

# **Social Justice and Regeneration Committee**

## **SJR(2)-03-07(p.4) Annex 1**

### **Welsh Assembly Government**

#### **Progress On Implementation Of The National Homelessness Strategy**

##### **Context**

In 2005 we reviewed our homelessness strategy in the light of the sustained rise in homelessness, and emerging good practice, and the need to prevent homelessness where at all possible. The context for that review was the continuing rise in house prices and the pressure on affordable accommodation. Since then we have received the research report from Michael Jones which provides evidence of the relationship between the private housing market and homelessness. House prices have continued to rise, and all the evidence we have indicates that the underlying demand for affordable housing continues to rise.

It is in this difficult context that we need to view this report, which shows significant progress across our agenda and in key performance areas. This progress began under our previous strategy, as we took measures to promote prevention and joint working, and this agenda was strengthened and extended under the revised Strategy for 2006-8.

Homelessness is always difficult to measure, and the homelessness statistics collected by the Welsh Assembly Government from local authorities do not tell the whole story. Nevertheless, they do provide an indication of how the real experience of homelessness and threatened homelessness has been improved for many people. The statistics in appendix 2 show that the numbers of people presenting and accepted by local authorities has fallen significantly over the past two years.

Given the prevailing pressure in the housing market, we believe that these falls are primarily due to the implementation of good practice in preventing homelessness, which lies at the heart of our Strategy.

##### **Other review work**

The Social Justice and Regeneration Committee has just published its review into youth homelessness. This covers a very important aspect of the Strategy, and its recommendations. I am sure that the majority of the recommendations will be implemented. I will be considering all of the 29 recommendations very carefully. A response will be provided in the Minister's report to the Committee on the 22nd March, and then recommendations will be incorporated as appropriate.

The Wales Audit Office has completed its study of the National Homelessness Strategy and its

impact on prevention. The recommendations from this work will be addressed after consideration by the Audit Committee.

Shelter Cymru have undertaken an enquiry into homelessness in Wales, chaired by the Archbishop of Wales. The report from this enquiry is due to be presented to the Assembly Government on the 28th March, and will be considered in due course.

## **Statistical Aspects of Homelessness**

Attached at appendix 1 are tables and charts produced by the Statistics Directorate, drawn from local authority quarterly returns. This uses data on statutory homeless presentations and acceptances, based on their statutory duties.

## **Homelessness Presentations and Acceptances**

The figures show that the numbers of households presenting as homeless decreased from 5707 in July–September 2004 to 3941 in the same quarter two years later.

Following the investigation of these presentations, the numbers of households then found to be unintentionally homeless and in priority need by local authorities fell during this period from 2603 to 1741, a fall of 33%. Thus the proportion of presentations accepted for the full duty rose even as total numbers fell, which indicates that local authorities were not reducing their duties by taking a harsher line on interpreting the legislation.

The above falls appear to be largely due to the changing focus of local authority services, which are focusing their efforts much more towards earlier intervention to prevent homelessness. In many cases this means action when the household first contacts the authority, and before a formal application for homelessness assistance has been made. In a high proportion of cases this action is successful, and will be measured in future through a new performance indicator.

Concerns have been voiced that some local authorities are merely gatekeeping, by discouraging people from making an application or simply referring them elsewhere. The Welsh Assembly Government is exploring with the WLGA, Shelter Cymru and others how this can be identified and addressed where it is happening. However, as referred to above, there is no statistical evidence of this within the data submitted by authorities.

## **Temporary Accommodation**

The statistics on temporary accommodation show an overall fall of 14 % between July-September 2004 and the same quarter 2006. This in part reflects the decline in presentations and acceptances. A lag in the impact of improved prevention on this data set would be expected, although it has been difficult for local authorities to reduce their use of temporary accommodation as the market conditions have restricted the opportunities to move people on into more permanent housing. Therefore this indicator shows a slower decline than others, and is likely to remain problematic in the foreseeable future.

Within these figures the number of households in temporary accommodation from less than twelve months has gone down, but there is an increase in the smaller number of households who spend more than a year in temporary accommodation.

