



*Housing services with a human face*

# **Review of homelessness in Wirral**

## **Executive summary**

**June 2012**



**Gill Leng.co.uk**  
*Housing services with a human face*

## **1. Introduction and background**

The Homelessness Act 2002 places a duty on local authorities to publish a new homelessness strategy at least every five years. Wirral Council's existing strategy to prevent and respond to homelessness in Wirral was developed and implemented in 2008.

People are now facing real difficulties in managing their income and housing as a result of the downturn in the economy and its impact on the housing market, as well as the changes taking place around the future of social housing and welfare benefits. Homelessness is increasing across the country, and there are fears it will continue to increase.

In November 2011 Wirral Council asked Gill Leng Housing Solutions (GLHS) to review homelessness so that there is an up-to-date understanding of homelessness and acute housing need in Wirral, and to determine how this is changing and might continue to change as a result of government policy as well as national, local and individual spending decisions. The Council also asked for suggestions for action that could be developed to address the threat of increased homelessness, and to identify opportunities to improve upon what is already in place.

Our review involved people who have been homeless or threatened with homelessness, services and agencies, housing providers and commissioners. It included an analysis of a considerable amount of data, visits to services and a review of past achievements.

## **2. What does homelessness in Wirral look like overall?**

### **2.1 Statutory homelessness**

The number of applications has risen year on year from 2009/10 to 2011/12 (full year), albeit only slightly. However, the rise in acceptances has been more significant: by 51% from 2009/10 to 2010/11 and by a further 30% in 2011/12. There has been a large increase in the proportion of lone female parents and a smaller increase in the proportion of lone males.

There has been a shift in the reasons for statutory homelessness. Significant increases in proportions have been amongst: families and friends unable or unwilling to continue to accommodate; other violence or harassment (not domestic abuse); non-violent breakdowns of relationship; people leaving the Armed Forces. There have been significant falls in: mortgage repossession; losing rented accommodation for 'other' reasons; domestic abuse from a partner; homeless from hospital. These decreases reflect the action taken to reduce homelessness as a result of the last strategy.

### **2.2 Housing Options Team 'threatened with homelessness' enquiries**

3,996 individuals threatened with homelessness were seen by Housing Options between April 2010 and October 2011, some of whom were seen more than once. It appears that the proportion of older people has declined, whilst the proportions of enquirers between the ages of 18 and 34 have increased. Singles and couples with no children and no pregnancy make up over 69% of all enquirers, over half of whom are under 35 years old. Unsurprisingly 18 to 24 year olds have the highest likelihood of homelessness risk.

By far the largest percentage (30%) lived in private tenancies. 24% of people were living in other people's homes, where their circumstances were very insecure, and 20% were classified as 'no fixed abode'.

At least 50% of householders required a one bed home (this could be higher as records have not been kept for everyone who has made an enquiry) – around 42% will only be able to claim housing benefit for a single room rent if they live in the private rented sector.

### **2.3 Housing related support services**

The main message about customers in support services is that the level of complexity of need has increased, and continues to increase. There are more people of all ages with drug and/or alcohol and/or other issues that require multiple skills to address.

Data and stakeholders also indicate that more people are accessing housing related support services solely because there is nowhere else for them to live. In the last two years just over 16% of new service users were recorded as single homeless with no other support needs (277 people in 2010/11). In addition, providers highlight that the lack of move-on accommodation means that people are staying longer (despite their ability to live more independently), which blocks access to support for others who require this specialist accommodation.

### **2.4 Homelessness in the future**

There is a clear trend of increasing homelessness as a result of the economic environment, and reducing availability and affordability of housing, reflecting experience elsewhere in the country. Acceptances during the whole of 2011/12 rose by 30% compared with the previous year. National data for the whole year 2011/12 isn't yet available but is anticipated to show a similar trend.

