

AWICS Wales News

December 2017



**The offices of Denbighshire County Council in Denbigh.
The Council un-pooled service charges in 2015.**

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Service Charges at Denbighshire County Council

Denbighshire County Council completed the de-pooling of service charges in April 2015 and it formed part of the rent setting process for that year. When the Council finished the exercise, nearly 3,000 properties, both general needs & sheltered incurred a service charge in addition to their core rent.

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The following charges were de-pooled from April 2015: Grounds Maintenance, Communal Area Cleaning, Communal Electricity, Communal Gas, Communal Water, Communal Door Entry Systems, Window Cleaning, Laundry Repair & Maintenance and Fire Safety.

The Council included general needs housing where the tenants receive a communal service. This ranges from grounds maintenance on housing estates to a number of the communal costs shown above incurred in housing blocks.

Exact costs of the administration of service charges were calculated and this resulted in a Management / Administration Charge to any tenant paying a service charge of 15% of their individual charge.

The Council worked tirelessly to ensure that the de-pooling exercise would be completed by the deadline originally issued by Welsh Government. This meant that all identified services were de-pooled in the first year and not phased in over a longer period.

Instead, through the working group set up including Members involvement and support, the Council agreed to minimise the impact on tenants by reducing their rent by the amount of service charge costs they were liable for. The Council then applied the rent increase for that year and then added the service charge costs back in. This was partly due to the greater number of services and higher service charge costs borne by those in Sheltered Housing.

Where the Council was able to identify site specific costs for cleaning, utilities, window cleaning and fire safety, the costs were apportioned to that site. Other costs were apportioned across the County to those properties benefitting from the delivery of that service.

It was further agreed that the Council would set the same charge for grounds maintenance to all tenants who benefitted in any way from the maintenance of communal open spaces as the variance was extreme between the many council properties with little communal land through to a few properties and much larger areas requiring upkeep. This figure was £1.50 per week.

The average service charge calculated at the commencement of de-pooling in 2015/16 was £1.99, amounting to costs identified to be recovered of £348,396.

I am grateful to Dave O'Brien, the Service Charges Officer at Denbighshire County Council for providing this information.

We will be holding a seminar on 'All You Want to Know about Service Charges in Social Housing in Wales' in Cardiff on 14th February 2018. For further information or to make a booking, please click here: <http://awics.co.uk/all-you-want-to-know-about-service-charges-in-social-housing-in-wales-2018>

Funding Supported Housing

The United Kingdom government published a policy statement and consultation paper on the funding of supported housing in October 2017. While it relates principally to England it also has implications for Wales.

Supported housing is any housing scheme where accommodation is provided alongside care support or supervision to help people to live as independently as possible in the community.

There are approximately 651,500 supported homes in Great Britain and at any one time there are around 716,000 people living in supported housing. Social landlords are the main providers with housing associations providing the majority (71%) alongside local authorities and third sector providers. A small proportion is provided by the private sector.

Demand for help to live independently is forecast to increase as the population ages and medical advances can help more people with acute health conditions and disabilities to enjoy longer lives. Projections suggest that the overall number of supported homes may need to increase across Great Britain from 650,000 to 845,000 by 2030 (30% increase), especially among older people (35% increase) and people with disabilities (53% increase).

Before the 2017 general election the United Kingdom government had decided to cap housing benefit at the level of the local housing allowance. This decision was especially significant for supported housing where the level of rent plus service charges is almost inevitably higher than the level of the local housing allowance. Consequently, the United Kingdom government proposed a new approach to the funding of supported housing based on housing benefit to fund core housing costs and a locally administered budget to fund housing support costs in England with equivalent sums transferred to the Welsh and Scottish governments to enable them to devise their own schemes. However, these proposals were criticised by many in the sector and by the Parliamentary Select Committees for Communities & Local Government and Work & Pensions. Neither were they fully developed at the time that the 2017 general election was held. This caused considerable uncertainty for providers of supported housing with the result that hardly any new supported housing is currently being developed anywhere in the United Kingdom although there has been some investment, for example in the Vale of Glamorgan as described below.

The policy statement and consultation were preceded by an announcement that housing benefit in supported housing (and in social housing in general) would no longer be capped at the level of the local housing allowance.

The United Kingdom government considers that there are three clear reasons for seeking to reform the funding of housing costs for supported housing:

- To secure supply now and in the future.
- To strengthen focus on outcomes, oversight and cost control.
- To ensure it works with the modernised welfare system.

