on his or her homeless situation and they are based in a rural area e.g. Aberfoyle? Would they be expected to travel to Springkerse House?

Advice can be offered over the phone but if a person wants to make a homeless application then this must be made in person. It is preferred that people travel in to Springkerse House but if they can't travel to Stirling then arrangements can be made for a case worker to go and see them. One staff member also said that taxis can be provided to bring people from the rural areas into Stirling if this is required.

9. a) How often do you receive training on homelessness and homeless service provision?
b) Who provides the training?
c) Do you feel that this training is sufficient?

Staff seemed happy with the amount and standard of training which was available to them. Lists of available courses were posted on notice boards, staff can apply to go to these. Management promotes training opportunities and encourages people to attend; they will also highlight areas where there is a training need. Training is provided by the Legal Services Agency, the Chartered Institute of Housing and Shelter as well as 'in-house training'

10. What is your understanding of the aims and objectives of the Council's Homelessness Strategy?

The main aim (in line with Scottish Executive policy) is to eradicate homelessness by 2012; this means there is a huge demand for more housing (both permanent and temporary) as well as a need for greater resources for prevention of homelessness.

Changes have been made to the service recently to link in with the Scottish Executive's policy.

11. Is there anything, in your view, which could be done to improve the service offered to the homeless in Stirling?

More money is needed to build more homes and to employ more staff to focus on the prevention of homelessness, as currently people find they don't have enough time to do this. A furniture service where second hand furniture can be provided to people moving into their own tenancies would be a great idea.

One worker also felt that the system was easily open to abuse and that there were people who were given chances but chose not to take advantage of what is offered to them. Also, there are people who claim to be homeless on a Friday night or Saturday when there is no-one who can check up on process their application. They stay in the emergency accommodation then are gone by Monday morning; it is thought people do this on purpose to get a free weekend in Stirling. Stirling Council need to look at finding ways to prevent this.

3. Interviews with homeless applicants and users of the homeless service:

3.1 Interview with users of the homeless service took place at Springkerse House.

The interview procedure was the same as it was with staff members. Every interviewee was asked the same set of questions.

3.2 Questions and Answers:

Thinking back to when you first made contact with the homeless service:

1. How did you find out about the homelessness service?

Those people who were interviewed were either advised to contact Springkerse House by the Social Security office, Citizens Advice Bureau or by a member of their family.

2. When did you first make contact with the homeless service?

The people interviewed had all been involved with the homeless service for a minimum of five months. One of them had initially made contact by telephone from Plean but was requested to go to Springkerse House and had to walk as had no money for transport. This is eight miles. This person was not offered a visit by a Caseworker in their area or any help towards transport.

3. How quickly were you seen?

After arriving at Springkerse House all interviewees were seen quickly, the longest wait was just 30 minutes.

4. How easy was it for you to get to Springkerse House?

For people who lived nearby getting to Springkerse House was reported as being easy as they all knew where it was and only had to walk a short distance, however, one person had to walk 8 miles from Plean.

5. What did you think of the service you received? Why?

Opinions differed here, some people found the service received to be excellent and commented that it had 'improved since last time'. Other comments were that the accommodation offered was better than that offered during a previous stay in homeless accommodation. Specifically one person said that the speed of the process of applying for and being offered temporary accommodation was quicker than it had been previously. However two others felt that although the service received while at Springkerse House was fine, the accommodation that they were offered was not suitable.

6. a) Were you provided with any information, advice or assistance from the homelessness service?

b) Was it useful?

All answered yes to both parts of this question.

7. Were you offered temporary accommodation?

Everybody interviewed had been offered and had stayed in temporary accommodation on at least one occasion. One turned down an initial offer of Alloa as this was unsuitable and made it impossible to continue with other commitments.

8. Have you stayed in temporary accommodation?

Two were happy with the temporary accommodation that they had accepted while two were unhappy. People interviewed have stayed in Glasgow, Tillicoultry, Alloa and Stirling (City Centre and Eastern Villages) in a combination of Bed and Breakfasts and temporary flats/bedsits.

9. Is it / was it suitable for your needs?

Only one person from those interviewed was completely satisfied with the temporary accommodation they were offered. One had a job and was offered accommodation in a place that made it impossible to continue with that employment. There did not seem to be much notice taken of commitments such as work. Similarly someone was offered Glasgow and this did not suit as it is too far from other commitments as well as friends and family.

