

Delivering Effective Enhanced Housing Options Services: Menu of Options and Action Planning Toolkit

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
A) STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF EHO SERVICES	5
Local authority corporate and member commitment Reviewing relevant strategies Communication and Publication	
B) DEVELOPING A CUSTOMER-FOCUSED EHO SERVICE	6
Improving accessibility to advice and support Ensuring a positive customer experience Customer empowerment Developing options/services for groups with specialist needs	
C) MAKING THE ‘CORE OPTIONS’ TOOLKIT WORK HARDER	12
Private Rented Sector Home Ownership/Intermediate Housing Functions Rough Sleeping Prevention Funds, Flexible Funds and Discretionary Housing Payments Overcrowding/Under Occupation Mobility Options Home Visits Housing Benefit Tenancy Sustainment Mediation Schemes Housing Grants and Loans Rent arrears Illegal Eviction Mortgage Rescue Supported Housing Options	
D) THE HOUSING OPTIONS ‘PLUS’ SERVICE	19
Tackling non-housing issues CBL as Housing Options ‘Hubs’ Proactive Services – Going the Extra Mile Working with Partners	
E) OPERATIONAL DELIVERY OF EHO SERVICES	24

Customer Assessment
Staffing the service
Funding
Quality Control
Recording and Monitoring
Positive Working Practices
Key Documents

F) ACTION PLANNING

29

SMART target setting
Top Tips
Common Action Planning Pitfalls
Action Plan Template

INTRODUCTION

The Enhanced Housing Options programme is about innovation in extending local authority Options services to provide better, 'joined up' services to people in housing need. It is also about taking the existing core options toolkit and making these work better to the advantage of all local authorities and service users.

At an Enhanced Options Seminar day held in November for some of the trailblazer authorities, it was agreed that it would be a good idea to produce a 'menu' of options that local authorities may wish to select from when developing their action plan.

There is no compulsion to take from this list, nor is the list exhaustive.

Rather it is list of suggestions designed to stimulate thought and discussion, and hopefully to help you ensure you can fully use the scheme to enhance your own service; the lessons learnt from your experiences will be to the benefit of all local authorities wishing to learn from innovation and best practice.

The menu covers all aspects of a strong EHO service – strategic management, how to maintain a focus on the needs of the customer, how to make the 'core' housing options toolkit work harder, how to embed 'enhanced' service elements, and also covers a number of operational issues.

As each authority's service is at a different stage of development, you may find that you are already operating a number of the enhancements outlined here. Although this document is not designed to be a definitive list of possible options, you may find it helpful to use it as a checklist to identify possible gaps in service provision. Some local authorities may wish to develop the majority of enhancements listed over the period of the scheme. Others may wish to be more focused and selective covering a specific theme. A number may wish to focus on developing new initiatives not listed in this menu. Local authorities should not think that they need to undertake ALL the suggestions included in this list. Rather should pick and choose which enhancements they feel will work best and can be realistically delivered by your service.

We estimate that around 60% of the suggestions in this document could be undertaken without significant additional investment.

Ideally you may wish to use this document as a starting point for your action planning, building on it and adding in your own ideas. The action planning template at the end is a suggested model and should be adapted as necessary to suit your own needs.

Action planning should cover everything you are hoping to add to or change about your service, even where you will be capturing funding from elsewhere – please let us know what the proportion of CLG monies to other monies is, and what CLG funding will be spent on.

This document is not statutory guidance. Local authorities are reminded that when discharging any housing function they need to have regard to relevant legislation and any statutory guidance. These are ideas to be tested, including suggestions drawn in part from the bids submitted for EHO trailblazers. All initiatives developed will clearly need to be fully tested and assessed for their effectiveness.

A) Strategic Management of EHO Services

This section contains ideas about ensuring that key strategic aspects are in place to develop effective EHO services.

Local authority corporate and member commitment

- Ensure inclusive/corporate-led approach to developing EHO
- Ensure corporate/member commitment expressed as a specific commitment with measurable targets via a local authority statement/target/policy
- Ensure both revenue/capital resources have been committed to EHO work for the next financial year, especially where this is match funding of the CLG Options grant, and funding identified and secured for future years
- Undertake assessment of the contribution that developing EHO services will make in assisting the LA to meet a number of indicators contained in the Local Government Performance Framework/LAA priorities/locally set performance targets
- Carry out impact assessment and risk assessment of EHO work, including statements of how risks will be mitigated where necessary

Reviewing relevant strategies/plans to include EHO, for example:

- Housing strategy
- Homelessness strategy
- Overcrowding strategy
- Community plan
- Neighbourhood management/renewal programmes
- Economic development strategy
- Other relevant statutory and non-statutory strategies – Supporting People, children, reducing re-offending, Domestic Violence etc

Communication and Publication

- Develop channels for dissemination of information on the progress of Enhanced Housing Options Initiatives to key partners and stakeholders
- Develop forums for discussion with key partners
- Develop a framework for consultation

B) Developing a Customer-Focused EHO Service

EHO services are tailored to the needs of the individual, offering personalised, realistic, practical advice and support where necessary. This section lists some ideas for ensuring that services are accessible and reflect the needs of the individuals approaching the service.

