



Shelter
Cymru



Acknowledgements

The **Take Notice** Project would like to thank everyone who has been involved in the creation of this document. Thanks to the researchers and authors: Richard Evans (Researcher), Dr Jacqueline Aneen Campbell (Senior Research Officer), Jennie Bibbings (Campaigns Manager), Carey Hill (**Take Notice** Project Co-ordinator), Manuela Behnke (**Take Notice** Project Worker).

Thanks also to all the interviewees whose insights and feedback helped to shape this guide. Thank you to the design team at i-labeling and many thanks to the **Take Notice** Project members; the project and this guide would not be possible without them.

Welsh Housing Aid Ltd (trading as Shelter Cymru)
Registered charity number: 515902
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What is Take Notice and why are we different

Take Notice

In 2014 Shelter Cymru secured funding from the Big Lottery Fund to develop a new kind of participation project. Innovative, inclusive and ambitious, the project was based on a simple but central insight – that people with lived experience of homelessness have a perspective no-one else can offer and can make a unique contribution to improving the quality of homelessness services.

The plan was to recruit a team, based in north and in south Wales, who would then build a network of people who had experience of homelessness and were interested in service user involvement. The group grew in number, came together as a team, and shared their personal experiences of homelessness so that professionals and the general public could learn from them.

And this is what makes **Take Notice** that little bit different. The aim of our project was not to give feedback on Shelter Cymru's services – although we have done a bit of this along the way – but to offer our services as an independent service user voice for local authorities and other organisations across Wales. We've also taken our message out to the general public, challenging misperceptions about homelessness.

We are proud to say we are different because:

- We are a Wales-wide project: our project members live in all four corners of Wales
- We are open to anyone who has experienced homelessness: not just for people who have used Shelter Cymru's own services
- We provide feedback to statutory homelessness service providers: no other project in Wales is doing this

Along the way, we also spread the word by speaking at a range of events nationally, running workshops and training, delivering talks to community groups, talking to young people in schools and colleges in partnership with Shelter Cymru's Education Service, producing films and digital stories, talking to the media, and taking our voices to the corridors of power. Visits to the Welsh Assembly and the House of Commons have been among our biggest achievements and most memorable experiences for us.

The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 puts an emphasis on increased service user participation, using a holistic or whole-person approach, moving away from the less responsive, more top-down approach of the past. We think this a positive thing and Shelter Cymru is keen to help move things forward.

Councils and individuals must develop new ways of working together and this was exactly what we were trying to do with this exciting new project.

It has been an eventful three years and everyone involved has been on a learning curve. It's been a constructive and valuable experience. Everyone who took part – Shelter Cymru staff, all the project members, and the stakeholders in local authorities and other agencies we worked with – learned an enormous amount. We hope this guide captures some of what we all learned, and we hope it will influence and inspire others.

We called the project Take Notice – and people did.

“The Take Notice Project is more than just a bit of voluntary work, it has shaped the view I have of myself. Where once I felt useless and unable, now, through training and opportunities I realise that, despite my disabilities, I can do many things and not just do them, but do them well; it's a bit of a cliché but I feel a bit like a caterpillar that turns into a butterfly. The Take Notice Project has given me wings and now it's down to me to decide what to do with them.”

Katey, Take Notice member



What is service user involvement

What is service user involvement

You might hear several different terms being used – involvement, participation, engagement – they are all largely the same thing. It happens when an organisation involves its users in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of the services it provides. Because of their direct experience, service users know better than anyone what works well, what doesn't and what can be done to improve the services they have used.

In practice involvement means:

- Recognising that people who have used homelessness services have the right and are best placed to have their opinions heard
- Creating opportunities so that these opinions can be heard by the people who plan and deliver those services
- Acting on what has been said
- Feeding back to people on the impact and outcomes that their feedback has had

Why involve service users?

For the individual, involvement and participation can:

- Be a chance to have their voice heard
- Increase skills, knowledge and confidence while making use of existing skills and experiences
- Provide new experiences and opportunities
- Challenge negative stereotypes
- Redress the balance of power so people can work as equals with service providers
- Provide a chance to act as ambassadors for an organisation and as role models for other service users
- Provide a chance to be part of the bigger picture and to influence change

How organisations benefit

For an organisation, involving service users can:

- Help to highlight what is good about a service and what needs to be improved
- Produce better outcomes in practice and in policy
- Provide a unique insight and alternative perspective
- Create an authentic service which reflects the needs of the people who use it
- Demonstrate a commitment to equality and joint working
- Break down organisational hierarchy
- Provide positive PR opportunities
- Make an organisation more competitive for tendering and funding

“It's about the viewpoint of the people who actually use the services and how powerful that can be. Get involved, get heard, and share what you've learned.”

Craig, Take Notice member



Craig's story - get involved, get heard...

GET INVOLVED, GET HEARD...

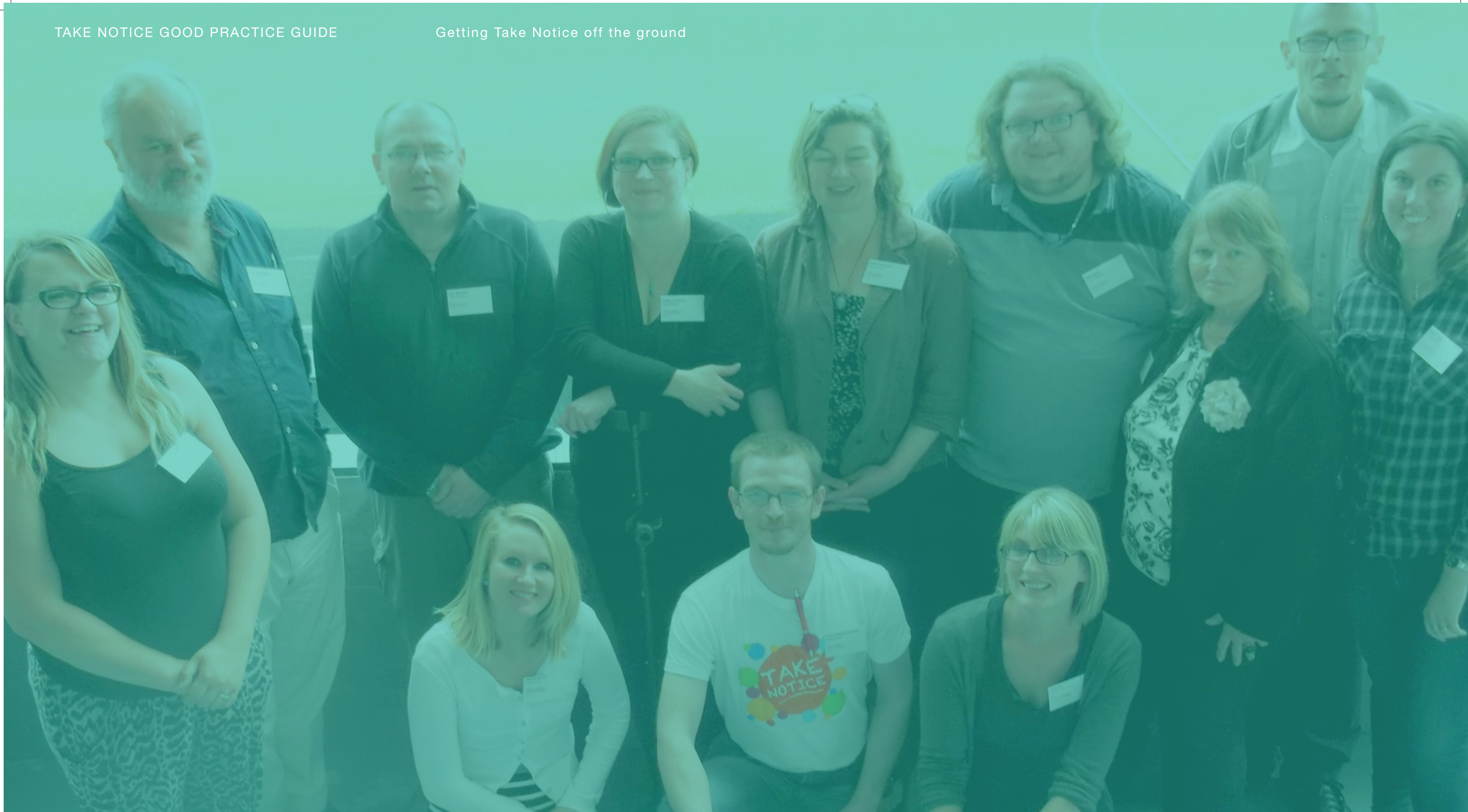
“When I got into recovery, I started getting interested in service involvement, so I went to a few Welsh Government meetings, some planning boards, things like that. A friend of mine had tried to develop some sort of group voice a couple of times before, but nothing had really taken off. How do you go from being a service user to someone who also contributes to the way those services are delivered? We just saw a gap, basically. Service users weren't being represented at these planning meetings in any way. So we formed SSURF. So that was a great learning experience even before I joined Take Notice, a trial by fire at times but I think that's the best way to learn.

