

**DRAFT HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY
2013 - 18**

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KEY MESSAGES

Wirral's Stock Profile

- The total dwelling stock in Wirral is 142,000, with over 84% designated as privately owned (72% owner occupied and 12% privately rented). The proportion of private tenures is high, when compared regionally and nationally.
- There are approximately 17,450 homes in the social housing sector with a further 680 units planned for development up to 2015.

Wirral's Homeless Profile

- The number of homeless applications has risen considerably since 2009 with a corresponding rise in acceptances of people as being statutory homeless (71% increase in acceptances and a 43% increase in the number of homeless decisions in the first three quarters of 2012/13 compared to the same period of the previous year.). This increase in levels of homelessness, arising from the economic downturn and the reductions in availability and affordability of housing, is reflected nationally.
- The profile of individuals making homeless applications has changed. There is a large increase in the proportion of lone female parents and a smaller increase in the proportion of lone males.
- Between April 2010 and March 2012, 4,927 housing advice cases were opened with the Council's Housing Options Team, and between 1st April 2012 – 31st December 2012 a further 2534 cases were opened.
- Of those, the number of older people who have presented as threatened with homelessness has increased and the 18 to 24 age group has been identified as at most risk of homelessness.
- Of those threatened with homelessness, approximately 30% lived in private tenancies, 24% were resident in other people's homes and people with 'No Fixed Abode' accounted for 20% of those presenting to the Council's Housing Options Team.
- The Supporting People Programme continues to invest in housing-related support services for the homeless, with over half of the overall programme budget allocated to services for people experiencing, or at risk of social exclusion.
- The numbers of vulnerable people accessing supported housing has remained largely static since 2009; however Figure 1 opposite shows that the number of people refused access to these services as a result of full capacity has notably increased indicating that there remains a problem with 'move-on' from homeless services.
- For some groups within the homeless demographic, the current configuration of homeless services is no longer relevant to their needs, with the largest gap existing for people that have a range of issues that are more complex to meet, including chaotic

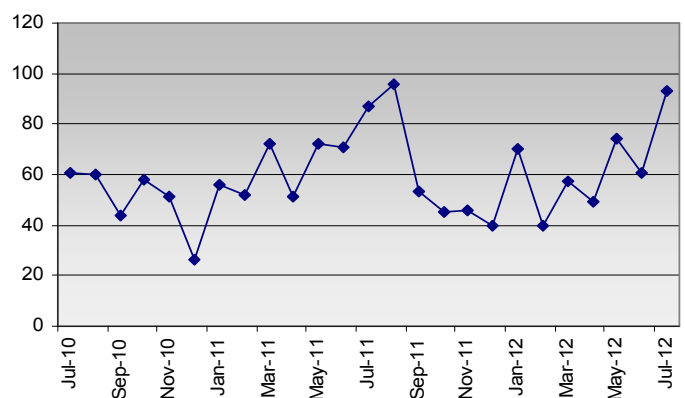


Figure 1: Supported Housing Refusals - Lack of bed-space

behaviour related to substance misuse and undiagnosed or unresolved mental health problems and mild to moderate learning disabilities.

- More people are attempting to access supported housing, solely because there is nowhere else for them to live. Since 2010, 16% of people accessing supported housing were identified as homeless but with no additional support needs.

Welfare Benefit Reforms

- Reforms to Welfare Benefit are likely to lead to an increased call upon homeless services, in particular:
 - The restrictions to Housing Benefit for people under-occupying social housing will affect 27% of the Borough social housing tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit (a total of 4500 households).
 - The increased age threshold for the Shared Room Rent means the maximum Local Housing Allowance (LHA) that can be paid for a single person under 35 is limited to the rate for a single room in a shared property or bedsit. Currently, there are 892 single people under 35 claiming LHA in Wirral.
 - The restriction of LHA to four bedroomed accommodation will affect large families in five bedroomed or bigger properties. The maximum rate of LHA that can be claimed by a large family has reduced from £862.51 per month in March 2011, to £613.21 per month in April 2013.
 - The Benefit Cap will be implemented on 15th July 2013. Under the Benefit Cap, the total amount of benefits that can be received by any individual or family will be limited to a maximum amount of £500 per week for single parents and couples with children and £350 per week for single people. The amount of the cap will be applied to Housing Benefit which will be reduced to prevent the total benefits received going above these limits. Current figures show 220 claimants in Wirral will be affected by the Benefit Cap. The introduction of Universal Credit (UC) will consolidate a range of existing benefits into one payment, including Housing Benefit. From October 2014 all new claims for Housing Benefit from working age people will be included in Universal Credit. Existing claims will be transferred through a phased approach from then until October 2017.

Resources currently in place through Wirral Council to prevent and address homelessness

Wirral Council is facing unprecedented challenges. Our 2013 – 2016 Corporate Plan clearly recognises that Wirral Council' budget is reducing, whilst at the same time demand for our services is rising, as are residents' expectations.

