

Social Justice and Regeneration Committee

SJR(2)-17-06(p.5)

Date: Wednesday 6 December 2006

Time: 09.30am – 12.30pm

Venue: Senedd, Cardiff Bay

Paper from Welsh Local Government Association on Youth Homelessness

1. Overall Homelessness trends in Wales

1.1 Overall levels of homelessness in Wales have been steadily increasing over recent years with homeless applications between 1999 and the end of 2004 increasing from 12,436 to 22,358. However, a long awaited downward trend started to emerge in 2005 and it is hoped that this trend will be continued. It is widely acknowledged that some homeless households will not approach the local authority therefore Local Authority records of presentations are likely to under-estimate the scale of the issue. Identifying levels of hidden homelessness and providing a reliable estimate of the true scale of homelessness in Wales continues to be a challenge.

1.2 Trends in youth homelessness in Wales follow those of overall homelessness, with a rapid rise taking place towards the end of the 1990's and a downward trend emerging more recently. Official data shows a reduction of 32% in the first 6 months of 2006 compared with the same period in 2005. This reduction has occurred alongside growing affordability problems and is largely attributed to the shift by local authorities away from crisis intervention and towards homelessness prevention.

1.3 The considerable efforts that authorities and their partners have made to address homelessness in Wales over recent years have resulted in real improvements in the range and quality of services provided. However, youth homelessness continues to be of concern with 6,824 young people aged 16 – 24 presenting themselves as homeless between mid 2005 and mid 2006; the scale of the challenge should not be underestimated and much work remains to be done.

2. Causes of Youth Homelessness

2.1 The fact that young people consistently represent approximately 40% of total homeless presentations in Wales is a reflection of their disproportionate vulnerability to homelessness, and has prompted extensive research into the causes. Studies consistently report the same pattern, consistently identifying a range of 'structural factors' such as the housing markets, labour markets and benefit entitlement, alongside risk factors and triggers such as unemployment, family conflict, parental neglect or abuse, and insecure accommodation. This body of evidence has informed the preventative approaches that authorities and their partners have been using since 2003. The most significant causes and triggers are:

Housing Supply

Affordability issues in the owner occupied sector: property prices in Wales have been increasing rapidly with a price rise of 7% between June and September 2006 and the average price of a property in Wales now at ?154,741. Income levels for young people aged 16–24 are low, effectively excluding them from owner occupation. The problems of affordability also serve to displace demand in the other sectors of the housing market.

Limited access to social housing: rising levels of demand for social housing and a shrinking stock increasingly mean that single people have a relatively low priority

Limited access to the private rented sector is largely a result of the requirement for bonds and deposits and unregulated rent levels. This sector provides limited security (currently 6 months) and includes the poorest conditions and highest levels of risk to health and safety

Housing and Welfare Benefits

Welfare benefits are lower for young people aged 18–24 than for older age groups and those under 18 have very limited access to welfare benefits

Young people are subject to a reduced level of housing benefit which for 16–24 year olds is based on a single room rent. This results in a very high proportion of young people subsidising rent from their low income levels and potentially being at risk of exploitation and eviction

The proposed introduction of the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) (currently being piloted in Conwy and Pembrokeshire) will require authorities to pay housing benefit directly to tenants except where the tenant is deemed to be vulnerable. There are growing concerns that the introduction of the LHA will result in landlords leaving the sector and increased levels of eviction for rent arrears

Support Needs

Young people, particularly those aged 16–17 are vulnerable by virtue of their age, limited life experience and skills. Very young people are increasingly presenting themselves as homeless and the 14–16 age group is of growing concern

A significant number of young people find themselves homeless as a result of leaving care or relationship breakdown with family/friends. The lack of a gradual transition to independence will mean that a high proportion of young people need a level of ongoing support to ensure that accommodation is sustained.

3. Local Authority Legal Duties

3.1 Since 1977 local authorities have been responsible for providing assistance to people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. The 1996 Housing Act subsequently placed a statutory

duty on local authorities to provide permanent housing for those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, and who are eligible for assistance, unintentionally homeless and within a priority need category.

3.2 Towards the end of the 1990's there were growing concerns that the homelessness legislation failed to give vulnerable groups, including young people, sufficient priority. This together with a recognition of the need for a more proactive, holistic and strategic approach to homelessness resulted in the 2002 Homelessness Act and secondary legislation in Wales in 2001. Local authorities are now required to:

review their homelessness services;

plan strategically to address homelessness; and

work with partners to provide appropriate services to prevent and address homelessness.

3.2 Where homelessness cannot be prevented local authorities are required to include some young people as priority need:

16 and 17 year olds;

18–20 year olds who were previously in the care system;

People aged 21 or over who are vulnerable as a result of being looked after, accommodated or fostered by the local authority, and as a result of fleeing violence or threats of violence.

