

SCTUTINY COMMITTEE	Scrutiny Committee – Community
DATE OF MEETING	14 May, 2013 am
TITELE OF ITEM	Noddfa Hostel, Deiniolen
CABINET MEMBER	Y Cyngorydd John Wyn Williams

1.0 Background and Context

An application for a report to the Scrutiny Committee emanated following a discussion at the Arfon Area Committee on the 13th of March 2013. This was in response to an incident outside a private property involving a person who was a resident at the Noddfa Hostel. This led to a discussion about the role and function of Hostels provision within Gwynedd Council's homeless service. The individual case has now been dealt with by the police and court system and it is not the role of the Scrutiny Committee to scrutinize individual cases. The purpose of this report is to examine the relevance of hostel provision as a means to provide services to homeless people and to consider the arrangements in place to assist the authority to meet its statutory responsibilities.

2.0 Gwynedd Council's Statutory Responsibilities

The provision of services to the homeless is one of Gwynedd Council's statutory responsibilities and those expectations are outlined in the ***Housing Act 1996 part vii section 188***. The Act sets out the Council's responsibility to provide emergency accommodation for people who find themselves homeless. The definition of homelessness includes people who are at threat of losing, or are unlikely to be able to remain in their current accommodation. The authority is expected to secure "appropriate accommodation" to the applicant and/or his family until it can identify permanent accommodation.

The Authority aims to meet its statutory duties in many ways including the provision of hostel. The advantage of hostel provision is that it allows the Council to provide emergency accommodation rapidly for vulnerable groups.

The *Homeless (Suitability of Accommodation) (Wales) Order 2006* stated that it does not consider it appropriate for local authorities to meet its

statutory responsibilities by providing B&B accommodation especially for vulnerable groups.

The Council's response and compliance in meeting its legal duty is regularly inspected by the Assembly and is challenged by outside organizations such as Shelter.

There is an expectation that elected members of the council are satisfied the Authority has the necessary services to meet its statutory duties.

2.1 Need and Demand for Services

Noddfa Hostel has been in the ownership of Gwynedd Council since 1974, and is one of two homeless hostels managed by Gwynedd Council. The Hostel is considered important to the homelessness service for various reasons.

- It assists the council to meet its legal responsibilities.
- It allows a rapid response to emerging situations and a way to provide secure placement for people in vulnerable situations.
- It is a cost effective way of providing accommodation especially for families.
- It provides a safe and protective environment for families as there are staff on duty to supervise and respond to emerging situations.
- Individual cases can be supervised and there are security measures in place.
- It has helped many people regain their lives after the unfortunate experiences of losing their home.

Although it is possible use another type of accommodation to meet statutory responsibilities, including leased properties; such arrangements can take time to establish and are not always suitable for some groups. A period in a hostel can be useful to identify the most appropriate type of accommodation for individuals and to highlight any ongoing support needs.

2.2 Placements at the Hostel

Before a person is accepted into the Hostel the homeless service completes a formal assessment to confirm the Council's statutory responsibilities. The service will also undertake a risk assessment to ensure that the placement is suitable for Hostel. Noddfa is used primarily as a hostel for families and low-risk cases, predominantly single parents, young families, women escaping violence, young people and others who are compatible with the above group. Due to the nature of the individuals accommodated, the service is careful about the type of people admitted to the hostel. The hostel is not used to accommodate people who are known to have a history of violence.

Analysis of placements since April 2012 demonstrates that :-

- 49% of placements were families with children.
- 77% of placements were women.
- Less than 10% were single men.

Applications are not accepted into the homeless services without a local connection, unless there is a statutory or legal responsibility to do so, e.g. case of domestic violence. Since April 2012 only 1 placement has been accepted without a local connection and that person had a close relative (parent) living locally. The remainder of the placements came from the Arfon area with one placement from Dwyfor. Therefore Noddfa is a resource that provides a service to people who are local to Gwynedd.

2.3 Other Provision for Homeless Within Gwynedd

In recent years the Gwynedd Council (along with 7 other authorities in Wales) has been criticized by the National Assembly for having an over reliance on bed and breakfast accommodation. The provision of hostel accommodation is considered to be a more acceptable way of providing services especially to vulnerable groups, due to the availability of support and supervision. Without the Hostel, dependence on Bed and Breakfast in Gwynedd would be higher and alternative types of provision is likely to be more costly to the Council and mean that individuals would be placed at higher risk due to lack of support.

