

# **Social Justice and Regeneration Committee**

## **SJR(2)-17-06(p.7)**

**Date: Wednesday 6 December 2006**

**Time: 09.30am – 12.30pm**

**Venue: Senedd, Cardiff Bay**

### **Draft Minutes from the National Assembly for Wales North Wales Regional Committee**

#### **Youth Homelessness**

##### **1. Introduction**

The North Wales Regional Committee is one of the National Assembly for Wales' five Regional Committees. It covers the electoral region of North Wales.

The role of the Regional Committees, as set out in Standing Order 10.2, is to advise the Assembly on matters affecting their regions, the effect of Assembly policies in those regions and the work of public bodies there.

At its meeting on 17 November 2006 in Civic Hall, Connah's Quay Town Council, Connah's Quay the Committee heard the opinions of the people of North Wales on Youth Homelessness. Points made by the various presenters and raised by the public are summarised in this report.

##### **2. Presentations on Youth Homelessness – Part I**

The Committee heard short presentations from various speakers. These are summarised below:

Mr Stephen Convill, Senior Housing Officer, Homelessness and Allocations representing Denbighshire County Council in his oral presentation made the following points:

- the lack of housing accommodation is a grave concern for Denbighshire County Council;
- of the 260 possible allocations there are only 20 Council flats available for letting to childless people between ages of 16 and 60, which have been divided into groups 16/17 years old; 18/24 years old and over 24 years old;
- All the three groups are given equal priority when allocating housing
- One third of the homeless applications received by Denbighshire County Council in the first 9 months of 2006 were from households classified as under 25. Of those 22 households contained a 16 or 17 year old;
- the breakdown in the relationship with parents is the major reason for people becoming homeless;
- Denbighshire County Council's first responsibility under the homelessness legislation is to investigate the homelessness presentations made to the Council. After investigation, nearly

half presentations are found not to be statutorily homeless;

- For single young people Denbighshire County Council has a responsibility to rehouse, the main source of accommodation is the Dyfodol project run by Clwyd Alyn Housing Association - it is very rare for Denbighshire County Council to house very young people by themselves;
- Denbighshire County Council experiences a difficulty in moving people on from Dyfodol and the other housing association partners;
- Of the ninety one under 25s who applied to Denbighshire County Council in the first nine months of this year, Denbighshire County Council had to find permanent accommodation for seven individuals who were homeless and childless and although the Council can manage at the moment, it is becoming increasingly difficult.

**Mr Mark Williams, Life Skills Coach, representing Wrexham Foyer (Clwyd Alyn Housing Association) in his oral presentation made the following points:**

- The National Assembly helps Clwyd Alyn Housing Association with funding and the association follows the National Assembly's guidelines, requiring helping young people to improve their basic literacy and numeracy: 38 per cent of the 16 to 25 year olds that Clwyd Alyn Housing Association deals have literacy and numeracy levels below entry level 3 which is expected of a 7/8 year old;
- Clwyd Alyn Housing Association helps young people to adopt healthy lifestyles and develop their personal and social skills, which is done by project workers who assist in delivering the programme;
- Clwyd Alyn Housing Association gives young people explanations on diversity and equal opportunities, although these issues are not a major problem;
- Clwyd Alyn Housing Association promotes Active Citizenship skills, using a range of voluntary organisations, including the Prince's Trust which delivers an excellent personal development programme;

**Clwyd Alyn Housing Association experiences the following difficulties:**

- Many homeless young people with good CSGE qualifications are unable to become full-time college students because if they are over nineteen years of age they lose their entitlement to housing benefit, which means that the association is unable to accommodate them;
- Vocational training is a problem in Wrexham – there are not enough places to accommodate the demand, e.g. a good college at Bersham road, Wrexham is so heavily oversubscribed that the recent bricklaying course had 88 applicants and there were 7 places.
- In other areas of North Wales (Rhyl) the colleges are further away from where the young people live and the travelling costs could be as much as £8.50 a week, which is a significant expense for a person surviving on £37 pounds a week - a free bus pass would be a solution;
- Other problem is bonds: if young people are found a place in the private sector they have to find a bond and they do not have that much money;
- It would be beneficial to resolve a problem of the loss of housing benefits as soon as young people get their first jobs as their first salaries are not very high and the loss of £90 a week leaves them with very little money to live on;
- If young homeless people are not given the correct help, they will rebel in different ways,

often resorting to street crime. The system should help them to succeed.

