

A Review of Homelessness and Homelessness Services in Weymouth and Portland

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Executive Summary

The local authority's statistical data identify five main issues that impact on homelessness in Weymouth and Portland. These concern:

- parents no longer willing or able to accommodate;
- friends or other relatives no longer willing or able to accommodate;
- violent breakdown of a relationship with partner;
- non-violent breakdown of a relationship with partner;
- end of an assured shorthold tenancy.

There is a need to develop preventative approaches that focus on these issues. In particular, the local authority should consider:

- supporting mediation work between parents and their teenage/adult children;
- supporting mediation work between adults who are in a relationship;
- addressing the issues around the ending of assured shorthold tenancies.

In addition there is a need to:

- consider the status of the Housing Advice Service and the nature of the work it undertakes;
- develop a shared and common data collection system for homeless casework undertaken by the agencies in the Borough;
- further develop 'joined up' processes and strategies across the local authority in order to respond to housing need;
- develop 'joined up' processes concerning the funding of agencies in the Borough;
- co-ordinate cross-sector information on the types of services and agencies working with homeless people;
- undertake further research on the impact of the prisons and the Young Offenders Institute on housing need in Weymouth and Portland;
- assess the value and impact of the rehabilitation (pre-release) services currently undertaken by HM Prison Service, and identify opportunities for service development;
- assess the extent to which residents from outside of the Borough move into the area in order to address their housing needs;
- consider the recommendations for action points arising from the survey of agencies working in Weymouth and Portland (see p45) with regard to whether the Borough is able to support or add value to existing services or work in partnership to develop new ones.

BACKGROUND

Key Facts and Figures

Weymouth and Portland Borough Council is a 'traditional' second tier local authority providing the expected range of community, economic, social, educational and leisure services in conjunction with the wider Dorset County Council. Covering an area of 16.12 square miles (4,175 hectares), it is the smallest local authority in the county. Yet, despite its size, the population of the local authority has grown steadily from 62,200 in 1991 to 63,800 at the time of the 2001 census. Population projections forecast that this number will increase to 67,165 by 2011. Weymouth and Portland's demographic profile reflects that of the wider county. According to the 2001 census, over 20% of the population are aged over 60 years, while just over 23% are aged under 19 years.

Given the small geographic size of the local authority's boundaries, and the relatively large population, Weymouth and Portland is a small urban area nestling on the Dorset coast with a close rural hinterland. Along with many local authorities within Dorset and the wider UK, Weymouth and Portland Borough Council transferred its housing stock to a newly created registered social landlord (RSL), namely Weymouth and Portland Housing. This was completed in March 2000.

Employment and Industry

Weymouth and Portland's economy is relatively diverse, with a small agricultural, industrial, manufacturing, construction and transport base. It remains, however, heavily dependent on a number of public sector employers, including HM Land Registry and three penal institutions on Portland (HMP The Verne; HMP Weare; HMYOI Portland). Those living within Weymouth and Portland are within commuting distance to Dorchester, Bournemouth, Poole and Yeovil, which, in addition to having further public sector employers, are increasingly reliant on the banking, finance and insurance industries.

Given Weymouth and Portland's coastal location on the newly appointed World Heritage Coastline, the area is also reliant on the seasonal holiday trade and the associated leisure industry. Current estimates suggest that this accounts for over 25% of employment in the area, primarily located within the SME sector.¹

¹ See Dorset Data Online, part of the Dorset County Council website.

Given the number of prisons in Weymouth and Portland, it is unsurprising to note that the local authority is also host to a number of associated agencies that work with those in the criminal justice system. These organisations span bail hostels and other supported accommodation services, drug and alcohol projects, and a number of other offender projects. While these agencies are a major source of employment, the concentration of these services within Weymouth and Portland has given rise to concerns regarding the impact that vulnerable people, either moving into or remaining in the area after discharge, have on levels of crime, access to health services, housing need etc. This area of work requires more attention (see Recommendations).

Poverty and Deprivation Indicators

Within the wider Dorset context, Weymouth and Portland are widely recognised as having political wards and geographic areas with high indices of deprivation and poverty. Indeed, Table 1 (below) identifies that two specific wards in Weymouth and Portland have the highest numbers of families reliant on means tested benefits in Dorset. Of the 13 most significant wards in Dorset, Weymouth and Portland are represented by a total of six wards, five of which are in the top six wards for Dorset.

Table 1. Wards in Dorset with the Highest Percentage of Families on Means Tested Benefits.

Ward	District Council	Income (% of population who live in families reliant on means tested benefits)	National ranking of income domain (out of 8414 wards)
Melcombe Regis	Weymouth & Portland	33.22	1036
Westham East	Weymouth & Portland	31.79	1183
Grange	Christchurch	30.2	1339
Underhill	Weymouth & Portland	29.54	1420
North	Weymouth & Portland	26.08	1878
Westham North	Weymouth & Portland	25.75	1922
Bridport South	West Dorset	24.01	2206
Symondsburly	West Dorset	23.09	2337
Wool	Purbeck	22.9	2397
North Central	Weymouth & Portland	22.79	2421
Bridport North	West Dorset	22.39	2499
St Leonards & St Ives South	East Dorset	22.19	2541
Dorchester North	West Dorset	21.55	2659
Swanage South	Purbeck	21.47	2679

Source: Dorset Data Online (2002).

Further evidence of Weymouth and Portland's reliance on means-tested benefits is demonstrated in recent data offered through countywide Poverty Mapping Indicators. In particular, Table 2 (below) highlights that Weymouth and Portland have the highest population claiming Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, the highest number of pensioners per pensioner population aged above 75 years claiming Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, and the second highest population of children in benefit-receiving households.

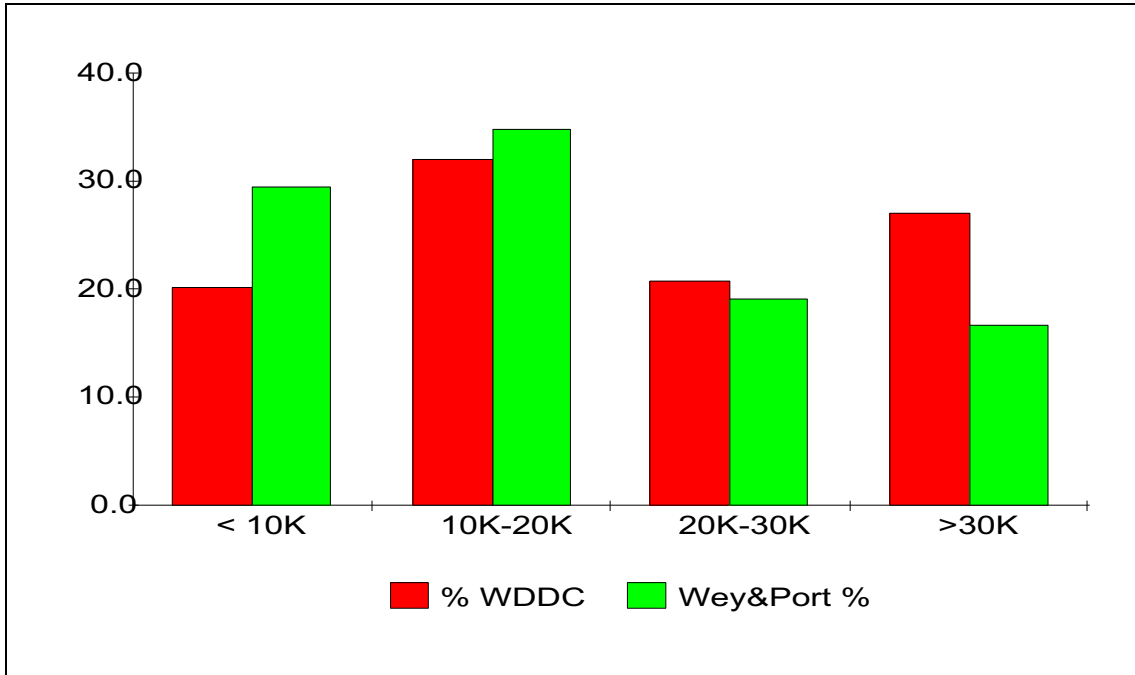
Table 2. Local Authority Population Groups by Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.

	Christchurch	East Dorset	North Dorset	Purbeck	West Dorset	Weymouth & Portland
Total population (2000)	44690	84560	62750	46820	92240	62920
Population receiving HB/CTB	5294	6868	5872	4843	9702	8156
Benefit population as % of total 2000 population	11.85	8.12	9.36	10.34	10.52	12.96
Population aged 75+	7180	10750	6170	4610	11550	5640
Pensioners aged 75+ receiving HB/CTB	1291	1819	1304	1085	2307	1341
Pensioners aged 75+ receiving HB/CTB as a % of total 75+ population	17.98	16.92	21.13	23.54	19.97	23.78
Population aged 0-19	8864	17268	15425	10355	20574	14995
Dependent children 0-19 in benefit receiving households	1398	1802	1421	1297	2375	2329
% of 0-19 population recorded as dependents in benefit receiving households	15.77	10.44	9.21	12.53	11.54	15.53
Households receiving HB/CTB	3166	3942	3156	2791	5832	4971

Source: Dorset Poverty Mapping Group (2002).

The poverty and deprivation indicators are similarly reflected in Figure 1 (below), which explores the levels of gross annual income of households. The table identifies that nearly two thirds of the households in Weymouth and Portland earn less than £20,000.

Figure 1. Gross Annual Income of Households in Weymouth & Portland and West Dorset.



Source: David Couttie & Associates (2000); David Couttie & Associates (2002).

As Figure 1 demonstrates, the income variation between households in Weymouth and Portland and West Dorset vary significantly, with just under 50% of households in West Dorset earning more than £20,000. The relative difference in the mean incomes of those living in the remaining local authority areas within 'old' Dorset is further evidenced in Table 3 (below). This table clearly locates Weymouth and Portland as having the lowest mean income, a full £1,000 below West Dorset, and over £4,000 below the mean income in East Dorset.

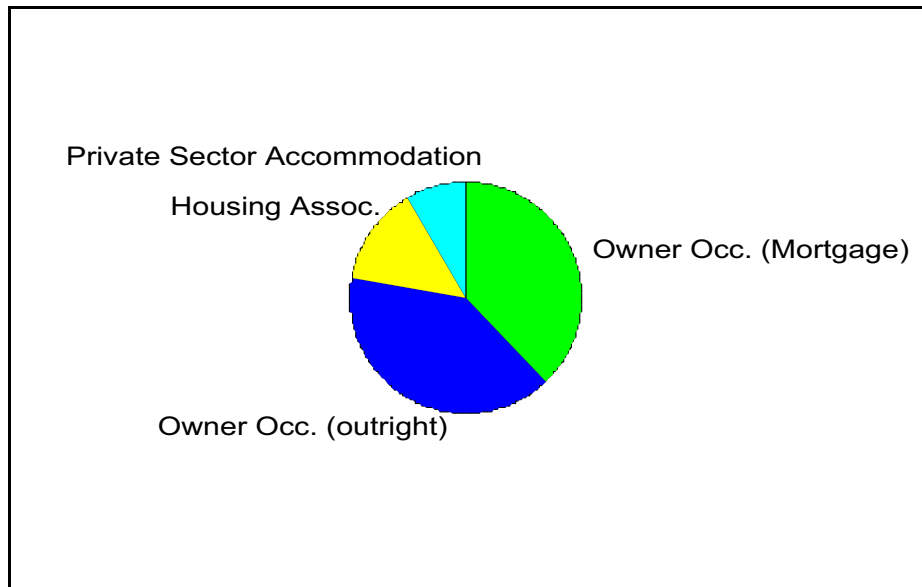
Table 3. Mean Incomes in 'Old' Dorset Local Authorities (1999).

