



Llywodraeth Cymru
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Case study evaluation of local authority projects to mitigate the impact of Housing Benefit reform

Research Summary

Social research

Number: 27/2013

In order to mitigate the impact of the Housing Benefit changes the Welsh Government provided, over the 2 years from April 2011, £1.4 million to local authorities, through its homelessness prevention grant programme to introduce a programme of approved work with landlords and tenants with the aim of preventing homelessness as a result of changes to the Housing Benefit regime¹. Shelter Cymru and Cardiff University were commissioned by Welsh Government to independently evaluate six of these local authority projects.

The study involved both a process and impact evaluation of six case study area projects: (i) Blaenau Gwent; (ii) a partnership approach between Denbighshire, Flintshire and Wrexham; (iii) Caerphilly; (iv) Carmarthenshire; (v) Swansea; (vi) Rhondda Cynon Taf.

Methods

1. The Research Team employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. The qualitative evaluation methodology varied for each of the case study areas. However, all methodologies involved interviews and focus groups with project managers and staff, wider partner organisations and service users.
2. The quantitative approach included analysis of secondary information (statistics, policy documents etc.) from Welsh Government and the Department of Work and Pensions individual local authorities, plus the utilisation of standardised data collected by Welsh Government.

Key Findings:

3. This summary presents general findings across all of the case studies. Please refer to the full report, also available on the Welsh Government website, for detailed information about the approach, effectiveness, and impact of each case study project.

Dadansodiad ar gyfer Polisi



¹On 13th March 2013, the Minister for Housing, Regeneration and Heritage at the time, announced that a further £750,000 would be provided for local authorities to continue this work between April 2013 and March 2014.

5. The project approach tended to take either a (i) face-to-face advice and case-hold role; (ii) an information dissemination role or (iii) an empty homes approach. Nevertheless, most of the projects incorporated elements of two or more of the approaches.
6. All projects have displayed evidence of evolving over the project period. This is due to project workers refining their methods as well as remaining flexible to meet changing external demands.
7. Despite the differences between the projects, there were a number of themes across the case study areas in terms of facilitators and barriers to the project process and impact. Facilitators included: (i) undertaking preparatory proactive work before the project set up; (ii) the recruitment of knowledgeable and experienced staff for the project posts; (iii) adopting partnership approaches to the project; (iv) inclusion of a face-to-face contact role that some projects can offer tenants.
8. Barriers included: (i) not addressing the full breadth of the changes; (ii) being more time-intensive work than first envisioned; (iii) a lack of appropriate accommodation locally and a focus on short-term solutions; (iv) a lack of landlord engagement in the projects; (v) a lack of tenant engagement in the projects; (vi) a lack of resource to be able to target all tenants impacted by the change; (vii) some evidence of a need for better communication of the project and its role to partner organisations to eradicate duplication of roles.
9. All of the case study areas displayed evidence that the projects were meeting (or at least working towards) their aim of preventing homelessness due to changes in Housing Benefit. However, a number of projects encountered delays in their implementation and the appointment of key staff and in some cases clear outcomes

- only began to emerge later in the evaluation period.
10. The case study projects displayed a number of similarities in how homelessness was prevented. The key elements of success were: (i) early proactive work and identification of vulnerable tenants in order for solutions to be sought at the earliest opportunity; and/or (ii) the increase of affordable housing stock via landlord negotiation to lower rents or by bringing empty homes back into use.
 11. Project success has been achieved via effective joint working both within the local authority, especially with Housing Benefit teams, and also with wider stakeholders including some landlords and tenants.
 12. The most valued aspect of the project roles was the ability of the post to go 'one step further' than resources and pressures would allow, without the grant.
 13. Partner organisations feel that rather than just advising tenants they now have someone they can refer the client on to for additional assistance. Thus, it is generally thought that the project workers can bring added value to what existing local authority workers can currently undertake.
 14. The majority of the evidence suggests that landlords are not going to lower their rents in line with the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate despite the projects. Although it is important to note that some landlords have reduced rents both through the project and via direct landlord and tenant negotiation.
 15. The evidence suggested that there is a lack of awareness amongst tenants of the Housing Benefit changes and how they are likely to be impacted as a result of them.
 16. The extent to which we were able to evaluate outcomes has been limited by the ability to collect and compare robust

quantifiable data across the different projects, although the Welsh Government's own on-going monitoring exercise assisted in this respect.

