

IN THIS TOGETHER

A guide for housing officers working remotely



ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed so much about the way we live our lives and initially brought unprecedented challenges and enforced changes to Welsh homelessness services. When the first UK-wide lockdown was announced in March 2020, staff were no longer able to work from their offices in their usual way and had to find new ways to work remotely with people in housing need.

This toolkit was produced by Shelter Cymru's Take Notice Project. It is designed to help support staff and service users while working remotely, either when government restrictions are put in place or because a blended form of working will remain the new normal for some organisations. It explores the challenges and opportunities of this new way of working.

We asked a lot of questions during our research about the impact of reduced face to face homelessness services on both staff and service users. We asked people how they felt about alternative service delivery and whether presentations by phone or video call meet people's needs. We asked if there are things that housing officers could do differently if they are not able to see people in person. We also explored the impact on staff well-being. We have brought everything that people told us together to make this Toolkit and whether housing officers continue to deliver their services remotely or return to the office to work, we feel that the findings of this research will still be useful in ensuring that housing services across Wales remain as person centred as possible.

The research repeatedly showed us that whether someone is accessing services, or delivering them, people have concerns, worries and stresses when faced with a global crisis and the personal crisis of homelessness. More than ever, working together cooperatively should produce the best results.

The report has two main sections and an accompanying "at a glance" summary. The first section is for housing officers who are carrying out remote assessments or in any remote contact with service users. The second is focussed on the staff themselves and their well-being.

People might find it useful to have the accompanying leaflet in their work area as a reminder of what people told us would be helpful. We hope it helps you and the people you are working with.

WHAT IS IMPORTANT FOR PEOPLE WHEN THEY COME TO YOU FOR HELP?

Breaking the ice and creating a warm welcome:

This sounds nice and simple, but it isn't always quite as easy to do this on the phone or by video call as it is in person. You might have to work a little bit harder to cultivate an initial welcome remotely.

Why making contact by phone is a challenge for some people:

For some people using the phone to contact the council for help won't cause any additional stress or anxiety but for some people it is a real hurdle to overcome and it's helpful to remember this.

Is there anything you can do to make this easier for the person contacting you?

Ensuring someone is physically safe to talk is extremely important, but we also think there are small gestures, like offering to call someone back to reduce costs, which could help.

Explain how the process will work:

A lot of people don't know what the homelessness application process entails or their rights and responsibilities within it. Explaining this and how the assessment will take place might help people to engage with your service more meaningfully.

Reassure people that they can tell their story in their own words:

People are worried that if they don't explain things properly, they may not get help. Giving people the time to tell you their situation in their own way should help them feel as comfortable as possible.

Make sure people understand what you have said:

Some people are less likely to ask questions on the phone and are worried about interrupting you or telling you they haven't understood. Bear this in mind, double checking throughout the conversation that people have understood and encourage them to ask questions.

Do you need to explain things in a different way?

This might mean, in a remote context, taking things a bit slower. Some things that might be relatively straightforward to explain or demonstrate face to face, might need explaining in a different way or more than once.

Sympathising and empathising with someone makes a big difference:

Even if you can't do anything to help someone, or change the situation they find themselves in, just showing that you care makes a big difference.

The importance of listening well:

People may not be as confident that you are listening when they can't see you. You might need to make an extra effort to indicate you are listening which will put people at ease and reassure them you are here to help.

Make sure people know what happens next:

Even in the best circumstances people may not have been able to take in everything you've said. The end of the conversation is a chance to reiterate the joint nature of the process so people know what you are going to do next to help them and what actions they need to take.



WHAT IS IMPORTANT FOR STAFF TO TAKE CARE OF THEMSELVES?

Create the right environment:

Not everyone has the luxury of a spare room that they can turn into an office but, if possible, finding a space in your home that is comfortable and private is very important. Choose a room that's quiet, well-lit and clear of clutter and distractions if you can.

Working flexibly and creating a balance:

The flexibility of working from home has brought real advantages for some people and significant drawbacks for others as they try to schedule work around family and caring commitments. It's never been more important to consider what a healthy home and work life balance looks like on a personal basis.

The importance of taking a break:

In an office environment, opportunities to take a short break usually occur quite naturally. Working on your own at home means you might have to cultivate these opportunities yourself and it's important for both physical and mental health that you do.

Mutual support and staying in touch with colleagues:

Whether this is designated time put aside for your team to video call collectively or a phone call to a colleague when you need to hear a friendly voice and some moral support, make sure you create time for each other that isn't solely focussed on work. The social aspect of work shouldn't be forgotten.

Managing expectations and creating and maintaining clear boundaries:

You're not expected to be available 24/7 just because you aren't confined to normal office hours, but some of the people you are helping may not be aware of or respect this. Be clear about your boundaries and availability.

Dealing with challenging behaviour and staying safe:

Challenging behaviour from the people you work with is no longer confined to the office environment. Vicarious trauma in your household could be damaging. Finding ways to cope with this and ensuring you have the right support from colleagues and management is vital.

The role of supervision:

Managers in particular need to be aware that people's well-being might be a changing picture and need to ensure that people are properly supervised and supported. However, we all have a role to play in looking after ourselves and the well-being of our colleagues.





PLEASE JUST TALK TO ME FIRST

Breaking the ice and creating a warm welcome

We asked people what housing officers could do differently when they first speak to someone if the initial contact is not face to face and it was clear that people felt it was important not to begin the conversation formally or to launch straight into difficult questions.

People who had used homelessness services in the past described to us how nervous they felt when they first approached their authority. People are anxious, even desperate, and might be worried that they will be blamed for the situation they have found themselves in:

It's a very stressful situation and if you don't see someone face to face, it's very impersonal and it's easy to feel like they don't really care about your situation and might not be doing much to help you.

Launching straight into what people perceive as an 'interview' exacerbates feelings of anxiety and confusion and can be intimidating, as speaking to someone in authority already is for a lot of people. People felt it would make a difference if they were helped to be put at ease first.

Some of the housing professionals we spoke to said similar things:

People are missing out on the best part of the service that we've got which is that welcome.

Everyone agreed that showing warmth and welcome is much easier to do in person. So much of the feedback we had was about the importance of building rapport but the challenges of doing this remotely were highlighted again and again. In a face to face context, most people would naturally give both verbal and non-verbal indications to help make others feel more comfortable, but when you can't actually see a person, the welcome needs to be a little bit more cultivated.

If you have a personal or unique way that starts off a conversation with someone when they first contact you, keep doing it, and maybe share your practice with your colleagues. The people you speak to will appreciate it.

As a minimum give your name, your role, thank the person for contacting you and say that you are going to do your best to help them today. If you can, and if you gauge it's appropriate, make some conversation, it's probably what you would have done if you were seeing someone in person anyway.