Local Authority Districts	Mean Income	National Ranking
East Dorset	£22,600	144
North Dorset	£20,800	230
Purbeck	£20,300	256
Christchurch	£19,600	304
West Dorset	£19,500	309
Weymouth & Portland	£18,500	372

Source: Dorset Data Online (2002).

Housing Profile of Weymouth and Portland

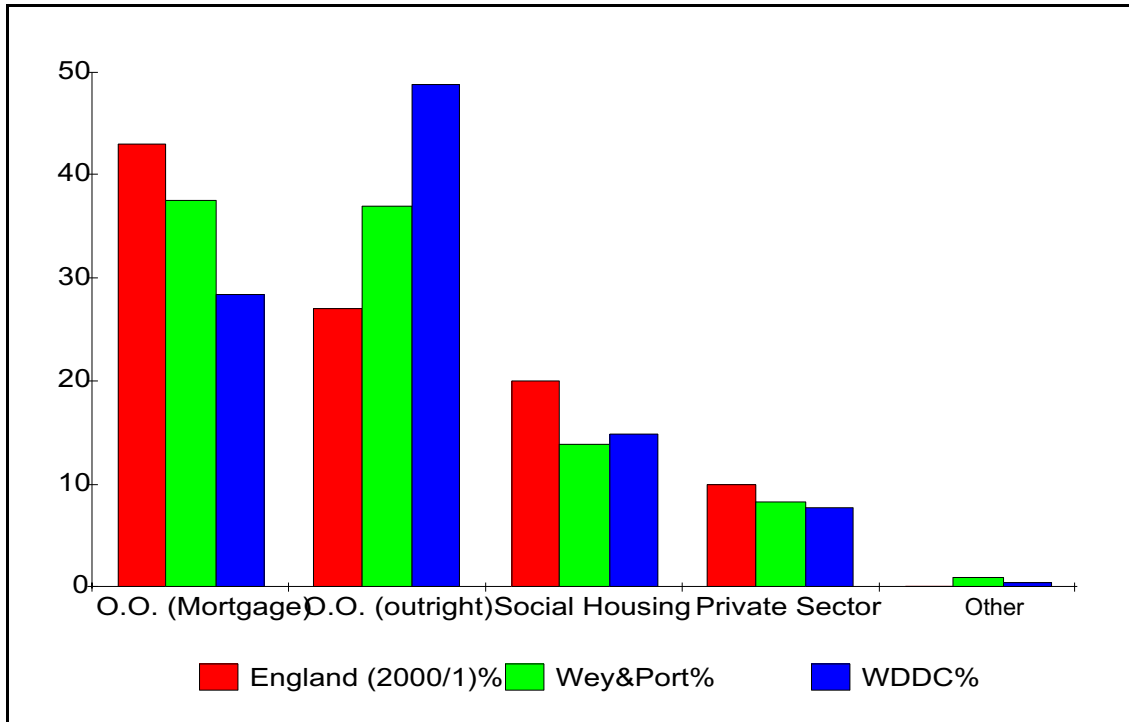
Figure 2. Housing Tenure in Weymouth & Portland.



Source: David Couttie & Associates (2000).

Figure 2 (above) illustrates that 22.8% of the housing stock in Weymouth and Portland is located within the broad rented sector. These figures are significantly at variance with the average for England, which is 30% of the national housing stock. The data for Weymouth and Portland can be broken down into 13.9% in social housing, 8.2% in the private sector and 0.7% in 'other' rented property, comprising tied accommodation (0.5), Armed Forces accommodation (0.1%) and shared ownership (0.1%). Overall, as Figure 3 (below) illustrates, these figures are similar to the closest neighbouring local authority, West Dorset. The major difference, however, is that Weymouth and Portland have almost 1% less Housing Association stock and 0.6% more private rented stock than its closest neighbour.

Figure 3. A Comparison of the Housing Profile in Weymouth & Portland with the UK Average and West Dorset District Council.



Source: DTLR (2000b); David Couttie & Associates (2000); David Couttie & Associates (2002).

As Figure 3 (above) demonstrates, a small percentage of households in Weymouth and Portland are buying their own home when compared with the national average. Given the high number of retired people attracted to the south coast, the area has more people owning their home outright. When this trend is considered within the profile of West Dorset, the major difference is that Weymouth and Portland have a higher number of households purchasing their own property and a lower number owning their property outright. In this sense, households in Weymouth and Portland are not as 'capital rich' as those in a neighbouring authority. Indeed, when we consider the findings in Figure 1, households in Weymouth and Portland are also 'income poor' when compared to those households in West Dorset. Thus, the housing profile of Weymouth and Portland underlines the economic status of the area when compared with both neighbouring local authorities and the national picture.

As a consequence of the combination of high poverty indices and the paucity of rented accommodation, attempts to respond to housing need in Weymouth and Portland are further affected by the general standard of housing and the work required to bring properties within the local authority area up to an acceptable level. Table 4 (below) highlights that, in most circumstances, the social and private rented sector require significant work to bring them up to an appropriate standard. In particular, the private rented sector appears to lack energy efficient resources

(window repairs, double-glazing, draught proofing, and central heating)
and as a consequence, are likely to be more expensive to run.

Table 4: Work Required on the Property by Tenure².

Work required	Owner occupier	Owner with mortgage	Weymouth & Portland rented	Private rented	HA rented
Window repairs	24.0	18.6	30.5	45.1	34.8
Draught Proofing	13.5	10.8	11.1	48.9	39.7
Structural Repairs	8.5	4.0	8.1	8.2	8.8
Kitchen modernisation	23.3	21.6	54.5	26.6	29.6
Bathroom modernisation	15.2	11.5	50.8	20.2	13.9
Double Glazing	29.4	24.8	6.7	51.9	14.1
Cavity Wall Insulation	30.0	37.1	19.9	18.8	18.4
Loft insulation	16.5	21.4	8.3	15.3	0.0
Central heating	15.8	17.5	30.5	49.3	16.2
Roof repairs	14.3	10.7	2.1	10.7	3.0
Damp proofing	11.0	10.9	13.1	22.9	39.7

Source: David Couttie & Associates (2000).

Table 5. Housing Deprivation by Wards in Dorset.

Ward	District Council	National ranking of housing domain (out of 8414 wards)	National rank of overall index (out of 8414 wards)
Grange	Christchurch	950	1575
Westham East	Weymouth & Portland	961	1625
Melcombe Regis	Weymouth & Portland	1385	782
Underhill	Weymouth & Portland	1888	1935
Blandford East	North Dorset	1900	3672
Tricketts Cross	East Dorset	2034	3543
Blandford West	North Dorset	2048	5842
Portman	North Dorset	2075	5038
Bulbarrow	North Dorset	2077	4178
Puddletown	West Dorset	2127	4238
Shaftesbury Central	North Dorset	2405	4370
North Central	Weymouth & Portland	2554	2863
Gillingham Town	North Dorset	2557	3701
Shaftesbury Christy's	North Dorset	2705	7163

Source: Dorset Data Online (2002).

² N.B. Since this data was collated, Weymouth & Portland Housing has embarked on a major refurbishment programme and, as such, the data relating to its property is not representative of conditions in 2003.

The impact of the poor standard of housing conditions in the rented sector is such that Weymouth and Portland appear among those local authorities in Dorset that have been ranked as having the worst housing deprivation in the county (see Table 5, above).

As a consequence of the data relating to poor housing standards and housing deprivation, the options that are available, when responding to homelessness in the Weymouth and Portland area, are heavily circumscribed. Indeed, one conclusion suggests that the private rented sector in Weymouth and Portland may be part of the problem rather than the solution.

The evidence suggests that any attempt to respond to homelessness has to consider, and subsequently address, strategies that link improving housing standards in the private rented sector and the general levels of deprivation (see Recommendations).

HOMELESSNESS IN WEYMOUTH AND PORTLAND

Defining and Enumerating Homelessness

Calculating the number of people who are homeless in a given area is fraught with problems. On one hand, we are presented with unreliable and inconsistent data that is difficult to use. On the other hand, we have a problem with definition. In part, this reflects a concern with 'rooflessness' and attention to the need to consider those who live in various forms of insecure accommodation.

Among this general level of confusion, the most reliable and consistent indicator that is recognised as indicating general trends in homelessness is the information provided by local authorities through Housing Investment Programme (HIP) returns and P1Es. Every local authority is required to provide a consistent range of common statistical information, among which are data related to the number of households seeking support under the homelessness provisions of the Housing Acts 1985 and 1996.

Yet, while the data collected by local authorities may be consistent and reliable, they cannot be interpreted as representing an accurate level of homelessness or giving a clear indication of the reasons why people become homeless. Given that local authority responsibilities towards different categories of homeless people vary, those who are either intentionally homeless or not in priority need may self-select and fail to seek advice and support from the local authority concerned.

The most reliable indicator of the levels of homelessness, therefore, concerns those who are unintentionally homeless and in priority need. Table 6 (below) highlights that, between 1997/8 and 2000/1, the number of households that fell into these two categories in England grew by 11% from 102,650 to 114,350.