The United Kingdom government has identified four key objectives in reforming the funding model:

- People-focused
- Funding certainty
- Flexible and deliverable.
- Value for Money

The policy statement abandons the proposals that were made in 2016 in favour of a new approach based on different funding arrangements for sheltered housing, short-term accommodation and long-term accommodation. These three categories of housing are defined as follows:

- Sheltered and extra care housing (usually designated for older people, but including some working age tenants);

- Short-term supported housing (for those in crisis such as those fleeing domestic violence and homeless people with support needs, or shorter term transitional help for those with substance misuse problems or vulnerable young people, such as care leavers); and
- Long-term housing (for those with long-term needs, such as people with learning or physical disabilities, or mental ill health).

The United Kingdom government is proposing to introduce a new 'Sheltered Rent' in England that will include an element for rent and an element for service charges. As rent setting is a devolved matter in Wales the 'Sheltered Rent' will not apply in Wales but the significant thing about the 'Sheltered Rent' is that it will be used to cap the level of service charges that will be eligible for housing benefit. As welfare is not a devolved matter in Wales this raises the question of whether the 'Sheltered Rent' or the service charges element of the 'Sheltered Rent' will be used to cap eligibility for Housing Benefit in Wales. The policy statement is silent on this issue and I have not heard any statements on the matter from United Kingdom ministers.

The United Kingdom government is proposing to take the funding of short-term supported housing out of the welfare system. Instead, it will be funded in England through grants that will be administered by the local authorities. In Wales and Scotland an equivalent amount will be provided, and it will be for those administrations to decide how best to allocate the funding. As previously committed, the United Kingdom Government will ensure that the devolved administrations receive a level of funding in 2020/21 equivalent to that which would otherwise have been available through the welfare system. It will therefore be necessary for the Welsh Government to devise its own scheme to fund short-term supported housing in Wales. This could either mirror the system that is envisaged in England or could be managed on some other basis. I have not heard any statements on the matter from Welsh ministers.

The United Kingdom government is not proposing any changes to the funding of long-term supported housing that will continue to be funded through the welfare system.

It is intended that these new funding regimes will come into effect from April 2020. The United Kingdom government considers that they are models that:

- Are fit for now and the future.
- Focus on outcomes, oversight and cost control.
- Work with the modernised welfare system.

Katie Dalton, Director of Cymorth Cymru (the umbrella body for providers of homelessness, housing-related support and social care services in Wales), said that:

"Now that we have more information about the UK Government's plans, Welsh Ministers need to guarantee that this funding will be ring-fenced for expenditure on supported accommodation. They also need to ensure that Supporting People funding remains ring-fenced for housing-related support and firmly rooted in their housing directorate.

"It is also important that Welsh Ministers recognise the benefits of existing Supporting People governance structures in Wales. The UK Government's White Paper outlines a new planning and oversight regime for England. However, in Wales, we already benefit from the oversight, planning and needs assessments carried out by the Supporting People Regional Collaborative Committees. We therefore urge the Welsh Government to build on these structures to allocate both Supporting People funding and the proposed new funding for rent and eligible service charges in short term supported accommodation."

Alongside the policy statement and consultation paper, the government also published a summary of the responses to the November 2016 consultation, independent reports of the task and finish groups and their response to the Joint Select Committee report.

I have written a briefing paper that summarises the policy statement and consultation paper and provides some commentary. Your copy can be freely downloaded from here: http://awics.co.uk/files/module_document_pdfs/funding_supported_housing_-_policy_statement_and_consultation_paper_-_briefing_paper.pdf

The policy statement and consultation are available on the Department for Communities & Local Government website at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/655990/Funding_supported_housing_-_policy_statement_and_consultation.pdf

I will refer to the implications of this policy for service charges in Wales at our seminar 'All You Want to Know about Service Charges in Social Housing in Wales' that will be held in Cardiff on 14th February 2018. For further information or to make a booking, please click here: <http://awics.co.uk/all-you-want-to-know-about-service-charges-in-social-housing-in-wales-2018>

Local Government Finance Settlement

Mark Drakeford, the Finance Secretary in the Welsh Government, announced the Welsh Local Government Finance Settlement in October 2017. Councils in Wales will see cash cuts of £4.1 billion (0.5%) in 2018/19 and 1.5% in 2019/20. In view of increasing inflation, the real reductions in funding will be much greater. However, Mark Drakeford described this as a 'realistic settlement' given the reductions in the Welsh Government's budget that have been made by the United Kingdom government. He told BBC Wales that:

"This is a realistic settlement that continues to protect local government from significant cuts against a backdrop of reducing budgets from the United Kingdom government."