PHONES FOR ME IS A NO GO"

Why making contact by phone is a challenge for some people and acknowledging this might make it easier

People naturally have different preferences about how they want to make contact with their council, there's no 'one size fits all' approach, but what we heard is that, in the context of the pandemic, a person's choice has largely been taken away as to how they make that initial contact.

Many people are comfortable speaking on the phone and remote contact is easier for some people. Most people considered things from a personal point of view but some people with lived experience also took into consideration the perspective of the officer and wider societal benefits. Here are some examples of what people told us:

Travel

You don't have to wait for an appointment, get a bus somewhere. If you live rurally it could be a whole day to have to go somewhere and present physically. If you have a busy life doing it over the phone is so much quicker and easier.

Convenience

Being able pick up the phone when it is convenient for you. People might not want to be in front of a housing officer and feel judged and assessed.

Fear and judgement

How are you supposed to dress when you go to one of these places? You could be judged in that 'he's tidily dressed, he doesn't look homeless'.

A phone call, could be so much easier, because it takes away that you have to be with a stranger or go into a big, intimidating building.

Safety

Some people are very worried about Covid so it would be better for them not to have to go into the office.

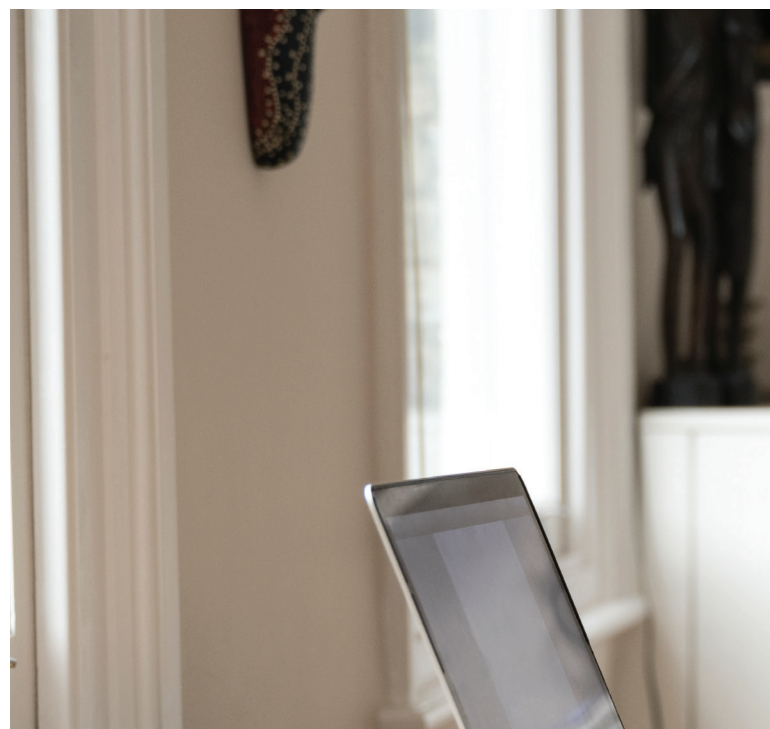
Efficiency

People are working from home and lots of people prefer it. So if a person is in their home and they are doing their job and working harder, hitting their targets and are happier then you should expect to receive a better service.

Nonetheless, when we asked people about how they would prefer to make contact with their council if they were threatened with homelessness, just over half told us they would prefer to do that face to face and why making contact on the phone would be daunting for them:

Phones for me is a no go, I have terrible issues with anxiety, the issue of having to ring several people to get to speak to who you need to. There's the issue of being disconnected. There's the issue of being misunderstood.

She couldn't see how I was reacting and I couldn't see how she was reacting. I was in a lot of distress ... If you can't see someone, you don't know that their agitation is through upset not anger or any other emotions.



People accepted that remote working is a necessity because of Covid and that it may continue into the future, but felt that even acknowledging that picking up the phone might not have been a person's preferred choice might help some people:

I feel that if they have phoned, the person needs to be given a different option of communication. For example, I prefer to communicate via text. Or what about live chats?.... Just by telling them there are other ways they can get in touch might make the phone call easier. Put the user in control of how they can get the help they need.

A lot of people speculated that there might be a significant number of people in need who may not be contacting the council at all, because using the phone creates too much anxiety for them.

As an example, one person described a time when their teenage daughter ended up in tears because she had to make a phone call to order a takeaway. She just couldn't cope with the idea of speaking to a stranger on the phone. It's just an example, but it highlights that telephobia and other general anxiety disorders are very real conditions for some people.

Other barriers to contacting the authority shouldn't be forgotten. We would always recommend that consideration is given to people who may need different accommodations made in order to access your services. Ethnic minority people are disproportionately affected by homelessness in the UK and people accessing your services may face language barriers. Other neuro-diverse conditions should be considered and accommodated, such as people on the autistic spectrum and also people with hearing impairments. We were pleased to hear from staff in Conwy Housing Solutions about the increased use of local advocacy services and specific examples of working in partnership with other agencies during lockdown and these kinds of arrangements must continue if access to services for people with more complex needs is to be ensured.

If someone does reach you by phone, keep in mind it may have been a huge hurdle for them to make the phone call in the first place. If there is a possibility the conversation can be conducted in a different way and you think that would help the person, offer them these choices.





IT'S ABOUT ACCESS ISN'T IT?"

Is there anything you can do to make this easier for the person contacting you?

Lots of useful suggestions were made about improving or alternatives to phone contact. For example:

- Offering to ring back to reduce the cost of phone call
- Offering a return call at a different time
- Conversing by video call and creating opportunities in community venues for this to happen where the technology isn't already available to the person
- Conversing by live web chat

We found that a lot of people may be digitally excluded or have other access issues, with cost and access to Wi-Fi or affordable data being some of the major considerations:

If it's a choice of spending £5 on a phone call or putting food on the table they are going to put food on the table.

I think it is generally presumed that all people have access to the internet and this is far from the case.

Having options and retaining choices where possible was a strong theme throughout our conversations with people and the onus is on the housing officer to sensitively offer ways of making communication easier. If a person isn't likely to instigate a conversation about how much the call is costing them, then you doing it for them might be the chance they need to say 'Yes please, it would be great if you could call me back'.

Where IT access would be an issue for some, conversely, people also told us that they would embrace other technological options and would like to be offered the choice of these. Some people expressed a strong preference for the option of video calling because it provides an element of human interaction that they felt was missing on the phone:

Video calling I would be quite happy to do because it's just being able to see someone and it takes that barrier away. I can see you nodding at something I am saying, it makes me feel you get what I am saying.

People thought that the more that councils could do to enable digital access the better. Staff and service users supported an idea of having access to video links in community settings:

I also like the idea of providing videolink services in the community in places such as leisure centres as many people won't have access to this technology themselves.

Once offices do start to open there's a really good opportunity. If there is a skeleton staff, there could be a room where someone could go in and be assisted to set up a Skype meeting and then the door gets closed so there's confidentiality and they carry out the assessment by Skype.

