

WELSH ASSEMBLY GOVERNMENT

DRAFT NATIONAL

HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY

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## **1. Introduction**

The Welsh Assembly Government (“the Assembly Government”) believes that everyone in Wales should be able to live in a good quality, affordable home. People need this to live stable, constructive lives. It recognises that homelessness is one of the most serious forms of social exclusion, and has a major effect on all other aspects of a person’s wellbeing. A home is more than a physical structure; it represents a sense of belonging, security and of personal affirmation.

“Better Wales” ([betterwales.com](http://betterwales.com)) set out the Assembly Government’s commitment to reducing homelessness and eliminating the need for anyone to sleep rough. This has been described in more detail in ‘Better Homes for People in Wales’, our national housing strategy. “Plan for Wales 2001”, the Assembly Government’s strategic plan, similarly sets out our commitment to reduce homelessness.

This paper has been drafted in the context of these strategic documents. It sets out our proposed objectives, and indicates how we might achieve them. It has been prepared in order to consult on the objectives and the detailed actions required to reduce homelessness in Wales. We want the views of people affected by homelessness and those working to tackle it on the specific measures that need to be taken.

This is not a final strategy. Once we have obtained views on this draft strategy, a full strategy will be prepared and adopted by the Assembly Government.

## **2. Background**

This draft strategy has been prepared during a period of significant change in Government's response to homelessness. One of the first pieces of secondary legislation passed by the Assembly was the Homeless Persons (Priority Need) (Wales) Order 2001, which came into force on the 1<sup>st</sup> March 2001 to extend statutory protection to a range of new vulnerable groups.

In February 2002 Parliament passed the Homelessness Act. Commencement of the Act this year will introduce new requirements on local authorities to carry out reviews of homelessness in their areas, and from these to adopt strategies to address the needs identified. These new responsibilities should ensure a change in the understanding of the extent and nature of the problem at the local level.

When the Assembly Partnership Government was formed in 2000, it made a commitment to setting up the Homelessness Commission to advise the Assembly on how it should be tackling homelessness in Wales. The Commission undertook an intensive programme of activity over seven months. The final report comprised a major review of the causes of homelessness, with 91 recommendations on how it should be addressed. This report set a challenging agenda for the Assembly Government, which has now prepared its response to the recommendations. The valuable work of the Commission has laid the foundations for this document.

## **3. Purpose of the Strategy**

The purpose of the strategy will be to set a national lead to policy to tackle homelessness at local levels, and to ensure that we meet the aims, objectives and targets of the Assembly Government to reduce the level and impact of homelessness and eliminate the need for rough sleeping.

The strategy will:

- provide a framework for the continuing developing of national guidance and policy on homelessness;
- help to identify the need for funding and how it should be prioritised;
- set a clearer context for the development of local homelessness strategies;
- ensure that homelessness is addressed appropriately in the development of other Assembly policies and strategies.

#### 4. Vision and Principles

The Assembly Government believes that there should be no need for anyone to become homeless or remain homeless due to a lack of accessible, appropriate and co-ordinated services.

The principles underscoring this strategy are that:

- services should be focused on meeting all the relevant needs of the individuals;
- services should be designed to be accessible to homeless people, taking account of their varying circumstances and lifestyles;
- services should be non-discriminatory;
- strategies and services should focus on what is effective and enables people to find and sustain secure and appropriate housing;
- homelessness must be tackled by different organisations working together, both to meet individual needs and at the strategic level;
- homelessness must be prevented wherever possible, and this must be reflected in an emphasis on advice and other preventative work;
- homelessness is normally associated with a range of other issues such as family crisis, debt, ill-health and many others, and the appropriate support services should be available to help people avoid losing their home or help them establish and sustain a new one;
- responses to homelessness should reflect the views of homeless people, who should be encouraged to contribute to the development of appropriate services;
- homelessness should not just be tackled with short term measures at the point of crisis, but through longer term structural solutions.

## 5. Context

Homelessness is not just about the lack of shelter; the Homelessness Commission defined a homeless person as, "*any person who lacks accommodation or where the tenure is not secure*". Homelessness can thus encompass people living temporarily with friends, in bed & breakfast hotels, in hostels and night shelters, or who are unable to remain in or return to their home due to relationship breakdown, harassment, inaffordability, unsuitability for their personal needs or other reasons. It can also cover people facing repossession or leaving hospital, prison or any other institution when they have no home to go to.

The most extreme form of homelessness is rough sleeping. The Homelessness Commission adopted the following definition of rough sleeping "*people sleeping, or bedded down, in the open air; people in buildings or other places not designed for habitation*".

Statistics are only recorded regularly for people who apply to the local authorities as statutorily homeless. These figures provide limited information about certain groups, and reflect widely varying practices and interpretations of the law by local authorities.

There has been no systematic monitoring of people who sleep rough, or the much larger numbers of people who may have shelter but have no secure home of their own and are not in 'priority need', often called the 'hidden homeless'.

Thus we do not have clear enough information on the true extent of homelessness in Wales. This will be one of the main challenges for the development of national and local strategies to tackle homelessness.

