

Homelessness Review

2017/18

Conwy County Borough Council

Executive Summary

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This Homelessness Review has been prepared by arc⁴ Ltd. on behalf of Conwy County Council. The Review itself provides a detailed analysis of the levels and nature of homelessness, an audit of the services and a review of the resources available to spend on homelessness within the county.
- 1.2 This Homelessness Review will form the principle element of the required evidence base for Conwy CBC. It therefore identifies, captures and quantifies the levels of current provision and future demand for homelessness services within the borough and through its findings will underpin and inform the development of both a local service level response, the emerging Local Housing Strategy as well as the development of a Sub-regional Homelessness Strategy for North Wales.
- 1.3 This Homelessness Review forms part of a suite of similar commissioned reviews for the six* North Wales local authorities scheduled to be completed by arc⁴ Ltd in the first half of 2018.

** Conwy; Denbighshire; Flintshire; Gwynedd; Wrexham; Anglesey*

2. Background

- 2.1 The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 requires every local authority to carry out a review of homelessness in their borough every four years, to develop and publish a Homelessness Strategy based on this review and to consult with other local statutory and voluntary organisations.
- 2.2 This review will provide a basis for a strategic approach to tackle and prevent homelessness and will help to build upon the positive work that already takes place in Conwy to provide individuals in housing need with a range of housing options to prevent and alleviate homelessness across the county.
- 2.3 This Executive Summary provides a briefing on the main findings of the review, an analysis of future trends and the next steps in terms of strategic responses.

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3. Methodology

- 3.1 The Homelessness Review is required to cover:
- An analysis of the past, current and future levels of homelessness;
 - An audit of the services aimed at preventing, accommodating and supporting people who are, or may become, homeless;
 - A review of the resources available to spend on homelessness within the borough.
- 3.2 The review process has drawn upon a wide range of sources, including homelessness statistics, supporting people data, housing advice data and a series of consultation exercises.
- 3.3 There are many complex issues that can give rise to homelessness, many of which are outside the scope of the local authority. Therefore in compiling this review, the Council has worked closely with a variety of other statutory and voluntary agencies.
- 3.4 The review should therefore be seen as a multi-agency document which recognises that partnership working is key to preventing homelessness and developing long term sustainable housing and support solutions.

Consultation

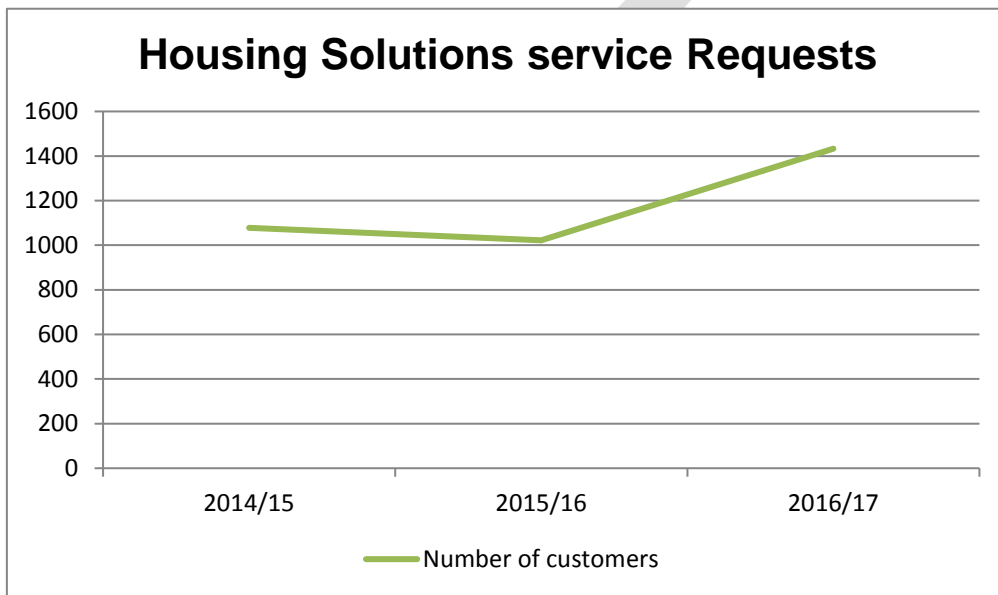
- 3.5 Consultation has been central to the development of the Homelessness Review and will continue to be an important element when developing the Regional Homelessness Strategy and local delivery plan.
- 3.6 Consultation has been undertaken through a range of different methods with customers, partner agencies and Council staff.
- 3.7 This has included focus groups, stakeholder workshops, questionnaires and telephone interviews with customers.
- 3.8 In particular, consultation with individuals who are either currently homeless or had experienced homelessness in the past has been vital to the review, and the results will be used to improve existing services and develop new ones where appropriate.