One person who had stayed in Alloa said that although the standard was OK they had to share a room with a person they did not know, and there were some rooms where there were three people sharing one room. Someone claimed that if there was someone else staying, staff at the Bed and Breakfast brought another bed into the room. This was also the case in accommodation in Tillicoultry. At this place in Tillicoultry residents were

required to vacate the accommodation between 10am and 6pm each day regardless of weather conditions on the day.

Even when people had no specific complaints relating to the accommodation provided, they found being sent to Tillicoultry or Glasgow difficult. Sending people to an area where they don't know anybody makes them feel more isolated than they would if they were able to remain near to their family and friends.

One person was staying in Bed and Breakfast accommodation in Glasgow and was the only female in the facility and she was assaulted. She felt that once someone has been sent out to Glasgow they are forgotten about by Stirling Council.

10. What did you think of the standard of this accommodation?

People were happy with the temporary flats that they were staying in at present, at Springkerse House and also at Princes Street.

11. Do you have any general comments you would like to make about the service?

There have been occasions when staff at the rent office have been rude to service users; the service users feel that they are treated unfairly due to their status as homeless. Formal complaints have been made on this matter. Other service users found staff to be friendly and helpful though.

People found it depressing and difficult to cope with what were felt to be threatening letters regarding rent arrears while they were waiting for rent rebates to come through. The financial difficulties and stress of setting up in new accommodation were hard to cope with but for many people the addition of letters which were threatening in tone was a lot to deal with.

There is little support for people with jobs. Accommodation that is offered does not always take into account a need to be close to their work, they are also charged more for accommodation and can find it difficult to manage money and maintain the employment.

Service users say transport is not provided to get to Springkerse House even from quite long distances. Money difficulties were often cited. Someone was sent to Glasgow Queen's Park Hotel. They were given a bus ticket to Glasgow bus station but left to their own devices to find the way to the B&B in Queen's Park. However, a taxi was sent to bring her back to Stirling from Glasgow, which was a waste of money where a public transport ticket would have been sufficient.

More support from council/charities to provide second hand furniture is needed, as people have to move into permanent accommodation without even a bed or something to cook with. Often homeless people cannot afford the cost of setting up their own home.

4. The Bridge Project: Youth Homeless Services.

4.1 The Bridge Project has ten spaces for temporary accommodation for young homeless people aged between 16 and 25 although the service users are predominantly aged between 16 –18. Loretto Care manages the Project.

4.2 Referrals to 'The Bridge' come from staff at Springkerse House who decide whether those presenting as homeless satisfy the criteria for 'The Bridge' and then refer them.

4.3 The Bridge Project offers four different services:

- Accommodation,
- An outreach service for those in their own flats,
- Crisis accommodation used for overnight or possibly weekend stays for individuals presenting as homeless after 5pm on a weekday or during the weekend,
- They also provide information in the form of leaflets and a DVD (still in development) which are available in a range of settings e.g. schools, housing offices, youth services and at Springkerse House.

4.4 Residents at the project will be allocated a key worker who works with them to develop and implement a support plan. Residents set their own goals. Examples of these goals given were:

- To get a house,
- To (re) build relationships with family members,
- To get a job,
- To get qualifications/education/skills,
- To deal with issues of addiction.

4.5 Residents are also given the opportunity to learn living skills such as budgeting and cooking. Residents must buy their own electricity cards, food and TV licence (if they have their own TV).

5. Viewing of temporary accommodation managed by the Bridge Project.

5.1 The Bridge service provides temporary accommodation and support services to young people only.

5.2 Two Tenant Inspectors were able to see round the crisis accommodation; this is used only for an overnight or weekend long stay (if someone presents himself or herself as homeless on a Friday) they will then be found a more medium term temporary accommodation.

5.3 This accommodation comprised of a one bedroom flat with its own kitchen, bathroom and lounge. It was decorated to a good standard and cleaned thoroughly after each person has stayed. Bedding and kitchen utensils are provided as is a television and licence.

5.4 The standard of this accommodation is good and is reported by staff at the project to be a good example of the standard of the temporary accommodation offered to the young people who stay at the project in the medium term.

6. Staff Interviews:

'The Bridge Project' staff:

6.1 The Tenant Inspectors interviewed five members of staff at this project. These members of staff did slightly different jobs but all were involved in the support of young people who accessed the services at The Bridge. This included outreach support workers, support workers based within the service and advice and advocacy workers.

6.2 The same question and answer procedure was followed as at Springkerse House.

6.3 Questions and summary of collected answers:

1. Under what circumstances is a person offered accommodation at 'The Bridge'?

Assessments are made at Springkerse House and the staff there decide if The Bridge is a suitable placement for the person and if there is space to take them they are offered accommodation. Some support services are available to young people living in temporary accommodation elsewhere also.

