Reasonable Steps:
Experiences of Homelessness Services
Under the Housing (Wales) Act 2014

Shelter
Cymru

OAK FOUNDATION

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Reasonable steps: experiences of homelessness services under the Housing (Wales) Act 2014

Our vision

Everyone in Wales should have a decent and affordable home: it is the foundation for the health and well-being of people and communities.

Mission

Shelter Cymru’s mission is to improve people’s lives through our advice and support services and through training, education and information work. Through our policy, research, campaigning and lobbying, we will help overcome the barriers that stand in the way of people in Wales having a decent affordable home.

Values

- Be independent and not compromised in any aspect of our work with people in housing need.
- Work as equals with people in housing need, respect their needs, and help them to take control of their lives.
- Constructively challenge to ensure people are properly assisted and to improve good practice.
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Executive Summary

Introduction

- In April 2015 the law on homelessness in Wales changed in a number of important ways. The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 placed a new duty on local authorities to carry out ‘reasonable steps’ to prevent or relieve homelessness for all eligible households, greatly increasing the number of people who can be helped. The Act created more flexibility in the range of councils’ interventions, and also expanded the definition of ‘threatened with homelessness’ so that people are assisted when they are within 56 days of losing their home.

- Alongside the legislative changes is a Welsh Government-led drive to create a more person-centred service culture, so that people are closely involved in identifying and putting into action the solutions to their housing problems. The aim is to create a system that’s more effective at prevention, by intervening earlier in smarter ways to address the root causes of people’s homelessness.

- In the official statistics, encouraging early signs have emerged about how things have improved. However, until now there has been no research examining people’s experiences in a qualitative way. This study draws upon interviews with 50 people who used homelessness services under the new Act in six Welsh local authorities.

- The research finds variability in approaches both between and within authorities, with clear examples of bespoke, person-centred service provision alongside cases where interventions are generic and insufficiently responsive to people’s circumstances. The report makes recommendations to local and central government to maximise use of available resources to further develop the Welsh homelessness prevention agenda.

Approaching the service

- Participants described their state of mind on presentation to the council’s homelessness services (known as Housing Options or, more commonly in Wales, Housing Solutions): the vast majority described feelings of worry, shame, frustration and desperation.

- Good initial experiences made people feel more positive about the service even when their eventual housing outcome wasn’t what they had hoped for. Conversely, people who eventually reached a good housing outcome still held negative opinions about the service if they felt they hadn’t been treated well at the outset.

- Questions that were narrowly focused on whether people felt staff spoke to them politely, with respect, tended to receive positive responses. However, a broader probing
of the matter revealed a more complex picture, with some people describing an overall attitude that seemed detached and cold, the politeness merely formal, with a lack of individual empathy (‘just a number’).

- Nine out of ten people (90 per cent) said they were spoken to with respect. However, 57 per cent said they felt the council had listened to them and understood their situation – while one in four (25 per cent) said they felt the council hadn’t listened to them.

- There was clear evidence of good practice: key factors were the ‘listening’, ‘understanding’ and ‘patient’ qualities of interactions with staff. These initial encounters with Housing Solutions were reassuring and empowering, breaking down fears and building a relationship of trust, which in turn led to positive outcomes.

Preventing homelessness

- Of the 50 people in this study, 20 made their initial approach to Housing Solutions because their current accommodation was under threat and they were concerned about being made homeless.

- Their experiences of prevention services were variable. Cases of prompt, personal and positive interventions showed the profound role that Housing Solutions services play in helping people move on. In other cases, the response left people feeling that they had not been offered an adequate level of support to resolve their housing problem. Some said they felt disengaged by a process which didn’t fully address their needs, ‘cast adrift’, ‘left in limbo’.

- When people felt that they had received good, effective support from Housing Solutions, they often expressed deep gratitude to the staff with whom they had been in contact. Feelings of relief and renewed optimism were common in these cases.

- In seven cases, people who’d received a valid notice to quit their privately rented home were told to stay in the property beyond the eviction date. Having followed this advice, people experienced stress and worry due to their uncertain circumstances and the threat of court action. Four people were inaccurately told that if they left the accommodation they would be found intentionally homeless.

- The use of contact lists of private landlords was spontaneously mentioned by participants in all six of the authorities in our study. However, 11 people across two authorities told us that the list they were given was out of date. Many hours have been wasted by people in our study in contacting landlords who turn out to have no interest in tenants on benefits, despite appearing on an approved list given to them by Housing Solutions.

- In one council, three people told us they were given a form to fill in whenever they looked for accommodation, in order to account for the time they spent house-hunting.

- There was a tendency for councils’ interventions to be drawn from a limited pool of
options with private rented sector (PRS) access very much front and centre, not only for single households but also for some families with dependent children. For some, this help was proactive in nature and included assistance with accommodation searches. Many were also offered financial help with bonds and rent in advance. While some did manage to find a new home using the PRS list, and were happy with this intervention, there were others who told us they felt out of their depth and needed more help than they got.

- More broadly, interventions like money advice, benefits advice and mediation seemed underused, with just five out of the 50 people recalling that they had been offered help of these types. Although the Act calls for Housing Solutions officers to use a wide range of interventions and look beyond the list for individual solutions, this study found a clear tendency for reasonable steps to consist of a set of generic interventions that concentrated on addressing immediate housing issues but not always the underlying issues that may have contributed towards a person’s homelessness.

- Both good and bad practice was found across the six authority areas, and also within each area’s Housing Solutions team, suggesting that the prevention agenda may be a work in progress in Wales.

Relief of homelessness

- Some of the most positive stories in our study came from people whose housing crisis was either caused or exacerbated by unmet support needs. Where council staff recognised these support needs, understood that they would need to be addressed in order to achieve anything other than a short-term fix, and worked together with the individual, people spoke highly of the help they’d had.

- Of the people we interviewed who were owed a duty under the section 73 relief duty, 24 per cent said that apart from being assisted to access temporary accommodation they had had little additional support from the council. Most of these were single men with no dependents, with a smaller number of single women, and a high proportion of prison leavers.

- Our findings suggest that sometimes interventions to prevent homelessness are not recognised by the service users as having been arranged by Housing Solutions. Conversely there is evidence that some people are receiving interventions provided by agencies other than the council, such as hostels and support providers. Some of these interventions do not appear to have been recorded as reasonable steps, and will therefore not show up in official statistics.

- People who were presenting as homeless having newly left prison accounted for seven of the interviewees in our sample. All were in temporary accommodation at the time we spoke to them, some had been given PRS lists, none had a clear idea of where they
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would be living in three to six months’ time. None appeared to have had meaningful housing support prior to leaving custody. This suggests that further work is needed to improve partnership working between probation and homelessness services.

Communication

- One of the most significant factors informing people’s overall positive or negative estimations of their experience was the quality and frequency of the communication initiated by Housing Solutions. In total, 61 per cent of the people we interviewed agreed that verbal communication was clear and easy to understand, while more than one in four (27 per cent) disagreed.

- In cases where there had been ongoing communication, people were keen to express their positive impressions. However, ongoing communication appears to be an area in need of improvement. Half of the people in our study (49 per cent) said that the council had not kept them up to date with their case, while just over one in three (37 per cent) said that the council had kept them up to date.

- Personal Housing Plans (PHPs) are recommended in the Homelessness Code of Guidance as a tool for collaborating with service users. Our findings suggest that this active, collaborative model of the PHP is not yet established. More than half (53 per cent) said they had not been given a PHP. Interview analysis revealed that only 20 per cent actually found the PHP relevant to them.

Outcomes

- By the time we carried out interviews, a total of 13 of the 50 people had had their homelessness duties discharged.

- A PRS tenancy was the housing outcome in eight out of the 13 closed cases. Of those eight, four said they had found their home themselves, without the help of the council. Where people had few other issues beyond their housing need, where the council’s PRS list (and liaison work) was fit for purpose, and where Housing Solutions offered to assist with bonds and initial rent payments, they reported themselves satisfied with this assistance.

- But as this research makes clear, people’s housing crises are part of a wider picture involving other aspects of their lives. Where people felt these other pressures and tensions had been ignored they were critical of the assistance they were offered.
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- When people were actively assisted in their search for PRS accommodation, with Housing Solutions officers doing more than just supplying a list of landlords, people often hugely appreciated these interventions.

- There were four cases where people were assisted into social tenancies. All four reported positive experiences of Housing Solutions. They were especially happy with the speed with which officers identified their support needs and began working with partners both within and outside the local authority to resolve them.

Conclusions

- The picture that emerges from this study is of a service that is in transition. Currently this transition appears to be taking place unevenly, within authorities as well as between them. We spoke to people who felt they’d been helped effectively and people who felt they’d been brushed off with minimal help, despite having presented to the same authority at the same time.

- This study has suggested a number of principles to help define what the person-centred approach to homelessness services looks like in practice, including the importance of a supportive manner, holistic assessments, and ongoing verbal communication.

- The stories we heard during this research built up an impression of services that often seemed extremely busy and were sometimes unable to dedicate enough time to identify and address root causes of homelessness. Nevertheless, we found numerous examples that demonstrated the person-centred approach – often with excellent results. That staff managed to achieve this level of in-depth help with some people, given high caseloads, needs to be recognised and commended.

- We conclude that ultimately, too much responsibility is being placed on the shoulders of Housing Solutions. Homelessness prevention is not just about bricks and mortar: it’s about assessing people’s needs in the round and providing bespoke interventions. This goes beyond the current capacity of Housing Solutions. We recommend that staff need to be better supported to deliver on the Welsh Government’s ambitious agenda.

