

# HOUSING PARTNERSHIP newsletter



Issue 12 March 2010

## Housing boost for the borough

Wigan Council has been awarded more than £2M to build 35 new, affordable homes for rent at a site in Leigh. The funding comes from the Homes and Communities Agency, the government body responsible for housing and regeneration schemes across the country. Together with the council's own investment in the scheme, the total value of project will be £4.5M.

The new development on the site of the former Wigan Council day centre at The Orchards, Leigh will provide a mix of two, three and four bedroom homes.

Consultation about the plans is already underway with residents living near to the site and, whilst the scheme has yet to receive planning permission, if all goes to plan it is hoped that work will begin this summer. The properties would be ready for letting by summer 2011.

Together with a number of other current schemes this scheme will provide much needed good quality family accommodation in the borough. By working in partnership with Wigan and Leigh Housing, four bids have now been successful, with 52 dwellings at Kay Close, Scholes, six bungalows at Etherstone Street, Leigh and eight houses at Windsor Avenue, Astley and now the 35 homes at The Orchards. The first of the homes are expected to be ready for letting in September.

The scheme will be part of the largest national council house building programme for over two decades that has been funded by central government via the Homes and Communities Agency.

It forms part of a larger package of measures to boost the house building industry during the recession by increasing



the supply of homes, safeguarding construction

safeguarding construction industry jobs and bringing vacant land back into use.

Deborah McLaughlin, NW Regional Director of the Homes and Communities Agency adds: "Today's announcement of a further round of new build schemes for councils is great news for the North West. "This new funding will give further stimulus to some of our key regeneration areas by providing vitally needed new homes to help people get on the property ladder and by protecting many jobs in the region's construction industry."

For more information please contact Angela Durkin on 01942 828953 or

[A.Durkin@wigan.gov.uk](mailto:A.Durkin@wigan.gov.uk)

## Action on overcrowding

With a growing waiting list and a particularly limited supply of larger family homes across the borough, overcrowding is an issue affecting a growing number of households. In an attempt to assist, Wigan and Leigh Housing have employed an Overcrowding/under-occupation Officer since September with the main purpose to make better use of our housing stock through identifying and tackling overcrowding and under-occupation.

After identifying the affected households from the Council's waiting list, the officer has made over 80 visits to those in the greatest need to discuss their housing options. The main findings have been;

- The current allocation policy did not give sufficient priority to overcrowded or under-occupying households to enable them to move into more suitable accommodation easily.
- The majority of elderly under-occupiers want a bungalow not a flat and would prefer two bedrooms. They usually want to remain in the same location and will only consider Council accommodation.
- Some under-occupiers in their late 40's or 50's will only consider a bungalow. They will have to wait until they are 60 under the current allocation policy to be eligible.
- Most households wish to remain close to where they live. So, for example, whilst there is a demand for four bedroom houses generally, this does not apply everywhere.

The officer has been able to offer a range of assistance;

- Offering advice about other housing options including the private rented sector and developing links with Wigan Housing Solutions
- Providing nominations to Housing Association new build schemes –

mainly from people who are overcrowded

- Offering support to elderly people throughout the process of bidding including providing on-going support when moving to another property.
- Helped with the removal costs for a couple of households who wouldn't have otherwise been able to move.

In support of the work undertaken Wigan Council and Wigan and Leigh Housing have now reviewed the allocations policy and once adopted it will provide more opportunities to these groups. We are also seeking opportunities to provide more homes that meet the needs of overcrowded and under-occupying households on new social housing schemes and are developing a new lettings policy for new-build homes.

The project has been funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government and is monitored on a quarterly basis. For more information contact Andrea Bucys on 01942 486566.

## Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment

A Developers Forum meeting was held on 10 December 2009 at the Oak Hotel, Riverway, Wigan, with the main focus of the meeting centred around the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) 2009 update. The Assessment is a study of sites across the borough potentially available for housing development and although the role of the Assessment is not to allocate housing sites directly, it will help inform the allocation process as part of the wider Local Development Framework

The morning event was well attended by a range of stakeholders from the development industry including housebuilders, property surveyors, architects, and planning agents, together with representatives from United Utilities. Officers from Wigan Council's Housing Strategy, Planning Policy and Development Management teams were also on hand.

