



Personal Housing Planning: What, Who and How?

Good Practice Guidance for Local Authorities



Our objective is to improve the scope and quality of housing information and advice throughout Scotland.

We aim to:

- identify and meet the needs of consumers
- improve the standard of housing information and advice provision.

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Introduction

Local Authorities should take the lead in the development of Personal Housing Planning (PHP) services because they are the organisations with the local strategic role.

This is the recommendation of a research report published by Scottish Homes in 1999. The research had been commissioned to assist in identifying ways to maximise the potential of PHPs. The research indicated that local authorities might benefit from having more information on what the PHP can offer as a housing information solution and strategic tool. This booklet has been produced for local authorities or for any agency in Scotland interested in acquiring new techniques for meeting housing need in local communities. It is offered with confidence that the PHP is a tool of special value in developing a useful information base on housing across all sectors in any area of Scotland.

This booklet describes first what the PHP Technique is, how it works and who benefits from it. Details are given of the three stages of running it, and the free tools available to operate a complete PHP service. Case studies help paint a picture of the many ways in which the programme can be used, along with the difficulties encountered and the solutions found.

History

Personal Housing Plans had their origins in rural Scotland. The PHP Technique was developed in 1994 in Skye & Lochalsh through a HomePoint pilot to create a way for widely scattered householders in the area to find out about their housing options. Housing needs in the area are diverse, there is a large range of tenures, and no point of central access to housing information was available. The private rented sector accounts for as much as 22 per cent of the housing in some areas and outside the main towns council housing provides only a small number of homes in the overall supply. Housing associations were then a recent addition to the scene, though self-build had begun to provide a significant source of new owner-occupied dwellings.

Unfortunately individual housing needs are not always met with simple solutions when the market is so diverse. For example, in much of the western periphery of Skye, caravans and winter lets provide two of the less attractive housing options available to prospective tenants. Buying may not be an

option even for people who could afford it elsewhere. As in many parts of rural Scotland, people on modest incomes who could buy without difficulty in Glasgow or Dundee cannot afford the local prices, and at the same time cannot access social housing. This presents a problem both for individuals and for housing strategists.

Into this breach stepped the PHP Technique, designed to provide clients in Skye & Lochalsh with the best possible housing solutions where information was scattered, diverse and hard to access.



SECTION 1

What is a PHP?

The Personal Housing Plan Technique is a three-stage activity. The heart of the PHP is a detailed person-to-person interview with the client on their housing needs and aspirations. This interview is followed up by a written report summarising the housing options open to the client and recommending an action plan for getting the house they require. The point of the action plan is to take the client off the multitude of housing waiting lists and get them to seek actively a satisfying solution to their housing needs. The interview and report are backed up by a live and active database of housing information that tells the interviewer what housing options are available in the area. Then the information gathered from all the clients is itself stored in its own database so it can be used as an up-to-date resource to inform local housing strategy.

The three stages are interlocked, but they are carried out as steps in a plan:

- ◆ first, development of the **housing options database** containing all the housing options in the area, which will be drawn on to write up the Personal Housing Plan

- ◆ next, the **one-to-one interview**, and preparation of the **written Personal Housing Plan** with action plan for the client
- ◆ last, compilation of a separate **strategic database** of client information accumulated from the interviews to inform future analysis and housing plans for housing providers.

The PHP Technique has been used enthusiastically in a number of regions with very different client groups. From the earliest beginnings, each project has contributed to streamlining and improving the delivery of the PHP, and general-use electronic templates have now been developed for the construction of both databases. There is also a printed Interview Guide fully tailored to the format of the strategic database and easily customised to local use. These two templates and Interview Guide are all available free of charge from HomePoint.

How does the PHP work?

The PHP process is very much an integral one. The first task is to define the need. Who needs the PHP? Is it a special target group like young people or disabled people? Is it a whole community, as it was on Skye? Or is the local authority itself in need of a clearer housing strategy? Once the need has been defined, the next task is

strategic planning and information exchange. The aims of the project must be communicated to all participants. This involves not only the agency doing the project but all the housing providers and other information-holding agencies in the area. When promotion and networking have ensured a solid base of inter-agency co-operation, the implementation of the PHP itself is a matter of mobilising the tools and staff, performing the interviews, and gathering relevant information for ongoing analysis.

To clarify the basic process first, we will look at the three primary tools of the PHP.