Ideally EHO services should be designed to cater for anyone with a housing problem. However in recognition of the practical challenges sometimes involved in adapting services, this chapter also includes a section on developing options and providing advice to groups with specialist needs.

1) IMPROVING CUSTOMER ACCESS TO ADVICE AND SUPPORT

Strategic

- Mapping advice services and developing a comprehensive advice network so that consistent advice on options can be provided at several points and through all key statutory and voluntary sector partners
- Undertake a community consultation exercise to identify appropriate methods of engagement with specific groups

Operational

- Extending service opening times – for example opening late once a week to coincide with Thursday late shopping, or opening early on Saturday mornings
- Emergency appointments – new ways of providing a service to people presenting in emergency or crisis
- Outreach services – to local hospitals, Prisons, Probation, Armed Forces Bases, Women's Centres, etc

Service Centre/Office-based delivery

- Face-to-face interviews/advice improvements and new ways of working – for example making these available through video conferencing for people out of Borough
- Telephone-based advice
- One-stop-shop facility
- Develop useable, useful Housing Options Packs – extended to include core information on debt/finance advice, prevention advice, benefit take up, employment and training, health and childcare options, accessing all tenures
- Ensure bespoke advice on options is available in various formats – for example Braille, large format, audio, multilingual
- Information displayed on: options, assessment process, complaints leaflets, service standards, performance and feedback, applying for social housing, JCP services
- Advice Directories for stakeholders and the public including self assessment techniques
- Dedicated CBL support line for all queries and feedback

Community-based delivery channels

- Surgeries and or information points/kiosks at GP surgeries, schools, hospitals, supermarkets, libraries, leisure centres, hospitals, colleges, family centres, Prisons, Probation, Women's Centres, voluntary sector partners, Jobcentre Plus (with a clear identity that says this is the housing options service)
- Home Visits (see Home Visits section) – use of Wifi technology for home visits
- Options bus (for example to engage with rural/semi-rural communities)
- Community champions to disseminate options information
- Training for frontline staff of social landlords on the range of advice and support options available and how to refer to them

Delivery through New Technologies

- Website-based advice and self assessment
- Links/ pop-ups to JobCentre Plus website etc built in to housing options website
- Use of Community Radio broadcasts
- Myspace and Facebook accessible advice and options services (e.g.: for young people)
- Downloadable housing options podcasts on the council's website
- Cable TV and Digi TV
- Information via mobile phone and text
- Email updates to hotmail, yahoo, googlemail or other externally-hosted email account (e.g.: updates on housing prospects after bidding through CBL, or what will happen next following options interview)
- Video-conferencing

2) IMPROVING THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Service Centre/Office-based delivery

- Improvement of physical premises – light, bright, airy
- Induction hearing loop
- Building accessibility
- Confidential interview facilities
- Friendly, welcoming atmosphere – free tea, coffee, soft drinks
- Clearly signposted service
- Free internet access
- High street location
- Co-location with money advice and debt services or surgeries
- Translation services
- Print out 'hand-held' record of options advice given to take with and provide to any other agency

Interactions with Staff

- Develop call centre scripts and one stop shop scripts to provide better first contact point access and advice
- Staff trained in delivering excellent customer service

- Same-sex interviews where necessary (e.g.: domestic abuse victims)

Service Reviews

- Customer Satisfaction surveys and new ways of delivering them
- Moving from customer satisfaction to customer shaping of services
- Mystery shopping exercise
- Independent external review of service which could involve service users
- Use of options web forums for local authorities to share and improve practice

3) CUSTOMER EMPOWERMENT

Housing Aspirations/Careers

- Personalised Action Plans (for some clients a housing action plan could be incorporated within a wider plan – for example, within an offenders sentence plan)
- Follow-up calls/emails to boost confidence in customers taking action for themselves.

Self-Service Options

- Housing options diagnostic tool on website leading to range of available options given individual circumstances
- Publish directory of key services and contact details
- Interactive help through website (e.g.: downloading of BOND leaflets and sample BOND certificate to show landlords)
- Self-registration for housing register that assesses provisional banding or points and housing prospects and advises on prospects and alternatives

Clients who could be Served by specific Service Enhancements*

BME groups (by group if necessary)	Those with complex/multiple needs
Lone parents	Those with reasonable preference
Young people 16-25	Those in priority need
Short-term rough sleepers	Those in high housing need
Entrenched rough sleepers	Those in medium housing need
Former rough sleepers	Those in low housing need
Offenders pre-release	Under-occupiers
Ex-offenders under probation supervision	Overcrowded
Ex-offenders not under probation supervision	Families with dependent children
Care leavers	Working singles
Those in contact with secondary mental health services	Working families
	Unemployed
	Those aged 16-19 in training/education

Those with moderate to severe learning disabilities Victims of domestic violence Substance misusers Ex-service personnel Elderly Physically disabled	Those aged 19+ in training/education Overcrowded households Intentionally homeless households Unintentionally homeless households Statutorily homeless households Single men Single women
*This is by no means a definitive list and should be viewed as a thinking aide only	

4) DEVELOPING OPTIONS/SERVICES FOR GROUPS WITH SPECIALIST NEEDS

General

- Undertake equalities impact assessment of services to ensure advice and support accessible to all
- Develop complex needs panels to address housing and support needs for vulnerable and socially excluded adults right through the housing process from assessment of eligibility for housing register minimising exclusions – supported housing options – referral - care plans - vulnerability – suitable housing – information sharing protocols
- Develop strong working relationships with key delivery partners (see 'Working with Partners')
- Consider mobility and employment options for vulnerable and socially excluded adults
- Developing a casework/multi-agency approach to handling complex cases

