

Accessing and sustaining social tenancies: exploring barriers to homelessness prevention

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The prevention of homelessness has never been more important in Wales. Since the introduction of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, no other nation, globally, has placed homelessness prevention on such a strong statutory footing.

In its 2015 inquiry on how local authorities have responded to welfare reform, the Public Accounts Committee expressed concern about a number of issues regarding access to, and the sustainability of, social tenancies, especially in light of changes to welfare reform¹. In their report:

- (i) The Committee recommended that the Welsh Government explore the use of financial assessments by social landlords to ensure that the assessments do not have the unintended consequence of excluding some people from social housing on the basis that they are 'too poor'. The Committee recommended that if there is evidence of exclusion on the grounds of affordability, then research is needed to explore the profile of applicants who fail financial assessments in case such assessments have a disproportionate impact on certain groups of people.
- (ii) The Committee also expressed concern over gaps in knowledge of what happens to evicted households after the event. They recommended that urgent research is required to establish a comprehensive understanding of the causes, and implications of, evictions, particularly where they generate further cost to the public purse.

Following the recommendations of the National Assembly Public Accounts Committee, we explored the accessibility and sustainability of social housing and examined the impact of eviction from council and Registered Social Landlord (RSL) housing. The ultimate aim of our research is to prevent homelessness and promote good practice among social landlords by highlighting potential barriers to the prevention of eviction and by proposing solutions.

¹ <http://www.assembly.wales/laid%20documents/cr-ld10320/cr-ld10320-e.pdf>

Methodology

Our research methods were as follows:

- We undertook a comprehensive literature and context review
- A brief, anonymous online survey, exploring the use of financial assessments, was sent to all 11 local authorities² that have retained their housing stock. This was followed up with a Freedom of Information Act request to all stock holding authorities
- A survey exploring Shelter Cymru caseworkers' experiences of RSL eviction practices³ was administered
- We performed a thorough examination of Shelter Cymru case studies
- In-depth interviews and focus groups were held with 35 local authority and RSL stakeholders across Wales
- Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were completed with 28 households who had either been evicted, or threatened with eviction, from social housing in Wales.
- We undertook a cost analysis on the financial impact of eviction from social housing in Wales. This included the direct cost to the landlord, wider costs to the local authority and potential wider costs to society and the public purse
- We consulted with a further five users of housing and homelessness services to specifically enquire about barriers to landlord and tenant engagement and how such barriers could be overcome.

The accessibility and affordability of social housing for people on low incomes

Pre-tenancy assessments are common in social housing and are often used as a means of understanding the needs of an incoming tenant and ensuring tenancy sustainment. As part of this process, some social landlords use financial assessments to determine the affordability of a tenancy⁴. This move is welcomed by us when its purpose is to assist the tenant to make the tenancy sustainable by boosting affordability and identifying support needs. However, we found evidence among some RSLs and one local authority landlord that some households had been denied tenancies on affordability grounds, even where the rent would be fully covered by Housing Benefit.

² To which we received seven responses.

³ To which we received 15 responses.

⁴ Assessments of income can also be used to rule out people who are not in need as they have higher income or assets.

Overall, we found the need for more transparency and clarity regarding the financial assessment process and more work should be undertaken to identify methods to improve and encourage tenancy sustainability, without excluding those people for whom it was designed.

Why eviction from social housing happens: eviction ‘triggers’

Overall, the most common reason for eviction from social housing is rent arrears followed by anti-social behaviour (ASB).

Although there were many differences between our participants' stories, two key pathways⁵ emerged from our research with regard to why tenants accrue rent arrears and face eviction:

(i) Tenants without additional support needs who are facing structural barriers such as changes to welfare reform, unstable (or no) employment, sudden changes in circumstances and Housing Benefit challenges. Tenants told us that they most value early intervention to deal with the structural issues that lead to the build-up of rent arrears. This includes direct assistance to resolve Housing Benefit problems; direct assistance to access additional funds and referral to independent income maximisation and/or debt advisors.