Another suggestion was that the council explore the possibility of live web chats to take place:

What I think would be a really good idea is the online live chat...a pop up box that goes up on screen and housing officers can be on the other end of the chat.

It's important to also note that, despite Covid restrictions, some service users felt that face to face services should still be available when the person feels they are really needed and that the council should "Apply discretion and deal with the most difficult and complex cases directly".

And it wasn't just people using services who felt this way, some staff expressed the same view:

Covid or not, people I work with need more support... If I continue to deliver good outcomes I will need to be back out there.

Service providers told us that they felt particular groups were being more severely disadvantaged by the lack of face to face services. Young people in particular were highlighted as harder to reach and assist on a remote basis:

Young people tend to have difficulties with phones these days, they won't answer withheld numbers and prefer to do a lot of texting or Whatsapp-ing but things can be misinterpreted that way.

Often, if people are sofa surfing, they get into a routine where if they aren't working or volunteering, they are sleeping for most of the day. So we are getting a lot of last minute calls at the end of the day which are frantic, or text messages, and if they can't get hold of you for any reason it carries on.

There were also challenges of helping them to understand their situation and being able to explain things to them:

It's just made everything much more difficult for them to access services. Difficult things like council tax bills, complex letters that they don't understand, you can't go over them with them and help them to understand because you can't see what they are saying they need help with.

Service providers painted a picture in which it wasn't hard to imagine why people might disengage from services because they don't understand what is going on or provision isn't accessible to them:

I have found that, with the most difficult cases, where previously I would have been able to achieve a good outcome, now, due to contact issues, it can fizzle out before I get to that point.

It became clear that if there is a strong reason to believe that someone would really benefit from a face to face service, and there is a Covid-safe way you can offer this, it might make all the difference to that person and that, as offices do open and services can return to something like the normality we knew before the pandemic, that some face to face provision be maintained whatever future restrictions might be put in place.

Making sure someone's fundamental safety isn't at risk by them contacting you (or you contacting them) is a huge issue to consider. Face to face services might be the only way that some people could feel safe to approach you or have the privacy to tell you what they need to. There are a wealth of issues that housing officers may need to bear in mind and deal with sensitively and cautiously when someone contacts them; is the person sofa surfing and are they able to find a private space to talk to you? Could the person be lodging with their landlord making their conversation with you unsafe? People experiencing violence or abuse in their home may have been able to pick up the

phone to you initially but may be concerned that they are not able to talk in confidence or that there will be ramifications for them if they do:

There's people facing domestic violence, and what if their partner checks their phone records, or if they see their partner on the phone for an extended period of time, is it potentially putting their safety at risk? If they were to meet someone in person they could say whatever they want to in privacy.

The rise in domestic abuse in the UK during the pandemic has been well documented in the UK media. Statistics obtained by BBC's Panorama programme in August 2020 revealed that there was one domestic abuse call every 30 seconds in the first seven weeks of lockdown.

Research by the UK charity SafeLives conducted in March 2020 amongst people working frontline in domestic abuse services found that 42% of respondents to their online survey expressed concerns about client privacy and safety whilst using phone or online services.

We think it's important to bear in mind that the person contacting you probably isn't going to let you know that there might be something you could do to make things a bit easier for them. Offering an alternative way to communicate may be the difference between someone engaging meaningfully with your service or not.

We'd also recommend that serious consideration be given to the resumption of some (Covid-safe) face to face services and that these be prioritised for people in particular kinds of need.



I DIDN'T KNOW MY RIGHTS WHEN I PRESENTED"

Explain how the process will work

There was a shared belief amongst people, whether they received or delivered services, that people don't understand what the homelessness process entails or their rights and responsibilities within it. This wasn't unique to assessments being carried out remotely, it was just generally felt to be true.

We aren't suggesting that you explain at length what a person's rights are in law during an initial assessment, but you can try and ensure that people have access to this information by offering to send out a factsheet or to follow up the assessment phone call with an email to provide this information. Suggestions were made such as:

They should explain in the simplest of terms the application process and ask if they need help in the form filling process.

Offer to email or post more information to them about the application process and ask the individual if they have understood their explanation of the process and what will happen next.

Another more practical issue was raised regarding simply outlining what that first phone call will entail; that it might take a bit of time and checking that a person has time to talk comfortably:

Maybe that housing officer has to think 'this phone call would normally take me 20 minutes but I need to slow things down and it might take 40' if that means the person is more comfortable at the other end.

We heard examples of where housing officers were already putting this into practice:

I always start off by saying I really want to get to know you. I say 'this may take 30 to 40 minutes so I can really help you'.

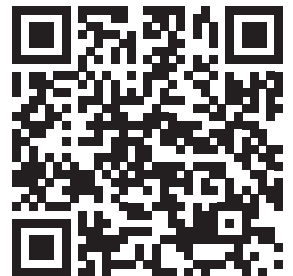
Other friendly indicators, demonstrating patience and consideration, were suggested such as:

We've got as long as you need, we don't have to rush through this or if you find things are going too fast to keep up with, let me know and we can start again if you need to.

Despite the success of the vaccine rollout in early 2021, the pandemic is still with us and, as the national government's furlough scheme comes to an end later this year, there is reason to believe that more people will be faced with economic uncertainty and job loss, that there will be people approaching homelessness services who have never done so before and are completely unfamiliar with the system:

I think we will also have a cohort of people soon, who have never had to use services before so will have no clue how to navigate the system. We are going to get professional people coming through the door soon and that will take a different skill to assist them because the dynamic will be different.

Remember that people find it hard to navigate unfamiliar systems, especially ones that could be perceived as authoritarian or imbalanced from their point of view. Giving a brief indicator at the start of the conversation as to what the phone call will entail will help. By giving people this information you are both empowering them to participate equally and alleviating some of the concerns they might have.



www.sheltercymru.org.uk/homelessness-application-guide/



IT'S IMPORTANT FOR SOMEONE TO HAVE THAT UNHURRIED TIME TO TELL THEIR SIDE"

Reassure people that they can tell their story in their own words

Both users and providers of services recognised people in stressful situations find it harder to tell their story and may worry about how to get things across. This might either manifest itself in people trying to tell you too much in one go or not really giving you enough information at all:

You are so nervous about talking to a stranger on the phone, you babble away and then the actual pertinent stuff gets lost.

Calling or video-linking can make me nervous and I might forget some important aspect of my personal history that would help the housing officer to assess my situation.

There can be ways to help people in this situation such as starting the conversation by saying 'tell me what's happening, take your time. I'll ask more questions if I feel there's something I haven't understood which will help me to help you'.

It was very apparent from the people we spoke to just how worried some were about saying the wrong thing, and that they were aware of the power imbalance that exists when contacting a council for help. Some people said that if they didn't communicate their situation effectively, they felt that the doors will close on them to access any help and support:

A lot of the time I know what I want to say but I can't get the words out. So that could be taken as you being hesitant, as you being reticent to talk about something. And because they can't see you, you don't feel you could say to someone on the phone "can you bear with me..."