He also said that councils would have to consider increases in council tax and other income - The settlement assumes a rise of 2.5% in council tax on average across Wales - and that:

"Local authorities will need to look at their reserves as well to see if they can squeeze some money out."

Councils' allocations are decided using a formula that considers factors including population changes. All councils will see a cash cut in 2018/19, apart from Cardiff City Council that will receive an increase of 0.2%. Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Conwy, Merthyr, Monmouth and Powys all see the largest reduction of 1%.

The Welsh Government has allocated top-ups for schools and for social care worth £62 million and £42 million respectively, but that means that less money will be available for other services such as libraries and leisure centres.

The settlement was not welcomed by the Welsh Local Government Association whose leader, Councillor Debbie Wilcox (Labour) of Newport City Council forecast that Council Tax increases in the region of 5% could be expected in 2018 and told BBC Wales that:

"Services are wearing down to the point of collapse and the public are rightly growing frustrated in terms of paying council tax and yet seeing key community functions cut or closed..."

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The whole position is unsustainable. Local authorities cannot go on to be expected to make the harshest of cuts whilst continuing to provide the same breadth and level of service; in short, something has got to give."

Prior to the announcement, Councillor Anthony Hunt (Labour), Leader of Torfaen Council and finance spokesman for the Welsh Local Government Association, said that councils could not protect spending on schools and social care forever if the United Kingdom government continued to cut public sector funding.

Sian Gwenllian AM, Local Government spokesperson for Plaid Cymru told BBC Wales that it is not clear whether increased funding for schools and social care was in fact new money, or found from elsewhere in the local government budget, and that the settlement is:

"Once again a very difficult settlement for Welsh councils... It is a continuation of the United Kingdom... government's politics of austerity and it means that there will be cuts to services and that vulnerable people across Wales will suffer as a result."

It is understood that an extra £15million-£20million will be made available to councils from the extra money coming to Wales as a result of the United Kingdom government's 2017 Budget (see below).

Mark Drakeford has also said that, following the Welsh government's decision to abandon its plans to merge the existing 22 councils into eight or nine, councils would be asked to work together to deliver key public services on a regional basis. The 22 councils will remain as the 'democratic tier' of local government, but 'concerted collaboration' will be expected. Transport, planning and economic development could be run on a city region basis, while education improvement and social services could be aligned to health board boundaries, The plan is to retain existing local authorities as the 'front door' through which people access services, but with key services being delivered regionally. Mark Drakeford told the Senedd that:

"This will give local authorities more resilience in terms of staffing and finance and also ensure that services are planned and delivered on the right scale."

Any councils wanting to 'build their resilience further by voluntarily merging' would be supported to make it happen; and further talks with councils, unions and other interested parties would take place leading to a 'viable way forward' by the new year.

The plan has been criticised by Councillor Russell Goodway (Labour) of Cardiff City Council who called it an 'unfortunate fudge' and told BBC Radio Wales that:

"You're going to have seven indirectly elected local authorities instead of eight or nine directly elected... They're not directly accountable to the people that they serve - the voting public can't sack them because they don't know really who is in charge here... When you've got responsibilities like education and social care, there needs to be a direct relationship between those who are making the decisions and those that are receiving the service."

Dominic MacAskill, Head of local government in Wales at UNISON, told BBC Wales that it was sensible for regionally-shared services to follow health board boundaries but that council workers and the public:

"Want the assurance that councils will have the ability to deliver quality public services with a directly employed workforce and that people will have a democratic say over how services are provided".

United Kingdom Budget 2017 and its implications for Wales

Philip Hammond, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, unveiled his latest budget on Wednesday 22nd November 2017.

The economic circumstances are not good. As Rob Whiteman, the Chief Executive of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy points out in the 'Local Government Chronicle':

"Interest rates are rising and we have a £1.8trillion national debt and the worst productivity growth since the second world war... Worse still.. some services (are) stretched to breaking point."

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has published an interesting report entitled: Autumn 2017 Budget: options for easing the squeeze' that considers options for the budget. In the context of a forecast reduction in productivity growth from 1.6% to 1.0%, a reluctance to increase taxes and under pressure to increase spending, the report suggested that the United Kingdom government would be forced to abandon its objective of balancing the budget. This prediction was effectively confirmed!