It is therefore difficult to assess trends in the numbers of people affected by homelessness. The figures of people presenting as statutorily homeless have been rising since the extension of the priority need categories, but they would appear to stem mainly from the new groups who would previously not have been recorded.

Homelessness numbers have been rising in England and Scotland where the priority need categories have not changed. This may arise from increasing pressures on the social housing stock, and some of these factors may apply in Wales, e.g. rising house prices, and reduction in social housing stock due to right to buy. There will also be a wide range of other reasons relating to

individual circumstances that result in homelessness, but these will be hard to quantify as causal factors.

We need a much better understanding of the causes and extent of homelessness, and this must be a priority for all those working to reduce the problem.

The Assembly Government recognises that the direct work to reduce homelessness will happen at the local level. Delivery of the strategy will depend upon the effectiveness of local organisations and local strategies, which the Assembly Government will support. Local authorities have the primary statutory responsibilities to address homelessness, and they will take the leading role to identify need and secure the delivery of services.

The responsibility for tackling homelessness does not rest solely with the Assembly Government and local authorities. A broad spectrum of statutory, voluntary and private organisations should be contributing towards this agenda, such as local health and social services authorities, lending institutions, voluntary support providers and advice agencies. Registered Social Landlords (“RSLs”) have a particular responsibility to work with the local authority on local housing strategies and the re-housing of people who are or would otherwise be homeless, and the Assembly Government will support this through its regulatory and funding role with RSLs.

## 6. Targets/Timescales

"Better Wales" ([betterwales.com](http://betterwales.com)) set objectives to, reduce the "number of homeless families living in temporary housing to...below 500" and, for "the need for rough sleeping to be eliminated". "Plan for Wales 2001" similarly shows our commitment to reduce homelessness and sets a target of achieving measurable reductions in the length of time families spend in temporary accommodation.

Statistics on the number of households in temporary accommodation for more than six months will be available in 2003, and this will allow the Assembly Government to set a target and timescale for the reduction of homeless families in temporary, with reference to the base-line figure.

The Assembly Government does not currently have adequate information on the levels of rough sleeping or the extent of emergency provision. This information will not be available until the Local Homelessness Strategies are in place (Summer 2003 at the earliest), and it will take some time before the planned investment feeds through into available provision.

The Assembly Government is committed to eliminating the need for rough sleeping at the earliest opportunity, but proposes that the target date for achievement of this aim is determined in summer 2003 on the basis of proper evidence.

The Assembly Government will work towards:

- eliminating the need for rough sleeping;
- reducing the numbers of people staying in temporary accommodation more than six months;
- reducing the incidence of "repeat" homelessness;
- eliminating the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless families and minimising it for others;
- ensuring that all local authorities have homelessness strategies in place;
- minimising the length of time local authorities take to assess people presenting as homeless.

## **7. Relationship of National Strategy to Local Strategies**

### **i Guidance**

The Welsh Assembly Government will review and revise the statutory guidance on allocations and homelessness (Code of Guidance for Local Authorities on Allocation for Accommodation and Homelessness). The revised Code of Guidance will be issued for consultation in the summer of 2002. This Code of Guidance will set out how local strategies should be developed taking account of national priorities and objectives.

The Assembly Government will consider all local authorities' Local Homelessness Strategies, and will provide guidance and assistance to ensure firstly, that the strategy meets national objectives, and secondly that it complies with all statutory provisions.

### **ii Funding**

The Assembly Government has already provided funding for work on homelessness strategies in seven local authority areas. Funding will be made available to all local authorities in 2002/3 to help them to carry out their homelessness reviews and formulate their local strategies.

The Assembly Government has increased its funding for projects tackling homelessness from £650,000 in 1999 to £4.8m in 2002/3, thereby showing its commitment to reducing this problem.

### **iii Other Strategies**

The Local Homelessness Strategy is one of a number of issue specific strategies that form part of the overarching Local Housing Strategy for the local authority area. As such, the broad aims and objectives of the Local Homelessness Strategy should be integral to the strategic housing vision and planned actions set out in the Local Housing Strategy. Through the Local Housing Strategy, the Local Homelessness Strategy should link closely with other strategies and initiatives, for example, the Community Plan, Supporting People, Communities First, and plans related to health, education etc.

It is also essential that local authorities do not regard geographical boundaries too strictly when formulating their strategy, and work with neighbouring local authorities.

## **8. Prevention**

### **i Advice**

Good advice is a cornerstone of the prevention of homelessness. This advice must be accompanied by the appropriate assistance, and encompass information, advice, representation and advocacy where needed. Advice across a range of areas can prevent homelessness, but housing and debt advice are particularly relevant.

The Assembly Government is committed to enabling everyone in need to have access to independent housing advice. An audit of housing advice services in Wales has already been carried out (“Housing Advice Audit”). There has been a substantial increase in the extent of independent housing advice services across Wales over the past two years with the support of the Legal Services Commission (“LSC”). It is the aim of the LSC to provide universal access to advice services throughout Wales. Further work remains to be done to achieve our objective, and we will take account of views on the Housing Advice Audit in taking this forward.