The pattern of temporary housing has changed considerably, with a dramatic reduction of 43% in the use of Bed and Breakfast premises during this period. This is a major achievement, and will be entrenched with the introduction of the Welsh Assembly Government legislation on suitability of accommodation. Local authorities have moved to greater use of private sector leasing, strongly encouraged and funded by the Welsh Assembly Government.

This indicates that the standard of temporary housing overall has improved, and will improve further. The numbers of households in temporary housing is slowly declining, but some households are becoming stuck in this position for longer, although often this in high quality leased accommodation.

## **Targets on Homelessness**

The National Homelessness Strategy 2006-8 contains the following targets from April 2005:

- Prevent homelessness among 50% of households who considered themselves as at risk of homelessness, who approached or are referred to the local authority and for whom housing advice casework intervention resolved their situation.
- Reduce the number of homeless households found to be unintentionally homeless and in priority need by 20% from 9856 in 2004/5.
- Reduce the numbers of households in Bed and Breakfast accommodation by 50% from 761 in 2004/5.
- Reduce the average length of time spent in temporary accommodation by 20% from 2004/5.
- Progress on the prevention target cannot be measured until the performance indicator on prevention is adopted. We await a decision by the Local Government Data Unit, but we are hopeful this will be agreed for introduction in April 2007.
- The number of households found to be unintentionally homeless and in priority need has already fallen by 28%, well in excess of our target for April 2008.
- The numbers of homeless households in Bed and Breakfast accommodation has fallen by 34%, again substantial progress against our target for April 2008.

Latest calculations show that the average length of time in temporary accommodation has fallen by around 13%. The overall numbers in temporary accommodation have fallen, with a substantially fewer people in temporary accommodation for less than 6 months, a stable number of households in for between 6-12 months, and a gradual increase in the smaller numbers of households in temporary accommodation for over a year.

## **Progress in Key Aspects of the National Homelessness Strategy 2006-8**

Local Authority Homelessness Progress Visits

Visits have been carried out to all local authorities. This direct contact has enabled two-way discussion on progress, issues affecting performance, and good practice.

### **General findings include:**

- Most authorities had adapted their strategic approach to focus on prevention, and had also reconfigured their staff teams to reflect this.
- Resources had been increased for tackling homelessness, with some increase in political profile of the issue
- Significant progress was being made on reducing the use of Bed and Breakfast for families, but this was proving more problematic for single people
- Difficulties in accessing permanent accommodation were seen as the major obstacle to reducing the numbers of people in temporary accommodation
- Partnership working was improving in most areas, although homelessness was not well reflected in high level strategic planning
- Some authorities did not appear to be well prepared for completing the homelessness planning part of their local housing strategies.

### **Private Rented Sector**

Officials have established a task and finish group to explore effective practice to improve access to sustainable tenancies in the private sector. The group includes representation from private landlord and agent representatives as well as the statutory and voluntary sector. Research has already been completed by Shelter Cymru with Carmarthenshire and Wrexham to identify factors influencing access. The group will look in more detail at services such as bond schemes, RSL leasing, and marketing of tenancies for vulnerable people.

### **Rural Homelessness**

In September 2006 the Rural Observatory published research commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government in to rural homelessness in Wales. A successful conference followed on 17th October 2006 to explore good practice in tackling rural homelessness. Work is now underway to produce a guidance publication drawing on good practice across Wales and the UK.

### **Housing Associations**

The Welsh Assembly Government commissioned research into the effectiveness of community housing agreements. The research concluded this could prove to be a worthwhile model to entrench good practice and clarify relationships, or to establish new partnerships. Joint working on homelessness can form a key part of such agreements. The joint WFHA/WLGA conference included a plenary session on joint working on homelessness, and feedback from most areas is that partnership working has improved. Many housing associations are assisting local authorities in tackling homelessness through nominations, leasing schemes and provision of hostel accommodation. WFHA and WLGA recognise that this agenda needs to be pursued vigorously, and the Welsh Assembly Government is funding mentoring work through Cadwyn HA to this end.

## **Supporting People**

The Welsh Assembly Government has encouraged local authorities to focus their Supporting People services to maximise homelessness prevention. At least eight authorities have remodelled services with the support of the Welsh Assembly Government to improve homelessness prevention.