- The task of reconfiguring homelessness services to focus on prevention was never going to be accomplished overnight. Having begun this journey in Wales we need to see it through to completion. Despite some excellent work taking place, there is a danger that without more support and direction, councils may end up falling into a pattern of generic and minimal reasonable steps for all but the most vulnerable people. Our recommendations are aimed at raising standards across the board and assisting Housing Solutions staff to prevent homelessness in the most effective way.
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Recommendations

1. Local authority Supporting People commissioners should prioritise the commissioning of services that are aligned with the prevention and relief of homelessness. This should include expanding availability of short-term, flexible tenancy support. These support services need to be designed with full involvement of local Housing Solutions, and be provided both to people at risk of homelessness and people already homeless.

2. Local authority Housing Solutions teams should continue to develop the range of reasonable steps they offer, avoiding generic PRS access for all but the least vulnerable people. Interventions such as money advice and mediation services need to be offered more often.

3. Local authority Housing Solutions teams should continue to develop a case management approach to homelessness prevention: communicating with other providers and with the service user to ensure that all reasonable steps are centrally coordinated and monitored, including those provided by other agencies.

4. Welsh Government should find ways of boosting resources to Housing Solutions following the end of transitional funding in 2018/19.

5. Welsh Government should explore further ways of securing continuous improvement in adherence to the Act and the Code of Guidance: this might include for example establishing a homelessness regulator body; establishing better information-sharing on the outcomes of legal reviews; or bringing key parts of the Code of Guidance within secondary legislation.

6. Welsh Government should provide more detailed guidance on how to use Personal Housing Plans as a tool for collaboration with service users.

7. Welsh Government should coordinate the development of an accredited training package for Housing Solutions staff. This could potentially build on the Housing Options Toolkit currently in development by the Scottish Government. As a long term goal the Welsh Government should consider creating a minimum training requirement for Housing Solutions staff.

8. In the meantime, local authorities should prioritise staff training, particularly in the Code of Guidance and the person-centred approach.

9. Local authorities should review pay levels for Housing Solutions staff to ensure they accurately reflect the role’s new responsibilities.
10. Housing Solutions teams that use PRS lists should ensure that lists are regularly updated.

11. Housing Solutions should continue to implement the Equal Ground Standard – assessing services and creating an action plan to record and guide progress.
1. Introduction

This study aims to answer a simple question: what is it like to use homelessness services in Wales today?

In April 2015 the law on homelessness in Wales changed in a number of important ways. The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 placed a new duty on local authorities to carry out ‘reasonable steps’ to prevent or relieve homelessness for all eligible households, greatly increasing the number of people who can be helped. The Act created more flexibility in the range of councils’ interventions, and also expanded the definition of ‘threatened with homelessness’ so that people are assisted when they are within 56 days of losing their home.

Alongside the legislative changes is a Welsh Government-led drive to create a more person-centred service culture, so that people are closely involved in identifying and putting into action the solutions to their housing problems.

The aim is to create a system that’s more effective at prevention, by intervening earlier in smarter ways to address the root causes of people’s homelessness.

In the official statistics, encouraging early signs have emerged about how things have improved:

- For people threatened with homelessness, 65 per cent had their homelessness successfully prevented during 2015/16
- In 2015/16 councils dealt with an estimated 17,913 households – 26.5 per cent higher than the previous year, when the old legislation was in place
- Between March 2015 and March 2016 the use of temporary accommodation fell by 8.5 per cent, while use of bed and breakfast accommodation fell by 45 per cent
- Numbers of households found to be in priority need fell by 69 per cent between 2014/15 and 2015/16, while households found intentionally homeless fell by 47 per cent.

However, until now we have had no sense of what people themselves feel about the new service. How highly do they rate the help they’ve had? How involved have they felt in the process? How well have they been listened to? What, in their view, are the most important next steps for improving services?
Our study involved in-depth interviews with 50 people across six local authorities. All had used homelessness services between May and August 2016. A team of researchers worked with peer researchers\(^1\), some of whom had used homelessness services themselves since the law changed. The authorities spanned a range of sizes, urban/rural settings and geographical distribution.

As well as carrying out interviews, we asked participants to fill in a questionnaire rating the service they’d received – a total of 49 people completed the questionnaire.

In Chapter 2 we look at people’s initial experiences when they first presented to services: how they were treated; whether they felt listened to and reassured that they would be helped.

Chapter 3 looks at the help people received when they were threatened with homelessness and assisted under section 66 of the Act.

Chapter 4 looks at interventions for people who became homeless and were assisted under section 73 as well as, where appropriate, section 68 (interim accommodation duty).

Chapter 5 analyses the effectiveness and importance of communications, including use of Personal Housing Plans, letters, and other forms of communication.

Chapter 6 examines housing outcomes for the 13 people in our study who had had their duties ended by the time of interview.

In Chapter 7 we present our conclusions and recommendations.

The full methodology for our study is included at the Appendix.

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\(^1\) Peer research is research that is steered and conducted by people with lived experience of the issue being studied.
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2: Approaching the service

For most people in the study, their first contact with local authority homelessness services (often known as Housing Options or, more commonly in Wales, Housing Solutions) was at a face-to-face interview with staff at their local office. Some were referred, for example by probation services, while a greater proportion presented at the office on their own initiative. All were either homeless, facing homelessness, or living in conditions they considered unsuitable.

We asked them to tell us their stories, the events and circumstances in their lives they felt had led them to this point. We wanted to get a picture of why people presented at their local authority homelessness offices, and of how they were feeling as they approached the service.

The stories are of course varied and individual, but a very clear set of themes emerges. For the overwhelming majority of the people we spoke to, the initial visit to Housing Solutions was experienced as the culmination of a long and insecure period, in which traumatic life events – domestic violence, illness, family disputes, bouts of addiction, abuse from landlords – were common. Such problems worked in combination with structural issues in the housing market, particularly around supply and affordability, to bring people to the point where they could no longer keep a roof over their heads without assistance.

Many told us that they were experiencing mental and physical illnesses either caused or exacerbated by these traumatic events and circumstances. People’s descriptions of the period leading up to their initial approach to Housing Solutions were often made in terms of a ‘battle’ or a ‘fight’, or a ‘struggle to keep a roof over our heads’.

It was common for people to talk of their first visit to Housing Solutions in terms of these stresses and pressures:

‘I was just so nervous. No mother wants to feel she has nowhere to go when she’s got a kid. I didn’t know if anyone would be able to help me, I didn’t know if I was entitled to any help. I just went in there completely clueless, stressed and upset.’

‘I hadn’t slept for a fortnight, I wasn’t very well. You can imagine how I felt. There wasn’t a lot of fight in me by then.’

‘I was in pre-panic attack stage so I was doing my best to stay calm and suppress myself. I honestly did not know how they could help me. I just felt so ashamed that it had come to this.’

‘I was devastated, I was absolutely scared, I didn’t know what I was
facing, what I had to do. For the last three months I’d been living… with the doors shut and bolted. No one was saying everything’s going to be okay.’

‘Anger. Not anger at someone, I wasn’t angry at any person or organisation in particular. I was just angry.’

Feelings of shame and frustration, of persecution and anger, and of desperation were described over and again by the people who took part in our study.

‘I was really bad. I wanted to end it all. I couldn’t stop crying.’

We asked people how the environment at the office itself, and the interactions with its staff, affected them. We were interested in how people already in a worrying and tense situation experienced their approach to Housing Solutions. Did they feel reassured? Did they feel secure? Did they feel they were listened to?

The answers we got were varied. There were many examples of good practice where people felt engaged and supported. Others reported experiences of the office and interactions that were less positive.

These initial experiences appear to bear quite heavily on people’s lasting impressions of the service. Good initial experiences made people feel more positive about the service even when their eventual housing outcome wasn’t what they had hoped for. Conversely, people who eventually reached a good housing outcome still held negative opinions about the service if they felt they hadn’t been treated well at the outset. First impressions, on the evidence of these interviews, are important.

The office environment

Where people gave positive appraisals of the office itself, these were generally in terms of the perceived attitude of staff and the facilities available to those waiting for interviews: availability of drinking water, access to toilets, and some consideration of those presenting with babies and young children.

‘The office was very welcoming, there were people with children waiting to get seen, and the kids were in a play area, it was friendly in there.’

‘It seemed friendly and clean, with a play area for the kids.’

‘The staff on reception were very friendly and helpful, so it was quite welcoming.’
‘It was a nice, clean environment... I’d say it helped with my nerves.’

‘I was waiting a while but it was fine, there was a toilet and you could get water to drink and it was quite comfortable.’

In these cases, the front office environment acted as a reassuring factor, creating an initial impression of a person-centred service. Even in cases where the waiting time was longer, people who spoke positively of the office environment were more likely to rate themselves as satisfied with their experience.

Conversely, those who commented on a lack of facilities in the waiting area tended to rate their experience as unsatisfactory even when their waiting times were shorter.

‘[The offices are] unbearably hot… you’ve got people with kids and they’re screeching… you’ve got people stoned out of their heads, drunk, it’s unpleasant, and people quickly get annoyed.’

‘There’s all sorts in the waiting room and a few of them don’t look happy at all, they look like they’re about to kick off. Then you’ve got kids in there going mad. I don’t mind kids, I’m alright with them being noisy, but there’s nothing for them to do in there so they’re going to get bored.’

‘It’s not exactly welcoming, no. Everyone in there is really stressed and the atmosphere is terrible. It was boiling hot, there was no air conditioning, you couldn’t get a drink of water or even go to the toilet. I hated it.’

