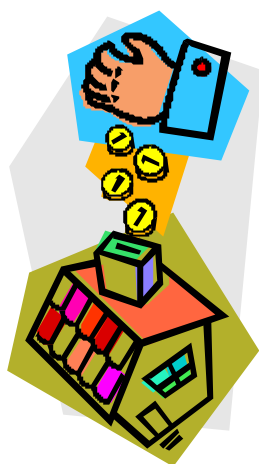


£6m boost for private homes



More action to tackle poor homes, more help for disabled residents to adapt their homes, more alleygating and environmental improvements and more

affordable housing schemes.

That's the councils promise after securing a larger than usual allocation from the Regional Housing Board - £6million. The amount is much better than anticipated and means the council will have over a million pounds more to spend this year than last.

Housing renewal areas like those in Abram and Platt Bridge will also benefit from extra spending, as will elderly and infirm owner occupiers who live in homes that are in poor condition.

Cllr Keith Cunliffe, Wigan Council's cabinet member for community protection, said: "This is excellent news and is the result of intense lobbying by officers, members and MPs who have pressed the borough's case for more resources. "We were concerned that we could be looking at a cut, but this £6M

allocation will allow us to invest more in our weakest housing markets, whilst also making progress on key issues such as disabled adaptations and affordable homes."

Plans include:

- clearance of small pockets of unfit housing in prominent locations
- assistance to elderly and infirm householders on low income who live in poor housing
- additional spending on adaptations for disabled residents
- additional regeneration in the six main renewal sites – Abram, Bedford, East Wigan and Ince; Firs, Healthside and Marsh Fields; Pagefield; Platt Bridge
- Money for affordable housing schemes, to be announced when an affordable housing strategy is published later in the year

The money for Wigan has been allocated by the North West Regional Housing Board, which was set up by the Government to advise ministers on the priorities for strategic housing investment in the region.

For more information contact Peter Layland on 01942 404135 or email P.Layland@wiganmbc.gov.uk

Property pact

Council and housing chiefs across the borough have signed an agreement that they hope will reduce levels of homelessness and improve access to affordable housing.



The council can now nominate tenants to half of all housing association properties that fall vacant thanks to a new agreement signed with Wigan and Leigh Housing and the borough's registered social landlords (RSLs). With increased demand for Council housing and growing evidence of people being unable to get a step on the housing ladder, housing bosses hope the new agreement will lead to a more co-ordinated approach towards tackling homelessness.

Cllr Keith Cunliffe, cabinet member for community protection, said: "The housing associations have a big role to play in providing affordable housing for rent. "The number of council properties available for rent has reduced considerably in recent months. By strengthening our partnership with other housing providers it will help us target accommodation where it's most needed.

"We all want to see the same outcome - a drop in homelessness and more decent affordable homes for the people who really need them."

The scheme is being supported by Arena Housing, Adactus Housing, the English Churches Housing Group and Northern Counties Housing Association. Other RSLs are due to sign up to the agreement in the near future.

For more information contact Michelle Feeney on 01942 486789 or email M.Feeney@wiganmbc.gov.uk

All change with Invest to Save

In March 2005 Wigan Council won £630,000 of 'Invest to Save' (ISB) funding to tackle homelessness amongst offenders.

The core elements of the bid included:

- More staff for the Key Project
- Rent costs towards office space for the Key Project
- Introduction of the Bond Scheme
- Revenue costs for a new hostel.

So far the funding has proved very successful, with the Bond Scheme getting off to a flying start - 23 bonds were issued between September 2005 and January 2006 and there have been zero claims against the bond. In addition the Key Project has employed 2 additional support workers.

However, it is not all good news. The Council has been unsuccessful in finding a site to build a new hostel. This means that the ISB funding, which is time limited, cannot be spent as originally intended.

Wigan Homelessness Forum, in agreement with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), has therefore re-allocated some of the ISB funding to new projects:

- *Intensive Support and Mediation Project* – Rainer aim to acquire 20 bedspaces to provide a dual approach of housing and support to young people who have very chaotic lifestyles. They will focus on life skills for the young person and mediation between the young person and others, eg neighbours, the local community.
- *Offender Accommodation & Resettlement Service* – English Churches will provide early intervention housing support to offenders who currently would not be assisted through arrangements for high-risk offenders.