Young people are often made homeless due to some sort of family breakdown.

2. Are there circumstances under which a person might be refused accommodation?

If they are known to have had previous problems with violence or breaking the rules on previous stays at the project then they might not be considered for a place. This would happen rarely though.

3. How long, on average, do young people reside at The Bridge Project?

People are in temporary accommodation for longer than they used to be as it takes a while for accommodation to become available.

If it is felt that an individual is not yet ready to cope on their own in a tenancy then they could stay longer at The Bridge Project until they are able to support their own tenancy.

The average length of stay is from 7 to 8 months but it can be up to a year.

4. Are there rules which residents must adhere to if they are to continue receiving support from your service?

There is a list of rules which must be stuck to; if someone constantly breaks these rules they will be asked to leave but this is always only a last resort. The rules are all listed in the pack which residents receive at the start of their stay. They are not allowed overnight guests in the accommodation and only a certain amount of visitors at a time.

5. Will their service be suspended immediately if these rules are broken?

They will work with people to try to resolve issues, asking someone to leave is a last resort only.

6.(a) What steps do you take to help people to move on to permanent accommodation?

Service Users are offered a complete support package. There is a cooking club that encompasses shopping/budgeting/cooking and cleaning up as well as meal planning. There is also access to external training programmes such as Fab Pad, which gives young people interior design skills, as well as paying them for ½ days attendance and a décor budget. They are also supported to learn housekeeping skills such as cleaning and doing laundry. There is support provided with form filling in organising things such as electricity. Support workers can also offer some support in filling in job/college applications and such like.

(b) And to help them to maintain these tenancies?

The Support Workers at 'The Bridge' provide an outreach service to young people who live in their own tenancies outwith the project's own accommodation. This ensures that there is support and guidance offered to people who are in their own tenancy so that they are able to maintain their tenancy.

7. (a) Do you have access to the right information in order to advise people of the rules and regulations surrounding homeless applications? (b) What do you refer to?

The applications process is done at Springkerse House. Staff members at 'The Bridge' refer applicants to there.

8. What additional support does the service offer to young people?

There is a lot more support offered through The Bridge Project than is offered by Springkerse House. The Support Workers help with budgeting, grants, rent rebates and crisis loans etc. as well as the support highlighted under question number 6. There are also computers with Internet access available for free use.

9. What information is available to 'off the street' callers who drop in the 'The Bridge'?

If they wish to process a homeless application then they are referred to Springkerse House. The computers are available for use, encouraged to look for jobs and training opportunities as well as other information. There is an Advisory Worker also based at The Bridge who can offer advice on benefits and grants etc.

10. (a) How often do you receive training on homelessness and homeless service provision?

Staff at the Bridge project commented that they get sufficient training which is provided both in-house and from external sources. Attending training events is actively

encouraged; if anyone feels they need to know more about a particular aspect then they only have to ask for the training to be provided.

(b) Who provides the training?

Training comes from a variety of sources; In-house training from Loretto Care, Stirling Council training sessions as well as other external training opportunities.

(c) Was it useful?

Staff members felt that training was sufficient and useful.

11. What is your understanding of the aims and objective of the Council's homelessness strategy?

This question was not answered by anyone, as they felt that as Loretto Care and not the Council employed them they had a more specific remit.

6.4 Youth Support Worker based at Springkerse House:

In addition to the staff based at The Bridge the Tenant Inspectors who were focussing on youth homelessness interviewed a Young Person's Support Worker who offers outreach support to young people and is based at Springkerse House. The questions differed in order to relate to her job better.

6.5 Questions and Answers as follows:

1. What support does the service offer to young people?

Helping them to get a place to stay until they are able to take on a flat from the Council. They are supported in learning skills for living such as how to cook and how to manage their money.

2. Under what circumstances is a young person provided with support from you?

Any young person can be offered support and assistance as long as they require it.

3. Are there circumstances under which a person might be refused support?

Some people may not engage with the worker and if they show that they do not want support then it is not pushed upon them. They can come back any time and request assistance and their case will be re opened.

4. How long, on average do young people require your support?

This varies according to the needs of the individual, some people may only need some advice but others will need more support.

5. Are there rules which service users must adhere to if they are to continue receiving support from your service?

There are no particular rules but if staff feel that someone is not engaging with them and is not interested in receiving support then they will close the file though people can come back at any time if they want support.

