

GWYNEDD COUNCIL CABINET



Date of meeting:	20 April 2021
Relevant Cabinet Member:	Cllr Craig ab Iago
Contact Officer:	Dafydd Gibbard - Head of Housing and Property Department
Title of Item:	Ensuring that the Housing Support Grant leads to the best possible support for the homeless in Gwynedd

Decision sought

The Cabinet is requested to:

- a) Support the prioritisation for using the Housing Support Grant as outlined in paragraph 36 of this report.
- b) Support in principle to continue working with external providers and offer additional specialist support services to those which are provided in-house.
- c) Note the future risk associated with the revenue grant (as with all other revenue grants) and the mitigation measure noted in paragraph 39 of this report.

Background

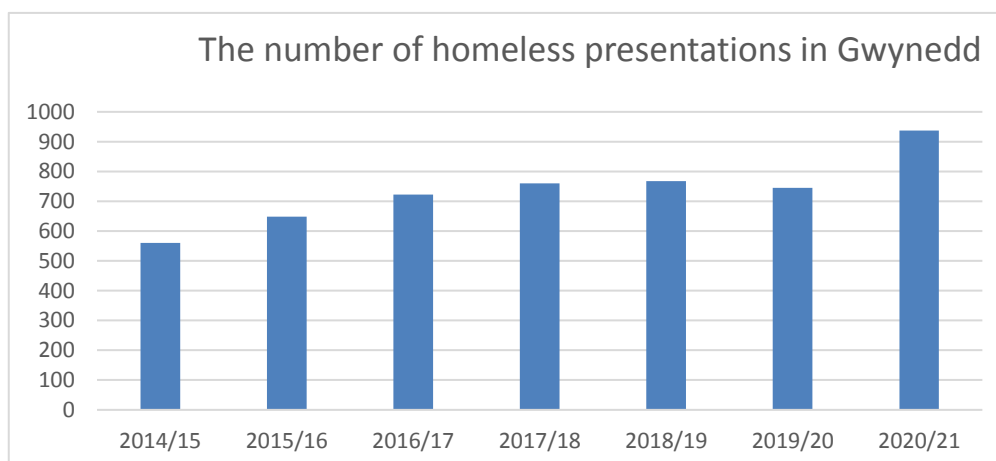
1. The Housing Support Grant is a Welsh Government funded programme (formerly Supporting People Programme), which assists over 2,000 people each year in Gwynedd to live independently. The programme provides essential support to people who face very difficult housing situations and assists some of the most vulnerable people in society to live independently in their own homes or in supported accommodation.
2. It is an early intervention programme, which helps prevent people from becoming homeless or assists homeless people to find accommodation and keep hold of it. It supports people to address problems such as debts, unemployment, tenancy management, substance misuse, domestic abuse, rough sleeping and mental health issues. The support is directed towards what people need, e.g. help to deal with mental health and/or substance misuse problems, help to improve their health and well-being, and/or help to move on to work or training opportunities, and improving their living skills in general.
3. In brief, the aim of the programme is to prevent or reduce homelessness and, without this grant, there would be a far-reaching impact on our ability as a Council to support the residents of Gwynedd to avoid homelessness and it would hinder our

ability to seek to re-home those who are unfortunate enough to find themselves homeless, as soon as possible.

4. Around the end of 2019, we were pre-notified that the Government intended to reconsider this grant, and there was concern that we could be facing a cut in the amount we currently receive, namely £5.1M per year. Therefore, it was intended to prepare ourselves for having to undertake a prioritisation process to identify how to reduce the assistance we were able to offer to the homeless in Gwynedd.
5. However, the homelessness crisis that has been highlighted, and which has to some extent been made worse by Covid-19, has meant that the future of this grant has been completely changed. Rather than having to face a potential cut, we have now received an additional allocation of £1.6M per annum, and are therefore facing a completely different situation. We now have an opportunity to seek to ensure that we make the best possible use of the new funding to provide the best possible support to the homeless in Gwynedd.
6. Confirmation of this additional allocation was received in February and there was a need to present an outline spending plan to the Government within the month. This timetable meant that there was no opportunity to report to the Cabinet before submitting the proposed programme. However, the programme can be changed annually and as the clear instruction received from the Government is that we should plan for the long-term, based on this new additional budget, there will be an opportunity to amend our spending programme for 22/23, should the Cabinet wish for us to do so.
7. A report was presented to the Care Scrutiny Committee on March 18th 2021, outlining the intended direction of travel in drawing up the new spending programme. Members supported the proposal unanimously.