Carey Hill, Take Notice Co-ordinator, heard about the group, came along to one of our meetings, and gave a short presentation on the Take Notice project, shortly before it was set up, and was looking for people who were interested in taking part. She sold it to us, basically, and a couple of us were interested, so we got involved.

Take Notice sounded like a real project, not just a box-ticking exercise, that's why I got involved. I already knew the importance of representation, and when I thought about the housing issues I'd gone through, I realised how little my voice had been heard in the whole process of using homelessness services. As I say, I'd learned a hell of a lot through founding SSURF, and Take Notice seemed a great opportunity to take it in new directions.

At the start of Take Notice, there were lots of training opportunities, there was a lot to get your teeth into. There have been quite a few personal milestones for me over the last three years with Take Notice. Being invited by AMs to the Senedd to share our research findings and discuss our ideas about homelessness services, that was good. We ended up having a really open and frank discussion. We grilled them, but they took it on the chin, and we made some real connections. We also got invited to Parliament by a group of Welsh MPs because they were discussing social issues and housing, and they wanted to hear from us. So a group of us went along and had a really productive and enjoyable day. Again, we were able to put our views across and start a real conversation about homelessness in our society today. That was a great experience for all of us, because it showed just how amazingly effective a project like Take Notice can be. My message to anyone thinking about any of this and wondering how to relate it to their own lives would be – get involved, get heard. When you do, you'll start to find your way.

The team we've got, we're so varied, we're such a cross-section of society, but we've all been faced with homelessness, and that shared experience has built bridges between us. I know we've all grown and developed as people over the last three years, and we support each other. I've loved the time I've spent on Take Notice, I've got an awful lot from it, and I know the rest of the team have too.”



Getting Take Notice off the ground

“Our biggest challenge in getting the project up and running was to reach out to people in communities across Wales and to present them with a very positive project that would welcome and support whatever contribution they felt able to make. We had to make it meaningful and practical, so people would want to engage with what we were doing.”

Lucy Beavan, Take Notice Project Officer

Tips from the project staff

With funding secured for a three-year project, **Take Notice** staff Carey Hill, based in Swansea, and Lucy Beavan, in Wrexham, got to work taking the project to the people. Here's what they learned.

Staff your project

Thanks to the support of the Big Lottery Fund, we were lucky in **Take Notice** to have two paid members of staff. Without some designated staff resource it will be more difficult to get good results. But you don't have to have a role exclusively designated to service user involvement. It can be as little as a staff member's job description including a few hours dedicated to involving users, as long as there is **some** staff resource dedicated to it. Make sure people know who this person is and how to contact them if they want to get involved.

Get networking

Meet with as many groups, projects, panels and forums as you can find that are working towards the common aim of user involvement and empowerment. Groups we engaged with cover a wide range of services – housing and homelessness, mental health, substance misuse and domestic violence and many more. Get in touch with as many of these groups and forums as you can, promote and market your project to them.

Cast your net wide

Project Co-ordinator Carey Hill explains: "A key to our early success was how wide we were prepared to cast the net. That meant inviting ourselves to countless service users' forums and participation panels, but also reaching out to other community groups.

"If someone was running a local arts workshop, for example, I'd ask if I could come along, have a cup of tea and chat with the members. It was all done very informally, just giving people the idea of what we were doing."

Don't expect every individual from every group you visit to join up – but don't get despondent and feel you're wasting your time. The more contacts you make, the more likely you are to find the broad cross-section of people your project needs.

There's no right or wrong way to do it

We've been asked to help others set up their own service user groups, and some people told us that they felt like they had tried before but felt they must have "done it wrong". This isn't true at all. Early meetings could be poorly attended; responses to surveys and feedback can be sparse at first. Sometimes it just needs a bit of perseverance and a commitment to keep trying. Remember, it can take some time to get up and running.

Getting Take Notice off the ground

Identify training needs, but be flexible

Get to know your project members. Let them tell you what training they need. North Wales Project Officer Lucy says: "Initially we imagined that the training and development needs we'd be addressing might be around building confidence in people, team building, presentation skills.

"What we found was that most of the team were already confident and articulate people, quite happy to talk about their experiences, both within the group and to a wider audience.

"So we asked them to tell us what kind of training they felt would be most useful for them. They were very interested in knowing more about homelessness policy and law. They wanted to know about the new Housing Act, for example, how that legislation and its Code of Guidance could be implemented. "We were happy to support them in that direction and provided free training courses in these areas.

"As they learned more, the team became increasingly interested in influencing policy and planning at local and national levels. This led to team members taking their views directly to policy makers, even being invited to the House of Commons by MPs keen to discuss homelessness issues with them."

Take Notice has been responsive to its members' interests and concerns. A successful participation project will stay flexible, creating the supportive space for people to develop and grow.

Start small

Engage people in a way that is comfortable and manageable to begin with. Don't take on too much too quickly. If opportunities arise to grow the project, make sure both you and the team are ready and willing to take on new challenges. Aim to develop the project organically, letting the team build confidence in themselves and in each other.

