

## REPORT TO THE CARE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**Date:** March 18, 2021

**Title:** Housing Support Grant

**Purpose:** To scrutinise the direction intended to ensure that the Housing Support Grant leads to the best possible support for the homeless in Gwynedd and to try and prevent homelessness in the future.

**Contact Officer:** Head of Housing and Property - Dafydd Gibbard

**Cabinet Member:** Cllr. Craig ab Iago

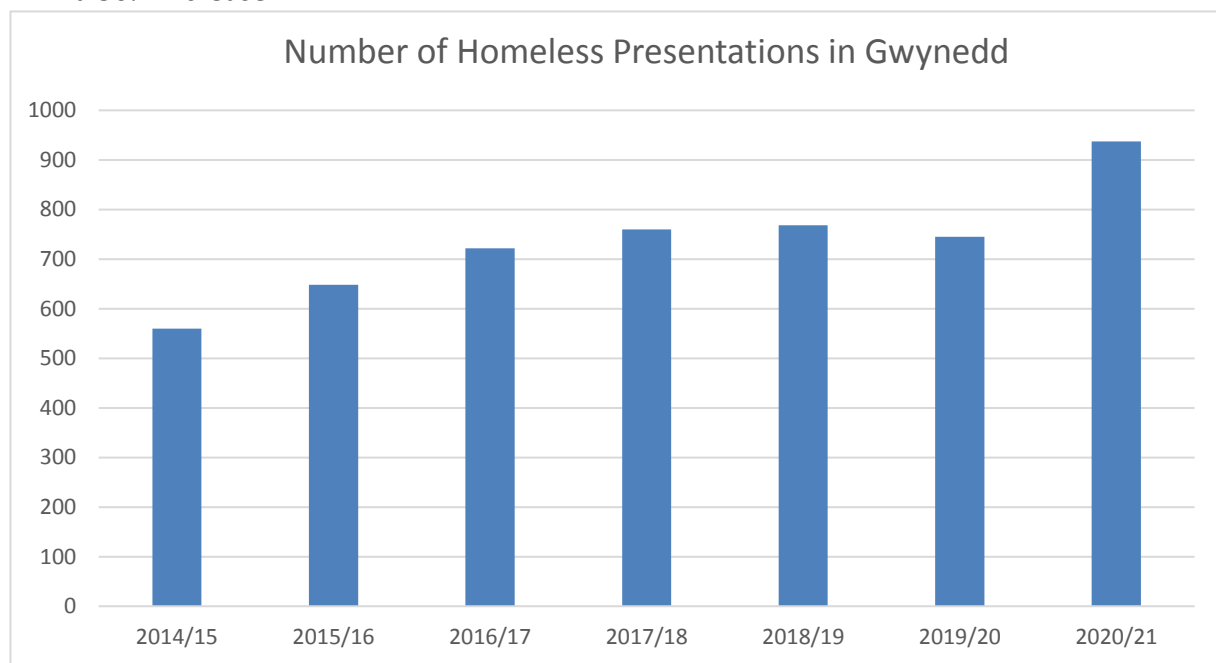
### Introduction / Background

1. The Housing Support Grant (formerly known as the Supporting People Programme) is a Welsh Government funded programme that helps over 2,000 people every year in Gwynedd to live independently. The program provides vital support to people facing very difficult housing circumstances and helps some of the most vulnerable people in society to live independently in their own homes or in supported accommodation.
2. It is an early intervention programme that helps prevent people from becoming homeless or helping homeless people find and retain accommodation. It supports people to tackle problems such as debt, unemployment, tenancy management, substance misuse, domestic violence, rough sleeping and mental health issues. Support is aimed at what people need, e.g. help to deal with mental health and / or substance misuse problems, help improve their health and well-being, and / or help move on to employment or training opportunities, and improve their general life skills.
3. In summary, the aim of the program is to prevent or reduce homelessness and without the existence of this grant it would have a far-reaching impact on our ability as a Council to support Gwynedd's residents to avoid homelessness and hamper our ability to seek re-housing as soon as possible for those who are unfortunate enough to find themselves homeless.
4. Towards the end of 2019 we were warned that the Government intended to revisit this grant and there was concern that we could be facing a reduction in the £ 5.1M per year we currently receive. It was therefore intended to seek the assistance of the Care Scrutiny Committee to scrutinise the historic use of the grant and to prepare for having to undertake a process of prioritising in order to identify how to reduce the assistance we were able to offer the homeless in Gwynedd.
5. However, the homelessness crisis that has been highlighted, and has been exacerbated by Covid 19, means that the future of this grant has changed completely. Rather than face a potential reduction, we have now received an additional allocation of £ 1.6M per year and are therefore seeking the Committee's assistance in scrutinising the direction intended to

ensure that we make the best possible use of this new opportunity to ensure that we provide the best possible support to the homeless in Gwynedd and seek to prevent homelessness in the future.

