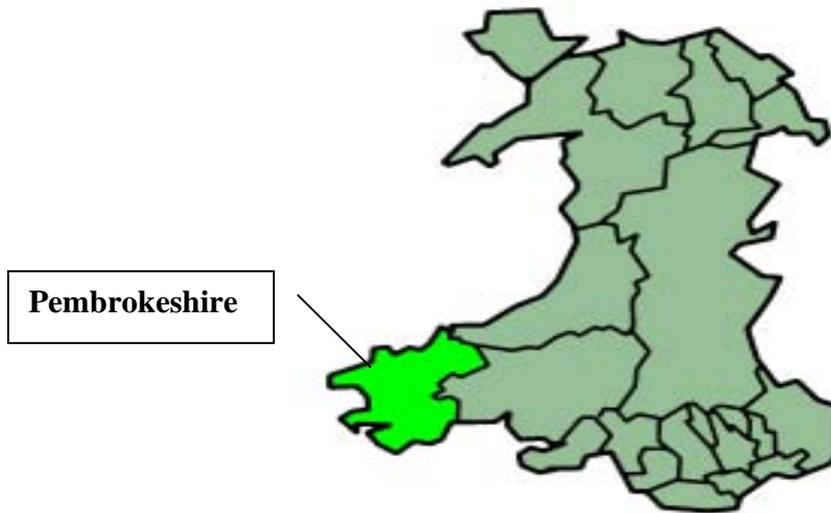


SOCIAL JUSTICE AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

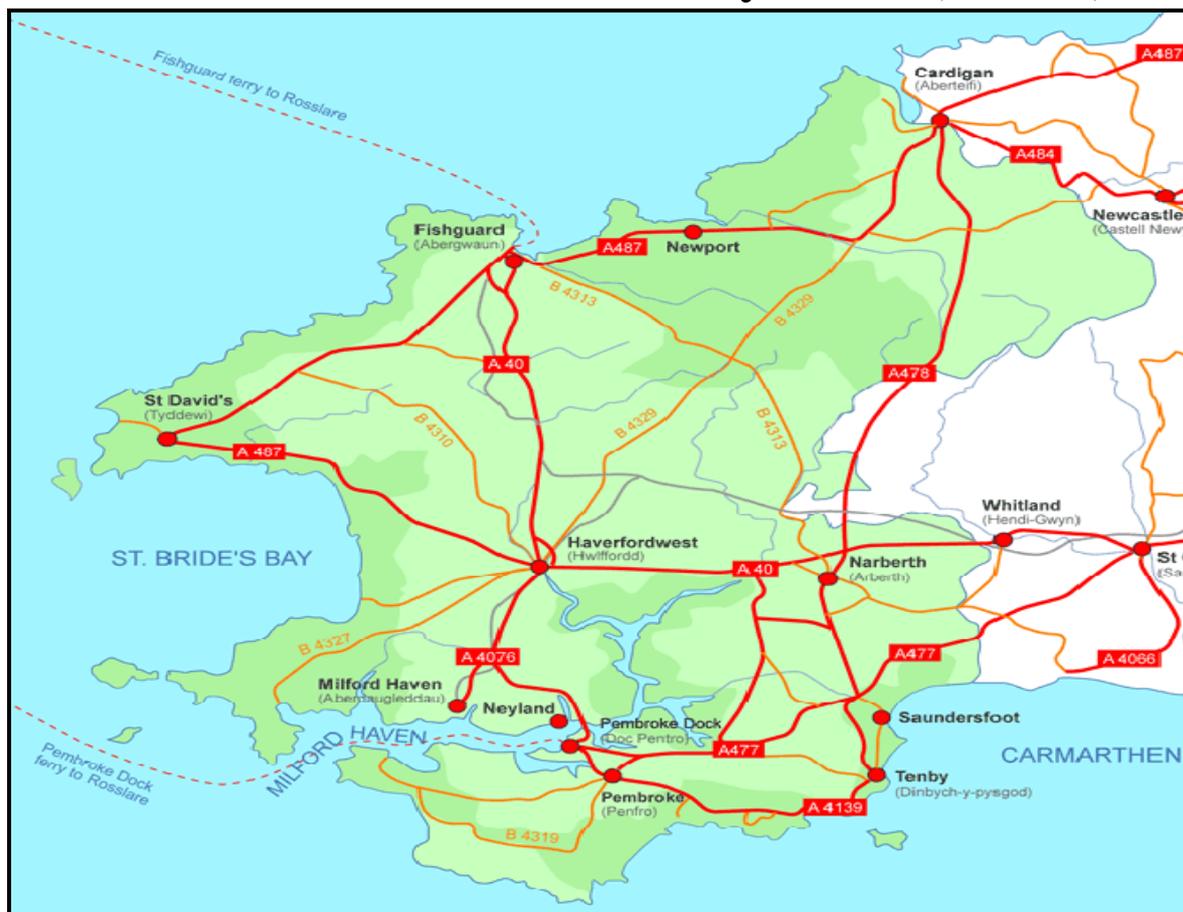
Date: Wednesday 8 November 2006
Time: 9.30am – 12.30pm
Venue: Senedd, National Assembly for Wales