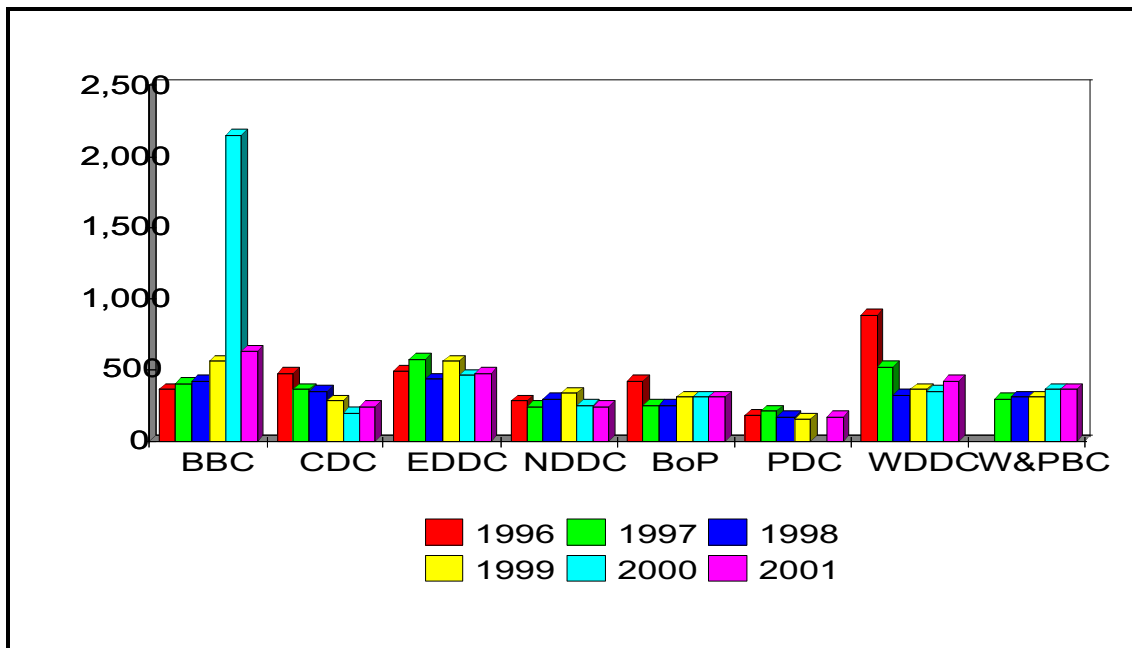
Table 6: Statutory Homelessness by Region.

Region:	Unintentionally homeless and in priority need during 1997/8	Unintentionally homeless and in priority need during 2000/1	% Change	Number per 1,000 households in 2000/1
North East	4,380	5,220	19%	4.8
North West	13,060	13,350	2%	4.7
Yorks & Humber	9,130	9,150	0%	4.3
East Midlands	7,550	7,370	-2%	4.3
West Midlands	14,670	13,860	-6%	6.4
East of England	8,120	9,800	21%	4.3
London	24,570	29,630	21%	9.5
South East	12,170	14,760	21%	4.4
South West	9,000	11,210	25%	5.4
Total	102,650	114,350	11%	5.5

Source: DTLR (2000a).

As Table 6 (above) demonstrates, this increase was not consistently experienced across England. It is significant that the South West region experienced the highest growth in homelessness acceptances during this four-year period. The homelessness situation within Dorset reflects the position across the whole of England. Indeed, as Figure 4 (below) demonstrates, the number of homelessness applications varies across the local authority areas within the county.

Figure 4. Number of Homelessness Applications in Dorset: 1996-2001.

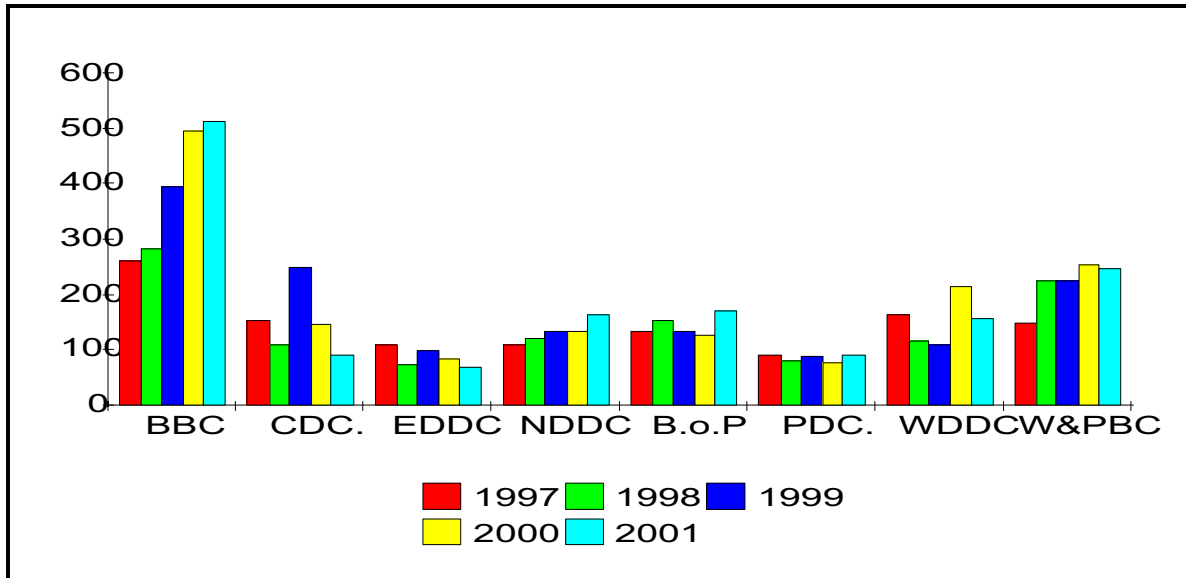


Source: Dobson (2002).

Key: BBC = Bournemouth Borough Council; CDC = Christchurch District Council; EDDC = East Dorset District Council; NDDC = North Dorset District Council; BoP = Borough of Poole; PDC = Purbeck District Council; WDDC = West Dorset District Council; W&PBC = Weymouth & Portland Borough Council.

Figure 5 (below) highlights that the number of acceptances by Weymouth and Portland has fluctuated between 1997 and 2001. Overall, however, there has been a significant increase when the figures relating to 1997 and 2001 are considered.

Figure 5. Number of Homelessness Acceptances in Dorset: 1997-2001.



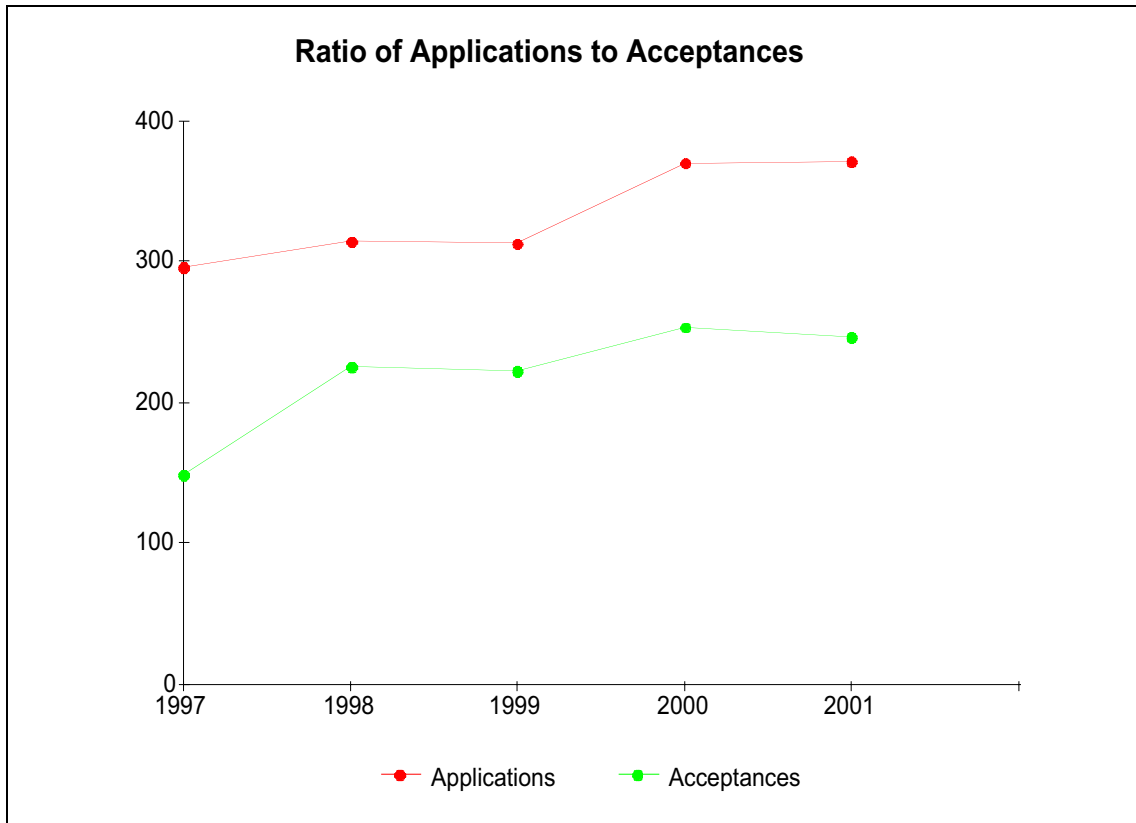
Source: Dobson (2002).

Key: BBC = Bournemouth Borough Council; CDC = Christchurch District Council; EDDC = East Dorset District Council; NDDC = North Dorset District Council; BoP = Borough of Poole; PDC = Purbeck District Council; WDDC = West Dorset District Council; W&PBC = Weymouth & Portland Borough Council.

The rate of growth in Weymouth and Portland's acceptances is better illustrated in Figure 6, below. This notes that, in both 2000 and 2001, the rate of acceptances was approximately 100 households per year more than in 1997. This equates with almost two more households per week, or a growth in acceptances of over 65% against a growth in applications of 25%.

Figure 6 also notes the ratio of acceptances to applications. Here, there has also been some change. In 1997, just over 50% of applications were accepted, while in 1998 and 1999 the ratio was almost 71.5%. It has remained around this figure in subsequent years, falling to 68.6% in 2000 and 66.4% in 2001.

Figure 6: Acceptances and Applications in Weymouth & Portland: 1997-2001.



Source: Weymouth & Portland Borough Council P1E Returns 1997-2001.

These figures are significantly higher than in most of the other local authority areas in Dorset. A neighbouring authority, for example, has a rate of acceptances to applications that is roughly 33.3%. It is difficult to identify the reasons for this difference. Anecdotal evidence from other agencies within the Weymouth and Portland area suggests that one of the reasons for this high ratio is a consequence of inappropriate practices within the service, which seek to discourage potential applicants from seeking support or making a formal application. If this evidence is correct, they serve to act as a stumbling block in trying to explore the reasons why people become homeless. There is a need to conduct further research on this particular issue to either substantiate or discount such perceptions.

It is clear, however, that when the homelessness statistics are considered on the basis of acceptances per 1,000 households within the local authority area, Weymouth and Portland's performance is, with exception of Bournemouth Borough Council, significantly at variance with local trends. Indeed, the evidence suggests that Weymouth and Portland accept more applicants per 1,000 of the population than neighbouring authorities (see Table 7, below).

Table 7. Homelessness Acceptances per 1,000 households in Dorset.

Area	Acceptances per 1000 households	
	3rd quarter 2002/03	4th quarter 2002/03
England	1.6	1.5
Bournemouth	4.0	3.8
Christchurch	1.8	0.3
East Dorset	0.3	0.4
North Dorset	1.9	1.6
Poole	0.8	0.8
Purbeck	0.7	0.8
West Dorset	0.6	0.7
Weymouth & Portland	2.5	2.1

Source: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2003).