Specific

Customer Group	Possible Options/Services
Economic migrants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Housing advice pack including tenure rights, accessing the PRS, handling illegal eviction ➤ Proactively tackling overcrowding and poor housing conditions
Victims of Domestic Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Sanctuary schemes ➤ Reciprocal arrangements sub-regionally for victims of domestic abuse ➤ Joint working to provide holistic advice and options to victims of domestic abuse either from one point of contact or through all partners providing a consistent advice package on legal options, support, housing options, personal safety
Pre-release offenders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Prison housing options surgeries ➤ Mediation and support for those offenders who could move back to the family home but need support to help them build and maintain these relationships ➤ Reciprocal job swap/shadowing with Prison Housing

	<p>Teams</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Close working with Housing Benefit Teams so that benefits change of circumstances or new claims are processed quickly and are in place for release
Ex-offenders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Budgeting/life skills training programme ➤ Work with offender management ➤ Pre-sentencing options advice ➤ Develop prison leaver protocol with probation ➤ Delivering housing options in partnership ➤ Preventing loss of tenancies for people on remand or on a short term custodial sentence ➤ Housing options surgeries in Probation Offices, ➤ Assess local authority commissioned services to check for and change exclusion criteria ➤ Signposting advice to link into substance misuse, mental health support and support with rent arrears and debt issues ➤ Arrangements locally or sub-regionally for people who need to leave previous networks or to be close to treatment or support ➤ Close working with Housing Benefit Teams so that benefits change of circumstances or new claims are processed quickly and are in place for release
Young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Joint protocols, holistic joint assessments and multi-agency support arrangements where needed for 16 and 17 year olds ➤ Specific arrangements with the YOT re: 16 and 17 year olds released from custody ➤ Family support/mediation to prevent or reverse parental eviction and maximise parental support ➤ Develop and run youth inclusion projects ➤ Access to suitable emergency accommodation if needed (e.g. Nightstop, assessment centre, time out/crashpad) ➤ Access to Connexions Personal Advisers with an immediate focus on preventing loss of course or job, and ongoing support ➤ Life skills accredited courses ➤ Signposting to Positive Activities for Young People programmes ➤ Referral to Targeted Youth Support Services. ➤ Referral to mediation services ➤ Strong linkages with colleges and training providers. ➤ Signposting to counselling services ➤ Referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and substance misuse services ➤ Enable access to emergency funds, including Section 17 (Children's Act 1989) for 16/17 year olds and prevention funds ➤ Consulting and involving young people to improve

	<p>service accessibility and approachability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Consider dedicated young people's posts and multi-agency co-location ➤ Enhancements to PRS access schemes for under 25s – flatmate finding, access to bonds for sharers, shared accommodation market development
Substance abusers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Work with Drug Intervention Programme to develop shared protocols and strategies ➤ Outreach advice ➤ Secondments or job shadowing to DIP Teams ➤ Signposting to substance misuse treatment and support ➤ Arrangements locally or sub-regionally for people who need to leave previous networks or to be close to treatment
Older people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Personalised support for those wishing to downsize ➤ Care and repair ➤ Handyperson schemes ➤ Support plans in place ➤ Information sharing protocols ➤ Nominations to RSLs sheltered housing
BME	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Programmes including use for BME communities through specialist radio or TV ➤ Multi-lingual resources (e.g.: website, leaflets etc) ➤ Translation services ➤ Consultation exercises to determine housing needs of BME groups

C) Making the Core Options Toolkit Work Harder

1) PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR

Support for tenants

- Practical advice on Tenancy Deposit Schemes that lead to people being empowered to be able to access the PRS through their own actions
- Financial assessment – essential living costs etc
- Housing benefit package – Local Housing Allowance Assessments, advice on entitlement, verification of housing benefit documents, fast-tracking of initial payments
- Bespoke options for specific client groups
- Online advertisements of PRS properties
- Access for single people and non-priority homeless to rent deposit schemes
- Negotiation of longer ASTs

Landlord incentive schemes

- Setting up a social lettings agency
- Access for single people and non priority homeless to accredited landlords HMO scheme
- Setting up an accommodation assessment, placement and support hub to control and coordinate access and support needs to all accommodation available in the district including statutory homeless duty temporary accommodation; PRS, hostels. The aim being to make the best use of the pool of accommodation available to the council and ensure the right placement to the right accommodation thus increasing the prospect of a sustainable placement
- 'Gateway' approach with designated routes out of accommodation with support where required
- Flat-share projects
- PRS accommodation and client matching service
- Providing a Guaranteed BOND scheme access for single people or other identified client groups, for example social tenants with a good track record
- Higher rate supported BOND scheme for substance misuse and mental health linked to support worker
- PRS rent arrears service hotline - offered to landlords, intervention – negotiate rent levels, LHA direct, DHP, ending tenancies correctly
- Accommodation options for small scale supported housing projects using existing C3 planning consent with support from the planning department
- Rent in advance schemes
- Damage guarantee schemes
- Deposit guarantee schemes

Accreditation Schemes

- Accreditation advice and help for both landlords and tenants

- Illegal eviction and harassment: direct action including enforcement and legal action
- Contributions through housing options PRS schemes to meeting the Private sector decent homes standard
- Housing Health and Safety Ratings System implementation to tackle private sector disrepair and overcrowding
- Student Housing policing of standards and raising awareness
- Landlord training and awareness raising to improve landlord confidence in letting to people in housing need and on housing benefit.