‘There was nowhere you could get a drink of water and they wouldn’t even let you use the toilets. I was one of the first in [the office at 9am] and I finally got in to see someone at gone two. No, it was not acceptable to me... to wait [five hours] with no basic facilities.’

‘Six hours, that’s how long I waited in the end. I went in at 9.30 and finally got in to see someone at 3.30. That was the worst part, and there was nothing in there like water to drink, no toilets, and it was boiling hot. By the time you finally get in, you feel ready to give up.’

‘It’s... not the best on a hot day when you’ve got a two-year-old. They haven’t got any facilities; they don’t even let you use the toilet. They used to but people were always taking drugs in them so they had to stop it for everyone. So that’s unfair, the rest of us should be trusted with a key for the toilet if we want to go.’
Interaction with staff

An interesting detail in the research is the tendency for people to answer questions about how respectfully they were spoken to by staff in generally positive terms despite rating their overall interactions with those same staff in more negative terms. For example:

‘Yes, they were respectful, it was ok... They weren’t not friendly. Once I went into the interview room I feel like it was minimal eye contact, minimal speaking and it was trying to get things up into the computer into the system.’

‘I couldn’t say the person was rude… but it was like they didn’t get what was going on. You got to feel you were just a number on a bit of paper.’

‘Polite and courteous but only because that’s their job, there’s no real sympathy coming from them.’

Figure 1: ‘I was spoken to politely and respectfully’

Questions that were narrowly focused on whether people felt staff spoke to them politely, with respect, tended to receive positive responses – 90 per cent said that they had been spoken to with respect. However, a broader probing of the matter revealed a more complex picture, with some people describing an overall attitude that seemed detached and cold, the politeness merely formal, with a lack of individual empathy (‘just a number’).
In many cases, the people we spoke to were able to describe this situation in terms of the demand on housing services and with an acknowledgement of the pressures on the individual officer:

‘They look at you as a case they’ve got to sort out, not a person with feelings. I probably get too emotional in these situations but then to have just a cold response is a bit strange, to me it is anyway. But they see hundreds like me a week, don’t they?’

“You get judged as... a prison leaver. It’s horrible to say, but from a professional point of view they must see these people coming in five days a week. They rubber stamp [prison leavers] and it’s [emergency accommodation], like it or lump it. That’s what you’re offered, if you don’t want to take it that’s up to you. It’s not a bad judgement on their part. But they’re dealing with people on a daily basis either straight out of prison or on drugs. So it’s not a nice job but they do have a duty of care to people who are vulnerable... and want to move forward.’

In this study there was a wide general acknowledgement of the difficulties and pressures faced by housing staff. People’s expectations of how the council could help them tended to be realistic and reasonable. On the whole, people were willing to engage with the system. What they wanted, but didn’t always feel they got, was the sense that their own individual situation was being considered, and that the effort would be collaborative. What they often felt was that the bare details of their stories were being slotted into pre-existing categories. A frustration with the respectful yet detached style of communication in the interview might be
understood as a desire by the individual to get beyond the formalised language of the paperwork and communicate in a more meaningful, personal way.

‘I was really struggling when I was speaking to the [Housing Solutions officer]. I struggle with people in authority; I am scared and could panic at any moment. When we sat down in the room she was really polite, she was considerate, and she was not being patronising at all. She got the gist of what I was saying straight away. After a while I started to trust her and she made me feel calmer.’

‘The contact was personal when I had expected it to be very bland, just policy and procedure, you know. I thought they’d throw a lot of rules and terms and conditions at you, and a lot of paperwork, but having an advisor who sees you and hears you and who you can sit down and directly talk to... They can see what a state you are in and what you can cope with... That in itself was fantastic.’

These findings reinforce Welsh Government guidance that ‘Staff should adopt a person-centred, non-judgemental, proactive approach that focuses on finding solutions to housing problems… work(ing) in partnership to identify the most suitable reasonable steps to take to prevent homelessness or help to secure accommodation.’

Privacy

The Equal Ground Standard highlights that service users prefer an element of confidentiality when discussing sensitive matters. Our study found that two-thirds (65 per cent) felt the level of privacy they were given was appropriate. Just under one in four (23 per cent) felt that the level of privacy was not sufficient.

‘I just spoke to them in a private room and we just took it from there really’.

‘When you go in initially and explain your situation that is at the desks with glass in front of them. They are a few feet away from the general waiting area so there’s a varied amount of privacy. Then you get invited through to speak to a housing officer in an individual room and that’s properly private.’

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2 Code of Guidance for Local Authorities on the Allocation of Accommodation and Homelessness (March 2016) 10.2
3 For more information, see the Equal Ground Standard: http://sheltercymru.org.uk/equal-ground-standard/
'You’ve got three individual little booth things… they’re not really private, so everybody can hear everybody’s business… some people come in and they’re in a really bad way and they’re really upset it’s just… it’s not pleasant, especially with small children’

‘I had to repeat [my story] to different members of staff… I had to talk about my business in front of other… people… then I have people looking at me… my business is my business, I don’t think I should have told you my business in front of all the other people’

Figure 3: ‘Whilst in the council offices I felt that the level of privacy I was given to speak about my housing situation was appropriate’

Good practice approaches

One man who had been homeless several times in his life felt that the experience of presenting to Housing Solutions was much more positive this time:

‘This time round it has been totally different. Before, I would have had to take my sleeping bag, my flask because you would be there for the duration of the day. The staff would have faces down to their asses. In and out of rooms moaning, you know. This time, totally different. They speak to you on a personal level, a better basis. They get you.’

For many people the relief of being heard and listened to in that situation can be quite profound. For some, it is the difference between despair and hope. A disabled single mother
facing imminent homelessness described her initial visit:

‘I was panicking, my hair was falling out, I had sores all over my face, all from stress. If it was just me, I wouldn’t care, I’d sleep on a bench if I had to, but I’ve got my four-year-old and nowhere to go. You feel you’re letting your daughter down, you’ve got no house to keep her safe in, nowhere we can go, just constant anxiety, panic attacks. I was so nervous... so upset. I broke down on poor M. [Housing Solutions officer] when she was asking me questions.

‘The [reception staff] were lovely, not sure of their names but one young girl was amazing, so patient and she listened to what I had to say. I didn’t feel as though I was being judged, I felt like I was being helped and looked after. Then M. my actual Housing Options officer, she is just lush, she’s been absolutely amazing, I can’t thank her enough. She’s been patient, she’s been so kind and understanding, I’ve had calls from her so many times when I’ve been upset, stressed and worried. I’ve broken down to her and I didn’t feel bad she made me feel comfortable, she has been amazing and she’s still helping.’

This individual and her daughter are now living happily in a secure tenancy, thanks to excellent work from the very beginning by the Housing Solutions team. The key factors in this mother’s positive appraisal of the council were the ‘listening’, ‘understanding’ and ‘patient’ qualities of her interactions with the staff. These initial encounters with Housing Solutions were reassuring and empowering, breaking down fears and building a relationship of trust, which in turn has led to a positive outcome.

Examples of this kind illustrate the importance of first contact. They also make a strong argument in favour of a more complete transition in service culture from top-down approaches to a genuinely person-centred ethos.
3: Preventing homelessness

Welsh Government guidance states that ‘preventing homelessness in the first place can help avoid the significant negative impacts’ on people at threat of losing their home, ‘for example on a person’s health, education, employment opportunities and social well-being.’ By creating a statutory right to prevention services, the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 aims to minimise these wider negative impacts and their costs to public services.

The Code of Guidance also stresses the need for councils ‘to investigate the reasons behind the threat and develop a deeper understanding of the applicant’s housing situation.’

The duty under section 66 of the Act to help prevent any eligible applicant from becoming homeless can encompass a wide and innovative range of interventions. The Guidance gives a range of examples and adds that ‘Local Authorities must be proactive in their utilisation... looking beyond this list for solutions... and applicants must be involved as much as possible to ensure they are fully engaged...’

The focus in the Act on the prevention duty gives local authorities the initiative to identify and support people before their point of crisis. Having the opportunity to address unmet support needs and plan for a sustainable housing future can help people get back on their feet and begin to repair their lives.

Of the 50 people in this study, 20 made their initial approach to Housing Solutions because their current accommodation was under threat and they were concerned about being made homeless. Where they were eligible under section 66, their local authorities accepted the duty to help prevent the threat becoming a reality.

Their experiences of that process were, again, extremely variable. Cases of prompt, personal and positive interventions showed the profound role that Housing Solutions services play in helping people move on. In other cases, the response left people feeling that they had not been offered an adequate level of support to resolve their housing. Some said they felt disengaged by a process which didn’t fully address their needs, ‘cast adrift’, ‘left in limbo’.

Reasonable steps?

Sometimes people felt that the steps they were advised to take by the council were not reasonable ones for them to take, and sometimes this led to disengagement and even to withdrawal from the process.

For example, a single mother who was served a two-month notice to quit her home in the private rented sector (PRS) because the landlord wanted to sell, said:

4 Code of Guidance for Local Authorities on the Allocation of Accommodation and Homelessness (March 2016) 12.2
5 Ibid. 12.16
‘So when I went to the council, they said “no, you stay there until the bailiffs come to take you out”. [But I didn’t want to stay] in a house with two children and bailiffs knocking the door waiting to kick us out...They just gave me a list [of private sector rented accommodation] and said “find it yourself”.

Another interviewee, a woman in her forties, found herself threatened with homelessness when a difficult relationship with her landlord’s son broke down, leading to animosity and abusive behaviour from the landlord and his wife, and then to an eviction notice. At her interview with Housing Solutions it was suggested that she ‘stay in the house [beyond the eviction date] and wait for the landlord to take [me] to court. They mentioned it would take around three months if I go down that road.’