4. Homelessness in Figures

Service Requests

- 4.1 Since the introduction of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, demand on Conwy’s Housing Solutions service has been increasing annually. At the end of March 2017, the Service had experienced a 32.9% increase in service requests since the introduction of the new legislation.

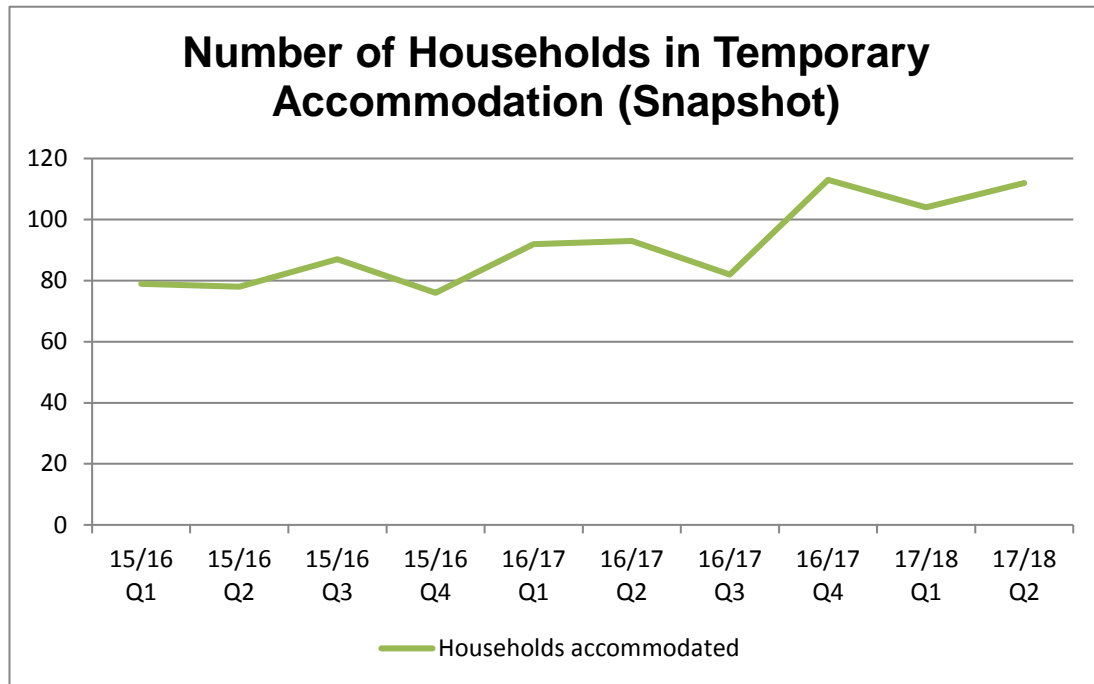
Fig 1: Source: Housing Solutions database



Use of Temporary Accommodation

- 4.2 At the end of the 31st March 2017 there were 113 households in temporary accommodation, of which 24 were accommodated in Bed & Breakfast accommodation. The number of households accommodated in temporary accommodation at the end of March 2017 increased by 29% compared with the previous year.

Fig 2: Source: Housing Solutions database



4.3 Temporary accommodation in Conwy is generally provided in self-contained properties, which are leased from private sector landlords. The households are able to remain in the temporary accommodation until the Council’s duty to them is discharged through an offer of suitable accommodation. Emergency accommodation is largely provided in holiday, Bed & Breakfast and hotel accommodation. Whilst the team seeks to source emergency accommodation within Conwy, there is sometimes a need to place households in accommodation outside of the county in instances when no local accommodation can be found.

Access to Accommodation

Social Housing

- 4.4 In 2008 Conwy County Borough Council transferred its housing to stock to the newly formed Catrefi Conwy. Within Conwy, social housing accounts for 12% of the total housing stock, which is the second lowest in Wales. Of the stock, 23% is sheltered housing. A total of 15% of social housing stock has one bedroom, in contrast with 30% of applicants on the Housing Register who have a one bed need.
- 4.5 There is a very low turnover of social housing, in 2016/17 there were 434 new lets, of which 305 were general needs accommodation. Of these lets 91 were one bedroom accommodation and 136 were two-bedroom accommodation. This indicates a significant issue in relation to supply, especially for single persons accommodation.
- 4.6 At the end of August 2017 there were a total of 891 households on the Housing Register. The greatest demand is for general needs one bedroom accommodation, accounting for 42.1% of applicants followed by two bedroom accommodation (29.5%).