6. Will their service be suspended if these rules are broken?

Their file will be closed but can be reopened at any time.

7. (a) What steps do you take to help people to move on to permanent accommodation?
(b) And to help them to maintain these tenancies?

General assistance with applying for benefits and grants to which they are entitled. Help to apply for housing and council tax benefits. There are links with the Fab Pad scheme run by youth services which helps young people to learn techniques to help them with decorating their home. They attend for a half-day per week and get an allowance for attending. They also get a small budget to help to pay for the decoration of their new home and paint.

8. (a) Do you have access to the right information in order to advise people of the rules and regulations surrounding homeless applications?
(b) What do you refer to?

Yes, There are lots of documents within the service. Internet access is also used to check for the most up-to-date information.

9. (a) How often do you receive training on homelessness and homeless service provision?
(b) Who provides the training?
(c) Was it sufficient?

Varied training is provided. Generally staff ask management for training if there is an area which they feel they need training on; generally requests for training are approved by management.

10. What is your understanding of the aims and objective of the Council's homelessness strategy?

There had been a lot of changes in the time they had been working there to fit into the strategy. One of which is mediation for under 25s which is felt to be a positive thing to introduce.

11. Is there anything that you feel would improve the service offered to young homeless people in Stirling?

There needs to be more time for the person to get a starter pack and to get them a hardship loan from Social Security when they are allocated a flat, and to apply for rent

and council tax benefits. There should be a minimum of 14 days. With only three days, often people have nothing to sleep on and no cooking appliances when they move into the new home.

Things are worse for people who work as they have less time available to apply for all of these things.

7. Interviews with users of the Homeless Service.

7.1 As at Springkerse House, the procedure for interviewing young homeless people was that each person was to be asked the same set of questions. One person agreed to be interviewed.

7.2 Young homeless people at 'The Bridge' Project.

One young person who is being supported by 'The Bridge' project agreed to be interviewed. This individual stated that the staff employed at 'The Bridge' service itself were very good as was the accommodation. She had also experienced mainstream services and lived in temporary accommodation outside of The Bridge Project. Because the answers given did not relate specifically to The Bridge Project but to the service as a whole they have been included with the other service users who were interviewed at Springkerse House.

8. Analysis and Reflection

8.1 On completion of the inspection, the inspection team met as a whole to discuss findings and recommendations. They also discussed the general impression of the service and the experience of carrying out the inspection as a whole. Tenant Inspectors wished to stress that they acknowledge that staff in homeless services can have a difficult job and that they often have to deal with people suffering from a range of problems. The inspectors identified common themes from the findings of the inspection; these have been presented under headings detailing which part of the 'homelessness process' the issue relates to.

9. During the Application Process

9.1 Service users on the whole reported that they were seen quickly by a Caseworker on arrival at Springkerse House. Overall people found that the service that they received at this stage of involvement with the homeless service was good.

9.2 There were problems for people who lived outwith Stirling City itself as they had to travel to Stirling to meet with a Caseworker at Springkerse House and have their homeless application processed.

9.3 Staff at Springkerse House said that although they prefer people to come to them they can arrange to send a Caseworker out to see the client or transport can be provided if the client cannot get to Springkerse House of their own accord. This does not seem to have

been the case for those interviewed. One person told the inspectors they had to walk 8 miles to get to Springkerse House.

9.4 Further Information Required

- Is there a specific distance from Springkerse House that homeless applicants have to be before transport is it arranged?
- If so, what is this distance?
- Are there only particular incidences where transport/home visits are arranged?

10. Temporary accommodation

10.1 The people who agreed to be interviewed for this inspection had all stayed in Bed and Breakfast accommodation before being moved in to self-contained temporary accommodation. This was an issue that staff members, homeless people and Tenant Inspectors all felt was of concern. Though people seemed happy with the self-contained flats and bedsits that they lived in while waiting for permanent homes.

10.2 Members of support staff had commented that there was too much reliance on the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation in general and of particular concern was sending people to Bed and Breakfasts outside of the Stirling Council area. Staff were concerned that, especially in the case of vulnerable young people, sending them away from home caused feelings of isolation, and displacement. They were lost within the system and couldn't always get the help required as a result of this. There are also issues with moving a person from a rural location to an urban setting even within the Stirling Council area.

10.3 The homeless people who had stayed in Bed and Breakfasts outside of the Stirling Council area echoed the concerns of staff members by stating that they didn't like being where they didn't know anybody. There were also reports of Bed and Breakfasts, which had 2-3 people sharing a room and also requiring residents to leave the accommodation during the day. These reports were in contrast to the accommodation that was shown to Tenant Inspectors when they visited two Bed and Breakfasts.