This individual did as she was advised, continuing to live in what was becoming an increasingly difficult and stressful situation. When we spoke to her she was still in the property, still awaiting proceedings against her, and still trying on her own initiative to find a suitable tenancy in the PRS.

In a similar case a father of five renting in the PRS visited Housing Solutions when his landlord issued a notice to quit because he wanted to move back into the property himself. In describing his interview with an officer he said:

‘I asked what I should do on [the eviction] date and he said “stay put”... the Council say that you shouldn’t leave the property otherwise you are intentionally homeless but it is actually very stressful waiting for the courts. And because the landlord is a relative, [the situation] is causing family problems now... I feel like it is just a waiting game. And if the landlord does go through the courts, I will have to pay the court fees.’

This individual received minimal support from Housing Solutions in seeking out alternative PRS accommodation, beyond supplying him with an outdated list of private landlords (‘I have contacted landlords and I have viewed properties, but in the end you see they don’t accept housing benefit’) and putting him in contact with a social letting agency (‘When I contacted [the letting agents] myself, they said they rarely have properties’).

Another tenant found herself with two months to vacate her PRS flat when the landlord decided to sell the property. On receiving the section 21 notice she arranged an appointment with her local Housing Solutions office where she says an officer advised her to stay in the property beyond the notice period.

‘[They] said they couldn’t do anything until the [order] was given. As soon as you got the [order] they could do something, because [until then] you were not homeless... They explained to me that... you have got to stay in the property otherwise you are making yourself intentionally homeless.’

This tenant followed the advice and was evicted; she subsequently returned to Housing Solutions, this time presenting as homeless, and was offered temporary accommodation.
A number of points emerge from these seven examples of people being advised to stay in rented properties after being given a section 21 notice.

**Advised to ‘stay put’**

Firstly, it is unclear whether the officers who advised the people to stay in their threatened tenancies beyond the end of the notice period had a sense of how stressful that course of action was likely to be for the tenant. In some cases, these were complex and volatile situations in which the tenant was advised to stay, to disregard a notice to quit, and to be taken to court. To the people facing this kind of crisis, these did not always feel like reasonable steps.

> ‘They told me to stay put until they took it to court, which I did but I was worried sick, I couldn’t sleep at night.’

Secondly, it appears that some authorities are warning applicants that if they quit the property before court action is begun they will be found intentionally homeless. This was the case for four out of the 50 people we spoke to; some felt compelled to stay, and indeed exacerbate an already difficult situation by refusing to leave, for fear that any other course of action would deny them any assistance at all from the local authority. This appears to be a misapplication of the law on intentionality, since having received a valid notice to quit, the applicants were threatened with homelessness through no fault of their own.

**PRS access services**

Thirdly, it is clear that councils are increasingly turning to the PRS to meet people’s housing needs. The use of contact lists of private landlords was spontaneously mentioned by participants in all six of the authorities in our study. However, our study found that in some areas there are significant problems with these lists. A total of 11 people across two authorities told us that the list they were given was out of date. Many hours have been wasted by people in our study in contacting landlords (and even viewing properties) who turn out to have no interest in tenants on benefits, despite appearing on an approved list given to them by Housing Solutions.

The PRS is more fluid than social housing, with higher tenancy turnover and more flexibility for individual landlords to change the way they manage their operations. An effective service to point tenants and suitable landlords towards each other would have to develop a good partnership approach and continual updating of information. This will become even more important in light of landlord licensing – if councils fail to update their lists they risk driving tenants towards unlicensed landlords.

In one council, three people told us they were given a form to fill in whenever they looked for accommodation, in order to account for the time they spent house-hunting. This approach is reminiscent of requirements on jobseekers, and is nowhere recommended in the Code of Guidance.
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For 11 of those who were eligible for help under the prevention duty, PRS access services constituted their only identified reasonable steps. Usually this included offers to provide a paper bond and rent in advance although for some the PRS list was the only help they got. This was particularly likely for single men with no dependents although there were also six instances of parents of dependent children who said the only help they had was PRS access.

Some people weren’t even offered access to the list: one tenant threatened with eviction came away from her interview with Housing Solutions with no knowledge that a list of PRS landlords who would accept housing benefit claimants existed and could be accessed. This tenant had been contacting private landlords she found via adverts in the papers and online, finding that none were interested in benefit claimants. She later found out about the PRS list by chance after talking to a friend who happened to work for the council.

If people seeking solutions to their housing crisis in the PRS are supported with up to date lists and given basic advice on, for example, reputable letting agencies and how to contact them, it is entirely reasonable to expect that people can then take this support and use it to seek out opportunities to resolve their issues. In our study, two people successfully found a private landlord using the PRS list, and both felt therefore that the list was an effective intervention.

However, others said they would have appreciated an additional level of support around making approaches within the PRS. People with health issues, disabilities, young people, and people with caring responsibilities said they were hoping for more help in accessing a private tenancy.

A single mother in her 20s and facing eviction said:

‘I would have liked [Housing Solutions] to be a bit more supportive. I needed someone to help me do things, not just be told what to do. I would have liked the officer to make some of the calls [to private landlords/letting agents]... I’m still quite young myself and I’ve never done this with a child, you know. I’ve been on the breadline, poor and struggling, and I’ve had to sofa surf myself but when you’ve got a child it’s very different.’

Good practice

When people felt that they had received good, effective support from Housing Solutions, they often expressed deep gratitude to the officers with whom they had been in contact. Feelings of profound relief and renewed optimism were common in these cases:

‘They [Housing Solutions staff] were generous in the sense that they took an interest in what I was saying. They were interested in my illness and made me feel comfortable in talking about it... they were genuinely interested in my circumstances and I felt that I was listened to.’

‘The whole experience has been [one of] mixed emotions. At first it was
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In one case a man in his forties faced homelessness after a heart attack and the onset of a serious illness requiring kidney dialysis. Housing Solutions intervened early and found him a bungalow in a supported living complex. They also carried out a full assessment of his support needs, worked with him to develop a Personal Housing Plan (PHP) and put him in touch with local authority welfare team to work on income maximisation. This has allowed the tenant to pay for help to maintain and clean his bungalow. He says that at every step along the way, the council made sure he was informed and consulted on everything, working through the PHP with his officer.

Reflecting on the experience, he said: ‘They were very helpful, to be honest, very helpful. Very understanding and sympathetic. Pretty much everything they could do, they did.’

Other interventions

More broadly, interventions like money advice, benefits advice and mediation seemed underused, with just five out of the 50 people recalling that they had been offered help of these types.

In some cases, people were at threat of homelessness due to family disagreements, but mediation was not offered. For example, one man was living in a house owned by his sister, who had issued him with an eviction notice. He wanted to remain in the house, which had previously belonged to their late father, but he said the council's advice was aimed solely at getting him into alternative PRS accommodation.

An intervention that often proved effective, in the cases where it was used, was landlord mediation. Even in situations when the relationship between landlord and tenant was very strained and a section 21 notice had been served, mediation led to homelessness being delayed and even prevented for up to six months. Even when the delay was only a few months, people felt more secure in moving forward than when advised to stay put and wait for court action. However, landlord mediation was not frequently offered and this seems another intervention which may be underused.

Although the Act calls for Housing Solutions officers to use a wide range of interventions and look beyond the list for individual solutions, this study found a clear tendency for reasonable steps to consist of a set of generic interventions that concentrated on addressing immediate housing issues but not always the underlying issues that may have contributed towards a person’s homelessness. Both good and bad practice was found across the six authority areas, and also within each area’s Housing Solutions team, suggesting that the prevention agenda may be a work in progress in Wales.
4: Relief of homelessness

Just over half the people in this study were homeless when we first made contact with them and were eligible for help under section 73 of the Act – the duty to help secure accommodation for homeless applicants.

The Code of Guidance emphasises that this duty ‘is owed to all applicants who are eligible and homeless’ and that local authorities should work proactively ‘in partnership with the applicant to identify reasonable steps that will help them find a solution to their housing need’.6

Housing Solutions officers are encouraged to look at a wide range of possible interventions, which could include engaging in advocacy or mediation work, support in managing debt and maximising income, or arranging security measures for people at risk of abuse. Recognising unmet support needs and making the right referrals can also play a large part in helping people resolve their problems.

From our interviews it is clear that council homelessness teams can embrace this more expansive, supportive role and that, when they do, their customers report high levels of satisfaction with the service.

But the opposite is equally true and our research has also highlighted examples of people who feel they were given minimal assistance and that they were barely listened to, their support needs either unrecognised or not taken into account. And in these cases, people’s views of the service were often negative.

A commonly expressed view was that the range and quality of interventions offered is not flexible or individual enough and tends to be minimal for certain types of applicant (single men with no dependents, for example, and prison leavers).

This pronounced variability in people’s reported experiences of Housing Solutions occurs not so much between different councils across Wales as within the councils – examples of excellent practice and minimal support are found side by side within the same local authorities throughout the study.

This suggests that the change in service culture represented by the Act and its Code is happening in a piecemeal way so far.

6 Ibid. 13.2
Recognising support needs

Some of the most positive responses in our study came from people whose housing crisis was either caused or exacerbated by unmet support needs. These were people who had been experiencing various problems in their lives – including domestic violence and mental illness – with little or no support, and were now at the point of housing crisis.

Where council staff recognised these support needs, understood that they would need to be addressed in order to achieve anything other than a short-term fix, and worked together with the individual, the responses we got were very positive.

