

## **Weymouth and Portland Borough Council**

The Weymouth & Portland Local Housing Authority area shares many of the characteristics of its Dorset and South West Regional neighbours. At the same time its position as a small urban area serving a rural hinterland sets it apart and presents a number of unique factors relevant to housing need and supply.

The borough is only 42 square kilometres in size (the smallest district council area in the South West). Weymouth is however the third largest town in the sub-region after Poole and Bournemouth. In the summer an influx of tourists increases the population from 63,665 (2001 Census) to about 200,000.

The borough is a mixture of built-up and, to a lesser extent, rural areas including open countryside, villages, the historic town of Weymouth and the 'Isle' and Royal Manor of Portland. Our natural advantages (including Sites of Special Scientific Interest and the historic built environment) attract visitors and new residents to the borough but also serve to limit land supply for housing development in what is already a very small geographical area.

There are over 29,500 households in the borough living in a mixture of privately owned and rented properties and properties owned and/or managed by housing associations.

Levels of owner-occupation in Weymouth and Portland (73%) are similar to national levels.

The private rented sector in the Borough, at 13.7% is larger than nationally (12%) The amount of private rented accommodation is even higher in areas such as Melcombe Regis (48%) and Radipole (21%) (Fordham Research 2007a) (Fordham Research 2007b).

<b>Total Dwellings</b>	<b>Number of dwellings</b>	<b>% of dwellings</b>
Private sector	25854	87
Local Authority/other public sector	14	0
Registered Social Landlords	3928	13
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>29796</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: HSSA 2007

The total proportion of social housing in Weymouth and Portland, at 13.4%, is lower than the national average of 18% (CLG 2007). This comprises around 3,928 properties owned by 14 Registered Social Landlords (Housing Associations). 85 of these units provide supported housing to meet the needs of particular groups including; women and children escaping domestic violence, vulnerable young people, teenage mothers, former rough sleepers and those recovering from drug and alcohol addiction.

Weymouth & Portland Borough Council's Corporate Plan published in 2007 has four key priorities the second of which is to '*Meet the Housing Needs & Aspirations of the*

*Borough*. The Community Plan for Weymouth & Portland 2008 -2016 Your Place Our Future places housing as a key priority with a number of specific identified actions.

### **Delivering more Affordable Housing**

The council has a Corporate Objective to increase the amount of affordable housing in the Borough and deliver a minimum of 60 new units per year. It actively supports and works with preferred partner Register Social Landlords (RSL's) to bring forward new housing developments. New developments in partnership with RSL's particularly using the planning process remain the most significant route to increase the supply of affordable housing.

The table shows additional units of affordable housing delivered in the last five years:

	2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008
Rented	63	0	113	22	65
Shared Ownership	0	7	19	0	29
Homebuy	5	5	0	0	0
Total	67	12	132	22	94

### **The Council's Housing Service**

Weymouth & Portland Borough Council transferred its housing stock in 2000 to the newly formed Weymouth & Portland Housing Company. The council retained its statutory functions administering its own housing advice, homelessness and allocations services, this is an integrated service offering advice, information, support, housing options, homelessness and housing register and allocations. The emphasis is to give appropriate advice information and support to prevent homelessness rather than deal with the effects of homelessness. In 2003 the council produced its first Homelessness Strategy 'Prevention for Cure', this strategies key objectives were to address the issues of homelessness in the Borough and embrace the spirit of the Homelessness Act 2002 shifting the emphasis to early intervention and the prevention of homelessness. At that time the council had a very traditional approach to homelessness with high numbers of homelessness acceptances and considerable reliance on bed and breakfast accommodation.

The Strategy had a very comprehensive action plan to deliver the change focusing on the following areas:

1.	To work with partner agencies to secure lasting solutions to homelessness
2.	To use bed & breakfast only as a last resort
3.	To improve the quality of housing advice available in the Borough
4.	To focus on the prevention of homelessness
5.	To secure more good quality accommodation for homeless households
6.	To control the costs associated with homelessness

Since 2003 a number of new specialised posts and initiatives have been introduced to support these objectives. The new posts were Young Persons Tenancy Support Officer to deal specifically with young people and care leavers approaching for assistance, Tenancy Support Officer to work with clients help them sustain a tenancy or assist them and help them to acquire the skills and knowledge to start and sustain a new tenancy, Temporary Accommodation Officer to support clients living in temporary accommodation provided by the council and Private Sector Development Officer to work with private sector landlords and assist clients to access accommodation in the private rented sector. The funding of these posts were supported by the DCLG Homelessness Grant, they were initially temporary posts that have all been made permanent as a result of the significant impact they have had on the prevention of homelessness.