The housing options database

Before doing the person-to-person interview, the interviewer needs basic accurate information on local housing options. Since housing information tends to be widely scattered amongst a variety of agencies, particularly in rural areas, this process requires compiling a housing options information database containing data about all housing provided by local landlords in the public, voluntary and private housing sectors. This database will constitute an essential tool for any agency in the business of supplying housing or advice. The database is a live document, kept up to date through regular contact with housing providers, and also including current intelligence

about developments in the owner-occupier segment of the market.

Setting up the housing options database will seem the most daunting part of a PHP project. However, this stage has been considerably simplified for service providers by the supply of a ready-made electronic template into which the user only has to type the local housing information as it is gathered. This template is based on the Housing Options Guide produced by the PHP project in Shetland, and is available in



a generic form for use in any local authority area in Scotland. HomePoint provides this housing options template free of charge. All the national information already included on the template can be supplemented by tailored local information (usually readily available in the local authority),

and will provide advisers with an extremely useful overview of the housing situation in their area. The template comes in Word format and takes no special expertise to operate, as the software package selected is one that is already generally in use within many authorities. Users will find that collating the information they require will probably take about eight weeks.

The interview guide and Personal Housing Plan

The PHP itself is a structured, in-depth interview taken from a printed questionnaire which is designed to ascertain a client's housing needs, preferences and financial resources. The interview usually takes between an hour and an hour and a half to conduct and is done in person at home or at a location convenient to both the client and the interviewer. The point of the interview is to give the interviewer a clear idea of what the client needs and wants, and what sorts of housing solutions they would prefer. The interviewer then goes away and compares the client data with the full range of housing options available in the area, using the housing options database described earlier. This will probably

involve the interviewer contacting a range of housing providers to determine the availability of the options in which the client has expressed interest. The interviewer then prepares a written report for the client covering housing circumstance and need, aspirations and costs of solutions, and summarising all the options open to the client. Finally the report offers a detailed plan of action for the applicant to follow in finding housing. This is the PHP report or action plan. It can be reviewed or updated every six months.

There is a real difference between this method and other methods of finding housing for applicants. PHP encourages clients to do more than put their name on a waiting list and then wait for telephone calls from agencies who may have nothing suitable to offer, particularly in sparsely built rural areas, for months or years. Applicants receive an action plan to follow which gives them options to pursue and do something about. It gets them into an active programme of searching for housing that satisfies both their needs and aspirations.

The interview questionnaire is available on paper from HomePoint in a form that matches each category to the categories in the electronic strategic database. Anyone wishing to set up a PHP service can send for it and users will find it is easily customised to special

needs groups, local areas or other particular use by eliminating the sections that do not apply.

The strategic information database

All the information gathered from the personal interview schedules taken together builds a very useful picture of local housing demand, including information about preferred location, family size and composition and financial resources of the client base. This information is compiled in a confidential database which can then be drawn on by the local authority or housing provider as an effective tool for informing housing strategy and system analysis, and ensuring improved provision of suitable housing in the future. The database information can also be used to support proposals for funding resources.

Though this strategic information database is described here as the last stage in the process because it is used for storage and analysis of the PHP questionnaire results, in fact it will be necessary to develop it before the interviews actually begin. This is because the way the database is compiled will depend upon the aims of the project and the specific questions included in the interview. If the strategic information sought is to reflect, say, the needs of a local ethnic community, then this decision will obviously have to be taken

at the outset of the project and the interviews structured so as to provide that information in the final database.

HomePoint provides a free electronic template for this database. It has been designed so it is easy to customise for any client group or project aim. It runs on Access 97 and can be operated at a basic level by anyone familiar with most word processing systems.

Who benefits from the PHP?

Users

PHPs are most usefully focused on people who for some reason are excluded from easy access to the local housing market. The profile of people involved will vary from local authority to local authority and it may also vary across different communities. It will depend upon a complex set of factors associated with the local housing supply, local



needs and access policies such as allocations.

Target groups might include:

- ◆ people for whom there are difficulties in creating sustainable housing solutions and where PHPs offer an in-depth assessment of needs. This could apply to minority groups like disabled people or people on local authority housing lists with complex needs who could be targeted for a PHP action plan
- ◆ people who cannot obtain access to housing in the local area because their needs profile is not sufficient to give them priority for social rented housing, but whose income is not high enough for the private sector
- ◆ communities with housing needs, such as rural areas where information is hard to access. This approach, used on Shetland, has worked to supplement local housing systems analysis by providing PHPs to everyone in the community willing to participate.

Providers

For providers, there are four issues that PHPs can address:

- ◆ lack of access for applicants to council or other rented housing in rural areas
- ◆ growing and more complex needs amongst applicants including community care issues
- ◆ greater complexity of provision and funding mechanisms without appropriate sources of information and advice
- ◆ greater emphasis on local authorities as enablers for their areas, without the accompanying information necessary on housing needs and aspirations.