Having a natural conversational style, rather than attempting to 'interview' the person from the outset will help make people feel less nervous and feel that they are being given a chance to tell their story in their own way. If the conversation is dictated by a series of questions (date of birth, post code, financial history and then asking about someone's current housing situation) the person might feel like they are being interrogated. They can feel that they might get something wrong, that they have done something wrong, and that it creates an "us and them" environment.

We think taking a more informal approach will mean you'll still get all the information you need but the person you are helping will hopefully feel more comfortable and cooperative and will have a sense that you are trying to help them, not interview them.

Reassure someone at the start that they can explain their situation however they like, and that you may need to ask questions but they can just to take their time and use their own words.



FLEETING AUDITORY COMMUNICATION"

Make sure people understand what you have said

It's not difficult to put yourself in the position of a person receiving a lot of information, some of it inevitably legal in nature, and recognise that some of this might be hard to take in. We recommend avoiding jargon as much as possible. Talking in language that is commonplace for staff might be complex and confusing for the average person, especially someone in crisis.

One person described how, after presenting as homeless by phone, they had to immediately look up what a Section 21 and Intentionality meant, as the housing officer had made no attempt to explain the legal terms they had used. Officers we spoke to understood that fear and anxiety only increases if someone doesn't understand the way things are explained to them:

If you could see them face to face, you could sit down and say 'right, these are the actions for you, these are the actions on my side'. Without that I just don't think they know what they should be doing and they don't know what we are doing to help them either.

When it is just on the phone I don't want to over complicate it for people by going over and over things. If you offload too much information it is too much for some people.

People particularly felt that asking questions or interrupting to say that they haven't understood something would be difficult during a remote assessment:

When you are facing someone, you are ready to ask questions. Sometimes you can't think of as many questions on the phone.

Or even that there might be ramifications for them if they did so:

In a face to face conversation people would interrupt each other or say 'hang on, can you just explain that to me again', but on the phone you don't know how they will react to being interrupted and you might be worried that that will change how they are going to help you.

People may already be nervous at the point when they contact you. Take the lead, not only allowing people time to ask questions to make sure they have understood everything, but encouraging them to do so. They may not ask if you don't invite them to.





I DON'T WANT TO OVERCOMPLICATE IT FOR PEOPLE BY GOING OVER AND OVER THINGS"

Do you need to explain things in a different way?

You might be giving the same advice that you have given hundreds of times before, but the person you are speaking to is probably hearing the information for the first time. Some people we spoke to felt that familiarity with their roles, and with the law, can sometimes make housing officers seem like they are "saying what they say by rote". Certainly people want frontline staff to be knowledgeable and well-trained but judging how to explain things each time and to each person is important and that it would help if staff could:

Break it down into smaller bits so you're not bombarding them with too much info in one go – ask them questions in between so they can speak too and not just be spoken at for ages.

Despite the enormous pressures of workloads and increasing numbers of people presenting as homeless, the frontline staff we spoke to were well aware of the need to avoid this:

I have had to water things down a bit. When you are giving people a lot of information over the phone it can be too much.

One of the big challenges that housing staff told us about was the difficulty of ensuring that follow up documentation is received:

In the most digitally excluded cases it becomes a real, real problem. I have yet to find a solution for it. If people aren't in a stable place (home) you can't send them anything by post, and if they haven't got technology you can't send it either.

In our interviews with staff in Conwy Housing Solutions we heard about creative partnership working with agencies such as the probation service and prison resettlement schemes enabling some staff to circumnavigate this issue to some extent, where the partner agencies, who are able to provide face to face services, can assist with form filling or handing over documents. But in most circumstances, where staff cannot meet service users face to face, they are uncertain about whether forwarded documentation has been received and understood.

How can we say now that someone isn't engaging with a PHP when we don't know if they've ever seen it or if they understand it?

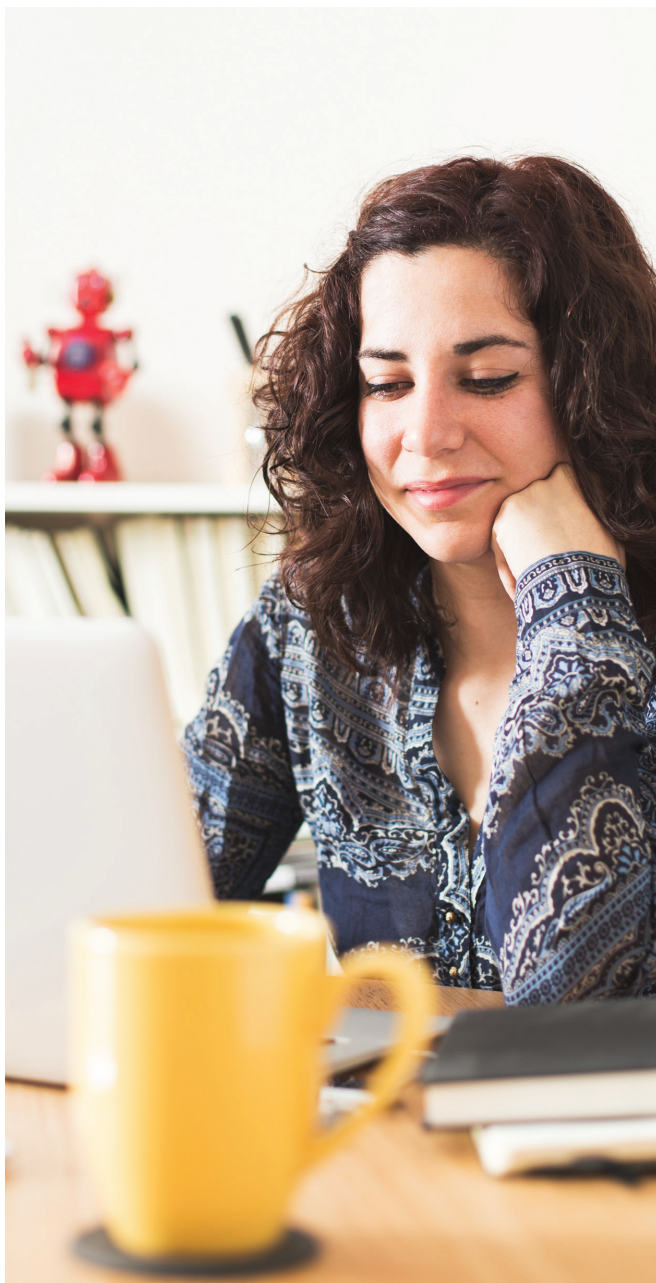
Staff acknowledged that receiving formal documentation that isn't fully understood could make some people even more fearful of the process. Anticipating these concerns when you first speak to someone and letting them know what follow up communication to expect might help. It might also be helpful to ensure that duty letters contain an explicit statement about sources of independent advice.