(ii) Tenants who have unmet support needs which interfere with their ability to pay their rent and engage with their landlord to resolve the issue. Tenants told us that they most value the following from landlords to help address rent arrears: an understanding and sensitivity towards the impact of mental health conditions on rent paying behaviour and communication; the opportunity for a mental health professional to advocate on behalf of the tenant with the landlord and joint working between housing and mental health to ensure a joined up response to eviction triggers.

Unmet support needs were responsible for the cases of alleged ASB in the current study. Tenants threatened with eviction for ASB told us that early intervention to address unmet support needs is most valued and successful in preventing actions that lead to the risk of eviction. Tenants accused of ASB want landlords to assess their life holistically and take into consideration issues such as mental health problems or domestic violence. The people we interviewed preferred intervention from a supportive, independent service rather than the landlord try to address the often complex needs themselves. This highlights the need for effective and collaborative working across organisations and sectors.

The impact of eviction from social housing: the financial and social costs

Up-to-date data on the number of possessions, warrants and evictions from RSLs compared to local authority landlords in Wales is not available. The most recent data relates to 2010-11⁶. However, by using uprated figures⁷ we estimate that in 2015-16 approximately⁸⁹:

⁵There will, of course, be tenants who fall into both categories (i.e. face structural challenges to paying their rent and have additional support needs) compounding their disadvantage.

- 517 evictions occurred in RSLs in Wales. Of these, 178 evictions involved families with children (34% of evictions)
- 397 evictions occurred in local authority landlords in Wales. Of these, 123 involved families with children (i.e. 31% of evictions).

Thus in 2015-2016 social landlords undertook an estimated 914 social evictions¹⁰, including 301 evictions of families with children. This means that approximately 512 children annually are made homeless through evictions from social housing¹¹.

We found that being evicted from social housing results in:

- Chaotic housing transitions
- Short and long-term homelessness for evicted households
- Personal trauma and fear from the eviction process and homelessness
- Increase in additional support needs such as substance misuse.

Our research also sought to understand the financial costs of evictions from social housing. Costs were examined across three levels:

- Direct costs to local authorities as landlords. This details the costs required to make an eviction actually happen

⁶ <https://statswales.wales.gov.uk/Catalogue/Housing/Possessions-and-Evictions>

⁷ A full explanation of how this has been calculated is included in the full report

⁸ This results in total evictions across RSLs and local authority landlords of 914. This is compared to 913 repossession actions highlighted in <http://gov.wales/docs/statistics/2016/160630-mortgage-landlord-possession-actions-taken-in-county-courts-2015-16-en.pdf>. This discrepancy is because, in order to estimate the total number of evictions in RSLs compared to local authority landlords, we needed to combine 2015-16 data with 2010-11 data. This extrapolates from orders and warrants, rather than directly from repossessions.

⁹ Due to the estimated split between RSL and local authority landlords, figures should be seen as indicative and treated with caution.

¹⁰ Our figures relate to the calendar year rather than the financial year that is featured in Welsh Government eviction bulletins.

¹¹ Assuming an average of 1.7 children per household as per: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/family-demography/family-size/2012/family-size-rpt.html>

- Wider costs to local authorities and other organisations. This provides information on wider costs incurred as a result of the eviction
- Societal costs. This highlights data on the wider costs incurred as a result of an eviction and its impact on society as a whole.

We found that evictions from social housing equate to approximate annual direct costs to Welsh social landlords of **£7,879,059** and these costs are more than doubled when wider costs to other organisations and the cost of ‘near miss’ evictions are taken into account. It is estimated that the annual cost of evictions from social housing to the Welsh economy is **£24,359,589**. This is likely to be a conservative estimate due to limited research available that shows the direct impact on the well-being of those who are evicted. Thus, costs to wider society could be higher than predicted in this report.

We estimated a cost of **£36,960** per year to the NHS alone due to the deterioration in the health of children evicted from social housing.

Both the financial and human cost of eviction makes a convincing case for the necessity of diverting resources into developing effective, support-based eviction prevention services. We found evidence that eviction prevention programmes are cost-effective at a partnership level. This requires landlords to work, not in isolation as self-interested economic entities, but together, for the common good at a regional or even national level.

