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# Post-implementation evaluation of the homelessness legislation (Part 2 of the Housing Act (Wales) 2014): Interim Report

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## Executive Summary

### 1. Research aims and methodology

- 1.1 Part 2 of the Housing Act (Wales) 2014 introduced major changes to the way homelessness is being addressed in Wales (from April 2015), with the core changes aimed at extending services to include prevention of homelessness and providing assistance to all eligible applicants. A longitudinal post-implementation evaluation of this part of the Act is now underway, which focuses on both process and impact.
- 1.2 The overall aim of the evaluation is to understand how the Act has been implemented by organisations involved in supporting people at risk of homelessness (local authorities, housing associations and third sector organisations), and once completed, the research will inform the Welsh Government's understanding of the impact of the legislation on people who are homeless/at risk of homelessness.
- 1.3 The specific evaluation objectives are to:
  - Evaluate the implementation of the legislation by local authorities
  - Evaluate the short and longer term impacts of the new legislation
  - Identify, through interim and final reporting, the need for further improvements, developments and support to ensure consistently good services are delivered across Wales
  - Assess the impact of the legislation on service users, local authorities and key partners
  - Evaluate the impacts on homelessness of the much greater emphasis on prevention that is a core feature of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014.
- 1.4 The evaluation comprises two waves of fieldwork, the interim report presents the findings from the first wave of fieldwork. As an interim report, no recommendations are provided within this report, but will form part of the final report.

- 1.5 The evaluation involves qualitative and quantitative research methodologies and a number of complementary phases utilising a number of different research approaches. To date the following activities have been completed:
- Quantitative analysis of secondary data
  - Survey and review of 22 local authorities [first wave: June – August 2016]
  - Consultation with 16 national stakeholders [October – November 2016]
  - Selection of six case study local authority areas to consult and engage with service providers and service users [September 2016]
  - Case Study: Engagement and consultation with service users [first wave: October 2016 – January 2017] 154 interviews were conducted.
- 1.6 The following activities are to be completed:
- Case Study: Engagement and consultation with service providers
  - Survey and review of 22 local authorities
  - Quantitative analysis of secondary data
  - Case Study: Engagement and consultation with service users
  - Collation and review of existing information: policy and literature review
- 1.7 The homelessness statistics collected by the Welsh Government on a quarterly basis from local authorities were examined. All of this data was taken from the publicly available Statistics for Wales website.
- 1.8 Sixteen interviews were conducted with national stakeholders from the following organisations: Community Housing Cymru (1); Chartered Institute of Housing Cymru (1); Cymorth Cymru (1); Higher Education institution (1); Homelessness Network (1); Shelter Cymru (2); Supporting People (1); Private Landlords Association (1); Take Notice Project (1); Welsh Local Government Association (1); Welsh Government (3); Tai Pawb (1)
- 1.9 All 22 local authorities were surveyed and both qualitative and quantitative information relating to the different stages outlined in the Act was gathered.
- 1.10 Six case study areas were selected on the basis of geography: urban/rural/coastal and north/mid/south Wales and whether housing stock had been retained by the local authority or transferred to an RSL. Additional criteria extrapolated from Stats Wales, including performance based on homelessness successfully prevented (s66) and relieved (s73) also guided selection. The location of case studies is not revealed in the interim or final report.
- 1.11 In total, 154 interviews were conducted with service users across the six local authority areas and the sample was influenced by the people who presented as homeless or were receiving assistance from the local authorities during the time of the fieldwork. Most of the interviews were arranged by local authority staff and conducted at local authority offices, or held at hostels and shelters.

## **2. Key findings**

### **Analysis of secondary data**

- 2.1 There are clearly large differences in what is measured in the data following the introduction of the Act, due to efforts to record processes and outcomes relating to the new legislation. For the most part, direct comparisons cannot be made due to these changes. There are also a number of other data limitations including data rounding and collection of data in the form of aggregate tables, which limits the extent to which relationships in the data can be analysed. Concerns have also been raised by stakeholders that not all interventions appear in the official statistics. Despite these caveats, the data can help to inform our understanding of the Act to some degree. While there is considerable variation in the levels of preventative work among local authorities, overall, the majority of work is recorded as preventative. Preventative work has involved more than three times as many cases of obtaining alternative accommodation than supporting people to remain in their existing homes, and in almost half of cases of obtaining alternative accommodation their new accommodation is in the private rented sector. Less people are now recorded as being in priority need as this is only taken into consideration when prevention and relief have been unsuccessful. Still, the demographics are broadly similar to before the introduction of the Act. Due to the new way of collecting data, it can now be seen that the proportion of BME households increases at each stage.