The Assembly Government will:

- work with the Legal Services Commission to monitor the extent of existing services and to plan for provision to meet unmet need;
- support the development of an independent housing advice service in every local authority area in Wales;
- review the need for and support provision of specialist advice services where appropriate;
- support housing advice services through Section 180 of the Housing Act 1996;
- promote improvements in the standards of housing advice, to meet the Quality Mark standards;
- encourage access to money/debt advice for all people at risk of losing their home, in partnership with the LSC and NACAB.

### **ii Evictions**

The number of people evicted from social housing has risen sharply in recent years. The reasons for this are not clear, although there may be links to the adoption of introductory tenancies. Evictions are likely to lead directly to homelessness, and the Assembly is concerned that they should only be used as a last resort. Housing and debt advice services have a major role to play in preventing evictions.

To ensure this, the Assembly Government will:

- carry out a review of the use of introductory tenancies;
- publish a good practice report on dealing with rent arrears in conjunction with District Audit and the University;
- undertake a statistical monitoring exercise on the extent and grounds for eviction;
- encourage landlords to use alternative means to tackle anti-social behaviour wherever possible;
- consider with the Council of Mortgage Lenders what other measures are required to promote sustainable home ownership.

### **iii Leaving Institutions**

A common feature of institutional life is that people are likely to be at risk of becoming homeless when they leave. This can affect people leaving hospital and care homes, as well as the armed services and institutions for offenders. Specific groups are addressed elsewhere in this report.

All too often the planning for discharge does not ensure that appropriate housing is available or that they are prepared for living independently in the community. Organisations must work with others to ensure that people in their care are able to move on to sustainable, independent living.

The Assembly Government will:

- seek to ensure through guidance and joint-working that everyone leaving hospital, prison, the armed services or any other institution is offered housing advice and help to find suitable accommodation and where appropriate prepared for independent living.

### **iv Education**

The cycle of homelessness which some people fall into often begins in very early adulthood, and is usually a reflection of exclusion from the normal paths to successful adulthood. This may include exclusion from schooling and family support, as well as homelessness in childhood. Education and information are vital components in breaking and preventing this cycle.

The Assembly Government has already recognised these links by funding the development of a learning pack for young people aimed at preventing homelessness, called 'Housemate'. The Assembly is also funding the Canllaw Cymru project, which also provides young people with information on housing and homelessness.

The Assembly Government will:

- continue to support the dissemination of Housemate, Canllaw Cymru and other learning materials with the aim of providing every young person before they leave school with advice about how to avoid homelessness;
- promote inclusion in full-time education for all children through its guidance to schools and local education authorities.

## v Learning and Employment

Homeless people are often excluded from employment, partly due to lack of skills as well as a home. Their lack of accommodation makes it more difficult for them to obtain and keep a permanent job or to access training. Thus they become stuck in a vicious circle of homelessness and poverty.

People who lack a good education or life skills are more likely to become homeless, and the learning and employment opportunities available to them may be unsuitable. Homeless people need learning and training opportunities, which are accessible, flexible and appropriate to their needs, including the option of therapeutic employment.

Employment policy is reserved to the UK Government. The main delivery agents are the Employment Service and the Benefits Agency, currently merging as Jobcentre Plus. They already operate a number of schemes that help vulnerable groups, and homeless people are granted early entry to the New Deal programme. They plan to introduce greater use of therapeutic work, and intermediate labour markets, in order to support a more transitional routeway to work. ELWa, the national body for higher education and learning, also has a vital role to play in supporting the development of services that equip people with skills and confidence.

The Assembly Government will:

- assist ELWa in researching gaps in provision of training in basic pre-vocational and employment skills, which is appropriate to homeless people;
- work with ELWa and the Basic Skills Agency to foster schemes that prepare homeless people for training and employment;
- reflect the importance of skills and training within the framework for Supporting People.

## vi Relationship Breakdown and Personal Support

Relationship breakdown is probably the single most common contributory factor leading to homelessness. Some studies suggest that it is one of the main causes in the majority of cases of homelessness. Whilst the fragmentation of traditional family patterns is widely recognised, ability of Government and other institutions to affect this trend is limited. Nevertheless, reconciliation must be supported where both parties want this, and where it is not, they must be helped to secure alternative accommodation.

Even where people do not wish to live together, supportive family and friends are important in enabling them to settle and avoid homelessness.

The Assembly Government has already provided funding for one service for young people, which offers mediation as a means of preventing homelessness. It has also commissioned a good practice pack on relationship breakdown that has been distributed to all social landlords.

The Assembly Government will:

- support the evaluation and further development of family mediation services aimed at the prevention of homelessness;
- encourage local authorities to re-house homeless people near their family and friends where possible and when this is what they want;
- foster the development of befriending and mentoring services with and amongst homeless people;
- reflect the importance of social networks in Supporting People.

## **9. Access to Housing**

### **i Supply**

The quantity of housing exceeds the numbers of households in all local authority areas. However, this crude surplus disguises the fact that there are shortages of certain types of properties in many areas, particularly when taking account of affordability. The surplus of family housing is often in peripheral estates where people do not wish to live. There is a particular shortage in the availability of housing for single people, as most of the stock is family-sized and the numbers of single homeless people are increasing.