### **3. Views expressed by Committee Members and Members of the Public – Part I**

Dr. Carol Hughes, Youth Magistrate, stated that recently there has been a lot of publicity about the provision of hostel accommodation for young people in England and asked what the Welsh Assembly Government's position was on funding local councils to provide housing arrangements for homeless 16 to 17 year olds (often with difficult family backgrounds who may be at risk of substance misuse or offending), including semi-supported accommodation similar to hostels (e.g., living with house parents who may provide the young people with help, support, guidance, including financial advice and assistance in liaising with family members to affect reconciliation).

Mark Isherwood AM agreed that the hostel accommodation was necessary and observed that the National Assembly funding for it would come through the social justice and regeneration Minister. Hostel accommodation is now usually provided in partnership between the County Council and housing associations and addresses not only homelessness, but also other problems young people might have (e.g., substance misuse, learning difficulties, mental health issues, self-abuse etc). Mr Isherwood stressed a lack of overall resources in this area, which needs investment.

Sandy Mewies AM observed that although such organisations as Wrexham Foyer, other housing associations and hostels provide accommodation to young homeless people, this is still not enough. Young homeless have complex problems which could not always be solved by one single issue action. Mrs Mewies suggested that all support systems should be regularly reviewed to provide a proper strategic approach to this problem.

Terrence Shaw, from Flintshire County Council observed that Due to the funding rules young people from Wales could be disenfranchised from the further education sector in England, even if there are places in the English colleges for them. He also stated that youth homelessness is part of the homelessness problem in general and suggested that although it was ideal if everybody could own their own home, the first fundamental right of everyone is to have a home to live in. He suggested that the right to buy should be removed and the money should be reinvested back into local authority housing.

Carl Sargeant AM agreed with the above mentioned view. In respect of the housing allocation point system Mr Sargeant enquired whether there were any cases when people tried to get ahead of the queue.

Stephen Convill responded that Denbighshire County Council's duty is to investigate all cases in accordance with the current legislation to establish which cases meet the points criteria and which do not. Both Denbighshire County Council and other councils across the North Wales employ homelessness prevention officers, whose jobs is to intervene at an earlier stage either to assist people in desperate circumstances in clarifying the position on waiting list or to help them with finding suitable accommodation in the private rented sector (Denbighshire County Council pays cash deposits for priority cases, i.e., if people might become homeless). However, keeping the balance between people who are homeless, people on the waiting list and transfer cases who have different

but competing demands is very difficult.

Eleanor Burnham AM observed that it is necessary to empower local authorities to fund more housing and increase the number of affordable housing. Mrs Burnham expressed a view that too much emphasis is made on higher education to the detriment of further education.

Janet Ryder AM stated that the shortage of social housing needs to be addressed, which means increased investment and reconsideration of the right to buy with a possibility of repealing it to allow Councils to build their stock up again. Mrs Ryder observed that work based training should be increased, which, in turn, needed more investment in further education and community sector. Mrs Ryder enquired whether there were any what structures to support the young people experiencing problems within families in order to prevent them becoming homeless.

Stephen Convill responded that in Denbighshire there is an access to neighbourhood mediation service. The Council has asked them on occasion to intervene on family mediation but family mediation is more common in England than in Wales; the Council needs more resources to develop that service.

Mark Isherwood AM observed that the social housing grant for funding either council houses or housing association houses is less today than it was ten years ago - the latest draft budget is 92 million, while it used to be 97 million; the grant should be raised up to the level it was before. He also noted that when going through stock transfer, the problem was how the councils were going to ensure people in priority need get the allocations through the housing associations. Mr Isherwood expressed an opinion that from the very beginning the councils should make agreements with the transfer associations to ensure that they have proper control and direction over allocations. On the subject of further education courses, Mr Isherwood stated that over last three years further education colleges in Wales have suffered a cut in unit cost funding, which means that they have had less money to accommodate increasing demands and consequently, the number of students has fallen. Observing that the cost of bed and breakfast to a local authority is as much per night as the whole housing benefit in a week and that the quality of housing the under 25s can afford on housing benefit affects their ability to study in a college, Mr Isherwood asked what course should be best taken to combat youth homelessness to.

