

CARTREF YW POPETH HOME IS EVERYTHING



Homelessness Service Improvement Project: Our findings

About Shelter Cymru

We exist to defend the right to a safe home because home is everything. We help thousands of people across all of Wales every year who have been affected by the housing emergency by offering free, confidential, and independent advice. When necessary, we constructively challenge on behalf of people to ensure they are properly assisted and to improve practice and learning.

We work with people who use our services as equals. We provide information, advice, and support to help people identify the best options to prevent homelessness, to find and keep a home and to help them take back control of their own lives.

We fight the devastating impact the housing emergency has on our people and communities with campaigning, advice, and support – and we never give up.

Shelter Cymru's involvement with the project

The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 introduced significant changes to the statutory homelessness framework, with the key provisions in Part 2 of the Act introducing a duty on local authorities to take reasonable steps to help prevent homelessness (Section 66, 'the prevention duty') and to help secure accommodation for those who are already homeless (section 73, 'the relief duty'). Where prevention and relief efforts are unsuccessful, the full statutory duty to secure suitable accommodation (section 75, 'the full duty') is owed only to applicants who are 'unintentionally homeless' and in priority need.

The Oak Foundation's Housing and Homelessness Programme (HHP) commissioned Crisis to further explore homelessness provision following implementation of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. This project has been concerned

CARTREF YW POPETH HOME IS EVERYTHING



with identifying the causes of ‘fallout’ of applicants receiving homelessness assistance under the prevention and relief duties introduced by the Act. Previous research has identified concerning levels of fallout resulting in an undesirable or unknown outcome. The project has involved Crisis Cymru working closely with specific local authorities. Capturing customer experience has been integral throughout the project in order to gain insight into what has gone wrong and identify how local authorities can work more effectively with those being assisted under the prevention and relief duties. At Shelter Cymru we have a high level of experience in delivering service user involvement and peer research workⁱ, and so we were outsourced to carry out interviews with customers of local authorities who had not had a successful outcome through the local authority’s intervention. The focus was on households where the local authority owed a prevention or relief duty yet had decided to end the duty as permitted under the Act, recording one of the following reasons:

1. *The applicant has refused assistance*
2. *The applicant has not cooperated*
3. *The applicant has withdrawn their application*
4. *The LA has lost contact with the applicant*
5. *Other*

Due to the client group having fallen out of the homelessness provisions, it was recognised at the outset that identifying interviewees and then confirming and carrying out interviews would be difficult. At the outset we identified two methods of attempting to find research participants to interview: it was hoped that the local authorities participating would provide lists of their customers within the scope of the project that we could use to find interviewees, and; using our ‘Sentinel’ database of previous Shelter Cymru casework clients we hoped to identify households in scope for the project. The client group within the project’s scope were likely to have ‘fallen

CARTREF YW POPETH HOME IS EVERYTHING



out' due to either loss of contact, refusing an offer they deemed unsuitable or withdrawing an application. Also, households that 'fell out' would be very unlikely to update the local authority in the event of a change of contact details, or to make future contact in relation to the specific homelessness case that had been closed, as the five fallout categories imply.

However, it transpired that there were further barriers to identifying interviewees. Firstly, possibly due to pressures on resources due to the pandemic and complications around data protection, we did not receive any contact details from the local authorities involved as we had hoped. This meant that we were reliant on identifying households from our database that may have been within scope. This was unfortunate because the local authority's records would show whether a household was in scope for the project, whereas our records would not necessarily do so. We searched several hundred of our own records, including reading narrative sections, to identify whether households were potentially in scope.

Many client records viewed in this first stage revealed that they were unable to locate correspondence relating to their homelessness applications, with some stating that they had not received the relevant letters. In some of the cases viewed, it appeared that our caseworkers had requested the correspondence from the local authority but did not receive it, or there were very long delays in sending the relevant paperwork. Such delays contributed to protracted homelessness for the clients involved, and meant that reasons for ending legal duties were often unidentifiable.