The focus of the event involved a practical workshop, whereby the range of sites currently identified in the Assessment were split into 4 Township areas. Participants were then able to examine those site maps of interest to them or their clients, and offer comment on the perceived deliverability and development potential of sites. A number of additional site suggestions were made for further consideration and participants were invited to submit further comments and/or further site suggestions by 22 January 2010.

Some very positive comments were received concerning the event, with some participants reporting that they felt very involved in the process, and that the event felt very "hands on" from their perspective.

Work on the SHLAA 2009 update is ongoing and it is hoped the finalised work will be published by the end of February.

For more information please contact Martin Stuart on 01942 404238

### **A helping hand for homeless people**

In less than two years, the derelict Bricklayers Arms pub in Wigan town centre has transformed from a local eyesore into a welcoming hub for people sleeping rough or facing homelessness. The dedicated team of staff and volunteers at 'The Brick' offer friendly support, a hot breakfast and advice for people who find themselves trying to cope on the streets.

Now, following a competitive tendering process, The Brick has secured Supporting People funding to extend its services. A borough-wide outreach service will be backed-up by individualised support plans to help people work through the issues that have led to them becoming homeless, and back into a stable home and lifestyle. The Brick team already work alongside the PCT and the Drugs & Alcohol Team to bring services to those who need help but may be afraid or unable to seek this out. The service will also help clients link in with training for

work and independent living skills and to address long-standing personal issues.



One of the great strengths of the project is that people who have moved on from the streets can get involved in supporting and encouraging others to play their full part in the life of the community. Sometimes the biggest challenge for someone to get their life back on track is believing that they can, and The Brick aims to break down the barriers which separate homeless people from 'normal life' by building bridges with churches, schools and community groups.

Visit [www.thebrick.org.uk](http://www.thebrick.org.uk) for more details.

### **New directory for older people**

Wigan Council has launched a new Older People's Directory. It contains a wealth of information including news, events, groups and services which are all aimed at older people living across the borough. You can find it at:

[www.wigan.gov/olderpeople](http://www.wigan.gov/olderpeople)

If you have any questions, or if you are finding it difficult to use the directory, please telephone Lesley Tyrer on: 01942 404501

## More help for women affected by domestic abuse

Sadly, Wigan borough has a high rate of incidents of domestic violence, and for many years we have had insufficient accommodation to offer a safe haven for the women who need it. The Housing Strategy team and the Supporting People team have been thoroughly reviewing what the borough needs from its domestic violence service and in December a new combined contract was awarded to Arena Options to manage refuge accommodation and a borough-wide outreach service to support people who are in dangerous or traumatic situations.

Arena have an excellent track record in delivering this sort of service and are already managing one of the borough's two refuges through their merger with Wigan Women's Aid. Now they will also be joining forces with community group DIAS who have been providing support and advice to local residents for many years. The new contract will integrate the whole service and bring cost savings, which means we will be able to help more women and children during difficult times.

Part of the service review also includes moving the current refuges out of their cramped and run-down buildings into more modern accommodation. This will increase the number of families the service can help, and help reduce the negative impact of the experience, especially for children. A small block of new build apartments in the centre of the borough, which the developer had been unable to sell, has been submitted for planning approval to convert to secure, self-contained refuge accommodation with round-the-clock staff support. If approval is granted, the building will get extra security measures and office space for the staff, before the service is moved across from the old building.

Work is also underway to move the other refuge to new accommodation later in the year. People who live locally to the new refuges have been consulted and given information about the plans, but the accommodation addresses are not

publicised to protect the safety and privacy of residents while they take time to rebuild their lives.

For more information contact Helen Taylor on 01942 828970 or [H.Taylor@wigan.gov.uk](mailto:H.Taylor@wigan.gov.uk)

## Plank Lane renewal area declared



The Council has declared its ninth Renewal Area along Plank Lane in Leigh. Up to £750,000 will be invested in the area over the next few years on carrying out environmental and housing improvements.

Works will include resurfacing rear alleyways and face-lifting blocks of homes by cleaning or rebuilding walls and replacing doors and windows with the aim of reversing decline and improving the economic, environmental, housing and social conditions within the area.

The improvements will also complement the interventions in the adjacent Firs, Heathside and Marsh Fields Renewal Areas and the development of the former Bickershaw Colliery Site nearby, where approximately 650 new homes will be built along with other commercial interests and opportunities for leisure activities.