17. Evidence suggested that the case study projects, which have varied quite considerably in their aims, have been cost effective as part of wider strategies to prevent homelessness and provide additional sources of affordable accommodation.

18. Overall, the projects have assisted tenants in the following ways: (i) practical help to sustain their tenancy or find a suitable alternative and (ii) peace of mind in a time of worrying change and upheaval.

19. Overall, the projects have assisted stakeholders in the following ways: (i) reducing the load on other local authority departments such as housing options and homelessness; (ii) some landlords have been facilitated to bring their empty homes back into use or assisted to rent (or continue to

rent) to tenants in receipt of benefits and (iii) increased knowledge of benefit changes and the potential impact due to the dissemination of information by project workers.

20. The continuing success of the projects can be maximised by linking in, and complementing, what else the local authority, and wider partner organisations, are also doing to mitigate the impact of Housing Benefit changes. This will eradicate duplication and ensure the best use of limited resources.

Moving forward

21. To ensure that the projects are most appropriate to the area, each local authority should ensure that the following work is being undertaken locally so that the posts can complement, rather than duplicate, these existing roles.

22. It is imperative that the local authority undertake a local service map in the area to establish what local authority departments, other social

landlords, private landlords and wider stakeholders are doing already in their roles to help mitigate the impact of Housing Benefit changes. The research established that there is currently duplication of roles in some local authorities and this is not the best use of limited resources.

23. There was evidence that other local authority departments and external stakeholders are also undertaking homelessness prevention work (as a result of the changes to Housing Benefit). Further joint working and communication is required to link in with other work being undertaken locally.

24. Close working with the Housing Benefit department can lead to the early identification of tenants affected by the Housing Benefit changes.

25. In order to ensure the time and cost efficiency of the roles, a national approach to sharing information about Housing Benefit changes via a generic newsletter (which can be

amended and tailored for each local authority) and dissemination of good practice between areas is likely to increase the performance of the projects.

26. Whilst the monitoring of standardised data across local authority projects supported through the Welsh Government Homelessness Grant is a valuable recent development, in seeking to measure the outcomes of individual projects it would be useful if arrangements could be put in place to agree project specific performance information (for example, the number and profile of households supported by a particular project, costs of temporary accommodation for a statutory homeless household, number of tenancies sustained for more than a given period, cost saving per homelessness prevention etc.) at the outset of a project, against which organisations would be expected to monitor and report progress.

27. There is a clear need for better and more consistent evidence of the costs and benefits of different schemes (and the local costs associated with different forms of temporary accommodation), which would help develop a clearer picture of the cost savings which could be achieved through different schemes and enable costs and benefits to be compared (and potentially benchmarked) across local authorities in Wales.
28. There is also a need for each local authority to have a knowledgeable person to cascade information on Housing Benefit changes, share good practice and help coordinate, disseminate and train other stakeholders and frontline staff.
29. Due to the importance of landlord engagement, there needs to be a person in the local authority who liaises with landlords directly – such as a Tenancy Support Officer or a Landlord Liaison Officer. Existing landlord relationships need to be built upon and ways sought to incentivise private landlords to rent at LHA rates and engage with the projects. The main issues of concern for landlords are low rent and direct payments to benefit recipients.
30. As well as maximising the use of private rented stock, it is imperative that other means of increasing the affordable housing stock are utilised – namely bringing empty homes back into use.
31. It is imperative that there is an element of face-to-face tenant working in each authority. This could be a specific project post, front-line local authority staff, other social landlords or wider stakeholders.
32. Examples of good practice and innovative ways of engaging with tenants need to be sought. Working in partnership across teams within the local authority and also with partner organisations is the best and, given the size of the changes, the only way to ensure that

each tenant has the opportunity of assistance.

33. It is likely that the number of tribunal hearings for tenants will increase due to issues arising from changes to Housing Benefit and local authorities may not have staff available with the right skills to engage in tribunal work. This issue is something that local authorities should prepare for and consider in the future direction of the project posts.

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