CARTREF YW POPETH HOME IS EVERYTHING



Another difficulty we faced was foreseeable, and discussed between the agencies involved in the research at the outset: the client group within the project's scope were more likely to be facing continuing adversity and multiple complex issues (often preceding them becoming homeless or vulnerably housed). Therefore, from the limited number of clients we could contact and confirm were in scope, there was a significant proportion who were unable, or did not wish to participate. There was a variety of reasons for this. In some instances they experienced mental health issues, or had caring responsibilities, or simply changed their minds about participating in the project. One interview was cut short due to the client being concerned that the answers given may impact upon their current housing application. Further attempts to make contact to reassure them did not receive a response.

Despite the above challenges, our peer researcher completed and transcribed an in-depth interview with a client in the Caerphilly local authority area. We were also able to have informal discussions with a small number of former clients (during the pre-interview stage) who had agreed to participate although ultimately they were unable to. These discussions also revealed relevant information. We also found useful information with an in-depth 'deep dive' into case records.

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Our findings

Interview: Lynette (name has been changed)

Background and details of the case:

Our peer researcher carried out an interview with a single female, Lynette, who became homeless aged 19 after a parental relationship breakdown. Lynette stated that she initially accepted Caerphilly CBC's offer of temporary accommodation in a B&B. However she received no written information, or explanation of the process, except that a support worker would hold weekly appointments. Lynette stated that the support worker merely collected payments for the accommodation, and she felt that she was offered little in the way of support. Lynette described the room itself as being full of damp, and the building as unsanitary with used needles on the floor. She also described inappropriate behaviour on the part of staff at the accommodation, specifically in relation to showing no respect for her privacy or peace, entering the room without knocking and disturbing her in the early hours of the morning to check that she was occupying the room.

Despite these issues Lynette stayed at this accommodation for a full three months, and was offered further temporary accommodation. However this accommodation was an excessive distance away from her network of support and those she had a caring responsibilities towards. Essentially Lynette did not accept the offer of accommodation due to having caring responsibilities for a family member. She felt that it would have been financially and logistically untenable. Lynette stated that she was told that this wasn't 'the local authority's problem' and would have to move

CARTREF YW POPETH HOME IS EVERYTHING



there, and that the local authority would be unable to provide further help if she refused the offer. Lynette did not accept the offer and duty was then discharged. Lynette went to stay with another family member temporarily as a last resort. A few weeks later Lynette managed to contact our housing advice services. Our caseworker attempted to contact colleagues in the local authority, but did not receive a response for almost a month. The only information that was passed on by the local authority to our caseworker was that Lynette refused an offer of accommodation because she did not wish to live in the area accommodation was offered. No written decision letter was sent to our caseworker for reference. During the interview for this project, Lynette stated that she felt if the local authority had communicated the full reasons that she provided for refusing the offer to our caseworker, then her situation may have had the prospect of being resolved. Housing Options informed our caseworker that the interim duty had been ended due to the refusal, yet it did appear that the relief duty was also ended. However, this was difficult to ascertain as Lynette claims not to have received a letter confirming assistance in respect of the interim or relief duties, and an 'end of duty letter' in respect of the relief duty ending.

The customer experience:

Due to a reported lack of information and not being provided with the level of support that she had expected, Lynette felt as though "they threw her (sic) in somewhere and shut the door". Lynette also reported to suffer with mental health issues and was on medication for this. She did not feel that she was listened to when she tried to explain that moving so far away and being so isolated would affect her mental health. Lynette stated that she did appreciate that she was given a certain level of assistance in being provided with accommodation in the B&B. However, she felt that

CARTREF YW POPETH HOME IS EVERYTHING



she was spoken to in a derogatory manner at times, and that she had no control over what happened to her or any say in how the help was given.