Remote working has made the exchange of information more challenging on a number of levels.

We know this only makes your job more difficult. But just taking a moment to think about explaining things as if it were the first time you have ever done so might help the person you are speaking to.



WE HAVE ALL BEEN IN SITUATIONS WHERE WE HAVE FELT POWERLESS



Sympathising and empathising with someone makes a big difference

On the first occasion you speak to someone there's probably not much that you can do to help them resolve their housing situation there and then. In some circumstances you might not be able to legally help them in the longer term either. But you can make them feel like someone cares:

People in awful situations are afraid, and frightened of what is happening to them... People already feel they haven't been coping. They need an approach of 'this is an awful situation, no-one is here to blame you, let's just find a way of dealing with it and helping you'.

For someone facing homelessness the difference between "someone who is sympathetic and empathetic, or someone who says 'what's your name? What's the matter? You haven't got a job'" is tremendous. Giving indications of sympathy for the person's situation doesn't have to be any more complicated than just listening and saying something like:

'Yes, I know how that feels' or 'you must be really anxious' and take the opportunity again to tell them you are going to do your best to help.

This is also an opportunity to think about what good signposting can do for the person. People told us about the importance of signposting or the need to access other services to deal with their situation. Even when the assistance you might be able to give is limited, signposting to other agencies for housing or related issues can go a long way to help people feel that the council is a source of support.

We know that frontline staff are under a great deal of pressure. Everyone is affected by the pandemic, not just people presenting to your service, and we understand that you have your own concerns and stresses both in work and at home. But, if you can, throughout the conversation, actively reassure people that you care and you are here to help and signpost where you can.



THEY HAVE TO THINK 'I HAVE TO SIT BACK AND LISTEN, AND LISTEN HARDER' //

The importance of listening well

There was quite a strong sense from people who have used services in the past that they don't always feel confident they are being properly listened to and taken seriously:

It's difficult to know how seriously what you are saying is being taken. I think there might be a danger of people feeling that their call wasn't taken as seriously and whether you can convey things over the phone.

This was echoed by professionals; that the need to listen actively and meaningfully, and to indicate that they were doing so, was more important than ever if contact is only being made remotely.

This may be the first time someone approaches your service, but if they have a history of trauma and disadvantage then they may bring with them their experiences of services not listening and properly supporting previously:

All of their experience has been that people haven't listened to them... People in the most desperate situations – it is really important they are listened to. It is crucial.

Staff spoke openly about the consequences of not doing so and how it can increase fear and mistrust of the officer and the service.

On a practical level, there are ways of indicating good listening skills such as brief verbal affirmations, redirecting and paraphrasing to show someone you have understood and giving them the chance to correct you if you haven't:

There are cues you can take from listening well, such as if people are talking very quickly they may be very anxious. Trying to inject some calm into that situation by trying to slow them down can be helpful.

I clarify everything they are saying to make sure I have got it right and have understood and try to make sure they have understood what I am saying.

Listening well allows you to build a picture and gauge when information is missing which means the need to ask more questions. It's about listening to what is being said but also what isn't. On a simple level it's about concluding whether someone has understood the advice and actions you are giving them. But on a more holistic level, it will demonstrate respect and empathy and that you are giving someone your time and the space to explain their situation. More than anything it helps to build trust. It could be the difference in making someone feel empowered to participate in solving their housing crisis and lead to a better outcome.

For some people listening patiently and empathetically comes naturally, for others it may take more work and perhaps some training. But however you get there, demonstrating that you are listening well will produce better results.



I DON'T WANT PEOPLE TO THINK WE ARE DOING SOMETHING TO THEM, I WANT THEM TO FEEL WE ARE DOING SOMETHING FOR THEM AND WITH THEM"

Make sure people know what happens next and reiterate the joint nature of the process

At the end of the conversation you may need to explain again what the Personal Housing Plan entails, what you have written in it, what actions you and the person have agreed to take, to expect a copy in the post or by email and that you are happy to answer any questions. This might help lessen concerns people may have when they receive your "official" letter or email.

However, staff recognised that for some people this might not be enough and said that working remotely has presented difficulties to the extent that they don't believe people will engage with the PHP process very much at all:

If you email something to them sometimes they don't even open it and people don't even really open post either. Or they open parts of it and get confused and scared because they don't understand it.

There was some sense from housing officers that a lack of face to face services, particularly with harder to reach client groups and people who are digitally excluded, is compounding people's willingness or ability to engage, and that this means it is even more important to try.

There are other practical measures that could help:

- Repeat your name, phone number and email address and ask the person to make a note
- Ask them to save your number in their phone so they know it is you when you call them next
- Check how and when they would like to be contacted in future, noting times they say they are unavailable or days of the week when they are more likely to be free to discuss things further.
- If you haven't managed to reach a person, think about the cost of them having to return your call. Send a text message stating when you will ring again rather than leaving a voicemail which may cost someone money to listen to.

These simple measures may help with some of the issues highlighted by officers with regards ongoing communication and disengagement from services generally.

This is a final chance to reiterate the joint nature of the process, explain what happens next and to offer your help. You might have to work that bit harder remotely to achieve this. As one person put it "human beings just don't engage as well with something that they don't feel they are really part of". Hopefully everything you have done throughout the conversation will mean the person leaves the conversation feeling supported and willing to engage.



THE KITCHEN TABLE, THE LIVING ROOM, THE CONSERVATORY...

Creating the right environment

The turmoil created by the sudden lockdown in March 2020 saw homelessness officers adjusting to working from home, sometimes at very short notice. Staff from Conwy Housing Solutions told us that their working culture has always been quite flexible, and that they were encouraged to work from home on occasions and so this sudden move to home working may not have been as big an adjustment as it might have been for other frontline workers in the sector. Nonetheless, 2020 saw staff working at kitchen tables and in spare bedrooms and these environments weren't always suitable long term arrangements.

Staff told us about the practicalities of bringing work into the home, creating a sustainable working environment for the future and how they have managed (or not) to create a suitable working space for themselves.

Some people were able to achieve this:

I am very lucky. I have a dedicated room in my house as an office, so I have a laptop, a second screen...and I also have a headset.

Others were finding it more problematic:

I don't have a proper work station...I could put a work station in one of the children's rooms but that seems unfair.

It quickly became clear that not everyone has the luxury of enough or suitable space at home to work in a healthy and ergonomic way or in a space that was free from the noise and distractions from other people in the household.

There was a shared concern from both users of and providers of services that privacy and confidentiality could be compromised with staff working at home:

When I started working from home I was in the dining area where I could have the doors open and it was sunny and then I was mindful that there would be other people at home who could hear my conversations.

Service users reiterated this concern and wanted overt reassurance from officers that they would be afforded the same levels of confidentiality as they would expect in more normal circumstances. It is vital to ensure that people's information and circumstances cannot be overheard by other people in the household.