In order to address this, we are looking at everything we do in a new light, working to become more innovative and transform the way we deliver and provide services, with the 2013 – 2016 Corporate Plan focusing our limited resources on protecting the vulnerable in our borough; tackling health inequalities and driving growth in our economy.

We will 'protect the vulnerable people in our borough' by making sure that our system and procedures help us to always identify and mitigate problems before they develop, safeguard the vulnerable effectively, working together across Council and agency boundaries and delivering our systems with empathy at all times. Simply doing nothing is not an option.

Detailed below are the main resources which are used to support the delivery of services to prevent and reduce homelessness and support those people who have become homeless.

Supporting People

The Supporting People programme continues to invest in housing-related support services for the homeless. The programme budget for 2013/14 will be £9.44m with almost 53% allocated to services for people experiencing, or at risk of social exclusion. This includes supporting homeless hostels; dispersed, semi-independent styled supported accommodation and floating support services.

In 2014/15 the Supporting People budget will be reduced to £7.44m which is almost a 24% reduction. It will therefore be a significant challenge to deliver the scale and quality of provision of Supporting People funded services in the future economic environment, particularly in light of increased demand for services arising from the ongoing impact of welfare reforms.

Homelessness and Homelessness Prevention 2012-13 and 2013-14

The Council's Homelessness duties are carried out by the Housing Options Section and partners which are partly funded through Wirral's Community Fund and Homeless Prevention Grant.

Staffing costs for the Housing Options Team for 2012-13 is expected to be £744,800. The Section attracts grant funding from CLG Homeless Grant and Repossession Prevention Grant along with income from Housing Benefit for the use and management of interim and temporary accommodation. The Section also benefits from a £400,000 contribution from the Council's Communities Fund.

In addition, the Housing Options Team projected net expenditure for 2012-13 totals £1,196,878 which includes a contribution to the One Stop Shops for first line Housing Advice.

It is important to note however that expenditure for Bed and Breakfast provision has increased from £36,600 in 2010-11 to £109,600 (projected) in 2012-13. (This does however compare to a maximum spend on Bed and Breakfast provision in 2007-08 of £210,600 in 2007-08. In 2007-08 the Housing Options Team expanded and changed its emphasis from homelessness assessment to prevention, which lead to the significant decrease in expenditure for this provision up to 2010-11)

For 2011-12 and 2012-13 Department of Communities and Local Government increased the Council's Homelessness Grant (not ring fenced) from £51,000 to £221,000 in recognition of the achievement of the temporary accommodation target and success in homelessness prevention. An additional £76,000 was also awarded to Wirral for the Repossession Prevention Grant, to address mortgage reposessions via grants or loans.

These combined funds were made available to the Housing Options service enabling funding for the following initiatives: Housing Options staffing contribution, CAB funding for fast tracking debt and housing advice to prevent homelessness, tenancy fraud, under occupation, hospital discharge homelessness prevention officer (match funded via PCT), mediation to prevent homelessness, mortgage rescue shortfalls, small grants to prevent homelessness and homeless prevention workshops in schools.

In 2012-13 some of this funding was also used to match fund a successful bid to the CLG Homeless Transition Fund by the Wirral Ark Project and YMCA. This new initiative focuses

specifically on engaging with clients with multiple complex needs, a key need identified within this strategy.

In April 2012, there was an earmarked reserve in the Council's General Fund of £271,000 for Homeless Prevention. This included Homeless Grant and Repossession Prevention Fund from previous years, following frugal management of the homelessness budget. This prevention funding was earmarked due to the expectation that welfare reform and austerity measures would place a higher demand on resources in the future when grant may be limited. In November 2012 approval was received for an allocation through this fund to provide an additional Housing Advisor with a domestic violence specialism until March 2014.

At the time of writing we do not know whether or not the Council will be able to sustain this level of homeless grant and funding to the housing options team for 2013-14.

Discretionary Housing Payments

The Government increased Wirral's allocation of funding for Discretionary Housing Payments by 84% in 2012-13 and a further 76% for 2013-14 to enable the Council to mitigate some of the effects of welfare reforms.

These Discretionary Housing Payments are made in cases where individual's circumstances call for additional financial help to meet housing costs. Payments are entirely discretionary and each case is assessed on its individual merits, taking into account individual's finances and personal circumstances.

A Discretionary Housing Payment may be awarded for example, where there is a shortfall in the rent and it would be unreasonable to expect someone to move because the property has been adapted for their needs, they have an established support network in the area or they have children at a crucial stage in their schooling. It can also be awarded in the form of payment for a deposit or removal costs to enable someone to move to more suitable, cheaper accommodation.

