

Local Government Strategic Housing Capacity in Wales

Report on the WLGA Survey of 2012

This report is based on a survey of lead housing strategy officers of Welsh Authorities which was carried out in February 2012.

Contact

Welsh Local Government Association

The WLGA's primary purposes are to promote a better local government, its reputation and to support authorities in the development of policies and priorities which will improve public service and democracy. It represents the 22 local authorities in Wales, with the 4 police authorities, 3 fire and rescue authorities and 3 national park authorities as associate members.

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Published: July 2012
Copyright: Welsh Local Government Association
ISBN: 978-1-906423-89-6

Introduction

Housing plays a vital part in our lives. Not only do our homes impact on our health, education and our family and community relations but the housing sector is a vital part of our economy and has a significant impact on our environment.

The right investment in housing can lead to multiple benefits for communities. If we are to capture these benefits, we need clear strategic leadership. The Welsh Government has responsibility for providing a national framework, but it is at the local level that improvements can be driven, based on the particular context within each area. Strong strategic leadership by local authorities can help ensure that all levers are used to enable more and better housing and to do so in a way that supports wider social, economic and environmental aims.

The Welsh Local Government Association has been promoting the strategic housing role of local authorities over many years. The importance of local government's strategic housing role is also recognised by our partners and is set out in the Welsh Government's White Paper, *Homes for Wales*.

Housing faces challenging times. There is evidence that we are reaching a crisis point in terms of housing supply and affordability¹. The economic downturn and the significant cuts to public spending make it increasingly hard to meet these challenges. This makes local strategic delivery even more important, so that scarce resources across the public, private and third sectors are targeted to best effect.

This report is based on a survey of lead housing strategy officers of Welsh Authorities which was carried out in February 2012. It aims to provide a snapshot of current strategic housing capacity in Welsh local authorities and follows a similar survey undertaken in January 2009. It also aims to identify changes in practice and perceptions over the last 3 years. Fifteen of the twenty two local authorities responded, equivalent to a response rate of 68%, with responses from at least one of the Authorities in each of the six collaborative regions.

¹ See Holmes, A and Monk, S, 2010. *Housing Need and Demand in Wales 2006 to 2026*. Welsh Assembly Government Social Research.

Key findings

The key findings from the survey of the strategic housing leads are:

- The strategic housing capacity in local authorities has strengthened between 2009 and 2012. This is reflected in:
 - Increased staff capacity
 - More effective delivery against the strategic housing objectives by other departments
 - Affordable housing plans and strategies being in place
 - Better relations with local developers and private sector landlords
 - Authorities have better access to the necessary skills to deliver against their strategic housing objectives
 - Greater perceived overall corporate support for the housing strategy function within authorities
 - The housing strategy being given a higher priority within the authority and having a better fit with other corporate strategies.
- The supply of affordable housing remains a clear priority for local authority housing strategy teams.
- Links between housing and planning appear strong whilst the effectiveness of relationships with partners in health appears to have weakened since 2009.
- The most important skill in delivering the housing strategy function was seen as developing and maintaining effective partnerships. Partnerships with Registered Social Landlords are considered very effective.
- Limited funding is seen as the main barrier to implementing housing strategies whilst stock transfer was not seen as a barrier.

Findings

Staff capacity

The survey asked respondents to list the job titles of their housing strategy team members, their full time equivalents, their main areas of responsibility and any changes in staff numbers and posts since 2009. They were also asked to provide the level or grade of the most senior member of the housing strategy team (see table 1).

The number of staff working in the housing strategy teams ranged from less than one full time equivalent to twelve full time equivalents. The number of people in the teams didn't reflect whether authorities had transferred stock or not and the average number of staff for authorities that had retained and transferred was the same. The differential size of teams is likely to reflect the diversity of roles undertaken by strategic teams across the Authorities.

More additional posts had been created since January 2009 (approx 17.5) than had been lost or about to be lost (approx 10). Where posts were being lost these were mostly, but not exclusively in authorities which had transferred stock. However, some authorities had lost senior posts and gained administrative assistant posts and vice versa so the numbers are not a true reflection of changing capacity. Some teams had expanded or decreased because of restructuring with the same posts having transferred to different teams rather than being created or lost.

