



Progress Report on Homelessness Strategy Action Plan October 2009

Background & Key targets:

Wigan Borough has traditionally struggled with a high level of homelessness proportionate to its population. The Homelessness Strategy 2008-2013 "A Place for All" therefore set out to analyse the root causes of homelessness and an action plan to tackle these, with some challenging targets:

- 50% of homelessness prevented or relieved through positive action (by 2013)
- 50% reduction in use of temporary accommodation (by end of 2010)
- Cease the use of B&B to accommodate homeless people in all but exceptional circumstances and even then for no longer than 6 weeks (by end 2010)

Current Issues & challenges

Temporary accommodation

The number of households owed a statutory homelessness duty but currently in temporary accommodation pending rehousing, continues to fall steadily, albeit slowly. This is due to an exceptionally challenging target set by central government which really stretches the limit of the reduction that can be achieved in a borough of this size. Nevertheless this figure has fallen from 59 households at the beginning of April to 42 at the end of September, and no clients have been placed in B&B accommodation since July.

Recession

The impact of the recession continues to be felt, but Wigan Council has been the recipient of additional government funding to tackle this. In part it is acknowledged that our region is particularly vulnerable to repossessions, and in part Wigan Council's track record in homelessness prevention gives confidence to the government that extra resources will be effectively used. This welcome additional support has certainly helped us implement some key measures such as increasing CAB funding for money/debt advice. It has also helped us hit some of our long term targets earlier than expected; but if the wider economy recovers, or a change of government means that funding returns to normal levels next year, some of the gains may slip back slightly. The challenge will be to keep up sufficient momentum to recoup any slippages within the target time frame.

Recent press coverage identifying Wigan as a repossession 'hotspot' has been designed to alert and encourage people to seek help early, and the advice and prevention services that have been put into place are having a significant impact – mortgage repossessions are down 42% on the same period last year (compared with 38% across the rest of the North West region and 35% nationally) and landlord repossessions are down 53% (against an 11% decrease both regionally and nationally). The full range of new government repossession prevention schemes has been rolled out and is in use by CAB and Wigan & Leigh Housing.

Strategic theme: Prevention of homelessness
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Culture change – ‘pro-active rather than reactive’

Since October 2008, a re-structure of the way homelessness services are provided at Wigan & Leigh Housing has yielded a dramatic increase in the numbers of households that have been prevented from becoming homeless.

	Homeless duty accepted	Homelessness prevented	Total	Prevention rate
2008/9 full year	481	376	857	43.8%
Qtr 1 2009/10	109	224	333	67.2%
Qtr 2 2009/10	90	195	285	68.4%

A new focus on attempting all relevant prevention methods before assessing the case under the statutory procedures has now been embedded in the culture of the teams at the Housing Options & Advice Centre. This change of focus also helps prevent repeat homelessness which has dropped by almost 90% over the last five years from a high of 113 cases to only 12 cases this year.

Improving access

The Housing Strategy Team has been liaising with other Council and voluntary sector services to discuss long-term improvements to the advice that is available to local residents and how housing advice overlaps with other issues. The new Wigan Life centre, when complete, will support this closer linking, and in the meantime a new Housing Options website is being constructed to provide an integrated resource for housing advice that aims to be useful to residents, tenants, support workers and private landlords alike. We hope this will be up and running by early 2010 and will be widely publicised.

Remove barriers

Agencies providing support to people who have been homeless understand that their clients may need to access drugs and alcohol services and/or mental health services. Liaison with providers of these services is underway to develop a better understanding of how referral pathways operate and provide channels to communicate where blockages can occur.

A hospital discharge protocol is also in development for patients leaving acute wards in the borough and improve knowledge among NHS staff about the housing services available. Wigan's protocol will sit within a liaison framework covering all Greater Manchester authorities to ensure that people whose hospital care is provided in a different borough are pointed to the right local service on discharge.

Targeted intervention

There is no doubt that Wigan borough is feeling the effects of the recession, but homelessness is not only caused by money pressures, although these can often trigger relationship breakdowns and a number of other problems. A number of specifically targeted services have been reviewed and expanded to make sure vulnerable people don't slip through the net:

- New Supporting People funding contracts have been tendered for services to people who have experienced domestic violence and rough sleeping, with the new service specifications requiring a greater focus on empowering clients to lead fully independent lives.
- A new protocol is in place between the Aftercare team and Wigan & Leigh Housing to ensure looked after young people get the right housing advice and support as they approach the end of their care placements.
- Catch 22 – a national youth support charity – are in the process of acquiring properties to provide supervised accommodation for young men leaving Hindley YOI to ensure that they reintegrate into the community with a positive plan for their lives that includes stable housing.
- The Supported Lodgings scheme which has helped many care leavers develop the skills they need for adulthood in a safe environment before they have to cope independently is

expanding to offer the same opportunity to other young people who find themselves homeless before they are ready to live alone.