3.3 This extension of the priority need groups, together with the new emphasis on prevention, has had a major impact on the way in which authorities are addressing youth homelessness.

4. Application of the Legislation

4.1 Application of the legislation with respect to youth homelessness can be divided into 3 areas of strategic planning; prevention services; and responding to the needs of young people where homelessness cannot be avoided.

4.2 Strategic planning - authorities have responsibility for carrying out a housing market assessment in order to identify the scale, location and nature of housing need in their area. This assessment includes the housing needs of young people, including those who are homeless, and informs the Local Housing Strategy. The Strategy plans to meet the identified needs and places homelessness within the wider corporate context including cross departmental work within the authority e.g. housing, social services and education as well as the work to be carried out in partnership with external sectors, e.g. criminal justice, the voluntary sector, private developers and housing associations.

4.3 Authorities also have in place a Homelessness Strategy which includes prevention activity as well as services to address homelessness where it cannot be avoided. A wide range of partners are involved in developing the Strategy, often through a Homelessness Forum. Links with the Supporting People Planning Group will ensure that appropriate and coherent support and homelessness services are developed. An increasing number of authorities have also developed Youth Homelessness Forums which contribute to the homelessness strategy, and allow young people to play an active part in planning to address youth homelessness in their area.

4.4 Prevention services - Following the 2002 Act and the Assembly's review of local authority homelessness services, every authority in Wales has reviewed and reconfigured their homelessness services, or is in the process of doing so. This has put in place a far more strategic and proactive approach and has introduced a clear focus on prevention, incorporating many of the following elements:

a housing options approach, offering advice, information and support and a range of solutions to prevent homelessness

partnerships with a wide range of external partners, including the voluntary sector, housing associations and Health Trusts to provide a range of services

improving cross departmental links within the authority e.g. joint work between housing and social services

working with all sectors of the housing market to increase the supply of housing e.g. with private landlords, private developers and housing associations

a holistic approach to assessing need which includes assessment of health and support needs alongside housing needs and the provision of appropriate support through the supporting people programme

building close links with supporting people planning groups to ensure that appropriate support services are developed

developing mediation services to resolve family disputes and landlord tenant disputes

homelessness prevention funds to provide homelessness officers with access to relatively small amounts of money which can be used to prevent homelessness and avoid the use of temporary accommodation

Involving service users in strategic planning and reviews of services e.g. youth homelessness forums

reconfiguring Housing benefit services to ensure they prevent homelessness by speedy processing and appropriate use of discretionary housing benefit

increasing the provision of appropriate staff training in the application of the homelessness legislation

developing alternatives to bed and breakfast provision

developing a homelessness strategy in conjunction with their partners and service users

developing corporate commitment to prevent and address homelessness.

4.5 A Key component of homelessness prevention work now being used by all authorities in Wales is the use of housing options interviews. The aim is to provide an initial interview and to offer a range of options to address the entire range of housing and support needs of the young person. Where an officer has 'reason to believe' that an applicant may be homeless or threatened with homelessness a formal homelessness application will be made. Such an approach provides a much more user-centred and holistic service and aims to explore all possible solutions rather than automatically processing a homelessness application.

4.6 There have been concerns about the housing options approach may be deterring young people from making a homelessness application when they are entitled to do so. However an analysis of the quarterly returns made by authorities suggests that this fear is unfounded. At the national level homelessness acceptances consistently account for just over 40% of all assessment decisions from 2002-5 which covers the period before and following the introduction of housing options interviews. If potential applicants were being discouraged from making an application and 'fobbed off' with a short term solution the result is likely to be a reduction in applications in the short term and a rise in future applications. An analysis of trends in applications suggests that to date this is not the case. From 2007/8 a core Performance Indicator is proposed for local government which will collect data on 'the percentage of all potentially homeless households for whom homelessness was prevented for at least 6 months'. This will provide further evidence regarding the effectiveness of homelessness prevention work.

4.7 Responding to the needs of young people where homelessness cannot be prevented - Official returns on homelessness activity by local authorities in Wales provide some data on the numbers of young people presenting themselves as homeless and the application of the legislation by authorities. Data on the main reason for the loss of the last settled home indicates that a relatively high proportion of all homelessness applications are a result of 'parents being no longer able to accommodate.' The percentage in this category has risen from 17% in 1998 to 21% in 2005. It is likely given the reduced levels of housing benefit for young people aged 16-24 and the high dependence of young people on the private rented sector that a relatively high proportion of young people will also be included in the other main reported reasons for homelessness, particularly 'rent arrears or loss of rented accommodation' and 'other relatives/friends no longer able/willing to accommodate'

4.8 Following the introduction of the 2001 secondary legislation giving young people increased priority, acceptance rates of applications from young people have increased from approximately 25% in England and Wales in the mid 90's (DOE 1996) to over 40% in Wales from 2001 onwards. Local authorities in Wales have made improvements in the time taken to process homelessness applications with 83% of decisions taken within the target time of 33 days compared with 81% in 2004/5.

