



THE SCOTTISH HOUSING REGULATOR

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar Inspection Report  
November 2008

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## 1. Introduction

### About this inspection

1.1 This inspection was carried out by the Scottish Housing Regulator under section 72 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 on behalf of Scottish Ministers. Our purpose in inspection is to provide an independent external assessment of the effectiveness of housing service delivery and make recommendations to help improvement. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar transferred its housing stock to Hebridean Housing Partnership in September 2006. In the light of this, our inspection looked at the Comhairle's homelessness service only. Inspections are conducted within a published framework of *Performance Standards*.

### How we assessed performance

1.2 Our inspectors asked two key questions:

- How well is Comhairle nan Eilean Siar delivering its services?
- Is Comhairle nan Eilean Siar managed for improvement?

1.3 In order to answer these questions inspectors:

- spoke to service users, staff and elected members of the council;
- asked other partner organisations for their views;
- visited homes and local areas;
- saw and tested first hand how well services were being delivered;
- examined key policies, publications, information and the organisation's self-assessment submitted for this inspection; and
- analysed published performance and financial information.

1.4 We have awarded grades for the homelessness services. The grades and judgements are based on evidence. The grades summarise performance in the following ways:

- Grade A = Excellent
- Grade B = Good
- Grade C = Fair
- Grade D = Poor

1.5 When we provide a summarised assessment and award a grade, we take various factors into account. These factors are:

- outcomes for service users;
- how far the service or organisation meets Performance Standards;
- performance against key indicators in comparison with others;
- compliance with legislation;
- how good the leadership and accountability are;
- how far good practice is followed;
- the organisation's level of self-awareness;
- how well value for money is being achieved;
- local context and legitimate local priorities; and
- commitment to, and track record of, improvement.

### The inspection team

1.6 The inspection team was led by Kirsty Anderson and included Gordon Scobie (Inspector), Sylvia Ward (Inspection Officer) and Ian Maclean (Tenant Assessor). Marisa Mundt and Lindsay Fyvie (Tenant Assessors) carried out a desktop review of some of the Council's publications. We were on site between 25 August 2008 and 5 September 2008. We would like to thank everyone involved in the inspection, particularly the councillors, staff and service users for their time and co-operation.

### Responding to this inspection

1.7 We expect all inspected bodies to make the inspection grades and overview section of this report available to anyone that wants it, report our findings to tenants and other stakeholders and respond to the issues raised in this report.

## 2. Inspection grades and overview

In this section we set out our overall assessment of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's performance, including inspection grades and we summarise our inspection findings.

### Grades

- 2.1 The inspection of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's homelessness service took place between 25 August 2008 and 5 September 2008. We awarded the following grade:

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar has achieved a **C** grade for services to homeless people. This is a **fair** performance.

### How well is Comhairle nan Eilean Siar delivering its homelessness service?

- 2.2 Our assessment is that Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's homelessness service has some strengths, but also many areas where improvement is needed. It does have a unique and challenging context, and it has improved the service over the last four years and has plans for further improvements.
- 2.3 These are the strengths in the Comhairle's homelessness service:
- it provides good access to its service;
  - it provides an excellent support service to homeless people and new tenants;
  - its assessment interviews are customer focused and well managed and it makes good decisions; and
  - it works well with Hebridean Housing Partnership to secure permanent accommodation.
- 2.4 These are the key weaknesses:
- it does not record the information and advice it provides;
  - it loses contact with a significant number of cases and does not actively manage cases;
  - it takes too long to make decisions; and
  - it has not always provided temporary accommodation when this is required.

## Is Comhairle nan Eilean Siar managed for improvement?

- 2.5 The Comhairle has some strengths in its approach to managing improvements to its services. It has a well developed Local Housing Strategy. Its Housing Service Business Plan sets out clear objectives for the service and is focused on driving improvement in the service. The Comhairle has a good approach to partnership working. It prepares a good twice yearly report for the Environment and Protective Services Committee that highlight progress and priorities for improvement. It is developing its customer focus with its exit survey and its good handling of complaints.
- 2.6 We found areas where the Comhairle needs to make improvement. It is making slow progress with some areas of its Homelessness Strategy. Its performance management framework for the homelessness service is underdeveloped and it does not publicly report on the service. It needs to further develop and mainstream its equalities monitoring throughout the service. The Comhairle's cost for the service is relatively low, but it has not carried out a cost and value assessment of its service.

## Key recommendations

- 2.7 Our inspection report covers a wide range of issues. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar must respond effectively to them. These are our most important recommendations:
- improve its approach to the provision of information and advice;
  - improve its approach to managing cases and maintaining contact with homeless people;
  - ensure it always provides temporary accommodation for those who require it and better plan for future provision; and
  - further develop its performance management and customer engagement framework for the homelessness service.

### 3. Context

In this section we look at Comhairle nan Eilean Siar as an organisation and the context in which it operates.