Make sure people know they can always say no

We felt very strongly that in **Take Notice**, nobody should feel under pressure or uncomfortable. "If someone had agreed to take something on but subsequently felt they could not do it, they knew they could just opt out and we would take care of it," says Project Co-ordinator Carey Hill.

"We were all very clear about this option to say no as it was very important to build trust. We'd say 'even if you're about to go on stage to speak, even if you're halfway through a talk, and you suddenly feel I can't do this, it's not a problem, it's our job to step in and take that away from you.' That opt-out must always be there."

Timing is important

Not every service user is able or willing to get involved. Some people may need extra encouragement and support right at the start, while others may be willing to give it a go and then decide it isn't for them. Be honest with people about what you expect from them and reassure them that it's fine to drop out if they feel it's not right for them. Let them know they are welcome to return later if they want to.

“

I wouldn't have got involved if I'd sensed that this was a meaningless, box-ticking exercise. I already knew how important service user involvement is, I'd used homelessness services myself and I understood that representation is vital. But I didn't yet know how loud my voice could be. Take Notice sounded like a way to find out, so I joined the team.”

Craig, Take Notice member

Carey Hill, Take Notice Project Coordinator talks about building confidence and trust:

“ We wanted to start in a gentle way and not ask the new project members to feel under pressure to do too much in the early stages. This wasn't because they lacked confidence or enthusiasm, quite the opposite, it was because we wanted to get to know them and find out from each person what they wanted to get out of the project.

We started off by saying: just tell us your personal stories, we're not asking you to be experts on anything else.

Over time, project members were able to speak to bigger audiences and more senior people: to policy makers, Assembly Members, Members of Parliament. They really started to get their voices heard.

In the early stages we hadn't consciously thought about creating these kinds of opportunities. But when these chances to speak to very high level decision-makers arose, the group seized the opportunities with both hands. We were delighted to be able to support them in that drive to influence policy around homelessness.

What we've learned is that you can build on people's accumulating confidence by presenting them with bigger opportunities over time and by supporting them to meet those challenges, to the point where nothing is going to faze them. We've seen every individual grow in confidence and I honestly believe they are at a point now where they could sit and discuss homelessness constructively with the Prime Minister. We just think they're fantastic. They are the real value of this project.”

Getting Take Notice off the ground



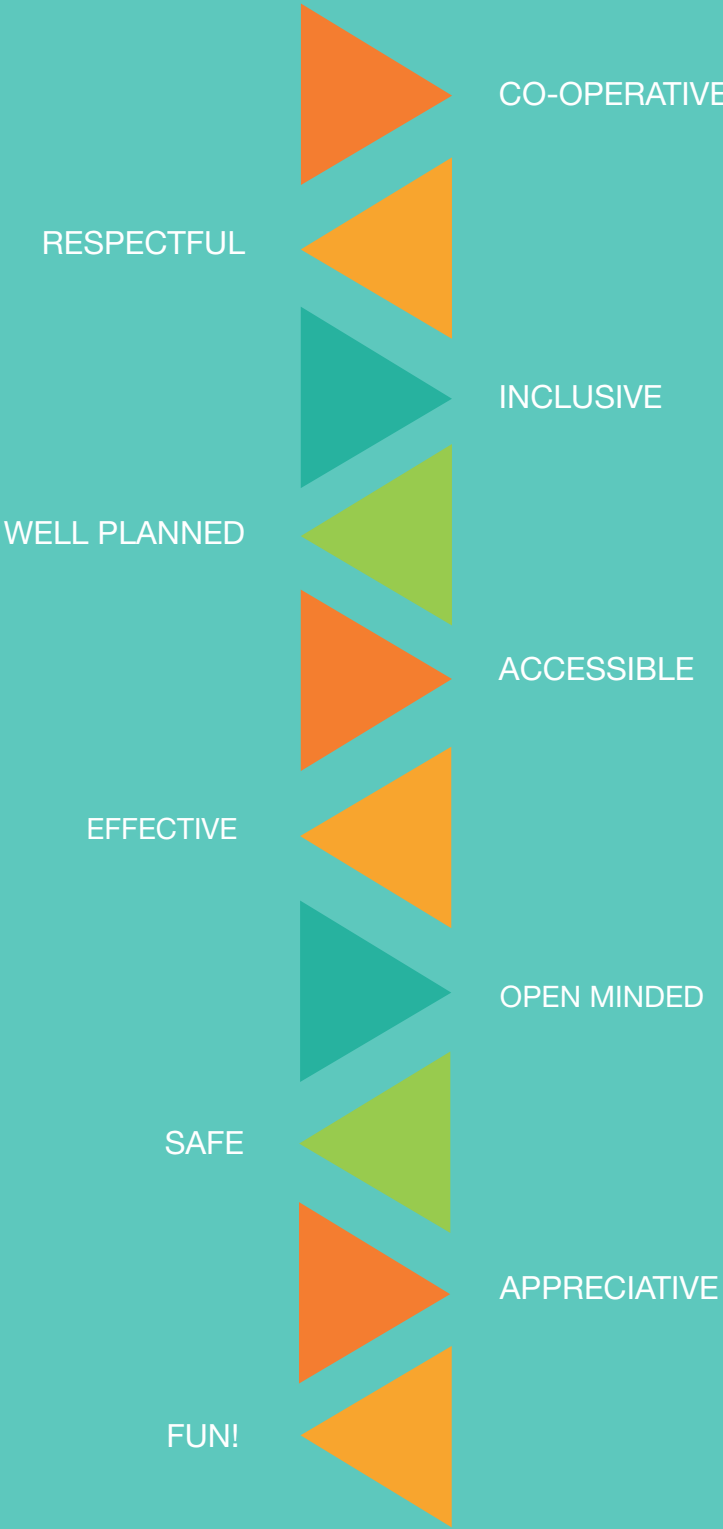
“ The Take Notice project came into being at such an important time, when new homelessness laws were fundamentally changing the way that people are helped in Wales. The project was able to influence these changes for the better, and this is going to have a lasting positive impact for years to come.”

Jennie Bibbings, Campaigns Manager, Shelter Cymru



What does it look like when it's right

With the right planning and resources, a service user involvement project can be extremely rewarding for all involved and an effective way to bring about organisational change. We think service user involvement should be:





Richard's story

IN HIS OWN WORDS...

Take Notice member Richard tells us what he has learned

“Everyone who has experience of homelessness will have a different story to tell, but they will all have certain themes in common. Our team includes people from all walks of life, many parts of the country, all ages, with all sorts of different life experiences. But what unites us is that we have all faced a housing crisis, we've been through that particular nightmare, and we have engaged with the system. For me, as for others, I found using homelessness services quite adversarial, not in terms of how I was treated personally, but the whole experience - the buildings, the settings, the difficulty of trying to explain quite complex circumstances, that constant sense of vulnerability. I'm far from the only one to have felt this way on becoming homeless. Other people have felt the same, however they personally arrived at their crisis. Recognising that we are all human and deserve respect and good treatment, regardless of our differences, is perhaps the essential point we've tried to emphasise.