The Institute for Fiscal Studies calculates that the government deficit could more than double to £36billion in 2020/21 or even £70billion if productivity declines still further. It also predicts that 'austerity' will continue for most of the public sector. However, others have argued that, because of the weakness of demand in the economy, the budget should feature increased public expenditure financed through increased borrowing.

The Chancellor announced that the Office for Budgetary Responsibility has revised its forecasts of economic growth downwards to 1.5% in 2017, 1.4% in 2018 and 1.3% in 2019. This is the lowest level of forecast growth in any G7 country. Government borrowing is forecast to be £49.9billion in 2017/18 and £39.5billion in 2018/19 with debt being equivalent to 86.5% of Gross Domestic Product in 2017/18 (it was at 40% in 2007/08). Described as 'fiscal loosening' by Andrew Neil on the BBC. Inflation is forecast to increase to 3%. No statement was made on changes to the 'public sector pay cap'.

Andrew Verity, the BBC's Economics correspondent tweeted that:

"If you blinked you may have missed him saying £14.8billion headroom (for spending or tax cuts) forecast for 2021/22. That's about £11billion less than forecast last time."

And Paul Johnson of 'The Economist' tweeted that:

"March 2016 Budget forecast surplus of £10billion in 2019-20. Today forecast is deficit of £35billion. Quite a turnaround in less than 2 years."

It has been reported that the United Kingdom government is about to offer the European Union £40billion to settle the 'Brexit divorce bill'. It is not clear where this expenditure is shown in the Treasury's financial calculations.

The implementation of Universal Credit has become controversial across the United Kingdom and £1.5 billion will be provided to alleviate some of the problems that have been identified. The seven-day wait will be removed from the start of a Universal Credit claim that will give claimants an extra week's money and will reduce the amount of time they will wait. Universal Credit claimants will continue to receive Housing Benefit for two weeks that will help to prevent tenants falling into arrears. Greater support will be offered to those who need advance payments and claimants will be allowed to apply for up to a month's payment within five days of applying. The repayment period for advances will be extended to twelve months. Targeted affordability funding for Local Housing Allowance claimants in the private sector struggling to pay their rent is to be increased by £250 million.

The National Living Wage is to be increased by 4.4% to £7.83/hour from April 2018. Youth rates will also be increased. This applies to two million workers on minimum wage. The freeze on benefits, including housing benefit will continue despite the increase in inflation.

The Chartered Institute of Housing commented as follows:

"We know that universal credit is causing significant hardship and that the lengthy waiting time for the first payment is a significant problem. Today's measures to help people suffering as a result of the delays are welcome. We hope to see further progress on some of the other issues affecting universal credit claimants, including administrative delays and lack of information. CIH wrote to the Department for Work and Pensions to express our concerns back in July and in particular we are urging the government to slow the roll-out down so that it can make sure it gets this vital reform right. Our research has shown that local housing allowance is completely out of step with rents in many areas of the country – especially for younger people. We welcome the extra funding to help support people in areas worst affected by that gap. However, we still think the government should go further and unfreeze local housing allowance rates. The ending of a private tenancy is the leading cause of homelessness in England and we look forward to contributing to the consultation on longer-term tenancies which could give much-needed stability to renters."

Aaron Hill, Assistant Director of Policy and Public Affairs at Community Housing Cymru, said that:

"The UK Government's adaption of the Universal Credit policy is a positive step forward. We're pleased to see that the Government has acknowledged and committed to resolve the design flaws in the policy; however, it doesn't go far enough and further improvements can still be made."

"We are calling for the rollout of Universal Credit to be paused so that more time can be taken to review the significant issues with the policy. We believe the waiting time should be decreased further to four weeks to ensure that people are not waiting longer than necessary. We would like to see payments being made to tenants as soon as their rent is verified, and we would also like to see tenants having the option to request that their housing support goes directly to landlords. We also want to see improved communication between DWP, claimants and landlords through the immediate rollout of the landlord portal and trusted partner status to all housing associations which would make a big difference to people across Wales."

"We were also pleased to see £1.2bn of consequential for Welsh Government and we would like to see this used for large capital projects, including housing, to achieve the ambitions set out in our long-term vision for housing associations announced last week, including a commitment to build 75,000 homes by 2036."

The United Kingdom government will begin negotiations towards a north Wales growth deal and consider proposals for a mid-Wales growth deal, working with local partners and the Welsh Government. Philip Hammond confirmed tolls on the Severn crossings would be scrapped by the end of 2018, first announced in July.