Homelessness in Gwynedd

8. As seen in the graph below, since the introduction of the 2014 Housing Act, which changed the definition in terms of who was eligible for homelessness support, the number of annual presentations has increased from around 550 per annum to around 750 per annum; an increase of 36%.



9. This led to substantial pressure on the Homelessness Unit in terms of its ability to offer support for individuals who are often very vulnerable and wholly dependent on Council support.
10. The biggest challenge was identifying re-homing options for these individuals, particularly suitable temporary accommodation. We know that the general lack of housing in the County, and Wales-wide, means that there is insufficient stock available to re-house a homeless person immediately. In cases where a homeless person does not have any other option, there is a statutory responsibility on the Council to offer temporary accommodation. Before the introduction of the 2014 act, the Council was able to cope by using houses that we had on lease from private Landlords for this purpose. We had around 60 houses available for that purpose at the time.
11. With the substantial increase in numbers as a result of the 2014 Act, the temporary housing stock was insufficient to meet the need and we had to make increased use of bed and breakfast accommodation to meet our statutory duty to offer emergency accommodation.
12. The current pandemic has made the situation substantially worse once more. At the beginning of the lockdown in March 2020, the Government, both sensibly and understandably, asked each Local Authority in Wales to ensure that nobody slept outside on the street. National regulations were amended overnight to ensure that everyone, regardless of their circumstances, had the ability to obtain support from their Local Authority if they were faced with homelessness.
13. The lockdown periods have had a far-reaching impact on our communities and the threat of losing employment, the strain on relationships in extended lockdown periods, the pressures on the health service and the impact on mental health, have all contributed to a substantial increase in the number of people who are faced with homelessness. The situation is continuing to develop of course, and we do not know what type of further increase we will be facing over the coming months.
14. As the above graph shows, the homelessness numbers this year have increased to being close to 950, which is a 26% increase in one year, and 71% higher than it used to be in 2014.
15. One direct side-effect of this is a situation where we now have around 94 individuals in bed and breakfast accommodation, compared with around 25 at the same time last year. We have also had to increase our stock of temporary housing and now we have around 95 in use. Our two homelessness hostels are full and a total of over 200 individuals, couples and families are in temporary accommodation in Gwynedd at present.
16. The cost of housing individuals in bed and breakfast accommodation is funded by Welsh Government during the pandemic.

17. We are facing an unprecedented situation and it is beyond our ability to meet the demand for temporary accommodation. With no sign that the situation will improve in the short-term, the situation is extremely challenging, the numbers may increase further and furthermore, the staff of the Homelessness Unit are under substantial pressure.

The Council's Response

18. Temporary accommodation, particularly in one room in a bed and breakfast, is not suitable accommodation to enable the residents of Gwynedd to live a dignified and prosperous life. Access to quality and safe accommodation is essential if individuals are to be integrated in the community, their work opportunities facilitated and for the quality of their health and well-being to be improved.

19. The Council's Housing Strategy states clearly that we do not wish to see anyone homeless in Gwynedd. In order to achieve this aim, we will of course need to ensure that we have a sufficient supply of houses available to meet the need across the county. However, we cannot ignore the fact that it is likely that we will always need to be able to offer support and emergency accommodation to those faced with homelessness.

20. Therefore, we aspire to end the overuse of bed and breakfast accommodation by providing a sufficient supply of temporary accommodation and developing our own suitable supported accommodation to be used to meet this demand. Our Housing Action Plan clearly sets out how we will achieve this and it ensures that we have a sufficient budget available to provide such a resource over coming years. With financial support from Welsh Government, we will develop over 50 bespoke "Supported Accommodation".

21. Such accommodation needs to be located in places that means that individuals do not need to be moved from their communities. Access to the support of family and friends, as well as the ability to gain easy access to familiar health and well-being services are essential when faced with the deplorable situation of homelessness. Therefore, we will seek to provide our new "Supported Accommodation" developments to correspond with the demand in each area of the county and do everything possible to avoid the need to move people to unfamiliar communities.