## Homelessness in Gwynedd

6. As can be seen in the graph below, since the advent of the Housing Act 2014, which altered the definition of who was eligible for homelessness support, the number of annual submissions has increased from approximately 550 per year to approximately 750 per year, a 36% increase.



7. This has led to considerable pressure on the Homelessness Unit in terms of its ability to offer support to individuals who are often vulnerable and wholly dependent on Council assistance.
8. The biggest challenge was finding rehousing options for these individuals, especially suitable temporary accommodation. We know that the general lack of housing in the County, and the rest of Wales, means that there is not enough stock available to immediately re-house a homeless person. Where a homeless person has no other option, the Council has a statutory responsibility to offer temporary accommodation. Prior to the advent of the 2014 law the Council was able to cope by making use of houses we had leased from private Landlords for this purpose. We had around 60 houses available for this purpose at the time.
9. With the significant increase in numbers as a result of the 2014 Act, the temporary housing stock was insufficient to meet the need and the use of bed and breakfast accommodation had to be introduced to meet our statutory duty to offer emergency accommodation.
10. The current pandemic has further exacerbated the situation. Quite sensibly and understandably, at the start of the lockdown in March 2020, the Government asked all Local Authorities in Wales to ensure that no one was sleeping rough. The national

regulations were amended overnight to ensure that everyone, regardless of their circumstances, had the ability to get support from their Local Authority if they were facing homelessness.

11. The lock-down periods have had a far-reaching impact on our communities and the threat of losing employment, the strain on relationships in extended lock-down periods, the pressures on the health service and the impact on mental health have all contributed to a significant increase in the number facing homelessness. The situation is still developing of course and we do not know what further progress we will face over the coming months.
12. As demonstrated in the above graph, homeless numbers this year have increased to almost 950, an increase of 26% in one year and 71% higher than in 2014.
13. One direct side effect of this is a situation where we now have around 94 individuals in bed and breakfast accommodation compared to around 25 this time last year. We have also had to temporarily increase our housing stock and now have around 95 in use. Our two homeless hostels are also full and there are currently around 190 individuals, couples and families in temporary accommodation in Gwynedd.
14. The cost of housing individuals in bed and breakfast accommodation is being funded by the Welsh Government during the pandemic.
15. We are facing an unprecedented situation and the demand for temporary accommodation is beyond our ability to meet the need. With no signs of improvement in the short term, the situation is extremely challenging, numbers may increase further and there is now considerable pressure on the staff of the Homelessness Unit.

### **The Council's Response**

16. Temporary accommodation, particularly in one room in bed and breakfast accommodation, is not suitable accommodation to enable the residents of Gwynedd to live a dignified and prosperous life. Access to quality and safe accommodation is essential if community integration is to be achieved, employment opportunities facilitated and the quality of individuals' health and well-being improved.
17. The Council's Housing Strategy clearly states that we do not wish to see anyone homeless in Gwynedd. In order to achieve this goal we will of course need to ensure that an adequate supply of housing is available to meet the need throughout the county. However, we cannot hide from the fact that it is likely that we will always need to be able to offer emergency assistance and accommodation to those facing homelessness.
18. Our aspiration therefore is to end the overuse of bed and breakfast accommodation by providing an adequate supply of temporary housing and developing our own suitable supported accommodation to be used to meet this need. Our Housing Action Plan sets out clearly how we will achieve this and ensures that an adequate budget to provide such a resource is available over the next few years. With the help of a significant Welsh Government grant, we will develop over 50 suitable "Supported Accommodation" units.