Most authorities had either a senior manager (8) or a principal officer (4) as the most senior member of the team, whilst two had heads of service and one a senior officer. Some authorities with large teams had a principal officer as the most senior member of the team whilst others with relatively small teams had a head of service within the team. This suggests that the number of posts in a team doesn't always reflect capacity.

There had been a shift upwards in the grade of the most senior staff within Authorities with either a head of service or senior manager as the most senior member of the team increasing by 9%. This has mainly involved a switch to senior managers and a decrease in principal officers as the most senior members of the team. This change reflects the increased priority which this survey indicates is being given the strategic housing role over the last 3 years.

Priority issues for housing strategies

The survey invited respondents to list the top three priorities their authority is aiming to address through their housing strategy (see table 2).

Every authority bar one stated that the supply of affordable housing was one of their top three priorities (31% of the total). Of the total number of ticks given, this received almost twice as many as the second highest priority, preventing/ reducing homelessness (17%). This was followed closely by improving private and public sector stock (14%), addressing the needs of vulnerable groups (12%) and building sustainable communities (10%). One authority listed an alternative priority as empty homes.

This indicates that the priorities are largely unchanged since the survey in 2009. The only apparent change is a reduction in the priority given to homelessness and this might be a reflection of an increasing focus on homelessness prevention. There has also been an increased priority given to the housing needs of vulnerable people.

In 2009, ensuring the supply of affordable housing was also a top priority (30% of total ticks). Whilst still a priority for many in 2012, preventing and reducing homelessness was a higher priority across authorities in 2009 (25% marked as within top 3 priorities) than it was in 2012. Meeting housing needs had been the third most common priority (14%) closely followed by improving private and public stock (13%). Building sustainable communities was the fifth highest priority (6%), higher than in 2012. Meeting the housing needs of vulnerable people has become a top priority for more authorities in 2012 than it was in 2009.

As one respondent noted, it may be that some of the priorities listed are potentially overlapping, for example, building sustainable communities may include improving the housing stock and regenerating neighbourhoods.

Support from other departments

Respondents were asked to consider the effectiveness of other departments within their authority in helping them to address the strategic housing objectives. They were asked to rate them on a scale of one to five with one being 'not effective at all' and five being 'very effective'.

Overall, other departments were seen as being significantly more effective in supporting strategic housing objectives in 2012 than in 2009. In 2009, only 27% of respondents had given a 4 or 5 rating to other departments whereas in 2012 this had risen to 42%.

Planning and legal departments were seen as the most effective departments in supporting delivery of the strategic housing objectives by a considerable margin. Planning was also considered to provide strong support in 2009 and the legal department was also considered one of the most effective. However, the effectiveness of the legal department was seen as significantly higher in 2012 with 73% of respondents rating it within the 4 or 5 categories compared to 34% in 2009. Finance was also seen as effective with no authorities scoring this service below the median. Economic development was also seen becoming more supportive of the housing strategy function with only 15% considering this service to be 'not very effective' or 'not effective at all' in 2012 compared to over 50% in 2009.

The perceived effectiveness of the support given by the chief executive and corporate policy teams varied considerably across authorities. This is a similar picture to 2009 but with a small increase in the perceived overall effectiveness in 2012. The perceived effectiveness of the property and estates team was also mixed in 2012 but represented a decrease in perceived effectiveness compared to 2009.

Environmental health, social services and research departments were all perceived to offer only weak support of the strategic housing role, although this varied from authority to authority and tended to hover around the average mark. Across these three departments, the perceived effectiveness of support for achieving housing objectives has declined since 2009 and this is particularly noticeable in terms of research.

Housing related strategies and plans

Respondents were presented with a list of seven housing related strategies and plans and asked to indicate which ones were in place in their authority and to identify any others they had developed in addition (see table 4).

All authorities that responded had affordable housing plans or strategies in place in 2012, whereas in 2009 this had been only just over half. All authorities (bar one who did not respond to this section) now have most of these policies and strategies in place. In 2009 more authorities also cited other strategies and plans in development apart from those listed. This may reflect shift in emphasis from developing separate strategies towards greater strategic integration and a focus on delivery.

Effective links between the housing strategy and other corporate strategies

Respondents were presented with a list of core corporate strategies and invited to rate how effectively the Authority had been at linking them with the housing strategy with one being 'very ineffective' and five being 'very effective' (see table 5).