## **Rough Sleeping**

The Welsh Assembly Government has notified all local authorities that they are required to undertake a snapshot count of rough sleepers in their area during the second week of March 2007. Guidance has been issued on how the counts should be carried out, and a consultant has been appointed to advise authorities on how to organise them. The Assembly Government has also made up to ?1,500 available to help authorities set up the counts. The results of the counts will need to be assessed in conjunction with evidence from continuing front line contacts, and will be used to inform local planning.

## **Access to Housing**

The Welsh Assembly Government has been undertaking a review of local authority allocation policies to ensure they comply with the Homelessness Act 2002. Guidance for housing associations on nominations and suspensions is being prepared, and work with access to the private sector is being taken forward through a task and finish group.

Guidance has already been published in the Affordable Housing Toolkit to improve the development of housing for homeless people and others in need.

## **Criminal Justice**

The All Wales Offender Accommodation Steering Group is continuing joint planning at a national level, including action under the All Wales Youth Offending Strategy. The Welsh Assembly Government has issued a model protocol for joint working, and is steering the commissioning of accommodation services, including the Prison Link service for prisoners.

## **Health**

Following audit work carried out by the Assembly Government and voluntary partners, approval was given for the appointment of a Health and Homelessness Facilitator to promote this agenda across Wales. Amanda Ryan has been appointed to this post, and will start her work in March 2007. The post will stimulate initiatives across Wales, and with the support of a steering group will advise on development of national policy.

Draft guidance for future Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Strategies has been published and is now out for consultation.

## **Social Services**

Following discussions with SSIW, questions on homelessness have been included in the annual performance evaluation of Social Services Departments. Local progress visits have revealed increasing examples of good practice, such as children's social workers co-working with homelessness teams, and a good practice bulletin is planned for 2007.

## **Substance Misuse**

The Welsh Assembly Government has issued a module on services for homeless people for consultation, as part of the National Treatment Framework. It is also funding guidance on working with homeless substance misusers in hostels.

## **Young People**

A range of actions are being pursued to prevent homelessness amongst young people, including housing action plans for young people prepared by YPPs; preparation of a toolkit for youth workers to help prevent homelessness; funding Llamau to support the development of mediation services across Wales; and discussions on involving young people in the National Homelessness Strategy.

## **Education**

The Shelter Cymru Education Project is mapping the range of work being undertaken in each local authority area to explain to young people the risks of homelessness and how to avoid it. This is being developed into a tool for exchanging good practice in this area. A very successful education and homelessness conference was held in November 2006. The Housemate education pack is already disseminated to all schools in Wales.

## **Equalities**

The BME Housing Review Group continues to monitor homelessness amongst ethnic minority groups. The Well-Housing project provides advice to all refugees to enable them to secure appropriate housing. The Stonewall report on homelessness amongst Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual people has been published, and Stonewall are being funded by the Welsh Assembly Government to provide training to housing services to improve their approach to LGB people.

## **Good Practice**

The Assembly Government's homelessness good practice grant programme has supported 25 projects to develop the understanding of best practice through toolkits, seminars, mentoring and other means. A further round of projects for 2007/8 has been invited. Funding has been provided for a co-ordinator to promote good practice within the local authority network.

## **Monitoring Implementation of the Strategy**

The Homelessness Strategies Working Group have met quarterly to review progress on the Strategy. The Group includes representation from the WLGA, local authorities, voluntary organisations, the CIH, housing associations, and Shelter Cymru. The Group has reviewed the areas where further action is needed, and this is covered in below.

## **Action by Others**

Questionnaires have been sent to all bodies on which the Strategy action plan places expectations for complementary action.

For local authorities, responses have been received from 19 of the 22 authorities. Their responses indicate actions to implement the main features of the prevention agenda, such as mediation schemes, improved Housing Benefit liaison, and joint working on Supporting People. Joint working with other services, such as health and care leavers, indicates more patchy progress, whilst equality actions are more thinly addressed. There are good practice examples in strategic planning, such as a Youth Task Group, Exclusions Panels, and housing advice planning forums.