Training can be very enabling. Training has been a huge, empowering element in Take Notice from the beginning. Through the project I've spoken about homelessness to large groups of people, I've contributed to radio and TV discussions of the subject, and it's been a part of how we've tried to influence things, contribute our insights, and maybe challenge some stereotypes or preconceptions. Speaking in a public way can expose one's vulnerabilities. It's a situation you're not entirely in control of. For me, that huge element of training, the preparation we've all done as a team, that's what made such a big difference. As well as being knowledgeable and up-to-date on the legislative and policy frameworks of homelessness, we've also done quite a bit of media training, presentation skills, that sort of thing. So lots of training, directed by both team members and the project staff, can go such a long way to enabling and empowering people to take our message out there to the public.

In organisations, like local authorities, the feedback available to officials is rarely obtained directly from the clients, and very rarely in any depth. By offering a proper analysis and report with recommendations, Take Notice has been able to reach the people who actually make the policy decisions. The way we've worked has meant that, in a sense, the people at the bottom end of the system could reach the people at the very top. And that is very rewarding, very enjoyable. There's a sense that you can have influence, see that your ideas are being absorbed. We need to move away from the notion of the deserving and the undeserving poor, and the rationing of services, toward seeing that everyone is worthy of help.

We're aware we can't influence structural changes like the number of houses being built, where they're built, how housing is allocated. What we can influence is the way the services that do exist can be improved from the point of view of any ordinary citizen. We can convey to the people who work in the field the subjective element of what it's like to be at that point of vulnerability.

My only fear is that we become a little too institutionalised, a bit close to the professional side of things and lose the independent edge.”

Working in partnership

One of our main aims with **Take Notice** was to work in partnership with local authority homelessness teams across Wales to provide feedback on the service they provide, based on our members' experiences of having "been there, done that".

Some of us had fantastic help and support from the council at the time that we were homeless and others had very poor experiences. We wanted the councils to hear about this range of experiences so that they could learn what they are already doing well, and what needs to be improved for the benefit of current and future users.

In the first year of **Take Notice** it was all about building relationships. We knew it would be a challenge to build good relationships with local authorities, and so we began by just introducing ourselves and offering our services.

By meeting with senior Housing Managers to speak about our personal homelessness journeys, we could highlight the need for changes within services and encourage councils to develop a person-centred approach, both in processes and staff attitudes. These early meetings were extremely positive. Even in the early days we managed to foster strong working relationships with our local authority partners.

We offered the councils a menu of evaluation or mystery shopping opportunities. These initial discussions led to more concrete plans. Over the last three years we have worked with **seven** local authorities on **ten** different tasks. We've reviewed websites, customer letters, Personal Housing Plans, delivered information sessions and workshops to local authority staff and managers, conducted peer research with current users of homelessness services, and completed face-to-face and telephone mystery shops.

All the local authorities we have worked with said that their interest in engaging with **Take Notice** developed from a sense that here was a real opportunity to develop service user participation in new and significant ways. From the start, they were keen to develop better ways of making use of people's expertise and experiences.

Making a difference

What the councils say

There was a sense that people who have used homelessness services in the past can be a difficult group to engage with.

Here, some of the councils we have worked with tell us about why they got involved with the project, and how it has benefitted them.

Simon Rose of Newport City Council explained:

"People who have had a housing crisis in the past often would rather not be reminded of the experience, quite understandably they often want to move on from that very difficult and distressing time, to get on with their lives.

"Take Notice offered us the opportunity to engage with people who had experienced homelessness services. This team was very well attuned and knowledgeable in how it actually felt to go through the system. And they would bring their ideas on how things could be changed for the better. That's something as professionals we often miss. So, that's what drew me towards the project."

The value of tapping into the unique perspective of people with lived experience of homelessness was a key factor for engaging with **Take Notice**, as Sue Cousins, Principal Housing Officer at Caerphilly County Borough Council notes:

"You can't put yourself in that position, not unless you have personally been through it. To get that perspective, it has to be someone who has been through it, knows all too well the stresses and the anxieties, the difficulties of finding the information you need and doing what's expected of you when in the middle of a housing crisis.

"You can never fully put yourself in the position of someone in this situation. There's no other way of getting that insight and perspective other than service user participation."

Working together

Communication is the key factor in creating a good, responsive homelessness service. Contact between the individual and the council can be by phone, in person, by letter or email, or via online web resources. These ways of communicating with people in housing crisis can either be done well, when they foster a reassuring and co-operative relationship, or less well, leading to confusion, anxiety and disengagement.

The homelessness teams **Take Notice** worked with were keen to get the project's views on various aspects of their communications. The team analysed and commented on a wide variety of these.

“Take Notice has shown that service user involvement can be a vital resource for local authority homelessness teams. It can help keep you on the right track, give you the means to change direction if you are going wrong. I've thought of Take Notice as a critical friend whose opinion I value.”

Simon Rose, Housing Needs Manager, Newport City Council.

Sue Cousins of Caerphilly County Borough Council told us:

“We were concerned that our webpages for homeless people weren’t as good as they could be. I arranged with Take Notice that they take a look at our web resource, try it out for themselves, then come back to us with a report, making recommendations.

“The feedback from the team was extremely useful. I’d initially thought their report would be of use in demonstrating our need to vastly improve in this area, but I was pleasantly surprised. The report contained a lot of positive feedback and it was useful to see where we were getting things right.

“There were recommendations for improvement that we took on board completely. They rang true – people expect a lot more interactivity on the web these days, and ours wasn’t very interactive. So, that was area where we could work with our IT colleagues to improve the service.”

Take Notice worked on other local authority web resources, including Newport City Council where recommendations made by the team were taken on not just by the council but also by the IT providers who designed the council’s web portal, changing their product to improve the experience of users elsewhere.

Facing barriers, overcoming challenges

Not every recommendation we made could be taken up in full. But councils often found ways of working towards collaborative solutions.

In Neath Port Talbot, we were given feedback from current users who told us that improvements needed to be made to the physical environment. Some of our recommendations were too expensive to achieve. However, using our report as a guide, the council was able to make some changes within the office to enhance privacy and make the environment more reassuring.

For Newport City Council, the team looked at letters drafted to explain new housing legislation to clients.

Simon Rose says: “I was concerned that they were too legalistic, not very user-friendly. The feedback was very useful with lots of good ideas which led to changes in wording and how we set things out. Some ideas we didn’t take forward, because there’s a balance to be struck between being user-friendly on the one hand and on the other the legal necessities of the way notices have to be presented. It’s difficult because it’s not fully in our control. But on the whole we were able to incorporate the main thrust of what the Take Notice team brought to us, so it’s been a collaborative process in getting that balance right.”

Looking to the future

There was a real enthusiasm for taking our involvement further in the future across all the local authorities we have worked with. There was a clear sense that **Take Notice** added value to their services, and that engagement of this sort will become increasingly important to help address challenges to come.

