

Social Justice and Regeneration Committee

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Date: Wednesday 6 December 2006

Time: 09.30am – 12.30pm

Venue: Senedd, Cardiff Bay

Paper from GISDA on Youth Homelessness

During our recent conference in Caernarfon held to record an important milestone in our company's history – our 21st anniversary Mr Peter Clarke, the Children's commissioner for Wales said "The model that GISDA has developed to help and support homeless young people should be adopted throughout Wales.

Peter Clarke, The Children's Commissioner seen here participating in our recent forum theatre drama held at our 21st anniversary conference in Caernarfon.(image removed)

Thank you for this opportunity to share with you what is going on within our organisation at this time and to also explain the problems we face when trying to meet the needs of young, vulnerable (not necessarily homeless) people in rural Gwynedd.

GISDA is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. We were founded by a group of laymen and women in the Caernarfon area in 1985 in order to respond to the growing problem of youth homeless in the town during the early 80's and the prejudices they faced when seeking help and support from those in authority at that time.

In partnership with a local housing association Cymdeithas Tai Eryri, we opened our first hostel in Caernarfon in 1989 for 8 young people, employing 1.5 members of staff. The funding was through rural funding grants and financial support from the old Arfon District Council.

Over the next 10 years the project developed rapidly and by 1999 / 2000 we had secured funding to support 36 young people including single parents / expectant mothers. New projects developed during this time included move on schemes and new hostels for young single people as well as hostels and move on accommodation for single parents. By 2000 we were supporting 36 service users along the length and breadth of Gwynedd and employing 20 members of staff.

The company consolidated on this growth during the next 4 years and formulated a wide range of new policies incorporating new areas of good practises in supporting young people. We achieved important designations including Investors in people and we became an Accredited Service Provider.

New practises, protocols and guidelines incorporated into the provision of new services were as follows:

- Advocacy
- Personal advisors
- Call in centres throughout Gwynedd
- Emotional and Practical support
- Counselling
- Inclusion and participation facilitation
- Training
- Education (Life skills, social skills, social responsibilities etc)
- Incredible Years training for single parents
- Preventative initiatives
- Gwynedd-wide Children In Need and Child Protection templates.

We also developed our own internal learning programme which has helped over 150 young people in 3 years to achieve qualifications and move on to further education. This programme has been accredited by the Open College Network (Wales)

and enables young people to gain recognised qualifications through our own organisation. Qualifications that encourage young people to access further education and thus allowing them to continue to learn develop and to explore their own potential.

This education programme was extended in 2004 to include pupils aged 12 – 16 years old from Gwynedd who had been permanently expelled from school. The company currently manages one education centre on behalf of Gwynedd Council's education department in Caernarfon for this purpose and teachers from the project visit a further 3 Council run centres one day per week. We also teach the programme in several Gwynedd schools.

Some of the children excluded from schools in Gwynedd (image removed)

Enjoying an arts lesson in our education centre in Caernarfon(image removed)

A new development.

An exciting development recently dreamt up by our service users is the founding of our own theatre group consisting almost entirely of young homeless people. This theatre group is engaged in forum theatre, a concept that allows the audience to change the script in order to improve the lives of the 'characters'. Members of the audience are invited to change places with actors if they think they can change the ending of the play for the better. This concept demonstrates to people that they can make a difference and turn their lives around if they are prepared to change their own scripts. This theatre group performed in The Millennium Centre in Cardiff last week and will tour Gwynedd Schools during the spring of 2007. Our intention will be to use topics that will help us prevent homelessness in the future such as bullying, domestic abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, dysfunctional family dynamics and sexual health etc.

The current situation

The company currently employs 32 members of staff and supports 56 young people at any given point in time.

Of these young people 20 are supported by a unique funding arrangement which allows us to target support effectively to wherever and whoever needs it. A large percentage of these 20 people at any given point are young people who are statutory homeless in accordance with local authority guidelines. Those young homeless people are the responsibility of Gwynedd Council and need to be housed. However, the law states that no young person under the age of 18 can legally hold an estate. This means that they cannot hold tenancies. In these circumstances the council can place them either in bed and breakfast accommodation and ask us to support them or release property to us so that we can manage these properties on their behalf and house and support the young people in them.