#### About the organisation

- 3.1 Eilean Siar are a chain of islands off the north west coast of Scotland comprising of Lewis and Harris in the north and the islands of North Uist, Benbecula, South Uist and Barra in the south. The population was just under 27,000 at the 2001 Census, the third smallest of any local authority in Scotland. The geographical spread of population is uneven with 44% living in the main town of Stornoway, 24% in rural Lewis, 20% in the Uists and Benbecula, 8% in Harris and the remaining 4% in Barra. The population has been steadily declining and aging and the islands have a higher elderly population at 23% than the national average of 19%.
- 3.2 Based on Scottish Government labour market statistics, unemployment within Eilean Siar is 5%, which is almost double the Scottish average. Fifty nine percent of the population are in employment, either full or part time, or self employed and this is lower than the national figure of 76%. Incomes within Eilean Siar are below the Scottish average whilst living costs are significantly higher than urban Scotland with food costs on average 15.2% higher and fuel costs 13% higher. Transport costs for travel between the islands is expensive as is the cost of air or sea travel between Eilean Siar and the mainland.
- 3.3 Eilean Siar has a relatively small number of ethnic minority households. In the 2001 census, the area's black and minority ethnic (BME) population was 0.7%, well below the national figure of 2%. However, over 60% of the population are Gaelic speakers, compared to the Scottish average of 1%. The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation shows that Eilean Siar has no areas in the most deprived 15% of data zones in Scotland. This does not mean that there is no deprivation in Eilean Siar; rather households in poverty are not concentrated in small areas. The Comhairle nan Eilean Siar area has the highest fuel poverty in Scotland at 44%, this is more than double the Scottish average.

- 3.4 The Comhairle has 31 elected members (24 independent, 4 labour and 3 SNP). There is no administration group and members consider, debate and vote on recommendations on an issue by issue basis.
- 3.5 The Comhairle committee structure consists of six main committees, reporting to the full Comhairle. Environment and Protective Services Committee deals with all housing issues with a sub-committee called the EPS Housing Panel, which deals with all housing related appeals. In addition, it has a Member / Officer Working Group which deals with housing issues such as responses to consultations and considering feasibility studies.

### About the housing stock and tenants in Eilean Siar

- 3.6 Following a successful ballot of tenants in October 2005, the Comhairle transferred all of its housing stock (1,798 houses) to Hebridean Housing Partnership (HHP) in September 2006. The Comhairle's contract with HHP sets out how the Comhairle and HHP will work together to discharge the Comhairle's statutory duty to homeless people. The contract covers service delivery; the provision of temporary and permanent accommodation, and financial arrangements.
- 3.7 In April 2007 five small local housing associations transferred their entire housing stock to HHP making it the sole general needs social landlord in the islands. The only other social landlord is Trust Housing Association which specialises in sheltered housing.
- 3.8 Owner occupation is the dominant tenure in the islands at 72%, which is higher than Scottish average of 63%, whilst 17% rent their home from social landlords. In addition, 7% rent from the private sector, which is similar to the national average. Private renting in the islands is mainly tied housing or holiday lets, and the supply of permanent private rented accommodation in Stornoway is low. This means there are few alternatives for those who cannot afford owner occupation, apart from the social rented sector. Currently, 55% of tenants receive housing benefit compared to the Scottish average of 54%. In the last year, the average house price in the islands increased by 11% from £104,224 to £117,184, thereby increasing affordability issues for many households.

- 3.9 HHP's right to buy sales as a percentage of its stock have increased sharply from 0.5% in 2006/07 to 1.4% in 2007/08, and a total of just under 1.8% of the total Partnership stock in the last two years.
- 3.10 The housing communities on the islands are widely spread and 79% of the population live in areas classed as very remote, compared to 3% for Scotland. Eilean Siar has the second lowest population density in Scotland at 8.5 persons per square km the Scottish figure is 65.2.
- 3.11 Properties within Eilean Siar are mainly houses or bungalows, with flats comprising only 16% of the stock. This profile reflects the rural, remote and crofting nature of the islands. Seventy seven percent of land within the Islands is held in crofting tenure which has implications for those requiring housing but who do not wish housed through the crofting system. There are many empty properties within the islands; however a large number of these are either below tolerable standard or in remote locations where demand for housing is low. The climate, particularly in the exposed rural areas, adversely affects the housing stock more rapidly than in most parts of Scotland.

## 4. How well is Comhairle nan Eilean Siar delivering services for homeless people?

In this section we set out our assessment of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's performance in delivering services for homeless people.

### Grade

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar has achieved a **C** grade for homelessness. This is a **fair** performance.

- 4.1 Our overall assessment is that the Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's homelessness service has some strengths, but set against these are many areas where improvement is needed. Some of these are significant and impact directly on the quality of services to people who are in housing need. The Comhairle operates in a unique and challenging context, particularly its geography and housing supply and demand. Its homelessness service is also relatively low cost. The Comhairle has improved the service over the past four years and was responsive to our feedback during the inspection.
- 4.2 The Comhairle provides good access to the service, makes good decisions and has an excellent, customer focused approach to interviewing and supporting homeless applicants. Its homeless staff are committed to delivering good outcomes for homeless people. It works well with Hebridean Housing Partnership to permanently rehouse homeless people. The Comhairle recognises that it has a number of areas where it needs to improve. Specifically:
- it does not record the information and advice it provides;
  - it loses contact with a significant number of cases and does not always actively manage cases;
  - it takes too long to make decisions;
  - it has not always provided temporary accommodation when this is required; and
  - it does not have a fully developed planning, performance management and customer engagement framework for its homelessness service.

## Access to service

- 4.3 The Comhairle received 252 applications for assistance under the homelessness legislation during 2007/08, up by 48% since 2002/03. This compares with a national increase over the same period of 9%. However, in 2007/08 the number of applications to the Comhairle fell by 11% on the previous year and compares with a national decrease of 5%. The number of households applying for assistance at 2.2% of all households in the local authority area is slightly less than the national figure of 2.5%.
- 4.4 The Comhairle's homeless services team is based in Stornoway, Isle of Lewis and in Balivanich, Isle of Benbecula in both Comhairle offices and the offices of the Hebridean Housing Partnership (HHP), the islands' main provider of social rented housing. Homeless people can access the service at these offices or by contacting Council offices on Harris and Barra.
- 4.5 The Comhairle publicises access arrangements for the service through leaflets, posters, the Comhairle's website and through information displayed on plasma television screens in the Comhairle's and HHP's reception areas. Its homelessness leaflet, website and plasma screen information encourages people in housing difficulties to contact the Comhairle, gives good information on the how to access the service and how the Comhairle can help people in housing crisis. We found that the leaflets and posters are available in a range of locations where homeless people are likely to find them.
- 4.6 Our tenant assessors reviewed the Comhairle's homelessness leaflets and their website. They found the leaflets easy to read with useful information about where to get help including the out of hours number and that these are available in alternative languages and formats. They thought the Comhairle's website was easy to access, gave a good explanation of the homeless service and contained good general information.
- 4.7 The Comhairle does not have formal referral protocols in place with internal or external partners, but receives informal referrals from a range of partners including Social Work, the Citizens Advice Bureau, Action For Children and HHP.