At a time of financial recession, and with welfare reforms on-going, many commentators are predicting that demand on homelessness services is likely to increase. In the current economic climate it is important that the Council has adequate and appropriate resources to meet the demand.

Since people staying at the hostel can qualify for housing benefit and that the service receives a Supporting People Grant the hostel provides cost effective service. The Council is able to recover the cost of providing service. In comparison the cost of providing service to a family in a bed and breakfast can be over **£400** a week with no recovery of the cost.

2.4 Management of the Hostel

The hostel employs 9 staff member at the hostel (2 full time staff and seven part-time). This ensures staff supervision during the day, weekends and over night with sleep-in staff.

Before receiving a placement at the Hostel the service undertake background inquiries and each applicant is expected to sign a license agreement where they agree to behave in an appropriate and responsible manner towards staff, the local community and fellow residents (see copy attached appendix 1). During

their stay staff will review compliance with the standards of conduct. If individuals do not comply they can lose the right to receive service.

CCTV equipment and other safety measures have been installed at the premises, and staff have established a good working relationship with the police with regular visits to ensure they are able respond to incidents or inappropriate behavior and to monitor and share information.

2.5 Incidents

Records show very few calls to the police relating to the conduct of residents at Noddfa over the last 5 years. Although cases have been recorded we are aware that some of those calls related to anti social behavior towards residents of the hostel and/or events related to the period prior to admission.

We are not aware of any evidence to suggest an increase in the number of incidents recently or a consistent pattern of events. Since the incident in January 2013 we are not aware that any further complaint has been received concerning the residents of Noddfa.

As a service we recognize that the incident was unacceptable but believe it has been dealt with in the appropriate manner by the police and the courts. We do not believe it could have been possible to predict what happened and we do not believe that antisocial behavior is common. Whilst appreciating community feelings and that people are unhappy about the incident, we do not believe that one exceptional event by one individual warrants a universal rethink of the way services are delivered.

We appreciate there is a belief in Deiniolen that the community have shouldered the responsibility of the hostel service and that the area has not benefited from the presence of Noddfa. There also seems to be a perception that Deiniolen has been disadvantaged. Although there may be sympathy with the argument that the community has made a valuable contribution by providing the hostel with a home, this is not a reason to undermine the use of homeless hostels as a suitable model to provide a statutory services to homeless people.

2.6 Regulatory Measures:

A number of measures have been in existence for some year to try to minimize the impact of the hostel on the community. Following the incident we have reviewed these arrangements and introduced further modifications to try to reduce the possibility of further events. The measures include :-

1. Confirming arrangement to record and investigate allegations of inappropriate behavior by providing direct contact numbers to highlight any concerns.
2. Undertaking a review of Risk Assessment Procedures to identify whether existing arrangements could be enhanced.
3. Strengthening arrangements for completing background investigations especially relating to individuals associated with the principal applicant.
4. Bring forward the door looking time from 11 o'clock to 10 o'clock in the evening, unless valid reasons are provided e.g. that person works and/or consent has been agreed in advance.
5. Giving notice (3 months) on a private property used in the village to accommodate homeless people in Deiniolen. Although there was no direct connection with the Noddfa hostel this change was instigated to reduce the number of homeless people in the village.

We also proposed that representatives of the community be invited to visit the hostel to view the management arrangements and offered to have regular meetings with the community council. It was believed that these measures would enable us to investigate and if appropriate take action if individuals were behave inappropriately. The aim was to try to build relationships and to discuss and exchange information; this offer has not as yet been accepted.

2.7 Alternative Provision

Due to the Council's statutory responsibilities it would be difficult to terminate existing service, without securing alternative provision. This would require capital resources and planning permission. Should that be an intention then sufficient time would need to be allowed and additional funds would need to be designated. The Homeless services believes that it is appropriate to continue to use hostels to meet statutory homeless responsibilities as it is considered an effective way of providing services especially for the most vulnerable in society.

The Council has invested in improving the quality and suitability of Noddfa Hostel over the past 6 years. A capital expenditure program in excess of £100,000 has been spent over the annual maintenance program.

Appendix 1 - Enclosure

(Terms and Conditions of Tenancy)