Perhaps the central proposal of the budget is to abolish stamp duty for first time buyers on the purchase of houses with a value of less than £300,000. This intended to help to reverse the decline in home-ownership. This will apply in Wales until April 2018 when the tax is devolved, and the Welsh Government's new Land Transaction Tax will be introduced. Following that:

"It will be for the Welsh Government to make any decisions about introducing future reliefs in Land Transaction Tax."

Wales' Finance Secretary Mark Drakeford told BBC Wales that he could change elements of the Welsh tax before April, as the regulations had not yet been laid at the assembly. He said:

"We will look at stamp duty. We have left ourselves with space if we need to make changes."

The Budget included plans for rail lines to be upgraded to allow direct services between Pembroke Dock and London via Carmarthen on the new Intercity Express trains. The Department for Transport will continue to develop proposals for other rail schemes, budget documents said, including station improvements at Cardiff Central station and Swansea, improving Cardiff to Severn Tunnel Junction Relief Lines, and improving journey times between: Swansea and Cardiff; South Wales, Bristol and London; and on the North Wales Main Line. The government will also consider proposals to improve journey times on the Wrexham-Bidston line and provide necessary funding to develop the business case.

The budget provides additional resources for the Scottish Government of £2billion, for the Welsh Government of £1.2billion and £650million for Northern Ireland. This amounts to a rise of around 2% in the Welsh Government's budget.

Alun Cairns MP, the Secretary of State for Wales, said that:

"The commitment to formally enter into negotiations over a growth deal for north Wales as well as kick starting early discussions for a growth deal for mid Wales are significant pan-Wales announcements... The move to improve rail services for businesses, workers and visitors from both sides of the Wales-England border, taken with the abolition of the Severn Tolls is also a clear demonstration of the United Kingdom government's ambition to move the Welsh economy into the fast lane."

Welsh ministers said that the additional money for day-to-day spending amounted to £215million over a three-year period. Mark Drakeford said that:

"While these small increases in the resources available to Wales are to be welcomed as they will help support our priorities, this additional funding will do little to ease the pressures on frontline public services, which have been struggling to cope as a result of the successive cuts to our budget we have experienced since 2010-11."

"Even with this additional funding, the Welsh Government's budget will be 5% lower in real terms in 2019-20 than it was in 2010-11."

"As a result of the measures the Chancellor announced today the funding Wales receives from the block grant will increase. But more than half of this increase is in the form of funding which must be paid back to the UK Treasury. £650m of the additional capital funding is in the form of financial transactions – this is a form of capital funding which must be repaid to the Treasury and there are tight restrictions on what it can be spent on."

The Budget Report identifies the fiscal implications for the United Kingdom as follows:

| | 2017-18 | 2018-19 | 2019-20 | 2020-21 | 2021-22 | 2022-23 |
|---------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Total spending policy decisions | -150 | -4,460 | -7,190 | -3,625 | -1,450 | -1,105 |
| Total tax policy decisions | -80 | -1,585 | -2,725 | +310 | -1,510 | -1,415 |
| Total policy decisions | -230 | -6,045 | -9,915 | -3,315 | -2,960 | -2,520 |

Public expenditure is budgeted to increase from £795billion in 2017/18 to £809billion in 2018/19, £827billion in 2019/20, £850billion in 2020/21, £872billion in 2021/22 and £897billion in 2022/23.

This is clearly a reflationary budget with increases in expenditure and reductions in taxation putting an additional £6.0billion into the United Kingdom economy in 2018/19 and £9.9billion in 2019/20; and with public expenditure budgeted to increase year on year. However, this follows seven years of 'austerity'.

I have written a briefing paper that summarises the budget's implications for public services and provides some commentary. Your copy can be freely downloaded from here: http://awics.co.uk/files/module_document_pdfs/budget_2017_-_the_implications_for_public_services_-_briefing_paper.pdf

National Health Service Wales and 'Brexit'

A report in 'The Lancet' written by Nick Fahy, a health policy senior researcher at the University of Oxford has concluded that any 'Brexit' that means leaving the single market as is currently planned by the United Kingdom government, could be catastrophic for the National Health Service and particularly devastating in Wales. Nick Fahy is a specialist adviser to the Commons health committee and has worked for both the Department of Health and European Commission.