### **Homelessness Prevention Initiatives**

When clients approach the council who are homeless or threatened with homelessness they are offered a Housing Options Interview which explores all of the potential options to resolve or prevent the homelessness. The council has fully embraced Homeless Prevention and has introduced a number of initiatives to support this work:

**Rent Deposit Scheme** to assist clients facing homelessness to access accommodation in the private rented sector.

The following number of households have been assisted with rent deposits in the last three years:

2005/2006	387
2006/2007	280
2007/2008	251

**Debt Counselling Service** introduced in 2007 in partnership with Weymouth & Portland Housing and Citizens Advice Bureau to assist clients who have debt related issues which can have an impact on their housing situation and ability to pay for their accommodation. The funding enabled the CAB to employ a specialist debt advisor.

**Tenancy Support Service** a specialist tenancy support officer to work with clients on an intensive one to one basis to assist them to maintain their accommodation. The assistance provided is tailored to meet the needs of the individual client but could involve assistance with setting up a new tenancy paying bills etc, maximising of income/benefits advice, assistance to prevent eviction by liaising with landlords or assistance with court process.

**Domestic Violence Sanctuary Scheme** providing a range of security measures to help victims of domestic abuse to remain in their own homes,

**Discretionary Homelessness Fund** enables Housing Advisors to use their discretion to make payments from this fund to assist clients and prevent them from becoming homeless. Examples of the type of things funded are payments of arrears, assistance

with the purchase of essential household items, assistance with court fees and rent top up's.

The following numbers of clients have been assisted with payments from this fund:

2005/2006	30
2006/2007	42
2007/2008	31

**Young Persons Housing Advisor** a post introduced in response to the significant number of young people in the Borough with housing issues. Working closely with 16 & 17 years olds and care leavers to provide specialist advice and assistance. A key objective of this role is early intervention to prevent young people from becoming homeless through education, liaising with families, providing mediation and ensuring that young people who are homeless have access to appropriate accommodation with support.

### **Temporary Accommodation**

The council has traditionally relied heavily on the use of temporary accommodation to deal with its homelessness issues. This accommodation has fallen into 2 main categories

#### **Bed & Breakfast**

Weymouth has a ready supply of bed & breakfast accommodation and has historically relied heavily on it to discharge its duty to provide temporary accommodation, having high numbers of households residing in this type of accommodation for unacceptable periods of time. In mid 2004 there were 90 households residing in bed & breakfast accommodation provided by the council, considerable focus has gone into changing this approach and now it is only used in emergencies when there are no other alternative options available. In 2007/2008 there were no more than an average of 6 households per week residing in bed & breakfast. Gross expenditure on providing bed & breakfast accommodation has reduced from over £600,000 in 2005/2006 to under £100,000 in 2007/2008.

The following shows the average number of households per week in bed & breakfast accommodation:

2004/2005	56
2005/2006	55
2006/2007	6
2007/2008	6

#### **Private Sector Leasing**

In 2004 the council introduced two private sector leasing schemes in partnership with two RSL's to provide good quality self contained temporary accommodation for

households to whom they had a homelessness duty. In 2006 it introduced its own scheme which is managed by the Housing Advice Team and transferred the management of its major scheme from the RSL. Whilst it is accepted that this type of accommodation is still temporary and not a settled solution it does provide good quality accommodation for some households until alternative solutions can be found.

The Government introduced a temporary accommodation reduction target to reduce the number of households in temporary accommodation by 50% by 2010. The base figure for this target at December 2004 was 157, which had risen to 188 by March 2005. This target has been achieved well ahead of time with a figure of 57 households in temporary accommodation at March 2008.

### **Homelessness Applications and Acceptances**

There are still a number of households to whom the council has no alternative but to take a homelessness application. Due mainly to the focus on homelessness prevention the numbers have reduced significantly, an example being a high of 462 applications in 2002/2003.