The Assembly Government encourages all local authorities to carry out housing needs assessments in accordance with good practice guidance. Funding has been made available for authorities to carry out this work to identify shortages in the availability of supply to meet demand.

The Assembly Government will:

- Provide guidance on carrying out needs assessments for homeless people;
- Expect all local authorities to carry out regular needs assessments as part of the preparation for their Local Housing Strategies;
- Continue to make funding available for authorities to carry out needs assessments;
- Expect authorities to reflect their plans for meeting the needs of homeless people in their Local Housing Strategies and in their bids for grant funding, for instance Social Housing Grant.

### **ii Access to Social Housing**

The Assembly Government is currently undertaking a review of policy on lettings. The outcome of this review will be reflected in the new Code of Guidance and the revised Regulatory Requirements, for local authorities and registered social landlords respectively, and we will consult on these during 2002.

The primary purpose of social housing is to provide decent accommodation for people who could not otherwise afford it. It remains an objective of the Assembly Government to make high quality social housing available to everyone who cannot afford to buy.

Homeless people generally are most in need of access to this resource, and social housing must be readily accessible to them if the Assembly Government is to meet its objective.

The review of allocation policy will take account of the National Assembly's three principal themes: tackling social disadvantage, sustainability, and equality of opportunity. Social housing tackles social disadvantage by giving priority to those most in need. Social housing itself must be managed in the context of sustainable communities, tenants must be empowered to sustain their tenancies, and everyone should have fair and equal access to social housing taking account of their needs and circumstances. Where there is competition for available housing, there should be arrangements in place for giving priority to households who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, whether or not they are in the statutory priority need groups.

The other main priority in this context is the promotion of choice, and everyone applying for social housing must have some say in where they live, including people who are statutorily homeless.

The Assembly Government will:

- publish statutory guidance on how social landlords should ensure that their housing is accessible to, and meets the needs of homeless people;
- promote choice for homeless people in the housing that is offered to them.

### **iii Bond Boards**

Access to the private rented sector can be very difficult for people on low incomes, particularly due to rent levels, housing benefit delays and the difficulty in raising deposits and rent in advance.

The Assembly Government is already funding bond schemes across Wales where it guarantees to pay the landlord if costs are outstanding at the end of the tenancy. These usually only cover repair costs. Schemes provide bond certificates to private landlords that can be called upon in the event of damage to the property when it is vacated. The Assembly Government is currently funding, and monitoring, a pilot custodial bond scheme in Cardiff, where the bond is held and administered independently.

The recent review of the private rented sector in Wales highlighted the limitations of these schemes from the landlord's viewpoint. The Assembly Government aims to develop access to bond schemes in all parts of Wales.

The Assembly Government will:

- support the further development of bond schemes across Wales, taking account of gaps in current provision, the review of the Cardiff Custodial Bond Scheme, and the need for more generic inclusive services which include more private landlords;
- publish good practice guidance for bond schemes in Wales.

### **iv Exclusions from Social Housing**

Social landlords, depending upon their policies, exclude many homeless people from consideration for housing. This may arise from previous conduct, particularly rent arrears or anti-social behaviour. Such people are likely to be deemed “intentionally homeless” under homeless legislation. Some social landlords exclude on other grounds, such as local residency criteria, or age limits.

Although the Homelessness Act 2002 will require local authorities to give individual consideration to most applicants, the issue of exclusion will remain within the policies and procedures by which landlords consider each application.

Once a homeless person is excluded, they are likely to find it very difficult or impossible to find social housing in an area where they are likely to have social connections. They will often remain in the area if they can, homeless or inadequately re-housed.

The Assembly Government has already supported and consulted upon a report on exclusions and other restrictive practices. It generally supports the recommendations in that report, the aims of which will be reflected in its forthcoming policy documents.

The Assembly Government will:

- issue detailed guidance on exclusions within the revised Code of Guidance for Local Authorities on Allocation of Accommodation and Homelessness, taking forward the recommendations in the Exclusions report;
- require Registered Social Landlords (“RSLs”) formally to agree nomination and referral arrangements with local authorities in their areas of operation, to ensure that they help the authorities to meet their statutory duties and local strategic objectives in housing homeless and vulnerable people;
- expect landlords to suspend applications for no longer than five years based on previous conduct and to monitor the implementation of suspensions;
- promote multi-agency arrangements which review the circumstances of excluded people and provide support to enable them to be reconsidered for social housing.

## **v Private Rented Sector**

The private rented sector continues to provide a range of accommodation for people in need, without which they may be homeless. For many single people, and those who are evicted or otherwise excluded from social housing, it may be the only tenure available to them, although its location, rent levels and landlord criteria mean that it is not available to all. Standards of accommodation and management vary, and there is a particular concern with houses in multiple occupation (“HMOs”). The

availability of good quality, well-managed private rented sector accommodation can have a significant impact of homelessness.