10.4 During the Bed and Breakfast visits an inspector enquired about there being more than one bed in a bedroom; the person showing inspectors the accommodation said that 'if more people come then we need to put them in'. When another inspector commented on the beds to a member of Council staff the inspectors were assured that this would be used for families only and that people are never expected to share rooms with strangers. Yet, this practice seems prevalent from the reports on their experiences given to the Tenant Inspectors by homeless people themselves.

10.5 Further information required

It may be the case that Stirling Council has a policy that homeless people do not share rooms while staying in Bed and Breakfast accommodation but the other Council areas in which temporary accommodation is used do not share this view.

11. Support while in Temporary Accommodation.

11.1 Young people who were given temporary accommodation at The Bridge Project were offered a good package of support and opportunities to learn skills, which they will require when they have their own tenancies. The Bridge also offers an outreach service, which supports people who have moved on to their own tenancies as well as young people who are accommodated outside of The Bridge. Stirling Council also employs a youth support worker who is based at Springkerse House. This worker offers support to young people moving onto permanent accommodation. External projects such as Fab Pad exist also for the benefit of young homeless people. Here, young people attend a course ½ a day per week for which they receive training on how to decorate their new home and also receive a budget towards decorating. This gives them pride in their home and also makes eviction on the grounds that they are not looking after it less likely.

11.2 There seems to be little support for people over the age of 25; they may also benefit from support and advice. Staff have commented that there are too few resources for outreach and support work.

11.3 Service users felt that anyone who was already in work or attending college were not offered the same standard of support, yet they still suffered problems with money and their tenancy. A member of staff commented on this also stating that for people who have jobs they have less time to spend trying to get everything sorted, such as getting an electricity account sorted out and finding furniture etc.

12. Moving into Permanent Accommodation

12.1 Only three days notice is given to a homeless person of the allocation of a permanent home, this is not felt to be long enough. The person will only have these three days to organise having utilities bills switched into their name and if they are on housing benefit, to get this sorted out. Some staff noted that often the person would end up having to pay rent on two homes while they got themselves sorted with furniture and such like and then started the tenancy in arrears. Other people moved into the new home but had to live there without furniture or facilities for cooking for a while. One member of staff stated that it was possible to request longer before having to move in to the new home but other staff did not seem to be aware of this.

12.2 Acquiring furniture was something that was an issue of concern also. One person had used the charitable Falkirk Furniture Service to get furniture for her home for free but staff at Springkerse House said that using the service was expensive for them. Tenant Inspectors were concerned that they knew of incidences where the Council had thrown out good quality furniture and carpets rather than allow a new tenant (who had requested them) to move into the house with the carpets intact. This seems wasteful especially when people could benefit from this second -hand furniture.

12.3 Further Information Required

- Does the Council pay for furniture that new tenants get from the Falkirk Furniture Service?
- When is it possible to request a longer period of time between notification of a house and having to start paying rent?
- Is it possible for Stirling Council to retain good quality furnishings which have been left behind by ex-tenants in order that they can be re-used by new tenants who desire them?

Part 3. Recommendations

1.1 At present people are only given three days notification before they are expected to move into their own permanent tenancy. If they take longer than this to move in they will be expected to pay rent on the temporary accommodation that they are leaving as well as the new property after the three days is up. Three days is not enough time, a longer period is needed between a homeless person being allocated a permanent residence and having to complete a move is required. Fourteen days is the period of time which Tenant Inspectors feel is required in order for a person to be able to sort out what they require in order to be able to take on the new tenancy such as processing their new housing benefit claim. More time is needed in order to get everything organised such as housing benefit, furniture and crisis loans. The application process for housing benefit and decoration/furnishing grants takes longer than three days. People will also need time to decorate if the standard of decoration is poor. **Tenant Inspectors recommend an increase to fourteen days notification of the allocation of a property. Inspectors also recommend that accommodation is always of a habitable standard before being allocated.**

1.2 A designated worker for benefits and grant claims from homeless applicants would help to speed up the process of applying for financial aid and help to prevent people from starting in a new tenancy with arrears already. Inspectors are given to believe that it is possible for other groups of people to have their claims received and dealt with in just one day. **Inspectors recommend that the process of dealing with financial claims be sped up. The recommendation is for a designated worker to deal with claims from homeless applicants.**