Strategic Direction

Wirral Council's Homelessness Strategy 2013-18 has been developed in this challenging climate and in the context of the resources currently available. We know that individually factors such as the economic downturn, high levels of unemployment, government austerity measures including significant reform to the welfare benefit system and difficult housing market conditions can disproportionately affect vulnerable people and increase the risk of homelessness. Collectively, these factors produce an environment that is bound to have a considerable impact locally and nationally. The Homelessness Strategy 2013 - 18 recognises this, and acknowledges that Homelessness is a complex problem with multiple causes requiring flexible solutions requiring the delivery of innovative services in order to reach the increasing number of people affected by the economic climate. The strategy has therefore identified four key priorities to respond to these issues:

- **Preventing Homelessness** wherever possible, through early intervention and effective collaborative work.
- **Strengthening Partnership Working** to ensure that the housing and support needs of those with more complex needs are met.
- **Evaluating and Re-aligning homelessness and prevention services** to ensure continuing strategic relevance and value-for-money within an environment of increasing demand and reducing resources.

- **Increasing access to the private-rented sector** to ensure the best possible use of the range of housing stock in Wirral.

A detailed action plan underpins the strategy, identifying a range of solutions which will contribute to achieving the four high-level priorities. It is intended that the Strategy, and its associated action plan, will be inclusive in approach and that partner agencies continue to work closely with the council to assist in the delivery of its objectives and priorities. In particular the Council will continue to use a range of resources to maximise homeless prevention and minimise incidences of homelessness whilst recognising that commitment from all Local Authority services and key partners is needed to take forward the solutions identified. Key to this is the input of Wirral's charitable, voluntary and community homeless services which are fundamental to addressing homelessness in the Borough.

Wirral's Homeless Forum will monitor the action plan against its outcomes and it will be reviewed annually to ensure it is responsive to emerging need.

Summary

The findings of the Wirral's review of Homeless Services, in conjunction with the priorities of the Homelessness Strategy and its associated strategic action plan, which supports both the overarching Housing Strategy and the Council 2013 – 16 Corporate Plan, provides the basis for the future direction of services for homeless groups. This, coupled with the activity already undertaken to improve services, will help to ensure where appropriate people continue to receive services tailored to meet their specific needs over the coming years and in the process, improve housing outcomes for the Boroughs most vulnerable people.

FOREWORD

From George Davies

A Vision for Wirral

Wirral's vision for addressing homelessness in the borough is **that no one needs to be homeless and partners will work together to make this a reality.**

Although our strategy focuses on homeless prevention, we acknowledge that there will be instances where homelessness cannot be prevented and we also need to ensure that appropriate housing and support is available to respond to this.

Our vision recognises that combating homelessness is not just about bricks and mortar and that a commitment from all Local Authority services and key partners is needed to prevent and address homelessness. This aligns with the Government drive to prioritise homeless prevention by making sure that every contact local agencies make with vulnerable people and families really counts.

The following strategic priorities have been identified to take this forward:

1. **Preventing homelessness** wherever possible through early intervention and better partnership working
2. **Strengthening partnership working** to ensure that the housing and support needs of more challenging client groups are met when homelessness cannot be prevented including working together to end rough sleeping
3. **Evaluating and realigning homelessness and prevention services** to ensure strategic relevance and the delivery of value for money in a climate of increasing demand and reducing resources recognising the wider costs of homelessness
4. **Increasing access to the private rented sector**

We will work with our partners to deliver a Strategic Homeless Action Plan which is measurable, realistic and achievable. This plan will enable us to deliver our priorities and respond to the changing economic climate and new perspectives as they arise, such as changing legislation and government policy.

To ensure this strategy remains responsive and flexible to change, it will be monitored by Wirral's Homeless Forum and reviewed annually in order that it can be responsive to emerging need.

Introduction and Background

The Homelessness Act 2002 places a duty on local authorities to publish a new homelessness strategy at least every five years and take it into account in discharging its functions. Wirral Council has produced a Homelessness Strategy since 2003 and this third strategy is informed by the findings and recommendations of a comprehensive Review of Homeless Services in 2011-2012 and the previous Homeless Strategy (2008-10).

Homeless Review

The Homeless Review was conducted over a period of seven months (November 2011 to May 12) and involved active engagement with service users and service providers. This engagement included customer and agency surveys, one to one discussions with people who have experienced homelessness in Wirral, discussions with staff from organisations who work to prevent or respond to homelessness or who commission services that contribute to these objectives, along with workshops for both service users and stakeholders. The draft findings were discussed and agreed with key stakeholders before the report was finalised.

To read the Review or for further details on the consultation, please go to www.wirral.gov.uk/homelessness.

The Review has provided a clear direction for preventing and addressing homelessness in Wirral, which reflects the factors we know will affect homelessness in the future. The findings and recommendations have formed the basis for the development of this new Homelessness Strategy for Wirral for the next five years.

Homeless Strategy 2008 - 10

This Strategy will build upon the success of the previous Homelessness Strategy 2008-10, which had four clear priorities:

Understanding homelessness and housing need: significant progress has been made in determining the levels of homelessness, the reasons why people become homeless and which household group it affects the most. This has been achieved through a range of measures including analysis of move-on from short-term supported accommodation, the Multi Agency Monitoring project (MAM) and research into households requiring housing resettlement services upon discharge from hospital.