Importantly, we highlight that financial savings are only one reason why a landlord might want to invest in eviction prevention schemes and that the social duties of landlords might be another motive.

Eviction prevention: social landlord responses

During our research, Welsh social landlords firmly emphasised their commitment to sustaining tenancies. There was a widespread agreement among housing staff that even when statutory proceedings are underway, the goal is to stop evictions going ahead and, where this isn’t possible, to stop evicted tenants from becoming homeless.

We found that approaches to eviction prevention vary considerably between landlords and across Wales. A range of policies and practices to rent arrears eviction prevention are employed by landlords. Many aim to take a pro-active approach to identifying eviction triggers and working with tenants to resolve issues before they reach crisis point. Our report highlights several examples of good practice.

Nevertheless, we found multiple examples of a lack of communication, both internally and externally, when it came to eviction prevention by some social landlords. Referrals to homelessness services were erratic. Of our sample of evicted tenants, 55% did not access Housing Solutions either before or after their eviction. The majority (59%) of people who were threatened with eviction (but were not subsequently evicted) had accessed Housing Solutions.

77% of people evicted were still homeless six months later and the 23% of evicted households who were homeless for less than six months reported some degree of involvement with Housing Solutions at some point in their journey. These statistics highlight not only the important role that Housing Solutions play in preventing evictions in the first place, but also their role in resolving homelessness swiftly when it does occur.

Barriers to preventing eviction

Despite extensive evidence of good practice across Wales, we also found a number of barriers to social landlords being able to successfully prevent eviction. The key findings were as follows:

Ensuring policy consistently matches practice

There is evidence of excellent, innovative approaches to eviction prevention in Wales. Our interviews with social landlords clearly demonstrate a broad and practical understanding of what constitutes good practice in preventing evictions. However, our interviews with evicted tenants brought us examples of bad practice, leading to unacceptable outcomes for people, suggesting there may be a gap between the aspirations and the achievements of social landlord aims.

These results suggest a training need for all frontline housing staff, not only on the landlord's prevention options, but also on sensitive and engaging approaches to rent arrears collection.

Ensuring consistent minimum standards of landlord response

Despite the broad array of prevention work being undertaken by social landlords, tenants facing eviction in Wales can expect an inconsistent response at present. This is despite the existence of the *Pre-Action Protocol for Possession Claims by Social Landlords* in the Civil Procedure Rules.

The aim of the pre-action protocol is to encourage communication between the landlords and tenants with a view to avoiding litigation and, where proceedings are necessary, to enable court time to be used more effectively¹². However, there are inconsistencies in the application of the protocol by social landlords and in its consideration in court. Social landlords are not required to show they have complied with the protocol by submitting a checklist and, while some courts encourage the use of a landlord's own checklist and some have a pro-forma checklist, the practice varies at best. Compliance with the protocol may not be considered at all unless raised by the defendant and then, so long as the landlord confirmed¹³ they complied, this is accepted by the court¹⁴. While many landlords have pre-

¹² A copy of the protocol can be found here: <https://www.justice.gov.uk/courts/procedure-rules/civil/protocol/pre-action-protocol-for-possession-claims-by-social-landlords>.

¹³ Either verbally or through producing a record of attempted contact.

action policies that go above and beyond the minimum standard of the pre-action protocol, we also found evidence that the pre-action protocol is not always followed prior to someone ending up in court.

The status of pre-action in rent arrears claims in England and Wales is different to Scotland where 'pre-action requirements' are enshrined in law. Our results suggest the need to assess the feasibility of a pre-action requirement for Wales.

When it comes to something as fundamentally important as a person's home, it is wrong to tolerate inconsistency in this area. Tenants need a consistent, minimum standard of response from their landlord at an early preventative stage to save both the financial and personal trauma of taking a tenant to court and, in some cases, evicting them. We are not suggesting that eviction never takes place: instead, we are asking that each case does not progress to the court stage until social landlords can provide evidence that they have employed a minimum standard of response and offered appropriate and sensitive solutions to the tenant. This will ensure consistency and fairness for tenants, while not proving an excessive burden on the many landlords who will already be fulfilling these minimum standards.