2) HOME OWNERSHIP/INTERMEDIATE HOUSING FUNCTIONS

- Establish working protocol with HomeBuy agents re: referral, awarding priority, marketing to tenants and those on the housing register, assessment of household income, flexibility regarding levels of rent or equity loan
- Promotion of LCHO options through housing options service (e.g.: see 'increasing accessibility' for possible delivery channels)
- Staff training to cover low cost home ownership options including HomeBuy range and Right-to-Buy/Acquire
- LCHO 'fairs' or open days
- Facilitate access to independent advice on home ownership
- Information and facilitating access to key worker schemes intermediate housing and advice on mobility within this context
- Leaseholder help and advice for both the ex-RTB social sector and private sector re: common hold issues; purchasing freehold; right to manage; service charges and repairs
- Develop a sellers pack: independent advice on requirements and next steps
- Set up a savings scheme to support individuals wanting to save for a deposit

3) ROUGH SLEEPING

- Personal action plans for former rough sleepers
- Taking forward early the actions recommended from the CLG Strategy 'No one left out'
- Innovative approaches to rough sleeping including exercising power to accommodate (192(3)HA1996) verified rough sleepers on the streets
- Street outreach/street rescue service innovative approaches
- Homelessness medical service
- Embedding commitment to tackling social exclusion throughout council services
- Sub-regional working through Multi-Area agreements where numbers of rough sleepers in each LA are low
- Developing hostels and day centres as 'Places of Change'
- Clearing house role for non-statutory sector hostels to avoid silting up and ensuring this provision is targeted at those in greatest need.

See: www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/roughsleepingstrategy

4) PREVENTION FUNDS, FLEXIBLE FUNDS AND DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS

Prevention Fund

- Develop clear criteria for what prevention money could be used to fund.
- Innovative ways of using prevention fund money (e.g.: tackling worklessness; covering rent for offenders until HB claims come through post release)
- Increasing access to prevention fund money to local authority partners working to prevent homelessness

DHP

- Holding the fund in the Housing Options service
- Developing value for money criteria
- Developing innovative ways of using DHP
- Simple forms and application forms
- LA top up to DHP payments to prevent homelessness.
- Evidence of using it in a targeted way

5) OVERCROWDING/UNDER OCCUPATION

Strategic

- Designated post to support overcrowded households
- Develop overcrowding strategy and action plan
- 'Myth-busting' re: allocations to overcrowded households built into staff training module
- Review allocations policy to tackle overcrowding (e.g.: priority for severely overcrowded households or additional preference for existing tenants who are overcrowded)
- Top priority for under-occupiers in the allocations scheme
- Develop overcrowding and under-occupation protocols with RSLs
- Health assessments for overcrowded households
- Experimenting with chain lettings

Move-On/Mobility Options for Overcrowded Households

- 'Handholding' support for overcrowded households/adult family members of overcrowded households wishing to access the PRS
- Extend PRS landlord incentive schemes and BONDS to overcrowded tenants
- Incentive payments to overcrowded households prepared to release a secure tenancy by moving into the PRS
- Cash incentive schemes to assist with home purchase through low cost market housing
- Support to households to register on other local authority or RSL allocation schemes in areas where someone may wish to move to through assessing their likely housing priority under a specific scheme, help with registration and help with bidding where needed

Making Best Use of Existing Space for Overcrowded Households

- Financial support for space-saving actions (e.g.: bunk beds, fold-down beds, storage units, removing unwanted furniture etc)
- Financial support for living space extensions or adaptations (e.g.: installing additional washbasins, partitioning, flat-pack pod technology)

Tackling Under Occupation

- Identify under-occupiers through council tax records, mail shots, GPs, social care teams, estate offices, Home Improvement Agencies (HIAs), handyperson schemes etc
- Handholding and bespoke support for under-occupiers wishing to downsize – for example packing/removals services, disconnections/reconnection, 'settling-in' packs, decorating new properties to a specific taste
- Ensure allocations scheme allows a 'spare' bedroom for under occupiers if this is required
- Housing staff trained to refer to mobility schemes e.g.: Seaside and Country Homes scheme

See: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/overcrowdingtoolkit>
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/Overcrowdingactionplan>
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/tacklingovercrowdingengland>

6) MOBILITY OPTIONS

Mobility options available to all social housing tenants

- Direct application to LAs in chosen area
- Direct application to RSLs in chosen area
- Application for transfer within stock of current landlord
- Mutual exchange
- Move into the private rented sector
- Encouraging local RSLs to join local and national mutual exchange schemes

London based social housing tenants also have:

- LAWN (landlord to landlord referral service)
- Seaside & Country Homes (over 60's)
- Increasing access to these specific schemes

RSL assisted/funded schemes

- Assistance with removal costs
- Under-occupation schemes (includes increased priority for those downsizing, payments for bedrooms released, support with move process etc)
- Local mutual exchange services