‘[The Housing Solutions officer] told me from the start that the council wouldn’t let a mother with a toddler fall through the gaps and end up on the street. That was a big relief to hear, it made me feel a lot more confident about getting help.’

These people talked about their experience with Housing Solutions staff in often emotive terms, speaking of their relief and gratitude at being listened to; for these people, often experiencing stress and mental ill health, their initial visit to the council brought at last a sense of security. Many described their contact with Housing Solutions as their ‘first step to feeling better, feeling in control again.’

‘I had a lot of benefits issues to sort through... I’m not very switched on with paperwork and all that side of it, I lose concentration... The [Housing Solutions] officer rang the benefits people while I was there and... explained it all to them in the terms they’d understand, and that sort of smoothed the way for me then to get all my benefits sorted out. So that was just a little thing but it turned out very, very helpful to me.’

One man with a learning disability found himself suddenly homeless after being exploited financially by the unscrupulous friend with whom he lodged. The first Welsh council he approached turned him away without making an assessment so he then approached his home authority, facing street homelessness with nowhere to sleep that night.

The Housing Solutions officer he spoke to recognised his needs and quickly worked to address them. By that evening he was safely accommodated in temporary supported housing, his travel expenses covered and a food parcel provided to see him through to the next day.

During his time at the temporary accommodation, his Housing Solutions officer worked with him to sort out the benefits problems brought about by the financial abuse he’d suffered, and helped him to maximise his income. He was also helped to identify an appropriate PRS home (from the council’s list) and assisted with finance and paper bond. As well as these interventions, the man was referred to the local social work team and has been allocated a
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support worker.

Here is how he describes his experience of seeking help from Housing Solutions:

‘I praise the council, they did everything they could do for me, [and] I praise [the officer], she just sorted it all out. I’ve got learning difficulties and I suffer from anxiety, but anything I didn’t understand I’d just ask and [the officer] would explain. I’ve got a house and I’m happy now.’

In this case, Housing Solutions recognised the individual’s support needs and understood that issues like his finances and his mental capacity would need to be addressed, together with a proactive approach in accessing a suitable PRS property. These interventions and referrals were carried out promptly, in partnership with the service user, and led to a satisfactory housing outcome and an overall sense of security.

Another man with a complex mental health condition told us:

‘I suffer from a lot of mental health problems, I have schizophrenia, I’m an alcoholic. I was a mess [when I first presented as homeless], I had been drinking loads and my mental and physical health was bad... The staff were amazing, really sympathetic. They listened to me and they helped me.’

Help to secure accommodation

The relief duty under section 73 requires councils to help homeless people to secure accommodation. For those deemed to be in priority need – those with dependent children, for example, or pregnant women – there is the further duty under section 75 (‘final duty’) for the council to actually secure accommodation for them, if action under section 73 isn’t successful.

Additionally, councils have a duty under section 68 to provide temporary accommodation to applicants who appear to be in a priority need group. This decision should not be based on extensive investigations into priority need status. Temporary accommodation may be provided under section 68 before any decision is made on whether a section 73 duty is owed.

Our research suggested that, in common with interventions under prevention, local authorities may be favouring a standardised approach that does not always take account of people’s unique situations and needs.

Of the people we interviewed who were owed a duty under section 73, 24 per cent said that
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apart from being assisted to access temporary accommodation they had had little additional support from the council. Most of these were single men with no dependents, with a smaller number of single women, and a high proportion of prison leavers.

‘Apart from putting me in temporary accommodation, there’s been nothing, no letters, no phone calls, I don’t know what’s going on.’

‘I don’t know really what’s happening now. The hostel is helping me more than [the council]. I haven’t received any letters or telephone calls [since moving into temporary accommodation]. Maybe I should have contacted them but I didn’t know.’

‘Obviously staying here [in temporary accommodation] has helped loads, but as for moving on I just haven’t been told anything.’

‘They put me in a hostel and gave me a [PRS list], told me to get on with it. And that’s it. I don’t know what will happen when this next three months is up.’

‘I feel like I’m in limbo. There doesn’t seem to be a plan.’

One participant, a prison leaver with a history of homelessness described the experience of living in emergency accommodation that was highly questionable from a suitability point of view, with no definite plan to move on:

‘A young person [in this hostel] – it could destroy them. I’ve seen people stay on floor space for six or seven weeks [and] they get dragged into that way of life. I’ve seen people... who have never taken drugs in their lives, and they come out of [the hostel] as raging heroin addicts. That’s a young vulnerable person right there. You’re young, weak minded, you haven’t got the strength to say no in a position like that, and you’ve got no support. And [the council] has put them in that position. You’re trusting the system and they just leave you there to rot.’

People often felt they had been offered only the most minimal support in trying to secure accommodation. Many reported little or no contact from Housing Solutions after moving into temporary accommodation, few appeared to have structured and relevant PHPs in place, and many were unaware of whether or not the council was still working on their case. In these cases, there was little evidence of homeless teams considering innovative interventions, too often falling back on the most basic level of support.
Interventions by other agencies

Our findings suggest that sometimes interventions to prevent homelessness are not recognised by the service users as having been arranged by Housing Solutions. When emergency accommodation is offered, for example, sometimes hostel staff will ring the service user to arrange a place. This is sometimes mistaken by the individual as having been arranged solely by the hostel, with no involvement from Housing Solutions, when it was they who originally made the contact.

Conversely there is evidence that some interventions may be taking place outside of the steps agreed by the council, often by staff at a hostel, shelter or other form of temporary accommodation.

One evicted tenant, for example, was offered a place at hostel which she took up. Staff at the hostel have been working with her to identify and apply for accommodation in the PRS, and also assisting her with accessing employment opportunities. These interventions do not appear to be part of her PHP but seem to have arisen spontaneously when she took up temporary accommodation.

If this is the case, then it means that these interventions will not be fully captured by the council as part of the agreed package of reasonable steps to discharge its prevention duty, and will therefore not show up in official statistics.

Prison leavers

People who were presenting as homeless having newly left prison accounted for seven of the interviewees in our total sample, and it is noticeable just how similar these people’s stories are. All were in temporary accommodation at the time we spoke to them, some had been given PRS lists, none had a clear idea of where they would be living in three to six months’ time. Their comments on their experience with Housing Solutions were similar too:

‘I’m on licence and you have to give them a permanent address, and I can’t do that because I haven’t got one. It’s been nearly six months now and I don’t think I’m any closer [to securing a tenancy] than when I first came out [of prison].’

‘I just wanted help, any help. Information would have been nice. I think they have just dumped me here. It felt like you are down as homeless, prison leaver – there’s a hostel for you, well done, off you go, next please.’

‘I do feel a bit let down by them all, the prison, the council. The hostel
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[staff] are great though and I do feel lucky in that.’

‘I’m a low priority, which means forget it. It’s going to end up with me going back inside, and not because of offending again because I’m not offending. It’ll be because I’ve got no roof over my head, I can’t give them a permanent address.’

It is discouraging that in this study we did not come across a single case of a homeless prison leaver being satisfied with the assistance they received, especially given the launch earlier in 2016 of the Welsh Government’s National Pathway which ‘pays particular attention to the needs of people leaving custody to prevent them from becoming homeless, thereby improving their resettlement into society and reducing their risk of reoffending.’

Under the Pathway, prisoners under threat of homelessness should begin receiving support 56 days before their release. This was not reflected in the experiences of any of the prison leavers in our study, who had either had no support before leaving custody or had only the most minimal support (in some cases, simply telling people to report to Housing Solutions on their release, in other cases not even that). One man was incorrectly told while in prison that he would definitely be accommodated by the council – advice which relates to the old legislation pre-April 2015.

The Pathway ‘clarifies the roles and responsibilities of all agencies and organisations involved in the process, resulting in a more coordinated approach with better support for people leaving custody’. For the prison leavers in our study, that aspiration is clearly not yet being achieved and that further development of partnership working between probation and homelessness services is an urgent need.
5: Communication

One of the most significant factors informing people’s overall positive or negative estimations of their experience was the quality and frequency of the communication initiated by Housing Solutions. In total, 61 per cent of the people we interviewed agreed that verbal communication was clear and easy to understand, while more than one in four (27 per cent) disagreed.

Figure 4: ‘The verbal advice and information given to me was clear and easy to understand’

What emerges clearly from the interviews is that people in housing crisis express a need to be listened to, understood, and to be kept in regular contact once the council has accepted the duty to assist them.

‘I wanted as many options as possible. I really wanted someone in authority in the field of homelessness to say, “You don’t even need to worry, it’s fine because we’ve got things in place and we’re going to help you.”’

Where they feel that this is happening, people report high levels of satisfaction with the service. They report finding it easier to establish a good working relationship with council staff, and they speak in often moving terms about their experiences.

‘[When I first approached] Housing Solutions I wanted to end it all. I couldn’t stop crying. I felt I had no one to defend me. [The Housing Solutions officer] was brilliant, totally understanding. He didn’t judge me,’
nothing like that. He was really, really nice. He definitely understood what I was going through and seemed to care about me.’

People’s primary concerns were around the clarity of information given, the sense of one’s individual situation being heard and understood, and the frequency and availability of ongoing contact beyond the initial interview.

‘I was suicidal. I had been clean for six months and then I went back to heroin. [The Housing Solutions officer I was allocated] was the only one who believed in me. Nothing was too much trouble, he said I was welcome to call him any time for updates or just a general chat about how things were going on. And he was always letting me know what was happening, he never went more than a few days without getting in touch, certainly no more than a week... Now I am doing well again. [Housing Solutions] helped me so much.’