The lack of formal referral protocols means that the Comhairle is unable to fully assess the effectiveness of access arrangements through partner agencies.

- 4.8 The Comhairle provides access to the homelessness service outside of normal office hours. This service is provided by staff from HHP's standby service in association with the Comhairle's community sheltered alarms service. The Comhairle does not provide access to the out of hours service via a freephone number. Callers to this number are charged at a local call rate.
- 4.9 The Comhairle advertises the out of hours service in the homelessness leaflets, posters, and on its plasma screens. Information on its website links to the Comhairle's community alarms service web page, but this does not advise that assistance can be provided to homeless people. We also found that the Comhairle did not display the out of hours service and telephone number outside its offices. The Comhairle took immediate action to display the out of hours number during the inspection.
- 4.10 The Comhairle responds well to the calls that it receives out of hours and provides appropriate advice and assistance. We found one instance when the Comhairle failed to provide temporary accommodation to a homeless person who was roofless. We discuss access to temporary accommodation further in paragraph 4.38 below.
- 4.11 The Comhairle has a target of providing 90% of homeless applicants with an appointment to discuss their homelessness within one working day of their initial approach or at a time that is suitable to the applicant. In practice, the Comhairle provides a more responsive service by interviewing on the day of the initial approach. Homeless people that we spoke to said that they found it easy to get a homeless interview.
- 4.12 The Comhairle records applications for assistance with homelessness from the date that homeless people first make contact with the service. As a result of providing assessment interviews when required, it loses contact with very few people prior to interview.

- 4.13 The Comhairle conducts homeless interviews in private, comfortable interview rooms. It advises homeless people that they can bring a friend or advisor to the interview and it interviews homeless people with a member of staff of the same gender, if requested.
- 4.14 In summary, the Comhairle provides good access to its homelessness service. Its information on how to access the homelessness service is widely available and in places where people in housing crisis are likely to come across it, although less so for out of hours access. It records initial contacts from homeless people, provides interviews on demand and loses contact with very few people prior to interviews taking place. However, the Comhairle has not always provided access to temporary accommodation outside of normal working hours.

### Advice and prevention

- 4.15 The Comhairle's 2003 - 2006 Homelessness Strategy sets out its approach to the provision of advice and information. The Comhairle does not have a separate information and advice strategy, nor has it updated its first Homelessness Strategy. The Strategy commits the Comhairle and its partners to provide:
- housing education in schools through a youth information and advice service;
  - advice and information through leaflets, posters and the website; and
  - independent information and advice in association with the Citizens Advice Bureau.
- 4.16 The Comhairle has made progress in taking these commitments forward. It has publicity information on the homelessness service and has a service level agreement in place with the Citizens Advice Bureau for the provision of independent information and advice. The Comhairle distributes the Streets Ahead guide to school leavers, but does not provide any wider housing information and advice services to school pupils. The Comhairle has however now put in place a programme to provide housing education classes to school pupils which will commence early in 2009. While it has made progress in taking the commitments forward, the Comhairle does not have a fully developed strategic approach to the provision of information and advice.

- 4.17 The Comhairle has a duty to ensure that homeless people can access good quality, free advice and information about homelessness and the prevention of homelessness. The Comhairle provides free information about homelessness and prevention across its area, and it has trained its homelessness staff to Homepoint national standards on information and advice. The Comhairle told us that it intends to have its advice services accredited, although we saw no firm plans for this.
- 4.18 The Comhairle has duties to provide a range of advice to homeless people and those threatened by homelessness, and to provide advice and assistance to homeless people it assesses as not in priority need or intentionally homeless. The Comhairle does not record the housing information and advice it provides to people who approach it for assistance and cannot demonstrate that it always provides appropriate advice and information to those who require it. This is a weakness.
- 4.19 The Comhairle works with the Citizens Advice Bureau to ensure the provision of independent advice and information. We also saw that it helps homeless people to access other advice agencies including Women's Aid, Social Work, Action for Children, Sgailean (Western Isles Foyer), as well as specialist mental health and substance misuse services. It has formal referral arrangements in place with the Western Isles Foyer and with the Citizens Advice Bureau, but not with other internal and external providers. The Comhairle does not have fully developed recording or monitoring arrangements in place for referrals it makes and does not always know the outcomes for homeless people, although it told us that it holds regular interagency meetings.
- 4.20 The Comhairle has good arrangements with HHP for it to refer tenants at risk of losing their home as a result of rent arrears or antisocial behaviour. HHP advises the Comhairle when it issues a Notice of Proceedings for Recovery of Possession and when a decree is granted in court. The Comhairle's homelessness team sends these tenants a letter to offer advice and assistance. However we found that the Comhairle has little success in contacting these tenants. It does not keep information on the tenants it has sent letters to, and so cannot follow up when they do not contact the Comhairle. We also saw that the content of the

Comhairle's letter may deter some people from contacting it. Following our feedback during the inspection, the Comhairle immediately took action to start to change its practice in this area.