Mark Williams replied that his job is training, education and employment, but in his opinion the bed and breakfast solution was far from ideal. He expressed an opinion that if sending young people to college on a course that has a real viable career outcome is aborted due to the fact that Clwyd Alyn Housing Association (or any similar housing association) is unable to house them due to the funding problem, the issue must be addressed.

Sandy Mewies AM stated that it was necessary to urge the Minister to discuss the housing benefit issue with her colleagues in the UK Parliament as this matter can be resolved there. Mrs Mewies enquired what is being done in respect of cash deposits availability for young people to ensure that they have a long term accommodation as opposed to hostels, the insecure environment of which could be detrimental to some categories of young people. She also asked whether in Denbighshire the local authority worked with the housing associations on the projects to cope with homelessness.

Mark Williams stated that on the average the young people stayed with Clwyd Alyn Housing Association between nine and fourteen months; they come on six month tenancy agreement. Mr Williams observed that moving on is always difficult as there is a housing waiting list.

Stephen Convill stated that Denbighshire County Council works successfully with Clwyd Alyn's Dyfodol project, relying on them for looking after single childless 16 and 17 year olds and cooperates with Tai Hafan housing association for looking after very young mothers. Dyfodol also successfully provides life coaches and education. Young people move through the different Dyfodol stages: they have high intensity support at the beginning, move on to a larger hostel, then proceed with their education and finally move further still to their own rented accommodation. Denbighshire County Council leased several family units on estates to be used as move on accommodation. The problem that the Council faces is that within the 20 units available they must accommodate the people between 16 and 60 who have, for example, serious medical problems: thus, somebody in a wheelchair gets the ground floor accommodation and the theoretical number of 20 units is drastically cut for young people because effectively the Council can only offer them the units on the upper floors due to competition from medical cases for the lower floors. Thus, the Council has to use the private rented sector. It would be ideal to house 17/18year olds in bed sits in a house in multiple occupation or a shared house and the Council maintains a landlords forum, which it uses to put its views across. Mr Convill invited the local AMs to attend the forum to put the moral pressure on landlords to play their part.

Councillor Chris Bethal, Executive Member for Education and Children Services, Flintshire County Council stressed the urgent need for more warden based hostels, where the young people are given advice and support to help them to be successful in independent living. Mr Bethal stated that the Westminster Government Minister Ruth Kelly announced the provision of help for such hostels in England and urged the Welsh Assembly to provide similar assistance.

An opinion was expressed that more building land should be available for accommodation for the homeless people and those who cannot afford to buy houses.

Karen Sinclair AM noted the importance of family mediation and other pro-active work to avoid young people becoming homeless.

#### **4. Presentations on Youth Homelessness – Part II**

Ms Kath Dobie, Area Service Manager (North East Wales) representing Shelter Cymru in her oral presentation made the following points:

The key issues for Shelter Cymru regarding youth homelessness in Wales are the size of the 16 to 25 year old homelessness;

Young people's homelessness covers a wide range of circumstances and causes, including:

- the current state of the housing market;
- unemployment and benefit restrictions;
- family breakups,
- violence or abuse at home,
- crime, alcohol and drug abuse problems;

- educational underachievement;
- lack of adequate independent living skills;
- mental health problems;
- rent and mortgage arrears.