Policy Review: Youth Homelessness

Youth Homelessness in Wales Concentrating on a rural area perspective



Pembrokeshire Care Society - PCS (PATH)



Rural Pembrokeshire

Pembrokeshire is a large rural area with numerous towns and villages. Three quarters of the county is coastal with only one quarter connected to other Local Authority (LA) areas. As with most other LA areas there is a lack of affordable accommodation for rent.

One of the main problems in this area for homeless persons is the difficulty in accessing housing and homeless services. There is a varied level of difficulty in travelling from area to area dependant on the frequency of public transport. The most difficult being the near impossibility of travelling between 9 and 5, to and from the main county town of Haverfordwest and a village on the border of Pembrokeshire.

There is a strong division between towns and reluctance for individuals to live or work out of their area. This facilitates sofa surfing which is normally preferable to rough sleeping. There is not a huge problem of rough sleeping in Pembrokeshire, but for the homeless with only this option available to them, their experience and needs are very different from city rough sleeping.

As with the majority of other LA areas Pembrokeshire does not have enough social housing to meet the needs of the applicants. This is more acute in certain areas which are deemed to be the more desirable social housing areas to live. The private sector market is made up mainly of private landlords who own single properties which they rent out. This does not lend itself to leasing schemes or development of private sector projects for homeless groups. There is no direct access accommodation in Pembrokeshire - the closest being Aberystwyth or Swansea both are almost sixty miles away.

Supporting People Schemes in Pembrokeshire are not even close to adequate in meeting the needs of the area. The opportunity to develop new schemes with Supporting People monies was not taken advantage of resulting in Pembrokeshire not having the basic services that most other LA areas have in place.

There is a very pronounced NIMBY culture within Pembrokeshire this and the reluctance of the planning department to agree any controversial schemes has had in the past a detrimental effect on any discussed or planned proposals for the homeless.

There is also a disadvantage for both the voluntary and statutory homeless sectors in Pembrokeshire with regard to isolation of services and access to external training both of which usually result in the beneficial networking with other like minded agencies. Pembrokeshire Care Society (PCS) have a greater need than most, for the continuation, of a good homeless second tier organisation to keep us informed of the major changes and initiatives that are happening in other areas. A second tier organisation also provides us with an opportunity to feed the local issues that affect a rural area into the bigger picture of homelessness.

Homelessness in Pembrokeshire is not all bad news due to the isolation of services, good practice models have developed which suit the needs of the area. Formal and informal partnership have developed and work well, local knowledge of key resources have allowed for practical schemes to be developed.

Statistical Information

The statistical information below is intended to give an accurate and current overview of youth homelessness in Pembrokeshire. Information shown is for the period 1st October 2005 to 30th September 2006

The information provided is from the client database of PCS and the LA Homeless WHO12 system.

1st October 05 – 30th September 06

Pembrokeshire Care Society (Applied for assistance stats)		
16/17 inc	Male	21
	Female	46
		Total 67
18/24 inc	Male	129
	Female	148
		Total 277
Total 16 to 24 year olds		Total 344

Pembrokeshire Local Authority (Registered Homeless Stats)							
16/17 inc	Male	25					
	Female	51					
		Total 76					
18/24 inc	Male	185					
	Female	255					
		Total 440					
Breakdown of above figures							
Age - Gender – Still pending-Not homeless- Priority-Intentionally- Not priority-Total							
16/17	Male	6	9	5	5	0	25
16/17	F/male	6	21	21	3	0	51
		Total 76					
18/24	Male	12	24	34	6	109	185
18/24	F/Male	18	45	132	10	50	255
		Total 440					
Total 16 to 24 year olds		Total 516					

The high figure (132) of 18-24 year old female priority category is mainly pregnant young women.