Cabinet champion for Neighbourhoods, Kevin Anderson, says:

“This is great news for the people living in the area. We’ve been listening to what residents have been telling local ward members and these improvements will not only improve their homes, but will create a much better environment on the approach to the town’s flagship housing and leisure development.”

For further information, contact Anees Mank, Private Sector Housing Manager, on 01942 733338.

## Kill the chill



With the heavy snowfall and plummeting temperatures we are experiencing this winter, it is now even more important than ever for staff to look out for signs of fuel poverty during appointments with clients.

It was recently reported in the national press that excess winter deaths, that is the number of people dying between December and March, rose by 49% last year. Vulnerable people are at extra risk of dying during the winter months due to increased risk of strokes and heart attacks when people don't stay warm enough in their homes.

Fuel poverty occurs when a household needs to spend more than 10% of their income on domestic fuel. Those living on a low income and in poor housing conditions are most at risk, and from the 2001 census it was estimated that there were 8,253 households in Wigan living in fuel poverty and 7,877 homes without central heating in the Borough. Despite good progress since then in improving housing standards across all tenures, increases in energy costs mean that fuel poverty continues to be an issue for many households in the borough.

AWARM is the Affordable Warmth Access and Referral Mechanism which has been in place across neighbouring boroughs and has now been introduced in Wigan. It offers vulnerable people assistance with a range of services to help get them out of fuel poverty. By referring your client to AWARM, you will give them access to help and information about keeping warm and well in their homes, using energy more efficiently, grants available for heating and insulation, benefits and debt advice, fire safety checks and home repairs.

If you visit or speak to someone you think may be at risk this winter, make a referral for them to AWARM. It will only take a couple of minutes, and the help they receive could prevent them falling ill, or worse, this winter.

Training for front line staff on how to spot the signs of fuel poverty and to make referrals to AWARM is available by contacting Greater Manchester's Energy Efficiency Officer, Sharon Bond at [awarm@manchester.gov.uk](mailto:awarm@manchester.gov.uk) or 0800 512012

## Meet the team

In the last few months we have welcomed new staff to the Housing Strategy team, the members are now:

Steve Sargent – Service Manager Housing Strategy  
Angela Durkin – Senior Housing Policy Officer  
Julie Marshall – Senior Housing Policy Officer (due to take up her post in March)  
Stuart Ratcliffe – Housing Policy Officer  
Helen Taylor – Housing Policy Officer  
Michelle Price- Housing Policy Officer  
Paula Daley – Housing Policy Officer (learning disabilities)  
Jennifer Martlew – Housing Advice Officer  
Rick Rickerby – Environmental Health Officer

## Award for local landlord

Umbrella Property Rentals are based in Wigan and are Wigan town centre's first and only ARLA (Association of Residential Letting Agents) approved company.

The importance of private sector lettings has grown dramatically in recent years and is now recognised as having a fundamental role within the council's current and future housing strategies. It is not enough therefore to simply live for today, and should a letting agent wish to survive in today's climate they must employ a long term vision. At Umbrella Property Rentals, the future is taken seriously, with a five year road map in operation; this being subject to constant modifications so as to allow for compliance with new legislation and complex legal requirements.

The private lettings sector has quite rightly come in for strong criticism within recent years, with sharp practices and unfair treatment of tenants often affecting some of society's most vulnerable members. Thankfully this situation is fast changing with companies such as Umbrella Property Rentals leading the way, their high, professional standards protecting both Landlords and tenants alike.



With the above taken into account, Umbrella Property Rentals was presented the deserved award for Letting Agent Winner in England by Konni Huq, the TV presenter. It's a positive step for a local Wigan based company to be recognised by an

independent national judging panel in the lettings for the Private Rented Sector.

Umbrella Property Rentals can be contacted on 01942 829490 or [www.umbrellarentals.co.uk](http://www.umbrellarentals.co.uk)

## Beating the recession

We knew that the recession, short time working and job losses could mean repossessions, increased family tensions and breakdown etc and we were aware that given the nature of the type of employment in the borough (low wages etc) that Wigan could potentially have been hit hard. However, we have very strong partnership links in the borough and were very quickly able to put plans in place to minimise the impact. Discussions with partners started in the Autumn of 2008: by Jan 2009 we had started to put new / redesigned services in place.