Young homeless could be single or couples with children or single parents and it is important not to stereotype people with housing difficulties in this age range;

Youth homelessness requires a broad set of responses and assistance. Depending on individual circumstances, there can be a need for:

- secure and affordable housing;
- assistance to acquire skills of independent living;
- intensive support because of illness, substance misuse or emotional problems associated with histories of violence or abuse;
- Youth homelessness brings particular vulnerabilities and it is important to ensure there are no unnecessary barriers to assisting young people in housing need;
- nationally over the past year Shelter Cymru has assisted 878 people between ages 16 and 24; 393 of these in North Wales;
- Majority of the above were either homeless or threatened with homelessness in short to medium term; 26 per cent had rent arrears and almost 20 per cent had housing benefit problems;
- Other reasons for seeking help from services included unsuitable accommodation, relationship break down, leaving prison or care;
- 27 per cent of young people seeking help were threatened with homelessness by parents, friends or relatives; 55 young people coming to Shelter Cymru during the year were street homeless; a high number were on low incomes including job seekers allowance, sickness benefits, working part-time, part-time carers, students or trainees;
- Around a third of the households in the 16 to 24 age range included dependent children and 193 households were single parent women;

### **Among other things, youth homelessness disrupts:**

- school and college work causing educational underachievement, which can lead to social exclusion and homelessness;
- employment and training opportunities.

Young working families are unable to afford even the cheapest end of the housing market, while housing benefit has a discriminatory impact on under 25s in the rented sector;

An inquiry conducted by Shelter Cymru revealed that the young people live in overcrowded conditions in order to afford rents; there were even some examples of landlords requiring young people to undertake menial work in lieu of rent shortfalls;

The replacement of housing benefit in the private rented sector with the local housing allowance may create further difficulties for young people seeking accommodation as this new scheme will end

direct payments to landlords for most households possibly leading to landlords being more selective in choosing tenants.

**Ms Jean Topping, County Manager Wrexham & Flintshire representing Cymdeithas Tai Hafan in his oral presentation made the following points:**

Tai Hafan is a charitable housing association, covering the whole of Wales and providing support in housing to vulnerable women and their children in particular those who are experiencing domestic abuse;

Tai Hafan works in close partnership with the local authorities and other agencies to ensure that disadvantaged single parent families and single women of all ages are able to meet their needs and move into leading independent lives in the wider community;

Tai Hafan delivers its service in a holistic way in order to ensure that women and children are treated fairly and in non abusive manner, have safe decent homes and are allowed to develop their full potential;

Three of Tai Hafan's projects on the provision of housing and support for young women are in North Wales - in Old Colwyn, Rhyl and Wrexham;

These projects offer temporary supported housing for vulnerable young women aged 16 to 25 and floating support in their own homes. The projects cover pregnant young women or those with children up to one year, (in Rhyl, slightly older);

Many young women that Tai Hafan houses are very vulnerable, often having been sexually abused or having mental health problems, such as eating disorders or self harming;

The appropriateness of providing single sex environment to these vulnerable young women is well documented. Properties are furnished and provide basic essentials;

As the aim is to provide an environment that assists young women to move to independence 24 hour support is not provided but staff sleepovers are carried out in some projects and there is 24 hour on call scheme available to all our service users;

The projects support staff work with the young women to build towards a positive future living independently in the community by the promotion of education training and social networks plus the development of parenting skills, personal interests and leisure activities;

Service users can access Tai Hafan's in-house learning programme which helps them gain accredited learning and house progress on to more formal learning or to gain employment;

The support package is based on individual needs negotiated between the service user and the support staff;

The demand for supported accommodation for vulnerable homeless young women is constant, which is demonstrated by the high number of referrals to the Tai Hafan service and the long waiting list.

## **5. Views expressed by Committee Members and Members of the Public – Part II**

David Barrett, Chairman of Flintshire County Council stated that more and more people were buying houses for renting out and many of the multiple properties were "unfit for human habitation". Mr Barrett asked what plans the National Assembly had to control such properties and make sure they were suitable for the young people to live in.

Councillor Godfrey North, Bethesda Community Council observed that, bearing in mind the shortage of single bedroom accommodation for homeless young people, the Welsh councils should make use of numerable vacant places above shops and offices. Councillor North enquired how the Assembly was going to encourage councils in Wales to take advantage on these opportunities.

Councillor Simon Glyn, Head of the GISDA services in Gwynedd stated that resolving the issue of homelessness meant not only providing accommodation but also acknowledging the range of problems faced by the homeless. As a charity GISDA employs teachers, councillors, personal advocates and general support workers to give homeless young people an adequate support. Councillor Glyn asked whether the National Assembly would have a strategic scheme to consider providing homeless young people not only with housing, but also with a range of relevant services.