The main factors expected to affect homelessness in the future are driven by the continuing economic climate and public expenditure savings:

- The single room rent only for single people aged 25 to 34; there were up to 960 single people in this age bracket that asked Housing Options for housing assistance between April 2010 and October 2011. These households will be affected by the restrictions if they live in the private rented sector
- Increasing financial pressure is likely to lead to more people living with family or friends being asked to find their own accommodation
- The reduction in housing benefit for working age social tenants who are under-occupying their home will affect many people: Wirral has completed an assessment which identifies that over 3,900 tenants are under-occupying and will, if they are in receipt of Housing Benefit, have to make up the difference in their rent or move
- Managing under-occupation is likely to reduce access to social housing for single people and childless couples; move-on from supported housing may be more difficult
- There are recently renewed concerns about the potential for increased homelessness amongst homeowners, as some mortgage providers raised their interest rates in May 2012 (despite the Bank of England base rate being held at 0.5%).

### **3. What does the review say about the response to homelessness in Wirral to date?**

#### **3.1 Achievements from the 2008 Homelessness Strategy**

The vision of the 2008-10 Homelessness Strategy was “Organisations in Wirral will work together to tackle the underlying causes of homelessness and provide excellent services to support people to access warm, appropriate and affordable homes”. There were four aims against which success has been evaluated.

*Understanding homelessness and housing need:* progress has been made in determining the levels of homelessness, the reasons why people become homeless and which household groups it affects the most. Work has included an analysis of move-on from short-term supported accommodation, and research into households requiring housing resettlement services upon discharge from hospital.

*Preventing homelessness:* homeless prevention amongst statutory homeless households has been particularly successful; the change in the Council’s approach to homelessness to offer a proactive rather than a reactive housing options service has been a significant factor in this.

*Increasing access to a choice of housing:* there has been progress in enabling customers to access properties owned by accredited landlords, and the Pathways Model enables people with support needs to move towards settled accommodation. The introduction of Property Pool Plus will continue this progress.

*Providing appropriate support:* floating support services have been retendered, resulting in more and better support for households who are vulnerable to homelessness, for example people with a substance misuse problem. Health and outreach services funded by NHS Wirral and Wirral DAAT also target very vulnerable people and enable them to access housing alongside health and treatment services.

#### **3.2 Summary of the current position**

When taking into consideration the contribution that other, non-housing specific services make to preventing and responding to homelessness there is a good level of provision when compared to other local authority areas. This is not to say that there is too much, particularly given levels of inequality and deprivation in Wirral. Overall provision is very susceptible to change given it stretches across a number of sectors affected by government reforms.

There is evidence of a mismatch between the type of services needed and those that are actually provided, with the biggest gap existing for people (young people and adults) who have a number of needs which are more complex to meet, including chaotic behaviour and undiagnosed or unaddressed mental health problems. Attempts to meet these needs through existing provision is a draw on resources and, more importantly, is unlikely to achieve positive outcomes for the individuals, their families, and other service users, including those who share the same accommodation. Not addressing these gaps will also be detrimental to working relationships at a time when economic and budget pressures necessitate collaboration.

Existing service provision could be more effective if a number of barriers were addressed. These include a lack of broader knowledge about services and therefore appropriate referrals for customers, and the lack of access to settled accommodation preventing timely move-on from supported and other forms of temporary accommodation, thereby limiting access to support for new service users.

Since the last homelessness strategy the council has shifted more resources and effort into prevention and this had an evident impact on preventing, especially, statutory homelessness. It is also positive that more households should now be able to access housing information and advice, as the One Stop Shops have been enabled to provide this. This arrangement should not, however, be seen as the only route to information and advice – there are some households/customers for whom this mechanism may not be appropriate.

There is real commitment from agencies and providers in Wirral to achieving positive outcomes for people who are homeless or who are at risk of homelessness. New solutions are being developed through the use of existing resources or by accessing alternative funding, for example Forum Housing Association is extending housing options for its customers. New relationships between agencies and providers are also developing and these are evidently improving outcomes for people. A number of individuals spoken to in the review are eager to meet their own, and their communities, housing needs – there is untapped potential.