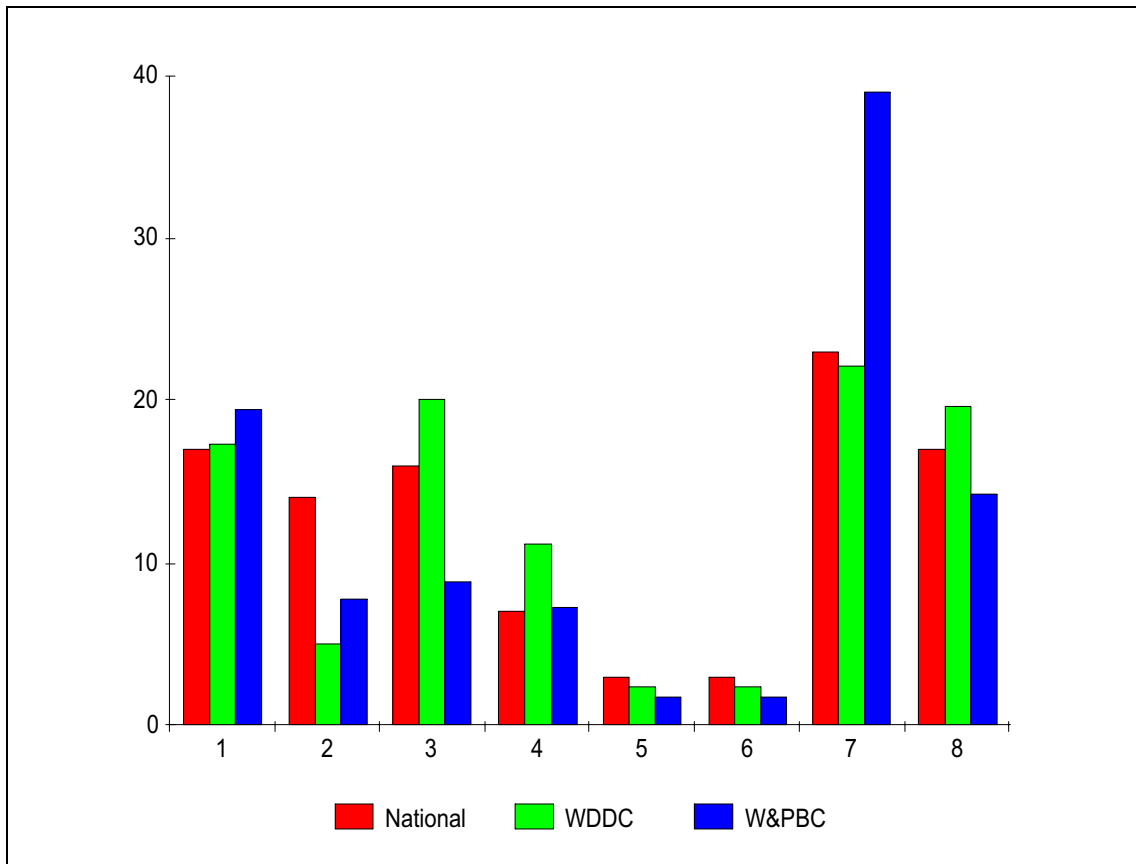
The data implies that while Weymouth and Portland are accepting more applicants per 1,000 households than most other local authorities in Dorset, the drivers for this are likely to be related to resource issues within the service (over-stretched and inexperienced staff), combined with the low supply of social housing (Figure 2) and high levels of deprivation (Table 1).

When considering the causes of homelessness, national trends often have little association with regional variations. Figure 7 (below, based on aggregated data between 1998/1999-2001/2002) highlights that, like many other local authorities, Weymouth and Portland has a distinct homeless profile, which is not only at variance with national trends, but has little in common with those of a neighbouring local authority (West Dorset). The data suggests that homelessness in Weymouth and Portland is exacerbated by five main problems. These concern:

- parents no longer willing or able to accommodate;
- friends or other relatives no longer willing or able to accommodate;
- violent breakdown of a relationship with partner;
- non-violent breakdown of a relationship with partner;
- end of an assured shorthold tenancy.

The incidence of homelessness as a consequence of these five factors is significantly higher than the national profile, contributing to over 80% of homelessness cases in the local authority area. As such, they suggest that the local authority needs to develop services that might tackle these problems. The problem with the ending of assured shorthold tenancies may be exacerbated by the problems noted above, which concern the scarcity and poor standards in Weymouth and Portland's private sector.

Figure 7. Causes of Homelessness – Weymouth & Portland trends compared with WDDC and the National Profile.



Source: DTLR (2002a); P1E returns from WDDC and W&PBC.

Key: 1 = Parents no longer willing to accommodate; 2 = Friends no longer willing to accommodate; 3 = Violent breakdown of relationship; 4 = Non-violent relationship breakdown; 5 = Mortgage arrears; 6 = Rent arrears; 7 = End of assured shorthold tenancy; 8 = Other reasons.

The problem is further clouded by the lack of clarity as to why assured shorthold tenancies are ended at the rate at which they currently occur. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy may take place for a number of reasons, including:

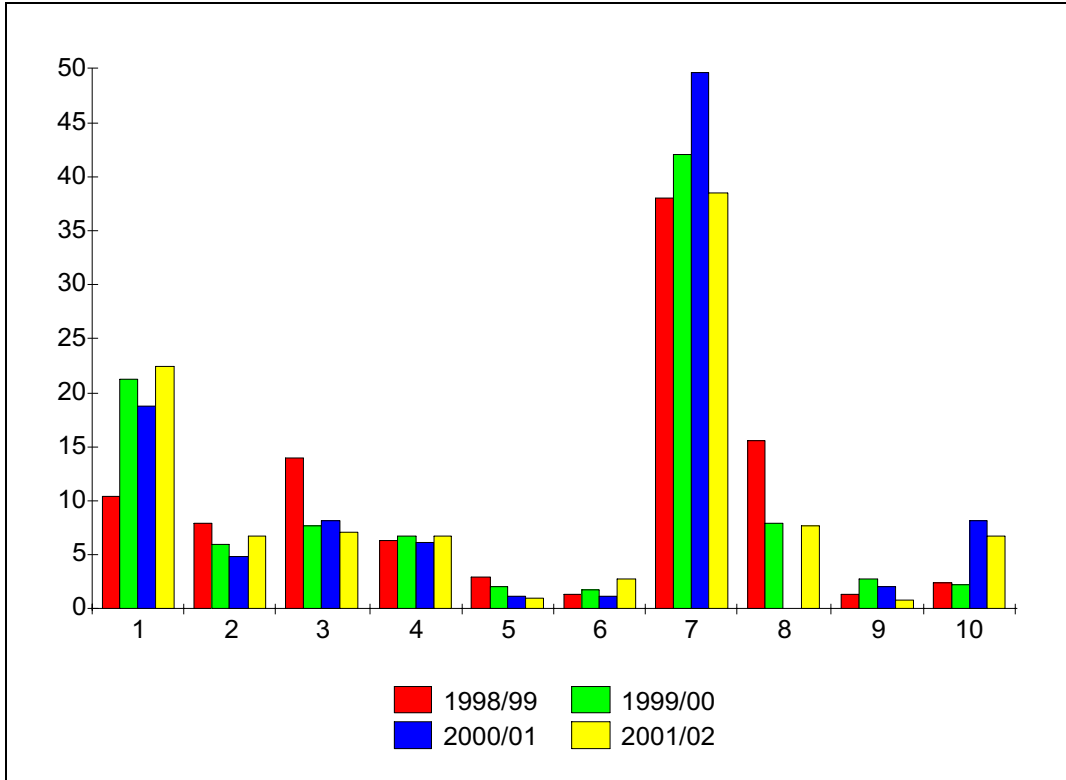
- the landlord intends to return to live in the property;
- the landlord seeks to increase the rent level;
- the landlord intends to sell the property;
- the landlord intends to renovate the property for another client group/ housing market.

It may also be the case that the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy may simply mask problems associated with nuisance or rent arrears, whereby the landlord is simply 'cutting their loss' with particular tenants.

The local authority may wish to commission further research that seeks to track the housing careers of particular groups (such as young people and families with a history of homelessness).

Further research is also required to clarify these issues and to identify strategies that respond to the incidence of those becoming homeless as a consequence of this trend.

Figure 8. Homelessness in Weymouth & Portland: 1998- 2001.



Source: Weymouth & Portland Borough Council P1E returns 1998-2002.

Key: 1 = Parents no longer willing to accommodate; 2 = Friends no longer willing to accommodate; 3 = Violent breakdown of relationship; 4 = Non-violent relationship breakdown; 5 = Mortgage arrears; 6 = Rent arrears; 7 = End of assured shorthold tenancy; 8 = Other reasons in the private sector; 9 = Leaving institutional care; 10 = Other reasons.

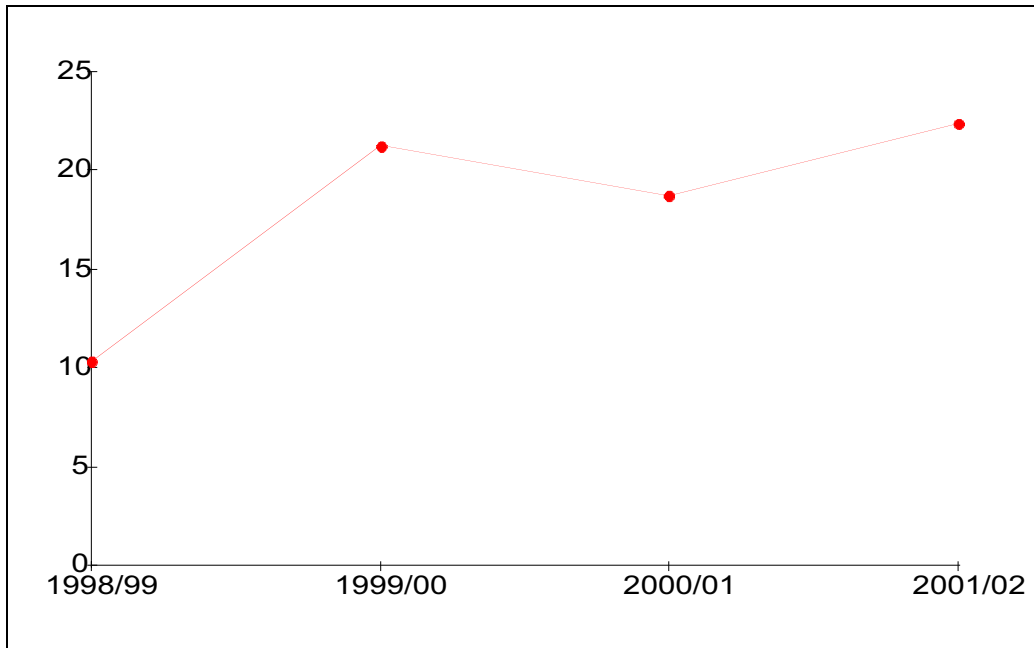
When Weymouth and Portland’s homelessness statistics are considered on a year-by-year basis (see Figure 8, above), it is evident that the five main factors contributing to the level of homelessness within the area have changed since 1998. In particular, it is clear that the number of homeless caused by the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy has declined since 2000/01. This decline, however, should not be interpreted as being significant, given that this category continues to account for almost 40% of the homelessness acceptances in the Borough. The local authority should note the small yet significant jump in the number of households becoming homeless as a consequence of rent arrears. While there has been some fluctuation in the trend, the number has more than doubled between 1998-2001.