The Assembly Government is committed to introducing a national mandatory licensing scheme, which aims to provide safe, acceptable living conditions without reducing the supply of private rented accommodation. The licensing proposals include changing the legal definition of an HMO, to bring many more properties into the ambit of registration.

Mandatory licensing will centre on all HMOs deemed to be high risk. Authorities will however have discretion to license other HMOs where it is felt appropriate for an area. It is also proposed that there will be other discretionary powers for other private rented properties to be licensed in certain circumstances under the Assembly Government selective licensing proposals.

It is not the aim of these proposals to reduce the size of the private rented sector by driving landlords out of the market with adverse consequences for tenants. Rather it is to raise standards and instil improvements so that the sector can continue to act as a magnet for meeting the needs of particular groups notably those on low incomes.

The Assembly Government will:

- introduce a national mandatory licensing scheme, which aims to provide safe, acceptable living conditions without reducing the supply of private rented accommodation.

## **vi Specialised Provision including Emergency Shelter**

No one should have to sleep rough on the streets or outside of a proper dwelling. The Assembly Government is committed to ensuring that no one need sleep rough. We should achieve a position where anyone likely to be in that situation can find adequate shelter within 24 hours.

Existing emergency accommodation across Wales varies considerably in its availability and nature. In some areas there is no emergency accommodation for non-statutory groups. In other areas the emergency accommodation is limited to facilities for specific groups, such as Women's Aid Refuges. Even where there are a number of services, they are not necessarily available to everyone, either because the hostels and shelters are full or individuals have been excluded.

For emergency accommodation to function effectively, occupants have to be able to move on to appropriate housing as soon as they are ready.

The Assembly Government will:

- require local authorities to assess the need for emergency accommodation and plan to meet that need, through their local homelessness reviews and strategies;

- provide funding for the development of these services through “Supporting People”;
- promote good practice in the development and management of emergency accommodation;
- support the development of methodologies for identifying the need for emergency accommodation.

## **vii Move-On Accommodation**

A wide range of emergency and other temporary accommodation is available to homeless people to meet their immediate housing needs and to help them prepare for resettlement in permanent accommodation. Unless they are able to move on from their temporary housing as soon as they are ready, they will remain in that increasingly unsuitable housing, the resettlement process will be undermined, and they will block access to the temporary housing provision for those who need it.

In some areas hostels and other short-term housing is often full due to lack of move-on accommodation, with consequential effects on other homeless people.

Arrangements for the provision of adequate move-on accommodation should be central to the planning of services within local homelessness strategies. This will require the full co-operation of local housing providers and support agencies.

The Assembly Government will:

- issue guidance expecting local authorities and registered social landlords to work together and with support agencies to make available move-on accommodation, which is sufficient and suitable to individual needs.

## **10. Resettlement, Support and Access to Services**

### **i Needs Assessments and Planning**

Support is critical to the prevention of and resettlement from homelessness. In responding to people at risk of losing their home, it is essential that an assessment of needs is undertaken so that appropriate support services can be engaged.

Individual needs assessments will be the foundation of work to tackle homelessness and to ensure that vulnerable people are able to maintain their tenancies. The needs assessments will link vulnerable people to "Supporting People" or other voluntary or statutory services. The individual needs assessments will also provide essential data for the local needs assessments within the Local Homelessness and Supporting People strategies.

The Assembly Government is already funding a number of projects that are developing good practice in this area, including the Housing Needs Assessment Project in Cardiff and the Personal Housing Plans Project in Bridgend.

The Assembly Government will:

- issue statutory guidance on individual needs assessments, within the context of guidance on Homelessness and Supporting People strategies;
- disseminate the outcomes of current projects focusing on the assessment of need and planning for resettlement of homeless people.

### **ii Supporting People**

There is a clear link between the prevention of homelessness and the supply of supported housing in the community. "Supporting People" is the new policy and funding framework for delivering accommodation-based support to vulnerable people, in different types of accommodation and across all tenures. It will be introduced in Wales in April 2003. The support is designed to prepare people for independent living, or help them to maintain independent living with support. Thus its purpose is integral to efforts to tackle homelessness.

The National Assembly will be responsible for funding Supporting People Revenue Grant ("SPRG"), which will be payable to all projects where an element of support is being provided. Some of these projects were previously funded under the provisions of section 180 of the Housing Act 1996, but will now fall into SPRG.

Local authorities should already have established a database of existing and planned provision. By October 2002, they should have identified unmet needs and drafted their first strategic Supporting People plan, identifying priorities and resource requirements for 2003-4. This work will form a substantial contribution to fulfilling their statutory duty to prepare Local Homelessness Strategies (Homelessness Act 2002).

Funding for projects involving sheltered housing and community care will be payable by the local authority,

The Assembly Government will fund other support services through SPRG, this will absorb appropriate elements of funding previously provided through grants under Section 180 of the Housing Act 1996, grants under Section 30 of the Job Seekers Act 1995, Transitional Housing Benefit, Supported Housing Revenue Grant ("SHRG") and Probation Accommodation Grants ("PAGs").

The Assembly Government will:

- issue guidance on Supporting People administration for local authorities;
- review the Supporting People Operational Plans and work with authorities to ensure they operate effectively to prevent and reduce homelessness.