For more information contact Steve Sargent on 01942 827702 or email S.Sargent@wiganmbc.gov.uk

***Due to high demand the Bond Scheme is currently looking for agencies to either provide extra funding for bonds or to underwrite bonds. If you can help please contact Michelle Feeney on 01942 486789 or email M.Feeney@wiganmbc.gov.uk**

Gateway to Wigan

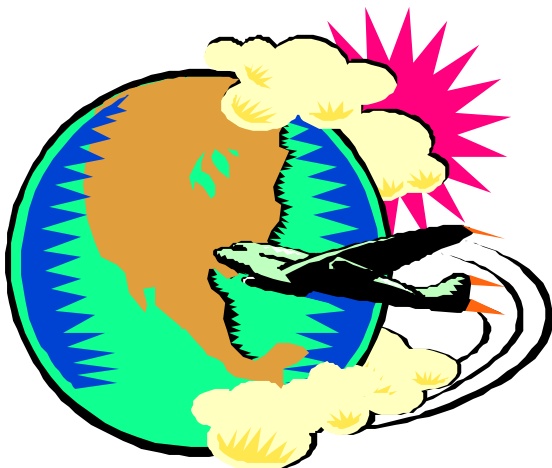
Wigan Council alongside a range of local partners could soon take part in a Home Office scheme to provide humanitarian assistance to refugees in most urgent need of protection.

The decision to participate in the 'Gateway Refugee Protection Programme', developed jointly by the British Government and the United Nations, was taken by the council's Cabinet committee in January 2006.

Since then the Council has been working with a range of partners, including Wigan and Leigh Housing, Greater Manchester Police, the local Primary Care Trust, Friendly Faces and others to develop a support package for around 20 families on a trial basis for up to one year. The Government will meet all the costs involved for that year. The Borough can also expect a reduction in its quota for asylum seekers. This is currently set at 1500, though there are only around 600 asylum seekers in the borough at any one time.

Cllr Keith Cunliffe, Cabinet Member for Community Protection explains:
"These are families who have survived torture, rape and horrendous attacks, have been trapped in squalid camps for many years and, as a result, have already been given 'leave to remain' in the UK. The very least we can do is consider what we can do to help them, whilst at the same time ensuring a balance between our commitments to local communities and the need to assist asylum seekers and refugees.

"Our track record in managing the asylum



process has been second to none, and our efforts have been strongly supported by our friends in the faith network and the voluntary sector. We have worked closely with them to tackle race-hate crime, dispel myths and ensure support is given to asylum seekers.

"On the face of it, the scheme appears straightforward, works well and is fully funded by the government. It helps refugees and keeps them out of the hands of the people traffickers who prey on their desperation. Medical and other checks are carried out before people are moved out of refugee camps and we would support them temporarily until they can support themselves."

If all goes to plan Wigan Borough can expect to welcome its new residents towards the end of this summer.

For more information contact Steve Sargent on 01942 827702 or email S.Sargent@wiganmbc.gov.uk

Leigh MP Andy Burnham is currently a Home Office minister responsible for immigration issues. He can also provide more information on the Gateway scheme and additional comment.

More information is available online at http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/downloads/briefings/gateway_prot_oct04.pdf

An asylum seeker is somebody who is undertaking an asylum application to become classified as a refugee.

In the UK a person is only a refugee once the Home Office has accepted their asylum claim.

A refugee is defined as somebody who:

- has a well-grounded fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion;
- is outside the country they belong to or normally live in; and
- is not able or willing to return home because of the fear of persecution (1951 Convention on Refugees).

The Choice is Yours

Following a review in November, Wigan Council, in partnership with Wigan and Leigh Housing, have made changes to the housing allocation policy – “A New Home – The Choice is Yours”. The policy, which was implemented on 20 January 2005, follows the Government’s guidelines on Choice Based Lettings systems that emphasises customers being actively involved in choosing the home they want.

Previously properties were allocated on a ‘First Come, First Served’ (FCFS) basis. However, after the November review it became clear that customers were unhappy with this system. Customers often felt disadvantaged whichever way they accessed the system. The 9.00am bid opening time caused customers to feel pressured into trying to be the first in line for a property. This led to customers queuing outside the Property Shops from early morning.

Under the revised system all properties will be advertised on a weekly cycle and customers will have 6 days to express an interest in any property advertised. There are two parts to the scheme:

Time Based Homes – The 20% of vacant properties previously offered under FCFS will be let to the applicant who expresses an interest, meets the property criteria and has the earliest registration date.