Preventing homelessness: homeless prevention amongst statutory homeless households has been particularly successful; the change in the Council's approach from one of homelessness assessment to a proactive homeless prevention and housing options service rather than a reactive housing options service has been a significant factor in this.

Increasing access to a choice of housing: progress has been made in enabling customers to access properties owned by accredited private sector landlords, and the Pathways Model enables people with support needs to move towards settled accommodation. This progress will continue now that Property Pool Plus has been introduced.

Providing appropriate support: floating support services have been retendered, resulting in more and better support for households who are vulnerable to homelessness, for example miss substances. Health and outreach services funded by NHS Wirral and Wirral Drug and Alcohol Awareness Team also target very vulnerable people and enable them to access housing alongside health and treatment services.

With this successful work already undertaken and acting on board the findings of the review, this new strategy will continue to strive to respond to evolving pressures on existing service provision to ensure that Wirral is best placed to meet the needs of those people at risk of or currently homeless.

The Future

We recognise that people are now facing real difficulties in managing their income and housing as a result of the downturn in the economy and its impact on the housing market, as well as the changes

taking place around the future of social housing and welfare benefits. Homelessness is increasing across the country, and there are fears it will continue to increase. To address this, the Government has published *Making Every Contact Count: a joint approach to preventing homelessness*¹ where it recognises that intervening earlier to prevent homelessness is key to its ambitions on social justice², particularly in terms of supporting the most disadvantaged individuals and families by tackling many of the underlying problems that, if left unchecked, can contribute to homelessness.

The Government is clear that for many people, becoming homeless is not the beginning of their problems; it comes at the end of a long line of crises, a long line of interactions with public and voluntary services and a long line of missed opportunities, which must be changed. Their aim therefore is a simple one; **‘to make sure every contact local agencies make with vulnerable people and families really count’**.

The following ten local challenges have been set, which the government has recommended local authorities should take forward. This strategy recognises the importance of these challenges and acknowledges existing work already undertaken or underway to respond to them. We will ensure that they remain key to the targeted joined up approach we take to addressing homeless prevention and homelessness in Wirral.

1. adopt a corporate commitment to prevent homelessness which has buy in across all local authority services
2. actively work in partnership with voluntary sector and other local partners to address support, education, employment and training needs
3. offer a Housing Options prevention service, including written advice, to all clients
4. adopt a *No Second Night Out* model or an effective local alternative
5. have housing pathways agreed or in development with each key partner and client group that includes appropriate accommodation and support
6. develop a suitable private rented sector offer for all client groups, including advice and support to both clients and landlords
7. actively engage in preventing mortgage repossessions including through the Mortgage Rescue Scheme
8. have a homelessness strategy which sets out a proactive approach to preventing homelessness and is reviewed annually so that it is responsive to emerging needs
9. not place any young person aged 16 or 17 in Bed and Breakfast accommodation
10. not place any families in Bed and Breakfast accommodation unless in an emergency and then for no longer than 6 weeks

Supporting this, the new Public Health Outcomes Framework, which sets out the desired outcomes for public health and how these will be measured also includes two indicators on homelessness (Statutory Homeless Acceptances and Households in Temporary Accommodation) as well as others which encourage a focus on the health of the local homeless population. There is real commitment through this framework to ensure health services do more to help identify those at risk of and prevent homelessness by ‘making every contact count’.

¹ Department for Communities and Local Government, *Making Every Contact Count: a joint approach to preventing homelessness* (August 2012)

² Department of Work and Pensions, *Social Justice: transforming lives* (March 2012)

Through engaging with our key partners to develop this strategy, we believe we have secured commitment from everyone who can make a difference to homeless and prevention services to address the challenges identified and build on the Government aim to make sure that *'every contact local agencies make with vulnerable people and families really counts'*

Draft Document

Strategic Links

Wirral's homelessness challenges and the solutions needed to address them need to be considered within the wider context of national and regional policy and across a range of agendas including community sustainability, health and well being and economic regeneration.

To ensure this happens, this new Homelessness Strategy also sits within a framework of policy across Wirral and the wider Merseyside area. It is within this framework that activities for delivering homelessness and other service priorities are shaped through working with partner agencies to ensure the delivery of the most appropriate services to meet the needs of local communities in the most cost effective way. A good example of this is the development in 2011 of the Merseyside 'No Second Night Out' Protocol, the first outside central London.

In particular we also recognise the significant contribution that voluntary and community groups in Wirral make and the opportunities for accessing key funding initiatives they have available to them in terms of helping to prevent and respond to homelessness.

Key targets have been set in Wirral's Housing Strategy 2011–26 Strategic Housing Plan and in its Corporate Plan for preventing and alleviating homelessness, recognising that preventing and alleviating homelessness in Wirral needs to be carried out through targeted early intervention and in partnership with other agencies. This Homelessness Strategy will further develop and expand on those targets and focus the work we need to take forward with our partners to prevent homelessness.