- 4.21 The Comhairle has made good progress with a number of the actions in its Homelessness Strategy that aim to prevent initial and repeat homelessness. It has helped to establish the Sgailean (Western Isles Foyer), a rent deposit scheme and a homelessness support service.
- 4.22 The Comhairle's homelessness support service provides support to people who are in temporary accommodation and to homeless people who have been housed for a period of three months. This is an excellent service, provided by experienced and dedicated support workers, through which it provides support tailored to the individual's needs including:
- tenancy start / settling in support;
  - life, social and budgeting skills;
  - welfare rights, housing and addictions advice; and
  - assistance with accessing other services.
- 4.23 Homeless people that we spoke to were pleased with the support that they receive from the Comhairle's support service. It plays a critical role in preventing repeat homelessness. The demand for the service is large and expanding and the Comhairle faces a challenge to maintain the quality of support it provides with the current level of resources.
- 4.24 The Comhairle provides furniture to newly housed homeless people by working with local churches and by providing furnished tenancy grants. It also gives newly housed homeless people starter packs and practical assistance with setting up home. These initiatives are working well. The Comhairle has provided assistance to two applicants under its mortgage to rent scheme and assistance to three applicants under its rent deposit scheme.
- 4.25 The Comhairle has made slower progress with other proposed actions in its Homelessness Strategy which weakens its approach to prevention and creates

gaps in its preventative services including:

- discharge protocols with health services;
- release protocols with prisons;
- protocols with social work services for young people leaving care and for the provision of support to vulnerable people; and
- mediation and counselling services.

4.26 The Comhairle works well with HHP to sustain tenancies, during 2007/08 of the 72 homeless people provided with permanent accommodation by HHP only one tenancy failed. It also has low numbers of people presenting as homeless more than once; homeless people who applied to the Comhairle more than once as a percentage of the total number of applicants fell from 11% during 2004/05 to 2% during 2007/08, less than a third of the national figure. This performance is excellent.

4.27 In summary, the Comhairle does not have a strategic approach to advice and prevention and does not have good information on its delivery of these services. It does however have an excellent approach to supporting rehoused homeless people, contributing to high levels of tenancy sustainment and very low levels of repeat homelessness.

## Assessment of homeless people

4.28 The Comhairle has a duty to make all necessary inquiries to satisfy itself whether homeless applicants are homeless or threatened with homelessness, have a priority need, and became homeless or threatened with homelessness intentionally. The table below provides an overview of the Comhairle's assessment decisions for people who apply to it for assistance.

	2005/06		2006/07		2007/08	
	Council	Scotland	Council	Scotland	Council	Scotland
All applications assessed in period	238	57,831	290	58,663	245	55,709
% priority unintentional	37%	52%	35%	45%	35%	55%
% priority Intentional	2%	2%	1%	2%	2%	2%
% non-priority	24%	17%	19%	15%	12%	15%
% not homeless	3%	9%	5%	8%	3%	7%
% lost contact/withdrew before assessment	11%	13%	18%	13%	24%	15%
% resolved prior to assessment	18%	7%	18%	7%	13%	4%
Proportion of assessments completed within 28 days	67%		50%		49%	

Source: Scottish Executive Housing Bulletins and the Comhairle's inspection submission

4.29 During 2007/08 the Comhairle, assessed 35% of homeless applicants to be unintentionally homeless and in priority need down from 37% 2005/06. This is well below the national figure for 2007/08 of 55%. During 2005/06 the Comhairle lost contact with 11% of people who approached it for assistance below the national figure. However, its percentage of lost contacts increased significantly over the following two years to 24% and is well above the national figure. The Comhairle loses contact with significant numbers of people who approach it for assistance with homelessness. The Code of Guidance recommends that Councils should make regular contact with homeless people in order to keep them up to date with the progress of their application. We found that the Comhairle does not ensure that it does this, and this is a significant factor in its level of lost contacts.

4.30 Scottish Ministers have set a target to reduce the number of applicants who receive non priority decisions by 50% by 2009, and to abolish priority need by 2012. The percentage of homeless or threatened with homeless applicants assessed by the Comhairle as non-priority has fallen significantly from 46% for

the year 2003/04 to 29% in 2007/08. The Comhairle has made progress in reducing the percentage of homeless applicants assessed as non-priority however, it has not seen a corresponding increase in the percentage of applicants it assesses as in priority need. From April 2008, as a step towards the 2009 target and the abolition of the priority need test in 2012, the Comhairle has expanded the groups of homeless people that it will regard as being in priority need. The Comhairle has not projected how this will impact on the percentage of homeless applicants assessed as priority need, but it plans to review progress on a regular basis.

- 4.31 The Code of Guidance recommends that councils should notify people of the outcome of their application as quickly as possible, and suggests a target of 28 days. The proportion of assessments the Comhairle completed within 28 days declined from 67% in 2005/06 to 49% in 2007/08. While it has improved its performance to 56% for the first half of 2008/09, the Comhairle took longer than two months to make a decision in 56 cases and fifteen of these took 100 days or more. The Comhairle's performance in making decisions within 28 days is poor. The Comhairle told us that it often experienced lengthy delays in obtaining information and care assessments from its internal partners and that this impacts on its ability to make decisions quickly.
- 4.32 We found that the Comhairle considers the main homelessness questions in the correct sequence when it assesses applications for assistance, and most of its decisions are good. However we also found that the Comhairle does not always take a proactive approach in investigating or managing cases. In a number of cases we reviewed it did not actively gather information following initial interview and placed the onus on homeless people to get and provide it with relevant information. We saw that it closes many such cases as lost contact or withdrew before assessment. This is a weakness.
- 4.33 The Comhairle conducts excellent homeless assessment interviews in a sympathetic, person-centred, helpful and professional way. Through these it gathers good information on the applicant, their circumstances and the reasons for homelessness, although it always asks for five years of housing history, even when it does not need this to make a decision. It also provides those it interviews

with a good range of information and advice and an agreed written record of the interview. Homeless people that we spoke to were pleased with the quality of interviews. The Comhairle issues good, easy to understand and informative decision letters when it has completed its enquiries.