Gareth Evans of Neath Port Talbot Council said: “There’s a lot of discussion now about moving service user involvement beyond consultation to co-production. My feeling is that if everything you do as a service is co-designed, co-produced and co-delivered by all stakeholders – including current and former users of the service – you will avoid tokenism altogether. **Take Notice** has made us think of how we explore co-production together, which would put individuals at the heart of planning on a permanent, on-going basis.”

Simon Rose of Newport City Council said:

“As financial pressures increase, we have to be more creative in finding ways to deliver services, to think outside the box and make the most of the resources we’ve got. That’s why a project like **Take Notice** is so valuable, and will be even more so as time goes on. It helps us become more person-centred, to avoid the tendency to put people into pre-designated boxes and categories. If you want to develop a person-centred approach, the only real way is to ask people what they think, and to respond to what they’ve told you. There’s no operational cost to us but what it brings us is extremely valuable.”

Learning points

All of the work that we’ve undertaken with local authorities has one primary purpose: to help improve the services on offer for current and future users.

Here are a few of the main points for improving customer service that the project has shared and promoted:

- Communication should be short and to the point
- Keep the layout of documents, letters, websites simple and easy to follow
- Use simple language which is easy to understand
- Be sensitive to individual support or communication needs
- Don’t use jargon, acronyms and legal expressions
- Highlight, underline or bullet point documents so that they are easily digestible
- Make sure you make any decisions about a person clear
- Answer the question, “what happens next”, or “what should I do next?”
- Make your contact information easily available
- Have a checklist of action points for both the user and the service provider
- Signpost to other organisations that might be able to help

“The feedback we've had from professionals and the way our views have been welcomed has shown they understand and appreciate the work we're doing.”

Pete, Take Notice member

We influenced decision makers and other organisations...

We have spoken at conferences and seminars, and delivered interactive workshops for housing professionals across Wales. We shared our personal experiences of homelessness, challenged myths and stereotypes, described the causes and impact of our own homelessness and shared our experiences, positive and negative.

We have visited the Senedd and the House of Commons to speak to AMs and MPs to help inform our leaders of the real impact of homelessness.

In total, we've done this to an audience of **742** people.

“It's clear that the project has worked to influence services across Wales by ensuring that the voice of people who have used services is heard. It has certainly influenced delegates at our events who have said that they will think differently as a result of Take Notice speakers.”

Oliver Townsend, Policy Manager, Cymorth Cymru

“It's been very rewarding to be able to take our point of view to other people, it's made me more confident in stepping forward to make a contribution. And that's what it's all about really – realising that your own experience can be the springboard for positive change.”

Pete, Take Notice member

We supported Shelter Cymru as an organisation...

In much the same way as we worked with local authorities, the project has also looked at aspects of Shelter Cymru's own services.

We gave feedback on the website advice pages, the Housing Help app, the Housemate educational training pack, and standard client letters. We undertook mystery shops of the Swansea and Rhyl offices. We also helped to deliver some courses on the Shelter Cymru public training programme.

We worked with young people...

Working with Shelter Cymru's Education Service, we have travelled around Wales to give talks in schools, colleges and youth groups, aimed at reducing the risk of homelessness among young people.

“I felt the day we went to Pwllheli School was inspiring - we were reaching out to the next generation. It was great to know that the young people took on board what we had to say to them. It was hard to tell my story but even though I was dragging up the past it felt nice to be able to speak to people about it, so it doesn't happen to them too.”

Darren, Take Notice member

And we did other stuff too

“For me the success of the project is down to the dedicated work of project staff to recruit people who were willing to engage and get involved. With the support of staff the project members have formed a strong team supporting each other in the work they do. They created great working relationships with local authority homelessness teams and other organisations, produced fantastic materials to fight stigma around homelessness and have impressed their audiences at school talks, events and conferences by telling their stories and showing the great benefits of service user involvement and joint working.”

Manuela Behnke, Take Notice Project Officer



We influenced the general public...

We have done a lot of media work to change public perceptions and stereotypes, and improve the public's understanding of why people become homeless. This has included radio, television and web-based interviews. In May 2016 we made a short film which has been shown at film festivals and events across Wales and is available online. It was viewed over **1,000** times in the first month.

We believe that hearing from people who have been through housing crisis can help to break down barriers and help the wider community to understand that it can happen to anyone. We hope we have helped to build more resilient and inclusive communities in Wales.

Members have taken their stories into communities in Wales to a total of **1,513** people.

We increased our skills, knowledge and confidence...

Over the last three years we undertook the following courses. It is a mixture of building softer skills together with developing an understanding of housing law in Wales, all of which equipped us to deliver the project:

- Housing and the Law
- Understanding the Housing (Wales) Act
- Working with the Media
- Discrimination Awareness
- Drugs, Housing and Homelessness
- Third Sector and Service User Involvement
- Preventing Homelessness amongst Prison Leavers
- "Getting your Message Across"
- Young People and Homelessness
- Housing and the Law in the Social Housing Sector
- Welfare Benefits
- Preventing Homelessness
- Press and Media training
- Christmas Debt
- Team Building and Resilience Training
- Train the Trainer

WHY I JOINED THE TAKE NOTICE TEAM, PETE'S STORY



I never expected to be on the verge of becoming homeless or ever having to use the council's housing services but it can happen to anyone. I'd served in the Armed Forces and after leaving the military I got really ill, I couldn't work, I couldn't cope. I was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. My life fell to bits. I couldn't pay my rent and whilst my landlord was very good and tried to assist me, he needed his rent. And suddenly I was faced with being homeless. It was soul-destroying, I just couldn't see light at the end of the tunnel. It's an experience that can devastate you.

When I first approached Flintshire Council's homelessness team, many years ago now, the standard of help I got from them was excellent and I just was so grateful to them. Of course, I just presumed that everybody faced with homelessness would get the kind of support I'd got.

Much later, as I got involved with Take Notice I came to realise that the help I'd got wasn't just excellent, it was actually exceptional. A lot of homeless people weren't getting anything like the support I'd had from my local homelessness service. It was an eye-opener for me, to see that a lot of people don't get the help they deserve.

Thinking about my own experience, I began to wonder why it was possible for one person to have such a good experience, with the council actively helping you back into a home, while others had such bad experiences. It seemed logical to me that the good practice should be shared and passed on to everyone, to raise the level all across Wales.

So that became part of my motivation in joining Take Notice. And it's been an incredibly engrossing and learning experience. My own confidence in talking about issues around homelessness has grown and grown. We focused on getting ourselves educated and informed about the big picture on housing issues, so we can speak with some authority to professionals and policy-makers. I'm also able to share my knowledge with people who are currently facing homelessness and hopefully help them get the best of the services on offer.”



Lots of training, directed by both team members and the project staff, can go such a long way to enabling and empowering people to take our message out there to the public.”

Richard, Take Notice member



Dan's story

DAN'S STORY

“ I was homeless, it was February, and I needed a place to stay. I had friends who were kind enough to let me stay. But there's only so long you can stay at friends' places. I was lucky, I didn't end up on the streets, but I was homeless.

I was very interested in volunteering so I worked on an education project with Shelter Cymru, devising and delivering a lesson plan on youth homelessness, taking it to schools, college, youth groups.