Information provided by the LA homeless co-ordinator and the youth prevention officer show a good internal referral mechanism. There have been 270 referrals from the homeless team to the prevention officer during a 15 month period.

Due to the time factor for this report it was not possible for the collation of referral figures for the period 1st October to the 30th September 06 but the previous yearly figures were provided by the LA prevention officer. Assuming a similar number of applications as homeless during a 12 month period the results of the prevention work are shown below.

During a nine month period 160 referrals were made to the prevention officer over 12 months this would be estimated at 213 over a twelve month period.

LA Young Persons Prevention Officer statistics		
	Over 9months	12 month (estimate)
Referrals	160	213
Remained at home (total success)	27	36
Homeless at home (partial success)	15	19
No. of clients not requiring temp. accom.	42	55
% of clients not requiring temp. accom.	26%	26%

	Over 9months	12 month (estimate)
Saving on Homelessness Budget	£29,400	£38,500

Estimations made - temporary accommodation costs £50 per night for an average of 14 nights stay per client. There is a saving on the homeless budget of a minimum of £38,500. Without waiting for the annual figures it is obviously a successful scheme.

Total Applications	516
Non priority	159
Not Homeless	69
Total Possible refs	288

The estimated referral of 213 clients is lower than the possible referrals of 288, if all 288 were referred then this could be a saving of £52,500.

One aspect of the LA prevention work has been to encourage the family and applicant to 'stay homeless at home' rather than take up emergency accommodation by assurance that the same points will be allocated as to a young person in temporary accommodation. Unfortunately the LA had a change of internal practice which prioritised allocations to homeless persons in temporary accommodation which has

meant that the young person at home has little chance of receiving an allocation and they are now beginning to feel that they have been deceived. This could result in a loss of trust of the prevention officer and make the young people reapply as homeless due to a change of circumstances (can't stay at home any longer) just to increase their housing points.

The LA have also decided to change the role for the Youth Prevention Officer post and make the role generic across all ages which will obviously reduce the access and the success rate of this work with young people.

Youth Homelessness

To gather the information for this report and to get a balanced view the LA young persons prevention officer and the homeless co-ordinator were interviewed. The outcome of the interviews confirmed PCS evidence that the reasons for youth homelessness are not different than for any other group. There was also no evidence that clearly showed an increase in substance misuse issues comparing homeless young people and non homeless young people.

Most of the reasons for homelessness affect all groups and are not specific to the youth client group. Examples being dysfunctional family, lack of life skills, understanding of responsibilities, borderline mental health or learning difficulties and anti social behaviour within the family. Evidence of the reasons results and consequences of homelessness are widely known and this report is not intended to repeat this past research.

Although the reasons for youth homelessness are similar the group have different needs. Young people are new to the experiences of homelessness and need to be provided with a specific service to prevent the repeat homeless application which is to often the 'norm' for older client groups. Unfortunately young homeless people are often stereotyped and so consequently only one type of service model is developed to meet that stereotypical need. This does not work as young people as with all homeless groups have varying levels of knowledge, responsibilities and ability to manage a tenancy.

The current process for applying as homeless in Pembrokeshire is unacceptable. Young people have to go into a large reception area and verbally state they are homeless in full view of a large number of people who are there on other LA business. This often results in an untrained LA worker (receptionist) handing over a homeless application form.

There are problems that have a greater affect or effect a higher number of youth homeless persons than other groups and consequently this highlights the need for specific services for this group.

- The Single Room Rent Restriction (SRR) is specific to the under 25's. This is compounded by the lower amount of Job Seekers Allowance or Income Support for under 25 year olds and an even lower amount for the under 18's. Due to these rules there is no equality of access to accommodation for under 25's.