### **Findings from the consultation with national stakeholders**

- 2.2 In the main, national stakeholders were overwhelmingly positive about the implications of the Act and welcomed its introduction and implementation. Stakeholders felt that the legislation offered a clearer framework for local authorities and partners to work in; provided the opportunity for earlier interventions; strengthened the prevention focus; engendered a change in the culture of local authority homelessness services; and improved the outcomes for people who are homeless/threatened with homelessness.

### **Findings from the local authority survey**

- 2.3 Overall, the findings from the 22 local authorities suggest that the preventative approach is working, although local authorities feel that there has been an increase in demand, cases are open for longer, and there are more administrative duties. There has been no dramatic increase in numbers of people presenting from other local authorities/cross border. No local authority has yet changed its position in regard to maintaining intentionality, though views are divided on whether they will maintain their positions in future. On the whole, local authorities appear to be in favour of the changes and believe that they have had positive effects.

### **Findings from the first wave service user interviews**

- 2.4 Factors leading to homelessness include: relationship breakdown, domestic violence and abuse; being unable to continue living with family; issues in the private rented sector; lack of accommodation upon release from prison/other institutions; eviction from social housing and being unable to access social housing due to previous breaches of tenancy; eviction from emergency/hostel provision; rent arrears, low incomes and benefit issues. Other factors causing or sustaining homelessness related to health, with a high incidence of mental health issues appearing to contribute to people's difficulties in accessing and sustaining accommodation.
- 2.5 Respondents were broadly very positive about the help they had received across the case study areas where they felt that the local authority had listened, understood their situation, and was in regular communication about their case. Service users' negative comments appeared to centre on provision and support in two of the case study areas.

### **3. Conclusions**

#### **Process**

- 3.1 Overall, local authorities indicated that they support the increased focus on prevention introduced under the Act, and they believe the legislative changes have had positive effects. National stakeholders also suggested that good progress was being made, however they felt that there is inconsistent application of preventative activities across Wales.
- 3.2 Local authorities reported that the preventative approach to homelessness is working, with over half indicating that prevention activity has increased since the introduction of the Act, and that it has helped them to improve their information and advice services. This was a view shared by national stakeholders who also felt the Act has increased the levels of advice and assistance available to people.
- 3.3 National stakeholders and local authorities outlined a range of successful prevention activities, including but not limited to outreach, mediation, advocacy, accommodation, and other forms of tenancy support. However, it is important to note that local authorities indicated that the main prevention activity is financial assistance – for rent guarantees, payment of deposits/bonds, rent arrears accrual – which reflects the fact that preventative work has involved many more cases of obtaining alternative accommodation than supporting people to remain in their existing homes. There are resource implications, as transitional funding currently sustains these prevention activities. Significantly, the reduction in help to secure case numbers suggests that homelessness is being prevented for a larger number of people than previously.
- 3.4 National stakeholders and local authorities welcomed the doubling of the period when people are considered to be threatened with homelessness.
- 3.5 The majority of local authorities indicated that they found the “Code of Guidance” useful in facilitating understanding of and compliance with the Act, and praise was offered for its comprehensive approach.
- 3.6 None of the local authorities have changed their formal overall position on intentionality thus far and no authorities reported any effects from changing intentionality from a duty to a power. There were mixed views from national stakeholders on the use of intentionality; several supported the flexibility it gave local authorities, however, some felt it should be removed altogether to fully reflect the ethos of the Act.
- 3.7 In the main, stakeholders felt that the pathways for homeless people with support needs were clear. However, local authorities indicated that there was significant variation in their use across Wales, with some authorities having pathways in place for people with mental health issues for example, while others did not.
- 3.8 National Stakeholders were emphatic about the integral role of Supporting People in successfully implementing the legislation. However, a variable picture emerged across Wales with regard to Supporting People services; in some authorities, services are part of homelessness teams and this was thought to work well.
- 3.9 Some concerns were highlighted by stakeholders regarding the use of statistics to evidence and monitor outcomes and responses from the local authority perspective also highlighted some shortcomings in the way that data are collected and recorded.