### **iii Outreach and Contact**

Some rough sleepers are particularly difficult to sustain contact with, and there is a much larger number of "hidden homeless" people whose lack of settled residence leaves them detached from mainstream services.

Contact between homeless people and the services they need can be inherently problematic and often sporadic. This undermines efforts to help people resettle and to measure the extent of homelessness.

This represents a challenge for both statutory and voluntary services, and requires flexible and focused approaches. The Assembly is currently funding a research project on identifying the needs of the hidden homeless. It also funds a range of outreach services.

The Assembly Government will:

- identify in its regulatory guidance ways in which local authorities should establish and maintain contact with rough sleepers and hidden homeless people;
- support the development of outreach work that enables homeless people to maintain communication with services, such as mailbox and telephone points.

### **iv Social Support**

The Assembly Government acknowledges the importance of social support to homeless people, as it is often the case that they lack a support network.

This is particularly the case for younger homeless people, single parents and sometimes the elderly. Consideration should be given to the importance of family and friends when allocating both temporary and permanent housing to homeless people.

## **11. Other Essential Services**

### **i Social Services**

The Homelessness Act 2002 places a specific requirement on local authority Social Services Departments to co-operate with their Housing Departments in the preparation and implementation of their Local Homelessness Strategies.

Local authorities have statutory responsibility to provide welfare services to a range of vulnerable groups, particularly children and care leavers, older people, people with learning difficulties, mental illness or physical disabilities and substance misusers. There has been no specific social services responsibility in respect of homelessness, but much of the community care work carried out by social services departments will be relevant to ensuring people can establish and retain settled accommodation.

The Audit Commission's Report, "*Home Alone*", found weaknesses in the collaboration between housing and social services departments, and made recommendations to strengthen their relationship.

The Assembly Government has already highlighted the need for local authorities to address the needs of homeless people in its Guidance on Social Care Plans.

The Assembly Government will:

- seek to ensure that Social Services Departments work proactively with housing colleagues, Local Health Groups, and other statutory and voluntary agencies to alleviate and prevent homelessness through the identification of needs and provision of assistance to children in need and other vulnerable groups;
- extend guidance on Social Care Plans concerning joint working with housing services, including homelessness responsibilities;
- amend the Flexibilities Guidance on the Health Act 1999 to point up opportunities for housing and homelessness services;
- ensure adequate coverage of housing and homelessness issues in Health and Well-Being Strategies Guidance;
- task the Wales Care Strategy Group with including care services provided as an adjunct to housing within its work;
- monitor through its inspection programme and management information systems the way in which social services authorities implement their responsibilities under the Homelessness Act 2002.

## **ii Health**

Homeless people are particularly vulnerable to problems with mental health, skin, musculo-skeletal, respiratory and arthritic conditions. There is also a high prevalence of drug and alcohol problems, which may need specific health services.

The Assembly Government has already identified the problems experienced by homeless people in gaining access to health services, and set an objective to improve health care for this group. The interaction between health and homelessness is complex, but the results can be severe. Research indicates that rough sleepers have an average life expectancy of only forty-two. Improving health care must be part of the process towards permanent resettlement.

The lack of a stable address, or any address at all, can result in homeless people losing contact with primary health services, and they can experience difficulty in being accepted onto a GP's list. Other secondary services and dental and optical care may not be accessed due to the mismatch between homeless people's lifestyles and structures for accessing services.

There are some examples of good practice in this area, particularly where nurse-practitioners have been given dedicated time to work with homeless people in a multi-agency setting. However, a more systematic focus is required so that homeless people are always able to access primary health care designed to deal with their needs and circumstances, and which can link them into other specialist health services as required.

The Assembly Government will:

- issue guidance on Health and Well-Being Plans, requiring Local Health Boards specifically to address the health needs of homeless people;
- promote and fund good practice initiatives for developing accessible front-line services for homeless people;
- address the needs of homeless people in the National Service Framework for Mental Health;
- take account of the importance of planned discharge to appropriate housing in the guidance it issues to health services on the arrangements for discharging patients.

## **iii Former Prisoners and Ex-Offenders**

Appropriate re-housing is a fundamental part of resettlement and rehabilitation amongst this group. A large proportion of rough sleepers have spent some time in prison, and ex-prisoners are likely to have particular problems finding suitable accommodation. There is a significant correlation between homelessness and re-offending amongst former prisoners. The National Assembly extended the homelessness legislation to cover this group, but problems remain in finding them suitable accommodation. The National Assembly is aware of the additional pressures and difficulties that

can arise from meeting this duty, but which can be overcome through positive inter-agency co-operation.

The Assembly Government will work with the Prison Service and National Probation Service to reduce homelessness amongst former prisoners and other ex-offenders.