Needs Based Homes – Remaining vacant properties, apart from a small number of direct lets, will also be advertised weekly. These properties will be let to the applicant who expresses an interest and is in the highest band with the earliest registration date. They must also meet any property criteria.

Properties will be advertised each Thursday in the ‘Property Shop weekly sheet’, which is available in all housing offices and some libraries, the Wigan and Leigh Reporter newspapers and the Property Shop website – www.propertyshop.walh.co.uk

For more information contact Debbie Emmitt on 01942 767341 or email d.emmitt@walh.co.uk

A problem solved

Residents in Wigan have joined forces with Wigan Council and Groundwork Wigan & Chorley to improve a ‘problem’ area in the town.

Abandoned garages in Pagefield had become a magnet for drug users, underage drinkers and other gangs attracted to the derelict site bordering Birch Street, Gidlow Lane and Diggle Street.

Following an approach by local residents and the ‘One Voice’ residents group, Wigan Council and local councillor Terry Halliwell financed a £40,000 improvement scheme carried out by Groundwork and the residents themselves.

The scheme includes security fencing and alley gates, and the planting of more than 400 plants and bulbs around the now-transformed site.

For more information, please contact Nigel Stockley on 01942 827520 or Cllr Terry Halliwell on 01695 628386.



Pagefield residents join Groundwork Wigan and Chorley to transform their neighbourhood.

Worth the wait for strategy update

The last Housing Partnership event in October discussed and challenged the draft Housing Strategy. Many useful comments were received, not least the need to develop a separate affordable housing strategy and the need for more comprehensive services to certain areas.

After taking these comments into account the revised strategy was discussed within the Council and approved by Council in January. The Government Office – NW have also been involved and they have now approved the revised document. The revised Strategy is now in operation, with work centring on implementing the new aspects to the policy including the new older persons and affordable housing strategies as well as updating the homelessness and private sector strategies.

The Housing Strategy is available at www.wigan.gov.uk/pub/ehcp/eh/housing/strategies.htm

What's next for the Partnership

The next **Housing Partnership Event** will be on **Friday 9 June at 9.15am – 1.15pm** (including lunch). Following comments from previous events we are trying a change of venue. This meeting will be at the **Derby Room, Turnpike Centre, Leigh.**

The meeting will focus on:

- How have we performed as a Partnership against our Targets in 2005/06.
- To challenge a draft Affordable Housing Strategy, to be launched in June. This is being developed from the information presented at the last meeting and your comments on priorities. Its likely aim will be to produce a variety of new affordable homes and we will set a target of producing over 500 over the next 5 years.
- To challenge a draft Private Sector Housing Strategy. This is being developed from the stock condition survey and the discussions at Partnership meetings. Again we are looking for the policy to be launched in June.
- Look at Partnership issues.

Landlord licensing lands

From April 2006 some landlords will need to have a license for their properties. Landlords that have a property with 3 or more storeys (including attics and basements), housing 5 or more people, that make up 2 or more households will need to apply for a licence from the council.

The government's aim in introducing mandatory licensing for these 'Houses in Multiple Occupation' (HMO) is to raise standards of accommodation. HMOs provide essential affordable housing for many tenants who need it. The new license is intended to ensure that all these properties enjoy a decent minimum standard of management. Raising standards of management will benefit tenants and the wider community as well as landlords who already manage their properties well. Collectively, badly managed properties can drive down values in an area, which many landlords and local residents find frustrating.

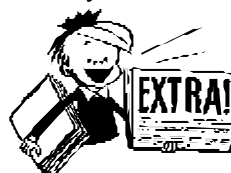
Application packs will be sent out to all landlords that the council are aware manage properties of this type, as soon as they are ready. However, **if you, or someone you know, owns or manages a property that you think may need a licence, you are advised to call the Council to make sure we send the information out to you.**

From July 2006 HMO landlords who haven't applied for a licence may face enforcement measures including fines of up to £20,000. They may also face losing the right to manage their properties as the council can use Management Orders to take over the management of properties which should be licensed.

For more information contact the Housing Enforcement Section on 01942 733348

Any news?

Do you have stories for this newsletter?



If so, please contact Michelle Feeney on 01942 486789 or e-mail: m.feeney@wiganmbc.gov.uk