#### **Impact**

- 3.10 The Act has had a significant impact on service users since more people are now able to access advice and assistance and help to prevent and relieve homelessness. However, the impact appears to be varied for people with protected characteristics/vulnerable groups, and people with mental ill health in particular. National stakeholders suggested that single

men, care leavers, ex-offenders and those experiencing multiple issues are most likely to have unmet housing needs.

### *Impact on local authorities*

- 3.11 There was a broad consensus across the local authority and national stakeholder cohorts about the positive effect of the Act, and of the 'person-centred' support it has engendered. However, it seems clear from the findings from both data sets that there is variation in the implementation of the Act across local authority areas. This can in part be explained due to differences in context, for example the demographics of a particular authority, the operation of housing markets, and demand for services. Concerns were also raised about the lack of accommodation for single people and in relation to the levels of rough sleeping.
- 3.12 Over half of local authorities indicated that there had been an increase in demand for services since the introduction of the prevention duty and it was generally felt that this placed additional workload pressures on local authority homelessness teams. Seventeen local authorities reported challenges in implementing the Act and adapting to new ways of working, indicating that this was in part due to cases being open for longer and an increase in bureaucracy. This view was shared by national stakeholders. The importance of continued training was emphasised by local authorities in order to further embed the Act as well as to ensure new staff were fully informed.
- 3.13 Both national stakeholders and local authorities expressed significant concerns about the reduction and eventual removal of transitional funding. While cognizant of the fact that the current funding is by its very nature transitional, both cohorts suggested that there is a need for longer term, sustainable funding to ensure that prevention activities continue to be resourced and the legislation successfully implemented.

### *Impact on service users*

- 3.14 In terms of their overall experiences of support received under the Act, service users were generally positive about the help they had received, particularly when they felt listened to and respected: in other words when local authority approach was person-centred. They also felt that their experiences reflected the ethos of the Act, and they reported positive interactions with local authority staff.
- 3.15 Service users in two of the case study areas reported much less positive experiences, and these centred on: difficulties in accessing services; a lack of face to face contact with staff; and a lack of responsiveness from local authority staff. The findings from service users, in these two case study areas suggests that there are some gaps in fully applying the person-centred ethos of the legislation and partnership working with some local authorities.
- 3.16 Responses from local authorities were mixed regarding whether there have been any changes in the way that people with protected characteristics are dealt with under the new legislation. National stakeholders suggested that the impact of the Act on people with protected characteristics/vulnerable groups largely centred on the variability in service provision. This is both in relation to differences across local authority areas, and also in terms of the protected characteristic involved, with people with mental ill health experiencing the most difficulties.
- 3.17 Although those service users with the most serious mental health conditions appeared to be receiving appropriate support, for many others, their mental health needs did not appear to have been properly addressed, and they were not receiving any support. A large number of service users indicated that they experienced issues with their mental health. Often people who were experiencing mental health issues were also experiencing/had experienced other difficulties, for example alcohol and substance misuse, criminal activity, serving time in prison and relationship breakdowns.

### *Impact on Partnerships/Wider Agendas*

- 3.18 Most national stakeholders felt that the Act has had a positive impact on other agendas and that the links between these (Violence against Women; Future Generations; Social Services and Wellbeing) were clear. Some were similarly positive about improvements to partnership working, and the findings from the local authority support this since they indicate that there has been a significant increase in partnership and multi-agency working with both internal and external partners and agencies. Concerns were raised by stakeholders on the potential impact of other agendas - for example Welfare Reform – on the successful implementation of the legislation. However, some stakeholders expressed concerns about partnership working, suggesting that there is variability across authorities in terms of partnership working, which is an area to address.
- 3.19 The majority of national stakeholders and local authorities did not feel that the new legislation had changed the role of RSLs in preventing homelessness, and suggested that many were already working in partnership with local authorities to prevent and resolve homelessness.

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Available at: <http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/evaluation-homelessness-legislation/?lang=en>

Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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