- The successful delayed eviction scheme for Asylum legacy cases which assisted 54 families last year, will be rolled out again to support a number of families whose cases are due to be resolved soon by the Home Office. This protects our social housing system from being overwhelmed, reduces B&B costs and enables refugees to be integrated into the wider community in a planned way. Most of these clients will be rehoused into the private sector, making use of the closer relationships we have been forging with reputable landlords.

Minimise mortgage repossessions

Targeted funding has enabled the CAB to provide an advice desk at every County Court session where repossession cases are listed and increased the office appointments available for clients struggling with arrears.

The court desk service is provided to an average of 22 households per month; and approximately 1 in 3 clients are referred on to a government repossession prevention scheme.

The CAB 'Open Door Service' which has been boosted by extra Council funding this year has received 2650 new debt cases and 612 new housing cases in the period April – September.

The CAB Legal Help Department debt caseworkers have dealt with over £4.2 million worth of debt since January 2009, of which 17.6% was housing debt.

Wigan & Leigh Housing have now assessed 46 clients in mortgage difficulties for help under the suite of new measures created by government to reduce repossessions, including Mortgage Rescue and Repossession Prevention loans. Despite delays with the new Mortgage Rescue administration system, which have been experienced across the country, 4 cases have now been approved for help; each one representing a cost saving as well as a household who will now be spared the upheaval of homelessness and the social problems this can store up, especially for children affected by it.

Minimise evictions from rented properties

A new protocol is now in place with Stephenson's solicitors to react quickly to any illegal evictions by unscrupulous private landlords and help keep people in their home, at no cost to the Council.

A new Liaison Officer has been recruited to work in the Housing Benefits section trouble-shooting Local Housing Allowance cases for private sector tenants. This officer will also be a key contact for the planned Landlords Forum which aims to promote the dissemination of useful information and good practice advice for reputable landlords. This will build their confidence and capacity to provide tenancies for people in housing need who would otherwise be reliant on social housing, and raise overall property management standards.

Strategic theme: Accommodation

Develop new affordable homes

At the last progress report in July 2009, the affordable housing strategy had already secured commitments for the development of 200 new homes over the next 2-3 years. A new funding bid has now been submitted to the HCA for a further 35 units in Leigh.

The consultation work that has gone into the production of the new Housing Strategy - officially launched on 21st October - has help defined the borough's housing needs and forged positive relationships with private developers and landlords as well as our traditional partners in the social housing sector. A successful launch event stimulated ideas about how these disparate individuals and organisations could work together, and where there are barriers to co-operation, an inclusive conversation has begun about how to dismantle them.

The 'HOLD' initiative which enables long-term disabled people to buy themselves a suitable home under a shared equity scheme has successfully delivered a solution to the housing needs of 9 clients with learning disabilities, with 6 more cases in the pipeline, and is now being expanded to people with physical disabilities

Make best use of existing stock

The Allocations Policy review is progressing well, with consultation feedback received from a broad range of sources. The finalised proposals will therefore be able to incorporate the needs of customers as well as provider partners. All but one local RSL have now agreed to let all their available general needs properties to nominees from the Council's housing register.

Wigan has committed to participating in Pinpoint (the Greater Manchester Choice-Based Lettings system) once the new allocations policy is in operation and will press for enhancements to this service which support our strategic priorities.

Wigan Housing Solutions is now starting to provide real alternative housing options, with the first properties approved for leasing and a waiting list of new applicants. The successful Bond Scheme also continues to be over-subscribed.

Over 200 applications have been received from private landlords wishing to join the new Accreditation scheme. One of the benefits this offers them is free advertising of available homes through the Property Shops, and customers can have confidence that these homes meet minimum standards for maintenance and safety and that the landlord is committed to responsible management practices.

The Private Sector Housing team is about to launch a new Empty Homes action plan, as part of the implementation of the new Housing Strategy. There is huge potential in this area for Wigan borough as there are currently 4000+ empty properties and many of them could be brought back into use as homes. Owners will be pro-actively contacted and offered a range of support measures including property improvement loans and advice from Wigan Housing Solutions on management options.

Wigan Council has also been designated as an Overcrowding Pathfinder by the government and specific funding has been granted for the implementation of an action plan to tackle this. A critical element of this plan is to support under-occupiers who wish to move to smaller properties and free up family homes. A Project Officer is now in post and is in the process of contacting all severely overcrowded applicants and under-occupying tenants who may be interested in downsizing to offer support and discuss possible options.

Reduce use of temporary accommodation

A key theme of the Allocations Policy review has been to explore ways to reduce the use of temporary accommodation by speeding up the rehousing of people in priority housing need, including statutory homeless cases. A strategic group of Council and Wigan & Leigh Housing officers also continues to meet regularly to explore ways to make homelessness services more efficient. Following extensive consultation and discussion, the final allocations policy proposals are likely to encourage greater use of direct offers and a more robust approach to identifying suitable properties.