Understanding Homelessness and Housing Need in Wirral

In Wirral, there has been a recent increase in homelessness as a result of the economic environment and reducing availability of affordable housing. The number statutory homeless acceptances in the borough increased from a very low base in 2009-10 by 51% in 2010-11 and a further 30% in 2011-12 which was twice the national rate of increase. These figures include a large increase in the proportion of lone female parents and a smaller increase in the proportion of lone males.³ At the same time the use of the overnight safe refuge operated by Birkenhead YMCA which helps to prevent rough sleeping has seen a high rise in its usage from an average of 44 times per month in 2010 to 140 times per month in 2012.

Wirral data over the three year period from 2009/10 – 2011/2012 shows a shift in the reasons for statutory homelessness, with increases in cases of family or friends unable or unwilling to continue to accommodate, non-domestic violence or harassment, non-violent breakdowns of relationship and people leaving the Armed Forces. There have been decreases in those who are homeless due to mortgage repossession, domestic abuse from a partner and homeless from hospital.⁴

Enquiries from those threatened with homelessness are mostly from those of working age (18-65) (76%) although the age of a large number of cases (21.2%) were not recorded. Singles and couples with no children make up over 69% of all enquirers which could indicate how difficult it is for these customer groups to compete in the Wirral housing market. Where the tenure was recorded, the largest percentage (30%) lived in private tenancies, 24% in other peoples homes and 20% were classified as no fixed abode.

There is an increase in the number of people of all ages with substance misuse and other complex support needs which require multiple skills to address. At the same time there is evidence that more people without any support needs are accessing housing related support services because there is nowhere else for them to live. The difficulty in accessing move-on accommodation also means that people are staying longer which blocks access to specialist accommodation and support for others.

The reduction in housing benefit for working age social tenants who are under-occupying their homes will affect many people: Wirral has completed an assessment which identified that at least 3,900 tenants are under-occupying and will, if they are in receipt of Housing Benefit, have to make up the difference in their rent or alternatively move. This will tie up a high proportion of smaller social housing stock for social tenants who want to down-size.

Evaluating our services based on robust evidence will ensure that our diminishing resources are used in the most effective way. Over the coming years it will also be important for us to work with our partners to ensure we analyse the level of demand for housing information and advice. This will help us understand the impact of changes introduced locally such as the initial point of access for any homeless enquiries being dealt with at One Stop Shops, the impacts of welfare reform and the continued quality of service provided to people by the Council and its partners.

³ Review of Homelessness in Wirral, GLHS, May 2012 pp1

⁴ Wirral P1E data 2009/10, 2010/11 and 2011/12

Strategic Priorities

It is clear that the Council cannot deliver this strategy on its own. **Partnership working** is a cross cutting theme which we see as fundamental to achieving our vision **that no one needs to be homeless**. The relationships between various teams and departments within the Council, key partners, stakeholders and the community and voluntary sector are critical to developing the true partnerships needed which will ensure services and access to appropriate accommodation are targeted to meet people's housing needs.

To do this, we need to continue to focus on working with and ensuring agencies work collaboratively and efficiently to support those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

1. Preventing homelessness wherever possible through early intervention and better partnership working

Whilst we have, over recent years, significantly reduced statutory homelessness in Wirral through prevention initiatives, demand for services is expected to increase as a result of welfare benefit reform. At the same time access to accommodation is becoming more pressured, as first time buyers are finding it difficult to get on the housing ladder and are competing for housing solutions previously available to those unable to purchase.

It is important to continue to review and improve existing support available to people who are at risk of becoming homeless. This will include putting in place a single gateway for client groups such as 16 and 17 year olds and clients with learning disabilities, helping to identify their needs at an early stage. This will be achieved through a partnership approach will continue to be developed so that support needs are identified early on, providing appropriate intervention and prevention to ensure the best possible outcome.

The Government has been clear to prioritise homeless prevention and continues to take forward a range of reforms and investment to tackle homelessness, for example the No Second Night Out model⁵. Initiatives such as the Homeless Transition Fund and the Crisis Private Rented Sector Access Fund have also been made available to the community and voluntary sector to proactively target vulnerable people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. From its CLG Homelessness Grant, Wirral has previously funded partners to carry out specialist prevention activity including debt and housing advice through the CAB and family mediation through Involve Northwest however from 2013/14 this funding from central government will no longer be available.

2. Strengthening partnership working to ensure that the housing and support needs of more challenging client groups are met when homelessness cannot be prevented including working together to end rough sleeping

Where key challenges and gaps in services have been identified, a collective approach and appropriate plans will be developed to strategically direct and co-ordinate how we respond. This will include particular plans to respond to a number of issues ranging from personalising responses for the needs of people who are regularly sleeping rough, albeit accessing either night shelter or existing hostel provision, to managing the continued impact of welfare reform and responding to under-occupation in the borough.

We will work to develop joint protocols where appropriate, to ensure partners are aware of the expectations and roles they and the Council have to play in preventing homelessness. Key to this will be making sure that every contact partners make with vulnerable people and families really counts.