The perceived effectiveness of the link between the housing strategy and other corporate strategies varies considerably across local authorities with few clear patterns. Although few are seen as being very effective, fewer still are considered very ineffective.

The one clear exception is in relation to the Local Development Plan/ Unitary Development Plan where 86% of authorities rated the link as either a 4 or a 5 (with 5 being very effective). This was also ranked highest in 2009.

Only one authority rated the links with the strategic equality plan as having less than median effectiveness. The community strategy, children and young person's strategy and

older person's strategies were all perceived to link relatively well. More effective joint working was seen with the community strategy Local Development Plan/ Unitary Development Plan and economic development than in 2009 but linkages with health and well-being strategies were seen as less effective in 2012 than they had been in 2009.

Effectiveness of partnerships with stakeholders

Respondents were presented with a list of key stakeholders and invited to rate how effective the partnerships with each were in helping to achieve the authority's strategic housing objective where one was 'very ineffective' and five was 'very effective' (see table 6).

The most effective partnerships were with Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) with every authority ranking these as either 4 or 5. This was also identified as the most effective partnership in 2009. The effectiveness of relations with the wider voluntary sector, local strategic partnership, local developers and private landlords were all medium to good and relationships with local developers and private sector landlords had improved somewhat since 2009. Partnerships with owner occupiers were rated as being median or low ineffectiveness. All the others hover around the median apart from health, with whom a third of respondents said partnerships were very ineffective. Relationships with health were considered less effective now than in 2009.

Importance of different skills for the strategic housing role

Respondents were presented with a list of skills and asked to rate how important each is for the strategic housing role on a scale of one to five, with one being 'not very important' and five being 'very important' (see table 7).

None of the skills were rated as 'not very important' in 2012 which had been the same in 2009.

The most important skills was seen as developing and maintaining effective partnerships, something which was not an option in the previous survey. Beneath this, skills that the highest number of authorities selected as very important were: understanding the connections between programmes, engaging with communities and partners, developing an evidence-based understanding of housing markets, building trust with and providing support for council members and influencing the allocation of resources. ICT skills were seen as the least important (as in 2009), followed by commissioning/ managing research and consultants.

Availability of skills

Respondents were presented with a list of skills and asked to indicate whether they were available within their team, elsewhere within their authority, within another authority, through consultants, from an RSL partner or not available (see table 8).

Most skills identified in the survey are available within the team in most authorities, but none of them are available in every team in every authority. The variation between what skills are available within the team, within the wider authority or in RSLs are likely to be a reflection of the different way teams are structured as outlined in the first two sections and there is nothing to suggest one is better than another. The authorities who have highlighted skills being available in RSLs cross both transfer and non transfer authorities.

In 2012, only 3 authorities indicated that any of the skills were being made available to them by another local authority. In 2009, the equivalent figure was 16 so even though more authorities responded in 2009. It appears that fewer skills are now shared across authorities, however a recent WLGA survey of existing and developing collaboration in relation to Local Authority housing services seems to indicate a different picture.

Every authority now appears to have access to the necessary skills identified from one source or another in 2012. It is clear also that Authorities are making less use of consultants in 2012 compared with 2009.

Additional skill areas desired

Respondents were presented with a list of skills and areas of understanding and asked to tick any that they felt they needed to have, or have more of, that are not available to them (see table 9).

Four authorities did not mark any areas where they would like to see additional skills. Of the others, the area which received the greatest number of ticks was on site appraisals. This was the same in 2009. Town planning and neighbourhood regeneration were also received to be areas of skills and knowledge that could be improved as they were in 2009. More skills and understanding of the local economy was a relatively higher priority in 2012 compared to 2009, whereas fewer teams are seeking additional skills and understanding around community development.

Level of satisfaction with corporate support for housing strategy

Respondents were invited to rate their level of satisfaction with the overall degree of corporate support for the housing strategy function within their authority, with one being 'very dissatisfied' and five being 'very satisfied' (see table 10).

Overall, levels of satisfaction with the support for housing strategy within authorities have risen since 2009.