We hope that you have found the most suitable space in your home to work in that's available to you but we still wanted to reiterate the importance of having an environment that is suitable for work in terms of comfort, productivity and privacy. Even if you don't have the luxury of a separate space to use as an office, choose a room that's quiet, well-lit and clear of clutter and distractions if you can. You might want to talk to your manager about investing in equipment for you such as a separate screen, mouse and keyboard to prevent musculoskeletal problems associated with laptop use.



THERE'S NO OFFICE HOURS ANYMORE, THERE'S NO 9-5" OR "IT'S BEEN LIFE-CHANGING"

Working flexibly and creating and work/life balance

We spent a lot of time talking to frontline staff about what they saw as both the benefits and drawbacks of working from home. There was a very mixed response, with some people thriving now that they only or mostly work from home and others struggling with being productive, finding a work life balance and wanting to return to the office.

There were some real advantages for people:

Personal lives

Being here with the kids, seeing them more. I used to be screaming at them, getting ready, and looking for shoes for the morning school run - all that stress has gone.

Working from home enabled me to juggle stuff I have had going on in my life over the last few months. If I was in work there's no way I would have been able to manage that or deal with the emotional side of things.

Productivity

Since I've been back in the office I have found that I was far more productive at home.

Travel and cost

There's no more rushing to get parking, I used to throw the kids out of the car at school - it was manic. Now it's an option to travel in, costs have reduced and the impact on the environment has reduced.

And there were some significant drawbacks:

Sharing home and workspace with others

I have been isolating with parents and work from the dining table. I can't tell them to be quiet or leave the room because it's their house.

Motivation

I need to find more self-motivation. It can be difficult to self-motivate when you're at home.

Guilt

I felt guilty about working at home, I felt people would wonder what you're doing and whether you were working or not.

And the biggest one...Switching off

Knowing that your laptop is there... it leaves you with the feeling of 'I could do another hour.'

You can switch off sometimes but all your office equipment is there in my home so you think 'should I check my phone?'



For people with children, changes in schooling and an increased amount of time spent at home has meant juggling work and parental responsibilities on a daily basis:

During lockdown it was bad, I struggled to juggle two parents working from home and home schooling. It's been better since they've gone back to school.

By June 2020 51% of workers who were working an average UK week (37.5 – 40 hours) alongside childcare and home-schooling responsibilities reported experiencing increased levels of distress with female workers disproportionately affected. In the early stages of the crisis, women were 43% more likely to have increased their working hours and traditionally carry out 74% of all childcare as well as, on average, 26 hours of unpaid labour in the home per week. (Burnout Britain: Overwork in an Age of Employment, October 2020)

Flexibility means different things for different people but it doesn't mean you have to be available all the time and there is no right or wrong way to work from home. Some staff have adapted well and would prefer to continue to work in this way in the longer term. For others, the opposite is the case. Whatever your personal preference, here are some suggestions for keeping yourself healthy and well while working remotely:

- **Create a routine:** this doesn't mean you have to stick to it every single day. This would actually negate the benefits of a flexible working arrangement. But if you do have a routine, you are more likely to notice if you have fallen out of it and can keep an eye on the times when, and the reasons why, you might find yourself starting work earlier or finishing later.
- **Work when you are at your most productive:** your motivation will naturally fluctuate throughout the day, some people are more energised in the morning, for others they work better later in the day. Working from home gives you the chance to learn when those ebbs and flows will take place and plan your schedule around it.
- **Spinning plates:** if you are trying to work from home whilst juggling childcare or other caring responsibilities your daily schedule is probably more challenging than ever. You can't parent and work at the same time so speak to your manager about a schedule that will work for you and your employer to manage both responsibilities most effectively.
- **Out of sight out of mind:** get used to switching off, both literally and figuratively. Even if you have a dedicated office space at home, it can be easy to remain in 'work mode' even after you've stopped for the day. Build a routine where you put your laptop away, switch your phone off and close the door on an office space if you can.

It's been over a year since some of you packed up your desks in the office and tried to create a work space and routine at home. Hopefully you have found what works for you. Remember that it's ok to take advantages of working flexibly as long as your organisation supports it.

Some staff, for different reasons, may be struggling to work productively at home, for example, because they don't have access to a suitable workspace, free from interruption or due to significant well-being issues. We encourage all councils to take the learning from this year and in some cases to give consideration to a return to office working for some people, where is it safe to do so, and whilst still adhering to Welsh Government guidance, perhaps on a limited or rota basis.



TAKE YOUR TEN MINUTES OUT, NO QUESTIONS ASKED"



The importance of taking a break

Staff in Conwy Housing Solutions were keen to stress that their managers have a culture which allows them to take a break when they need to and they don't feel they will be questioned if they are away from their desks for periods of time:

We have flexibility. If I want to work early in the morning or take a 2 hour lunch break or go for a walk or I could say 'I am not working this afternoon, I'll do it this evening because I've got 4 people to get hold of who I can't get hold of in the day because they are working'. That helps massively.

We've already talked about flexibility on a longer term basis; here staff highlighted the importance on a daily basis of taking time away from their desk and their screen and from the stresses of the job.

The caseload has increased dramatically. We've been told that if you need to take ten minutes out, take your ten minutes out, no questions asked. If you need to log out, please just let us know so we know you are safe, but there will be no questions asked. They have been super supportive.

In an office environment, opportunities for a short break might occur more naturally. We were told about natural breaks stemming from making a drink for a colleague or taking a break to talk after a difficult phone call. But when you are working on your own at home, you may need to self-manage and make time for breaks for yourself.

It's important in any role to take regular breaks and working from home can sometimes mean you spend the entire day indoors. If you are at home, in front of a screen for your whole day it is now even more important to think about regular time away from your desk for both physical and mental health reasons. Build a walk into your routine to get some fresh air, step away from your desk for 10 minutes on a regular basis to relax and take 10 minutes to pick up the phone to a colleague if you need to talk to someone.



THOSE WATER COOLER MOMENTS

The importance of mutual support and staying in touch with colleagues

We asked staff and managers of Conwy Housing Solutions what the impact had been on their sense of “team” now that they were not spending as much, if any, time together in person; how are they remotely supporting one another and ensuring there are opportunities to debrief and distress for staff on the frontline?

Staff unanimously told us that a culture of ongoing mutual support had been actively fostered despite the fact that they no longer regularly shared an office space. This includes a weekly team meeting in which the focus is on the welfare of staff and having a chat with each other.

Managers were praised for their open door approach and staff felt that a good balance has been struck between helping staff to stay focussed on their work whilst also providing support for their welfare:

Don't get me wrong we still get some very clear directives. We know, though, that their doors are open to us and the most important thing is that we know it's ok not to be ok.

Outside of this designated time for staff to catch up with each other there is also daily ad hoc support for each other:

The team are just checking in on people and making sure we are all ok...We ring each other daily, we are coming together a lot more. We talk about work, but then we have more meaningful conversations because it's a deliberate phone call not just an accidental conversation over the desk.

