

# Progress Report on Homelessness Strategy Action Plan

July 2009

## Introduction / Background

It is widely acknowledged that homelessness can often be a symptom of some other problem rather than the problem itself. In tackling and preventing homelessness, it is therefore important that the underlying problem is addressed as the likely consequence of merely treating the symptoms, i.e. rehousing, is likely to mean repeat homelessness occurrences. This approach has paid dividends in Wigan in recent years as repeat homelessness acceptances have reduced from 113 in 2004/05 to 10 in 2008/9.

## Current Issues

Whilst housing has seen a new set of challenges in recent months that require a new set of responses the underlying principles of how the problem should be tackled remains unchanged. Despite the recession beginning in 2008/09 Wigan had a lower level of homelessness presentations and acceptances than at any time over the last 10 years and has reduced from 1445 in 2004/05 to 481 in 2008/09.

Wigan's approach to tackling homelessness has meant that Wigan Council and its partners have been well placed to respond to the recession, with the effect that mortgage aid, landlord claims and orders have reduced at a significantly greater rate than across the region or the country as a whole.

### Court Activity: Quarter 1 of 2009/10 compared to Quarter 1 of 2008/9

	Mortgage Possession Claims	Mortgage Possession Orders	Landlord Possession Claims	Landlord Possessions Orders
Wigan	-49%	-59%	-54%	-59%
Leigh	-33%	-50%	-65%	-42%
Greater Manchester	-37%	-28%	-12%	-9%
North West	-41%	-36%	-25%	-11%
England & Wales	-41%	-£36%	-8%	-2%

Whilst the impact of the recession is currently in the spotlight, the main reasons for homeless remain unchanged; with 60% of all homelessness acceptances from households whose relationship with their partners has broken down (27%) or young people who have left their parents' or relatives' home (33%). Whilst it is acknowledged that financial worries can often be at the heart of relationship difficulties it is important to continue to address all the issues that may cause homelessness in the borough.

The primary aim of Wigan's homelessness strategy is to "Prevent Homelessness by tackling the main causes within the borough and to minimise the impact of its effects". With this in mind the action plan has been broken down in to 4 themes:

- Prevention
- Accommodation
- Support
- Excellent Services

Appendix below is a summary of significant areas of progress over the last 12 months with the full action plan update available at [www.wigan.gov.uk/Housing Strategy](http://www.wigan.gov.uk/Housing Strategy)

Appendix 1 of this report also summarises the additional help that has been made available to minimise the impact of the recession on homelessness in the borough.

## Prevention

A number of significant effective measures have been put in place to provide housing advice and to reduce homelessness including:

- Expansion of Wigan and Leigh Housing Options Service with significant training provided for new and existing staff and re-focussed approach from homelessness assessment to homelessness prevention with separate teams to ensure cases are dealt with effectively (from October 2008) and recruitment of additional staff to deal with prevention work (July 2009).
- New tools available to help prevent homelessness:
  - Wigan was designated a fast track authority for the implementation of Mortgage Rescue and was able to respond quickly because of the excellent partnerships already in place in the borough. Joint protocols are in place between the Council, Wigan & Leigh Housing, Wigan CAB and Plumlife, supported by additional funding from the Council. In the last 6 months 32 households in mortgage difficulties have been considered for the scheme and although only one of these has progressed through to approval for a rescue package, the advice and support for negotiations with lenders that has been offered to all cases has successfully prevented homelessness for the remainder.
  - A homelessness prevention fund was established in 2008/09 with £10,000 set aside to be used as a 'spend to save' budget to prevent homelessness. An additional protocol is also now in place to establish a repossession prevention fund which makes loans available to mortgagees and tenants that can be used as a bargaining tool to halt possession action.
  - Wigan CAB operate a duty court rota system on all days when possession hearings take place. The County Court sends out flyers to all those subject to County Court claims with contact details of the CAB and the Housing Options team in order that they may attempt to prevent repossessions. The CAB also offers a 'text message' service for all these clients and offers Wigan Council a fast track priority debt assessment for all those who are at risk of losing their home because of financial problems.
  - Catch 22 now offer a mediation scheme for young people at risk of homelessness and their families, funded by Supporting People.