19. Such accommodation needs to be located so that individuals do not need to be removed from their communities. Access to the support of family and friends, as well as the ability to easily access familiar health and well-being services are absolutely essential when faced with the wretched situation of homelessness. We will therefore seek to provide our new “Supported Accommodation” developments to match demand in all areas of the county and do everything possible to avoid the need to transport people to communities that are unfamiliar to them.
20. While this will mean that we will be able to offer acceptable quality temporary accommodation to those facing homelessness, accommodation alone will not meet the complex and challenging needs that are more often than not tied to homelessness. This is why the Housing Assistance Grant is absolutely vital.
21. Individuals who face homelessness often need support for a period to try to cope with their situation. Those individuals, couples and families who have no option but to receive emergency accommodation from the Council often only require additional support to find suitable accommodation. They often need support with issues relating to domestic violence, alcohol dependence, drug dependency, mental health, debt, crime, or a relationship with a partner or family that has broken-down.
22. Providing suitable accommodation is therefore not in itself sufficient to help vulnerable homeless individuals cope with the other challenges that can make their lives very complex.
23. The Housing Support Grant provides an annual financial resource for providing this support. This includes providing substantial financial support to enable assistance from a number of external specialist providers. See Appendix A for further details on the valuable services provided by these organisations and bodies.
24. In addition to this external support, the vast majority of the service offered to the homeless is provided by an experienced team of in-house staff. There are statutory elements to the work carried out by this Team i.e. a first point of contact for the homeless, help to prevent homelessness, carry out a needs assessment, draw up a housing / support plan and provide temporary accommodation where appropriate. The main aim of course is to permanently re-house individuals in suitable accommodation.
25. In addition to these statutory elements, the team also provides further, absolutely essential, support to help individuals re-establish themselves or preferably avoid homelessness in the first place. That support includes help to:
  - develop good independent living skills, such as shopping, cooking and cleaning;
  - become confident in money management and budgeting
  - have access to health and social care
  - contact other relevant organisations for help and advice
  - have access to education, employment, training and voluntary opportunities
  - become part of a wider community
  - complete housing application forms and contact landlords and hostels
  - prepare to move on to permanent accommodation
  - establishing gas / electricity supplies
  - maintaining a tenancy and avoiding repeat homelessness

26. The staff resource within the Homelessness Unit for tenancy support of this kind has remained fairly constant since before the advent of the Housing Act 2014 and is therefore based on the homeless numbers at that time. During the pandemic we have been able to take advantage of additional Government funding to increase our support resources and that has been invaluable in trying to help our clients.
27. Due to the 71% increase in homelessness since the support team was established prior to 2014, we are now operating on a staffing scale of one support officer to approximately every 60 individuals in need of support. One officer is unable to support so many vulnerable individuals and this results in individuals being unable to cope with the complexities in their lives that prevent them from being able to find a permanent home and as a result having to spend far too long in temporary accommodation.
28. The new Housing Support Grant fund gives us the opportunity to rectify this situation. The size of the in-house support team can be significantly enlarged with the aim of one officer supporting around 25 vulnerable individuals. The additional Government funding gives us the opportunity to put in place appropriate support arrangements for the first time since 2014.

## **Conclusions**

29. Due to a 71% increase in homelessness numbers, the Homelessness Unit is currently unable to meet the demand for their service.
30. The use of temporary bed and breakfast accommodation is unsustainable and does not offer acceptable quality accommodation to facilitate the ability of individuals, couples and families to overcome miserable situations and we will develop our appropriate “supported accommodation” with the aim of ending the need to use bed and breakfast accommodation. We will prioritise additional funding from the Housing Support Grant to fund the running costs of these developments.
31. We will seek to provide “supported accommodation” within the communities where there is demand from the county's residents and avoid the need to move individuals to communities that are unfamiliar to them.
32. Providing suitable accommodation does not in itself improve our homelessness situation as the vulnerable individuals in our care need much better support than we have been able to offer since 2014.
33. We will prioritise additional funding from the Housing Support Grant to enhance the in-house support team so that appropriate support can be given to assist the homeless to establish a permanent and sustainable home as soon as possible.
34. We will also continue to work with the providers identified in Appendix A and will undertake a joint exercise with them over the next year to review the valuable services they currently offer and return with a further report on the work's findings' to seek further input from the Care Scrutiny Committee.

35. The Committee is asked to scrutinise the direction outlined above bearing in mind the need to act quickly in light of the current homelessness crisis.

## **Appendices**

Annex A - Providers funded through the existing Housing Support Grant.