Nick Fahy outlined issues ranging from potential risks to the National Health Service budget, workforce shortages and uncertainty over future arrangements for research and medicines. He said that:

"It's going to be very hard, I don't think we should be under any illusions about that - and that's why what kind of Brexit we have really matters. If we have a soft Brexit - where we remain pretty well integrated within the single market, where we continue to have an ability for European Union doctors and nurses to come and work here and feel confident about their future in the country, then I think the impact can be managed and be relatively minor. If we have a hard or no deal Brexit, I think the impact risks being catastrophic."

"We haven't got slack in the National Health Service; we're not coming at this from a position of strength, but from a position where each winter we breathe a sigh of relief that we managed to make it through without the National Health Service collapsing and that doesn't give us a situation of reserves we can draw on."

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He said that the United Kingdom has an unusually high dependency on workers from abroad. Although in Wales only 2% of the National Health Service workforce is from the European Union - it could be vulnerable to workers moving elsewhere if European Union workers left the south east and London. Nick Fahy said that hospitals in London would have to offer more money and the risk is that in the medium term, this would 'suck in' health professionals from Wales.

Carol Shillabeer, Chief Executive of Powys health board, told BBC Wales that there were already significant recruitment issues and it could be a particular problem for the social care sector, that is hugely reliant on European Union workers. She said that:

"If we reel forward, what could happen without that workforce, we start to think about sustainability of the social care sector, particularly residential homes, the availability of surgeons; you start to see the workforce eroded even further."

A Welsh Government spokesperson told BBC Wales that 'Brexit' posed a number of challenges and that:

"We want European Union nationals currently working in the National Health Service in Wales, or those who wish to come here to work, to feel welcome... Despite record numbers of frontline National Health Service staff working in Wales, some professions and speciality fields still face recruitment challenges. Health boards, along with our support, are working to address these challenges."

Increased building of Affordable Homes

Last year the Welsh Government announced a commitment to deliver an extra 20,000 affordable homes by 2021, including supporting the construction of more than 6,000 homes through the Help to Buy - Wales scheme.

In November 2017, the Welsh Government published figures that show a 6% rise in new affordable homes in Wales last year. In 2016/17, local authorities reported 2,547 additional affordable housing units had been delivered across Wales, an increase of 6% on the previous year. These figures exclude homes delivered via Help to Buy-Wales. 1,864 homes were delivered through Help to Buy during 2016/17 which, when added to the affordable homes statistics, highlight the progress towards the Welsh Government's 20,000 target in the first year.

Welsh Registered Social Landlords continued to make the largest contribution to additional affordable housing in Wales, delivering 93% of all additional affordable housing provision during 2016/17 (2,378 units). The number of affordable housing units delivered with capital grant funding increased by 3% during 2016/17 to 1,810 units, while the number delivered without capital grant funding was up by 16% to 737 units.

Rebecca Evans, Welsh Minister for Housing and Regeneration said that:

"Ensuring that people have a safe, warm and secure home is one of our key priorities. I am committed to increasing the housing supply in Wales and have an ambitious target of building 20,000 affordable homes during this term of government. I am therefore pleased to welcome today's significant progress."

“I am grateful to social landlords for the important role they play. I am proud of the positive and constructive relationship we have with the RSL sector in Wales and our joint commitment to work together for the benefit of tenants.”

Community Housing Cymru calls for review of Affordable Housing

Community Housing Cymru, the membership body for Welsh housing associations, has called for a review of the affordable housing policy in Wales to enable housing to achieve its full potential to improve people’s lives and the places in which they live. The call comes as Community Housing Cymru announces its twenty-year vision for housing associations in Wales, that includes a commitment to double the sector’s delivery rate by building 75,000 new homes and creating 150,000 jobs by 2036.

The twenty-year vision, revealed at Community Housing Cymru’s Annual Conference, pledges to make good housing a basic right for all in Wales by 2036 by establishing housing as the starting point for successful lives and successful places.

Ten years ago, the Essex Review of Affordable Housing in Wales laid the foundation to enable housing associations to achieve more. Today, housing is firmly established as a priority in Welsh Government’s Prosperity for All strategy. However, Community Housing Cymru wants to see even more ambition, improved partnership working and recognition that affordable housing is the key to prosperity so that housing associations can do even more to tackle Wales’ housing crisis and add value to communities across Wales.