Gwyn Jones, Director of Housing for Cymdeithas Tai Clwyd informed those present that Tai Clwyd collaborated with Conwy County Council on two pro-active projects on preventing homelessness, one of which was funded by the National Assembly and involved the production of a DVD containing homeless young people's stories. The DVD will be used in secondary schools in the borough of Conwy. The other project involves a mobile information system for young people called "Bus Stop" to provide information about housing, training employment and health. Mr Jones asked whether the National Assembly would make appropriate resources available for further the development of these schemes, which prevent homelessness rather than looking at the problem once homelessness has actually occurred.

Stephen Convill, on the subject of the underutilisation of the private rented sector, flats above shops etc commented that although the potential was there and every area should be explored, there were difficulties, e.g., such premises were owned by private landlords and the fact that business premises were nearby should also be recognised. Mr Convill suggested that it was necessary to consider whether or not there were incentives that could be put in place to bridge the gap between what makes a property viable to let and what is not viable.

Kath Dobie added that Shelter Cymru cooperates with Wrexham County Borough Council on the effective use of the private sector and it will publish a report shortly. In cooperation with an organisation called "Compass" Shelter Cymru helps young people between 16 and 25 to obtain bonds required when renting private accommodation.

Mark Isherwood AM noted that in late spring new secondary legislation on the licensing of houses



with multiple occupation was approved, in accordance with which houses of three storeys or above must be licensed. Councils have discretionary power to licence multiple occupation houses lower than three storeys. Mr Isherwood stated that the Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills Committee produced a number of reports on special educational needs, recommending that the notion "special educational needs" should be replaced with an "additional learning needs", incorporating such wider issues as family breakdowns, abuse, bullying (in lines with the Scottish model). Dealing with this enlarged area from the outset requires an apparatus capable of an early intervention. Mr Isherwood observed that at the moment the debates were going on as to what that apparatus should be. Mr Isherwood asked what needs to be done to tackle family homelessness and what provision exists or needs to exist for the young people leaving prison - Mr Isherwood stated that housing them in the same area where they lived before might cause them to re-offend as they might be affected again by the same bad influences they had previously. Mr Isherwood expressed his concern that once the young people are with Shelter Cymru or similar organisations, they lose social services' support. He also asked what can be done to prevent the rise of arrears and repossessions.

Lilian Higgins, Project Leader, Wrexham Young Person's Project responded that Shelter Cymru operates prisoner link project which involves the members of staff attending prisons and taking homelessness applications from the prisoners due for release in North Wales. Although this project prevents prisoners becoming homeless on release, ex-prisoners are re-housed usually within the same local authority where they have previously lived unless there was a reason why they could not return there. Ms Higgins went on to say that there may be an issue for looking at inter-authority agreements for prisoners who do not wish to return to their own local authority areas. Ms Higgins also pointed out that in respect of the arrears and repossessions rising, prevention is easier and hence it is important to raise the people's awareness of the availability of advice and assistance agencies, help from the local authorities' homelessness prevention officers.

Stephen Convill added that in the past in Denbighshire there existed a specific pot of money that the Council was able to use in co-operation with housing association colleagues to run a mortgage rescue scheme. That specific pot of money disappeared in this financial year and the Council had to make it up by other means because the earlier the intervention, the more chance a solution could be found. Many people have exercised their right to buy their council homes, but have subsequently fallen prey to high interest rates on additional loans, which lead to repossessions.

Sandy Mewies AM observed that the benefits do not match the local rent levels and the homeless often cannot rent privately. Ms Mewies also pointed out that mediation does not always suit, as sometimes young people are frightened to face the persons who have abused them. She stressed that the question of the housing of care leavers needed a thorough consideration.

Janet Ryder AM enquired about the funding of projects which not only offer accommodation but also provide training and other support: what could be done to improve the funding system. Mrs Ryder also asked what kind of a waiting list existed and how much that waiting list impacted on by the inability of service users to move on when they are theoretically ready to do so.

Jean Topping replied that funding projects was a difficulty; usually it was necessary to "mix and match" funding to put the projects together, which was not always possible. It would be useful to

have one "funding pot" for certain projects. On the question of the housing of care leavers coming by Tai Hafan, Ms Topping said that the difficulty was the lack of suitable accommodation for follow on.