In terms of coping with the stresses of the job and the need for mutual support, some staff who have returned to the office for a few days a week felt this had been additionally beneficial to them.

People with lived experience were sympathetic to frontline staff and understood the stressful nature of the job. They told us that it's important to them that staff work in a supportive culture so that they can continue to do their jobs effectively. They supported any opportunities for staff where:

...you can say 'you wouldn't believe the week I have had', that's what people are missing - what you would normally do round the coffee machine.

All of this active support is important. Without it, feelings of isolation would increase. A study by Total Jobs in July 2020 showed that since March the average number of people we interact with daily has halved (down 51%) and almost half (46%) of UK workers have experienced loneliness during lockdown.

We also heard a few suggestions that were not already in place that could be considered:

- A buddying system in which staff are paired with each other for ongoing mutual support.
- Ring-fencing time so staff can attend training (specifically training available to do with welfare and looking after your own mental health). At present, some staff feel they have to try and fit this in around all their other duties meaning they often end up not bothering.

Your staff are your biggest assets. Any opportunities to build team morale, to connect with each other or allow time for self-care won't be time wasted. For as long as teams continue to work remotely from one another, actively creating opportunities to talk to each other about coping mechanisms will be valuable. You could think about investing in putting time aside for activities other than talking; allowing staff time to attend webinars on self-care or downloading an app such as Headspace might be helpful to some people.



THEY THINK YOU ARE AVAILABLE 24/7"

Managing expectations and creating and maintaining clear boundaries

Leaving the office at the end of the working day used to mean the end of work for most people. Remote working meant that some staff told us that this isn't the case for them anymore, not least because people sometimes think they are now available at any hour. Whilst not everyone found this to be a problem, some staff told us about being contacted regularly outside of normal working hours, sometimes receiving numerous text messages at night:

The clients can think you are available 24/7 and can ring you or email and expect you to answer them at any time of day. It changes the relationship between the client and adviser because it becomes more of a personal contact than a professional engagement. That means my phone is going at strange times of day and night.

Some staff had found some coping mechanisms:

I am lucky that when I log off for the day I can close the door on my office and then my phone is off and the clients are aware of that because we always try and say 'we are available between these hours' anyway. It's also to do with the boundaries you put in place.

This isn't the same as self-discipline and resisting the urge to check emails in the evening, this is about the importance of managing the expectations of the people who are using your service and trying to make it clear when you are and are not available.

There might be something simple you can do, such as letting people know your working hours when you first speak to them or including this information in your email signature, voicemail and on any written correspondence.

Additionally, several people told us that, where before, someone would respect that a face to face appointment was arranged and turn up at the agreed time, remote contact seems to have diminished the agreement and the expectation in some cases is that staff are available more often and can simply rearrange:

Sometimes I ring at a set appointment time and the person says 'I am taking the kids out' - but I had arranged the date and time with them and I had said it would be for an hour. But people say 'can you ring me back at 10am tomorrow?'. Well, no, this is when your appointment was booked. As difficult as it is to be stern about these things, it is necessary sometimes, otherwise we would be working 12 hours a day, six days a week which isn't viable.

If you feel you're already making your availability clear and it isn't stopping people contacting you at odd hours, we think it might be worth council homelessness teams exploring and investing in some technological solutions to provide automated "out of office" replies for messages via text and other platforms. Some auto-reply apps are free and others, with more extensive settings and unified corporate messaging allow you to choose the exact times you'd like away messages to be turned on and which contacts you'd like to receive automated messages. Although these come at a cost, councils could consider it as an investment in staff well-being.

Just because you are working from home, and possibly working a bit more flexibly in a way that suits you, doesn't mean that everyone is available 24 hours a day. Manage expectations from the outset and be firm and clear about when you are not available. Turn your work phone off and manage your own expectations about your availability. Don't feel guilty for switching off.



YOU ARE INVITING PEOPLE INTO YOUR HOME"

Dealing with challenging behaviour, vicarious trauma and staying safe

Some people facing homelessness can occasionally behave in a challenging way. They are often angry and upset and their behaviour can potentially be aggressive. We talked to people about this and whether it was impacting them (and their household) differently now that this behaviour is no longer contained in a more neutral office environment with supportive colleagues to help deal with it:

My partner has overheard them and people are irate and shouting, and possibly under the influence. A person may be shouting and swearing... when it is in your own home it is difficult.

In the office you would put the phone down and someone would ask if you are ok but when you are at home you are absorbing it more. It's particularly hard receiving abuse by text.

The aggression has been horrendous during lockdown.

I've had women disclosing abuse to me and you are listening on the phone and you have to be very careful about what you are saying and then when you put the phone down, normally you have a colleague who would say 'are you alright, do you want to talk about it?'

Some staff felt that they had ways that they could cope with this:

Remember you are in control and that you should be able to say to somebody 'look, your behaviour towards me is unacceptable'

But others missed the fact that they couldn't turn to colleagues for immediate support in the way they would normally do and were reluctant to reach out to their co-workers knowing that they themselves are busy and under pressure:

You feel so guilty calling a colleague or getting upset because you know they are so busy whereas if we were in the office they would offer, they'd say 'let's get a drink, let's talk about it'. I don't want to impose on other people by phoning them and by putting what's happened in my home into their home.

Dealing with and not sharing trauma can have adverse effects on a person. Staff may well feel exhausted and overstretched and these feelings are then compounded by the fact they have been working from home for over a year. Creating time for colleagues to reach out to one another and not to feeling guilty for doing this might be the difference between some staff burning out or being able to continue to work effectively.

At the time of our research, although most staff we spoke to weren't regularly video-calling to speak to service users, most felt that increasing face to face services remotely basis would be a positive step, certainly from the perspective of the person needing help.

There are risks that need to be thought about in relation to video calling. Anonymising your personal life or your home setting is one of many issues to consider:

If I had a video call with a client, I have a picture of me and my husband on our wedding day on a canvas which could be seen on camera. So I know full well if someone knew who my husband was, they can just Google his name and get a load of details about him and his family.

Fortunately all staff and service users we spoke to were aware of the measures that could and should be taken to reduce the risk of homes and family lives being identified, such as:

- ensuring the background that can be seen on screen is neutral, using the inbuilt functions in the video conferencing programme to do this if needed
- making sure that there are no family photos that can be seen and that the view from your window cannot identify your location if you haven't used a virtual background.

However, some staff felt that they hadn't been given enough specific guidance on this and they had simply drawn their own conclusions about how to keep their household safe:

We are definitely reminded to be sure that our profile pictures are professional and I know one colleague has started using a screen behind her so that her home isn't on view. So it has been spoken about but more on a professional level than a protecting yourself level.

