

<b>NAME OF SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</b>	<b>Communities Scrutiny Committee</b>
<b>DATE OF MEETING</b>	<b>5 February 2013</b>
<b>TITLE OF ITEM</b>	<b>Scrutiny of Social Housing</b>
<b>CABINET MEMBERS</b>	<b>Councillors John Wyn Williams and John Wynn Jones</b>

The following questions were asked during the recent preparatory meeting:

1. What is the situation within the strategic plan regarding the provision of social housing and how does the Council promote input into provision of social housing?
2. It is understood that there are 3,500 applications on the housing register – are these applications duplicated?
3. How much has the waiting list increased from year to year?
4. Can the Council restrict housing to local people?
5. Is the target of 100 empty properties sufficient and how can the number be increased?
6. Is there sufficient finance available?
7. How many houses with more than one bedroom have one person living in them?
8. How much collaboration is there between the above mentioned Cabinet Members (Planning and the Economy) in addressing social housing needs in town centres?
9. It has been given to understand that grants are available to undertake improvements to properties above shops and it would be beneficial to receive information on this.

### **1. Social Housing**

- 1.1 Working with Registered Social Landlords is a key part of the work of the Housing Strategy Unit. The main Housing Associations operational in Gwynedd are Cartrefi Cymunedol Gwynedd (CCG), Cymdeithas Tai Eryri, Cymdeithas Tai Clwyd and North Wales Housing Association.
- 1.1 The Council receives a Social Housing Grant (SHG) from the Welsh Government annually which is equivalent to approximately £1.5 million every year. The Council distributes that grant to the Housing Associations in accordance with the scoring matrix which has been developed in order to ensure that the distribution targets the strategic requirement for housing within the County. The SHG is the main method of funding the Social Housing provision within the County and as with several central budgets, the level of investment will reduce in the future.

1.2 The Welsh Government has developed a revenue model for the Housing Associations and, dependent on the Housing Associations' ability to borrow money, it is anticipated that £2.5 million is available to Gwynedd. Again, the Housing Strategy Unit has collaborated with the Housing Associations in order to ensure that we maximise our opportunity to use this revenue funding to add social housing in the County. This venture is in addition to the SHG.

1.3 As an Unit, we co-ordinate quarterly meetings in order to receive progress reports as well as regular contact via e-mail or phone with the relevant Officers within the Housing Associations.

1.4 Please see the following table which summarises the activity of the Housing Associations to provide houses for rent locally.

Table 1

Year	No. of SHG/SCIF grant funded new units	No. of non grant funded new units	Gwynedd Council Empty homes initiative/ Private Sector Leasing	Social Housing Grant Homebuy scheme / Gwynedd Council mortgage deposit loan scheme	Mortgage rescue scheme	Total number of units
2007/08	11	24	24	17	3	79
2008/09	34	16	27	0	2	79
2009/10	37	10	8	0	3	58
2010/11	56	16	14	16	4	106
2011/12	21	13	16	11	1	62
2012/13	47	16	9	10	2	84
Total	206	95	98	54	15	396

1.5 The distribution of the SHG has secured a supply of housing through various other ventures, in addition to social housing. Some of these ventures are the Private Leasing Scheme, Homebuy Scheme and Mortgage Rescue Scheme.

## 2 Common Housing Register and the Housing Options Team

2.1 Since September 2012 a Common Housing Register is in operation in Gwynedd. This means that there is one Common Lettings Policy for letting social properties. In order to administrate the Policy, the Housing Options Team was established which deals with all enquiries from the public about information on applying for social housing and the procedure of assessing applicants in accordance with the Lettings Policy.

2.2 In order to establish the waiting list, all individual Housing Association waiting lists were combined into one waiting list. Table 2 shows the current information as at 21 January 2013:

Table 2:

<b>Live applications:</b>	<b>2729</b>
Applications delayed for a period: (delayed due to financial resources and subject to further investigations by the Housing Options Team)	382
Applications not completed by the applicant: (new applications which have not provided the relevant information to be registered in full and, therefore, subject to further investigations by the Housing Options Team)	438
<b>Total:</b>	<b>3549</b>

2.3 As the list was established recently and that all Housing Associations have provided information about their waiting lists to the Council, any duplication in applications has been checked and it is fair to say that the figure above reflects the accurate figure of need for the first time.