From there I became involved with Take Notice. My first impressions of the project were very different compared to what it's actually become. I thought of it as more a service user board, to shape the organisation in small ways. However, as it goes, Take Notice was in many ways much bigger than that.

The journey of it all was hard for me to begin with, partly because of my mental health problems, partly because of my speech impediment. But I liked the meetings and I discovered very quickly what Take Notice could achieve.

It got easier the more meetings I attended. I found that the other members were people who were much like me – we had all faced difficulties in our lives, each of us with our different experiences of homelessness and health problems. So any initial barriers no longer existed as a deep sort of friendship started to happen among the team.

We did evaluations of councils and their services, we organised workshops, made films promoting awareness of homelessness and we have really become a national sort of project in a small but meaningful way.

As for me, I have accumulated many new skills and improved on many more. I have grown confident in meetings and in meeting new people. I've developed skills in organizing events, planning ahead, and I'm happy speaking to audiences of hundreds of people, which are all immensely valuable skills to have.

I have learned much about housing policy and law, and I have learned how welfare reforms can affect the most vulnerable people in our society. I've developed skills that help me pass on knowledge to young people in the classroom and I've have learned how to represent the project to the media.

But most importantly to me, I have learned to open myself to different perspectives and ideas. I have learned that though ideas, and ideals, and people can be very different, that we can all learn from each other and progress to make amazing things happen. I may have learned a lot in the last few years, but there is still much more that I don't know, and there is even more for Take Notice to do moving forward. As the political and social words collide and change, we too need to change and adapt to what is happening in the country and there will always be a role for a project like this.”

The Winner / Enillydd :

Take Notice Project

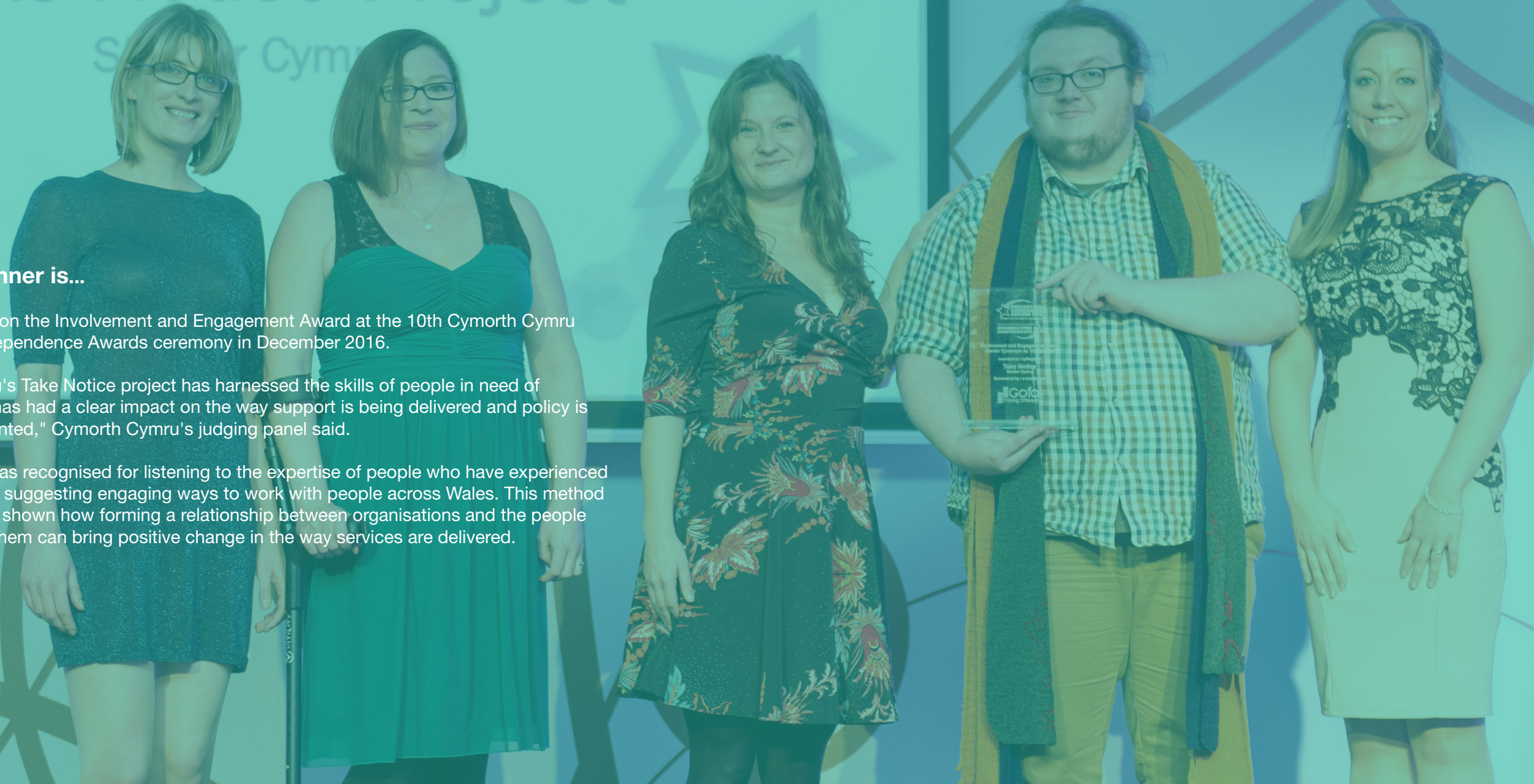
Shelter Cymru

And the winner is...

Take Notice won the Involvement and Engagement Award at the 10th Cymorth Cymru Promoting Independence Awards ceremony in December 2016.

"Shelter Cymru's Take Notice project has harnessed the skills of people in need of support...and has had a clear impact on the way support is being delivered and policy is being implemented," Cymorth Cymru's judging panel said.

Take Notice was recognised for listening to the expertise of people who have experienced homelessness, suggesting engaging ways to work with people across Wales. This method of working has shown how forming a relationship between organisations and the people supported by them can bring positive change in the way services are delivered.



And the winner is...

“While we don't do the work we do for awards, it's always heartwarming to know that the work we have done has been recognised and made a difference. I hope we can use the winning of this award to further our work”

Dan, Take Notice member

Staff and project members have learned a lot along the way. Here are some practical tips to help any service user involvement project run smoothly.

The right welcome

Put together a welcome pack for new people. This can include anything you think is relevant, such as background information for your organisation, a project summary and description, or individual questionnaires to find out what specific interests a person might have.

Offer individual inductions. New people may not feel comfortable joining an existing group where it seems like everyone already knows each other. They also might not want to jump straight into a formal meeting. Offer an informal, one-to-one meeting with new people. This will help them settle in and ask any questions in advance.

Staying in touch

Make sure the communication methods you use suit people. Some will happily chat on the phone, others might prefer a text or email. Ask people about their preferences at the start and check that this is still how they want to communicate as time goes on.

Communicate with your participants regularly, not just when you are asking them to do something. Create ways for the group to communicate with each other – you could set up a Facebook group so members can chat informally in their own time.