Unrealistic payment plans

During our study, approximately half of our local authority interviewees in rent arrears had a repayment plan to which they had not adhered. In the remainder of arrears cases, no repayment plan was in effect at the time of the tenant's eviction. Repeatedly, the service users interviewed referred to 'unrealistic' repayment rates which did not take into account their extremely limited financial means. In a number of these cases, interventions by support workers from housing charities led to monthly repayment rates being challenged in the court and reduced to more manageable levels. In these cases, tenants tended to avoid eviction. This suggests that court action may be less effective in recouping arrears than agreeing a realistic repayment plan. Service users reported feeling disengaged by repayment plans with which, they knew from the beginning, they would not be able to comply.

Being referred for independent housing advice was highly valued by tenants facing court action. The most common work carried out in these cases was representing the tenant in court, liaising with the council and the Department for Work and Pensions, negotiating repayment plans, helping with appeals and applications, accessing grants and referring to other agencies.

¹⁴ Information, Advice and Representation in Housing Possession Cases, 25 April 2014, Oxford University, University of Hull.

External factors: the changing landscape of welfare benefits and Housing Benefit delays

There was a widely held view among stakeholders we spoke to that the on-going introduction of Universal Credit (UC) and the future plans to cap Housing Benefit for social tenants in line with the private rented sector (PRS)¹⁵ will bring fresh challenges and will require new ways of working to ensure tenants are able to negotiate the changes. There was particular concern that fit and healthy single people under 35 would bear the brunt of the changes.

A recurring theme in the research was the tenant facing eviction due to rent arrears caused by complications with Housing Benefit. Service Level Agreements and/or protocols between local authority Housing Solutions and Housing Benefit departments are essential for overcoming rent arrears brought about by delays or complications with Housing Benefit payment. Indeed, such protocols are in place in most authorities in Wales. However, we heard evidence that not all Housing Solutions departments have access to the Housing Benefit system and this makes it harder for landlords to prevent eviction.

Damaging punitive approaches

During our research, it was apparent that many social landlords routinely issue high numbers of 'Notice of Seeking Possession' (NoSPs). In one RSL, approximately 1,500 were served each year. The attitudes of landlords towards the use of NoSPs varied drastically. There were those that regard their use as a last resort and feel that they should only be used where an eviction is actively being sought. However, other social landlords felt that the notices were a useful tool to highlight the seriousness of the situation and stated that they often led to better engagement with tenants.

However, tenants that have been evicted, or threatened with eviction, told us that the issuing of the NoSP (without offers of accompanying support) actually hampered their desire and ability to engage with landlords to resolve the issue. Thus, we believe NoSPs should only be used in instances where all other attempts at engagement have failed. Importantly, the use of NoSPs with potentially vulnerable households needs to be carefully considered by landlords.

We found that some landlords are using mandatory eviction grounds for rent arrears, notably via section 21 'no fault' proceedings in starter tenancies. This is despite Welsh Government guidance advising that discretionary grounds should be used in such cases. The recent Renting Homes (Wales) Act, 2016, established a broad principle that mandatory eviction grounds are incompatible with the purpose of social housing. We feel it is important that Welsh Government reinforces this message with social landlords to ensure that when tenants do fall into rent arrears, they at least have the right to defend themselves in court.

¹⁵Due to be introduced in 2018 and likely to significantly impact single people in social housing under 35 without children.

Lack of tenant engagement

A lack of tenant engagement in eviction prevention work is the most cited reason for social landlords to progress to eviction stage. Social landlord stakeholders interviewed for this study were unanimous in their view that the greatest barrier to eviction prevention is lack of tenant engagement. Where the tenants fail to engage it leaves the landlord with little recourse other than to proceed down the court route: a course of action, that all interviewed emphatically believed, was a last resort and was seen as a failure.