22. Although this will mean that we will be able to offer temporary accommodation to an acceptable standard to those facing homelessness, accommodation alone will not meet the complex and challenging needs that are more often than not associated with homelessness. This is why the Housing Support Grant is completely essential.

23. Very often, individuals facing homelessness need support for a period in an attempt to cope with their situation. Those individuals, couples and families that do not have an option but to accept emergency accommodation from the Council very often need additional support to merely finding suitable accommodation. In many cases, they need support with matters relating to domestic abuse, alcohol dependency,

drug dependency, mental health, debts, crime, breakdown of relationships with a partner or family.

24. Therefore, providing suitable accommodation in itself will not suffice to help vulnerable homeless individuals to cope with the other challenges that can make their lives very complex.
25. The Housing Support Grant provides an annual financial resource to provide this support. This includes providing substantial financial support in order to be able to receive support from a number of external specialist providers. See Appendix A for further details on the valuable services obtained from these organisations and bodies.
26. In addition to this external support, the vast majority of the service offered to the homeless is provided by an experienced team of internal staff. The statutory elements of the work being achieved by this Team, i.e. the first point of contact for the homeless, support to prevent homelessness, carrying out a needs assessment, drawing up a housing/support plan and providing temporary accommodation where appropriate. Of course, re-housing individuals permanently in suitable accommodation is the main aim.
27. In addition to these statutory elements, the team also provides further support, which is completely essential, if they are going to help individuals to re-establish themselves or, best of all, to avoid homelessness in the first place. This support includes assistance to:
 - develop good independent living skills, such as shopping, cookery and cleaning;
 - gain confidence when managing money and budgeting
 - gain access to health and social care
 - contact other relevant organisation for support and advice
 - gain access to education, employment, training and voluntary opportunities
 - become a part of a broader community
 - complete a housing application form and contact landlords and hostels
 - prepare to move on to permanent accommodation
 - establish gas/electricity supplies
 - maintain a tenancy and avoid facing homelessness for the second time
28. The staff resource within the Homelessness Unit to support such tenancies has remained relatively consistent since the introduction of the 2014 Housing Act and so it is based on the homelessness numbers at that time. During the pandemic, we have been able to take advantage of additional Government funding to increase our support resource and this has been incredibly valuable when seeking to support our clients.
29. As a result of a 71% increase in the homelessness numbers since establishing the support team pre-2014, we now operate on a staffing scale of one support officer for approximately every 60 individuals who require support. It is not possible for one officer to support so many vulnerable individuals, resulting in individuals being

unable to cope with the complexities in their lives that prevent them from being able to identify a permanent home and consequently having to spend far too long in temporary accommodation.

30. The new Housing Support Grant money provides us with an opportunity to make good this situation. It will be possible to adjust the size of the internal support team, with the aim of having one officer supporting around 25 vulnerable individuals, rather than the current ratio of 1:60. The additional Government funding provides us with an opportunity to put appropriate support in place for the first time since 2014.

The outline spending programme

31. In order to draw up an outline spending programme, an urgent consultation was held with all external providers who are currently providing support for the homeless under the banner of the Housing Support Grant.
32. We note our intention in paragraph 19 and 20 above, as part of our Housing Action Plan, to develop over 50 Supported Accommodation units across the county. Revenue costs will be associated to these developments and so they need to be included in our outline spending programme for this Grant.
33. An opportunity was also given to the staff of the homelessness work units, which provides front-line services, to present their recommendations, specifically to increase the support that we can provide to each individual who needs our support.
34. There was also an opportunity to consult with the existing residents of our two homeless hostels and there was strong support for the intention to provide accommodation in the future which would be self-sufficient rather than having to share kitchen and bathroom facilities with other residents.
35. See Appendix B Equality Assessment which considers the intended direction of travel
36. Following a high-level prioritisation process within the time available, the following outline allocation was established:

Spending heading	Outline allocation
Extend the current partnership with external providers, including Shelter, Nacro, Cais, Gorwel and Cyfle.	£430,000
Regional Plans jointly with the other Councils in the North	£50,000
The revenue costs of the Council's new Supported Accommodation	£200,000
Improve the service being provided by the Council: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the direct support for the homeless (as outlined in paragraph 26 above) • Establish a 24 hour a day service and on weekends. 	£560,000