- 4.34 The Comhairle carries out periodic audits of its homeless assessments, although its decisions are not routinely countersigned by a second officer. The Comhairle does not have a fully developed system for examining and assessing the quality of casework, does not conduct audits on a regular basis nor ensure that findings are fed back to front-line staff or used to address any identified weaknesses.
- 4.35 The Comhairle has a set of homelessness policies and procedures that provide its staff with information on how to conduct homeless assessment interviews, and the types of evidence and information needed to inform decisions. However, these do not provide clear guidance on how staff should carry out enquiries or progress cases in accordance with the Code of Guidance.
- 4.36 The Comhairle has a duty to advise homeless applicants of their statutory right to request a review of decisions. The Comhairle advises homeless people of this right through its charter for homeless people, during the homeless assessment interview, in decision letters and also in letters from HHP offering permanent accommodation. Its two stage appeals process goes beyond its statutory requirements, with appeals being dealt with by a member of staff who has not been involved in the original decision. The Comhairle receives very few appeals and deals sympathetically with those that it receives.
- 4.37 In summary, the Comhairle provides excellent homeless assessment interviews, considers the main homelessness questions in the correct order, and overall makes good quality decisions. However, it does not always actively manage cases, does not keep in regular contact with homeless people, loses contact with significant numbers of applicants and can take a long time to make decisions. The Comhairle has a fair approach to assessments.

### Securing accommodation

- 4.38 The Comhairle owns five houses it uses for temporary accommodation for homeless people, and it leases 26 houses from HHP and two properties from the

private sector. In December 2006 it opened the Old House, a seven bedroomed temporary accommodation unit, which can accommodate up to five single people and two couples. It is decommissioning its use of mobile homes as temporary accommodation, and aims to cease using these by the end this year. The Comhairle also has to rely on bed and breakfast establishments for temporary accommodation.

4.39 The table below sets out key figures on the Comhairle’s use of temporary accommodation.

	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
	Council	Council	Council
Number accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation	64	71	58
Percentage accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation	62%	60%	47%
Average length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation (days)	51	88	143
No. of families with dependent children accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation	5	6	2
Number accommodated in Council furnished accommodation*	39	47	66
Percentage accommodated in Council furnished accommodation	38%	40%	53%
Average length of stay in Council furnished accommodation (weeks)	23	29	25

Source: the Comhairle’s inspection submission

4.40 The Comhairle has reduced its reliance on bed and breakfast over the last three years, although it is still heavily dependent on this type of accommodation. While it has reduced the number of people it places in bed and breakfast, homeless people are spending increasingly long periods of time in this type of accommodation. The Comhairle told us this is in part as a result of it extending the provision of temporary accommodation for homeless people who are non-priority. Homeless people are also spending long periods of time in the Comhairle’s furnished accommodation.

4.41 The Comhairle has worked well to increase the provision of temporary accommodation alternatives to bed and breakfast. Between 2003 and 2008 it increased the supply of temporary accommodation by 169% through purchasing properties – including the Old House accommodation – and by leasing houses from HHP and from private sector landlords. However, the Comhairle does not have an up to date assessment of the need for temporary accommodation and

does not have a strategy to help it meet current and future demand. It has also struggled to provide temporary accommodation to those who require it in a small number of cases. Taken together, this is a significant weakness. The Comhairle is in the early stages of developing proposals for a 25 space hostel and this will significantly enhance the availability of temporary accommodation for single people.

- 4.42 The Comhairle has a comprehensive set of standards for its self-contained and shared accommodation, although it does not formally monitor or report on how it is meeting these standards. It has recently set good standards for the bed and breakfast accommodation it uses; it is at an early stage in implementing these standards.
- 4.43 The Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2004 prohibits councils from using unsuitable accommodation for households with children and pregnant women for longer than 14 days unless exceptional circumstances apply. The Comhairle twice breached the order during the current year (2008/09) and on two occasions in each of the previous three years. The Comhairle seeks to provide households who it places in unsuitable temporary accommodation with suitable alternative accommodation as soon as possible, but it struggles to achieve this in practice. The average length of stay for people it placed in unsuitable accommodation increased from 35 days in 2007/08 to 53 days for the first half of 2008/09.
- 4.44 We found that the Comhairle's Old House temporary accommodation unit provides good quality supported accommodation and its self contained houses are well furnished and maintained. Bed and Breakfast establishments that the Comhairle uses also provide good quality accommodation, although not all provide access to adequate cooking facilities. The Comhairle accommodates a small number of homeless people in mobile homes, which it is aware are unsuitable and it is currently phasing out their use.
- 4.45 Homeless people that we spoke to who had been provided with accommodation in the Old House, in Bed and Breakfasts or in dispersed flats told us that they were pleased with the quality of accommodation provided by the Comhairle.