- Due to the geographics of Pembrokeshire and lack of accommodation young people are being moved away from their family and friend support networks.
- The difficulty and cost of travel further isolates young people from support networks.
- Access to Mental Health Assessments are more difficult for young people. The reluctance of young people to attend a GP appointment which is the only referral method is intimidating. There is also a gap in provision for the 16/17 year olds who are not being picked up by the Child Care Assessment Teams (CCAT).
- The change in legislation which deems all 16/17 year olds as priority need has resulted in the ceasing of child care assessments for this age group. The lack of resources within the CCAT has reduced the services to this client group and assessments are now only done if an interagency referral is forwarded to the department. (This has improved since the appointment of the young persons prevention officer in post since March 04).
- Young people are often impressionable and when they are forced to sofa surf or placed in unsuitable temporary accommodation they are often exposed to dangerous and/or risky influences.
- Pembrokeshire have joined the second stage of the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) pathfinder, one aim of this was to give choice to private tenants. Unfortunately in an area of limited bedsits and HMO's with an average cost of £55 per week when the LHA allowance for an under 25 is £47 most landlords are reluctant to take under 25 year olds as tenants.
- The other problem for young people taking on their first tenancy and claiming LHA is the main aim of the scheme is to pay the benefit direct to the tenant. A young person with little or no experience of paying bills who is in receipt of rental money direct may not use the money for the purpose it has been provided for. If the young person has no previous history of non payment of rent there is no way of changing the housing benefit departments decision to pay the money direct to the tenant.
- Due to Data Protection restrictions the Housing benefit department cannot disclose the names of landlords who already accept the LHA. If this restriction was lifted there is a possibility of increasing the database of local landlords with bedsits or HMO's for the younger clients.
- Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP). The housing benefit department will not assist a young person with the DHP as they state an applicants situation is not different from any other young persons. Example Job seekers £44.50 per week LHA £47 per week rent £55 per week. Balance £36.50 per week to pay for food utilities etc this figure is well below the accepted poverty level.
- Travel to access homelessness service for young people can be costly in a rural area and this can restrict access to services.
- Most private landlords insist on rent in advance. Often the only access to this money is by way of a crisis loan which puts added strain on an under 25 who is in receipt of benefits as this is then taken direct from the lower amount they already receive.
- Leading from the above young homeless people are taking on tenancies which are unaffordable for them and are becoming homeless again due to rent arrears this can then result in them being deemed intentionally homeless by the LA.

- Low incomes and training allowances in Pembrokeshire also cause affordability problems for young people.
- Many under 25's already have a history of renting in both social and the private sector. Due to the geographic's and communication grape vine in Pembrokeshire there is a tendency for past social problems to be widely known which affects the future choice of accommodation availability.
- Young people who become homeless and are then accommodated are often taking on their first tenancy they are mainly inexperienced and have no or little knowledge on tenancy law, benefit issues and responsibility towards neighbours. This can lead to rent arrears and/or anti social behaviour problems, eviction and consequently repeat homeless applications.
- Both statutory and the voluntary sector agree there has been an increase in the view of young people that if they' become pregnant or commit a crime they will be housed'.
- Both Statutory and voluntary sector agree that young people need to be informed of the reality of being homeless and the difficulties they can expect. In the past there appears to have been too much legislative information given which has been miss understood by many as 'I am entitled to a flat in the area of my choice and it will be paid for'.
- Young people are more likely to have little or no possessions when they become homeless. If social housing is allocated this is totally unfurnished and as a result it is unlikely that young people are to have a successful tenancy.
- The difficulty for college students with the 16 hour rule and entitlement to benefit further marginalises this particular group.

Pembrokeshire Care Society PCS (PATH) Overview of services see attached leaflet.

PCS is a local homeless charity which was established in 1979. The organisation holds the quality market in Housing and Welfare Benefit Advice and has adapted over the years with the aim of providing the most effective services for all client groups within its given resources. We provide a choice of an appointment at one of our regular out reach housing advice surgeries or access to our duty worker who is available daily in our Haverfordwest office for face to face interviews or phone advice. (Full list of our services is shown in the leaflet attached).

We have successfully overcome this access to services problem by working with transport providers and our other partners and provide a cost and resource effective travel warrant scheme. We are in the process of opening this scheme out to other agencies – LA homeless department are already taking advantage of the scheme and it is being developed for probation, social services, careers office and the DIP team.

PCS also run four bond schemes one of which is specifically for young people.

PCS manage the PATH (Pembrokeshire Action for The Homeless) forum which tries to bring together all other agencies that have clients who can become homeless. The aim being agencies that specialise in other fields have good background knowledge and know how to access services for their clients. This forum is also the arena for the identification and development of informal partnerships and good practice.

PCS have cross border partnerships with Carmarthen and Ceredigion. These partnerships allow for the agency closest to the client to provide the services including bond guarantees.