Do what you need to do to keep yourself safe. Take the basic measures of ensuring that your home and family can't be identified. Whatever well-being support your organisation has available, make sure everyone in your team knows about it and how to access it. Reach out to colleagues for support when you need it and do the same for them.



ARE WE SERIOUS ABOUT WORKING IN A PSYCHOLOGICALLY INFORMED WAY?"

The role of supervision

Covid-19 is a whole population crisis. People working in the homelessness sector are just as likely to have been affected by the pandemic as the people they are supporting. Their household income may have reduced, they may have experienced illness or are anxious about becoming ill or may have lost loved ones.

Staff living alone may struggle with the isolation caused by lockdowns and people with caring responsibilities, busy households or people at home self-isolating may also feel overwhelmed. Put simply, it isn't only the people who are using services who are worried or afraid:

Because we aren't just local authority officers, we also have to worry about Covid and our families and childcare as well.

People's mental health may have been affected by the pandemic or the restrictions imposed because of it. Staff who may already be experiencing mental ill health could find that this is exacerbated by the ever-changing Covid situation. There may also be staff who have never suffered with stress or anxiety before who may not have any existing coping mechanisms and require additional support.

The consequences to any of these things may not only be short term. Studies from previous epidemics on the impact on mental health show that there is both an immediate impact on mental health of populations and a longitudinal one (Centre for Mental Health: Covid 19 and the nation's mental health, May 2020).

Managers need to pay attention to people's needs based on their personal situations and be vigilant about stress-awareness, actively fostering a supportive culture in their team. People may not be forthcoming about anything they are struggling with and the fact that you are not seeing your colleagues face to face every day means it is harder to notice when someone isn't coping. You may have to work harder to spot signs of stress in those around you (and yourself); try to look out for changes in people's normal behaviour and indicators which could suggest difficulties in coping such as working extended hours. Ensuring that staff take their annual leave is important so that people have time away from work.

In the circumstances in which we find ourselves, supervision and support of staff needs to be active and personalised and may need to be more frequent than in an office environment.

Working in the homelessness sector can be traumatic and more than ever we would recommend that consideration be given to the need for clinical supervision of staff:

One thing that Welsh Government could do is seriously back funding for proper clinical supervision... You can't always be understanding of people with specific needs if you haven't had the opportunity to talk about what you are seeing and hearing and offload yourself...I said it before the pandemic, you have to properly invest in proper clinical supervision, and more so now than ever. Otherwise you will have staff who are burning out, and leaving their jobs and don't treat clients fairly and clients will have a bad outcome.

Overall, the frontline staff we spoke to were full of praise for the support they have received from their managers who were described as:

Flexible and supportive

[they] have been amazing, they check in to make sure you're ok

Good at promoting care first and they say 'ring if you need to or anything happens'

It was reassuring to hear how well staff felt they had been taken care of in such challenging times and it certainly seems to have helped people to cope with the ongoing challenges of working remotely in this difficult time.

Look out for your colleagues and employees and recognise that people's well-being may be a changing picture. Some people may be fine at times but, if something changes in their personal lives, someone who was coping before may now be finding things harder.

Remember that self-care is necessity, not a luxury and this is heightened because of lack of normal coping mechanisms such as sharing stresses with colleagues in an office environment. Ensure that there are both formal and informal routes for people to access mental health and well-being support, both within the organisation and by signposting to external sources of help. Ensure that staff are updated regularly as to what is available to them.

Because we are all spending more time working on our own, it might be helpful to be aware of the ProQOL Measure which considers compassion fatigue, burnout and secondary trauma.



ABOUT THIS PROJECT

In September 2020, seven months after the UK underwent the first national lockdown as a result of the global Covid-19 pandemic, Conwy Housing Solutions and Shelter Cymru's Take Notice Project agreed to work together to examine the effects that national and local lockdowns and a forced reduction in face to face service delivery, particularly initial presentations, were having on service users and staff.

The Covid-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to Welsh statutory services. Staff were no longer able to work from their offices in their usual way and were finding ways to work remotely with people in housing need. Although, at the time of writing, vaccines are beginning to be given to people, we expect remote or blended working is likely to be the new reality for staff and service users for some time.

The project explored two main themes:

- The views of people who have previously used homelessness services on how a reduction in face to face homelessness presentations and a move to more remote assessments would affect people
- Are there new considerations for Housing Officers working in a new way in terms of their well-being?

The findings of the research are intended to help Welsh homelessness providers identify the challenges and opportunities that remote assessing has created from both a service user and operational staff perspective so that if remote or blended working is our new reality, services can still be as accessible and person centred as possible.

WHO TOOK PART?

The people who participated in this research fall into three categories:

- People with lived experience of homelessness who have all presented to their local authority in the past. This includes members of Shelter Cymru's Take Notice Project and service users from Conwy who were contacted via local housing associations and third sector agencies.
- People without personal experience of homelessness to obtain the views of someone who has never used Welsh homelessness services before.
- Staff from the Welsh housing/homelessness sector.

In total 45 people took part in the research.

HOW WE DID IT

Fieldwork took place over a 6 week period from October – beginning of December 2020.

It was an all-Wales consultation. Not everyone lived, worked or had presented as homeless in Conwy as it was felt that people's views were important and relevant irrespective of location.

The research consisted of a variety of methods allowing people to engage with the research in the way that suited them best:

- Semi-structured interviews with operational and managerial staff from Conwy Housing Solutions and with housing sector staff external to Conwy Housing Solutions
- Semi-structured interviews, focus groups and questionnaires with people with personal experience of homelessness
- An online questionnaire for people without personal experience of housing crisis to obtain the perspective of approaching a local authority for help for the first time
- A working group of Take Notice members giving feedback on the role of the PHP in the context of remote assessing
- Desktop research looking at guidance and good practice from both inside and outside the housing sector in the UK in the context of the pandemic.

THE END RESULT

The end result of this project is the Toolkit that incorporates the main themes from the research.

An original version was issued to Conwy Housing Solutions in March 2021. This is a second version intended for wider circulation to support all homelessness service providers and was produced in May 2021.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was conducted and written by Carey Hill and Paul Bevan of Shelter Cymru.

With thanks to all who contributed.

USEFUL LINKS

<https://www.homeless.org.uk/webinar-communication-skills-during-times-of-change>

<https://www.homeless.org.uk/digital-inclusion-for-those-experiencing-homelessness-during-covid-19>

<https://www.homeless.org.uk/webinar-how-to-build-healthy-habits>

<https://www.homeless.org.uk/webinar-pie-at-home-creating-healthy-remote-working-space>

<https://www.homeless.org.uk/webinar-using-effective-time-management-to-balance-priorities-and-manage-well-being>

<https://www.headspace.com/>

<https://www.proqol.org/>

For more information about the Take Notice Project and the activities it delivers please visit the Shelter Cymru website sheltercymru.org.uk/projects/take-notice/

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

08000 495 495

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

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

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:

sheltercymru.org.uk/support-us



Registered charity number 515902