The extent to which people were or were not satisfied with the frequency and quality of communication from the council was often pivotal in how they rated their overall experience.

‘In the beginning I felt so worthless, ashamed because I had to go to the council and beg for help. But [the Housing Solutions officer] was really good and understood everything. It was such a relief, how good she was, that I got upset and cried. I’d lost faith in people by this point, but [the Housing Solutions officer] reassured me. The council’s done me good.’

There are examples of people who, at the time of our interviews, were not yet in settled homes. They were often living in temporary accommodation, their housing issues still to be resolved and the council’s duty not yet discharged. When we asked them how they felt about the assistance they had received from Housing Solutions since their first meeting (or phone call), some responded positively; they felt supported and were fully engaged with the process:

‘I have lots of support needs but the [Housing Solutions officer] took note of everything, asked me loads of questions, found out all about me, and I think he listened to me well. He keeps in touch, we’re working things out together.’

But others in almost identical situations, their housing problems not yet resolved, felt very differently. These people said they felt ignored, unsupported, cast adrift. They were disengaged and in some cases withdrew from the process. Some had low confidence in the officers working on their case, feeling that they had not been empathetic and responsive to the information they were being given.
A woman at risk of losing her home told her Housing Solutions officer all about her history of significant mental illness and explained the profound impact it has had on her housing needs over the years. But she felt unhappy with the way this information was received:

“When you speak to [Housing Solutions staff] about mental health issues, you have to go through the same thing three or four times. I’ve been diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and when I mentioned that to [the officer] she said, “Oh, you have problems cleaning?” I found that quite offensive, though I know she only said that because she was ignorant. They don’t mean to offend but it doesn’t give you much confidence in them.”

The factors that made the difference in these cases were often around how well supported people felt after the initial meeting, especially:

- How clear was the information they were given
- Whether they feel staff understood and sympathised with their situation
- Were they able to have their say in making plans and agreeing reasonable steps
- Whether an agreed plan of action was established
- How frequent was on-going contact from Housing Solutions officers.

It’s clear from our findings just how important factors around communication are to people, influencing how they assess the council overall, even when the eventual housing outcomes are broadly similar. People are generally happier with the service when they feel that the approach has been more individual than process-oriented, more holistic than narrowly focused on the immediate crisis.

A disabled man in kidney dialysis at threat of homelessness told us:

‘I was impressed by how fast they got me a property...They were so helpful, they installed an emergency button in case I fall...They were very understanding, very sympathetic... After I was allocated the property the council called me to offer help from their welfare officer. She then helped me to get more money so I can afford to pay people to help clean and maintain my property... And I’m only a few miles from my mother and few miles the other way from my aunt. It couldn’t have been a better spot really.’

Housing crises do not, of course, occur in a vacuum. The various factors that can lead to a person facing homelessness can include illness, disability, abuse, poverty, addiction. These
and other issues are frequent in our findings and they represent significant support needs which in many cases had not been adequately met.

If the more significant underlying causes of a person’s homelessness are not recognised, it seems likely that any solution to their current housing crisis will run the risk of being a temporary one. The same pressures that led to this crisis, if unresolved, are likely to arise again. It seems clear, then, that a lasting, sustainable solution to a person’s housing crisis is likely to be one that recognises, understands and seeks to address these wider issues.

Effective referrals, good awareness of mental health and other issues, consistent partnership working with other agencies – where there is evidence of these, people are more likely to report high levels of satisfaction with the process. Again, this requires Housing Solutions officers to take a broader, more person-centred approach in assessing people’s needs. Key to this is understanding good communication as an integral and active part of achieving better housing outcomes, not an ‘add-on’ dependent on caseload or resources.

Ongoing contact

After the initial meeting, with a duty accepted and reasonable steps agreed, we found widely differing accounts of how people experienced their ongoing contact and communication with their Housing Solutions teams. Again, these accounts varied both between and within local authorities, and examples of both excellent and fairly poor practice exist side by side in the findings.

‘The letters they send me are a waste of time. I think they’re sent automatically, written out by a computer, there’s no human contact there... But what they’re actually doing, I don’t know. Not a lot, I don’t think. I think they’re doing the bare minimum they need to do, like sending me the odd address or whatever. I’m just not a priority to them.’

‘Since the first interview I asked if they could only contact me via my mobile number, because I didn’t trust my [landlord] with letters, I caught him opening a letter from the benefits office [addressed to] me. And I didn’t want them listening in if I got a phone call. So they agreed to just call my mobile and that worked out okay, help was just on the other end of the phone for me.’

In terms of ongoing contact between themselves and Housing Solutions staff where the council has accepted a duty, the main concerns people had were:

- How regularly were they contacted by Housing Solutions staff working on their case
• Did they feel that contact was constructive, useful and clear?

• How easy was it for people to get in touch with the officer(s) working on their case?

• Did they feel the on-going contact they received was well integrated with input from other agencies involved in their case?

Figure 5: ‘Any written communication (letters, council leaflets) given to me was clear and easy to understand’

![Graph showing responses]

Ongoing communication appears to be an area in need of improvement. Half of the people in our study (49 per cent) said that the council had not kept them up to date with their case, while just over one in three (37 per cent) said that the council had kept them up to date.

In cases where there had been ongoing communication, people reported high levels of satisfaction with the service and were keen to express their positive impressions – these issues matter enormously to people and can be key in establishing the confidence and constructive engagement necessary to achieve better outcomes.

‘They did more than I was expecting them to really, because they helped me sort out my benefits situation too by putting me through to the right departments and passing on information they needed to put my case right, and they kept me in the loop all the way through.’

Other people, particularly those in more difficult categories such as single, non-disabled people with no children, reported little or no contact at all beyond the initial interview.

‘I’ve been sofa-surfing for a while but now I can’t keep on much...’
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longer...The council gave me a list of [PRS properties] and told me to get on with it. I haven’t heard anything at all since then. There’s been no phone calls, no letters. There’s no action plan that I’ve seen. I don’t know if they’ve still got a duty on me or not, I’ve just heard nothing so I assume I’m on my own.’

‘I’ve had one call since the initial interview about a month and a half ago... just asking what’s my current situation. I told them that I’m still couch surfing and that’s going to finish next week... I think they’re still working on the case. I hope they are.’

Figure 6: ‘The council kept me up to date about my situation and the progress of my application’

Personal Housing Plans

The Guidance states: ‘The Welsh Government recommends the use of a personal housing plan which details the applicant’s desired outcome, the housing support needs of the applicant, the reasonable steps to be taken and an agreement on the actions the applicant and the Local Authority... are expected to undertake.’

A template Personal Housing Plan (PHP) is included in the Guidance, to be used or adapted by councils. A specific PHP template devised by local authorities may also be used, but the key point is that the PHP should be an important focus for both service user and council in moving forward. Ideally, the completion of the PHP would be carried out by both parties, working together to develop a plan that both agree on and can commit to. The plan would

7 Ibid. 10.33
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also have a clear timetable of stages and steps moving into the future, including a timetable for regular communication, updates and so on.

Our findings suggest that this active, collaborative model of the PHP is not yet established. We gave interview participants a description of a PHP, and more than half (53 per cent) said they had not been given one.

Figure 7: ‘I was given a Personal Housing Plan and it was explained to me what this was and how it would be used by both the council and me’

For the majority of people, then, PHPs were not an integral part of the process. We found a high degree of uncertainty and vagueness around people’s understanding of the PHP’s relevance, even in cases where they had definitely been given one. Interview analysis revealed that only 20 per cent actually found the PHP relevant to them.

Instead of being used as a tool for collaboration between service users and staff, many of the PHPs that were completed seem to have been done by the officers with very little input from service users.

‘We had a conversation about [planning reasonable steps and desired outcome] but it was just a phone call, there was nothing written down. It was a month ago and I’ve heard nothing since, so I can’t remember.’

‘They sent me [a PHP] in the post a week after the interview. I didn’t see the form at the interview, it was filled in by the office I suppose.’

For PHPs to work properly, there needs to be a clear and inclusive conversation between the parties in which the plan becomes a jointly agreed way forward. In many cases where PHPs
Reasonable steps: experiences of homelessness services under the Housing (Wales) Act 2014

were used, the value of the plan had clearly not been communicated to the service user. Nor had the ongoing contact between the parties made any overt reference to the contents of the plan.

‘I was given a personal plan for my housing needs, it was okay but I don’t know what it was really for. It’s just the paperwork I suppose, what they [Housing Options] need you to fill in to show you’re cooperating with them, it shows you’re part of their system.’

‘I might have had one [a PHP] but if so I didn’t know about it. There were lots of forms to sign, it could have been one of them. If so, it was never mentioned again.’

On the issue of PHPs there were again examples of good and bad practice side by side within councils, but the proportion of good to poor or entirely absent PHPs suggests that local authorities as a whole have yet to fully adopt and get the best use out of plans. And again, where they have been used effectively, people report feeling more confident and engaged with the process:

‘[The Housing Solutions officer] did a lot to help me, it was all worked out in the plan we did together at the first meeting. We went through everything she could do, and what I would do.’

‘She went up into the office and provided a list of all the letting agents they work with directly. She explained that the same agents put their properties on Home4U so if I contacted them directly it allowed me to get in before they had been placed on the market. She did numerous other things, as we’d discussed when we were filling in the [PHP]. Phone calls and other things to help me. I did have an agreement that I would keep on looking at the letting agencies, I would speak to my GP and find out what I would need, things to support me. At the same time, she was trying to investigate about my personal things, like contacting my parents to find out why they were evicting me, why they needed me out and so forth. She always kept me up to date. She called me and informed me of any changes or any progress.’
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6: Outcomes

In this section we look at outcomes, focusing on how people’s housing crises were resolved, what solutions were arrived at, and how people felt about these outcomes.