Community Housing Cymru’s ‘Housing Horizons’ vision outlines a plan to increase and accelerate the work housing associations are already doing to make Welsh communities more healthy, prosperous, and connected. Other commitments for 2036 include:

- Spending 95p of every pound in Wales
- Exploring the establishment of a housing innovation hub to enable the development of flexible homes to meet people’s changing needs
- Ensuring that all housing association homes will meet near-zero-carbon standard

The call for a housing policy review, alongside the launch of the sector’s long-term vision, comes as new figures reveal the vital economic impact of Welsh housing associations. Data released today in Community Housing Cymru’s latest Socio-Economic Impact report demonstrates that, in 2016/17:

- Welsh housing associations built 2,207 homes - an increase of 17% on last year’s figure.
- 34% of these homes were built without Social Housing Grant.
- The sector directly spent over £1billion, with 84% ploughed into the Welsh economy.
- For every person employed by a housing association, another one and a half jobs are supported elsewhere in the Welsh economy.

Stuart Ropke, Chief Executive of Community Housing Cymru said that:

“Our vision for Wales in 2036 is one where good housing is a basic right for all. Housing is the cornerstone of a stable community – it affects our health, the connections we make within communities and, fundamentally, the prosperity of our places.

“From doubling the delivery rate of affordable homes to ensuring that the right services are built around these homes, it’s crucial that we establish the most effective policy environment to create a solid foundation for current and future generations. This is why we need a review of housing policy in Wales.

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“Our latest socio-economic impact report demonstrates that we have a strong track record of building, investing and re-investing. We have big ambitions and we’re embarking on this next stage of the journey to build a stronger and more prosperous Wales, but we cannot do it alone. Today, we’re laying down a challenge to housing associations and our partners across the public, private and third sectors to work together to ensure that good housing is a basic right for all in Wales by 2036.”

Vale of Glamorgan Council improves Sheltered Housing

Vale of Glamorgan Council has spent nearly £400,000 improving Longmeadow Court, a sheltered housing facility for the elderly in Cowbridge. Longmeadow Court is made up of 24 flats, with on-site management staff to take care of residents.

The refurbishment saw a new two-storey extension constructed, additional storage and laundry facilities built, while communal areas were also upgraded to include accessible toilets. This has allowed frail people living in the surrounding area the opportunity to become part of the scheme. Two new accommodation units were provided by the extension for use by people who are ready for discharge from hospital, but not yet able to return home. Such individuals can stay there while they recover further, and any necessary adaptations are made to their properties.

Partly paid for through a grant, the project has been allocated money from Welsh Government’s Intermediate Care Fund. The construction works at Longmeadow Court were carried out as part of the Accommodation Solutions Project, which involves an innovative partnership between the Vale of Glamorgan Council, City of Cardiff Council, Cardiff and Vale University Health Board, Care and Repair Cymru and Age Connects Cymru.

Together the five organisations work to fast-track low level adaptations to patients’ houses so that they can return home as quickly as possible. Where this is not possible the team arrange a stay in specially designed properties known as ‘step down’ units like those at Longmeadow Court to aid recovery. In 2015/16 Cardiff and the Vale provided eight ‘step down’ units for patients requiring alternative short-term accommodation, which meant they could be discharged from hospital. This helped avoid a significant number of hospital bed days where certain individuals would have stayed had this accommodation not been available. Over the course of one year, three units in the Vale were used by 16 people and avoided 297 hospital bed days.

Councillor Andrew Parker (Conservative), Cabinet Member for Housing and Social Care said that:

“We have made a substantial investment to improve facilities at Longmeadow Court and I’m pleased to see that money has translated into such major improvements to the building. Credit must go to Cllr Bronwen Brooks, who started the ball rolling on this project while in office.

“Laundry and toilet facilities are among the areas to have been upgraded, along with communal areas, but perhaps the most significant work has seen two new accommodation units built. These are specifically for people who should not be in hospital but are not yet ready to return home. Offering such provision should free up precious hospital beds for people who really need them.”

Editorial Note

The AWICS Wales News is published by AWICS Limited. This edition was edited by Adrian Waite. Articles are written by Adrian Waite unless otherwise stated. However, the views expressed are not necessarily those of Adrian Waite or AWICS unless expressly stated.

AWICS Surveys

At AWICS we value feedback from our clients and from users of our website. This is for two reasons:

- We actively seek feedback from clients so that we can evaluate what we are doing now and use the information to improve our services in future.
- We like to have a dialogue with clients and users of our website so that we can understand their developing needs and provide services to meet them as part of a long-term commercial relationship.