Assistance with LA tenancy start up. PCS request monthly information from the LA about any new tenancy allocations for young people. We then try to assist the new tenant with the start up and furnishing of the property, this involves completion of Housing Benefit & Welfare Benefit forms, connection of utilities and setting up payment plans, list of useful telephone numbers e.g. utilities, LA and also identifying their training/employment needs and referring to the relevant agencies.

Our work is a combination of legal housing advice and practical assistance which includes crisis donations, furniture grants and assistance with paperwork.

Local Authority Services

The Young Persons Prevention Officer role comes to an end in March 07 and it has been decided by the LA to make the role a generic position covering all age groups. This role has had a positive impact on young people with clear evidence of success.

LA Homeless/Housing Team are often criticised for what appears to be a lack of care that is shown to young homeless applicants. This assumed lack of care is frustration that they have few options available to them to assist the homeless applicants. There are few suitable temporary accommodation places or available tenancies and the team are pressured by the demands of agencies who work on behalf of other specific groups like ex-offender and substance misuse groups who appear to have a larger proportion of the resources to spend on the client group so it is often other groups like young people who do not get the best service.

Other Agency Services

There appears to be confusion surrounding the youth services. After discussing the topic of youth services with homeless workers in both the statutory and voluntary sectors it was obvious that the majority of us who are working with homeless young people do not know what additional services are available for the client groups. There is a LA published guide to youth services which unfortunately is not being used to its best advantage mainly because the confusing team titles management/co-ordinator titles and role descriptions do not define the roles. There could be a good source of support that we are not tapping into.

When changes are made at government level the effect on the most vulnerable are not considered fully. Examples being 1) The recent change in the Job Centre applications process which can now only be completed by phone. This is not always possible for vulnerable groups who do not have access or cannot use a phone. They are using agencies like our own to make the hour long calls.

Decisions on social fund applications for rent in advance are the key to accessing accommodation in the private sector. The recent change in the process has meant a delay of two weeks in the decision being given. By the time the applicant has been informed that the loan has been agreed the property has gone. This is frustrating for everyone involved.

Housing Benefit Department implementation of the Local Housing Allowance. Although there has been a recent improvement in the administration of the benefit as with all changes the most vulnerable groups again suffered when the scheme was opened out. There was also a lot of additional work placed on PCS and other agencies who work with clients with other social problems in trying to prove the vulnerability of the client.

Probation service, Youth Offending Team and substance misuse groups often work with homeless young people. Unfortunately due to the lack of suitable support projects in Pembrokeshire for this client group the only option available to the young person is the private sector accessed with the assistance of a bond guarantee from PCS. The long term affect of these unsuitable tenancies is the loss of private sector landlords who are prepared to take clients with social problems.

Good Practice in Wales

There is good practice and good organisations throughout Wales. Unfortunately in Pembrokeshire the lack of supporting people money means we can only look on in envy at what could have been.

Good Practice in Pembrokeshire

Pembrokeshire has on a small scale tried dispersed self contained flats with floating support for care leavers. This was unsuccessful and the flats were handed back to the LA. In an area like ours there is an identified need for this type of service but without the basic night shelter and 24 hour managed project the move to this type of independent living is unlikely to work.

Research has been done in Pembrokeshire which included service user opinions and the conclusion was that, ideally service users wanted self contained accommodation with minimal support in an area of their choice. The reality was that some of these same young people tried and could not manage their own tenancies. To increase the support to 24 hour management of these dispersed flats would be far to costly and so an alternative model is in the pipeline. Unfortunately this model requires Supporting People funding. (A copy of the project is attached)

PCS's Travel Warrant Scheme is a good cost effective method of homeless clients accessing the relevant services and possible accommodation choices. This has reduced the use of taxis by the LA which were an expensive alternative.

Joint working with the PCS and the Careers office has resulted in an excellent referral process, joint training, this ensures that all young people access the specialist knowledge which can only be provided by the expert agency.

Freephone for clients to access services by phone. Due to the geographics it is often not possible or practical for a client to access homeless services direct.

The development of a comprehensive contact list of all agencies that may be able to assist with homelessness and related issues. The system will be an easy to use keyword selection and when completed will be made available to all our partners.