With Public Health now at the heart of the Council we will continue to work to ensure health services do more to help identify those at risk and prevent homelessness by referring them on to the appropriate services to address their needs thus 'making every contact count'. Realising key opportunities to work

⁵ Reference gov NSNO model

with health colleagues to improve outcomes for those who are at risk of or become homeless will be key to our future success. In particular developing housing options for people to move on to after drug or alcohol rehabilitation who may need more intensive support than would normally be provided, which will help them to sustain their tenancies over the longer term.

Where existing partnerships are working well and having a positive impact on preventing and relieving homelessness, such as the jointly funded Hospital Discharge Project, the Mental Health Homelessness Practitioner, the Housing Advisor for Children and Young People's department and the Specialist Homeless Advisor for domestic violence, we will seek to ensure their continuation through the availability of mainstream or grant funding based on outcomes based evidence.

We will seek ensure solutions to address and prevent homelessness are not developed in isolation, just because this can be seen as the quickest route to success. To do this we will work with partners to develop and agree key outcomes, decide what is required to achieve these and what each agency's role in delivery is, with or without re-targeted resources.

Wirral has already increased and improved the provision of support for households who are vulnerable to homelessness; however we recognise that we must continue to ensure we take a strategic commissioning approach to homelessness which will increase multi-agency partnership working. Key to this is the need to review levels of floating support available in the borough, where it has been recognised that some people have higher needs than current provision allows for.

We will continue to build on the work we have already taken forward in responding to the needs of people with learning disabilities. We will ensure the needs of these individuals who are homeless and living in short term supported accommodation are considered, in any subsequent reconfiguration of non accommodation based services.

Progress has been made in enabling customers to access properties in both the private and social sectors; we need to continue to work with our partners to make use of existing stock, realigning this where appropriate to meet the needs of specific client groups. This will be taken forward by commissioning services, such as those for emergency and respite accommodation for 16/17 year olds and exploring the use of shared tenancies. Supporting this, we will make use of opportunities to secure funding and develop innovative approaches to targeting homelessness by enabling people to access appropriate housing which meets their needs and is sustainable for them in the long term.

Bringing this all together, we recognise that partners need to have a better understanding of housing and the support services the Council provides so that they can clearly help and support their clients when homelessness is an issue. Information sharing between Council teams (such as Housing Options and the One Stop Shop teams) is already underway which has allowed the Council's provision of housing advice to its customers to be developed, enabling specialist staff within the Housing Options Team to focus their time on homeless prevention.

3. Evaluating and realigning homelessness and prevention services to deliver value for money in a climate of increasing demand and reducing resources, recognising the wider costs of homelessness

Services need to be widely accessible across the borough and delivered in a way that ensures customers are at the heart of what we do. However in the climate of reduced resources, services will need to be more focussed and deliver better value for money. We will need to recognise and promote the savings that early intervention and prevention make for other services further down the line. Strong partnership working will be vital in ensuring this happens.

There is a good level of provision of homeless services in Wirral, however we will respond to evidence of a mismatch between need and the services actually provided, particularly when attempts to meet these needs through existing provision is a draw on resources which is unlikely to achieve positive outcomes for the individuals, their families and other service users, especially if they share the same accommodation. We will work to reduce barriers which prevent full use of existing appropriate services,

particularly in relation to the lack of access to settled accommodation. By addressing this we will ensure timely move-on from supported or temporary accommodation for individuals supporting them to sustain their homes in the long term.

We recognise that there is some duplication of existing services and this does not represent value for money, so we need to remove this. We will consider undertaking a value for money assessment of the current prevention tools in place. It is vital that Wirral makes best use of all its resources, across all partners, to intervene in the homelessness system and create opportunities to prevent and resolve homelessness, resource people to enter and retain work and protect the health and wellbeing of those who are at risk of homelessness or are homeless.

The Council has been working with registered providers of social housing to increase the availability of dispersed accommodation, ensuring that no family stays in bed and breakfast accommodation for more than a few nights. Where families do have to stay in this type of accommodation we will ensure they have some stability in terms of ensuring they do not have to move around from one place to another.

4. Increasing access to the private rented sector

The Council recognises the increased demand for appropriate, affordable housing to meet local need, but also acknowledges homelessness in the future will be driven by the continuing changing economic climate and public expenditure changes. Welfare reforms in the private rented sector along with the requirement to meet the housing needs of other priority groups and the understanding that homelessness cannot be an assumed route into a social tenancy for life, means that the private rented sector must be developed as a solution for those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.

Where homelessness is unavoidable, it is important to ensure that alternative innovative solutions are sought in order to secure both the immediate and long term realistic opportunities available to access appropriate housing. Following the Localism Act 2011, the Council is now able to discharge its homeless duty in this sector, which will enhance the options available to the Council to enable those households who are homeless and in priority need to access a sustainable affordable home. Evidence currently shows⁶ that families who need larger homes in the social rented sector usually wait much longer to access them because of the low levels of four or more bedroom properties available. The private rented sector provides an opportunity to help with this, as indications are that there is a reasonable number of larger homes available through this route. Building on and expanding the relationships already developed with private landlords accredited by the Council will be key to this as we look to further develop the use of good quality private rented sector stock over the coming years.