Homelessness is not something that the Council's Housing Options Team, nor voluntary and community sector organisations, should be left to tackle alone. The problem is simply too great and complex, and is going to be exacerbated by welfare and other reforms in the public sector. There are many 'wicked problems'<sup>1</sup> that need wider partners to come together to address. Two of these relate to either end of the homelessness 'system'; the prevention of homelessness amongst people who are unlikely to be deemed as 'statutorily homeless', and the lack of smaller (one and two bedroom) and affordable accommodation.

#### **4. What should the environment look like if we want to be successful in the future?**

At present there is a lack of 'joined up' thinking and strategic commissioning, with council departments tending to work in isolation. As a unitary authority Wirral should have the huge advantage of a common understanding, a unified purpose and taking a cohesive, whole system, approach. There is some evidence that this is developing but a step change needs to be made.

Taking a strategic commissioning approach to homelessness would increase multi-agency partnership working; all partners would agree the key outcomes, decide what is required to achieve these and what each agency's role in delivery is, with or without additional or retargeted resources. Partners would pool their expertise and funding. The benefits could include identifying and developing new ways of preventing or addressing homelessness by any of the partners and a co-operative approach to securing additional funding e.g. resources only available to the voluntary and community sector.

The approach to commissioning housing related support has been effective in developing the role of support in preventing homelessness, amongst other outcomes, and enabling improved access to settled accommodation for vulnerable households. A limited resource (when considering the challenges faced in Wirral) has evidently been targeted. The way in which support services have sought to shape provision with the involvement of their customers is also positive. Building on this practice would deliver a more holistic approach to homelessness.

The ideas, innovations and creative use of resources demonstrated by agencies and providers in Wirral could be harnessed more effectively. Solutions have been developed in isolation simply because this has been viewed as the quickest route to success, but it is questionable

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<sup>1</sup> Wicked problems are ones with no clear answer or path to resolve them. Because they are the result of complex relationships or circumstances, we need multiple perspectives and actions to tackle them.

whether this approach is sustainable in the longer term, particularly as resources reduce further.

With the exception of housing related support services, it is not possible for Wirral to know whether what is in place is working as well as it could – whether existing provision is achieving the right things in the right way. It is not possible to understand value for money. An appropriate performance management framework is needed to inform decisions about the best course of action and use of resources, particularly as many non-housing specific services contribute to homelessness objectives, and that changes here are likely to impact on success.

## **5. What does homelessness look like for households, and how can the response be improved?**

### **5.1 Families with children or expecting, including teenage parents**

The economy has increased housing stress amongst this customer group as a whole but, owing to more effective prevention, the homelessness rate has decreased since the last review and Wirral compares well with its neighbours. The largest proportions are occupying privately rented homes, but there are increases amongst those who have been living with relatives, presumably because of inability to find their own home. 70% of all families threatened with homelessness are lone parent households. Younger parents are finding it harder to cope, having presumably built up fewer resources to cope with harder economic circumstances. However, homelessness amongst 16/17-year-old parents has decreased significantly, confirming the excellent work done to provide specialist assistance for these young people. Agencies do however report that teenage parents have increasingly complex issues that are harder to address, including drugs and alcohol.

Over 70% of all families threatened with or actually homeless require two bedroom homes. Work with landlords to improve access to affordable and decent private renting is a priority, particularly with the reductions in social housing relative to household numbers. This will also improve opportunities for larger families for whom there is little social housing available.

Accepted homeless families are being increasingly placed into bed and breakfast, and are sometimes required to move from one to another; especially difficult for this customer group. Where bed and breakfasts can't be avoided, they should provide appropriate facilities, particularly for babies and younger children, and under-five year olds should receive health checks.

Families found intentionally homeless should be offered specific assistance to resolve their homelessness and also to check that children are safeguarded where the Council isn't providing temporary accommodation. Teenagers that are pregnant or have children should be referred for specific support both during and after their homelessness episode.

Alternative temporary accommodation in dispersed housing would be considerably better for households' health and wellbeing and would be much cheaper for the Council. Registered providers would be the supplier of preference. Placements should be in suitable locations to enable support from extended families and maintain access to education.