- 4.7 From 2014/15 there has been an increase in the number of evictions from social housing due to rent arrears. It is likely that these are linked to welfare reform changes, including the bedroom tax.

Supported Accommodation

- 4.8 There is a high demand for supported accommodation and floating support services. During 2016/17 there were a total of 1,308 referrals to Supporting People funded services, of which 57% were female. The majority of clients accessing Supporting People funded services were aged 25-40 years (41%) and 16-24 years (28%), followed by 41-60 years (25%).

Private Rented Sector

- 4.9 In Conwy the Private Rented Sector accounts for 18% of the total housing stock. Given the limitations on the size and investment in the social rented stock, it constitutes an essential element in the provision of housing for people who may otherwise be homeless.
- 4.10 The private rented sector in Conwy is not a particularly affordable market, low proportions of properties are within Local Housing Allowance levels (an average of 10.9% between 2014-2016).

Shared Accommodation

- 4.11 Shared accommodation is increasingly becoming the only affordable housing option for young single people but there is not a culture of sharing in the county and Council policies have discouraged the creation of Houses in Multiple Occupation.
- 4.12 The lack of shared housing significantly restricts the affordable housing options available for single people particularly those who are under 35 years and in receipt of local housing allowance.

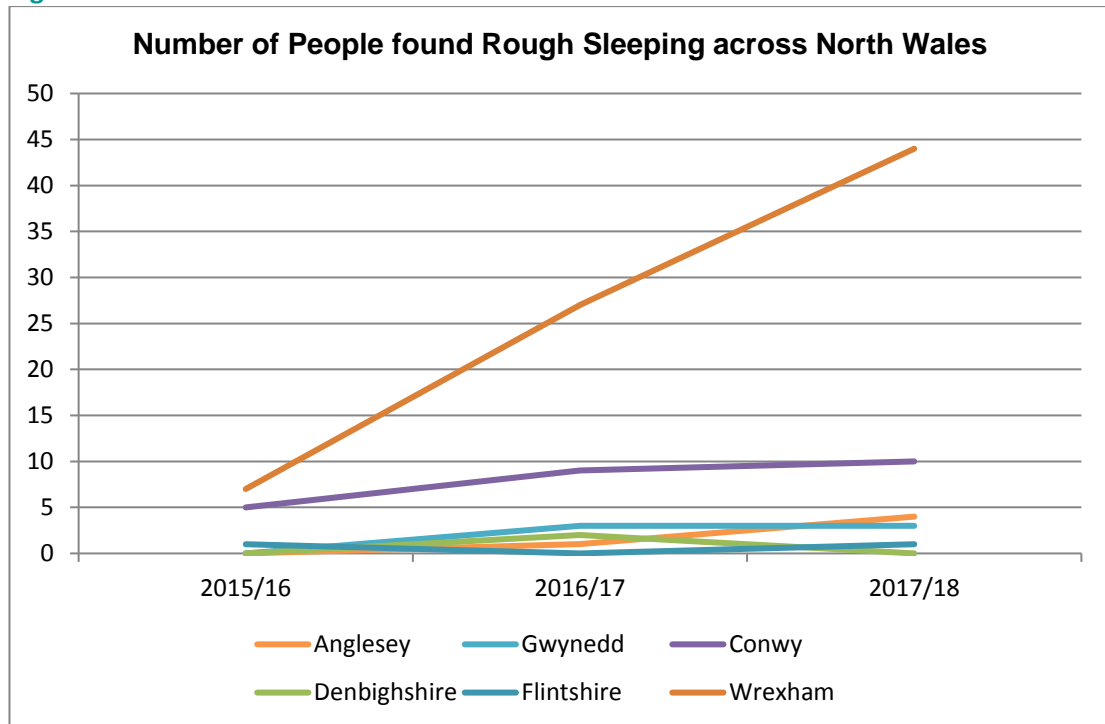
Affordable Housing Need

- 4.13 The Local Housing Market Assessment identified that Conwy needs 995 additional affordable homes over the plan period (2016-2021), which equates to 199 units per year.