The numbers of homeless applications and acceptances in the last three years are as follows:

<b>Period</b>	<b>No of Applications</b>	<b>No of acceptances</b>
2005/2006	111	89
2006/2007	38	25
2007/2008	44	29

The three leading causes of homelessness identified in the Borough are:

- Parents and relatives no longer willing or able to provide accommodation
- Relationship breakdown, both non-violent and violent
- End of Assured Shorthold Tenancies

### **Rough Sleepers**

A street count of rough sleepers is carried out in line with Government methodology. In March 2008 this recorded four rough sleepers in the Borough. This is a reduction from 10 at the previous count in November 2006. A multi agency group meets to deliver and review a Rough Sleeper Action Plan for the Borough and is developing its work and actions to reduce the incidence of street homelessness by working with those people who are either sleeping rough or at risk of sleeping rough.

Whilst some rough sleepers pass through the Borough in transit between the larger towns and cities, a number of the local street homeless population move between Weymouth and Dorchester in particular. In order to better understand and tackle this particular group an assertive homelessness outreach team (SHOT) worker is being

jointly commissioned by the two authorities as part of a one year pilot project with the overarching aim of reducing rough sleeping levels to as near to zero as possible.

## **Housing Register**

Weymouth & Portland Borough Council introduced a Choice Based Lettings system 'Home Choice' in August 2006 which has proven to be successful with clients being able to bid or express an interest in vacant properties rather than being allocated a property giving the client's greater choice in where they want to live. Since its introduction 485 properties have been advertised with 12401 bids being placed.

As at 1 April 2008, there were just under 5,000 households on the Housing Register. The number has risen over previous years and in part reflects recent changes to legislation which has widened access to the register.

<b>Number of bedrooms required</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>
One	1290	2746	1682	2125	2897
Two		1557	823	1034	1102
Three	116	683	501	619	716
Four or more	38	119	160	201	241
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1444</b>	<b>2746</b>	<b>3166</b>	<b>3979</b>	<b>4956</b>

Source: CLG 2007, HSSA returns

These households will have varying levels of housing need. They include people in social housing wishing to transfer, and those living in the private sector. Of these 222 have a priority status on the register (Their priority is due to homelessness 22%, medical 29%, social 14%, overcrowded 4%, under-occupation 31%)

The level of housing need far outstrips supply. There were a total of 225 properties that became available to people on the register during the financial year 2007/8.

## **Review of the Service**

Since 2003 the Housing Service has undergone considerable review and scrutiny including an Audit Commission Inspection in March 2006, the outcome of which the service was rated as 'Fair' with 'Promising Prospects for Improvement'

In 2003 the Housing Advice Service was located at the Ferry Terminal in Weymouth, whilst the reception and interviewing facilities were considered to be good and DDA compliant it was recognised that the location of the office caused difficulties to customers as it was on the edge of town, not readily accessible to customers without transport and remote from other services such as Housing Benefit. In 2007 the service was relocated to the main Council Offices at North Quay, a more central and easy to access location offering the clients a one-stop-approach to the council's related services

In February 2008 questionnaires were sent to all the council's strategic partners on homelessness issues about their perceptions of homelessness in the District and the numbers of clients who accessed their services. 13 organisations who had worked with a total of 1275 clients whom they perceived to be homeless responded. Views of the organisations concerned and of their clients of the council's housing advice and homelessness service were very varied from poor to excellent. When evaluating further comments the views of the service are generally influenced by the lack of accommodation and positive outcomes for their clients.

When asked about their perceptions of the general housing situation in Weymouth & Portland the agencies' overwhelming view was that there was insufficient affordable accommodation for all client group and the difficulties of renting in the private sector were identified because of rent levels. Lack of housing-related support and planned move-on from supported housing were also issues of significant concern.

There does appear to be a lack of understanding or engagement from some of the agencies with whom the council works of the homelessness prevention agenda and a feeling that the council is in some way denying their clients their legal rights and access to social rented accommodation. This does highlight a need to further inform/consult and engage with these agencies on this issue.

All customers using the Housing Advice Service are asked to complete a Customer Feedback Questionnaire. This was introduced in 2006, the responses to date show that in 2006/2007 70% of customers were satisfied with the service increasing to 77% in 2007/2008.

### **Customer Access and Diversity**

It is vital that people have easy access to our services. In February this year the whole council was subject to an Audit commission Customer Access Inspection. The council was rated as 'Fair' with 'Promising Prospects for Improvement'

To make the Housing Service more accessible to customers there are a number of outreach surgeries located in the community and introduced the role of Housing Visiting Officer for clients who require home visits.

There are range of advice and information leaflets available for clients which are currently under review, they will be available in various formats including electronic downloads on the council's website.