Plans to enable bidding for accepted homeless households are welcomed, but the Council needs to ensure that they are supported and encouraged to bid to avoid longer than necessary stays in temporary accommodation.

Family homelessness is likely to continue to increase in the light of welfare reforms, including universal credit, increasing pressures on extended families that provide default

accommodation and renewed concerns about homeowners, given recent rises in mortgage interest rates.

## **5.2 Young people**

It is difficult to pinpoint whether there has been a change in the level of homelessness amongst young people since the last review. Taking into consideration both statutory homelessness data and data reported by agencies working with young people, it appears – as stakeholders suggest – that the number of young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness has remained the same but may now be on the increase because of pressures on the family and relationships, such as reduced household income. However, the issues and needs with which young people are presenting have become more complex and are felt to require more input and/or different responses.

There is a good level of service and accommodation provision but there are gaps. A smaller, more therapeutic home environment may be more appropriate for young people with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), mental health and learning disabilities, and the following are also needed; more intensive support for those with complex needs; emergency and respite accommodation (emergency assessment of needs should precede access); gender specific supported accommodation.

There has been success in preventing homelessness amongst 16/17 year olds to date, but urgent work is needed, particularly, to improve access to assessments of need and to emergency accommodation, to prevent homelessness by enabling the young person to return home, and to ensure the needs of young offenders are met. A single point of access and integrated youth, care and housing services are recommended.

There has been very successful work with young people with drug and/or alcohol issues but this could be enhanced by more timely and appropriate treatment services.

It will become harder for young people to find an affordable home in the future. Building on existing relationships between providers, joint work is needed to develop new housing options e.g. shared housing.

## **5.3 Homelessness as experienced by offenders including those at risk and young offenders**

The proportion of offenders re-offending in Wirral is higher than for other Merseyside authority areas. The Ministry of Justice reports that people who are without accommodation before going into prison (a group very likely to be homeless on release) are 1.5 times more likely to re-offend than those who have accommodation.

Data on homelessness comes from a number of sources; for example at the time of the review Probation reported that 119 offenders had no accommodation and a further 152 people had a significant degree of unsuitability with their housing. 15 (15% of all) customer survey responses reported homelessness on leaving prison. Stakeholders report a rise in the number of service users with alcohol issues, more complex and chaotic needs, and increasing debt issues.

There is no final agreement about how agencies will work together to prevent homelessness and to accommodate offenders (all, not just high risk) and barriers such as information sharing have not been overcome.

There has been increased investment in housing related support services for offenders but work is needed to support providers to reduce re-offending amongst their service users. Whilst women can access supported housing, there is no female-specific accommodation (recommended by the Corston report).

There is more that can be done to prevent homelessness and to enable offenders to access settled accommodation. There is some housing advice in prisons but this is not Wirral specific. Offenders need to be supported to register for housing.

Welfare reforms are expected to present a real challenge to offenders seeking accommodation in the future. Housing problems are most prevalent amongst single men aged under 40; welfare reforms will disproportionately affect single people, who are least likely to be able to compete well in the rented housing market). Action is needed to plan for, and manage, the expected impacts.

#### **5.4 Mental health**

There is a high degree of overlap of mental health and drugs/alcohol issues and numbers are increasing. Numbers threatened with homelessness with severe and enduring mental illness remain relatively low, and apparently stable, although data doesn't enable clear separation of these from wider mental health issues. The introduction of dedicated nursing services for a range of homeless customer groups has been extremely beneficial; working in cooperation with accommodation and support providers and reducing entrenched homelessness by enabling access to specialist services including treatment.

Clinical commissioners should be persuaded by the evidence to recommission specialist health services (currently all in pilot phase): all stakeholders agree that these significantly improve the effectiveness of services in addressing homelessness and improving sustainment of recovery. Many homeless people have mental health issues as a result of issues stemming from childhood or young adulthood. Counselling is required to address these issues and enable people to move forward, but these services are lacking in Wirral. Again, this is an issue for clinical commissioners.