Rough Sleeping

- 4.14 The official rough sleeping count carried out in November 2017 identified 10 people rough sleeping, this was the second highest number across North Wales, and represents an annual increase over the last three years.

Fig 3: Source Stats Wales



5. Key Findings

- 5.1 The implementation of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 signalled both a legislative and cultural shift in the Council's response to homelessness. Conwy County Borough Council places a high priority on preventing homelessness with a focus on delivering individually tailored solutions for its customers.
- 5.2 The key findings from the Homelessness Review are:

Homelessness Levels across Conwy

- There is an increasing demand on the Housing Solutions service following the implementation of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. An increasing number of households are homeless or threatened with homelessness in Conwy. Evidence throughout the review suggests that this increase will continue.
- The main causes of homelessness in Conwy are:
 - Loss of rented or tied accommodation,
 - Parents and relatives no longer willing to accommodate,
 - Relationship breakdown,
 - Domestic abuse,
 - Leaving prison.
- There are high numbers of households in temporary accommodation, and a high use of Bed & Breakfast accommodation. Further work is needed to more fully understand the temporary accommodation requirements, and how these are best met, including future projected demand, through the development of a temporary accommodation plan.
- There are a very high proportion of single people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. Specific housing options and prevention solutions will need to be developed to meet the needs of single people.

Rough Sleeping

- There is an increasing number of people sleeping rough across Conwy as indicated by a number of data sources and supported by consultation responses. There is a need to develop targeted services in response to this growing need.

Services Available for the Prevention of Homelessness

- Conwy Housing Solutions is an effective partnership model and provides customers with access to a range of housing and advice services under one roof. The service provides a high quality service to customers, and has effective systems, tools, policies and procedures in place.

- The current caseload size of Housing Solutions Officers is unmanageable and not sustainable in the long term. The high caseloads are impacting upon the team's ability to successfully prevent and relieve homelessness, with the inevitable impact this then has on the level of B&B and temporary accommodation placements. There is a need to review caseloads, structure and resources to ensure that caseloads remain at a manageable level and opportunities for effective prevention are maximised.
- The Housing Solutions service is able to both successfully prevent and relieve homelessness, and the number of successful outcomes increased significantly in 2016/17.
- There are many examples of excellent partnership working to prevent homelessness, there is a need to continue to develop these partnerships and implement joint protocols. There is a need for a more joined up approach to early intervention and prevention with adult social care colleagues. This is particularly the case for responding to clients with complex needs to ensure the right support is in place to resolve the underlying medical and support needs.
- There is a need to ensure that customer's expectations in relation to housing are realistic through ensuring that information in relation to housing availability and options is easily available and accessible, including through online tools.

Accommodation and Support Available for People who are Homeless or Threatened with Homelessness

- Owner-occupation is the dominant tenure within Conwy. However, accessing this tenure has become increasingly difficult given house price increases over the past few years, with a house price affordability ratio in 2017 of 6.05, compared with 5.42 in Wales.
- The social rented sector plays a vital role in providing affordable accommodation in Conwy. However, the overall proportion of social rented stock is lower than the national average and the number of lettings made to new tenants is far outweighed by the number of households on the Housing Register, this is particularly the case for single person accommodation.
- The private rented sector is the second biggest tenure in Conwy and plays an important role in providing accommodation for a variety of households and income groups who cannot access owner occupation or social renting. Access to the private rented sector is frequently used to prevent homelessness. However, loss of private rented accommodation is the main cause of homelessness in Conwy. It is becoming increasingly more difficult for Housing Solution's customers to access private rented accommodation, this is in part due to affordability, a competitive market, and reluctance from landlords to accept tenants in receipt of benefits.
- Affordability is a significant issue within parts of Conwy in relation to owner occupation and privately renting. Low levels of income and reliance on benefits among households in housing need further exacerbates the problem.

- The Local Housing Market Housing Assessment has identified Conwy needs 389 additional affordable homes.
- The impact of current and future welfare reform set against a backdrop of a difficult economic climate will continue to pose particular challenges and make it even more important that services for those at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness, are as effective as possible.
- There is a need to maximise access to social housing for households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.
- There is a need to develop a comprehensive landlord offer that enables clients to not only access the private rented sector but to also successfully sustain this accommodation. Alongside this there is a need to review the Social Lettings Agency offer to ensure that it attracts landlords and enables the Council to discharge its duty into the private rented sector.
- There is a need to develop a range of affordable housing options for single people under the age of 35; this may include lodging schemes, house shares and supported provision.
- There are high levels of demand for supported accommodation. A formal needs assessment would provide a comprehensive understanding of the need for housing related support services across Conwy to inform a robust commissioning strategy.