Only 14 out of 32 major housing associations responded to the survey. They cite allocations policies as being complementary to the local authority homelessness agenda, and refer to their involvement in homelessness partnerships. Some refer to additional initiatives, such as money advice and welfare benefits services, and leasing partnerships. Some of the associations show evidence of excellent practice in joint working, although some associations are less clear on how their work in areas such as exclusions and rent arrears complements the local authority's work on homelessness.

Work continues on obtaining and collation of responses from other organisations.

## **Funding for Homelessness**

The Welsh Assembly Government has increased funding by over 1200% since 1998, from ?500,000 to ?6.33m in 2006/7. This includes ?500,000 this year for local authority homeless prevention work, and ?450,000 for good practice projects. There are over 100 projects supported by long term funding, including bond schemes, housing advice services, night shelters, and outreach projects. The Welsh Assembly Government is reviewing its grant fund process to enhance the monitoring and evaluation of the work undertaken, with a greater focus on outcomes.

## **Building on the Strategy**

At its meeting on the 18th January 2007, the Homelessness Strategies Working Group, which monitors the implementation of the Strategy, considered the priorities areas for further work to achieve the Strategy's objectives.

The Group concluded that, in addition to implementing the current action plan, the following areas needed further action in the coming two years.

## **These areas were:**

Raising awareness of the Strategy and homelessness as an issue amongst the public and in organisations who may deal indirectly with homelessness. There needs to be greater recognition that this is an issue which could affect any family, and that it should not be seen as an issue of 'fault'.

Evaluating Prevention. Prevention is central to the Strategy. It is essential that good practice is understood and shared. It is also important that prevention is monitored to ensure that it is genuinely preventing homelessness. The proposed prevention indicator will be a corner stone for taking this forward. In addition, the Assembly Government will explore with WLGA, the WAO and the voluntary sector how qualitative monitoring and support for good practice can be enhanced.

Implementing the homelessness legislation. Concerns have been expressed that, in addition to positive working on prevention, some authorities have not implemented the law properly in their interpretation of accepting applications, and in dealing with intentionality. As well as revising the Code of Guidance, the Welsh Assembly Government is funding a number of projects to aid local authorities and advice agencies in the proper interpretation and implementation of homelessness duties. Rolling out this out will play an important part in ensuring that homelessness people receive services to which they are entitled.

Service user involvement. It is tenet of the Strategy that service users are at the heart of service planning. We already expect local authorities to involve users in strategic planning, and work is ongoing to promote good practice. This includes funding the development of a toolkit and CD-rom with Swansea CC, and working with the Local Government Data Unit on developing a standard model user satisfaction survey form and guidance. This theme can be re-enforced through additional grant conditions, strengthening the Code of Guidance, and further monitoring, to ensure that services are designed to reflect the views of people who are using them.

Hidden homelessness. It is widely recognised that some people do not approach services, or if they do their limited rights mean that they do not have sustained engagement with them. They can stretch across a spectrum of housing need, but would fall within the recommended definition of homelessness in the Strategy. Further consideration is needed into how people in this category are identified and engaged with.

Promoting equality. Tackling inequality is a fundamental theme of the Strategy, which contains a number of action points to address specific aspects of inequality. There is now a need to carry out an evaluation of the Strategy in relation to its impact on reducing inequality.

Local strategic planning. The policy context for local planning is changing, with plan rationalisation leading to the end of the requirement on local authorities to produce separate homelessness strategies. Homelessness planning should be incorporated into local housing strategies produced for April 2007. Local authorities will need to continue to plan strategically to meet the prevention and tackling of homelessness, but from 2008 they will have wide discretion as to how and where this is reflected in their published plans. The Welsh Assembly Government is already working to support the local strategic housing function, including establishing a local authority network, funding the WLGA and



CIH to deliver training, advice and toolkits to raise local authority capacity. The Assembly Government and partners will need to work together to ensure that good practice is clearly understood and applied in the planning of homelessness services.

## **Next Steps**

Following consideration of this report by the Committee, and evaluation of the recommendations emerging from the Committee's report on youth homelessness and the WAO report, the action plan will be revised to include actions to take forward the above issues.