The Assembly Government will:

- issue statutory guidance, through the revised Code of Guidance for Local Authorities on Allocation of Accommodation and Homelessness, clarifying local authority responsibilities to re-house homeless former prisoners under the Homeless Persons (Priority Need) (Wales) Order 2001;
- develop housing advice work with prisoners from the start of sentence to release;
- encourage the integration of preparation for resettlement into prison sentence planning;
- improve access to advice and support services for post-release help with resettlement;
- encourage a seamless link between Prison and Probation resettlement work, to be reflected in joint Prison/Probation plan for Wales;
- tackle the exclusion of ex-offenders from social housing, through implementation of the Homelessness Act 2002 and statutory Assembly guidance,
- promote protocols between prison, probation and housing services to cover resettlement planning, including exchange of information and the safe re-housing of dangerous ex-offenders;
- improve the availability of appropriate accommodation for ex-offenders through inclusion of Probation and Prison services in local homelessness strategies planning frameworks;
- ensure the availability of appropriate accommodation based support services for ex-offenders through the inclusion of probation services in Supporting People planning frameworks.

#### **iv Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence is one of the most common reasons for homelessness. The victims are usually women, and very often have to leave the family home at short notice in order to escape the abuse. The psychological and physical trauma is compounded by loss of the home and social support, particularly where children are involved.

The National Assembly has responded to this by extending the homelessness legislation to include victims of domestic violence. In its Provisional Guidance, the Assembly confirms that "local connection" should not apply to an applicant who is escaping violence.

The Assembly Government also continues to support a network of refuges across Wales managed by local Women's Aid Groups, and supports the national Welsh Women's Aid.

The Assembly Government is determined to tackle domestic violence in a joined-up way, and is developing a national strategy in this area, with the assistance of the newly formed All Wales Domestic Abuse (And Violence Against Women) Working Group.

The Assembly Government will:

- adopt a national strategy to tackle domestic violence that will incorporate objectives to meet the housing needs of people fleeing domestic violence;
- review the effectiveness of current local provision to ensure that resources are best targeted to meet needs;
- issue guidance to local authorities through the statutory Code of Guidance for Local Authorities on Allocation of Accommodation and Homelessness, on the need to ensure that people fleeing domestic violence are given appropriate advice and support, as well as housing.

## **v Welfare Benefits**

Welfare Benefits and Housing Benefit in particular underpin Government policy to enable people with low incomes to access housing. Inevitably there are constraints on the availability of benefits, which are largely means-tested. Nevertheless, these benefits should support the policy that everyone should be able to live in decent housing with adequate means to support themselves.

The Homelessness Commission identified a number of areas where the benefit system should be strengthened to achieve these aims. In particular these focus on the adequacy of benefits for under 25 year olds, and on access to Community Care Grants and other special hardship payments.

The Assembly Government has already written to the UK Government raising these concerns. The UK Government has already announced its intention to introduce new standards and monitoring arrangements for the delivery of housing benefit.

The Assembly Government will:

- continue to seek amendments to benefit policy, which increase the affordability of accommodation for young people;
- liaise with the Department of Work and Pensions on the local implementation of benefit policy to improve access to appropriate benefits based on individual need.

## **vi Substance Misuse**

The prevalence of drug and alcohol problems amongst homeless people is well documented. These problems can both cause and compound homelessness, as they become part of an entrenched lifestyle and coping mechanism.

Homeless people who are misusing substances often have other problems, such as mental illness, and may experience difficulty in getting properly diagnosed.

The UK Government recently amended Section 8 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 that will increase the responsibilities of people working with “hard” drug users. This will be implemented only after consultation on forthcoming guidance.

The Assembly Government already has a Substance Misuse Strategy, which sets out its priorities for planning and delivery of services.

The Assembly Government will:

- undertake a review of the commissioning and provision of treatment and rehabilitation services in Wales, taking account of the needs of homeless people, to address concerns about the availability of these services;
- respond to the forthcoming exercise by the Home Office on the amendment of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, to stress the importance of enabling work to continue with drug users in a harm reduction environment within supported housing settings.

## **vii Care Leavers**

The particular vulnerability of young people in care is well documented and that vulnerability continues into early adulthood. Care leavers feature disproportionately across a range of indicators of exclusion, including homelessness.

Government determination to tackle this led to the passage of the Care Leavers Act 2000, and the following year in Wales of the Homeless Persons (Priority Need) (Wales) Order 2001 (“the Priority Need Order”) to extend statutory homelessness protection to care leavers up to 21 years.

The Assembly Government’s statutory guidance on the Care Leavers Act explains how statutory and voluntary services, including housing, should work together to enable young people to move towards independence in the community. The Priority Need Order places a statutory duty on local authorities to secure suitable accommodation for homeless care leavers. The statutory framework is in place, and organisations must ensure that the right housing is made available with appropriate support, so that homelessness is no longer a likely part of a care leaver’s future.

The Assembly Government will:

- monitor the impact of the Priority Need Order and Care Leavers Act on the re-housing of care leavers;
- commission research to identify effective action to prevent people leaving care from becoming homeless.

## viii Armed Services

People serving in the armed services spend most or all of their time away from their home area in service accommodation. It can sometimes be difficult for ex-service people to resettlement in the community and find appropriate accommodation on discharge.

The Assembly Government has already recognised this problem and helped service veterans, by extending protection of homelessness legislation to them through the implementation of the Homeless Persons (Priority Need) (Wales) Order 2001.