- 4.46 The Comhairle seeks to provide temporary accommodation that meets the needs of homeless people. It has not used out of area placements on the mainland. Most of the Comhairle's temporary accommodation is in Stornoway and this provides easy access to transport, services, shops and other facilities. The Comhairle has limited temporary accommodation outside of Stornoway and Uist and does not have provision in all areas of the islands. The Comhairle is therefore not always able to fully meet the needs of homeless people to be near friends, family, social networks, employment or schools when providing temporary accommodation. However, the Comhairle works with Education and Children's Services to ensure that children in temporary accommodation are transported to their schools when this is required.
- 4.47 The Comhairle provides excellent support with regular contact for those in temporary accommodation including an extensive range of information and advice. The Comhairle has a general leaflet on temporary accommodation and this provides some useful information, but it does not cover the service standards or the services that homeless people can expect. The Comhairle gives homeless people accommodated in the Old House a handbook which gives good information on the accommodation and the services it provides.
- 4.48 HHP is the only general needs housing provider in Eilean Siar. The Comhairle works well with HHP to secure permanent accommodation for homeless households. It refers applicants it assesses as unintentionally homeless and in priority need to HHP, which then makes homeless people up to two offers of accommodation. HHP makes no distinction in the type and quality of offers it makes to homeless people and to other applicants. The Comhairle does not use provisions under Section 5 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 to secure houses for homeless people.
- 4.49 During 2007/08 the Comhairle secured permanent accommodation for 65 households that it had previously assessed as unintentionally homeless and in priority need. A further nine households returned to their previous accommodation, three obtained accommodation in the private sector and twelve secured other housing outcomes. In addition, the Comhairle secured permanent

accommodation for an additional seven households to whom it had no duty to secure permanent accommodation.

- 4.50 The Comhairle seeks to ensure that homeless people are provided with permanent housing quickly and sets a target within its service level agreement with HHP to make first offers within three months and second offers within four months. During 2007/08, HHP made 40% of first offers and 36% of second offers within target timescales, with the average number of days to first and second offers during 2007/08 being 148 and 155 days respectively. On average it takes the Comhairle around five months to get a first offer of permanent housing for homeless people. In 2007/08, HHP let 33% of its empty houses to homeless people. The Comhairle is working closely with HHP to try to secure offers of housing more quickly and HHP recently set a target to allocate 60% of its homes that become empty in Stornoway to homeless applicants. Given the unique and challenging context in which it operates, the Comhairle is performing well in securing permanent accommodation.
- 4.51 The Comhairle takes a long time to conclude cases. The time it took increased from an average of 11 weeks during 2004/05 to 34 weeks during 2007/08. The Comhairle has a backlog in discharging its duty to homeless households and in securing permanent accommodation to households in priority need. However, this is largely as a result of low turnover and high demand, particularly in Stornoway where most homeless households wish to be housed.
- 4.52 In summary, the Comhairle is good at securing accommodation for homeless people. It has increased the supply of temporary accommodation, provides good quality accommodation and has introduced standards for its accommodation. It is working to improve the supply and quality of temporary accommodation although it has not always provided temporary accommodation to those who require it. The Comhairle works very well with HHP to provide permanent accommodation to those whom it has duty to house. Homeless people are given up to two good quality offers of housing which meet their needs and which are generally in areas that they want to live.

## 5. Is the homelessness service at Comhairle nan Eilean Siar managed for improvement?

### Leadership and strategic planning

- 5.1 A Best Value Audit carried out by Audit Scotland in 2006 found that the Comhairle and its partners have a vision for Eilean Siar and are making some progress towards this, though improvements are needed to develop mechanisms to assess the impact of what is happening.
- 5.2 In its report Audit Scotland stated that it was concerned that the Comhairle was unable to demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement which is built into its processes. In particular, it highlighted the Comhairle's failure to plan for and introduce best value and a lack of robust performance management arrangements. The Comhairle agreed an action plan with Audit Scotland and it is reporting good progress with this. Its planned actions include improvements to the performance management system and a review of future political and administrative structures.
- 5.3 The Comhairle has a well developed Local Housing Strategy and this includes clear objectives for the homelessness service. At the strategic level there is a link between the Corporate Strategy and the Housing Service Business Plan. The Housing Service Business Plan sets out clear objectives for the service and includes targets and milestones. The Business Plan is focused on driving improvement in the service. However, the Comhairle's two key strategic documents – its Corporate Strategy and its recently agreed Single Outcome Agreement – include little reference to the homelessness service. The Comhairle makes its Local Housing Strategy available on its website, but not yet its most up to date Corporate Strategy or its Single Outcome Agreement.
- 5.4 The Comhairle developed its Homelessness Strategy in co-operation with a range of internal and external partners. It has not formally reviewed its strategy since it was first agreed in 2003 however it has included updates in the Local Housing Strategy reviews in the last two years. The Comhairle has a good approach to partnership working on homelessness particularly at an operational level. However, the Comhairle's Homelessness Network meets infrequently and it does not effectively monitor progress with the strategy or fully manage the delivery of

the strategic objectives. We found the Comhairle was making slow progress with a number of key areas in the strategy. Partners we spoke to were positive about the Comhairle's partnership approach, but we found that it has few formal protocols in this area and has not always ensured that it achieves the most effective contribution from key partners including internal partners.

### **Performance management, planning and reporting**

- 5.5 The Comhairle is developing its approach to performance management at a corporate level, and has recently completed a fundamental review of systems which it started in 2006. The review included an increased role for its Audit and Scrutiny Committee and review of both reporting to the Comhairle and responsibilities for officers. The Comhairle's updated system includes greater emphasis on performance improvement and firmer links with business planning and risk management.
- 5.6 The Comhairle reports twice yearly to its Environmental and Protective Services committee on the homelessness service. Its reports provide a good overview and analysis of the service, challenges, progress and future plans. In addition, it included in its most recent report for the year 2007/08 more performance information than previous reports and key performance information against most targets. However, it did not include SMART targets or trend and benchmarking information, limiting the Comhairle's ability to analyse the potential for improvement in the service. The Comhairle has recently joined the Scottish Housing Best Value Network to benchmark its performance against a range of other local authorities.
- 5.7 The Comhairle sets only a limited number of operational targets for the homelessness service which it includes in its homelessness procedures and in the Housing Service Business Plan. The Comhairle does not have a fully developed or comprehensive range of targets for the service. The gaps in its framework impact on some important areas for the Comhairle, including around the 2009 and 2012 Ministerial targets, lost contacts and bed and breakfast accommodation.