The Needs of Identified Groups

- Young people are over-represented in the homelessness statistics and Supporting People data, when compared with population data, indicating a lack of suitable and affordable housing options for young people. It also indicates that young people are at a greater risk of becoming homeless.
- There are a very high number of complex cases, including both single people and families with multiple and challenging needs. There is a need to have a better quantitative and qualitative understanding of these issues, alongside understanding if existing provision meets the needs of these customers.
- There has been an increase in the number of evictions from social housing due to rent arrears. It is essential that social housing tenants are able to access debt and money advice, and that referral pathways with Citizen's Advice Bureau should be fully utilised. The development and implementation of pre-eviction protocols is also essential.

6. Future Trends

6.1 Whilst there has been considerable success in preventing homelessness in Conwy, there are many factors which potentially may have an effect on the number of people faced with homelessness. It is important that these are recognised and, wherever possible, services enhanced to minimise the negative effect of each of the factors.

- The continuing impact of the economic climate, financial pressures and personal debt.
- Financial pressures on local government budgets and homelessness services, including the Homeless Transitional Funding Grants becoming part of the flexible funding pathway.
- Many of the services which sustain people in their own tenancies or provide alternative accommodation options are funded through Supporting People. It is important to recognise that any reductions in funding would have a significant impact on future levels of homelessness.
- Reducing numbers of social rented housing through historic right to buy sales coupled with a reduction of void levels could result in less available accommodation for those on the Housing Register.
- The lack of one bedroom accommodation, and in particular affordable housing options for under 35 year olds, is likely to lead to an increase in young single people being unable to resolve their own housing issues. This will result in an increased demand from this customer group on the Housing Solutions service and other support and advice services.
- Welfare Reform has already begun to have an impact upon homelessness levels, and it is likely that the further welfare reforms, including the introduction of Universal Credit, will continue to impact upon individuals' ability to meet their housing costs.
- It is anticipated that there will be a continuing increase in evictions by housing providers due to rent arrears as a result of welfare reform, particularly once Universal Credit is rolled out.
- Ongoing financial pressures on households may lead to overcrowding and breakdown in family relationships.
- An ageing population will require appropriate housing and support to prevent an increase in homelessness amongst older households.
- The national increase in the prison population increases the risk of people losing their home whilst in custody.
- The new prison in Wrexham will begin to release prisoners in 2018, this is likely to result in an increase in prison leavers accessing service provision in Conwy.
- Rent Smart Wales – the increased requirements on landlords, may continue to result in some landlords, including smaller scale or 'accidental' landlords, choosing to sell their properties, reducing the number of private rented properties available for Housing Solutions' clients.

- Wilfa Newydd will generate additional housing demand from up to 11,700 construction workers at its peak in the mid-2020s. There will be a significant requirement for additional housing over the build period and beyond which is likely to impact on the most vulnerable and cause potential displacement in the private rented sector.
- Affordability issues and the very limited access to private rented accommodation, including shared accommodation options, make it increasingly more and more difficult for the Housing Solutions service to be able to find affordable and sustainable housing options for clients. Unless affordable accommodation is available it is anticipated that homelessness will continue to increase.
- The high caseloads of the Housing Solutions service are currently unmanageable and impact upon the service's ability to effectively prevent or relieve homelessness. If this continues both homelessness and placements into temporary accommodation will increase.
- The removal of intentionality for homeless families by 2019, will have an impact on services, with the need to find suitable accommodation options for families with often complex and multiple needs, and a poor tenancy history, placing a demand on the Housing Solutions team.
- An increase in mortgage rates would result in an increase in people unable to meet their mortgage payments, with a likely increase in repossessions, including both home-owners and buy to let landlords.

7. Next Steps

- 7.1 In order to ensure that the information contained within this review is a true reflection of homelessness in Conwy the review will be made available to all stakeholders and the wider public for consultation.
- 7.2 Following this review and consultation responses the Council is required to produce and publish a Homelessness Strategy. At the time of writing this review the six Councils of North Wales were in discussions with Welsh Government regarding the development of a Regional Homelessness Strategy with local delivery plans to address issues specific to each Authority.
- 7.3 The Council is committed to working with its partners to preventing homelessness in Conwy.

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