

The Welsh Assembly Government welcomes the report and offers the following response to the 6 recommendations:

1 Recommendation

We recommend that the Assembly Government's forthcoming guidance should clearly set out:

- a. **how local authorities should interpret homelessness legislation and definitions in practice, with practical examples to assist local authorities in their decision making; and**
- b. **the difference between "gate-keeping" and prevention.**

Accepted.

a. and b.

Comprehensive guidance on interpreting the homelessness legislation in addition to the issue of prevention and 'gate-keeping' practices will be provided in the revised Code of Guidance for Local Authorities on Allocations and Homelessness to be published for consultation by December 2007. As well as revising the Code of Guidance, the Welsh Assembly Government is funding a number of projects to aid local authorities and advice agencies in the proper interpretation and implementation of homelessness legislation. These projects will play an important role in ensuring people who are homeless or are at threat of becoming homeless will receive good quality services to which they are entitled. The Welsh Assembly Government is also working with the WLGA and Shelter Cymru on development of an advice leaflet for enquirers to explain their rights and how they can get further help to resolve their housing problems.

2 Recommendation

We recommend that the Assembly Government's homelessness team should raise awareness of the Strategy amongst other teams and departments, for example through seminars and sitting on working groups.

Accepted.

The homelessness policy team are already involved in many working groups including the All Wales Offender Accommodation Steering Group and the Youth Justice Committee for Wales, as well as joint groups covering social services, health and private rented sector issues, through which joint-planning and cross-sector working is being taken forward at a national level. Officials are planning cross-departmental presentations on the National Homelessness Strategy in the context of the 'Making the Connections' agenda, the first of which has been given to health and social care officials in June 2007. Further joint meetings are in progress with officials in other policy areas such as education, youth policy

and local government to raise awareness of the Strategy and develop joint action to meet its objectives.

3

Recommendation

We recommend that the Welsh Assembly Government should commission or carry out:

- a. **inspections of temporary accommodation, with risk-based follow-up spot checks; and**
- b. **a full assessment of whether local authorities' housing allocation and homelessness policies and practices are in line with statutory requirements.**

a. Accepted.

b. Accepted

a The statutory responsibility for ensuring the quality of temporary accommodation is with local authorities through the Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (Wales) Order 2006. The WAG has issued guidance on this legislation, which will be incorporated into the statutory Code of Guidance on Allocations and Homelessness. We will include a clear expectation in our revised statutory guidance that local authorities should carry out spot checks based on risk. We will also enter discussions with the WAO, WLGA and the voluntary sector to see whether this guidance should be strengthened, including the need for risk-based inspections and spot-checks. These discussions will begin in July 2007.

b The Welsh Assembly Government has in partnership with Shelter Cymru completed an assessment of all local authority allocation policies in Wales to check compliance with statutory requirements. A report entitled 'Review of Local Authority Allocation schemes' was issued in March 2007 to local authorities on the key findings, with recommendations to them on how they should review and revise their policies. The homelessness policy team has also commissioned a number of toolkits and good practice publications to help local authorities discharge their statutory homelessness duties in line with legal requirements. The Welsh Assembly Government will issue revised statutory guidance on allocations and homelessness policies in the coming twelve months, and take follow up action to ensure local authorities have responded to the good practice recommendations and guidance to be issued this year. We will also work with Shelter Cymru and the WLGA to identify and tackle any instances of poor practice.

We have supported the development of local homelessness strategies through direct funding and statutory guidance since the duty was introduced in 2003. Since then we have provided over £1m over the past two years to supporting local authority homelessness prevention and temporary accommodation initiatives. We are also funding the local authority homelessness network posts, which support local authorities in meeting the national agenda. We have carried out visits to all local authorities over the past 18 months, and it is clear that all authorities are making progress towards meeting national objectives, although in a number of cases greater political priority needs to be given to this problem.

From 2007 the Welsh Assembly Government expects local authorities to meet their duties to formulate homelessness strategies within their local housing

strategies. We will be considering the final housing strategies in due course. The provision of specialist services is a matter for local planning. Local authorities have a duty to identify needs and plan services with partners through their local housing strategy. The National Homelessness Strategy gives clear direction on the need for joint planning and delivery of services. We are supporting and funding a range of specialist services through our Homelessness and Supporting People grant programmes. For example, we are funding services which promote health access, specialist housing advice and enhancement of independent living skills for homeless people. On the issue of armed service veterans, last autumn we organised a national conference with veterans and homelessness organisations, and are currently discussing with the housing and veterans' sectors the development of a service directory and regional seminars to promote homelessness prevention amongst veterans.