In this survey, 15% of respondents said they were very satisfied, which is similar to 2009 (14%), and 29% gave a score of 4 which is again similar to 2009 (29%). However, in the 2012 survey, the remainder (54%) gave the median score whilst in 2009 only 38% gave the medium whilst 20% reported lower levels of satisfaction.

Over a third of the authorities perceived that the housing strategy team had limited ability to influence the allocation of resources within the Authority.

How strategic housing fits within the authority

Respondents were given a list of statements relating to the priority given to housing strategy within the local authority and its fit with other corporate strategies (see table 11). They were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with each statement on a scale of one to five with one indicating 'strongly disagree' and five indicating 'strongly agree'.

On nearly every account, perceptions of the strategic fit of housing within the wider authority has improved since 2009.

In 2012 30% of the respondents felt that the housing strategy fitted well with other corporate strategies, while in 2009 none of the respondents thought this was the case. Similarly, in 2012 30% of Lead housing strategy officers felt strongly that the development of an effective housing strategy was a priority for the authority while in 2009 none took this view. Nobody thought the success of the housing strategy wasn't monitored and evaluated and in this case 40% of respondents felt strongly that it was. Again, nobody thought the strategic housing function didn't occupy a crucial position on their authority's agenda. However, in this case only 13% agreed strongly that it did. In most authorities, delivering the housing strategy is more of a priority this year than last and in just over a quarter it was the same. Half of the respondents disagreed that the housing strategy isn't given enough priority by their authority.

Main barriers in implementing the strategy

Respondents were presented with a list of potential barriers and asked to rate the extent to which these represented a barrier to them in developing and implementing the strategic housing role within their authority with one representing 'not much of a barrier' and five representing 'a major barrier' (see table 12).

Unsurprisingly, limited funding was identified as a significant barrier by every authority and more so than in 2009. The second biggest barrier was seen as competing priorities, again an issue in 2009 but more so in 2012. Interestingly, a lack of understanding of the role of housing strategy was seen as the third highest barrier overall, despite the progress made since 2009 indicated in previous answers. It was also identified as a lower priority by the same number of local authorities and so this is a mixed picture.

The least significant barrier was seen as stock transfer, followed by the recruitment and retention of staff. Several of the issues presented were not seen as major barriers including the size of the authority, partnership working, a lack of understanding of the strategic role of housing or a lack of support and guidance from the Welsh Government.

Useful forms of support

Respondents were given a list of support mechanisms and were asked to indicate which they would find most useful (see table 13).

The most useful form of support identified was sharing best practice through Housing Strategy Network meetings, as it had been in 2009. This was followed by an increased profile for housing (which had also been popular in 2009 but not as high up the list) and then policy briefings (again popular in 2009 but not in the top 3).

The least useful form of support listed was the register of consultants which had also been one of the least useful forms of support identified in 2009, followed by benchmarking and then seminars, which were also amongst the three least useful forms of support in 2009.

Conclusions

The 2012 WLGA survey of the perceptions of lead housing strategy officers in Local Government has identified some interesting trends since the baseline survey in 2009. The overall perception is that the housing strategic function of Authorities has strengthened over this time and this is evidenced in a number of ways including the increase in corporate profile and support, the stronger links with departments within the Authority and with partners outside the Authority. There is also a perception that there is much better alignment with the housing strategy and other corporate strategies. The fact that staffing capacity, access to appropriate skills and knowledge have increased is a clear indication of the growing importance of the housing strategic role.

The priorities of housing strategy teams have remained consistent over the past 3 years with the supply of affordable homes continuing to be a key priority and the housing needs of vulnerable people becoming increasingly important.

The survey has identified a number of areas for improvement, notably the partnership with health and cross boundary sharing of skills and capacity, both of which appear to have deteriorated since 2009.

Recommendations

Recommendations for improving the Local Authority strategic housing function in the coming years are set out below, based on the survey results.

- **Continue to develop and maintain effective relationships with departments within the Authority.** Particular consideration should be given to improving relationships with environment, social services and research teams.
- **Continue to improve links with strategic planning across the Authority and other partners such as health.** It will be particularly important that the strategic importance of housing is reflected in the single integrated plans.
- **Strengthen the strategic links between housing and health.** The strategic links with housing and health appear to have weakened since 2009 on a number of counts.