- In January 09, Wigan became one of the first (fast-track) areas on Mortgage Rescue - protocols put in place between Housing Strategy, Wigan & Leigh CAB and WALH
- We also funded additional debt advice workers in the Wigan & Leigh CAB.
- With W&L CAB. we established "Wigan Housing Solutions" a not for profit housing management company which helps to overcome problems for people wanting private rented accommodation (previously tenants were faced with upfront fees such as a £1000 bond, advanced rent payments, admin fees... the new service has reduced or even removed lots of this and on some occasions they now charge landlords a £125 tenant finder fee)
- Working with WALH, services were boosted to 'prevent' homelessness rather than just rehousing people who became homeless.
- We also provided additional resources to tackle any increase in rough sleeping
- We were quick to take advantage of national funds and via the housing associations began to buy up stalled /

empty developments to bring them into use.

- Identifying additional demands the council funded an additional post in Housing Benefits to provide more services including fast-tracking housing benefit applications for private tenants at risk of losing their homes.
- Recently the area has been allocated additional funds to increase and improve the much needed accommodation for those fleeing domestic violence.

The effect has been better than we expected. Our main aim was to minimise the increase in homelessness, but with our partners we have actually reduced our homelessness problems ( they are still significant) and in some areas, made big reductions:

- Homelessness has reduced by around a third over the last 12 months and by over two thirds since it peaked in Wigan in 2005.
- We're currently 'preventing' around 200 households per quarter from becoming homeless by the above interventions
- We've reduced mortgage repossessions by 37% (compared to 20% reduction in GMcr, 28% reduction in England)
- We've reduced landlord repossessions by 32% (compared to 3% increase in GMcr, 8% reduction in England)
- 76% of people represented by Wigan & Leigh Citizens Advice Bureau at court on possession cases kept their property

But there's more we can do:

- Need to ensure people get the message that the sooner people highlight they have a problem, the easier it is to fix it. (Over the next 4 weeks there will be a publicity campaign across the borough, led by C.A.B.)
- Still not tackled rough sleeping / homelessness amongst single people issues, particularly those with more complex needs.

For more information contact Steve Sargent on 01942 828952 or [s.sargent@wigan.gov.uk](mailto:s.sargent@wigan.gov.uk)

## Review of the Housing Partnership

The Housing Partnership has been helping to shape housing strategies and actions for over a decade. However given the development of the wider Economic, Environment, Cultural and Housing Partnership, the revised Housing Strategy and the Sustainable Communities Strategy, a review of the Housing Partnerships role in developing housing's contribution locally is currently underway.

The aim will be to strengthen the Partnerships accountability and its role in implementing policy. It is also important that it links with other Partnerships in a more effective way. A report setting out proposals will be developed in the coming weeks and it is hoped to implement the recommendations in the new financial year.

Part of this review will involve the re-focusing of some existing groups and the development of new sub groups within the Partnership. If this is to be successful it will require Partnership Members to contribute and participate more effectively than we have all managed in the past. So watch this space.

For more information contact Peter Layland at [p.layland@wigan.gov.uk](mailto:p.layland@wigan.gov.uk)

## Dates for your diary

Wigan Developers Forum – 9.30am  
Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> March, Coors Lounge, DW Stadium. Contact Stuart Ratcliffe on 01942 488479 or [s.ratcliffe@wigan.gov.uk](mailto:s.ratcliffe@wigan.gov.uk)

Wigan Homelessness Forum – 9.30am  
Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> March, Committee Room A, Wigan Town Hall. Contact Helen Taylor on 01942 828970 or [H.Taylor@wigan.gov.uk](mailto:H.Taylor@wigan.gov.uk)

## The impact of hate crime

Hate crime is the most serious result of unlawful prejudice and discrimination in our society, and is defined as:

“Any hate incident which constitutes a criminal offence, and is perceived by the victim or any other person as being motivated by prejudice or hate.”

Police record hate crimes that have been, or are perceived to have been, motivated by hatred due to a person's:

- Race
- Religion / Belief
- Sexual orientation
- Disability
- Gender

Or a combination of the above factors.

Hate crime can take many forms – physical attacks, verbal abuse, abusive gestures, damage to property (arson, graffiti), offensive letters / leaflets, cyber bullying etc.