We have therefore developed a series of surveys and questionnaires that can be found at: <http://awics.co.uk/questionnaires-and-feedback>

These include a survey about our seminars. Whether or not you have attended one of our seminars recently, I would be grateful if you could assist us by completing our short survey. It can be found at: <https://form.jotformeu.com/71926426584364>

AWICS Seminars:

All You Want to Know about Service Charges in Social Housing in Wales

We are holding our seminar on 'All You Want to Know about Service Charges in Social Housing in Wales' in Cardiff on 14th February 2018. This seminar is designed to give an introduction and overview to this important subject and is fully up to date.

Service charges are an integral part of landlords' work in financing value for money services and sustaining customer satisfaction. They have always been relatively complex but with increased financial challenges and legal and financial complexity there is an increased need to understand how service charging works.

Traditional Housing Associations have usually levied service charges but most local authorities and stock transfer associations in Wales have usually 'pooled' their service costs. However, local authorities and stock transfer associations have recently introduced service charges as part of the Welsh government's new rent policy. The rolling out of Universal Credit is having an impact on benefit entitlement for service charges.

This seminar is suitable for people who are not experts in service charges, but who need to understand the basics and achieve an overview of what is going on. It is suitable for councillors, board members, housing managers, legal staff, finance staff, tenant representatives, members of the service charges team with limited experience and others who realise that an understanding of service charges can place them at an advantage!

What the Session Covers:

- How do Service Charges work in Housing Associations and Local Authorities and for Leaseholders and Tenants?

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- How are service charges calculated?
- How to de-pool service charges?
- Legal obligations, accounting guidance and good practice
- When are service charges eligible for housing benefit / universal credit?
- How to ensure excellent customer service?

The sessions are accompanied by a very useful 100-page book that is designed for reference after the session entitled: **“All You Want to Know about Service Charges in Social Housing in Wales 2018”**

Venue and Date: Novotel Hotel, Cardiff – 14th February 2018

Price: The price of this seminar is £195 plus Value Added Tax, a total of £234. **However, there is a £20 discount for people who book a month or more in advance** making the cost £175 plus VAT, a total of £210.

For further information or to make a booking please click here: <http://awics.co.uk/all-you-want-to-know-about-service-charges-in-social-housing-in-wales-2018>

Information about all our seminars can be found at: <http://awics.co.uk/seminars2017> and <http://awics.co.uk/seminars-2018>

About ‘AWICS’

‘AWICS’ is a management consultancy and training company. We specialise in providing support in finance and management to clients in local government and housing in England, Scotland and Wales. We are well known for our ability to analyse and explain complex financial and management issues clearly. Our mission statement is ‘Independence, Integrity, Value’. We therefore provide support to clients from an independent standpoint that is designed to help the client to achieve their objectives. We are passionate about working with the utmost integrity. We believe that we offer the best value for money that is available today!

For more information about our services and us please visit our website at www.awics.co.uk or contact Adrian Waite at Adrian.waite@awics.co.uk. Services that we offer include:

- Management Consultancy – <http://www.awics.co.uk/ManagementConsultancy.asp>
- Interim Management – <http://www.awics.co.uk/interimmanagement.asp>
- Regional Seminars - <http://www.awics.co.uk/seminars2017.asp>
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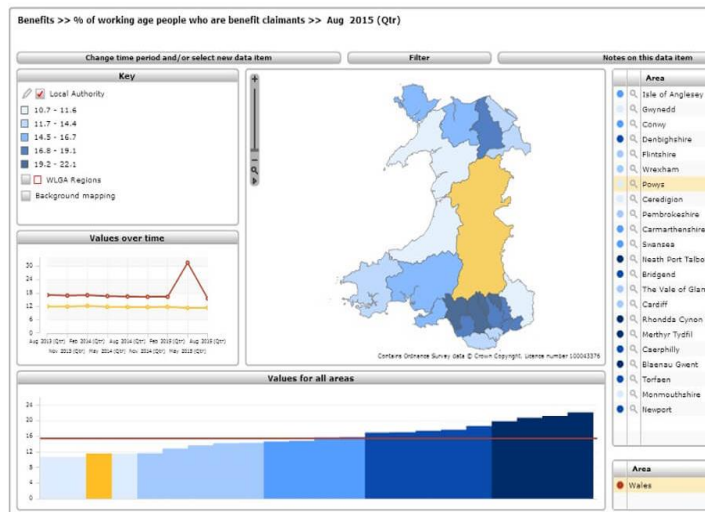
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- is a freely available, national information system displaying publically available data about Wales from local authority level to a local area (lower super output area) level
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- presents data in reports, tables and maps which are all easy to export

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