Options for vulnerable people

- Work with partners to develop options for local and sub-regional moves for those who need to move to be close to support, substance misuse treatment or to leave old networks

7) HOME VISITS

- Clear criteria for identifying when home visits are appropriate
- Establish protocol for good practice in home visiting
- Taking forward the options approach to the home visit
- Home visits to identified 'hard to engage' customers
- Home visits where individuals are unable to access advice via another route
- Wifi technology to enable better off in work calculations to be undertaken, housing options info accessed, and bids made via CBL website
- Home visits to overcrowded households to identify need and support that might be offered/available
- Home visits to under occupiers to establish level of support required to enable them to downsize

8) HOUSING BENEFIT

- Housing Benefit protocol or SLA covering how Options and Benefit service will work together
- Local Housing Allowance calculator
- A structured training programme in Verification for all options staff and key partners including voluntary sector and RSL/Council Housing management services to reduce the risk of homelessness through rent arrears
- HB training packs and courses for prevention and options work covering partners and landlords
- Better joint working including job shadowing
- Early warning systems of benefit being turned off given to options services
- Short HB forms to reduce bureaucracy
- Coordinating advice and benefit take up
- Information sharing protocols with HB
- Agree shared understanding of how quickly change of circumstance and new claims will be processed for those entering and leaving prison

9) TENANCY SUSTAINMENT

- Floating support, targeted with better outcomes
- Tenancy support, targeted with better outcomes
- New tenancy visits for social landlords to identify early problems that may lead to a risk of homelessness
- Rent account checks and advice
- Pre-tenancy training in managing tenancies for new tenants.
- Financial capability training

10) MEDIATION SCHEMES

- Consider the scope of the mediation scheme, decide who will it be offered to, develop referral forms and outcomes etc
- Clear criteria for identifying when mediation is appropriate
- Operating mediation schemes within existing options services full time or on a surgery basis
- Co-locating mediation services
- Work with partners to develop mediation schemes that address families and also address the needs of those temporarily away from their family due to prison or drugs rehabilitation

11) HOUSING GRANTS AND LOANS

- Innovation in private sector renewal grants /loans for home improvement
- Help to elderly owner occupiers on equity release for improvement and repair to assist people to stay in their home.
- Incorporate Home Improvement Agencies within options services.
- Handypersons services and small scale home safety work for elderly people, victims of domestic violence and the physically disabled
- Possible administering Disabled Facilities grants from the options service, and minor adaptations
- HECA: energy efficiency schemes in partnership with energy companies across private sector to improve thermal comfort and save energy/tackle fuel poverty
- Empty property grants and loans linked to PRS access schemes at affordable or intermediate rents

12) RENT ARREARS

- Pre-action protocols with RSLs and housing management services
- Innovative prevention schemes and tackling arrears
- Schemes for keeping people in their property (e.g.: 'Social Housing Rescue' type arrangements for the social sector based on mortgage rescue joint working principles)
- Early warning rent arrears system with all social sector landlords where this poses a risk to the home
- Joint options advice and money advice letters sent out automatically with arrears letters
- Options to write-off or reclaim rent arrears (e.g.: through reduce incentive payments to under occupiers)

13) ILLEGAL EVICTION

- Develop a clear plan - who will do what within the council and partners
- Illegal eviction packs and advice for landlords and tenants
- Court advocacy services

14) MORTGAGE REPOSSESSION

Taking the MRS CLG package and enhancing this through local activity and initiatives. For example:

- Contributing capital funding to reach more cases including those in negative equity
- Targeting buy to let properties where there are mortgage difficulties to help keep tenants in the home through direct payment of rent to lenders

15) SUPPORTED HOUSING OPTIONS

- Increasing provision with support including making more use of the PRS
- Innovative use of Move-On Protocol (MOPP)
- Developing a local voluntary initiative for all supported housing to work towards the standards set out in 'Places for Change' for buildings, support, management and engagement (where capital is not achievable for buildings organisations can still aim to reach the standard in management, support and engagement).
- Reviewing SP contracts to make sure that the services commissioned do not exclude certain groups, which then makes it hard for the local authority to place them anywhere

D) The Housing Options 'Plus' Service

This section covers service elements which cannot be considered extensions of the 'core' housing options toolkit but are fundamental to an effectively run, forward thinking EHO service. It covers ways of developing and embedding these service elements, making the most of existing infrastructure, making your service more 'proactive,' and working effectively with partners to develop the service.

1) TACKLING NON-HOUSING ISSUES

Strategic

- Embed non-housing issues throughout service via a revision of key mechanisms (e.g.: needs assessment form, standard staff training, personal action plans)
- Think about most appropriate delivery mechanism for non-housing advice – in house surgeries, in-house case worker/secondee (see 'making service more accessible' for delivery channels)
- Develop referral mechanism into services with relevant expertise

Worklessness (key partners economic development team, Jobcentre Plus)