- A “Delayed Eviction” pilot using private sector leasing arrangements prevented 58 former Asylum Seeker households becoming homeless and saved an estimated £400,000 in Bed and Breakfast costs.
- Wigan Council was the first local authority in the country to meet with Building Societies with the aim of working together to reduce repossessions.
- Publicity campaigns undertaken to emphasise the need to get advice as early as possible where people have financial difficulties and a campaign warning of the risks of ‘Sale and Rent Back’ schemes.
- Wigan Council employed a Housing Advice Officer to work with private landlords to help prevent homelessness and has developed a protocol (May 2009) with Stephenson Solicitors (and will provide funding as required) to deal with illegal evictions and harassment by private landlords.

## **Accommodation**

An affordable housing strategy was adopted in 2006 in light of developing shortages of affordable housing.

- The affordable housing strategy has created 295 additional affordable lettings in just 3 years with 69 new affordable homes being completed in 2008/09 (largely by RSLs);
- There has been continued success in bidding to the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) and there are nearly 200 further social rented and shared equity homes that have been approved and are in the development pipeline. Especially valuable are the 40+ homes for rent that are being bought direct from developers by RSLs. These are largely family homes including some 4-bedroom properties, with the added advantage that they are all currently vacant.
- Additionally Wigan and Leigh Housing with financial backing from the Council have recently been successful in bidding to the HCA for the development of 50 new homes at Kay Close in Scholes. It is hoped that these will be on site in the autumn and followed by further bids
- The new social lettings agency (Wigan Housing Solutions) has been set up and has now commenced operations. It aims to increase the scope of the popular but over-subscribed bond scheme by arranging to manage or lease up to 150 homes from private landlords for letting to people in housing need
- Equally important is the attempt to ensure maximum use is made of the existing stock and here the levels of empty Council homes have been minimised, the Council Housing Allocation policy is under review and new nomination agreements are in place with RSLs, with all but one partner offering 100% nominations to the Council
- Additional plans for further bidding are being developed from the Council, Wigan and Leigh housing and other RSLs over the next 12 months. For example the HCA have announced that Councils will for the first time be able to bid against a £350m pot for the development of new Council housing and a bid is being prepared in liaison with WALH.

- The Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy is being amended to try to encourage owners to improve homes to get them back in to use and this will be linked to Wigan Housing Solutions, to ensure they are affordable to those that need accommodation
- Review of landlord accreditation with a new scheme managed in-house aimed at improving standards within the private rented sector as well as promoting the availability of affordable, decent private rented housing to those in housing need.

### **Support to minimise the impact of the effects of homelessness and prevent homelessness re-occurring**

- Temporary Accommodation reduction strategy in place, re-enforced by the Council adopting NI 156 as one of its top 5 indicators on the Local Area Agreement.
- Significant Reductions in the use of Bed & Breakfast. Where this is unavoidable, only Bed & Breakfast establishments that have been inspected, graded and approved are used.
- Fortnightly “Strategic Temporary Accommodation Reduction” (STAR) meetings take place between Wigan and Leigh Housing and the Council to identify causes of blockages in Temporary Accommodation and measures to tackle them.
- Intensive Floating Support Service established by Stepping Stone (funded by Supporting People) for those with complex needs.
- Continued funding (matched by ALWPCT) of The Brick project in Wigan town centre to reduce the numbers of people sleeping rough in the borough by providing support for people to access services and build up the skills needed to maintain independent living. The Brick provides both outreach and drop-in services to engage with rough sleepers and help them address chaotic lifestyle issues, substance misuse and/or mental health problems with the ultimate goal of empowering them to maintain a successful tenancy.
- Homeless and Vulnerable Persons Team, Ashton Leigh and Wigan Primary Care Trust is a flagship service now fully established with Health Visitors Community Psychiatric Nurse, Nursery Nurses, Outreach workers all linked to a GP with a specialist interest. Poor health (mental and physical) can be a cause of Homelessness and homeless people face inequalities in accessing health services. To address this the service provides healthcare support to those placed in temporary accommodation, rough sleepers, gypsies and travellers and asylum seekers, i.e. those groups who would find it difficult or may be reluctant to access health care services. Only a few areas of the country offer this type of service and I am not aware of any other that operates on this scale.