However, The Assembly has decided to discourage the use of bed and breakfast accommodation by Councils (a move which we support) and this has led to Gwynedd Council like many other Councils in Wales to lease property from the private sector. GISDA has already initiated discussions with Gwynedd Council on this matter in order to discuss our concerns with regard to the placing of vulnerable young people in leased properties after March 2007.

It is our view that young vulnerable adults should not be placed in leased properties with other homeless people, who may be in a position to influence, manipulate or harm them in any way unless risk assessments show that they are not in any danger.

It would be our preferred option to be asked to manage a proportionate amount of these properties reflecting the number of vulnerable young homeless people in percentage terms (42%).

Some vital statistics.

During the first 6 months of this year (April to September 2006) 383 people declared themselves as being homeless in Gwynedd. 162 of these people (42.3%) are in categories, which we have a mandate to support.

Due to limited resources this company was only able to support just over half of these people (83) during this period.

If we as a society are to make homelessness a thing of the past it is imperative that organisations like ourselves who are recognised as pioneers in tackling homelessness are given the resources to carry out our work effectively.

It is also important that the main thrust of the new Children's Act 2004, i.e. the necessity for the local authorities to work with partners in supporting children and young people is seen to be done. Actions not words are now needed.

In addition, GISDA has identified an additional service for young people especially single parents and new parents in the North Wales area, which is not currently available. Specifically, we need residential units for parents locally so that we can provide learning opportunities for them with regard to parental skills and responsibilities. Many mothers risk losing their children through the courts these days as a result of their inability to care properly for their children. The nearest centre to us here in North Wales which can provide this type of teaching and support is in Cheshire.

It is also worth noting that in percentage terms, Gwynedd has the highest rate of homelessness in North and West Wales and is only marginally behind Cardiff in terms of youth homelessness. Other figures as seen below demonstrate the seriousness of Gwynedd's homeless situation.



**Table 5
Summary of
homelessness;
decisions
taken, by
unitary
authority, April
to June 2006(a)**

	Ineligible household	Eligible, but not homeless	Eligible, homeless but not in priority need	Eligible, homeless and in priority need but intentionally so	Eligible, unintentionally homeless and in priority need	All Households
Isle of Anglesey	0	18	19	9	40	86
Gwynedd	3	47	41	17	79	187
Conwy	0	13	34	11	49	107
Denbighshire	1	41	15	2	35	94
Flintshire	0	28	14	4	76	122
Wrexham	0	55	44	17	71	187
Powys	0	11	27	4	68	110
Ceredigion	0	17	6	6	18	47
Pembrokeshire	2	48	42	13	117	222
Carmarthenshire	0	57	31	20	106	214
Swansea	2	197	136	8	256	599
Neath Port Talbot	4	153	55	4	57	273
Bridgend	2	34	73	10	136	255
The Vale of Glamorgan	0	21	12	15	30	78
Cardiff	2	27	15	8	287	339
Rhondda Cynon Taf	0	66	19	10	46	141
Merthyr Tydfil	6	22	38	5	27	98
Caerphilly	0	66	27	10	86	189
Blaenau Gwent	0	47	29	4	36	116
Torfaen	0	43	7	10	47	107
Monmouthshire	0	16	16	11	48	91
Newport	3	133	63	26	183	408
Wales	25	1,160	763	224	1,898	4,070
(a) Under Part VII of the Housing Act 1996.						

Conclusions.

Rural homelessness is a reality and the problem is worse in Gwynedd than almost any other area in Wales be they rural or urban. The lack of investment in tackling rural homelessness is our greatest problem. We urgently need more housing. Council stocks continue to dwindle by up to 100 houses per year through the 'right to buy' policy and affordable housing is in

extremely short supply in Gwynedd. House prices are also beyond the means of the vast majority of people living and working in the County.

People who would be expected to buy their own homes are now competing to rent from housing associations and from the council and in so doing edging many others out of the rented properties market.

Investment is also needed to support and educate young people especially young parents in residential units.

We ask the Assembly to re-visit the issue of the 'right to buy' policy and also to initiate a large scale all Wales house building programme so that all groups in our communities are afforded the right to their own home.

We also ask that vulnerable groups are considered a priority with regard to further investment in housing support.

GISDA is committed to working towards eliminating homelessness in Gwynedd and beyond. However, we recognise the need to work in partnership with others in order to achieve success. We thank you for this opportunity to address you and hope we can work in partnership with you for the future benefit of Gwynedd residents.