2.4 It is not possible to provide information on the annual increase to the waiting list as no historical data is available. Comparing the waiting lists that the Housing Associations would have would not provide comparative information.

2.5 The Common Lettings Policy states clearly that applications will be assessed on the basis of need. The current situation of the property, its condition and medical information about the applicant will be considered. The applicant must satisfy the criteria of being in need in order to be accepted on the waiting list. Local connection to the County and area within which the applicant wishes to live will be assessed.

### 3 **Empty Properties**

3.1 A target of 150 properties was established for the 2011-2014 Strategic Plan, namely 40 in 2011-12, 40 in 2012-13 and 60 during 2013-14. We will not be proceeding to fulfil the 2013-14 target as the Council's 2013-18 Strategic Plan will replace the current Plan. The target of 90 reflects the above changes.

- 3.2 It would be important for any discussion about setting a target for the Strategic Plan from 2013 onwards to take into consideration the resources available within the Empty Homes Team. At the moment, there are two officers working across Gwynedd.
- 3.3 The empty homes officers work with owners to bring empty properties back into use. The budget allocated for activity to bring empty homes back into use is spent in full by the Empty Homes Team annually and, naturally, any opportunities for additional resources would be targeted to encourage more empty homes back into use.
- 3.4 A First Time Buyers Loan Scheme which is being targeted for empty homes has been launched by the Housing Department recently and the number of enquiries by the residents of the County shows the level of interest and the obstacles that first time buyers come across when trying to buy a house, in particular when they are required to find a deposit of up to £30,000.
- 3.5 A national scheme 'Houses into Homes' by the Welsh Government provides an interest-free loan for people to be able to make improvements to a property. Gwynedd has received expressions of interest to the value of £661,100 in this scheme, with applications to the value of £441,100 having been approved. The amount allocated to Gwynedd was £432,426 and, if other Counties do not claim their allocation, Gwynedd could apply to use the remaining money.

#### **4 Changes in Welfare Benefits**

- 4.1 The Welfare Reform Task Group Progress Report (21/11/12) discussed by the Corporate Management Team notes that welfare reform will affect 11,854 residents in Gwynedd with 1,348 affected by the bedroom tax.

#### **5 Collaboration**

- 5.1 Strategic collaboration takes place through the Housing Partnership, which includes the preparation and development of the Housing Strategy. Collaboration on an operational level takes place through the various sub-groups which bring the Council's Departments and external partners together to implement specific interventions (e.g. Arbed 1 & 2 schemes and bids). In addition, Departmental collaboration occurs when responding to opportunities, for example, a recent joint application was submitted to the Housing and Regeneration Innovation Fund.

#### **6 Grants to undertake improvements to properties above shops**

- 6.1 The Council provides various means of assistance that can be relevant when undertaking improvements to properties above shops. Specifically, the Empty Homes Team are responsible for the management and administration of the:

- **Houses into Homes Scheme** which offers short-term, interest-free loans to assist with repair costs to bring an empty property back into use. The highest loan sum is £25,000 for each living unit, to be repaid within two years if the property is to be sold, or three years if the property is to be rented.
- **Vacant Property Grant Scheme** which offers a limited grant to help new owners of empty properties pay for the repairs and renovation of the property. The grant targets properties which have been empty for six months or longer, and can contribute up to 75% of the renovation costs up to £5,000 for each flat, £10,000 for each house, or £7,500 for each conversion into a flat.
- **Repair and Renovation Scheme – Empty Homes Loans** which offers short-term loans up to £15,000 to reintroduce residential use to empty and disused houses, and/or conversion of existing property into housing. All the loans will be offered at an interest rate of 4%. Following completion of the work, the property must be available for rent by local people, or the owner must use it as his or her main residence for a period of five years, or until the loan has been repaid in full.

6.2 In addition, the Private Sector Housing Service (on behalf of the Economy and Community Development Department) administers and manages the **Town Improvement Scheme**. The scheme is funded by the Welsh Government's Môn Menai Programme (which is operational in Arfon), and offers grants towards external improvements to buildings in town centres. Grants of 50% are usually available, although in exceptional circumstances they can be up to 75%.

6.3 Officers from the Empty Homes Team, the Private Housing Sector Service and the Economy and Community Development Department meet regularly in order to ensure that there is convergence between the available schemes.