- **Improve the sharing of appropriate skills, capacity and expertise across local authority boundaries**, particularly where this supports broader regional collaboration.
- **Targeted training opportunities** for strategic housing teams, particularly on site appraisals as well as opportunities to gain a better understanding of the local economy.
- WLGA to maintain the **Housing Strategy Network**, its work on **raising the profile of housing** and providing **policy briefings**.
- **Consider capturing data on the impact of the strategic housing function** in delivering against broader strategic priorities, including education, health, social services, regeneration, economy and environment.
- **Promote housing's potential to deliver against wider corporate strategic priorities** at a time of increased funding constraints.

List of tables

Table 1: What level or grade is the most senior member of the housing strategy team? (Please tick)

Level	
Head of Service	2
Senior Manager	8
Principal officer	4
Other (please state) Senior Officer	1

Table 2: What would you say are the three main priorities your authority is aiming to address with the housing strategy? (Please tick)

Ensuring a supply of affordable housing	13
Addressing the needs of vulnerable groups	5
Meeting housing needs	2
Meeting housing aspirations	0
Preventing/reducing homelessness	7
Improving of private/public sector stock	6
Balancing housing markets	1
Tackling worklessness	0
Building mixed communities	0
Building sustainable communities	4
Regenerating neighbourhoods	2
Making best use of existing resources	1
Other (please state) Empty Homes	1

* One void response

Table 3: How effective are the following departments within your authority in helping you to deliver your strategic housing objectives? (Please tick)

1= not at all effective

5 = very effective

Department	1	2	3	4	5
Planning			2	9	4
Legal		1	3	11	
Finance/treasurer			7	2	3
Chief executives	1	3	2	4	2
(Corporate) policy	1	3	2	4	2

Environmental		7	4	2	
Social services		6	5	3	
Property/estates	2	5	2	5	
Economic development		2	6	5	
Education	4	6	1		
Research	1	4	3	1	1
Other					

* Not all authorities gave a tick across each department, including on chief executives, corporate policy, finance, environmental, social services, property/ estates, economic development, education and research.

Table 4: Which housing related strategies/plans in place (please tick)

Housing related strategy/plan	
Affordable housing	14
Homelessness	12
SHG Programme Delivery Plan	13
Empty property	12
BME Housing	11
Supporting People Operational Plan	12
Private sector renewal	13
Other (please state)	Affordable warmth strategy; Local Housing Market Assessment; Local Housing Strategy

* One authority left this box empty.

** Some authorities have said their BME housing and/or affordable housing and/or homelessness strategies are included in the local housing strategy. These have been included in the figures above

***One local authority said some of its strategies/ plans were being reviewed and another was draft. Strategies under review have been included, but draft strategies have been excluded.

Table 5: How effective has your Authority been at linking the housing strategy with the following corporate strategies? (please tick)

1= very ineffective

5 = very effective

Strategy	1	2	3	4	5
Community Strategy	1	2	4	4	3
LDP/UDP		1	1	9	3
Children & Young person	1	2	4	6	1

Health & Well being		5	3	4	2
Economic Development	1	3	6	2	1
Social Care		5	6	3	
Older People		3	5	5	1
Strategic Equality Plan		1	7	3	
Other (please state) Regeneration			1		

* Not all authorities ticked anything for strategic equality plan or economic development.

** One authority didn't complete this section.

Table 6: How effective are your partnerships with stakeholders, in helping you to achieve your strategic housing objectives? (Please tick)

1= very ineffective

5 = very effective

Stakeholders	1	2	3	4	5
Local Strategic Partnership		2	4	3	5
Community and resident groups	1	2	8	4	
Local developers		1	9	5	
Private landlords		2	8	4	1
Consultants	2	3	4	4	
RSL's				7	8
Health organisations	5	4	6		
Voluntary/third sector		2	6	7	
Owner occupiers		6	6		
Other (please state)					

* Not all authorities responded on owner occupiers, consultants or local strategic partnership.