- 5.8 The Comhairle has a staff development appraisal system to assist with ensuring that staff work to meet departmental objectives and targets, but at the time of our inspection had not agreed targets and objectives with staff for 2008/09. We found the Comhairle effectively supports and trains staff in their day to day roles, but that it makes only limited use of performance information to help it to identify the development of its staff.

### Customer focus and influence

- 5.9 The Comhairle has a charter for homeless people and some internal targets for delivering services to homeless people. The Comhairle does not have a comprehensive set of service standards for the homelessness service and does not adequately publicise the standards and targets that it does have or what homeless people can expect. It does not include in its charter information on its targets for the homelessness service, such as providing appointments quickly, assessing cases within 28 days and providing offers of housing within three months. The Comhairle does not publicly report on how it meets the terms of the charter or its internal targets for delivering the service.
- 5.10 The Comhairle makes the agendas and minutes of the Environment and Protective Services Committee available on its website. However its annual and bi-annual performance reports on the homelessness service are not available on the website and the Comhairle does not publicise the performance of the homelessness service in any other way.
- 5.11 The Comhairle has an Accessibility Policy and through the Diversity and Equalities Steering Group has a contract for the provision of sign language, lip reading and translation. However, the Comhairle does not always advertise this service on its publications. It has a target of 14 days for providing a translation. The Comhairle carried out an audit of accessibility for its offices and found only 60% of the offices complied with the DDA legislation. The Comhairle has a programme of improvements for its offices. The Comhairle's website has the Browsaloud facility and while this is good, the site does not include an onsite text translation facility or enable text to be re-sized or advise that it can provide information in alternative formats or languages.

- 5.12 The Comhairle recently carried out its first exit survey of people who have used the homelessness service, but it does not have systems in place for routinely gathering the views of service users. Its survey contains a limited number of questions and does not enable the Comhairle to fully assess the quality of services it provides or assess what it needs to improve. When we raised this with the Comhairle it agreed to develop the survey. The Comhairle has not yet analysed the information obtained from the exit survey, but intends to do so and to take any action to improve services.
- 5.13 The Comhairle has a corporate complaints policy. We found that the leaflet on how to make a complaint was not available in the reception area of HHP's offices in Stornoway and that copies that were available in the reception area of the Comhairle headquarters, were available in Gaelic only. The Comhairle does not ensure that corporate information on how to complain is adequately publicised. The Comhairle only received one complaint during 2008/09. It dealt with this speedily and appropriately and in accordance with its complaints policy.

### Equalities and diversity

- 5.14 The Comhairle is developing its approach to equalities. It made progress in the last year reviewing and bringing all of its statutory schemes up to date. It included consultation with the relevant community groups in this process. The Comhairle has a clear commitment to providing equality of opportunity and this is reflected in its key strategies including the recently agreed Single Outcome Agreement. The Comhairle works through the Diversity and Equalities Steering Group of the Community Planning Partnership to offer training for the Comhairle staff on all aspects of equalities. However it has not made training on equalities mandatory and take up of the voluntary courses has been limited, and it is now considering mandatory equalities training for all staff dealing with service delivery.
- 5.15 The Comhairle's Housing Service Business Plan does not refer to equalities issues. The Comhairle reports annually on equalities outcomes for its recruitment and publishes this on its website but it does not monitor the impact of its services on equalities groups.

- 5.16 The Comhairle collects and reports on the ethnicity of homeless applicants, including gypsies/travellers. It also records and reports on the percentage of applicants who have a disability. It does not compare the percentage of homeless applications from minority ethnic communities or from disabled people with the profile of the local population or report on the outcomes obtained by these applicants. It has not carried out an assessment of how accessible the homelessness service is for these communities or if it meets their needs. The Comhairle does not report on the number of homeless applications by age or gender or the outcomes obtained by these applicants.

### Efficiency and value for money

- 5.17 The Comhairle has reduced its expenditure on the homelessness service from £657,000 in 2004/05 to £494,000 in 2007/08. The Comhairle reviewed the service at the end of 2007/08 and agreed to strengthen the service through the conversion of temporary contracts for six members of staff to permanent contracts. It has further reduced its budget for the homelessness service by £110,000 in 2008/09. The Comhairle has not carried out a cost and value assessment of the service to find out if the current service arrangements are adequate to guarantee the level of homelessness service the Comhairle expects to deliver to homeless people.
- 5.18 We found that the Comhairle has detailed budgets for the homelessness service, proactive management and control of the budgets and good procurement arrangements.
- 5.19 The Comhairle's spending on bed and breakfast accommodation increased significantly from £116,000 in 2004/05 to £205,000 in 2006/07. It reduced this expenditure in 2007/08 to £147,000, after it brought the Old House in Stornoway into use. The Comhairle is looking at the feasibility of a hostel for Stornoway to increase the availability of single persons accommodation and further reduce the spend on bed and breakfast. The Comhairle has a good, active approach to maximising income from temporary accommodation.