4 Recommendation

We recommend that the Assembly Government should:

- a. use the housing needs assessment to develop a national baseline of housing need and supply; and**
- b. assess the capacity of the private sector to continue accommodating people with a general housing need while increasing access for homeless people.**

Accepted.

a The Welsh Assembly Government and Local Authorities will use the information collected in local housing market assessments to inform planning for Social Housing Grant programmes, supporting delivery of local housing strategies and to help utilise the private rented sector more effectively to meet housing need. Planning for housing need is important for the wider context of housing policy and cannot be entirely directed by homelessness policy. However, a wide range of research evidence has been commissioned and amassed to better understand the issues impacting upon housing need and supply, in order to better inform the delivery of more targeted and effective policies. This research evidence includes the study undertaken by Michael Jones of Cambridge University on the relationship between the housing market, homelessness and social housing lettings. Local authority housing market assessments are a key tool through which information on local demand for housing can be gathered.

b. Assessing the capacity of the private rented sector to meet housing need should be carried out at a local level and addressed through local housing strategies and housing market assessments. The Assembly Government will aggregate a national picture from these assessments which will be used to inform the development of policy. The Welsh Assembly Government has issued guidance to local authorities on carrying out local housing market assessments, including the condition and capacity of the private rented sector. Shelter Cymru have already produced a report for the Welsh Assembly Government which looks at the factors that can influence access to the private rented sector for homeless people. Wales has a growing private rented sector which comprises approximately 11 per cent of the Welsh Housing Market. Through the Housing Health and Safety Rating System and the Licensing of Houses in Multiple

Occupation as introduced by the Housing Act 2004, standards in and access to the private rented sector are set to improve. The Welsh Assembly Government has encouraged local authorities to bring empty properties back into use: our Circular 20/02 explains how this should be taken forward, and we have introduced Empty Dwelling Management Orders to reinforce this. The Welsh Assembly Government's working group on the Private Rented Sector is committed to identifying and disseminating good practice to this effect.

5 *Recommendation*

We recommend that the Welsh Assembly Government should work with local authorities, the independent sector and other Government agencies to develop a clear and consistent strategy to secure sustainable funding for projects that can demonstrate good practice.

Accepted.

The Welsh Assembly Government has increased funding for tackling homelessness in Wales by over 1200 per cent since 1998, from £500,000 to £6.44 million in 2007-2008. This includes £500,000 in 2006-2007 for local authority prevention work and a further £450,000 for projects involving good practice and its dissemination across Wales. The Welsh Assembly Government supports over 100 homelessness projects with long term continuous funding and at present approximately 78 per cent of the homelessness grant programme is deployed in this way amounting to a total of £5,034,423. Projects provided with continuous funding include bond schemes, housing advice services, night shelters and outreach projects. The Welsh Assembly Government has reviewed its grant funding process to enhance the monitoring and evaluation of projects and to provide a greater focus on outcomes and to ensure the needs of service users are met. We will continue to invest most of our homelessness grant programme on projects which can receive long term sustainable funding, provided that the projects continue to demonstrate their strategic value and effectiveness.

6 *Recommendation*

We recommend that the Welsh Assembly Government should develop a clear plan to monitor and evaluate:

- a. progress against each of the Strategy's 10 objectives;**
- b. progress against actions delivered by other organizations;**
- c. the impact and quality of homelessness services it funds directly;**
- d. the impact of prevention services provided by local authorities, housing associations and other independent organisations; and**
- e. the adequacy of services from the users' perspective.**

Accepted.

a. The delivery of the Strategy and implementation of the Action Plan is monitored by the Homelessness Strategies Working Group and Reports on progress against the Strategy's objectives are presented to the Social Justice and Regeneration Committee. We will continue to ensure that progress reports focus on the 10 main objectives in the Strategy.

b. The Welsh Assembly Government's homelessness policy team is currently engaged in completing a survey of all the other organisations on which the

Strategy's Action Plan places an expectation of complementary action. Initial responses to the questionnaires indicate generally positive responses to the National Homelessness Strategy, improved joint-working and the development of many innovative initiatives.

c. The Welsh Assembly Government's homelessness grant process already involves the monitoring of performance information for projects. However, the process of evaluation of grant funded projects has recently been reviewed to deliver a more qualitative and outcome focused assessment of projects. Monitoring and evaluation of homelessness grant funded projects will take account of the strategic value of the project, deliver quality assurance evidence and work to promote partnership working and more effectively meeting the needs of service users.

d. The new homelessness prevention indicator has been well received by local authorities and this performance indicator will be a cornerstone for taking the prevention agenda forward. Homelessness prevention is central to the National Homelessness Strategy and the Welsh Assembly Government has already provided extensive guidance to local authorities on best practice in homelessness prevention. The homelessness policy team through their visits to local authorities have assessed the comprehensive nature of homelessness prevention services provided across Wales. In addition, The Welsh Assembly Government will explore with the Welsh Local Government Association, Community Housing Cymru, the Wales Audit Office and wider voluntary sector how qualitative monitoring and support for good practice and homelessness prevention work can be enhanced. This will run in parallel with the introduction of the new performance indicator for prevention of homelessness, which began from April 2007.

e. Service users are at the heart of planning for homelessness services and the Welsh Assembly Government expects local authorities to involve service users in strategic planning and is promoting good practice in this area. The Welsh Assembly Government has funded the development of a toolkit and CD-Rom with the City and County of Swansea and is working with the Local Government Data Unit on developing a standard model user satisfaction survey form and guidance. The Code of Guidance for Local Authorities on the Allocation of Housing and Homelessness already expects local authorities to give a prominent role to service users in the development of services, and this will be emphasised in the revised Code of Guidance. In addition, the new process of evaluating homelessness grant funded projects strengthens the requirement for evidence of service user involvement and feedback on services delivered to ensure homelessness grant funded services effectively meet the needs of service users.