Enabling access to this greater range of accommodation will require the Council and its partners to be innovative and develop appropriate solutions to meet specific needs. We will utilise a range of existing services such as the Council's Bond scheme, which is being developed to become more accessible to wide range of people, as well as supporting our partners in the Voluntary and Community Sector to maximise the use of funding opportunities to bring empty private sector homes back into use.

⁶ The Review of Homelessness in Wirral 2012 *Gill Leng Housing Associates* p16

Our success so far

A number of significant issues were highlighted in the Review of Homelessness in Wirral 2012 which the Council and its partners have already worked to address whilst this strategy has been developed, some of which are detailed below:

- The need to increase the availability of more dispersed accommodation has successfully been addressed, following negotiations between the Council and Wirral Partnership Homes.
- The Housing Options Team has set up a pilot Private Sector Leasing pilot scheme which enables the team to place homeless clients to be placed into these properties instead of Bed and Breakfast type accommodation.
- Further work has been carried out with the Registered Providers to clarify their approach to rent arrears and enable customers to be offered a tenancy and this has been reflected in the allocations policy.
- Following the inclusion of statutory homeless households in choice based letting scheme, Property Pool Plus, the Council has put in place measures to enable and support households to bid for available homes rather than occupying temporary accommodation for longer than necessary
- The Council now provides more readily available housing options to prevent people from rough sleeping, sofa surfing or drifting into hostels when they have no support needs through bonds, discretionary housing payments and personalised solutions.
- Regular meetings between the Housing Advice Team and One Stop Shop service continue to help inform how and what housing advice is provided. This has particularly helped with customers who present with challenging behaviour where it can be difficult to clarify their needs and what can be done to help.
- Regular training and access to current information keeps One Stop Shop staff up to date with changes to services and eligibilities ensuring that the correct advice is given to people who need advice and assistance.
- The Council has identified a housing Armed Forces Champion who represents the needs of current and former Armed Forces personnel and their families and is able to influence decisions which impact on this client group.
- The provision of information sessions to volunteers in the veterans contact centre has helped to raise awareness and knowledge of housing options and services for this client group. This has been further enhanced through the production of a leaflet which provides information relating to housing options available in the borough.
- The Council's Finance Department have delivered awareness sessions to a number of external organisations and all front line staff on the Welfare Reform Act 2011 changes and a regular newsletter is also produced to help keep staff up to date. The team will continue to update staff as the Welfare Reform Act is rolled out to ensure accurate and consistent advice is given.
- A joint protocol between Housing and Children and Young People's Department on dealing with 16 and 17 year olds presenting as homeless has been signed and launched.
- Wirral Church Ark project (The Ark) has worked with Birkenhead YMCA (BYMCA), Arch Initiatives and the Council to submit a bid for Homeless Transition Funding which has secured funding, in line with the Council's strategic priorities, to ensure services available for both new and entrenched rough sleepers are available 24 hours per day to increase the level of

intervention and support available to get them off the streets. The Council has provided match funding for this initiative.

- BYMCA has employed a worker to engage with people using the night shelter to increase their connection with services.
- The Ark and BYMCA have extended the programme of activity available through the Crisis Skylight programme, providing purposeful activities to service users, increasing their skills, confidence and engagement.
- Wirral PCT and the DAAT have included street drinkers (some of which are homeless) in their flu vaccination programme, giving 112 flu vaccines to this high risk group.
- The Ark and Wirral Partnership Homes are working in partnership to enable homeless service users to repair and refurnish empty properties for their own future use.
- A multi-agency critical needs group meets fortnightly to share information and co-ordinate intervention activity around a small number of the most complex, resource intensive individuals with multiple needs.

This successful work clearly demonstrates the commitment the Council and its partners has in place to respond to Wirral's vision for addressing homelessness in the borough **'that no one needs to be homeless and partners will work together to make this a reality'**.

Resources

The Council currently utilises a range of resources to target homeless prevention and homelessness as follows:

- Council General Funding
- Homeless Grant Funding through Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG)
- Supporting People Funding
- Partnership funding through other agencies such as Public Health , Homeless Transition Fund, Crisis Private Rented Sector Access Development Programme and 2011 – 15 Affordable Housing Programme (Homes and Communities Agency)

It is however important to stress that the Council is facing unprecedented challenges. Our 2013 – 16 Corporate Plan clearly recognises that Wirral Council' budget is reducing, whilst at the same time demand for our services is rising, as are residents expectations and therefore this will have a significant impact on how we respond to our strategic priorities.

Collectively the Council is looking at everything we do in a new light, working to become more innovative and transform the way we deliver and provide services, with the 2013 – 16 Corporate Plan focusing our limited resources on protecting the vulnerable in our borough; tackling health inequalities and driving growth in our economy.

Below is a brief summary which details how the resources listed above are utilised in targeting homeless prevention and supporting those people who have become homeless.