We first made contact with the 50 people who took part as they were making their initial approach to Housing Solutions, and interviews began four weeks later. Given this timeframe, it would be unrealistic to expect all cases to have been resolved by the time we spoke to people and, understandably, the majority of cases were ongoing. Here is the breakdown across the areas we looked at:

Table 1: Housing outcomes: progress of cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Duty discharged, case closed</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duty not discharged, case ongoing</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duty not accepted by council</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>50</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When we look at the 13 cases in which definite outcomes were achieved by the time of the interviews, this is how they break down in terms of people’s housing solutions:

Table 2: Housing outcomes: how duties were discharged

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Duty discharged</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Council helped to find PRS tenancy</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person found own PRS tenancy, council helped with bond/rent</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council helped to find RSL tenancy</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council helped to find LA tenancy</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>13</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PRS outcomes

A PRS tenancy was the housing outcome in eight out of the 13 closed cases. Of those eight, four said they had found their home themselves, without the help of the council.

Interventions by Housing Solutions in these four cases were generally limited to providing the individual with a list of landlords and offering to supply bond and/or rent. In some cases, there was also the offer of temporary accommodation. Where people had few other issues beyond their housing need, where the council’s PRS list (and liaison work) is fit for purpose, and where Housing Solutions offered to assist with bonds and initial rent payments, they reported themselves satisfied with this assistance.

‘I found my own [PRS] place, it wasn’t on the list... but the council have been marvellous, I always felt they had my back covered, [my Housing Solutions officer] kept in touch, made sure I was happy with everything, made sure I had everything I needed [bond and rent] so I could move in. I was very happy with [Housing Solutions].’

But as this research makes clear, people’s housing crises are part of a wider picture involving other aspects of their lives. Where people felt these other pressures and tensions had been ignored they reported feeling ‘cast adrift’ and were critical of the assistance they were offered by Housing Solutions.

‘To be quite honest with you the way I’ve been treated I couldn’t care about the council no more. They basically gave me a list of private sector rented accommodation and said find it yourself.’

The lack of on-going verbal contact from Housing Solutions made some people feel they were on their own despite the council having accepted a duty to help them:

‘I’ve had no letters, they don’t keep me up to date, there was no [Personal Housing Plan], just them saying what I should be doing [contacting properties on the council’s PRS list] and every place I phoned and went to had nothing for me. I’m a single mother and a prison leaver, and I felt I was looked down upon because I’d just come out of jail and my two children had to go and live with my parents.’

Some people felt the assistance they had received was given in an unsympathetic and even coercive way:

‘They [Housing Solutions] did the bond in the end, and the rent, but they said if I ever ended up out of the house or whatever then they won’t help me with it again, you’ve only the one chance of having a bond and help with the rent. And that was all they did, I had to find the place myself.’
The views of the four people who were more actively helped to secure a PRS property were far more positive:

‘I went back [to Housing Options] a few more times after that first visit. The housing officer allocated to me was good, we worked our way through the landlords on the council’s list. They were making the initial approaches for me, it was very helpful to be fair.’

‘I’ve been homeless on and off for the last 20 years. I’m under no illusions and I didn’t expect miracles, I was just hoping for a bit of a help, and to be fair to them they did their best on that… I’m just pleased when a council actually does something at all to help… If you’re lucky, you’ll get good advice and a leg up like I did.’

In these cases, people were actively assisted in their search for PRS accommodation, with Housing Solutions officers doing more than just supplying a list of landlords, often making initial enquiries on their behalf, offering practical advice on how to secure the tenancy that suits their needs, and working to help people manage their debt and maximise their income. These interventions were hugely appreciated:

‘They explained they helped with bonds, which was great. We found a fantastic property which suits my needs in the long term. [My Housing Solutions officer] worked with the agent and the landlord to make sure my finances were in order, helped sort out my benefits situation, and paid my bond and the first month’s rent. I can now stay and stabilise myself.’

There were four cases where people were assisted into social tenancies. All four of these people reported very positive experiences of Housing Solutions. They were especially happy with the speed with which officers identified their support needs and began working with partners both within and outside the local authority to resolve them. These factors acted to reassure people, to ease the stress they had been feeling, and to lead to smoother cooperation between all parties in finding a suitable home.

‘From what I understand it seems that [the local authority] are making huge efforts for me. When I came to see [the council flat] it had been cleaned and all the walls painted white throughout. All the electrics and light fittings and everything had all been checked. The day I moved in their technical services recommissioned the gas central heating boiler. So I feel in terms of it being a fit place to live there’s a security thing on the door downstairs and entry phone, yes I feel it’s clean, it’s safe, it’s secure.’

In these cases, people’s perspectives on the service tend to be both realistic and positive,
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taking into account the pressures local authorities are under and showing a clear understanding of the aims of the service:

‘They [Housing Solutions staff] are very, very good. I was quite distressed at the time. I suspect they are used to that... The [Housing Solutions officer] was absolutely superb and she clearly knows her job. She spoke to me at length not just then. She clearly knew what she was talking about. Also she was very up on this new law and [the local authority] is very much aware that in the past the process with homelessness hasn’t been the best. They’re very much aware that they really want to make improvements so that they can prevent people ending up in a cycle of homelessness.’

The findings suggest the better and more collaborative the approach, the more likely people are to feel themselves as participants in a process rather than passive recipients of assistance. It is when this relationship of respect is established that people feel empowered to fully participate in the process. The evidence is that the more information, communication and empathy a person receives, the more likely they are to extend the same towards their Housing Solutions officer. Better engagement is the result, with both the council and the individual gaining a deeper understanding of each other, of the pressures and difficulties each party faces, and of the opportunities and possibilities they can find together.
7: Conclusions and recommendations

The picture that emerges from this study is of a service that is in transition. Currently this transition appears to be taking place unevenly, within authorities as well as between them.

We spoke to people who felt they’d been helped effectively and people who felt they’d been brushed off with minimal help, despite having presented to the same authority at the same time.

We found numerous examples of good practice where Housing Solutions staff are working in the spirit of person-centred services. Where this is happening, people often expressed profound gratitude: ‘I can't thank her enough… she has been amazing and she’s still helping.’

What emerged from this study was a clear sense of why it’s so important that local authorities commit to undertake this shift from a process-driven service to a more supportive, solutions-focused approach. Many people said that when they first approached services they were in a very poor mental state, with high levels of anxiety and fear for the future. Practical help to solve their housing problem was what they needed, but they also needed support through this period of crisis in their lives: ‘At first it was upsetting and embarrassing… but in a way it's been a relief because now they’re helping me out… she was lovely about it, she said, ‘don't panic, you're going to be fine, we'll help you’. She was wonderful.’

It was noticeable that people’s good opinion of their service did not necessarily correlate with getting the best housing outcome. We spoke to people who were still in temporary accommodation and could not speak highly enough of their Housing Solutions officer. We spoke to people who’d been helped effectively and supportively, with ongoing regular communication, even in large services that deal with high volumes of service users daily. It was evident that where people felt supported in this way, they were more likely to engage fully and more likely to get what they needed from the service.

In the most positive stories we heard, the council had worked hard to help people towards the best possible outcome.

One man with a serious illness was found an adapted bungalow near his family. The council gave him a good Personal Housing Plan (PHP); they took his illness at face value and didn’t ask for burdensome levels of proof; they referred him for support; they referred him to welfare benefits advice so that he was able to afford a cleaner, which was important to his health as he required a sanitised environment. Now settled in his new permanent home, he had high praise for the support he’d had from Housing Solutions.
In another case, a vulnerable young man with learning difficulties was being financially exploited by the woman whose house he was staying in. The first Welsh council he approached didn’t help him but when he went back to his home authority they recognised signs of financial abuse. They found him emergency accommodation, paid for his bus fare, and arranged for him to have a food parcel. They referred him for support and helped him sort his benefits. They identified a privately rented home for him and his young family, and negotiated a three-year tenancy. When we spoke to him he was busy painting the outside of the family’s new home.

These good experiences contrasted sharply with what some others told us. In total, one in four people (25 per cent) felt that the council had not listened to them and understood their situation. Among the most negative stories were:

- Private renters who’d had a valid notice to quit and were told to go home and come back once they’d been evicted. Four were told that if they left before that time they would be found intentionally homeless – a clear misapplication of the law

- People who were given a list of privately rented accommodation which, they found, was out of date and included a high proportion of landlords who didn’t accept housing benefit. A total of 11 people across two authorities reported this happening to them. In some cases, people felt pressurised to keep ringing every number on the list despite their lack of success, otherwise they may be found to be unreasonably failing to cooperate. In one council, three people said they were asked to make a written record of the time they spent house-hunting which put them under additional pressure

- People who were advised to seek privately rented accommodation and were not given a list of landlords or any other form of help

- People who felt ‘abandoned’ in interim accommodation, with no further communication from Housing Solutions about their case

- People who felt pressurised to remain in accommodation that in their view was unsuitable and unsafe, including following relationship breakdown and landlord harassment

- People who were unreasonably asked to do tasks themselves: for example, one person who was homeless was told to ring round and find their own hostel place

- People leaving prison with no assessment having been carried out and having to present as homeless to Housing Solutions.

We also found that PHPs are only rarely being used as intended, as a tool for collaboration, with more than half (53 per cent) stating that they hadn’t been given one. Where people did
recollect the PHP they generally viewed it as just another piece of paper to sign: only 20 per cent of participants understood the PHP and found it relevant to them.