### **Excellent Services**

A number of inter-agency protocols have been developed and implemented in recent years, however what the protocols can not readily demonstrate are the excellent partnership relationships that are now in place in Wigan.

The Homelessness Forum was established in 2002 and continues to flourish. When new challenges arise such as the current recession, Wigan is able to respond quickly because of the strong partnership relationships that have developed in recent years, with partners supporting each other in funding bids and service development.

- Wigan volunteered to be a fast track authority for mortgage rescue.
- Wigan responded to the increased need to provide additional court desk services before funding was made available by Government.
- The success of the Brick is due to partnership working between the Queens Hall Methodist Church, Green Pastures, the Primary Care Trust and the Council.
- The Council were keen to develop private sector leasing arrangements and through its partnership with Wigan CAB, developed a new not-for-profit company to act as a social lettings agent "Wigan Housing Solutions". Which has just won a SPARK challenge award for innovation.

### **Next Steps**

Wigan's Homelessness Strategy has set out an ambitious 5 year action plan. Whilst significant progress has been made in the first year there is still much to do. Wigan is confident that it will achieve the temporary reduction target and has listed NI 156 as a key indicator in the Local Area Agreement. Whilst the target itself is rather a narrow indicator it is a reflection of the success of the up-stream work that is now taking place to prevent homelessness. Wigan has stepped up a gear to meet the challenge:

- A review of the Housing Allocations Policy is taking place and is now subject to consultation. It includes proposals to increase priority for those at risk of homelessness in order to avoid the need for temporary accommodation.
- Wigan Housing Solutions has been set up and commenced operations and will start to manage properties in August 2009 with a target of managing 150 properties for private landlords or via leasing arrangements by the end of its second year.
- A new Private Landlord Accreditation Scheme has been launched by the Council and we are now processing applications, with the first landlords expected to be accredited by the end of July 2009.
- Funding has been allocated for the creation of a Liaison Officer post within Housing Benefits with the aim of:
  - Fast tracking Housing Benefit applications for those at risk of becoming homeless
  - Increasing the confidence of private landlords to take tenants who would qualify for Local Housing Allowance
  - Supporting Wigan Housing Solutions
  - Funding has been allocated to the development of a Supported Lodgings Scheme which although will be managed by the Council's Aftercare team but will also be available to young people who have not been involved with the care system

- The CAB, with support from the Council and Legal Services Commission, are to employ an additional money advice worker
- In partnership with the ALW Primary Care Trust, WWL acute hospitals trust, and Wigan & Leigh Housing, the Council is developing a Hospital Discharge and Homelessness Prevention Protocol which will link with a similar protocol for all ten Greater Manchester authorities.

### **Three key challenges we are currently facing are:**

1. Responding to recent case law which places the emphasis of responsibility for meeting the needs of homeless 16 and 17 year olds to the 1989 Children Act rather than the homelessness legislation. Housing providers will continue to provide accommodation and support but holistic needs assessment protocols are to be developed with Children & Young Peoples' Services.
2. More work needs to be done to support people with complex needs, i.e. those with a mixture of mental health issues, low level learning difficulties, substance misuse issues etc. This group often lead chaotic lifestyles and do not easily access existing resources. Better linkages need to be developed between housing and mental health and substance misuse support services in order to best meet the needs of this group and prevent blockages in temporary accommodation and hospitals.
3. Wigan has a severe shortage of emergency accommodation for single people. A partnership has been developed with Great Places (RSL) and Recycling Lives which would also produce training and employment activities for homeless people along with better waste recycling facilities. The scheme would support people who would otherwise be placed in temporary accommodation by the Council along with other single people who would not fall into the 'priority need' category determined by homeless legislation. Despite extensive efforts however, a suitable site has yet to be identified and until one is found tendering applications cannot be made.

### **Summary / Conclusion**

Through the Homelessness Forum, the borough has significantly improved a range of services to people at risk or who have experienced homelessness. The statistics around homeless acceptances possession and repeat homelessness are a reflection of these efforts but sustained effort is required to enable us to meet our challenging target to reduce the use of temporary accommodation.