Nevertheless, our research suggests that many social landlords base their prevention policies on 'common sense' approaches to engagement rather than evidence-based approaches. We urge social landlords to adopt evidence-based approaches towards tenant engagement. In addition, it is overwhelmingly evident that there is a significant proportion of tenants who are incredibly vulnerable due to mental health issues. For these individuals, engagement may have to be redefined and expectations adjusted, to reflect the characteristics of their condition.

We fear that the 'failure to engage' reasoning has the potential to become a default for landlords, or even an excuse to be risk-averse, if they only employ a 'one-size fits all' approach to motivating tenants to work with them towards solutions. The theory of engagement and behaviour change is a complex field of inquiry that is constantly evolving. A sophisticated understanding of tenant engagement should draw on numerous areas of knowledge.

The service users we spoke to felt that a lack of tenant engagement with the landlord, when the tenancy is at risk, is primarily driven by (i) fear of the authority, (ii) fear of the outcome, and (iii) the presence of unmet support needs hampering the person's ability to engage.

Landlords can boost engagement by:

- Sensitive and appropriate contact with the tenant and the use of third party support and advice teams where necessary
- More 'carrot' and less 'stick' approaches, placing equal emphasis on support as well as consequences
- Providing appropriate support for unmet support needs.

Conclusions

We found many examples of good practice and some outstanding practice in inclusive lettings and in the prevention of eviction. However, we also found instances where people had been excluded from social housing when it was inappropriate and unfair to do so. In some cases, this was because landlords' policies were insufficiently inclusive, and in other cases, this was because well-developed and inclusive policies were not followed. Our evidence suggests that more can be done to ensure that Welsh social housing is continuing to meet the needs of people on very low incomes.

We found that rent arrears, and the subsequent threat of eviction, primarily happens for two main reasons: (i) structural barriers such as changes to welfare reform, unstable (or no) employment and Housing Benefit challenges and (ii) the presence of unmet support needs. We also found that ASB is often the result of a failure to address unmet support or complex needs. Eviction triggers are symptoms of underlying issues in a person's life and we highlighted the importance of the need for landlords to assess the tenant's circumstances holistically.

The personal impact of eviction is devastating with evicted tenants finding themselves without support to transition into stable housing, facing long-term homelessness and developing, or experiencing deterioration of, support needs such as mental and physical health conditions and substance misuse.

In terms of financial impacts, Welsh social landlords are currently spending £7,879,059 annually on evicting tenants. The wider costs to other organisations of dealing with the consequences of these evictions are nearly twice as much again. In total, evictions from social housing cost the Welsh economy more than £24 million per year. This is not a positive use of public funds.

Both the financial and human cost of eviction makes a convincing case for the necessity of diverting at least some of this resource into developing an expansion of effective, support-based eviction prevention services. We found that eviction prevention programmes are likely to be cost-effective at a partnership level. This requires landlords to work, not in isolation as self-interested economic entities, but together, for the common good at a regional or even national level.

The findings from this study highlight areas of best practice as well as areas for improvement. Some of the stories and experiences of tenants suggest that there are lessons to be learnt by landlords, particularly in their approach to dealing with vulnerable tenants. The enduring attitude of landlords towards eviction – 'any eviction is a failure' - demonstrates that they are aware of the value of a social tenancy and the costs when this fails. This, then, begs the question, why are so many people still being evicted from social housing?

Social landlords vary in their approach and methods to eviction prevention and it is clear there is excellent work currently being undertaken in Wales. However, we have concerns that tenants are not receiving a consistent response to eviction prevention. As well as revealing different approaches between landlords, our study suggests that the aspirations of landlords with inclusive policies may not always trickle down to the frontline staff, leaving a chasm between policy ideals and actual practice on the ground. For example, while many landlords have pre-action policies that go above and beyond the minimum standard of the pre-action protocol, we also found evidence that the pre-action protocol is not always followed prior to someone ending up in court.