By using the PHP Technique providers have found they can match people much more efficiently to suitable and affordable houses in the location they prefer. But the gathering of such detailed data on housing need also allows providers to plan their housing strategy for the future. In summary, the PHP is a solution not only for the individual but for the housing information provider as well.

The practical experiences of agencies setting up PHP projects will be covered in the section on case studies. First we will look at the good practice guidelines that help to make the project a success.



SECTION 2

How to set up a PHP service

People who have used the PHP Technique support it with enthusiasm. They report that their clients have benefited by receiving an improved quality and range of housing information and advice, and that they as organisations have benefited by increasing their understanding of client needs. However, a relative lack of take-up of the PHP spurred Scottish Homes to run a study on how the PHP was perceived and how it could be improved. The study, by Customer Management Consultancy Ltd and Craigforth HCAS Limited, found that many agencies and local authorities who had not used the PHP perceived it – somewhat erroneously – as potentially time-consuming and costly compared with their normal housing information procedures. The study therefore made the following recommendations for setting up a PHP project economically and efficiently:

- ◆ responsibility for PHPs should reside with local authorities
- ◆ the core components and purpose of the PHP must be very clear (the interview, the offering of options, the action plan and the link to strategic planning) and its delivery must be flexible

- ◆ costs can be reduced by streamlining the process to fit the local need
- ◆ PHPs should be targeted to benefit those who need them most, whether particular groups, particular locations, or combinations of the two.

So what is the best way to go about setting up a PHP project?

Clear purpose

Before setting up a project, local authorities must know exactly what the objective of the exercise is. For the provider, what is the long-term purpose of the project? Is it to give a broader perspective on the housing needs of a particular area? Is it to improve provision for a particular client group? Is it perhaps to develop a housing site in the most appropriate way? What is the target group? Will the project help the provider develop a better housing strategy for the area? For the user, what benefit will be gained?

Accurate targeting

The target group will probably not be large. For example, the resources required for a PHP service are unlikely to be available for a whole local authority area. This is quite acceptable, since for most people seeking housing advice, the normal channels are perfectly adequate. The target group will therefore be chosen with reference either

to particular groups or particular locations, or a combination of both. How PHPs are targeted by a provider may also change over time with changing local context, policy, or priorities. They are flexible enough to accommodate this change without difficulty.

Realistic timescale

Time required to operate the PHP Technique as a programme is more intensive at the beginning, when setting up the databases, than at later stages when compiling or gathering further information. However, the personal interview does, by nature of its detailed format, require at least an hour to conduct, and if say 100 interviews are to be conducted, this constitutes 100 hours of staff time plus possible travel to and from the client. To minimise this, the personal interview could just as effectively take place in an office, if there is not an issue of confidentiality or physical disability involved. However, remember that the home-based interview should always be offered as an option as it can make the interviewee feel more comfortable with the process.

Dedicated staffing

Dedicated staff will be necessary to operate the PHP programme because of the time-requirements of the personal interview. The quality of advice associated with PHPs is high and must involve

understanding the client's needs as well as having a grasp of all the housing options available – not just in the staff member's agency but in the area as a whole. This means staff must be fairly experienced in the area of housing and have good interpersonal skills. However, existing staff, offices and equipment can be used as much as possible to minimise expense, and some PHP services have obtained secondments of staff from partner agencies to do the interviews.

Data Protection

The issue of protection of data is not only vital to client confidentiality but is embodied in law in the Data Protection Act (1998). Client information that is gathered in the course of a PHP project must remain absolutely confidential. There are a number of ways this can be assured: for example by assigning a code number to each case and removing names from all data, retaining the coding information in a locked file. In addition, on the questionnaire form itself it is essential to include a signed statement from the interviewee giving permission for the information gathered to be used in enquiries with other agencies on their behalf. This is not because the enquiry process will include their names, but because in rural areas clients can often be identified by circumstance alone, and to do so

without permission is a breach of the law. Check with the relevant authorities about data protection before starting the project. It is essential that as a PHP service provider you satisfy yourself that the database and interview process complies with the Data Protection Act, as legal responsibility for confidentiality will rest with you.

Effective promotion and publicity

Sufficient promotion of the project at each stage, as in any public relations exercise, will make the whole process smoother. The first promotion of the PHP will be to other provider organisations at the very outset of project planning. Agencies and organisations must be told about what is happening and what the aims of the project will be, in order to gather all the necessary data from them on local housing options. Throughout the entire running of the project, information exchange will be very important, both to inform partners of what is happening and to create the databases for analysis of needs.