It should also be noted that Figure 8 identifies that, while their number remains significant, since 1998/99 there has been a reduction in the number of households (women and children) that become homeless as a

consequence of domestic violence. These figures are at variance with the national picture and the profile in West Dorset. These figures may be influenced by the lack of move-on accommodation available to women living in local refuges, which impacts on the number of households that can be accommodated in the refuges.

Figure 8 also highlights that the number of people becoming homeless as a consequence of parents no longer being willing or able to accommodate has increased by more than 100% since 1998/99. This growth is more clearly evident in Figure 9 (below).

Figure 9. Parents No Longer Willing To Accommodate.



Source: Weymouth & Portland Borough Council P1E returns 1998-2002.

It must be noted that an analysis of data by seasons (yearly quarters) does not identify any specific trends in homelessness. This suggests that landlords are not evicting local people for summer lets at any significant level. This implies that there are possibly two groups of landlords operating within the area, who either deal with the local market or the holiday market (this is supported by the data on the poor standards in the private rented sector, which are unlikely to satisfy holiday-maker expectations). If there are two groups of landlords in the area, then the local authority might wish to build new relationships with those that offer summer accommodation. Further research is required to investigate the potential offered by using summer lets as a means to alleviate the use of B&B accommodation for homeless households, to gauge the number of empty properties in the Borough, and to assess and identify the number of second homes in the Borough.

It is difficult to predict how trends in the nature of homelessness in the Borough will unfold in the coming months. It is clear that the changes in the nature and strength of the wider UK economy will impact on many households in the area. This is likely to lead to an increase in debt, specifically related to mortgage and rental costs. The financial pressures within households may impact on the number of young people living in their parental home and the breakdown in adult relationships.

The changing nature of the housing economy, and the belief that house prices may fall or remain static, may have an impact on the availability of rented housing in the area, as landlords make decisions related to their financial situation. Some landlords might sell their properties, while others might bring empty properties into use.

However uncertain the state of the economy remains, it is clear that the major causes of homelessness in the area are reliant on economic factors. The local authority should prepare itself for an increase in demand in the coming months.

THE PROFILE OF HOMELESS SERVICE USERS

As part of the data gathering process for this research project, and in order to gain a clearer snapshot of housing and homelessness problems within Weymouth and Portland, all agencies were requested to complete a data sheet on every homeless person they worked with during a two-week period leading up to 28th March 2003.

The data from 13 agencies working within the Borough produced 127 completed contact sheets, of which nine individuals appeared on two or more datasheets.³ (The datasheets collected details of the service user's date of birth in order to gauge the number of people who presented themselves to two or more agencies). Of these contacts, one was from an Asian background, while another referred to themselves as Irish. The rest were classed as white Europeans.

Of these contacts, 50 were known to be women, the remaining 68 were men. This highlights a much higher level of homelessness among women than previously thought, although the data may be influenced by the agencies that returned completed forms for this data gathering process. The current housing situation of these people varied enormously. Specifically, Table 8 demonstrates that while many people were living in insecure accommodation, a significant number were sleeping rough, squatting or sleeping in vehicles.

Table 8. Current Housing Situation of Service Users.

No. of People	Current Accommodation Situation
29	Hostels
16	House/flat/bed-sit
16	Sleeping rough
13	Living with relatives
8	Living with friends
7	Refuge
7	Squatting
5	B&B
3	Mobile Home
3	Other vehicle

³ N.B. The data and the number of user groups appearing in this section have been influenced by those agencies that took the time to complete these forms. As such, questions concerning the 'representativeness' of the data arise.

All those who sought help and support were asked about the main reasons for their homelessness. The information gathered highlights the disparity that exists with those accepted as being in priority need. Specifically, Table 9 (below) notes that, while many appear as being made homeless as a consequence of parents not being willing or able to continue accommodating them, a large number were escaping violence, leaving institutions or other forms of care, or were unable to find accommodation as a consequence of their drug/alcohol problems.

Table 9. Primary Reasons for Homelessness.

No. of People	Primary Reason for Homelessness
19	Escaping domestic violence
18	Leaving institution or care
15	Parents not willing to accommodate
13	Drug/alcohol problems
7	End of assured shorthold tenancy
7	Non-violent breakdown of relationship
6	Other relatives or friends
4	Sleeping rough
3	Affordability of rent/deposit/mortgage
3	End of other private tenancy
3	Physical mental health problems
2	Other forms of harassment
2	Rent arrears – registered social landlord
1	Landlord raising rent beyond ability to pay
1	Racially motivated harassment
1	Split with partner after becoming pregnant
1	Landlord selling

It is significant that of those who responded to the question, two-thirds had approached the council for assistance, while a majority (75%) did not believe that they were on the Housing Needs Register.

HOUSING, HOMELESSNESS AND ASSOCIATED SERVICES

These profiles are based on interviews with the principal providers of homeless services in the Borough.

Housing Advice Centre

This service was not interviewed as it was felt that P1E returns and other official data gave an account of its work.

Weymouth and Portland Housing (WPH)

As noted above, Weymouth and Portland Housing is a major provider of social housing within the local authority following the large-scale voluntary transfer of the Borough Council's housing stock. It currently has approximately 2,960 properties comprising general needs and sheltered accommodation.

The service is funded through rents and associated service charges of tenancies. The source of income is either through payments made by tenants directly, Housing Benefit, and Transitional Housing Benefit (soon to be replaced by the Supporting People grant).

In the majority of cases, WPH offers advice to those tenants vulnerable to homelessness. Referrals to the local authority for further information and assistance occur at an average rate of two tenants per week. Evictions for rent arrears or anti-social behaviour are approximately 20 per year.

South West Dorset Primary Care Trust

It is widely acknowledged that homeless people (particularly those sleeping rough) have more significant health needs than the general population (Crisis 2002). It has also been shown that a significant number of homeless people suffer multiple health needs including drug and alcohol dependency problems and underlying physical health problems (Bevan & Van Doom, 2002). In addition, it must not be assumed that homeless people necessarily access primary care services in the same way that others might. One survey found that the homeless people interviewed were almost 40 times more likely not to be registered with a GP than the average person (Wilson, 2002). Those interviewed were also nearly three times more likely than the general population not to have seen a GP in the last year.

Homeless people often access primary care services through signing up with a GP practice under the auspices of a 'temporary resident', as their care is often deemed 'immediately necessary'. This apparently common practice runs contrary to the advice of The Royal College of General

Practitioners which states that, wherever possible, homeless people should be registered permanently (Statement on Homelessness and Primary Care, 2002). It has been suggested that while 'temporary' status may bring a reasonable level of one-off service, a person needing care for a longer-term, chronic condition will have problems in accessing ongoing care in the normal way. It is also extremely unlikely that patient notes will be passed on from any previous surgeries, affecting the continuity of care. Clearly, by definition, the nature of homelessness means that people are very mobile, so patient notes will always need to be passed on more regularly than those of other people. This process should become easier with the introduction of electronic patient records.

There would seem to be a number of reasons for continuing to register homeless people as temporary residents, and at least two of these should be recognised as significant factors when considering policies affecting services. First, for GPs, who are independent contractors of healthcare, there are greater financial incentives attached to signing up patients as 'temporary residents'. Second, temporary residents can be 'de-registered' within eight days without any reason being required. This offers a safety net to GPs who may find it difficult to deal with homeless people. Potential difficulties may include anti-social behaviour (such as drug and alcohol dependency problems), but perhaps more importantly, there may be difficulties in responding to complex health needs that cannot be dealt with independently of the individual's social needs.

Beyond the issue of registration, there are particular problems with accessing appointments. Many practices work largely on an appointment only basis, which is likely to be off-putting to homeless people, so a policy of immediate access for the homeless is encouraged. A more complicated problem is that of appointments for secondary care services that rely on postal communication. The Prince of Wales Road Practice in Dorchester is setting the pace for change in seeking to respond to these issues. The practice has an inclusive homeless policy as part of their Practice Development Plan. They offer instant access to homeless people, and by working together with 'The Hub' (a walk-in provision in Dorchester), they try to ensure that homeless people receive appointment letters, therefore enabling them to access secondary care. Their evolving work should be recognised as a valuable development in attempting to make services more accessible. Agencies in Weymouth and Portland are keen to work with health services providing care for those who are homeless. The Salvation Army already links with local hospitals and other medical professionals and Soul Food and the Lantern (see below) are interested in better health service access and provision.

There is no clear understanding of how homeless people access healthcare services generally across the South West Dorset PCT area. Local observations suggest that the situation is unlikely to be very different from the picture nationally; that homeless people can often only sign up as 'temporary residents' in primary care, and that they are likely to use A&E departments and Minor Injury Units when accessing GP services becomes problematic (Wilson, 2002). These 'walk-in' services have traditionally provided invaluable care to homeless people, but it can be argued that they are not necessarily best placed to deal with the complex and multifaceted health needs that homeless people present. It is worth mentioning that analysis has shown that the use of A&E by the homeless can be up to three times more expensive than a GP appointment (North et al., 1996).

North Dorset Primary Care Trust

North Dorset PCT provides mental health services to Weymouth and Portland. At least one in five homeless people suffer from a severe mental health problem (Crisis, 1999), and homeless people are eight times more likely to suffer from mental ill health than the general population (Centre for Housing Policy, 1994).

The Community Mental Health Team (CMHT) that serves Weymouth and Portland actively works to prevent homelessness and supports those who are homeless or who are at short-term risk of homelessness. Where homeless people are present with severe mental health problems, they are either hospitalised or supported in an appropriate community setting. The Trust has contracts with several RSLs (Weymouth and Portland Housing, Magna, Warden and Signpost) to provide appropriate accommodation for service users. CMHT staff work alongside floating support workers from Carr Gomm (see below), with whom the Trust has also got a contract. Workers have found that sharing an office in this way has been particularly beneficial. CMHT staff also work closely with other homeless services such as the Lantern.

Dorset Probation Service

The Probation Service provides housing advice, rent deposits and placements in both hostels and the private sector. This work has been funded by the Home Office through the Probation Accommodation Grant Scheme (PAGS) up to the end of March 2003 and then by Supporting People. The service offers reasonably high levels of support to clients and accommodation providers and operates a rent deposit scheme.