- Jobcentre Plus 'surgeries' at housing options service centres
- Frontline staff to spend a day at a local Jobcentre Plus
- Weekly 'Jobsearch clubs' at housing options service centres
- In-house 'ready for work' workshops/classes covering CV writing, interview skills, body language etc
- Arrange volunteering opportunities for service users
- Training and employment of ex-service users at the housing options service
- Social enterprise schemes
- Better off in work calculations performed by front line housing staff or caseworkers with staff encouraged to promote benefits of employment to workless customers – financial and confidence/self-esteem benefits
- Installation of 'Job Points' at housing options service centres
- Support to use free internet access to search job vacancies
- Co-location of housing/JCP services
- All housing options to include analysis of impact on worklessness and encouragement into training and employment

Debt/Financial Issues (key partners Citizens Advice Bureau)

- Debt advice action planning with clients to reduce debt; negotiation with creditors
- Court advocacy services to prevent homelessness from housing debt cases in all sectors
- In-house debt/finance/budgeting surgeries plus emergency appointments
- LA funding of Citizens Advice Bureau provision
- Mortgage repossessions streamlined services and enhanced joint working

Education and Training (key partners LSC, LearnDirect, NextSteps, adult further/higher education colleges, hostels)

- In-house classes – literacy, numeracy, filling in forms, basic skills
- Prospectuses for college courses available through housing options services
- Referrals to further education colleges

Health (key partners adult social care department, Primary Care Trusts, Drug Intervention Programmes)

- Health assessments for families/individuals whose housing situation may be impacting negatively on their health or substance misuse issues
- Home adaptations where necessary
- Establish hospital admission and discharge policies

Personal Development

- Self-esteem building classes
- Life coaching
- Motivational activities

Benefits

- Fast-track benefits system for certain vulnerable client groups
- Income maximisation including assessment of peoples circumstances against benefits due

2) CHOICE BASED LETTINGS AS HOUSING OPTIONS HUBS

Many authorities are seeing the potential for developing existing CBL infrastructure as a way of promoting and accessing a wide range of housing options. This section suggests a number of ways in which CBL infrastructure might be used to do this.

- Using CBL as the HUB 'engine' for promoting the options service - magazines/websites/DigiTV/text
- Ensuring CBL is accessible to those out of Borough or who need support to use the system
- Extending into PRS options – for example *'tick here if you want a PRS option offered or advice – you are not successful but have you thought about this PRS option'* (text/email feedback)
- Low-cost home ownership, mutual exchange, assistance to downsize all appear as viable options through CBL infrastructure
- Housing options services extended into proactively assisting existing social housing tenants with planning their housing futures
- Establishing clear links to tenants groups to gain greater access to tenants and obtain feedback on what options they want to see
- Tenants options meeting to promote mutual exchange and facilitate education and awareness

- Develop an accommodation options vacancy hub covering all vacancies in TA, PRS, BOND, Supported Housing etc. Hub checks vacancy position and type of vacancy with support needs and finds most appropriate household from pool either as Housing Option, prevention, and duty met or ending of duty

3) PROACTIVE SERVICES: GOING THE EXTRA MILE

Service Promotion – doing more to raise the profile of the service within the local community to encourage individuals to see it as the service of first rather than last resort.

- Use high-profile CBL schemes to promote alternative housing options/available services – magazines/websites/DigiTV/text
- Poster campaigns
- Targeted mail shots (e.g.: social tenants, identified under-occupiers or overcrowded households)
- TV and radio adverts
- Council website
- ‘Open days’ and road shows in strategic locations
- Promoting the service with partners, such as Probation, local Prisons, Drug Interventions Programmes, the PCT
- Develop and promote the service with other sections of the Council, such as Children’s Services and Social Services

Proactive Management of the Housing Register

- Changing the focus of Housing Registration staff to combine registration and verification with proactive options help to all - Options Access staff team
- Options Access Team to proactively engage with those actively bidding but have no realistic chance of social housing – offer an options interview to discuss prospects, position and alternatives
- Checking bidding patterns under CBL to access where people actively want to live – giving feedback on prospects and possibilities for extending areas of choice and considering PRS options
- Checking who is overcrowded in public and PRS and providing bespoke advice
- Establishing under occupiers in social housing from the register and promoting trade down options
- Promoting mutual exchange for Social Housing tenants wishing to move but may have insufficient priority to achieve this. (including workshops)
- Developing a disability register to make best use of properties that are adapted or could be adapted
- Checking whether those who are registered and flagged as vulnerable are bidding and if not contact direct, or through support key worker
- Provide an accessible homes matching service

5) WORKING WITH PARTNERS

Working with partners is essential to making EHO services work effectively. Partnership working might take place with respect to:

- identifying named contacts
- developing protocols for information-sharing
- developing referral mechanisms (both into and out of service)
- developing dispute resolution protocols
- training of stakeholders on services available
- establishing information sharing protocols
- outreach work
- designing systems that are accessible to a wide range of different clients

Possible EHO Partner Organisations*

DWP contractors	Adult Social Services
Voluntary sector organisations	Drug Action Team
Faith-based organisations	Children's services
Credit Union	Youth offending Teams
Citizens Advice Bureaux	Connexions
Adult Advancement and Careers Service (LearnDirect/NextSteps)	ProbationLocal Prisons
Information and Guidance services	Drugs Intervention Projects
Sub-regional working with surrounding LAs to effect economies of scale	Community Mental Health Teams
HomeBuy agents	Further/higher education colleges
Social lettings agencies	RSLs
Independent source of legal advice	Relevant council departments (e.g.: housing, education, regeneration, economic development, health)
	Primary Care Trust
	Job Centre Plus