People with ADHD, often mature adults who have gone undiagnosed, are in relatively small numbers but have and create significant issues in hostels, and more frequently lose their accommodation. Fast track access to specialist treatment would help considerably.

Mental ill health is often a primary cause of tenancy breakdown and there is room for a more coordinated response to these customers. A Mental Health protocol between specialist services (social care and health) and housing options and involving social landlords would improve effectiveness of homelessness prevention and early access to MH interventions.

Given the economic situation, reactive mental ill health is likely to increase amongst the population as a whole, and especially those who are facing homelessness, and it is important to take a more cohesive approach to addressing this. Given the forecast increases in homelessness generally, those with vulnerabilities such as mental illness are likely to be disproportionately affected.

#### **5.5 Disabled people and their families**

There is evidence that homeless people with mild or moderate *learning disabilities* are living in hostels or are rough sleeping, which prompts safeguarding concerns. Customers with learning disabilities are at increased risk of homelessness even when they have a tenancy. Generic floating support services that provide support to people with learning disabilities report that



their customers need more support than their contracts enable. Tightened access criteria to social care means there is no specialist assistance available to those that are, homeless or are at risk of homelessness. Numbers are small, but these customers find it more challenging to learn new skills to enable access to and maintenance of a tenancy.

Specialist assessments are needed for those with learning disabilities to ensure their support needs are met in partnership with existing providers, and existing providers need more capacity to provide more, and sustained support to people living in the community. Providers with learning disabled customers also need training in order to provide support more effectively.

There is a need to understand the future housing needs of people currently living with families who have moderate to severe learning disabilities, and use data drawn from social care assessments to plan to meet these through housing enabling and in partnership with landlords.

Rates of homelessness amongst *physically disabled people* or those with chronic ill health appear to be increasing, but the data doesn't support a detailed analysis. Limitations on housing benefit plus the need for housing with specific design features means these customers find it harder to access the right housing. The specific health services for homeless people are important in addressing chronic ill health and in preventing acute health problems from becoming long term, or resulting in disability.

Actions are needed to reduce gaps and improve equitability of access to settled housing. The council and its registered provider partners need to work together to agree an approach to funding adaptations to avoid excluding people that are homeless or have no choice but to move.

Welfare reform has been cited as being disproportionately harsh for disabled people as there is little room for manoeuvre to allow for their additional housing requirements. Property Pool Plus will enable a better approach to re-use of adapted homes and an early review of the impact of this is needed to ensure that there is fair access to housing.

## **5.6 Domestic abuse**

All stakeholders report that domestic abuse is on the increase. Referrals to the Family Safety Unit (FSU) increased by 23% across the last two years. The FSU, together with a wide range of partners has instigated best practice in target hardening and multi-agency protection. In addition there is some support for people who choose to stay with their abusive partner, or who are experiencing abuse from another family member (usually a teenage son). Recent years have seen increases in mental illness and, although numbers are still small, there are also increases amongst women fleeing honour-based violence, forced marriages and abusive adult children.

Customers in the refuge should have priority for housing equal to those who have been accepted as homeless. This will release refuge capacity for others in need. Children and Young People's services should be involved where children have specific housing and other needs, to minimise access to housing obstacles, and also provide continuum of care.

All homeless households that have experienced domestic abuse (whether or not this is their primary cause of homelessness) should be connected to specialist support services to ensure ongoing support for both adults and children. The FSU with its partners should review the availability of outreach/floating support for households who have experienced or are experiencing domestic abuse, including those without children, and males.

## **5.7 Substance misuse (people with a drug and/or alcohol problem)**

Alcohol related health issues are a significant concern in Wirral, including amongst young people. 90 out of 99 people seen by the hospital discharge worker in ten months from April 2011 had an alcohol problem and needed some support to access accommodation/return home. Evictions and being asked to leave by family and friends were the main reasons for homelessness.