The service enjoys an excellent working relationship with partner organisations, and around 15 homeless people are seen per year. The major reasons for their homelessness have been:

- relationship breakdown;
- parents no longer wishing to accommodate offspring;
- leaving prison;
- drug abuse.

In recent years, the changes in funding have enabled the service to engage in a more advantageous way with the private sector.

There appears to have been a higher incidence of offenders using drugs.

Dorset Youth Offending Team (YOT)

Dorset Youth Offending Team works with young people aged between 10-18 years who find themselves within the criminal justice system. The service is able to offer generic advice and support, on both an emergency and on-going basis.

The service is funded through the County Council, health, probation and police services, with additional funding from the Home Office via the Youth Justice Board.

The YOT does not keep figures on the incidence of homeless among service users, but estimates that they see 8-10 homeless young people per year. The reasons for homelessness in these cases tend to be:

- family breakdown;
- offending behaviour;
- poor mental health;
- substance misuse.

The service notes that, in recent years, the needs of homeless service users have become more complex, as they experience multiple problems that require substantial support or supervision.

Homeless service users are given support in applying for accommodation and some limited visiting support to help maintain tenancies. This support ends following the completion of a supervision order etc.

The YOT does not wish to develop services in order to assist service users with their accommodation issues. However, the service would like these vulnerable young people to have their housing needs met by other providers, thus freeing up time for the team to concentrate on the prevention of re-offending. As a consequence, relationships with other organisations are developing. In particular, The Children's Society (Waves) is currently developing links on behalf of the YOT. These appear to be positive.

Dorset Police (Western Division)

The police service encounters those who are homeless and those who are mis-using drugs and alcohol. They have referral workers who visit offenders, and who can act as referral agents to housing and other agencies. The service also contributes to the funding of a Housing Support Worker and will offer informal advice to support people in securing and maintaining accommodation. This work is funded through Communities Against Drugs Referral (Home Office) and police and local authority budgets. Future funding is uncertain.

The police service does not collate relevant statistical data, but notes that around 20 homeless offenders are seen each year. The wider homeless population encountered by the officers, who do not offend, are additional to this number.

The primary reasons for homelessness are drug and alcohol abuse. The local bylaw banning outdoor public drinking where it causes a nuisance has led to fewer people with alcohol dependency and homeless problems being seen in the centre of town.

The service's relationship with other organisations is good but there is a gap in knowledge about all the facilities and agencies working with housing and homelessness.

Gypsy and Traveller Liaison Service

This service provides a liaison between travellers and housing and other agencies. It is funded by the local authority and some internal sources. The funding is secure at present.

Only a small number of travellers declare themselves homeless or apply for housing; about two or three families in the Weymouth and Portland area per year. Most have chosen to travel and then decide to seek housing. Some cannot find or afford conventional housing and then 'take to the road'.

Apart from liaison with housing, the service helps with form filling and providing references. It has good and cordial working relationships with colleagues in partner organisations but many travellers still struggle to qualify for housing.

WAVES

Waves is an advice and information service based in the centre of Weymouth and managed by the Children's Society. It offers advocacy for young people threatened with homelessness and who are in court. It also has a rent deposit scheme and provides food parcels, laundry and showering facilities.

There are referral protocols and procedures with regard to accommodation. A floating tenancy support service assists young people to maintain their tenancies. The relationship with accommodation providers and other partner organisations is good.

The Children's Society and Social Services fund the project and Weymouth and Portland Housing Forum fund the rent deposit scheme. Housing and homelessness are not core projects for the Children's Society and are thus vulnerable. The rent deposit scheme always depends on Housing Conference success.

The reasons for the homelessness of young people seen at Waves are:

- relationship breakdown with parents;
- loss of private rented accommodation;
- loss of supported housing due to misunderstanding the policies of accommodation providers.

In recent years, more young people are becoming homeless following relationship breakdown with their parents, and losing their tenancy because they cannot cope with living independently. More flexibility is needed in the development of support services. The service should be able to match the changing needs.

Soul Food, Weymouth

Soul Food operates under the auspices of the New Covenant Church, and is a signpost agency providing hot food and drinks, clothes, blankets and showers. If appropriate, it offers assistance in helping users towards independent living. It is funded by private donations and receives financial assistance from the Church.

During the past three years, the service has seen between 175-225 people, which account for over 1300 different contacts. Many service users seek continual support. The major reasons for homelessness have been pain and trauma following family breakdown, and sexual and physical abuse.

In recent years, the project has developed a better understanding of those in housing need. The homeless require support, mental health care and counselling. Those sleeping rough need provision and easier planned access to services. The pastoral arm helps with advocacy to landlords, utilities, neighbours and housemates, support with budget planning, form filling, rent deposits, personal counselling, dealing with abuse and debt.

The support takes the form of self-help groups, 12-step programmes, the basics of setting up home, food, clothing and signposting to other agencies and local departments.

Salvation Army

The Salvation Army provides breakfast twice a week and runs other support services on a full-time basis, such as help with benefits, housing, and clothing. It offers a listening ear, visits hospitals, and liaises with the medical profession. To support tenancies, they give personal finance advice and liaise with other agencies, namely Genesis, Melcombe House and the Lantern. The work is funded by Weymouth and Portland Borough Council.

No statistical information is collected but the major reasons for the homelessness of the people seen are past abuse, substance misuse or that they are victims of circumstance or lack of resources. The Salvation Army works well with other agencies and feels supported in return.

5, Carlton Road North

This is a mental health hostel, which takes referrals from the Community Mental Health Team and hospital, of those who are homeless and in need of rehabilitation. It is funded by Social Services (20%) and Housing Benefit (80%). The funding responsibility will be transferred to Supporting People.

Service users are offered temporary accommodation while they resolve their problems. They are referred to Housing with support from the hostel and are assisted in chasing up medical evidence to gain extra points on the Housing List.

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The major reasons for homelessness encountered by the hostel are:

- mental health problems;
- drug misuse;
- loss of accommodation due to hospital admission;
- debt due to poor mental health;
- not claiming benefits;
- giving up a previous tenancy in order to claim Housing Benefit at the Hostel.

In the last few years, the hostel has seen younger people with dual diagnosis becoming homeless. The Hostel staff feel that they are working in parallel with other agencies but not in unison.

Carlton House

Carlton House is a residential drug and alcohol unit that incorporates additional addiction recovery. This partly involves dealing with homelessness. A meal and some warmth during the day are given while

trying to find housing help. Counselling and advice are given and people are referred to other agencies.

Approximately 20 homeless people are seen by the unit per year. They are homeless primarily as a consequence of their addiction. In recent years, the profile has changed from 'men of the road', who slept on park benches, to a younger, more volatile group of needy people.

The partner organisations working with Carlton House are Bournemouth Churches Housing Association, Melcombe House, Charis and the Amberwood Project. All work well together.

Bournemouth Churches Housing Association (BCHA)

In Weymouth BCHA provides:

- a fully supported project at Melcombe House (15 units);
- a Resettlement Worker at Melcombe House;
- move-on accommodation (satellite) in Albert Street (5 shared units);
- 34 units leased from private landlords with full nomination rights to Weymouth and Portland Borough Council;
- five new flats are being developed for ex-offenders with Signpost Housing Association;
- three move-on units for the Foyer in conjunction with Weymouth and Portland Housing Company;
- training and support services for residents.

Funding for accommodation provision comes from rents, invariably Housing Benefit, and from the Housing Corporation for the supported provision at Melcombe House. The Probation Service and Social Services also provide funding support. The training and support is funded through New Deal and the Bridges Consortium (European Social Fund). The latter expires in June 2003. The Resettlement Worker, funded by the Drugs Action Team, is in year one of a three year funded programme.

The new Supporting People structure encompasses the Housing Corporation funding, Probation Services Level Agreement and Transitional Housing Benefit in a single contract. The short-term contract will cover the operating costs of the scheme. However, indications from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister are that there will be a scaling down of the Supporting People funds at the contract review stage.

Client composition at Melcombe House

Approximately 93% male

	Referrals	Acceptances
1998-1999	71	34
1999-2000	83	29
2000-2001	124	50
2001-2002	199	53

Age profile

25-35	50%
35-60	40%
65+	10%

Referral Sources

Lantern	40%
Housing Advice	20%
Probation Service	20%
Social Services/Mental Health	20%

Reason for homelessness

Drugs/alcohol	50%
Mental health	20%
Ex-offender	20%
Family breakdown	10%

Resettlement

Private lets	30%
Housing Association (local authority/BCHA)	25%
Supported Accommodation	15%
Return to partner	10%
Out of area	10%
Left without notice	10%

**Weymouth Women's
Refuge**

Weymouth Women's Refuge is managed by Stonham Housing Association in partnership with Weymouth and Portland Borough Council and Social Services. It offers safe, short-term temporary accommodation and support to a maximum of six women and their children, fleeing domestic violence. The long-term aim is to empower residents to take control and make appropriate decisions about their future. Contact is made through the police, Samaritans, Social Services, Housing Departments, Citizens Advice Bureau, Women's Aid, or by self-referral.

Accommodation charges are mostly met by Housing Benefit. Staff help with arrangements for rent payment after they arrive. Residents are offered assistance in obtaining housing and with the moving in process.

Statistics

	Referrals	Accommodated
2000-2001	298	36
2001-2002	275	21
2002-2003	260	21

Age Profile

18-25	23
25-30	15
30-35	21
35-40	7
40-45	6
45-50	4

Stonham Housing Association, which manages Weymouth Women's Refuge, commented that the relationship with the other agencies has been up and down over the last year and perceives that the refuge is not being seen as emergency accommodation with rules and confidentiality issues. As a consequence, women are staying for up to 16 months.

Dorset Women's Outreach Project

The Outreach Project offers flexible and non-directive support and information to women and their children affected by domestic violence. This includes a freephone helpline, drop-in groups, advocacy, one-to-one meetings, and resettlement and tenancy support.

The Project is funded by regular applications to various grant making trusts and bodies, such as Rausing Trust, the Lankelly Foundation, and the South West Foundation and a variety of small funders including Social Services and local authorities. Funding remains a continual and time-consuming concern with a number of applications outstanding, including a three-year Community Fund application. Funding is secure for the next 12 months. The Dorset Women's Outreach Project would like to continue and develop its existing services of information, support and advocacy, but it needs more secure, longer term funding. Monitoring and feedback from service users reveal how highly the resettlement/tenancy services are valued, but constraints on the workers' time are a barrier in providing these.

The number of homeless women/families has continued to rise over the last three years: 2000-2001 = 177; 2001-2002 = 193; 2003 so far = 56.

The Project finds it difficult to produce totally inclusive and accurate figures and areas of origin, as policies are drawn up to allow clients anonymity when requested. Thus, these figures are only based on the women who offer this information.

The major reason for their homelessness is escaping domestic violence but they often have additional and complex issues such as rent arrears, mental health, relatives no longer able to accommodate.