Always report back to the people involved in your project. Tell them how their feedback has been used and thank people for their time and efforts.

Make it easy for everyone

If you are holding group meetings make sure you think about the accessibility of the venue for everyone who will be attending. This doesn't just mean whether the building you use has wheelchair access or a lift. You might need to think about whether people can get there easily by public transport, and whether it is a safe, well-lit area which people will feel comfortable getting to.

Reimburse any expenses such as travel. Ideally this should be done in advance so that people don't have to spend their own money to participate, but if this isn't practical make sure it is done in cash and on the day. Don't leave service users out of pocket as a result of participating.

Send out the details for any event or meeting in plenty of time. Include any information that people may need, including an agenda, directions and map. For bigger or more formal events you might need to provide information about dress codes or dietary requirements. This will help people know what to expect on the day.

What we have learned

Although our project did not do this regularly, you may decide to offer incentives or payments to people for their participation. Make sure you have a clear and consistent policy on how these payments will be made. Signpost people when appropriate to information to help them understand how any payments might affect their benefits.

Getting the timing right

Give people time. You do not want participants to feel rushed in your group meeting. What may only take an hour in a staff meeting might take twice as long if you want to make sure you are giving everyone enough time to contribute and enough time for them to take breaks when they need to.

Make sure you take into account people's availability and existing commitments. Vary the times and days of your meetings and events so that people who work or have family commitments can still be involved. Try and find ways to involve people even if they can't attend meetings: for example, can they write a piece for a newsletter, or take part in questionnaires or surveys at home?

Stay focused

Set clear targets for what you want to achieve and when, so you all know what you are collectively working towards. Do this regularly, not just at the start of the project. Involve project members in the monitoring and evaluation of the project. Ask them what they think is going well and what needs to be improved.

Keep track of what you are doing. Good monitoring should help you not only record what your project has achieved, making any reporting you need to do easier when the time comes, but can also highlight any areas that haven't progressed so well so you can address these.

Are you looking after people properly?

It is important to regularly review how participants are feeling and what further support they may need. Because our project relies on the members' willingness to share difficult and traumatic experiences from their past we realised that we needed to make sure we were looking after our members' emotional well-being each time they shared their story.

Without meaning to, you can take it a bit for granted that everyone in the team has become so used to sharing personal experiences that it's become 'no big deal'. The key is to make sure that people's emotional welfare is always a priority. We do this by asking these questions after each talk or event. Think of it as an emotional debrief.

- How are you feeling?
- Is there anything you need from me right now?
- How do you think the audience responded?
- Do you think it went well?
- Would you do this kind of thing again?
- Would you do anything differently next time?
- What are you doing later on to relax and unwind?

What to avoid

We have already looked at some of the benefits of increased service user involvement. But are there potential problems with participation? If there are, how can they be overcome? These are a few pointers based on the experiences of the **Take Notice** team:

Ask yourself - “Are people in the right position to participate? Do they have the information they need to make an informed choice?”

Listen - if people scrutinise and eventually criticise an aspect of a service, don’t jump in straight away with explanations. Listen and take all points on board.

Avoid leading questions - consultation exercises should be as neutral as possible. Respondents should not be made to feel that there is a “right” answer.

Explain - sometimes not everything can be changed and it is important for people to receive feedback about this.

Give feedback - being asked about the same issue again and again, or not hearing about the outcome of your feedback, might mean people quickly become demotivated.

Act - it might put people off participating again if nothing changes. Be genuinely prepared to make changes to the way you do things.

Diversity - ensure a variety of voices get heard. Everyone in a group should have a chance to voice their opinion.

Fear - people might feel nervous of saying what they really think, nervous in big groups, or may have had previous negative experiences of involvement. Don’t underestimate how these fears might stop someone from getting involved. Make sure you can reassure them that they are safe to contribute.

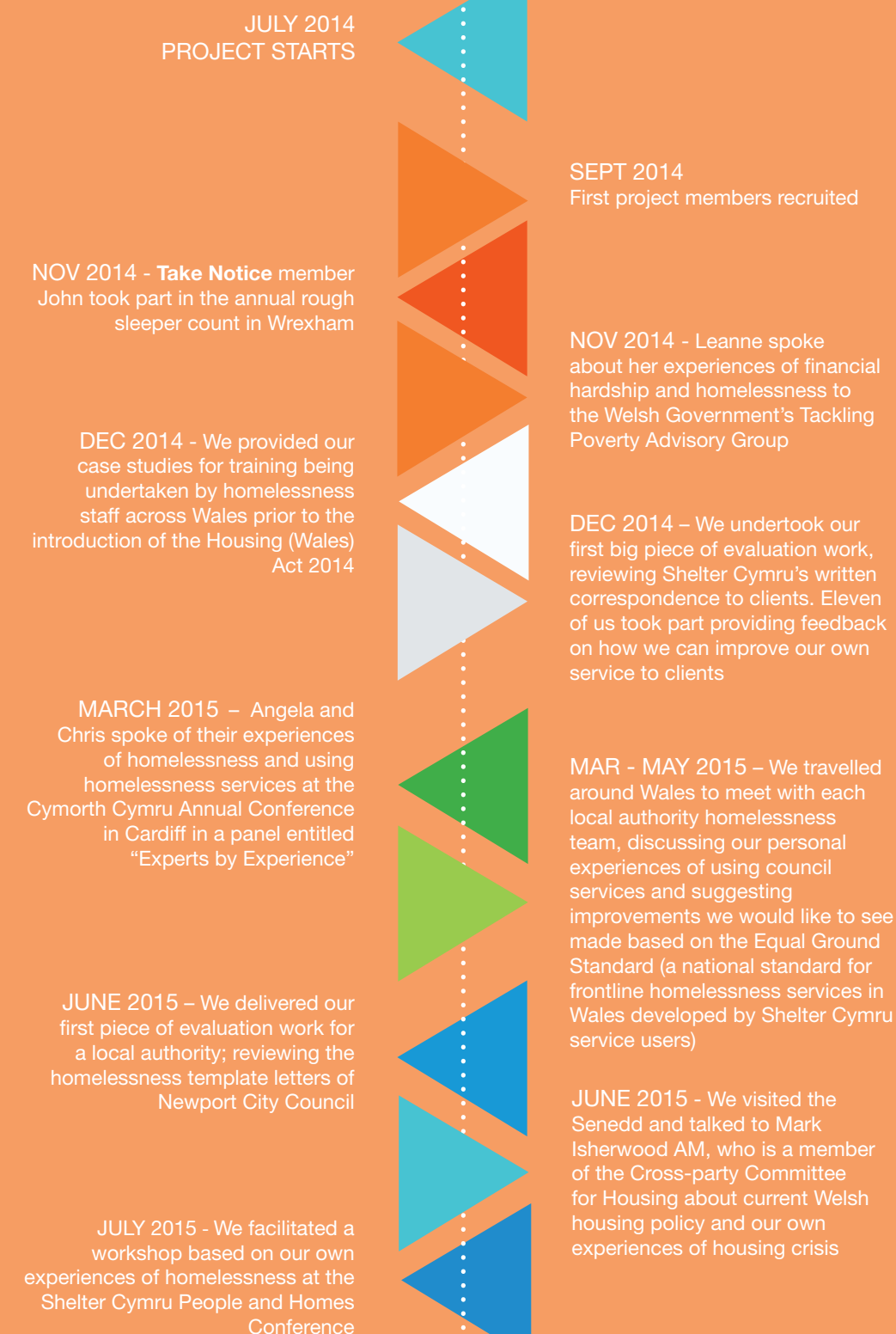
Trust - on an organisational level there may be nervousness around possible negative outcomes of participation. A relationship of trust and respect based on plenty of communication is the answer.