When it comes to something as fundamentally important as a person's home, it is wrong to tolerate inconsistency in this area. Tenants need a consistent, minimum standard of response from their landlord at an early preventative stage to save both the financial and personal trauma of taking a tenant to court and, in some cases, evicting them. We suggest that each case should not progress to the court stage until social landlords can provide

evidence that they have employed a minimum standard of response and offered appropriate and sensitive solutions to the tenant. This will ensure consistency and fairness for tenants, while not proving an excessive burden on the many landlords who will already be fulfilling these minimum standards.

The importance of ensuring appropriate solutions to eviction prevention is clear from our findings. Why tenants engage – or more accurately, why they fail to engage – emerged as a major issue that requires future exploration. A lack of tenant engagement in eviction prevention work is the most cited reason for social landlords to progress to eviction stage. Nevertheless, we fear that the ‘failure to engage’ reasoning has the potential to become a default for landlords, or even an excuse to be risk-averse, if they only employ a ‘one size fits all’ approach to motivating tenants to work with them towards solutions.

We found a number of methods can boost tenant engagement including: landlords adopting sensitive and appropriate contact with the tenant: using more ‘carrot’ and less ‘stick’ approaches and providing tenants with appropriate support for any current issues they might have that hamper successful engagement. Only when tenants’ circumstances are looked at holistically, and appropriate prevention methods adopted, will landlords see their rate of tenant engagement improve.

Rather than an ad-hoc common-sense approach, we urge social landlords to adopt evidence-based approaches towards tenant engagement. In addition, it is overwhelmingly evident that there is a significant proportion of tenants who are incredibly vulnerable due to mental health issues. For these individuals, engagement may have to be redefined and expectations adjusted, to reflect the characteristics of their condition.

In this challenging financial climate, we are increasingly seeing social landlords under pressure as they attempt to balance their social obligations with their financial viability. Nevertheless, we hope that this report resonates with landlords and reaffirms their belief in the social ethos of the service they provide.

Welfare reform and austerity are clearly placing landlords under significant pressure. How they respond to this pressure may well define the role of the sector for years to come. Will it be a case of closing the door, putting the chain lock on and only opening it to tenants who are financially the fittest and perceived as the safest bet, thus resulting in a financially healthy sector, albeit one without a social heart? Will it result in increased conditionality in an effort to regulate tenants’ conduct, whether in terms of finding work or adopting healthy lifestyles, or forcing them into other models of socially acceptable behaviour?

Or will landlords adhere to their social purpose by continuing to provide homes, security and life chances to those who need them: a purpose so fundamentally important that it cannot be overstated.

Recommendations

Financially inclusive lettings

We argue that more can be done to ensure that Welsh social housing is continuing to meet the needs of people on very low incomes. Our recommendation is that Welsh social landlords and Welsh Government work together to develop a Wales-wide approach to financially inclusive lettings. This would need to be developed in partnership with the sector but we suggest that it may include, for example:

- A standardised approach to assessing affordability, incorporating independent FCA-registered financial advisers where appropriate
- Parameters for acceptable use of rent in advance policies, with signposting to sources of help to ensure tenants don't start a new tenancy in debt
- Parameters for when people can be excluded from waiting lists because of past arrears, to ensure that where people are making a reasonable effort to pay off the debt, they are not excluded from the list
- An agreed common pathway for people refused a tenancy on affordability grounds, so they are proactively assisted into affordable alternative accommodation
- Recording and monitoring of the demographics of applicants refused a tenancy on affordability grounds, including protected characteristics.

We also argue that it must include a commitment by landlords to never deny a tenancy on affordability grounds if a tenant's rent is fully covered by Housing Benefit/UC, if there are no other suitable housing options available at the time.

Finally, we welcome the recent report from Community Housing Cymru and the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) on developing shared housing for people aged under 35. Work is already underway in the social sector to develop affordable housing for young people in light of the Local Housing Allowance cap on social rents. We recommend that all social landlords proactively address this upcoming challenge, looking at a variety of solutions including shared accommodation and low-cost, single units.