In recent years, recognition of domestic violence has increased on a national and local level, and the Project has increasingly been working to ensure that women's housing needs are top of the housing agenda. Refuge accommodation is not, in all cases, an option. Many women are now in employment and are reluctant to leave jobs, families and friends. There is an increasing understanding by the women that the abuse they experience is not their fault, they are not to blame and that they have the right to live free from violence. This has resulted in increased numbers of women disclosing abuse and seeking safe housing options and support.

To assist service users in securing/maintaining accommodation, the Project provides information, support and advocacy to women survivors of domestic violence before, during and after homelessness applications. It provides a resettlement and tenancy support service and signposts women and their children to safe existing services. It also supports women through the civil law process as they make safe their existing tenancies. (It is important to recognise that this is not always a safe and appropriate option). It also raises awareness of the range of housing needs experienced by women affected by domestic violence. As part of the resettlement/tenancy support services, the Project works with clients on a wide range of issues such as rent arrears, budgeting, home security, accessing education and training, and accessing schools/nurseries. This role could certainly be extended, but due to resource deficiency it is currently balanced against time spent on providing services to women in crisis and at immediate risk.

As many of the clients have complex needs, advocacy is also a well-used element of the service. Many women are too traumatised to seek help from other agencies such as housing without one-to-one support from a worker. The current shortage of appropriate affordable housing available in the Weymouth and Portland area makes the service a necessity in supporting women to remain in, or re-access, their current accommodation.

The Project works closely with partner organisations, as its clients may have key/support workers from other agencies. It plays a key role in facilitating the West and Rural Dorset Domestic Violence Forum, a multi-agency group focusing on all issues affecting this client group. The Forum holds a well attended annual conference updating and offering new information to an ever-widening range of participants. It also sits on the Weymouth and Portland Housing Forum as well as the recently established Homelessness Strategy Group. The Project is well known as a sign-posting agency for other organisations, and an important part of its role is working with other service providers to identify strategies and look at options to work with women who are facing homelessness due to domestic violence.

The Lantern

The Lantern is an independent registered charity offering a range of front-line services that directly benefit people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Qualified staff work alongside volunteers to provide a one-stop-shop, open-access resource centre to benefit all vulnerable people. The Lantern provides:

- housing advice for those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, supported by intensive resettlement support;
- welfare benefits advice and help with forms;
- advocacy and representation at tribunals when appropriate;
- referral agency for Melcombe House hostel and Second Chance furniture store;
- access point for the Weymouth and Portland Housing Forum rent deposit scheme;
- some limited emergency accommodation (from sympathetic landlords) for those homeless with mental health problems who are in crisis;
- used clothing for those who are homeless or attending job interviews, for example;
- practical assistance with moving into accommodation, such as bedding and access to furniture;
- information and advice service enhanced by the use of the comprehensive Lantern Directory of resources and support services;
- a coffee bar support centre with personal and social support and low cost food and drinks;
- shower facilities for those who are homeless;
- baby changing facilities;
- assistance in referrals to primary and dental health care;
- free use of telephone for job, health, housing, and welfare benefit needs;
- access to fast-track referral to the Community Mental Health Team;
- crisis prevention and intervention in person and/or by phone;

- domiciliary and community support for those facing mental health problems;
- various support and interest groups meeting throughout the week, including basic adult literacy and numeracy.

(Adapted from Lantern document: *Statement of Purpose, Aims and Service Provision.*)

Funding comes from several sources: a three-year rolling contract with Dorset Social Services, support from 17 local churches, and 'The Friends of the Lantern' raise funds locally. The centre has roughly 300 interviews with people who are affected by homelessness each year and received 70 housing referrals in 2002. They work closely and successfully, referring clients between several local agencies, most notably the Community Mental Health Teams, DDAAS, Melcombe House, The Salvation Army and Soul Food.

There is a feeling that the reasons for homelessness locally are not fully understood. It was suggested that where statistics suggest that 'the end of assured shorthold tenancies' is the most significant factor, they mask the causal reasons for that being the case. Mental health problems and chemical dependency were cited as the most significant reasons for homelessness. It was perceived that, while the needs of service users had remained constant in recent years, there had been a major deterioration in the responsiveness of the housing market to their needs. A significant downturn in the amount of available accommodation was experienced about 18 months ago and top-up payments on rents appear to be unrealistic for many homeless people locally.

The Lantern's Housing and Resettlement and Community Support Outreach Service has been developed around the needs of clients. In practice, this holistic approach includes more than what is listed above and (being an independent organisation) workers are able to be creative and flexible in working out a way forward for individual clients. The service mainly contacts clients through the coffee bar, which stresses the importance of social integration for those who have been socially excluded. The effectiveness of the service is built on the combination of professional staff working (through partnerships) in an environment that is respected by those people the service seeks to help. Due to this, the Lantern is in the fairly unique position of being able to engage or re-engage people with statutory services and other agencies.

Carr-Gomm Society

The Carr-Gomm Society is a registered social landlord and charity providing support services and accommodation to vulnerable people. One of its functions is the Dorset Floating Support Scheme for people

with mental health and/or substance abuse related needs. This work is funded under a Supporting People contract with Dorset County Council and is subject to a three yearly review.

The Floating Support Scheme provides practical advice, assistance and emotional support to people in their own homes. As needs change, the level of support is adapted and tails off. The aim is to maintain tenancies by helping the individual to develop independent living skills. Support and assistance is offered in the following areas:

- budgeting;
- welfare benefits;
- dealing with courts and social services;
- information on local statutory and voluntary organisations and help accessing their services;
- access to education, training and employment;
- advocacy;
- support in moving home and obtaining furnishings;
- emotional support;
- sexual health;
- substance misuse issues.

The service tries to prevent homelessness. During the past three years, they have seen six homeless people in the Weymouth and Portland area. The major reasons for their homelessness have been:

- mental health problems;
- drug abuse;
- alcohol abuse.

These issues can lead the individual to bring their tenancy into jeopardy by either failing to pay the rent, clean or maintain their accommodation, or falling out with their neighbours.

The Carr-Gomm Society enjoys a good relationship with other agencies.

The Bruised Reed Trust (Charis)

The Bruised Reed Trust provides accommodation for homeless men who suffer with drug and alcohol problems. It also implements a programme of recovery, including counselling and support.

Funding is received from Supporting People payments, Housing Benefit, top up payments from residents' benefits, and the charity receives grants and donations from various sources.

Approximately 35 men between 23 and 50 years old are helped each year in the six-bed facility. There is a very low void rate.

Weymouth and
Portland Citizens
Advice Bureau
(CAB)

Service users are either self-referrals or are referred by prisons, rehabilitation units, homelessness projects or mental health services. Most service users are homeless as a consequence of their dependency on alcohol and/or drugs. In recent years, there has been a higher incidence of substance misuse and changes in the drug used, such as Crack Cocaine. The service believes it has a strong relationship with other local agencies.

The CAB provides advice and information about all aspects of housing and homelessness. It also undertakes casework and appeals relating to homelessness decisions. Outreach work takes place at a number of GP surgeries and the Portland Centre.

In order to help people maintain tenancies, the CAB helps with:

- the application for benefit;
- planning debt/rent arrears repayment;
- court representation;
- negotiation with landlords.

Core funding comes from Weymouth and Portland Borough Council and has remained at the same level for the last three years. The Primary Care Trust funds outreach at GP surgeries through an annual contract. Funding for the Portland Centre Outreach comes from the Portland Centre's Lottery Award. Dorset County Council funds training to a level dependent on the number of voluntary advisers and trainers, and a successful bidding process.

During 2002/03, the CAB saw 353 people who were homeless/threatened with homelessness. The major reasons for their situation were:

- violent and non-violent relationship breakdown between children and parents;
- eviction from property due to the end of a shorthold tenancy or rent arrears;
- changes in personal circumstances, such as end of employment or ill health.

In recent years there has been a slight increase in the number of clients who appear to need some sort of supported accommodation to help them manage paying the rent and apply for Housing Benefit.

Weymouth and Portland Housing Forum

Nearly all the agencies described in this report have representation on the Weymouth and Portland Housing Forum, which is one of the last independent forums in the county. The fact that the Forum has an ongoing role in identifying need, planning, and the development of services locally, is seen as extremely positive. The Housing Forum acts as a conduit for effective partnership working and agencies should get involved wherever possible so that homelessness can be tackled in a corporate way across the Borough. It should be recognised that the problem of homelessness requires agencies to work together. Without a separate District Operational Group, as has been set up in other local authority areas, the Forum is also the most significant independent body that can affect local housing strategy and ensure public accountability.

FUTURE TRENDS IN HOMELESSNESS IN WEYMOUTH AND PORTLAND

Forecasting trends in homelessness is a difficult activity. It is an issue that is influenced by a number of variables. In part these relate to national domestic policy regarding housing and homelessness and the performance of the national economy. At the same time, they also relate to local factors associated with employment, housing building, and the continuing practices of local organisations, especially those concerning the criminal justice system and social care.

A focus on trends is also problematic as it concentrates on the future, and is in danger of ignoring the existing homelessness problem. This review has had to balance a need to respond to those who are currently homeless, while identifying preventative strategies to influence the nature and incidences of homelessness in years to come. It reflects the balancing exercise that local authorities find themselves in when addressing housing need.

It is clear that existing services offering accommodation for vulnerable people (including women escaping domestic violence, people with learning difficulties or mental health problems, young people and ex-offenders) are either 'silting up' or in danger of doing so. There is a sense that services which were established as crisis, temporary or short-term accommodation are unable to meet this brief due to a lack of suitable move-on accommodation. Again, this issue impacts on future trends.

If current levels of service provision remain the same, and if the preventative strategies identified in this report are not acted on, the number of homeless people will continue to rise. This will occur in two distinct ways. Firstly, the number of homeless applications to the local authority is set to rise. Recent trends identified in the body of this report highlight the growth in numbers over a short time scale, and there is no evidence to suggest that the figures will decline. Consequently, there will be a rise in the number, if not the proportion, of those who are deemed to be in priority need and unintentionally homeless. It is likely that the recent widening of the definition of groups in priority need will further exacerbate the problem.

Secondly, many voluntary organisations within Weymouth and Portland have identified that, in recent years, the number and complexity of cases they see have increased. Many of the homeless people they work with

are ineligible for housing under existing legislation. There is no evidence to suggest that their number will decrease.

At the time of compiling this report, there was some discussion regarding a potential recession in the housing market. It is difficult to forecast the implications this would have on homelessness in the area. While negative equity does not necessarily directly influence the levels of homelessness, the depth and duration of a recession might impact on the nature and number of private sector properties available for rent. A recession may also inadvertently influence the local authority's approach to the private sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations arising from the Homelessness Data

An analysis of the local authority's statistical information identifies five main issues, which have an impact on homelessness in Weymouth and Portland. These concern:

- parents no longer willing or able to accommodate;
- friends or other relatives no longer willing or able to accommodate;
- violent breakdown of a relationship with partner;
- non-violent breakdown of a relationship with partner;
- end of an assured shorthold tenancy.