*this should not be seen as a definitive list

Ideas for Partnership Working

- Bringing statutory and voluntary sector services together in co-location or weekly surgeries to help single homeless or at risk of homelessness
- Sharing the housing options toolkit so it is delivered through more partners – needs training for partners
- Delivering enhanced housing options toolkit through partners
- Developing tailored packages – for example options advice for health professionals, or options advice for people working in education or schools
- Develop local 'accreditation' certificates or local quality mark in options: basic course/course plus, ensuring that all able to give advice – able to access services
- Capacity building of local third sector organisations

- Specific training courses for volunteering in housing options work with modules in mentoring, helping in hubs, helping homelessness forum work, helping in supported housing projects
- Develop clear protocols with partners covering service level, outcomes, referral routes
- Monitor SLAs, expectations and outcome with independent advice agencies funded to undertake specific tasks
- Develop a framework for delivering options work in partnership
- Develop one stop shop hubs with multi agency advice
- Develop local quality standards and joint training programmes
- Use case conferences with key partners for certain client groups for housing assessments and accessing supported housing
- Develop common forms
- Develop information sharing protocols
- Share data on housing needs and use this to assess current services and jointly commission new services and projects

E) Operational Delivery and Administration of EHO Services

It will be the operational working procedures, processes and administration that will ensure consistency and speed of intervention and consistent decision-making. It is therefore critical that these 'nuts and bolts' service elements are reviewed and made to work as efficiently as possible. Take the basics here and adapt to make them work better providing an improved customer service as a result.

1) CUSTOMER ASSESSMENT

Triage

- Triage assessment carried out at point of access to service (including where this is an outreach service)
- Developing EHO options script for front desk filtering officers to use – short version
- Better use of front end triage to reduce the need for people to come back more than once

Needs Assessment

- Needs assessment/first contact form revised to include some or all of the following elements: employment status/previous employment/qualifications/benefits currently received/health – physical and mental; substance use/skills/existing support or service involvement/citizenship status/recommended referrals/risk assessment including danger to self AND others

Options Interviews

- Developing full options script/checklist to be used for options interviews incorporating EHO elements, should be fully adapted for the local authority
- Staff trained to deliver personalised EHO service (see 'staff training' section)
- Translation services available where appropriate using traditional methods and new translation on line software
- Prepare bespoke options advice letters with menu of standard paragraphs that ensure bespoke advice and action plan for the client.
- Develop a standard Options Pack to be sent and given out with the outcome advice letter. Pack should include as a minimum LHA rates for the district; how to find PRS accommodation (applicant); landlord incentive scheme (guide for landlords for applicant to show landlord in search for accommodation); accessing social housing and likely waiting times; bespoke leaflets for mediation, debt, etc; income and expenditure sheet for debt; promotional leaflets for JCP/DAT etc services

Elements of an Enhanced Housing Options Interview

As a core EHO options service advisors could provide each client at interview with:

- Better off in work calculation
- Income maximisation health check including benefits take up
- Income and expenditure basic debt management health check and referral on to specialist where required
- Housing prospects social housing and private rented sector
- Assessment of support needs - low and medium level
- Tenure retention specific advice and action plan
- All the above contained in a holistic Housing Options Advice letter and Action plan
- Plus ability to refer and referral routes referral to other services where appropriate including life skills, health awareness, nutrition, budgeting, developing relationships, anger management, resolving family conflict, plus removing barriers to work through ESOL

2) STAFFING THE SERVICE

Structures

- Designated post to lead on EHO work
- Designated post or incorporated into responsibilities of existing post to take forward local authority mentoring work
- Service properly staffed with clear job descriptions prepared for any new posts
- Consider secondment arrangements to secure necessary expertise for the EHO service

Training

- Develop standard training module for all service staff
- Knowledge-based training – homelessness legislation, landlord and tenant law including court advocacy procedures, housing benefit, income maximisation, debt advice, jobcentre plus services
- Skills-based training – interview skills, statement taking, getting the message across, customer service

Management

- Developing core management information to monitor performance and feeding this back to clients, stakeholders and staff
- Individual performance appraisal, and assessment of training needs systems specifically for Housing options work

Possible Staff Posts for EHO Service*

EHO project manager/coordinator
Worklessness officer
Financial inclusion officer
Resettlement workers
Mentoring Coordination Officer
Rural Housing officer
Private sector liaison officer
Young persons housing options officer
Housing benefit officer
Partnership development officer
Performance/monitoring officer
Supporting People Lead
Vulnerable People Officer

* this should not be seen as a definitive list

3) FUNDING

- Formalise an 'invest-to-save' strategy and procedure which is able to quantify value for money and savings
- Identify potential match funding streams for EHO work (e.g.: DAT, PCT, decent homes, JCP, HCA, WNF, national lottery)
- Identify and capture under spend for EHO work
- Develop joint working agreements with RSLs to capture RSL funding for specific work

4) QUALITY CONTROL

- Systems diagnostic work – process analysis – end to end processes to improve the EHO service and customer experience
- Develop enhanced service standards for EHO service
- Setting up advice and options forums, and advice protocols.