4.9 Concerns have been expressed that authorities are rejecting an increasing number of homelessness applications from young homeless people on the grounds of 'intentionality'. An analysis of the all Wales figures do not appear to bear this out as they show that over the past 5 years authorities have consistently rejected around 5% of applications on this basis. Local authorities will generally seek to minimise the number of applications rejected on this basis on the grounds that such a decision does not resolve the housing difficulty and the young person is likely to return again with their difficulties further compounded. There is no evidence to suggest that the downward trend in numbers of people found to be statutorily homeless is a result of authorities 'gate keeping'. It is inevitable however that where there is an element of discretion in Local Authority decisions, those decisions will be open to challenge and rightly so. It is for this reason that the majority of authorities fund independent advice services, such as those provided by Shelter.

5. Examples of Homelessness Prevention Activity by Local Authorities and their Partners

5.1 Local authorities in Wales along with their partners are developing a wide range of projects which seek to prevent and address homelessness amongst young people. The number and diversity of the projects is considerable and the details below provide a flavour of the work being undertaken.

5.2 Mediation - several local authorities in Wales have established family mediation services. Their aim is to help seek solutions and provide support for young people threatened with homelessness, after being asked to leave the parental home. For those young people unable to return home the mediation service works with them to help rebuild support networks with their parent/s or the wider family. The City and County of Swansea, in partnership with Barnardo's provides such a service within the BAYS project, which provides a safe environment for young people to receive advice and support from housing and social care professionals. Other local authorities (Cardiff, Newport, Torfaen, Bridgend, Caerphilly and Vale of Glamorgan) have Llamau Family Mediation Officers operating within them. Llamau is a registered charity which works to improve the lives of socially excluded homeless young people.

5.3 Homelessness Prevention Funds - the majority of local authorities in Wales have prevention funds in place, including Wrexham, Vale of Glamorgan, Neath Port Talbot, Carmarthenshire and Rhondda Cynon Taf and Flintshire where they are well established. These 'spend to save' funds allow local authorities to make often small, one off payments to reduce homelessness and can cover the cost of bonds, damage deposits and rent in advance payments. To help young people to secure rented accommodation in the private sector, over half of local authorities in Wales, including Caerphilly, Flintshire the Isle of Anglesey operate a bond or rent in advance scheme to help young people to secure rented accommodation in the private sector. Over half of local authorities also have a bond or rent in advance scheme operated by other organisations, for example the Barnardos Open Door Project, which operates a bond scheme for people aged 16 to 21 (and up to 25 in exceptional circumstances).

5.4 Supported housing - a wide range of supported housing projects have been developed by authorities and their partners to provide safe, secure and supported short-term accommodation for vulnerable young people. A partnership between Carmarthenshire County Council and Trothwy Cyf

has established an innovative project to help tackle youth homelessness. 'Carmarthenshire Nightstop' offers young vulnerable people safe, secure emergency short-term accommodation within a volunteer's home rather than in bed and breakfast or hostel type accommodation. Hosts are provided with training and a very high level of support. In Newport, the local authority in partnership with Charter Housing and Llamau has opened York House, which provides 24hr safe, supported accommodation for vulnerable and potentially homeless 16 and 17 year olds.

5.5 Inter departmental collaboration - there is increased joint working within local authorities to address youth homelessness. In Flintshire for example the local authority has an officer from its vulnerable adults team working within the housing departments, applying their expertise to identify, assess and fast track vulnerable young people. In Caerphilly, the authorities mediation officer, social worker senior practitioner, together with the homeless/ prevention officers, based in the Housing Advice Centre offer an holistic approach to identifying and responding to the needs of homeless young people aged 16-21. Over half of local authorities also promote awareness of homelessness amongst young people by inclusion in the school curriculum. In Monmouthshire, the local education authority is developing a homelessness prevention programme with all its comprehensive school as part of Personal Social Education lessons. This would include visits from housing officers and Wallich Clifford Community, a homelessness charity. In Pembrokeshire, the local authority's homeless prevention officer has worked with schools on youth homelessness through the citizenship element of the curriculum.