Supporting People

The Supporting People programme continues to invest in housing-related support services for the homeless. The programme budget for 2013/14 will be £9.44m with almost 53% allocated to services for people experiencing, or at risk of social exclusion. This includes supporting homeless hostels; dispersed, semi-independent styled supported accommodation and floating support services.

In 2014/15 the Supporting People budget will be reduced to £7.44m which is almost a 24% reduction. It will therefore be a significant challenge to deliver the scale and quality of provision of Supporting People funded services in the future economic environment, particularly in light of increased demand for services arising from the ongoing impact of welfare reforms.

Homelessness and Homelessness Prevention 2012-13 and 2013-14

The Council's Homelessness duties are carried out by the Housing Options Section and partners which are partly funded through Wirral's Community Fund and Homeless Prevention Grant.

Staffing costs for the Housing Options Team for 2012-13 is expected to be £744,800. The Section attracts grant funding from CLG Homeless Grant and Repossession Prevention Grant along with income from Housing Benefit for the use and management of interim and temporary accommodation. The Section also benefits from a £400,000 contribution from the Council's Communities Fund.

In addition, the Housing Options Team projected net expenditure for 2012-13 totals £1,196,878 which includes a contribution to the One Stop Shops for first line Housing Advice.

It is important to note however that expenditure for Bed and Breakfast provision has increased from £36,600 in 2010-11 to £109,600 (projected) in 2012-13. (This does however compare to a maximum spend on Bed and Breakfast provision in 2007-08 of £210,600 in 2007-08. In 2007-08 the Housing Options Team expanded and changed its emphasis from homelessness assessment to prevention, which lead to the significant decrease in expenditure for this provision up to 2010-11)

For 2011-12 and 2012-13 Department of Communities and Local Government increased the Council's Homelessness Grant (not ring fenced) from £51,000 to £221,000 in recognition of the achievement of the temporary accommodation target and success in homelessness prevention. An additional £76,000

was also awarded to Wirral for the Repossession Prevention Grant, to address mortgage repossessions via grants or loans.

These combined funds were made available to the Housing Options service enabling funding for the following initiatives: Housing Options staffing contribution, CAB funding for fast tracking debt and housing advice to prevent homelessness, tenancy fraud, under occupation, hospital discharge homelessness prevention officer (match funded via PCT), mediation to prevent homelessness, mortgage rescue shortfalls, small grants to prevent homelessness and homeless prevention workshops in schools.

In 2012-13 some of this funding was also used to match fund a successful bid to the CLG Homeless Transition Fund by the Wirral Ark Project and YMCA. This new initiative focuses specifically on engaging with clients with multiple complex needs, a key need identified within this strategy.

In April 2012, there was an earmarked reserve in the Council's General Fund of £271,000 for Homeless Prevention. This included Homeless Grant and Repossession Prevention Fund from previous years, following frugal management of the homelessness budget. This prevention funding was earmarked due to the expectation that welfare reform and austerity measures would place a higher demand on resources in the future when grant may be limited. In November 2012 approval was received for an allocation through this fund to provide an additional Housing Advisor with a domestic violence specialism until March 2014.

At the time of writing we do not know whether or not the Council will be able to sustain this level of homeless grant and funding to the housing options team for 2013-14.

Discretionary Housing Payments

The Government increased Wirral's allocation of funding for Discretionary Housing Payments by 84% in 2012-13 and a further 76% for 2013-14 to enable the Council to mitigate some of the effects of welfare reforms.

These Discretionary Housing Payments are made in cases where individual's circumstances call for additional financial help to meet housing costs. Payments are entirely discretionary and each case is assessed on its individual merits, taking into account individual's finances and personal circumstances.

A Discretionary Housing Payment may be awarded for example, where there is a shortfall in the rent and it would be unreasonable to expect someone to move because the property has been adapted for their needs, they have an established support network in the area or they have children at a crucial stage in their schooling. It can also be awarded in the form of payment for a deposit or removal costs to enable someone to move to more suitable, cheaper accommodation.

This Homeless Strategy has been developed in this challenging climate. We know that individually, factors such as the economic downturn, levels of unemployment, government austerity measures including significant reform to the welfare benefit system and difficult housing market conditions can disproportionately affect vulnerable people and increase the risk of homelessness. Collectively, these factors produce an environment that is bound to have a considerable impact locally and nationally. This strategy recognises this and acknowledges that Homelessness is a complex problem with multiple causes requiring flexible solutions and the delivery of innovative services in order to reach the increasing number of people affected.

In order to successfully implement our Strategic Homeless Action Plan, we will need to look at how existing and future resources are utilised and where appropriate consider how they could be re-aligned. We will need to work with our partners to ensure alternative and new resources / funding initiatives are accessed and realised by developing innovative solutions to homelessness and homeless prevention which are based on a sound understanding of the issues and demonstrate clear value for money.

The Council and its partners need to recognise that clear value for money is central to all of the work that is undertaken and strategically commissioned, with monitoring of performance targets clearly

supporting a strong culture of value for money and quality services and provision which respond to appropriate needs.

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