Pembrokeshire Housing provides a comprehensive tenancy start up service. This is provided at the allocated property on the day the tenancy begins. Included in this service is utility information and pre arranged connections, tenancy explanation, information on contacts in an emergency and assistance with form completion for any housing benefit entitlement.

Local Authority youth prevention service.

Pearl project. A shared house for young women ran by Tai Hafan.

The close working relationship between the voluntary sector and the statutory sector front line teams negates the need for timely costly reviews and so speeds up the process for homeless persons.

Negative Practice in Pembrokeshire

Due to the lack of accommodation good intentioned persons try to advise and work with youth homeless people. Often giving advice which can escalate the problem for example encouraging under 25's to go into accommodation that is not affordable.

Single Room Rent Restriction. This legislation clearly discriminates against the under 25's and it proves that access to accommodation is not equal for all. In an area with very few HMO's or bedsits the SRR means under 25 are further marginalised.

Homeless decisions made by the LA, possibly due to the lack of accommodation, are often deemed intentionally homeless due to rent arrears or anti social behaviour and so duty is discharged. In an area like Pembrokeshire with no alternative projects or support this leaves the young person back to sofa surfing or rough sleeping.

Since the change in legislation making all 16/17 year olds priority need for housing this age group are unable to access a social service child care assessment.

The inconsistency from the LA with regard to SLA's. Example being the leaving care team works closely with PCS to review and agree any changes for the start of the financial year. The housing department for the financial year 05/06 agreed and paid the SLA in February 2006 and for this financial year we are still awaiting confirmation of any agreement. For the voluntary sector this is not acceptable as budgets can not be overspent.

A growing culture that people are stating that to access accommodation you need a child. These statements have been made and are becoming more frequent.

Local Authority tenancy start up. Young people taking on their first tenancy are often unaware of the requirements of starting up and managing a tenancy. The assistance from the LA is minimal and usually consists of the new tenant signing the agreement and being handed a set of keys.

Utility supply – The LA are unable to inform the new tenant of this information on who supplies the property. As there is no forward planning.

Recommendations

- The need for re-distribution of the SP monies to give Pembrokeshire a second chance to develop support services.
- Inclusion of the voluntary sector in SP planning.
- Continuation of the existing LA post of youth prevention officer.
- Cease the SRR and encourage equality
- Review the student 16 hour rule to allow for the continuation of study
- Welfare benefit entitlement to be raised in line with over 25's especially for homeless young people
- Research into the cost to all agencies who are working with young homeless people with the aim of providing a more effective service. Research to include health and substance misuse services, police service, ambulance service, homeless statutory and voluntary workers, probation service and other agencies who are working with this client group.
- Consideration of the negative affects other committees/departments changes to policy make on the most vulnerable in society.
- Tenancy start up with LA to include information on utility suppliers tenancy and benefit advice.
- Data protection sharing of information for the benefit of the service users inside the LA and externally.
- Clarification of the youth workers and the roles they perform with the aim of tapping into any resources available.
- Preventative work in schools and youth organisation which portray the realities of homelessness.
- Re-engaging of the Social Services departments for all homeless 16/17 year olds.
- Spend to save funds to be used to develop alternative accommodation with the intention of preparing young people for independent living.
- The need to complete action plans which have been identified from local and national strategies before moving on to writing further action plans.
- Acknowledgement and continuation of good practice
- A more customer friendly (private and confidential) process for registration of homelessness by the LA
- A change in the homeless process which includes prevention advice and assistance with the aim that young people do not need to apply as homeless.
- With regard to the above - recommendation the development of an accurate record keeping method to take account of the reduced homeless applications.

Conclusion:

There is not equal access to accommodation for young people in Pembrokeshire. There is a need for all LA areas to provide a basic level of services which include access to night shelter or similar for non priority young people who if not supported during their first experience of homelessness may become the repeat older homeless client of the future.

Pembrokeshire needs to campaign for the re-distribution of Supporting People monies to enable the development of young peoples schemes. Acknowledgment that rural youth homelessness needs a different approach than the successful urban models.

Pembrokeshire needs the basic provision of a night shelter and 24 hour managed accommodation.

It is widely accepted by all sectors working with homeless young people that some of these young people cannot manage their own tenancy. It is often politically correct to provide what the service user asks and not what the service users requires to become a responsible member of society.

The additional assistance currently being provided for homeless young people with offending and/or substance misuse issues needs to be reviewed to ensure that best use of the resources are being used.

Carol Crowther
Manager