The Ministry of Defence has established a Veterans Initiative to consider this issue for all UK forces.

The Assembly Government will:

- work with the Ministry of Defence to ensure that all Welsh armed service personnel are given appropriate advice and assistance in preparing for discharge, and are then helped to find suitable housing in the community.

## **12. Equal Opportunities**

The Assembly Government considers that all applicants should be treated equally. The ultimate goal should be that services are accessible to and sensitive to the needs of all groups. Although there may be a need for certain groups of people to have access to specific services (people with disabilities, lesbians and gay men, black, minority ethnic (BME) and older people) there is also a need to ensure that mainstream services are available to meet the needs of all groups.

### **i Refugees**

Refugees are particularly vulnerable to homelessness once they are given leave to remain. They will have to leave their NASS accommodation within fourteen days, and are likely to have difficulty in securing employment or benefits during this period, particularly as there are usually delays in obtaining a National Insurance Number.

The Assembly Government will:

- issue guidance on how local authorities should work with other agencies to enable refugees to access accommodation and other services, so that they can be integrated into mainstream society.

### **ii Black Minority Ethnic Groups (“BME”)**

The Assembly Government recognises the disadvantages experienced by BME groups in society, as well as their diversity. To this end, it is about to publish National BME Housing Action Plan.

There is a lack of information on the extent of homelessness amongst BME groups. There is an understanding that housing services will need to be more sensitive and proactive in reaching BME groups, and this includes homelessness services.

The Assembly Government will:

- amend the monitoring of statutory homelessness to include ethnic minorities;
- expect authorities to address BME needs in preparing their homelessness strategies;
- explore homelessness issues and appropriate responses through its BME housing strategy work;
- invite the BME National Housing Review Group to consider homelessness issues and appropriate responses.

### **iii Lesbians and Gay Men**

Recent research has highlighted the particular vulnerability of homeless young lesbians and gay men. The stigma attached to homosexuality often leads to relationship breakdown with parents, making it impossible to remain in the family home. Even when this is not the cause of homelessness, societal attitudes can make the experience of homelessness much worse for lesbians and gay men.

The Assembly Government will:

- undertake an evaluation of the housing needs for Lesbian and Gay Men;
- invite the views of the All Wales Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Forum on the recent research and its significance for Wales;
- require local authorities to consider the specific needs of lesbians and gay men in their Local Homelessness Strategy.

#### **iv Disability**

People with physical disabilities often find difficulty in accessing accommodation that meets their needs. They can be left stranded in housing which they cannot fully access and which may be totally unsuitable for their needs. If the accommodation is not adequately usable for a disabled person, they can be rendered effectively homeless.

The Assembly Government is keen to see the emergence of more databases of accessible housing, which can be matched against registers of disabled people requiring re-housing.

The Assembly Government will:

- support the development of accessible housing databases and Registers of Need;
- explore the most effective means of providing disabled people with specialist advice to meet their housing needs.

## 13. Delivering the Strategy

### i Implementation

The National Homelessness Strategy will be designed as an Assembly Government document setting out the action it will take to reduce homelessness. However, a range of external factors, including the economy and social and demographic trends influence the extent and nature of homelessness. Above all, homelessness and the action to tackle it are dependent upon the work of agencies providing services on the ground. Local authorities in particular have a leading role to play in the implementation of this strategy.

The Assembly Government will:

- review the implementation of homelessness legislation by local authorities;
- liaise with and support local authorities and other agencies to ensure that they are working towards implementing the strategy and its objectives;
- establish internal arrangements to secure effective joined-up agreement to implement the strategy across departmental lines.

### ii Research and Evaluation

The homelessness strategy must be based on evidence to support its objectives and effectiveness. This evidence will be based partly on information supplied by on-going feedback and liaison with external organisations, and partly on research.

The Assembly Government has recognised the importance of research in this area, and has reflected this in its forward programme.

The Assembly Government will:

- review research into the housing histories of people who have experienced homelessness;
- review research on the reasons for poor access to and take up by homeless people of medical, care and support services;
- commission research into action to prevent people becoming homeless on leaving institutional care;
- commission guidance on gathering views of homeless people on service provision;
- carry out an evaluation of the main forms of action taken by agencies to prevent homelessness;
- carry out an evaluation of the main forms of temporary accommodation for young, single homeless people.

### **iii Measuring, Monitoring and Review**

It is vital that progress in achieving the strategy's objectives is measured and monitored, to ensure it is being effectively implemented, and to inform review of the strategy.

The Assembly Government already collects statistical returns from local authorities on statutory homeless figures, although some authorities are very slow to provide these.

The Assembly Government has already asked the Local Government and Housing Committee and the National Consultative Forum on housing in Wales ("NCFHW") to monitor progress in this area.

The Assembly Government will:

- produce a final version of the strategy following consultation on this draft strategy;
- report at least annually to the Local Government and Housing Committee and to the NCFHW on the implementation of the strategy;
- review and revise the strategy as necessary following consideration and advice by the NCFHW and the Local Government and Housing Committee.