When considering possible ways to develop a preventative approach to homelessness, the local authority needs to focus on these five issues, and, in addition, it should consider:

- supporting mediation work between parents and their teenage/adult children;
- supporting mediation work between adults who are in a relationship (the local authority might wish to encourage partnerships with local RSLs in undertaking this work);
- addressing the issues around the ending of assured shorthold tenancies.

While this report has recommended further research on the reasons why landlords evict their tenants, there is a need to tackle additional issues:

- Responding to the poor standards in the private sector. In order to develop an appropriate strategy, the local authority needs to develop the relationship it has with private landlords. In particular it needs to:
 - focus on a landlord accreditation scheme;
 - work with colleagues in the local authority to devise ways in which renovation and other grants might be concentrated on this sector;
 - respond to concerns landlords may have regarding Housing Benefit policy and procedures.
- Improving the number and range of properties in the private rented sector. Thus, the local authority needs to:
 - consider how it might encourage those properties let for summer holidays to be let for the wider private market, if only out of season;

- consider promoting buy-to-let schemes (in conjunction with the point below);
- consider ways of developing the private sector leasing scheme in conjunction with Weymouth and Portland Housing.

While these issues represent a significant number of households that become homeless, the doubling in the number of households made homeless as a consequence of rent arrears is a major concern. Indeed, the poor standard of accommodation suggests that many of these tenants are also likely to experience fuel debt. While money advice services are provided by the local Citizens Advice Bureau, it is evident that the local authority should consider promoting/supporting/funding the provision of additional money advice services in Weymouth.

Given the paucity in the standard and number of housing stock in the private rented sector, there is a need to explore how social housing within Weymouth and Portland might be further developed. Any development needs to reflect the wider housing needs of the population. In particular, there is a need to develop opportunities for those living in supported accommodation. This type of accommodation was originally developed as a short-term option to enable young people to move towards independent living. The lack of move-on accommodation has increasingly resulted in tenants remaining in this type of accommodation longer than originally planned, and has restricted the opportunities that are available for other young people seeking this type of support.

Recommendations Arising from the Research

Changes to the Housing Advice Service (HAS)

Given questions regarding the policy and practice concerning the nature of housing advice and the processing of homeless applicants within the Housing Advice Service, the local authority should seriously consider establishing the Service as an independent, arms-length organisation. It is only through taking a radical step such as this that confidence in the integrity of the work of the Service might recover. The local authority should also reconsider whether this Service is best placed to undertake the homeless investigation function. Again, it is worth considering whether an independent organisation is best placed to respond to the needs of homeless people in a more dynamic manner.

The authors acknowledge that such changes require political will. As such, the local authority may have a number of reasons why these changes could be considered unnecessary. An alternative to the proposed changes could be the establishment of an independent

advisory board, with representatives from local organisations, to oversee the running of the HAS and to monitor its work and processes.

Developments with Partner Agencies

The local authority and the partner agencies should be congratulated on the dynamism that exists within the Housing Forum. This has arisen via the effective participation of senior officers, and the commitment of the many agencies that work in Weymouth and Portland. This forum has the impetus and enthusiasm to respond to many of the local authority's pressing housing problems.

Attendance and adequate representation of agencies working with homeless people are problems that beset many inter-agency groups of this type. While the Forum is broadly representative of the agencies active within the area, it would benefit from a more active engagement with the local Primary Care Trust.

It is recommended that further work is also undertaken to explore the potential for involving the Forum in commissioning, monitoring and reviewing services working with homeless people in Weymouth and Portland. The Forum might provide a useful context in which the recommendations identified below are developed, implemented and monitored.

Recommendations from Agencies

The following recommendations represent the views put forward by local service providers who responded to the survey. These agencies working within Weymouth and Portland identified the need for a more co-ordinated or strategic approach when responding to homelessness. This includes:

- The use of a shared and common data collection system that would enable a Borough-wide monitoring process. Common data sheets and a central collation system would allow the local authority and partner agencies to respond to changing needs and assess the extent to which the homelessness strategy is being met. Data collection and collation should include the local police service, which might provide further information on the nature of homelessness and the profile of homeless offenders.
- The need to further develop 'joined up' processes and strategies across the local authority in order to respond to housing need. One key objective, against which services might be measured, is the extent to which they prevent homelessness and promote housing opportunities. In this context, local authority departments, including

Environmental Services, Economic Development, Housing Benefit, and Housing Services, would be required to work together in identifying and sharing objectives, and in implementing new processes and procedures.

- The development of 'joined up' processes across the local authority in the funding of organisations working within the Borough. In particular there is a need to ensure that:
 - departmental committees that allocate funding are better informed of the decisions made by other committees within the local authority;
 - the funding provided is evaluated and monitored against the purpose originally stated;
 - prioritisation is given to those services that adopt preventative measures in helping those in housing need, or respond to those in housing crisis;
 - the local authority considers the range of services that it might provide 'in kind' to those voluntary agencies working with the homeless. Such services might include assistance with completing grant applications for other sources of funding;
 - the local authority seek to work closer with other statutory agencies within the Borough in ensuring that the funding they make available to voluntary organisations meets local authority priorities.

- Co-ordination of cross-sector information on the types of services working with homeless people, in addition to information relating to the various rights (and responsibilities) available to homeless people. This information could be readily available to those in housing need via the agencies working with this user group.

- Undertaking further research on the impact of the prisons and the YOI on housing need in Weymouth and Portland. This research should consider:
 - the numbers of prisoners discharged into the local community;
 - the housing destinations and careers of those discharged into the local community;
 - an assessment of the wider social needs of these residents.

Weymouth and Portland is a local/regional centre for a number of agencies working with this user group, and the impact of these services on housing needs to be better understood.

- Assessment of the value and impact of the rehabilitation (pre-release) services currently undertaken by HM Prison Service. Also, identify opportunities for service development.
- Assessment of the extent to which residents from outside the Borough move into the area in order to address their housing needs. The local authority might wish to develop its work with neighbouring authorities to ensure that housing needs are met more locally.

Emergency and Specialist Services and Accommodation

The profile of the service users of the various agencies working in Weymouth and Portland highlights the need for emergency accommodation and associated services within the Borough. While further research might be useful in this area, particular attention needs to be made towards:

- Provision of emergency accommodation. The evidence suggests that there is a need for emergency accommodation within the Borough. This service will need to respond to the various complex health and social needs of homeless people, and it is recommended that any service will be required to accommodate those with mental health problems and those with drug and alcohol problems.
- Further day centre services integrated with free/cheap food provision. There are currently at least three projects that provide varying levels of frontline day centre services for those living in insecure accommodation or sleeping rough. These include drop-in support, housing advice, food, clothing and basic washing/showering facilities. There is, however, a need to develop these services still further to meet the current level of need and bring about a greater coverage throughout the week. It is suggested that such services might also develop to include direct access to medical/healthcare provision.
- Short-term high support assessment accommodation for those with drug/alcohol problems or mental health needs.
- Long-term supported/floating support placements for those leaving short-term high support services.
- Further funding for drug and alcohol rehabilitation agencies.

Support Services

A number of agencies in Weymouth and Portland have identified the need for a number of support services for vulnerable groups. These services include:

- Independent living skills. Services might include training on budgeting, basic DIY, health and safety, personal skills and health care. These services would be available for those in supported accommodation projects.
- Employment opportunities. There is a need to consider developing services that might support homeless people in securing appropriate employment or employment training.

Advice Services

In response to the survey, the advice services identified a need for:

- Consideration of ways to encourage registered social landlords and private landlords to refer tenants to advice services before problems become more complex.
- Exploration of how tenants might be better informed about the consequences and implications of their court order.
- Exploration of how tenants might be better supported and advised at court hearings.

Domestic Violence

Agencies working with women escaping domestic violence identified a need for:

- Provision of safe accommodation for women service users with high support needs i.e. women with drug/alcohol issues and women with mental health issues.
- Safe, temporary accommodation for women who choose to remain in their home while they access civil law remedies, ouster orders, or non-molestation orders. Working women and women with teenage sons are often unable to access a refuge, and spaces within local refuges are at a premium.
- Independent advice service for all client groups faced with the threat of homelessness to advise on early interventions, particularly regarding rent arrears advice.
- Dorset Women's Outreach Project (DWOP) to work with local authorities in developing interventions to reduce and prevent homelessness caused by domestic violence. This would include extending the current range of support, advocacy and information services to help clients maintain their tenancies, including information about legal rights and remedies, housing options,

advocacy, health and counselling services. DWOP could also provide support to sustain tenancies, and resettlement services where appropriate.

- Some form of move-on accommodation, with possibly floating support, as Weymouth Refuge is almost always full and many of the residents experience long stays. The 'silting up' of the service means that the refuge is rarely able to offer emergency direct access housing to women in crisis.
- Maintenance of the joint working initiative now in place, with regular monitoring and updates so that all participants are fully aware of all services related to housing and support.
- A review of allocation and pointing policies particularly to ensure that clients in accommodation, such as refuges and move-on/temporary accommodation, are not disadvantaged on the waiting lists.

Young People

Agencies working with young people identified a need for:

- provision of emergency accommodation for vulnerable young people;
- supported accommodation for vulnerable young people with multiple needs;
- use of the Foyer to its potential;
- housing support services for teenage parents and their children as part of the Government's teenage pregnancy strategy and the locality action plan.

Gypsies and Travellers

The Gypsy and Traveller Liaison Service identified a need for:

- provision of authorised stopping places for gypsies and travellers;
- alternative provision such as caravan sites and informal park-ups;
- recognition that the majority of travellers do not consider themselves to be homeless as they have a home but nowhere to park it;
- greater variety of provision to cater for travellers' special needs.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

As with any other local authority area, homelessness in Weymouth and Portland is influenced by some very specific factors relating to employment, housing stock, and the nature of services that exist in the area. In addition, the situation in Weymouth and Portland is influenced by its geographical location and the fact that it is a tourist resort. Consequently, the nature of homelessness does not always reflect national or regional trends.

This research has revealed that there have been strained relationships between the local authority and other agencies and services in the past. Encouragingly, however, a new climate of inclusivity and partnership working has been noted between both members and officers, showing a willingness to confront issues and overcome historic perceptions. This has been reciprocated by the voluntary sector embracing this change in approach.

Within a short timescale, the nature of the partnership that is emerging, and the work that has already been completed, suggests that the building blocks required for responding to homelessness are coming together. There is a sense that the local authority and its partners are moving from a reactive to a proactive approach to their work. It suggests that there is not only a willingness but an ability to tackle the problems involved in meeting existing need and developing preventative services. If this trend continues, it is likely that the number of homeless people in the area will decline, while the quality of services available to the homeless will increase. This must be the yardstick against which the local authority and its partners are measured in the future.

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