It is also a major factor affecting cohesion within communities, and large-scale public disorder can be ignited by hate crimes. Police aim to respond to hate crime in an effective and transparent way, and give a high priority to thoroughly investigating it, prosecuting offenders and supporting victims.

It is therefore critical that the level of support is tailored to the differing, individual needs of victims and witnesses, and all necessary measures are taken to provide immediate practical help and ongoing reassurance.

Tackling repeat victimisation is a priority, along with providing the necessary support and using all available prevention, intervention and enforcement measures.

It is only by delivering a quality service to hate crime victims that GMP and its partners can improve confidence in all our communities.

Police will record and investigate any incident of hate crime reported to them, regardless of whether it is a criminal offence or not. They understand the devastating impact hate crime has on the people who suffer from it and the community as a whole, and treat all hate crimes as a priority. When a potential hate crime is reported, a detective and inspector are always made aware to ensure that police response is swift.

All hate crimes are given a short review date of no longer than a week - supervisors are always made aware by crime evaluators that an officer is dealing with a hate crime. Hate crime is reviewed on a daily basis by the senior management team at the daily briefing.

“GMP is committed to fighting hate crime and we want to make it easier for people to report such matters. All reports submitted online will be dealt with promptly, sensitively and in the strictest confidence. The informant can even remain anonymous if they wish.”

For more information contact Abida Niaz, Community Relations Officer, Greater Manchester Police on 0161 856 7184.

## ConstructionSkills Apprentices

The current economic climate provides challenges to every business sector, and construction is no different. Yet longer-term predictions denote strong growth for the industry and so it is imperative that industry learns the lessons from the last slump in the early 1990s and continues to train or risk facing a severe lack of skilled workers when the economic recovery begins.

We know that taking on an apprentice is a big decision and that employers of all sizes are already doing what they can to survive and we need to consider what additional incentives can be provided to further support them but in fact the business case for taking on or retaining an apprentice is actually stronger now than ever before. Here's why.

Taking on apprentices demonstrates a commitment to training and local employment often demanded by public sector contract conditions and an increasing number of clients. Such public sector contracts could prove a lucrative source of work over the next year or so given the Government's promise to bring forward a large amount of spending to help our sector. For smaller businesses, they can also offer the opportunity to think about long-term succession planning.

ConstructionSkills can support employers to recruit, train, and qualify your apprentices through our Apprenticeships team.

We offer the widest range of both occupations and Apprentices to meet your requirements and our achievement rate is 10% above the national average. Other benefits include:

- Two different routes to train your apprentice
- Recruitment service
- Travel and lodgings
- Monitor and review the apprentice through a dedicated Apprenticeship Officer
- Offer support for progression
- Employer grants of up to £5,700 for a Level 2 Apprenticeship.
- Further grant of up to £4,120 for Apprentices that progress to a Level 3 Apprenticeship

For further information please contact Vivienne Gibney of NW Construction Skills on 07771.893469 or by Email [Vivienne.gibney@cskills.org](mailto:Vivienne.gibney@cskills.org)

### **Wigan is performing well for residents**

In our first Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) Wigan has received praise for the way in which the Council and partners work together to meet the needs of residents. The CAA is an independent assessment that sets out how well local public services are tackling the major issues

in Wigan. It says how well we are doing at delivering better results for local people and how likely these are to improve in future.

The report recognised improvements made to housing in the borough, including more affordable homes and improvements to achieve decent homes and energy efficiency across all tenures. It also praised the approach to tackling homelessness that has resulted in a significant fall in cases. However the report stated that we need improve the quality of our neighbourhoods, including tackling litter, graffiti, and traffic congestion. We also need to do more to encourage residents to feel part of the community and improve life chances in our most deprived neighbourhoods through tackling unemployment, alcohol misuse and chronic illnesses.

The full report is available at <http://oneplace.direct.gov.uk/pages/default.aspx>

### **Housing Partnership Newsletter**

Thanks to all our partners who have contributed to this issue.

The Newsletter is designed to keep all members of the Housing Partnership up to date with developments within the housing world here in Wigan.

If you have any interesting articles for future editions please contact Angela Durkin on 01942 828953 or [a.durkin@wigan.gov.uk](mailto:a.durkin@wigan.gov.uk)

Remember updates on other housing issues are available on the Housing Strategy web pages ;

<http://www.wigan.gov.uk/Services/Housing/HousingStrategyPolicy/>

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