Publicity to clients must allow enough lead time for the project to become known before it begins. Initially most publicity about the service can be targeted through direct mail to people on waiting lists, by referrals from social work or by local word of mouth. Where a particular client group is to be targeted, of course, publicity can

be generated through the agencies they use; for example minority ethnic communities being offered a PHP service might be reached through their own publications, support agencies and community elders. Once the project is up and running, personal endorsement by past users creates an excellent referral service.

Publicity budgets should take careful note of what approach is most appropriate to the project aim and to the area. Costs can be reduced by achieving a steady throughput of enquirers, minimising downtime for staff, and publicity will be at least partially responsible for this kind of success.

Outcomes

Providers

The potential outcomes for housing providers are tremendous. Knowing the needs of local communities will help determine the type of new housing planned for an area. For example if there is a need for more accommodation for extended families, this will affect the future thinking of housing associations, private contractors and planners. Housing authorities and housing associations will benefit greatly in planning and development. In Glenelg on Skye, for instance, the information gathered from the PHP service led directly to the development of a particular

site to meet needs identified by the service's findings. As well as suggesting a strategic direction in advice provision, PHP databases can give support to future funding applications for services wishing to improve particular areas of advice.

Other benefits include improved partnership working between councils, housing associations and local information agencies. Information on the availability of grants for landlords, empty homes initiatives, and simple levels of demand are all by-products of the PHP system. The gathering of such information stimulates housing supply. Provision of information to house builders and developers may encourage a level of financial support for PHPs by local enterprise companies.

Users

Benefits for users are obvious. Access to information about a wide variety of tenures ensures better choice in housing, and sometimes can assist individuals to move into privately owned accommodation, to access development grants (like the rural home ownership grant provided by Scottish Homes), or to move to a more suitable area. In areas where housing is traditionally hard to come by this service is essential (and much appreciated). Many people empowered are those most excluded from the local housing system. This includes



minority groups whose housing needs are far better met after a PHP assessment, improving their access to housing solutions even where choice is limited. And the process in itself respects the individual's needs and wishes, increasing their confidence and understanding of the situation as well as giving them good quality advice.

SECTION 3

PHP in practice: case studies

These studies give an idea of the varying scale and aim of some PHP projects already in progress or complete. Each project differs remarkably according to its area, its aims and its resources. In other words, there is no 'average' PHP!

Skye & Lochalsh

The original PHP project was run as a pilot in the Skye & Lochalsh area. Its aim was to find a user-focused method for drawing up personally tailored housing plans for individuals on housing waiting lists and to help people in housing need to find appropriate housing. The successful pilot led to a two-year project over a wider area delivered by two full-time advisers in a service which included evening work. One of the staff in fact left at the end of the first year and was not replaced, but the project continued unhindered. A database output produced statistics of 153 client interviews nearly half of whom were significantly helped by the process to find a solution to their housing problem. One of the main concerns from the provider point of view was the time taken in conducting the interviews, partly due to travel time required for home visits. The technique itself however was praised by all who

used it as effective, friendly, and strategically useful.

Shetland

Shetland Islands Council Housing Department wished to develop a housing information and advice strategy to guide the improvement of their housing advice services. As part of their Housing Plan, ensuring all groups of their population had access to an adequate range of affordable housing, they wished to develop an advice and information service providing information to people in housing need on the different solutions available to them. After becoming interested in the original PHP scheme, they ran a pilot PHP project based in Scalloway between September 1998 and April 1999 assessing housing options available to people wanting to live in Scalloway and its adjoining council areas. Partners in the project were

Hjaltland Housing Association and Shetland CAB. The project used two full-time members of staff with skills in housing and was supported by a steering group made up of members of various local organisations. The information gathered from the 69 applicants proved beneficial both to them and to the agencies providing the services, and influenced the direction of the Shetland housing strategy. Information was fed back into a review of the council's housing allocations policy and the merits of a common waiting list considered for the area.

One major contribution to the strategy was the development of a Guide to Housing Options in Shetland, a comprehensive list of options in Shetland compiled for the project and distributed to all organisations involved in providing housing information and advice.



Shetland was the first area to develop such a guide and their pioneering work was later adapted as the basic model for the Housing Options database template now supplied by HomePoint for national use.