Wirral has had success in drug treatment, specifically by engaging with a very high percentage of problematic opiate users. For the 12 months January to December 2011, Wirral had a total of 2,359 drug users in treatment, a reduction since 2007/08. The role of a safe place to live in recovery remains critical to success in the future, recognised by the 2012 Home Office publication *Putting Full Recovery First*<sup>2</sup>. Data suggests acute housing need may be on the increase amongst people with a drug use.

Failure to prevent and respond to homelessness amongst people with a drug and/or alcohol problem is likely to be detrimental to the success of treatment and recovery services, and in turn the resources available to deliver these in the future. A housing plan is recommended, which should be based on a good understanding of the barriers to housing, the likely impact of welfare reforms, and the potential for people to be able to meet their own needs, for example through initiatives to bring empty homes back into use, and the needs of others e.g. through peer support and mentoring schemes.

The plan must enable provision to address street drinking and rough sleeping. The Tomorrow's Women project is an example of how such provision could be enabled using existing resources e.g. buildings that are no longer being used for their original purpose, volunteers from a wide range of backgrounds, and staff from a range of services providing specialist input. Alternative models such as 'housing first' and personalised budgets may also provide suitable housing options.

In the meantime, the single point of contact for people and agencies provided by the Phoenix Futures Outreach Team could be enhanced further, information and training on the housing 'system' will better enable the treatment and recovery services to advise their clients on housing issues, and awareness raising amongst registered and supported housing providers of the availability of support, and what to do before a crisis occurs, may prevent evictions.

## **5.8 Rough sleeping**

Wirral Council's rough sleeping estimate (which used a methodology based specifically on robust evidence obtained in partnership with a range of key agencies), reported to the government in December 2011, identified five rough sleepers on 24 November 2011, compared to four people recorded in 2010. This figure does not reflect the true picture. Other local data and stakeholders suggest that a much greater number of people sleep rough on occasion. There appear to be two groups of people who sleep rough; those for whom a lack of accommodation and perhaps timely support to sustain this appears to be the main issue (typically single men, with no priority need) and a core group of about ten people rough sleeping, who have a drug and/or alcohol problem, with whom the Phoenix Futures Outreach Service usually works. There has been an increase in the number of people reporting that they have slept rough prior to accessing supported housing.

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<sup>2</sup> Putting Full Recovery First <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/alcohol-drugs/drugs/recovery-roadmap?view=Standard&pubID=1013653>

Recommendations for homeless prevention, intensive support and alternative accommodation options for people with complex needs and perhaps challenging behaviour, drug and/or alcohol use, and offenders will prevent and reduce rough sleeping.

Wirral is part of the Merseyside City Region No Second Night Out (NSNO) pilot. For this to be a success, a protocol is needed to enable people from Wirral who are rough sleeping in other areas to 'reconnect' with Wirral, for example find accommodation and access appropriate services in Wirral. Thought also needs to be given to the availability of appropriate accommodation; access is limited for those who have been excluded from existing provision and/or from the Birkenhead area, where this accommodation is based. Alternative options could be a pilot scheme of emergency accommodation in small units, a controlled drinking environment with accommodation or a Housing First scheme, providing access to ordinary accommodation with long-term intensive support for those who cannot or will not access hostel accommodation.

NSNO alone is not going to resolve rough sleeping in Wirral. A Wirral specific resource is needed, led by one agency and employing a dedicated worker who could also focus on addressing the housing needs of people who are 'non-priority' and may sleep rough in the future.

Wirral's response should build on positive practice elsewhere, for example there should be a place where people can sit while their needs are assessed and a bed is found for them; peer support from people with experience of not just homelessness but also drug and alcohol use; a focus on improving health and wellbeing; initiatives to enable choice and developing tailored solutions.

## **5.9 Ex-armed forces and Merchant Navy**

Nationally it is difficult to identify the level of homelessness experienced by those who have left the Armed Forces. In Wirral there is evidence of homelessness and acute housing need, recorded by the council's services (an increase since 2008) and reported by the Wirral Veteran's Contact Centre. People are increasingly reporting a mental health problem or physical disability, alongside housing issues and relationship breakdowns. In future it will be important to maintain data about veterans to understand the scale and type of need that is arising.