Table 7: How important are the following skills for the strategic housing role? (Please tick)

1 = not very important

5 = very important

Skill	1	2	3	4	5
Developing & maintaining effective Partnerships				2	14
Undertaking and evaluating options			2	4	9
Understanding housing finance including development economics (inc. Viability)				7	8

Knowledge of planning policies & practices			2	7	6
Understanding of revenue streams including supporting people			3	7	5
Commissioning and managing research/consultants		2	3	8	2
Managing performance			3	6	6
Understanding connections between programme areas		1		2	12
Negotiating			1	5	9
Research & data analysis			3	6	6
Developing an evidence-based understanding of housing markets				5	10
Writing strategies, reports and action plans			1	7	8
Building trust with and providing support for council members			1	4	10
Engaging with communities and partners			1	2	12
Influence and leadership			1	5	9
Influencing the allocation of resources			1	4	10
Communicating				6	9
ICT skills eg GIS		4	4	4	
Other (please state)					

Table 8: Please indicate whether the skills below are available within your team, elsewhere in your authority, from another Authority, through consultants, from an RSL partner or not available to you?

Skill	In the team	In the Authority	In another Authority	Via Consultants	Via RSL	Not available
Undertaking and evaluating options	13	7		2	6	
Financial understanding	10	12		1	4	
commissioning	11	11			2	

and managing consultants /research						
Managing Performance	13	9			4	
Understanding connections between programme areas	13	9			3	
Negotiating	14	7			6	
Site appraisals /valuation skills	7	10			7	
Research & data analysis	12	9	2		1	
developing an evidence-based understanding of housing markets	11	10		2	3	
writing strategies, reports and action plans	14	8			1	
Building trust with and providing support for council members	14	7			1	
Engaging with communities and partners	12	8			3	
Influencing and leadership	12	9				
Influencing the allocation of resources	9	10			1	
Communicating	14	7			3	
Undertaking and evaluating options	12	6			3	
Appropriate ICT skills eg GIS	8	11				
Other (please State) legal			1			

Table 9: Are there any other skills/understanding you need to have, or have more of, that are not available to you? (please tick)

housing design/town planning	4
Project management	2
Relevant legislation	2
the local economy	4
Neighbourhood regeneration	4
Site appraisals	6
the enabling process	0
RSLs/consortia	0
Community development	1
Construction	3
Marketing the affordable housing	2
national policies	0
Housing market analysis	3
Other (please state)	0

* Four authorities did not mark any issues in this section.

Table 10: How satisfied are you with the overall degree of corporate support for housing strategy function within your authority? (please tick)

1	2	3	4	5
		7	4	2

* One authority didn't answer this, one authority ticked more than one option and so was not included

Table 11: Please say how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements in relation to your own authority (please tick)

	1	2	3	4	5
The housing strategy fits well with other corporate strategies			3	7	5
The development of an effective housing strategy is a key priority for my authority			5	4	5
The success of the strategic housing function is monitored and evaluated in my authority			6	3	6

The strategic housing role occupies a crucial position on my authority's agenda			11	2	2
Delivering the housing strategy is more of a priority for my authority than it was a year ago	1	1	4	6	2
The housing strategy is not given enough priority by my Authority	2	5	5	2	

* Not all authorities put a value against each statement. Where more than one tick was given against a statement this was taken as void.

Table 12: What are the main barriers in developing and implementing your strategic housing role within your Authority? (Please tick those that apply)

1= not much of a barrier

5= a major barrier

Barrier	1	2	3	4	5
Limited funding				9	6
Recruiting/retaining suitable staff	4	7		1	2
Partnership working	3	5	4	2	
Lack of understanding housing strategy role	3	3	2	3	3
Planning issues	2	4	4	4	
Lack of support/guidance from the Assembly	3	3	6	1	1
Political barriers	2	3	7	3	
Lack of profile	3	2	4	4	
lack of Member support/understanding	2	2	7	2	
Competing priorities	1		3	6	5
Size of the Authority	4	4	3	1	
Stock transfer	8	2	1	1	
Other (please state) regional collaboration				1	

* Not all authorities put a value against each statement. Where more than one tick had been given against a statement this was taken as void.

Table 13: What support for your strategic housing role would you find most useful? (please tick)

Support	
Sharing best practice through the HSN meetings	13
Specific training courses	7

More advice/guidance/Information	9
Seminars	6
Easy access to housing market data	9
An increased profile for housing policy briefings	11
Mentoring	7
An increased understanding of the strategic housing role by Members	9
A register of good quality housing consultants	2
Benchmarking services	5
Regional collaboration	7
Other(please state)	