1.3 There is little legal support available for homeless people. Legal Aid solicitors are reluctant to take on homeless cases and Shelter's own solicitors are already busy but do offer a solicitor if there is one available, otherwise they can offer only advice. In addition there is often a long wait for an appointment with an advisors from the Citizens Advice Bureau. **Recommendations in regard to this would be outwith the powers of the homeless service itself.**

1.4 There are a lot of people staying in Bed and Breakfast accommodation instead of their own temporary accommodation. There needs to be more houses available for people who are ready to move into a permanent home. Then the temporary accommodation can be freed up and young people can receive the support and independent living skills training that Loretto provide before moving into their own tenancies. It was suggested that this helps to prevent people being unable to keep their tenancy and becoming homeless again. **In response to comments from members of staff, Tenant Inspectors**

recommend more resources and more staff to enable more outreach work to assist people in maintaining their tenancies. Either by preparing them better for taking on their own tenancy or by helping to prevent people who are struggling to maintain an existing tenancy from becoming homeless.

1.5 In response to concerns from homeless people and staff members, the inspection team recommend a reduction in the use of Bed and Breakfasts on the whole and specifically the use of those outwith the Stirling Council area. Sending vulnerable people to Glasgow is not acceptable. People are displaced and lost through the system. Stirling Council do badly here as they fail to follow up on cases where people have been sent to other local authorities.

1.6 A reduction in the use of Bed and Breakfasts and out of Stirling area placements will require more accommodation to be made available for use as mid-term accommodation. In the short term identifying more Bed and Breakfasts for homeless service use within the Stirling area so that there is no longer a need to send people outwith the area. Similarly finding temporary accommodation for people in the rural areas of Stirling so that they do not have to be accommodated far away from their home and suffer the same isolation as those sent to other Local Authority areas despite remaining in the same Local Authority area.

1.7 More support is needed for people allocated new tenancies. More help is needed for people who work; they get little or no support while there are a range of support services available for people out of work. Staff are concerned that for a young person with little experience it can be depressing to be left to sort out electric, gas, rent and furniture by yourself. **Therefore we would make recommendations that more support staff are required as well as a starter pack with information on how to do these things.**

1.8 People should not be expected to walk long distances to get to Springkerse House. Some people may be in areas with little or no public transport. **Inspectors recommend that, in line with Council policy, taxis are provided for people outwith Stirling city boundaries or caseworkers sent out to meet with people who live outwith easy distance of Stirling city. Inspectors, therefore recommend that greater use is made of the rural housing offices with caseworkers from Springkerse House meeting applicants there and staff at local offices being able to process the application.**

1.9 Inspectors also recommend that Stirling Council should save all good quality furnishings and carpets that have been left behind by ex-tenants. These should be stored and re-distributed to people who need them.

2. Strengths and Benefits of Tenant-Led inspection

2.1 Tenant Inspectors would like the findings and recommendations of this report to be taken into consideration by Stirling Council and reflected in policy when it is next reviewed.

2.2 The findings represent the views of the tenant inspection team, service users of the homeless service who agreed to be interviewed and members of staff employed by Stirling Council and Loretto Care who agreed to be interviewed. It is a service user

focussed and needs based analysis of the service received by people presenting themselves as homeless in Stirling Council area. This provides the Council with excellent feedback on how to improve the service it currently provides.

2.3 The inspection demonstrates Stirling Council's commitment to tenant participation. It shows that the Council is open and transparent and prepared to offer tenants meaningful methods of improving their communities and the Council's services.

3. Limitations of the Inspection

3.1 There is a great deal more which could be looked into as part of an inspection of the homeless service and an inspection could go into a lot more depth than this one has. Due to the Tenant Inspectors being voluntary it would be inappropriate to ask them to carry out a fully comprehensive investigation, as this would take time and resources that they do not have.

4. Recommendations Summary

Following analysis and discussion of the experiences and views expressed to the inspection team as part of this inspection, the following recommendations are suggested as a priority:

- More effort to meet with people in the rural areas without them having to travel to Stirling at their own expense.
- Ceasing to use temporary accommodation outside of the Stirling Council area
- Ceasing to use Bed and Breakfast accommodation where individuals must share bedrooms or have to leave the accommodation during the day.
- Giving more notice of the allocation of a permanent home before people have to move in and start paying rent.
- Creating provision for, (or working with an existing organisation) a furniture recycling service that can furnish homes cheaply for people moving in.
- Taxis should be provided for people from outside of Stirling City boundaries. This would be in line with Council policy.