Locally the council has committed to supporting the Wirral Veterans Contact Centre and more recently to developing an Armed Forces Community Covenant. This should incorporate specific action to prevent and respond to homelessness, beginning with appointing an Armed Forces housing champion to represent needs and to influence decisions.

The veteran community is keen and motivated to assist people but support is needed to make best use of this contribution, ranging from equipping volunteers to provide information and advice, and enabling them to audit existing accommodation options for their suitability, to involving veterans in commissioning decisions around mobility and disability issues and enabling them to meet their own needs, for example by bringing properties back into use (this approach has been taken elsewhere in the country).

## **6. Crosscutting issues**

### **6.1 Information and advice**

Customers in homeless services report that it can be difficult to know where to go and what's available – most relied on friends and family and people they met once in services. One Stop

Shops have improved the level of information and advice for people with housing issues, releasing housing options time to focus on homelessness prevention but some customers find One Stop Shops difficult to use (depending on their vulnerabilities). The hospital discharge and other health projects have improved access to information and advice and to housing, reducing costs to health and other agendas (e.g. community safety).

Better-placed publicity about where to go for housing help, and more readily available housing advice is needed to prevent people from rough sleeping, sofa surfing or drifting into hostels when they have no support needs. One Stop Shops need to adjust their approach to information and advice giving so that any customer feels welcome to use the service.

Some potential customers are not reaching housing options even though their homelessness is a certainty. Examples include people with no current address that are provided with hostel details by One Stop Shops. The Council needs to adjust its pathways and partnerships need to improve referral protocols to ensure that people who clearly need practical help to avoid homelessness are given this by the team best able to help.

## **6.2 Access to the private rented sector**

Much has been done to improve availability of and access to private rented homes, but the continued squeeze of social housing resources, and the economy make this sector the most useful in resolving homelessness. Private landlords are keen to work with the Council and with support providers to address needs of more vulnerable people, provided this doesn't put unreasonable risks on their businesses.

A multi-agency approach to bringing more empty homes back into use would improve supply in a way that makes best use of resources. Agencies need to be supported to help their customers into privately rented homes, and customers need to be convinced that they will have a good experience as a tenant.

The Council's Bond scheme is recognised as requiring review to increase the number of people that will find it useful, and this and a local lettings agency should be subject to discussion about provision by agencies other than the Council.

Given the 'bedroom tax' on under-occupying social tenants, and the number of people with spare rooms but little spare cash, a lodger scheme would have a beneficial impact all round.

Private landlords are more likely to accept more vulnerable people as tenants if they had a package of measures to reduce risk, e.g. safeguarded rent, support, guaranteed deposit, closer relationships with housing benefits and access to a ready supply of new tenants to minimise voids. A 'competent tenant' scheme would help both customers and landlords.

## **6.3 Access to social housing**

There is a historic practice of specifying the characteristics of households that can bid for homes, but this is reducing choice and access particularly for younger people and those with more children. Property Pool Plus will improve the availability of information about potential customers, which should reassure registered providers and make the whole system more seamless. It will also provide a local mutual exchange scheme, making it easier for under-occupying tenants to move to homes that match their benefit entitlements.

Registered Providers need to reduce the 'labelling' of properties advertised so that more people can apply for a wider range of homes. This will help people that are overcrowded or need larger or adapted homes, and those that are younger, in particular.

More needs to be done to enable schedule 1 offenders and those subject to MAPPA to access homes especially given the risks to others associated with homelessness and not being able to track where these customers are living.

The Council and registered providers need to formulate a full plan to respond to the benefit limitations on under-occupiers. The mutual exchange scheme is a good start but other actions will both limit risks to RPs' income streams, and reduce the risk of homelessness amongst those that can't afford the rent.

## **7. What will happen now?**

This is a summary of the review findings and recommendations. The review will be used as the basis for a new homelessness strategy and to inform the shape of housing services in Wirral. The council will be leading on this work, with external partners.