

# Briefing Paper 8

## Housing and Homelessness

### National Assembly Elections 2007

*"For four months we didn't go to school, we went to six houses, no seven houses and six new schools.....I don't like moving because every time I make new friends and then I have to move again and again and again."*

Listen Up: The voices of homeless children  
Shelter



## **Housing and Homelessness**

Housing is a priority for state assistance under Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is reflected in the Welsh Assembly Government's core aim for children: "A safe home and community".

Thousands of people become homeless in Wales each year. Homelessness increased in 2003 and 2004 and although there was a decrease in 2005, over 20,000 households still applied to their local authority as homeless. Reducing the number of homelessness applications does not always mean that people are being effectively assisted. There is a danger that the homelessness prevention agenda locally is leading to people being denied assistance and being given only short-term solutions (as identified through Shelter Cymru's casework and lack of monitoring of the work by local authorities).

A significant proportion of homeless people are families with dependent children and others are young, vulnerable people. Research shows that homelessness destroys people's physical and mental health, affects children's educational attainment and blights the future life chances of families. It is not a marginal problem with limited costs – it costs individuals and families in the short and longer term and costs Wales, both socially and economically, with impacts on mental and physical health, educational attainment, crime and re-offending for example.

### **What has been achieved since 2003?**

The Welsh Assembly Government has taken some measures to tackle homelessness in Wales. Examples of this include secondary legislation that will restrict the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for families with children and 16-17 year olds, ensuring that the health needs and access to support and services are improved for households placed in temporary accommodation and improving the conditions in temporary accommodation.

There is a revised National Homelessness Strategy that emphasises prevention, tackling repeat homelessness and includes an action plan for the Assembly Government and Local Authorities. Some resources to assist local authorities with prevention services have been provided. Partnership working and linking strategies and plans is also an important element. This is a thread running through the approach to social policy and wider assembly policy – making the connections.

Homebuy schemes have helped some people on low incomes on to the housing ladder. The Assembly Government has also abolished the means test for adaptations to housing for disabled children and has begun to address the needs of BME communities. We welcome the National Housing Strategy and review of Housing adaptations recommendations to provide information and advice to people with disabilities and local registers of accessible and adapted properties available within local authority areas.

### **What are our current concerns?**

- 8,376 households were accepted as homeless in 2005
- 3,372 of these – 40% - were households with dependent children
- 654 households accepted included a pregnant woman
- 716 of those accepted were 16-17 year olds

Additionally, although there has been a welcome reduction in the number of homes considered unfit, there remain over 57,000 unfit occupied first homes in Wales and many of

these are unfit due to dampness and disrepair. Over 20,000 households with dependent children live in accommodation that is considered unfit.

The National Housing Strategy for Wales acknowledges that there are more unfit houses in rural areas than in other areas. Housing is also at a premium in rural areas owing to second home purchases right to buy and market pressure. To address this, the National strategy has increased the homebuy scheme to 50% of the value of property in rural areas, but lack of affordable homes is still a significant issue

There remains a lack of suitable and affordable housing for identified needs, including disabled people and vulnerable young people.

Although there appears to be a desire to tackle housing and homelessness among some national and local politicians, there are not enough resources to fundamentally tackle these issues in Wales.

## **Recommendations**

We call on the Welsh Assembly Government to:

- Give high political priority to tackling homelessness and providing suitable affordable housing and ensure that there is high priority at Local Authority level.
- Work to find enduring solutions for homeless families and young people, rather than simply gate-keeping services and reacting to crisis situations with short-term measures.
- Make a greater commitment of public investment to support the Welsh Assembly Government's strategic developments and provide more affordable and suitable housing in Wales.
- Utilise any opportunities under the forthcoming Government of Wales Act to improve responses to homelessness and access to affordable housing in Wales.
- Ensure that all tenures, not just homes in the social rented sector, are built to life-time home standards. This would enable families who have a disabled member to consider adaptations much more easily regardless of their housing tenure.
- Explore rural housing co ops and community purchase of land/ flats, as in Scotland.
- Promote robust work with private landlords to enable quality private rented accommodation.
- Give grant support for self build.
- Set-up a Welsh version of Scotland's Ownership Options which enables disabled people in unsuitable housing to access home ownership through the use of the benefit Income Support Mortgage Interest relief (ISMI).
- To implement the recommendations of the National Assembly for Wales's Social Justice and Regeneration Committee's report of its review of Youth Homelessness in Wales ("Everybody's business: no-one's responsibility" Feb 2007).

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**This briefing is supported by Children in Wales**