Accept that sometimes it is just not the right time – we asked some of the local authority homelessness teams who we haven’t worked with why this was the case and if we could have done anything differently to support them.

In some cases it just wasn’t the right time to receive feedback on their service: teams had staff shortages; were under pressure generally and did not have capacity to start working with us; teams were in the process of reviewing systems, changing staff structures or had new staff in place.

And finally...

All in all, involvement activities should be enjoyable! We’ve had a great time during this project. We’ve made friendships, tried new activities. We’ve learned new skills and had the satisfaction of seeing the impact of our work. Homelessness is such a hard thing to go through: we hope that the feedback we’ve given to local authorities will help ensure that anyone going through the process in future receives a good, compassionate service.



YR. 2 TIMELINE



SEPT 2015 – We evaluated Conwy County Council's template letters

JAN 2016 – We took part in a focus group for Crisis to help shape their new service in South Wales. Claire also took part in the interview panel for the Director of Crisis Skylight South Wales

MAR 2016 – We evaluated the new self-help tool on Newport City Council's website

MAY 2016 – We conducted a peer research task for Neath Port Talbot Council to gather feedback on the service they provide

JUNE 2016 – We all came together the second year at the Shelter Cymru People and Homes Conference to deliver a workshop with Newport and Conwy housing managers called "Are People Being Heard?"

SEPT 2015 – Claire and Pete each facilitated a workshop called "Involving Citizens in Improving Homeless Prevention Services" for the Tenant Participatory Advisory Service

OCT 2015 – We were invited to take part in the Welsh Local Government Association "Tackling Bureaucracy" advisory group to make sure that people are put at the heart of homelessness services in Wales

MAR 2016 – Four of us travelled to London to speak to Welsh MPs at the House of Commons about our personal experiences of homelessness and using Welsh homelessness services

APR 2016 – Richard and Katey delivered the project's first community talk in Llanelli

MAY 2016 – We told our stories of homelessness in a short film to challenge myths and stereotypes and travelled to Aberystwyth and Colwyn Bay for two days of filming

YR. 3 TIMELINE



AUG 2016 – We completed an evaluation of Cardiff City Council's homelessness letters

SEPT 2016 – Craig delivered a community talk in Barry

SEPT 2016 – Craig took part in a panel session about his experience of using services for a Cymorth Cymru Conference

OCT 2016 – Richard continued his media work with an appearance on nightly magazine show Heno on S4C to coincide with World Homelessness Day

NOV 2016 – We undertook further work for Conwy County Council in the form of two reviews of their housing website and Personal Housing Plans

DEC 2016 – The Take Notice Project won the "Innovation and Engagement" award at the Cymorth Cymru Promoting Independence Awards

DEC 2016 – Pete and Katey delivered an information session for housing officers in Vale of Glamorgan County Council sharing their experiences of housing crisis and temporary accommodation

FEB 2017 – Katey spoke at a Cymorth Cymru conference about Adverse Childhood Experiences

MARCH 2017 – We conducted a mystery shop of the services offered to people presenting as homeless across Powys County Council

AUG 2016 – Richard was interviewed for Newyddion Naw on S4C about his personal experiences of homelessness

SEPT 2016 – Four of us created short online films as part of National Housing Week

SEPT 2016 – We produced an educational booklet called "Leaving the Myths Behind" to challenge misperceptions about homelessness and those it can affect

OCT 2016 – Claire and Katey shared the good practice seen in our local authority work at the Homelessness Network

NOV 2016 – We conducted an evaluation of Caerphilly County Council's housing website

DEC 2016 – Richard was interviewed live on Radio Cymru and Katey was also interviewed online for BBC Wales about her experience of being homeless at Christmas

JAN 2017 – Five of us met with Welsh Assembly Members at the Senedd to talk about our experiences of homelessness

FEB 2017 – Richard and Katey facilitated a community talk to Labour Party members in Aberaeron



Tyger's story

'KEEP LEARNING, KEEP SHARING'

Tyger talks about being a **Take Notice** member.

“When I think about Take Notice and why I've been involved, I keep thinking back to one particular experience I had, when I first presented myself to my local housing options team. I had an appointment at their office, so I went along not knowing what to expect – and it was the most traumatic thing I'd been through.

I was in my 60s, retired, and facing homelessness. And that was very demoralising. It taught me in a very powerful way that homelessness doesn't just happen to young people.

When I went to my appointment with the homelessness team it was very intimidating. They called me for my interview, then led me into a cubicle with high walls and a table bolted to the floor. They ushered me in, then two people followed me in there, and locked the door. I just thought, my god what's all this about? I mentioned my unease at the locked door, and I was told it was a necessary precaution because “you don't know who we have to deal with”. But I said, well I don't know who I'm dealing with either.

Now, I'm a grown woman, I've been around a while, and this was pretty intimidating and humiliating for me – how would a younger, more vulnerable woman or a teenage girl have felt?

And that's the experience I keep looking back to when I think about Take Notice. For me, it's about making sure that if for whatever reason you end up in a situation like that, you'll be treated with dignity, as a human being, and not belittled.

The journey to homelessness always comes with its own baggage – it can be health issues, traumatic experiences, job insecurity, a whole range of things. We need to see the person, not the problem, and let them be heard.

Making our promotional film was one of my favourite experiences with Take Notice. I'd watched the Ken Loach film *Cathy Come Home* and it always stayed with me. In our film we were challenging stereotypes, myth-busting, showing how easy it is to become homeless and what the impact on a person can be. I felt we were continuing that work of taking the message out into the world.

When you've been all the way down, you know it isn't nice down there. People go through very dark times, I did myself. Some people never manage to get back up again, and that can be tragic. But when you're part of a group like us, there's something there to help you back up. We're non-judgmental, we accept each other exactly as we are. We're a team, we're friends, a support network, we're a family.

I don't have all the answers either, none of us do. That's why we all work together. If *Cathy Come Home* is still relevant today – and it is – then that's one hell of an indictment. But we can all play a part in making the future better than the past has been.”

The law has changed in Wales and more people can get help. For help, advice and support contact Shelter Cymru's helpline on:

0345 075 5005

or online at: www.sheltercymru.org.uk/get-advice

To find out more about Shelter Cymru's **Take Notice** project:

www.sheltercymru.org.uk/projects/take-notice

If you want to help us fight against poor housing and homelessness in Wales, become a campaign supporter at:

www.sheltercymru.org.uk/support-us