Avoiding unnecessary court actions

This research strongly suggests that the Pre-Action Protocol for Possession Claims by Social Landlords is not always followed. We recommend that the Welsh Government works with social landlords, tenants and the wider housing sector to explore the feasibility of new pre-action *requirements*, following the example of the Scottish Government. Pre-action requirements would ensure that tenants are not put through the stress and expense of court action unless it is genuinely a last resort. It would relieve pressure on Housing Solutions teams, the courts and advice services. Landlords would need to provide the court with evidence that the requirements had been followed.

Specific requirements may include, for example:

- Referral to independent money and housing advice
- A support needs assessment
- Negotiating a realistic repayment plan
- An expectation that mandatory eviction grounds will never be used for rent arrears
- A requirement that landlords must undertake reasonable efforts to help tenants address any Housing Benefit issues or make an application for Discretionary Housing Payments prior to notice being served
- Helping tenants manage rent payments by assisting them to open credit union 'jam-jar' accounts, or setting up Alternative Payment Arrangements under Universal Credit
- Early referral to local authority Housing Solutions services
- In the case of alleged ASB, referral to a preventative support project.

The aim of the requirements should be to establish an agreed minimum standard for all social landlords. It should, in no way, stifle creativity or hamper local, innovative approaches to eviction prevention.

Developing a knowledge base on eviction prevention

Engaging with tenants who are at risk of losing their home is often difficult. Landlords told us that what works for engaging one tenant will not necessarily work with another.

It was clear from our research that landlords are already employing particular specialist approaches to boost tenant engagement. However, these approaches are not always effective and can even be counter-productive, sending tenants even further into withdrawal and worsening any pre-existing mental health conditions. Some landlords routinely use the threat of eviction as a 'stick' to incentivise engagement. More generally, efforts to engage tenants, whether by 'sticks' or 'carrots' or other means, are not always based on robust evidence about what works, leading to much wasted effort.

We recommend that social landlords and the Welsh Government work together to improve the current knowledge base on eviction prevention and tenant engagement. There is much potential to learn from fields of knowledge such as behaviour change theory, which is currently generating useful insights in the areas of public health and sustainability, and apply these principles in a creative and experimental way in social housing.

Mental health emerged as a central theme in our research. In some cases, mental health conditions were not recognised by frontline staff, and in others, they were recognised but nothing was done as a result. The relationship between mental health and engagement is a critical one for landlords to understand.

All frontline housing professionals should have training in how to identify potential mental health issues (and make referrals to a relevant healthcare professional) and work sensitively with people with mental health conditions. Even in the absence of an official diagnosis, frontline staff should be sensitive to the tenant's predicament and signpost, or refer, where unmet support needs are suspected. We recommend that all frontline housing teams have a named mental health professional contact, as is the case for local authority Housing Solutions teams under the Welsh Government Mental Health Delivery Plan.

Finally, we suggest that landlords may find it useful to share their approaches to prevention via an online central hub of good practice. This could be a place where landlords share what works for whom and when, in terms of eviction prevention. One option might be to host the hub in the housing section of the WLGA website (in development at the time of writing).

Supporting local authority Housing Solutions teams to prevent homelessness

Our study suggests a need for social landlords to work co-operatively in order to make alternatives to eviction financially worthwhile, sharing costs and risk at a regional or national level. We recommend that the Welsh Government takes a co-ordinating role to rebalance current spending on evictions towards improved availability of support-based, preventative services.

We recommend that more needs to be done to ensure that local authority Housing Solutions and Housing Benefit teams are working co-operatively. Our research found that there are a number of authorities in Wales where information on Housing Benefit claims is not shared with Housing Solutions. Addressing this lack of co-operation may require Welsh Government intervention.

We recommend that Supporting People Regional Collaborative Committees take note of the findings of this study when making future recommendations about local spending priorities.

Local authority homelessness transitional funding has been cut substantially in 2016/17, with further cuts expected in the next Welsh Government budget. This cut has already led to some authorities reducing their homelessness prevention budgets, which is likely to reduce authorities' ability to help people access the PRS. Welsh Government should preserve funding, at least at 2016/17 levels, to enable local authorities to deliver on the Welsh Government's legislation.