(See also: 'Ensuring a Positive Customer Experience')

5) RECORDING AND MONITORING

- Record number of applications made for social housing
- Record reasons for applying for social housing
- Record reasons for homelessness
- Record level and type of housing need of individuals approaching service
- Record the number of people entering supported housing
- Record the number of people accessing the private rented sector

- Record the number of successful mediations where people successfully remain in the family home (where this is appropriate)
- Record employment status of those approaching service
- Undertake regular 'health checks' to review figures and identify anomalies
- Monitor use by women, BME groups, disabled people and by socially excluded groups to assess whether your service is used by all those who might need it

6) POSITIVE WORKING PRACTICES

- Develop a '*Directory of Services*' which includes lead contacts for all advice and homeless agencies in the area
- Develop a common housing register and common allocation policy to improve customer access routes and reduce confusion
- Develop a vulnerable persons database backed by an information sharing protocol
- Look at IT provision – touch screen housing options; user-friendly IT; video-conferencing facilities, WiFi-enabled laptops for outreach work
- Support services for those with low literacy skills or learning disabilities.
- Check procedure manuals for options service and retain what can be used. Procedures need to cover how the triage system will work and when will a case be passed on from one part of the service to another or referred to another service (filtering, reception, options interviews, homelessness assessment, TA placement); plus administrative procedures and accountability including who signs off invoices, decisions, etc; file checks and audit trails
- Develop a new procedure manual incorporating the above and look to provide this on each officer's PC desktop rather than paper files
- Recording prevention procedure in the context of the requirements on the P1E section for prevention. Could adapt to identify separately prevention cases that would otherwise have led to a full duty acceptance to provide evidence for invest-to-save approach
- Develop joint housing actions plans with partners – so that housing actions can be included in resettlement plans for example

6) KEY DOCUMENTS

- Bring together all working forms and letters and decide to either to keep, amend along EHO lines if required. Phase out the use of all redundant forms
- Develop a core set of Homelessness forms for Local Authority Area, this might include: the basic Options Form; Homeless Application form (see below for full list)
- Test standard inquiry letters to use across Local Authority Area.
- Develop a set of standard prevention letters for use across the Council.
- Develop a set of standard Housing Options letters
- First approach filtering form for reception triage housing options work.
- Develop one 'what to bring to interview' letter for appointments

- Develop a general front desk short advice form and recording of advice
- Look to combine Options and Homeless Application forms into one
- Develop an interview outcome recording form to record advice given
- Develop one standard homeless assessment inquiry form for making and recording all homeless inquiries on the case. The form prompts the actions to be taken and recorded. This needs to be capable of being used as a paper form and integrated into any IT system
- Customer feedback questionnaire for options services
- Case planning and outcome forms for prevention and options and homelessness assessment cases – case plan ‘what I will do next’ to be filled out after options or assessment interview

F) Action Planning

The importance of effective Action Planning cannot be underestimated. Plans need to include effective arrangements for monitoring, reviewing, and evaluating your actions.

SMART TARGET SETTING

The use of measurable targets and outcomes is essential based on SMART targets (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-Bounded).

Specific - Actions should be straightforward and emphasize what you want to happen. Think about **what** you are going to do. Use action words such as direct, organize, coordinate, lead, develop, plan, build etc. Think about **why** it is important to undertake this action at this time - what do you want to ultimately accomplish? Think about **how** you are going to do it.

Measurable - Choose an action with measurable progress, so you can see the change occur. What will the service look like once the action has been achieved? Establish concrete criteria for measuring progress toward the attainment of each action.

Achievable – with a multitude of possible service enhancements, it is easy to become over-ambitious. All actions need to be achievable given the resources, time and skills available.

Realistic - Ensure that the skills needed to do the work are available; that the project fits with the overall strategy and goals of your organization. A realistic project may push the skills and knowledge of the people working on it but it shouldn't break them.

Time-Bounded - Set a timeframe for each action. Putting an end point on your goal gives you a clear target to work towards. If you don't set a time, the commitment is too vague. Without a time limit, there's no urgency to start taking action.

TOP TIPS

- Plan backwards – think about what you are hoping to achieve, then identify key actions that will need to be undertaken in order to achieve this
- Ensure there is an end date for each action, which is realistic and achievable
- Make sure each action has a lead person identified – tasks given to a group may not be carried out by anyone

- Break actions into achievable tasks by setting 'milestones' – staged achievements or 'interim targets'
- Determine how success will be measured or what it will look like
- Think about what resources are needed to achieve each action including direct financial support and or staff time
- Identify the intended outcome for each action
- Use your action plan as a 'working document' by: including a comments column so that people can see what has been achieved, why progress has been slow or why targets were achieved early; and reviewing actions regularly, for instance every three months, producing a progress report so all can see what has been achieved and where action is still needed. Take this opportunity to update the Action Plan each time it is reviewed, clearly marking the version with a date and with the next review date

COMMON ACTION PLANNING PITFALLS

Common problems with action plans are that:

- Timetables are often loose, for example covering everything in the first 6 - 9 months
- Timetables are too short for actions to be implemented
- No one person was identified to take an action forward
- Action plans are overly ambitious and strategic rather than action-led
- Success criteria are not always sufficiently clear

ACTION PLAN TEMPLATE

Below is a suggested action plan template

What We will do?	When will we do it by?	Who will deliver this?	Resources Needed	Milestones	Target/ Outcome	What would success look like?	Comments