

TITLE	Homelessness Strategy
PURPOSE	Respond to the Outcomes of the Strategy and the Local Work Plan
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1.0 Background

The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 requires every local authority to undertake a strategic review of homelessness in their area every 5 years and to develop and publish a homelessness strategy based on the findings. Under the Act, the Homelessness Strategy must seek to achieve the following objectives within the local housing authority's area:

- a) The prevention of homelessness
- b) Ensuring that suitable accommodation is and will be available for people who are or may become homeless
- c) That satisfactory support is available for people who are or may become homeless

Gwynedd Council have undertaken its first Homelessness Review in line with legislative requirements and are consulting on a Local Action Plan to provide a local strategic response to tackling and responding to homelessness across Gwynedd. A copy of the Homelessness Executive Review document is attached as Appendix 1.

The implementation of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 signalled both a legislative and cultural shift in the Council's response to homelessness. Gwynedd's Housing Service places prevention at the core of service delivery, with a strong focus on meeting the needs of service users through person centred solutions.

2.0 Statutory Duties

2.1 Homelessness is one of the Council's statutory responsibilities and there are a number of legal duties which the Council is required to undertake. The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 that came into force in April 2015 has placed additional statutory responsibilities upon the Council, including:

i) a duty to assess the accommodation and support needs of everyone who is homeless or threatened with homelessness.

ii) a duty to assist anyone who is threatened with homelessness within 56 days to help prevent homelessness.

iii) a duty to provide assistance to any homeless person to help them secure a home.

2.2 In addition, the Council continues to have a duty to provide temporary accommodation for people in priority need if it is not possible to find them somewhere else to live.

2.3 There is no requirement to be in priority need to be eligible for a duty under 2.1 and as a result more people can receive help where they did not qualify under the old legislation.

3.0 The impact of the New Legislation on the service

3.1 Following the changes to the Homelessness Legislation the service has seen a significant increase in the number of people who require assistance

Number of referrals to the Service	
2014/15	560
2015/16	648
2016/17	722
2017/18	760

The above show an increase of **28.9%** between 2014/15 and 2016/17

3.2 Cases can also remain open for a much longer period because the duty to prevent homelessness starts within 56 days of becoming homeless, and after that, if we cannot prevent homelessness, the duty to identify another property is open for a further 56 days. The burden of cases is heavier on officers because of this change.

3.3 In addition, the administrative responsibilities has increased due to the statutory requirement to provide each applicant with a written notification of what duty is relevant to their case and a notice when that duty ends and moves to a new duty.

3.4 Officers are having to spend more time looking for affordable property in the private sector, which proves difficult due to a number of factors, including changes in the welfare benefit regime, high rent rates, and a lack of one bedroom accommodation.

3.5 Although the numbers placed in temporary accommodation have reduced, due to the successful homelessness prevention work, those who have received temporary accommodation have had to remain there for longer periods while waiting suitable permanent properties.

3.6 The Homelessness Unit reports on a number of measures to the Welsh Government and in line with most authorities there has been a decline in performance which reflect the pressures facing the service. Despite this decline, the service has performed well compared to other authorities, who also experiencing an increase in workload.

4.0 Prevention

4.1 Gwynedd Council has for many years placed an emphasis on trying to prevent homelessness as we believe this improves service user experience and lead to greater stability for users and families as their networks can be maintained. This work also proves to be more cost effective. The new Housing Act reinforces the need to focus on preventing homelessness. However, a number of factors affects upon our ability to secure positive results for the vulnerable client group.

4.2 Identifying suitable accommodation for homeless people

There are significant challenges in identifying properties for certain groups, namely single people and people with complex needs, e.g. people with mental health problems, prison leavers, and people with alcohol and drug misuse problems. An increasing number of people with high needs are discharged to the community without support. In addition, there is a general lack of one bedroom properties and supported housing in the County.

4.3 Changes in the Welfare Benefit System

There are significant challenge resulting from the reform of the benefits system that has a significant impact on particular groups and imposes a burden on the service. A high number of people now receive housing benefit that is lower than private and social rent, resulting in the need to identify extra money to cover accommodation costs that puts pressure on the sustainability of tenancies

4.5 The service has also witnessed an increase in the number of people requesting help due to tenancy affordability issues following a change in benefit. The impact of Universal Credit has already been seen for single people who have transferred following a new application. More presentations are anticipated when universal credit is extended to everyone.

4.6 The effect of the benefit cap is also impacting with families with several children.

5.0 Regional Approach to Preventing Homelessness

Alongside a local review, the North Wales Local Authorities have also committed to tackling homelessness collectively across the region, and have prepared a Regional Homelessness Strategy, which supports the local delivery action plans. The Regional Homelessness Strategy seeks to:

- Develop a regional approach to tackling homelessness in North Wales
- Share best practice across the region
- Develop shared services and collaboration where possible
- Develop a better understanding of the causes of homelessness through better data capture across the region
- Reducing homelessness in North Wales

The Regional Homelessness Strategy seeks to reduce homelessness across North Wales focusing on three themes of **People, Homes and Services**.

The core commitment from the six local authorities in North Wales is to create a culture of better collaboration, in terms of addressing the specific issues causing homelessness.

6.0 Local Action Plan

A Local Action Plan for 2018-22 is being consulted upon and this will aim to build on the progress achieved to date by Gwynedd's Housing Solutions team and further develop and enhance existing services and initiatives in response to need.

This Local Action Plan has considered the findings of Gwynedd's Homelessness Strategy, which provides a comprehensive analysis of homelessness across Gwynedd and highlights issues and gaps in service provision, which need to be addressed alongside partner agencies. The action plan focuses around the priorities of the North Wales Homelessness Strategy, and opportunities for regional collaboration.

The local delivery plan has been formulated in consultation with partner agencies. The Council recognises that the Local Authority working in isolation cannot tackle homelessness, and that progress is dependent upon effective and targeted partnership working between the Local Authority and organisations who are working to prevent and respond to homelessness. It is intended that the final action plan will be delivered in conjunction with key partner agencies.

The Local Action Plan concentrates upon the following strategic themes based upon the findings of the Homelessness Review.

Services

- Delivering an effective Housing Solutions Service to meet service user needs.

- Ensuring robust early intervention and homelessness prevention services are in place.

Homes

- Reducing reliance on temporary accommodation and Bed & Breakfast.
- Increasing access to supported and permanent housing options.

People

- Meeting the complex, multiple and diverse needs of our clients.

7.0 Governance

7.1 The Homeless Strategy will cover the period 2018 to 2022 and will be monitored and reviewed by the Preventing Homelessness Steering Group, alongside the Council's internal performance management systems. Gwynedd's Homelessness Forum will play a key role in assisting with the delivery of the Local Action Plan.

8.0 CONCLUSION

8.1 The report highlights that the homelessness service faces many challenges due to legislative and benefit changes as well as the increased expectation. The service already recognizes that demand has increased and the forecast is that it will continue to grow. It is therefore crucial to consider how we will respond to ensure the sustainability of the service and to help manage expenditure in future.