Strategic theme: Support

Increase provision

The key to preventing repeat homelessness lies in equipping vulnerable people with the confidence and skills to manage their lives. A range of targeted support initiatives already exists, but a gap in provision that has been identified for some time but is not easy to fill, is the provision of accommodation that is accessible in an emergency and which provides not only a temporary safe haven but a programme of challenge and support to prepare people for independent living. A number of potential sites have been identified for the proposed Recycling Lives project, and there is now a real possibility that this project will come to fruition.

The review of the Supporting People contract for Domestic Violence refuge services has been an opportunity to both expand and modernise the accommodation provision, to help more women. The economic downturn has been used to advantage here by enabling negotiations to go ahead on an affordable basis to acquire better building facilities.

Make best use of existing provision

More can be done to improve access to the existing supported accommodation for young people, in particular to reduce the complexity of application and referral processes that can be a barrier to access. Places are currently let by each provider for their own projects but resources could be better co-ordinated by an integrated allocations system that matched services to clients' needs. Preliminary discussions have begun with the provider partners about possible models for future development.

Strategic theme: excellent services

Strengthen partnership

A network of positive relationships already exists between housing providers and support agencies in the borough and this is reflected in the diverse membership of the Wigan Homelessness Forum. From November 2009, all Forum partners will be able to share news and good practice through a quarterly newsletter that can reach staff and clients at all levels.

The quarterly liaison meetings between the Council, Wigan & Leigh Housing and other RSL provider in the borough have been resumed and provide a useful forum for consultation and discussing improvements to joint working. The affordable housing programme has also begun to attract new RSL partners into Wigan borough, which is seen as an expansion area for organisations who have previously concentrated on neighbouring boroughs.

New clarity arising from a recent House of Lords ruling about the responsibilities of Children's Services departments towards homeless 16 and 17-year-olds has also caused us to look at the relationships between housing and children's services and review each service's roles in such cases. This review presents some challenges in the short term and strategic discussions are still on-going, but we aim to be able to provide more holistic support to individual young people in the future.

Raising standards

A programme of training and information support has been made available from the Supporting People team for supported accommodation providers to comply with the new, and more rigorous Quality Assessment Framework. This framework ensures that standards are maintained consistently on a national basis and that value-for-money is obtained from funded services.

Despite the reducing reliance on B&B accommodation to accommodate homeless people, a register has now been produced of establishments which comply with acceptable safety and facilities standards, which can provide emergency accommodation to less vulnerable people where appropriate.

Previously homeless people are often in need of a Community Care Grant or Crisis Loan to set themselves up in a new tenancy so that they don't lose their home before they have settled in. A Greater Manchester joint working group has started to meet with Social Fund managers from the DWP to streamline procedures and identify possible policy improvements. A 'hints and tips' guide from the first meeting has already been circulated to a wide range of support agencies.

Wigan has also been designated as a 'Wave 1' pilot project by the government-backed organisation Homeless Link to help develop a research method and start to gather data about the health needs of people who have experienced homelessness. One of only three such pilots, Wigan was chosen because of its track record of partnership working with rough sleepers, including integrating health services where street homeless people can easily and safely access them.

Ensuring services are focused on the needs of the borough

The intelligence gathered during consultation for the new Housing Strategy will continue to inform the commissioning and monitoring of homelessness services. The good relationships that exist between service providers and other stakeholders help foster an on-going exchange of information so that strategic aims can be continually re-tested against changing needs.

Next steps

An enormous amount of groundwork invested in the existing framework of services for homeless people and some radical thinking on approaching the prevention agenda is starting to produce solid progress towards reducing homelessness in Wigan borough. This is particularly striking in a recession where all authorities are seeing an increased demand for services.

Having got the basics right, future commissioning and shaping of services can now focus on the needs of marginalised groups such as entrenched rough sleepers, people with a 'dual diagnosis' of substance misuse and mental health problems and other people with complex needs and/or chaotic lifestyles. More emergency help needs to be in place for people coming out of hospital who can't simply return 'home' and others who find themselves homeless and unprepared to cope. Finding workable solutions to such needs is not simple, but the necessary ingredients of good partnership links and reliable intelligence about what works, are in place.

Young people are still over-represented in the homelessness figures in Wigan borough and sadly the prevailing reason for this is still that some parents are not willing to go on providing a home for their child when relationships become tense or new circumstances arise, such as an unplanned pregnancy. Not all young people will fall into a statutory homeless category but all are disadvantaged by their lesser earning power and the limitation on what help they can claim with housing costs, as much as by having less experience of life or coping skills to draw on. Housing services will continue to work closely with CYPS and supported accommodation providers to address the issues young people face and ensure that borough residents can start off their adult life with the right options and the right support.

We will continue to look at ways to remove barriers to accessing housing and support services, including innovative approaches which circumvent the need to go through the traditional homelessness bureaucracy, and encourage people to understand how to take control of their own housing options. We know that we still desperately need emergency accommodation for single homeless people; this remains high on the agenda and work continues to identify a suitable site for the Recycling Lives project and secure resources.