In general, we found that councils concentrated on addressing immediate housing issues but did not always identify underlying issues or refer people on to support. For example, money advice and family mediation appeared to be under-used. We also found that some people received help from other sources, such as hostel workers and support providers, which helped address their housing situation and underlying issues. Much of this help was spoken of in positive terms but often did not appear to form part of the formal reasonable steps.

There is a clear tendency for councils’ interventions to be drawn from a limited pool of options with PRS access very much front and centre, not only for single households but also for some families with dependent children. For some, this help was proactive in nature and included assistance with accommodation searches, while others were just given a list of private landlords. Many were also offered financial help with bonds and rent in advance. While some did manage to find a new home using the PRS list, and were happy with this intervention, there were others who told us they felt out of their depth and needed more help than they got.

Putting people at the centre

This study has suggested a number of principles to help define what the person-centred approach to homelessness services looks like in practice:

- First impressions are important. This goes further than treating people with respect. Listening closely to what people say, with a sympathetic, non-judgemental attitude, is more likely to lead to good ongoing engagement. Privacy is also vital so that people don’t feel humiliated by having to reveal personal details in front of a roomful of strangers

- Help to prevent/secure is not just about sorting housing problems but is also about supporting someone emotionally through a period of crisis. This is not ‘soft stuff’ but is key to the likelihood of a successful outcome

- Staff should not make assumptions about people’s situations but should treat each case as unique, in order to avoid people feeling as though their case is being slotted into pre-determined categories


8 For more on the person-centred approach, see the Equal Ground Standard: http://sheltercymru.org.uk/equal-ground-standard/
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- Assessments need to be sufficiently holistic to pick up not just on housing issues and obvious vulnerabilities, but other support needs that might be an underlying cause of housing problems. Employment, financial capability, physical and mental health, substance misuse, offending history and other aspects of a person’s situation need to be fully understood. And – critically – having identified support needs, the right help has to be provided.

- PHPs can be a tool to collaborate with service users and achieve a solution in genuine partnership. Or they can be just another piece of paper. People need to be fully involved in the process of filling them in, ensuring that the PHP accurately represents their views, achieves a balance of responsibilities and doesn’t set unreasonable expectations of either party.

- Although PRS access may be all that some people need, others need greater support. Services need to be sensitive to people’s situations, particularly where people have disabilities, mental health problems, literacy problems or caring responsibilities that may reduce their capacity for house-hunting.

- Quick interventions are highly appreciated by people. Conversely, having to stay for weeks or months in insecure situations, with no certainty about the future, has a corrosive effect on people’s mental health. Prevention works best when it’s done as early as possible.

- Ongoing verbal communication is vital: people need to be kept updated and contacted regularly while they are owed a duty. People need to be given contact numbers so they can get in touch when they need to. If staff go on holiday, alternative contacts need to be given. The onus should not be on the service user to do the chasing.

When this new approach to homelessness services is considered in the round, it’s clear that expectations on Housing Solutions staff are considerably higher than they were pre-Housing Act. The question is: do Housing Solutions teams have the resources they need to deliver this new agenda?

The stories we heard during this research built up an impression of services that often seemed extremely busy and were sometimes unable to dedicate enough time to identify and address root causes of homelessness.

Nevertheless, we found numerous examples that demonstrated the person-centred approach outlined above – often with excellent results. That staff managed to achieve this level of in-depth help with some people, given high caseloads, needs to be recognised and commended.
Insufficient funding for homelessness services will manifest in certain key ways: problems of staff recruitment and retention; problems due to lack of training; a reliance on a limited range of short-term solutions; and the likelihood of higher numbers of people re-presenting.

As well as resource pressures, it’s also likely that service culture change is still an active process in many authorities. We found evidence that some members of staff may still be working in a process-driven way, placing too much emphasis on intentionality, priority need and so on, and not enough emphasis on support.

Ultimately, too much responsibility is being placed on the shoulders of Housing Solutions. Homelessness prevention is not just about bricks and mortar: it’s about assessing people’s needs in the round and providing bespoke interventions. This goes beyond the current capacity of Housing Solutions. Prevention needs to be everybody’s business – including support services, schools, hospitals, GPs, social services, police, probation and landlords.

An important first step is to make better use of Supporting People-funded services, which are naturally support-orientated and which have the resources to work with people in sufficient depth to help them get back on their feet.

There are already some good examples of Supporting People services that work with large numbers of people in short-term, flexible arrangements that put the focus on empowerment and creating independence®. While it would not be desirable to limit Supporting People too closely to the requirements of the Housing Act, and stifle activity that has longer-term outcomes in mind, there is certainly much more potential to commission services that complement and reduce pressure on Housing Solutions.

By working more closely with other services to put reasonable steps into action, Housing Solutions services can free themselves up to adopt a case management role: not having to do everything themselves, but concentrating on communicating with other providers and with the service user to ensure that reasonable steps are flexibly delivered, and centrally monitored. This will help to broaden the range of reasonable steps and make them more bespoke to the needs of individuals.

At the same time, we need to support Housing Solutions officers to develop the skills required in this new role. There is currently no standardised training, let alone a national training requirement – and whenever resources are tight, training often becomes a lower priority. We argue that an accredited training package needs to be developed and, in time, Welsh Government should consider creating a training requirement for Housing Solutions staff to ensure a consistent level of understanding about the Act, the Code of Guidance and the person-centred approach. This should help to raise the value of the Housing Solutions

® For example, Bridgend Floating Support Service run by Gwalia: https://www.gwalia.wales/supporting-people
role within councils, so that staff can be recruited and paid at a level that reflects their responsibilities.

Finally, we note that there has still been no binding case law to clarify implementation of the Act in key areas such as reasonable steps. We recommend that Welsh Government explores further ways of securing continuous improvement in adherence to the Act and the Code of Guidance: this might include, for example, establishing a homelessness regulator body; establishing better information-sharing on the outcomes of legal reviews; or bringing key parts of the Code of Guidance within secondary legislation.

The task of reconfiguring homelessness services to focus on prevention was never going to be accomplished overnight. Having begun this journey in Wales, we need to see it through to completion. Despite some excellent work taking place, there is a danger that without more support and direction, councils may end up falling into a pattern of generic and minimal reasonable steps for all but the most vulnerable people. The recommendations in our report are aimed at raising standards across the board and assisting Housing Solutions staff to prevent homelessness in the most effective way.

Our recommendations

1. Local authority Supporting People commissioners should prioritise the commissioning of services that are aligned with the prevention and relief of homelessness. This should include expanding availability of short-term, flexible tenancy support. These support services need to be designed with full involvement of local Housing Solutions, and be provided both to people at risk of homelessness and people already homeless.

2. Local authority Housing Solutions teams should continue to develop the range of reasonable steps they offer, avoiding generic PRS access for all but the least vulnerable people. Interventions such as money advice and mediation services need to be offered more often.

3. Local authority Housing Solutions teams should continue to develop a case management approach to homelessness prevention: communicating with other providers and with the service user to ensure that all reasonable steps are centrally coordinated and monitored, including those provided by other agencies.

4. Welsh Government should find ways of boosting resources to Housing Solutions following the end of transitional funding in 2018/19.

5. Welsh Government should explore further ways of securing continuous improvement in adherence to the Act and the Code of Guidance: this might include for example
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establishing a homelessness regulator body; establishing better information-sharing on the outcomes of legal reviews; or bringing key parts of the Code of Guidance within secondary legislation.

6. Welsh Government should provide more detailed guidance on how to use Personal Housing Plans as a tool for collaboration with service users.

7. Welsh Government should coordinate the development of an accredited training package for Housing Solutions staff. This could potentially build on the Housing Options Toolkit currently in development by the Scottish Government. As a long term goal the Welsh Government should consider creating a minimum training requirement for Housing Solutions staff.

8. In the meantime, local authorities should prioritise staff training, particularly in the Code of Guidance and the person-centred approach.

9. Local authorities should review pay levels for Housing Solutions staff to ensure they accurately reflect the role’s new responsibilities.

10. Housing Solutions teams that use PRS lists should ensure that lists are regularly updated.

11. Housing Solutions should continue to implement the Equal Ground Standard – assessing services and creating an action plan to record and guide progress.
Appendix: Methodology

We interviewed 50 people using homelessness services in six local authorities, representing a spread of urban/rural and geographic distribution.

We employed three recruitment methods:

1. Direct recruitment in frontline housing offices
   
   A total of 28 research participants were recruited in frontline Housing Solutions offices between 16th May and 8th June. After the initial contact, interviews were carried out between 6 weeks and 11 weeks later. Interviews were carried out face to face, by phone or email according to participants’ preferences.

2. Direct recruitment in hostels
   
   A total of nine research participants were recruited in hostels in Cardiff and RCT. Participants were approached by the hostels to gauge interest and then further vetted on the interview day for suitability by the interviewer. The face to face interviews were conducted in Cardiff on the 4th August and on the 18th in RCT.

3. Numbers supplied by local authorities
   
   Flintshire, Vale of Glamorgan and Cardiff supplied contact details that resulted in a further 13 interviews carried out between 1st August and 16th August. Interviews were carried out face to face or by phone according to participants’ preferences.

Table 3: Sample breakdown by local authority

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local authority</th>
<th>Numbers interviewed</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LA1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA4</td>
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<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>50</strong></td>
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</table>

All participants who were interviewed were also asked to complete a short questionnaire which provided a measured score of between 1 and 5 (1 = totally disagree and 5 = totally agree) against a list of statements about the service they received. In total 49 participants completed the questionnaire.
Table 4: Sample demographics

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