Overall Lynette was very disappointed by the assistance she received, she felt that she was ignored and dismissed by the local authority and at the time of the interview stated that she was still homeless.

Findings from case note reviews

Sixteen case files were identified as within the scope of the project and reviewed in depth. A significant proportion of the cases. I reviewed and potential participants I spoke to revealed that the clients who experienced unsuccessful outcomes frequently experienced multiple complex needs. Most commonly, mental health issues were cited as a significant issue that was impacted upon by housing and many of these clients felt that their concerns were not given proper consideration in relation to whether an offer was suitable.

CARTREF YW POPETH HOME IS EVERYTHING



Please see below a statistical breakdown of our findings from our case review:

No of clients: 16	Section 68	Section 73	Section 66
Duty accepted	13*	16	0
Ended	13	16	N/A
Successful challenge	2	3	N/A
IH from TA	7	N/A	N/A
Refusal of offer	5	N/A	N/A
Loss of contact	N/A	6	N/A
Non co-operation	1**	1	N/A
Application withdrawn	N/A	1	N/A
Other	0	0	N/A
56 days	1	5	

* 2 instances in RCT and 1 in Caerphilly when interim accommodation should have been offered to prison leavers but wasn't according to client. This was during Covid measures.

** One client's interim duty was ended due to non-co-operation, which was legally incorrect and successfully challenged

While it was difficult to confirm whether the clients whose case files were examined were precisely in scope for this project, these findings do present some interesting points for consideration. Most significantly, the most common reasons for fallout as per scope (in bold in the table) were 'refusal of an offer' and 'loss of contact'. In relation to loss of contact this related to section 68 duties rather than 73 duties, but it appeared that the vast majority of these clients eventually fell out of the relief duty due to loss of contact or the passing of 56 days. The ending of duties due to the expiry of a 56 day period is within legislation but not included in the scope of this

CARTREF YW POPETH HOME IS EVERYTHING



project. As the breakdown above demonstrates, the 56 day provision was a significant reason that the relief duty was ended, accounting for about a third of all relief duty closures. Upon examination of the cases, there were many common themes among those who fell out, and those where duty was ended due to the 56 day period. This could be a consideration for future work in this area. Also, possibly due to the increased strain on resources in local authorities' homelessness teams, there were often procedural issues relating to the provision of written decisions as required by the Act. In one of the cases examined a caseworker requested a written decision letter in relation to a presentation as street homeless and a subsequent offer of emergency accommodation. Upon receiving the letter from the housing options team, our caseworker noted that the letter did not refer to the homelessness legislation as required. When our caseworker queried this with the local authority, they were informed that the client had been provided the accommodation under 'Covid measures'. This raised concerns about procedure, as there was no information received by the client in relation to a relief duty or a personal housing plan.

Conclusion

The critical phase of this project has taken place during a time of unprecedented challenges and strain on housing and homelessness services. This has been true in both the statutory and voluntary sectors. The 'Everyone In' initiative, rightly introduced by the Welsh government in response to the pandemic, has certainly presented a huge challenge to local authorities' homelessness services. The

CARTREF YW POPETH HOME IS EVERYTHING



requirement to treat all of those who are street homeless as in priority need and therefore provided with interim accommodation has undoubtedly seen the need to significantly increase temporary accommodation provision. There have been wide variations in customer demand and the ability to meet homelessness need between local authorities, with some rising to meet the challenge successfully. Most importantly, the Covid measures have provided invaluable information as we move forward in our commitment with Welsh Government to eliminate homelessness in Wales. We believe that all people living in Wales have the right to a home, and we welcome the sector-wide willingness to examine how this vision can be realised. This will be considered through examining opportunities to reform the approach to 'priority need' with the aim of ensuring that all have the right to shelter from the injustice of street homelessness, rather than just a few who meet the limited priority need criteria.

ⁱ See [“Hwyl Fawr to Homelessness: how to end homelessness in Wales, by people with first-hand experience”](#)