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure the presence of appropriate support services in Bangor. • Increase the resource to rehabilitate homeless prisoners. • Increase the staffing capacity in our Hostels to improve opportunities for homeless individuals to be re-homed quickly. 	
<p>An unallocated amount until further feasibility work will be completed during the year.</p>	<p>£360,000</p>

37. The external providers referred to in the table above are responsible for specialist support which is specifically focused on people outside mainstream service provision. The support offered is wide ranging and includes providing emergency accommodation for people who are homeless or fleeing domestic abuse and preventing eviction by Landlords (public and private sectors). The provision is also an important element to complement the work delivered by the Homelessness Unit offering different options to provide Housing and Assistance and also tenancy support. As a result, it contributes to the delivery of the Council's duties to deliver the Housing (Wales) Act 2014.

38. There is a significant and growing demand for services dealing with domestic violence, mental health, substance misuse, multiple support, financial advice and generic support throughout the County. Due to the additional investment, it will be possible to directly respond to this increased demand for housing support services. The investment will enable a significant increase in the number of vulnerable clients supported in Gwynedd, not only by improving the physical and mental health of these individuals, but also by saving money and easing the burden on the Homeless Unit and other public services (eg health, police and social services).

39. The Welsh Government has asked each authority to plan for the long-term based on the assumption that the new level of Housing Support Grant will continue at the same level. However, as this is a revenue grant, there is a need to be aware that the grant level could reduce at some point in the future. By then, we will have appointed a number of individuals to provide the new services outlined in this report. Should the grant reduce, we will need to carry out a prioritisation exercise across the entire £6.7M programme to identify where it would have the least impact on our services. The plans outlined in this report respond directly to the situation that now faces us and is therefore unlikely to be prioritised in a cuts exercise in the future. We do not anticipate a risk therefore of having to meet redundancy costs in the future.

40. The proposed activities which will be made possible by the increase in the HSG will directly contribute to the delivery of Gwynedd Council's well-being goals, particularly for supporting people to live in quality homes in their communities. Improving the well-being of people in Gwynedd through measures to prevent homelessness underpins the department's work with partners to respond to housing needs. The 'five ways of working' as well as the general principles of the Well-being of Future

Generations (Wales) Act 2015 are integral to the use made of the HSG and the increased allocation will enable the Council to support more people to obtain suitable housing for their needs.

Conclusions

41. As a result of a 71% increase in the homelessness numbers, the Homelessness Unit cannot meet the demand for their service at present.
 42. The use of temporary accommodation in bed and breakfast accommodation is not sustainable and it does not offer accommodation of an acceptable quality to facilitate the ability of individuals, couples and families to overcome deplorable situations and we will develop suitable "supported accommodation" ourselves, aiming to wind up the need to use bed and breakfast accommodation.
 43. We will seek to provide "supported accommodation" within communities where there is demand from the county's residents, avoiding the need to move individuals to communities that are unfamiliar to them.
 44. Providing suitable accommodation in itself will not improve our homelessness situation as the vulnerable individuals who are in our care will need much better support than what we have been able to offer since 2014.
 45. Therefore, we will prioritise the additional money that will come via the Housing Support Grant in accordance with the outline allocation noted in paragraph 36 to ensure that we provide the best possible homelessness service for the residents of our county.
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Views of the Local Member: Not a local matter

Views of the Statutory Officers:

The Monitoring Officer:

That which is proposed offers an appropriate plan for the use of the Grant noting of courses that the conditions of the financing will be relevant to the activities.

Statutory Finance Officer:

I welcome the additional funding that has been received to assist with the ongoing task of trying to tackle homelessness within Gwynedd. As the report notes, the Council has received an additional £1.6m for 2021/22, and viable schemes to use this money had to be developed in a short period of time.

The table found in paragraph 36 outlines the plans to use the £1.6m of additional funding, which appears reasonable and achievable. The report recognises the risk that exists of

redundancy costs should the grant scheme end or is curtailed, but this risk is relatively small compared to the benefit arising from the scheme, and it is a risk that the Council will be able to cope with should the grant be cut in the future.

Appendices

Appendix A - Providers funded via the current Housing Support Grant.

Appendix B - Equality Impact Assessment