### **Stephen Convill made two comments:**

- the lack of move on accommodation could be alleviated by the funding that has been made available to authorities to lease accommodation for homeless households - in Denbighshire the Council plans to put together shared houses;
- Denbighshire County Council has a small, but significant percentage of highly traumatised care leavers, who as a rule need special provisions not available in Denbighshire – e.g., a very small intimate hostel with 24 hours high level support.

Carl Sargeant AM agreed that the legislation requiring the inspection of housing of multiple occupation was useful to provide the required level of accommodation. Mr Sargeant pointed out that while building supported accommodation might be unpopular with the local residents, it was still necessary to resolve the problem of youth homelessness. Mr Sargeant also spoke in support of an early educational engagement and intervention to give support to vulnerable young people. He asked Shelter Cymru if they had any key messages on what they would like to be done in addition to the current support from the National Assembly.

Kath Dobie replied that Shelter Cymru operated two very successful tenancy support projects in Flintshire and Gwynedd for local authority tenants (not specifically for 16 to 24 year olds). There was, however a difficulty in ending the support because there are no relevant agencies to refer the people to. On the educational projects for young people Ms Dobie observed that it would be useful to make young people aware as soon as possible of the renting costs and available options with a possibility to refer them to appropriate agencies.

Antoinette Sandbach praised the work done by the voluntary organisations such as Shelter Cymru and Tai Hafan and commented on the move to make housing benefit payable to vulnerable people instead of landlords, expressing a fear that the vulnerable young people might not have the life skills to handle the payments and therefore fall into arrears, which ultimately would reduce the availability of private housing for them rather than increase it.

Alison Thomas from Conwy Housing Services, commented on the link between homelessness and lack of skills and training. Ms Thomas said that a project on the provision of a supported route into construction for homeless young people in Conwy was very difficult to develop due to the struggle to provide appropriate funding for people to access training. The funding is paid largely retrospectively to agencies on outcomes so the agencies are reluctant to take on young people that they deem unlikely to achieve jobs or qualifications at the end of the course. At the same time there are real skilled labour shortages. Ms Thomas asked if the National Assembly has any plans to capitalise on the opportunities offered by the Welsh Housing Quality Standard and the work to be done in construction to meet that standard, in terms of the opportunities for our young homeless people and young unemployed people.

Mark Jones, Community Safety Manager for North Wales Fire and Rescue Service wanted to raise

awareness of the consequences of living in homeless conditions and the readiness of the North Wales Fire and Rescue Service to co-operate with the relevant agencies to provide help and assistance to reduce the risks of consequences of fire.

Paddy Alton from Holywell enquired if there was a one stop shop for homeless people.

Kath Dobie agreed that replacing housing benefit in private rented section with housing allowance will stop direct payments to landlords and potentially might create difficulties for young people seeking accommodation, but it will give people more choice of premises they may occupy. On a "one stop shop" issue Ms Dobie stated that Shelter Cymru provides housing advice and assistance; homeless young people should contact one of the Shelter Cymru's agencies but it might be appropriate to transfer a homeless person to some other organisation (e.g., in Wrexham there is a project dealing with 16 to 25 year olds who have substance abuse issues).

Lilian Higgins added that Shelter Cymru offered a service called "Soup Dragon" providing food three evenings a week for homeless roofless in Wrexham; last year between a given period of April 2005 to March 2006 it provided 2,600 meals; there is an outreach van which goes one evening a week going out to predetermined areas to provide food, drink, blankets etc as well as offering advice.

Stephen Convill observed that the rent direct payments is Westminster legislation and suggested that the National Assembly could tie this legislation into some landlord accreditation scheme, in accordance with which the signing up landlords would automatically agree to a code of conduct, the required improvements in standards etc.

Carl Sargeant Mewies AM supported the point made by the North Wales Fire and Rescue Service on the importance of sharing data between authorities, be it social services, education departments or others and stressed that this message should reach the Minister.

The Chair and thanked all the presenters, Committee Members and Members of the Public for their participation in discussion.