5.6 Involvement of young people in planning homelessness services - the participation of young people in the planning of local authority services, including youth homelessness is being undertaken by a number of local authorities in Wales through the Young People's Partnership Framework. In Gwynedd, through the Chief Executive's Department the authority has established 'The Young People's Opinion Group' to hear the views and opinions of people aged 11-25 within its area, whilst in Carmarthenshire the authority has established 'Carmarthenshire Youth Council'. In Bridgend, the authorities 'Youth Council' has set up a Housing Forum.

5.7 Advice Services - local authorities in Wales are currently working in partnership with other agencies, including Shelter Cymru in projects aimed at offering a wide range of specialist advice services to young homeless people. In Wrexham, the Young Persons Project, aimed at young homeless people aged 16-25 offers services such as support with substance misuse issues, practical help finding accommodation, outreach support and hot meals. In Gwynedd and Flintshire the Independent Tenancy Advice and Support Projects offer one-to-one long-term support by means of a support worker to tenants, including young people to prevent them from becoming homeless and create sustainable tenancies. The projects provide services such as advice on welfare benefits and debt, advice on budgeting, advocacy and help with finding furniture and applying for grants.

5.8 Employment and skills training - a number of authorities are working in partnership with other agencies to develop projects which provide young homeless people with permanent accommodation, a qualification and the opportunity of gaining full time employment. In Torfaen, the Young Builders Trust is working in partnership with the local authority and other agencies to create opportunities within the construction industry for 50 marginalised residents from the authority, including disadvantaged young people. For those young people on the project faced with or experiencing homelessness, the projects work experience/welfare officer works with them to secure suitable

accommodation. In Cardiff, the local authority works with Cardiff Community Housing Association (CCHA) to secure funding for its Cardiff Young Builders project on a similar project, which works with 16–50 year olds, unemployed people, those who want permanent housing and to train for full-time employment. A number of authorities aim to break ‘the no job, no home, no home, no job’ cycle with projects, commonly referred to as ‘Foyers’ which provide accommodation, careers and education advice, life skills training and job search support.

5.9 Outreach support - as well as providing fixed support, local authorities are also developing their outreach work with young homeless people. The Cardiff Rough Sleepers Intervention Team, for example, a partnership between Cardiff County Council’s City Centre Team and Wallich Clifford Community provides rough sleepers with hot food and drink, offers housing advice and referrals to appropriate agencies and access to healthcare and legal services.

5.9 Private Sector leasing and management Schemes - the majority of authorities now have in place private sector leasing schemes to provide good quality temporary accommodation. Some innovative work is now taking place with the housing association sector to develop private sector management schemes which provide access to homeless or potentially homeless households. A good example is the joint work between Cardiff City and County Council and Cadwyn Housing Association.

6. Youth Homelessness: Issues for Local Government

6.1 There are a range of issues facing local authorities in addressing youth homelessness issues. The key concerns relate to the following issues:

The need for increased investment in affordable housing. Bids for the Social Housing Grant programme for 2007–08 is three times the size of the funds available

Reductions in social housing stock caused by the Right to Buy

The potential impact of the proposed Local Housing Allowance

Increasing level of need emerging in the 14-16yr age group and concerns about the lack of appropriate temporary provision

Difficulties in providing access to services in rural areas

Lack of appropriate temporary accommodation particularly for young people and the impact that the legislation on B&B standards will have on the supply of temporary accommodation

Difficulties of providing appropriate and sufficient move-on accommodation with the result that supported accommodation which is designed to be temporary becomes ‘silted up’

Uncertainty of future supporting people budgets which is impacting on availability of support provision and development of additional capital schemes via Social Housing Grant

Need for more effective engagement of criminal justice agencies and the health sector in strategic and homelessness services.

7. WLGA Activity

7.1 The WLGA Manifesto 2005–08 identifies homelessness and the need to improve services in this area as one of its key priorities. A range of work is being undertaken by the Association to support authorities' work in this area:

Formation of a Housing Cabinet Members Network to exchange notable practice in homelessness provision, for example, the Network recently arranged a study visit to Newport for cabinet members

A Members Homelessness Handbook is about to be published and will provide a Member development resource. The publication in January 2007 is to be followed by homelessness seminars for members in North and South Wales

An Improvement Toolkit for local authority homelessness and advice services has been developed with authorities and their partners and will be piloted early in 2007. It is intended that it will be followed by the development of a peer review framework to assist authorities with the improvement of homelessness services

A learning exchange has taken place to encourage the sharing of good practice in 4 key areas of homelessness prevention: use of prevention funds; private sector leasing; use of the HRA to fund leasing; and improvement of Housing Benefit services. A survey of good practice in this area has taken place and is being used to provide a Toolkit for local government

Work is underway with Community Housing Cymru to identify notable practice in joint work between local authorities and Housing Associations. This will be disseminated via a seminar and a toolkit