## 6. Next Steps

- 6.1 This report highlights our findings following this housing inspection. We expect all organisations to respond effectively to our recommendations using their own improvement planning processes. We ask organisations that receive fair or poor assessments overall in their homelessness service to submit an improvement plan to us within eight weeks of the publication of this report.
- 6.2 Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's improvement plan should show how it intends to respond to our findings. The plan will be agreed with us. We follow up improvement plans at regular intervals.
- 6.3 If you would like to see the Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's improvement plan you should contact the Comhairle by:

**Telephone: Lorraine Graham - 01851 707909**

**Email: [l.graham@cne-siar.gov.uk](mailto:l.graham@cne-siar.gov.uk)**

**Website: [www.cne-siar.gov.uk](http://www.cne-siar.gov.uk)**

## Sources of evidence

### Groups and third parties consulted

- The Comhairle's external auditor
- Housing Associations operating in the Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
- Homepoint
- Scottish Government's Homelessness Team
- Scottish Public Service Ombudsman
- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Care Commission
- Lewis Women's Aid

### Interviews/Meetings

- Chair of Environment and Protective Services Committee
- Vice Chair of Environment and Protective Services Committee
- Chief Executive
- Principal Officer Housing Services
- Senior and frontline staff in the homelessness team
- Equalities Officer
- Internal Auditor
- Senior Accountant

### Reality checks

- Observation of information and advice to service users
- Observation of shared, dispersed flats and bed and breakfast accommodation
- Shadowing of assessment and follow-up interviews with homeless people
- Shadowing of temporary accommodation visits
- Review of information for applicants
- Review of homeless assessments and appeals
- Review of complaints

### Key documents reviewed

- Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's Inspection Submission
- Audit Scotland's Audit of Best Value and Community Planning
- Relevant policy and procedures
- Minutes of meetings and associated reports
- The Comhairle's website and publicity material
- Outcome reports for homelessness
- Protocols with other agencies
- Local Housing Strategy
- Homelessness Strategy

### Examples of Positive Practice

These are areas we would highlight as working particularly well, taking account of the organisation's operating context:

#### **Homeless Assessment Interviews**

We found that the Comhairle's approach to homeless assessment interviews is excellent. Homeless staff are professional and highly skilled at interviewing. Homeless people are treated sympathetically and in a person centred manner. Its homeless assessment interviews are exemplary and conducted fully in accordance with the Code of Guidance and Performance Standards.

#### **Homelessness Support service**

We found that the Comhairle's homelessness support service is excellent. The service provides a comprehensive range of services to support homeless people through homelessness, while they are in temporary accommodation and for a period after they are provided with permanent accommodation. Homelessness Support staff are committed, proactive and provide homeless people with support that is tailored to the needs of individuals. The support provided makes a significant contribution to the prevention of homelessness and to the overall quality of the homelessness service.

## Glossary

<b>Benchmarking</b>	A process used by organisations to systematically compare service processes and performance to identify best practice.
<b>HomePoint</b>	<p>A team within the Scottish Government that supports providers of housing information and advice services.</p> <p>HomePoint has broken down advice activities into three types:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Type I active information, sign-posting and explanation.</li><li>• Type II casework.</li><li>• Type III advocacy, representation and mediation.</li></ul>
<b>ICT system</b>	Information and communication system.
<b>Notice of Proceedings (NOP)</b>	The formal notice provided to tenants informing them that their landlord is taking legal proceedings to seek a court order for recovery of possession of a property.
<b>Performance Standards</b>	Housing standards for all social landlords in Scotland, jointly agreed by the SFHA, COSLA and Communities Scotland.
<b>Procurement</b>	The way an organisation obtains services or materials from other organisations or agents.
<b>Registered social landlord (RSL)</b>	A landlord providing social rented housing that is registered and regulated by the Scottish Housing Regulator.
<b>Right to Buy</b>	The right of many Scottish tenants to buy their property at a discounted price, depending on length of tenancy.
<b>Section 5 referral</b>	Where, under Section 5 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, a local authority can request a registered social landlord that has accommodation in its area to provide accommodation to homeless people.
<b>Shadowing</b>	An inspection technique that involves accompanying and observing staff while they carried out their day-to-day tasks.
<b>SMART criteria</b>	Performance management acronym for: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timebound.
<b>Tenant assessor</b>	Trained tenants (not of the landlord being inspected) who are part of the inspection team. They are involved in preparing for inspection, reading landlord materials and on-site visits as well as talking to tenants.
<b>Tenure</b>	The method by which a person occupies a property i.e. tenant, lodger, owner-occupier.

## About the Scottish Housing Regulator

The Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) is an executive agency of the Scottish Government. We exercise independently the regulatory powers of Scottish Ministers in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. We register and regulate independent social landlords. These are usually housing associations, but they can also be housing co-operatives or companies limited by guarantee. We also inspect the housing and homeless services provided by local authorities.

We operate independently and impartially, while remaining accountable to Scottish Ministers for the standard of our work and for inspecting and reporting within the overall context of Scottish Ministers' strategic objectives for the social housing sector and tackling homelessness. A code of practice sets out what Ministers expect from us in delegating their regulatory powers to us. Our independence is further safeguarded by a Regulation Board that supports the Chief Executive to manage and direct the organisation.

Our purpose is to:

- protect the interests of current and future tenants and other service users;
- ensure the continuing provision of good quality social housing in terms of decent homes, good services, value for money, and financial viability; and
- maintain the confidence of funders.

Our work supports the principles of public service reform by promoting good services that are organised around the needs of the people who use them. We encourage registered social landlords (RSLs) and local authorities to be open, accountable, efficient and well governed. And we expect them to provide equal opportunity and open access to their services.

[www.scottishhousingregulator.gov.uk](http://www.scottishhousingregulator.gov.uk)

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## Availability in other formats

This document can be translated, on request, into your community language. Please phone 0141 271 3810 or email [shr@scottishhousingregulator.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:shr@scottishhousingregulator.gsi.gov.uk).

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