Shetland performed a valuable service in streamlining the previous PHP process. In the original version of the PHP, the action part of the written housing plan listed all the housing options for the client in a series of appendices. In Shetland they decided to set out the action points against each option in the body of the report, rather than putting them at the end. This turned out to be easier and quicker for the consumer to read and much faster for the adviser as well. Shetland also suggested streamlining the interview process by inviting participants to come to an office instead of conducting every visit as a home visit, minimising travel time. A surprising number were happy to come to an office, though all were offered the option of having the interview at home.

DPHS

The Disabled Persons Housing Service in Edinburgh offers a PHP service to match people with disabilities to the houses suitable to their needs. People with physical disabilities have special housing needs which are often very hard to match to the right accommodation. The first action of the DPHS

was to design a Housing Options Register for the Edinburgh area including all housing sectors, public, independent and private, and categorising them by location, size and suitability for disabled people. The Housing Options Register has since been expanded to cover the four local authority areas in the former Lothian Region. They also modified the PHP interview guide to reflect the special needs of disabled clients, while retaining its general structure. Emphasised were the design features required in the home as well as special physical needs and client aspirations.

In addition the DPHS developed a strategic database that allowed any question of strategy to be asked of the information stored in it. Routine strategic examination of the data allows them to look for emerging trends, and compare them with previous trends. Client confidentiality is ensured by giving each case file a unique coding known only to the service providers. The codelist is stored separately and not listed in the computer programme.

The agency has found the operation of the PHP technique especially useful in addressing the needs of its clients, and in establishing and maintaining long-term contacts with housing providers. In addition, the Housing Options Register has allowed the

DPHS to respond to the needs of service users and to provide fast, focused HOPE (Housing Option Enquiry) reports in cases where the disabled person does not require the detailed and complex engagement involved in the PHP process, but does require access to quality, up-to-date information on the housing market. Work is under way in setting up locality-based DPHS services across Scotland, with doors open in Glasgow and Renfrewshire. Their PHP services will soon be available to disabled people in those areas.

Future service potential

Ownership Options helps disabled clients

Ownership Options provides advice to people with physical disabilities or learning difficulties on routes to home ownership. In order to test a housing options self-assessment tool for disabled people, the service proposes to simplify and widen access to the benefits of a PHP. The aim is to publish a 'workbook' document which will use as its basis the PHP format. It will help the user to clarify housing needs and aspirations, including support needs, and help them to understand the housing options in the area. The document will also help to evaluate the user's options from the perspective of availability, affordability and legal issues. The organisation hopes to see

the process produce an action plan allowing individuals and households to evaluate for themselves the choices they have before them. This, they hope, will empower users and encourage them to pursue options they might never have considered without the assistance of the PHP.

The beauty of this project is its replicability for other client groups. The initial format of the questionnaire will be on paper but they aim to produce something easily translated to use on the Internet, touch screen or other electronic formats.

South Ayrshire defines needs of ethnic communities

Lack of detailed information about the housing needs and experiences of black and minority ethnic households has Scottish Homes and South Ayrshire Council to consider ways of identifying services appropriate to the specific needs of this community. A proposed PHP service will provide a means of improving working links between housing providers and minority ethnic groups in order to increase understanding of needs and remove any barriers to services, leading to a better overall provision and uptake of service by these communities.

The service plans to assemble details of all housing options in South Ayrshire and assist applicants to plan towards finding the option

best suited to their needs and preferences. The information gained from the project will be used to inform future strategy.

The proposed timescale is 18 months, including four months for development, 12 months for the delivery of the PHPs, and two months for analysis of housing need after the project concludes. Staffing will consist of two part-time workers with a background in housing and knowledge of the local housing options across all tenures. The project will operate from premises in an office with provision for confidential interview space, two computers with access software and access to interpreters. They will be offering interviews at flexible hours including evenings and weekends. The operation of the project will be overseen by a steering group including members of the communities to be targeted.

Angus focuses its own housing approach for young people

Angus Council felt the need for a more detailed, focused approach to young single people's housing needs, to be tied in with their needs for support. The council felt that PHPs were an essential part of information gathering for this approach to supply housing to the young client group. Staffing for the project is still being discussed but the council hopes to second existing staff from the local authority

and from one of the housing associations involved as the project gets under way.

The project has several linked aims. First they hope by using the PHP Technique to better meet the housing and support needs of young single people in the area. However, they are also performing the interesting exercise of tying in the PHP project with a future self-build project in the area, where priority will be given to people assessed as having housing need, especially those in danger of becoming homeless. A household with a wheelchair user has also applied to move house from a rural area to a town, and Angus Council are looking into using a PHP as an effective diagnostic tool for this household as well.

This project demonstrates the flexibility of the PHP programme as a tool for planning and for very specific, even individual, application with clients with particular needs.

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