



Local Authority projects to minimise the impact of housing benefit reform, using Homelessness Grant funding (Revised)

Emerging Findings Bulletin

Social research

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Background

To help local authorities prevent homelessness as a result of the changes to the housing benefit regime, the Welsh Government made £1.4million available to local authorities to develop projects in the two years to March 2013, to raise awareness of the reforms and provide support and advice to landlords and tenants.

This bulletin presents emerging findings from two monitoring and evaluation exercises to explore the approach, effectiveness and impact of each project.

Key findings to date:

Key findings from regular monitoring of projects.

1. Workers were appointed by Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Conwy, Denbighshire, Swansea and the Vale of Glamorgan before October 2011. By March 2012, Anglesey, Flintshire, Gwynedd, Neath and Port Talbot, Ceredigion, Bridgend and Merthyr Tydfil had also taken on workers. Later appointments were made in Cardiff, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Wrexham. Carmarthenshire, Monmouthshire, Newport, Pembrokeshire and Torfaen did not make appointments with the grant. It is understood that some work was also undertaken in Powys.
2. The project approach tends to take either a face-to-face advice and case-hold role, an information dissemination role or an empty homes approach. Nevertheless, most of the projects incorporate elements of two or more of the approaches.

3. The nature of support provided for landlords and tenants via the projects varied between local authorities and for individuals, ranging from personalised mail to intensive and repeated personal contact support. Whilst only three quarters of authorities reported this data, the figures showed for these authorities that nearly 900^(r) landlords and more than 1000^(r) tenants had received personal advice or help in the six months to 31st March 2012. These figures had risen to nearly 2000 landlords and over 4000 tenants by 31st September 2012.
4. Most authorities provided evidence of partnership working with people external to the organisation, principally with private sector landlords. Most commonly, this involved indirect support through landlord forums and distribution of information.
5. Nearly half the LAs reported that they were overcoming barriers to landlord and tenant engagement through direct contact with landlords. Nearly a quarter were making direct contact with tenants. Some were also mediating between landlords and tenants.
6. Most also reported changes to housing benefit team practices in order to prevent homelessness, principally through closer liaison between housing benefit and housing options or homelessness teams, through changes in systems for identifying and supporting tenants most at risk, and through changes to the targeting and administration of discretionary housing payments.
7. The rate of homelessness cases where private sector rent arrears were identified as the main factor remained low, at less than 5% in all authorities at 31st March 2012, and at less than 6% in all authorities at September 2012.

Key findings from the evaluation case studies

8. The evaluation case studies looked in detail at projects in Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Carmarthenshire, Swansea, Rhondda Cynon Taf and the partnership project between Denbighshire, Flintshire and Wrexham.
9. All projects have displayed evidence of evolving over the project period. This is due to project workers refining their methods as well as needing to stay flexible to meet changing external demands. Each project is unique. However, there were a number of themes across the case study areas in terms of facilitators and barriers to the project process and impact.
10. Facilitators to project success include:
 - (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 the 'personal touch' that some projects can offer tenants.

^(r) Revised on 15th March 2013, due to a data processing error in the initial version. This bulletin was first published on 14th March 2013, and showed incorrectly that more than 1000 landlords and more than 3000 tenants had received personal advice or help in the six months to 31st March 2012.

11. Barriers to project success include:
- (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 and tenant engagement in the projects
 - (v) a lack of resource to be able to target all tenants impacted by the change
 - (vi) some evidence of a need for better communication about the project and its role to stakeholders to eradicate duplication of roles.
12. All of the case study areas displayed evidence that the projects are meeting (or at least working towards) their aim of preventing homelessness due to changes in housing benefit.
13. The case study projects displayed a number of similarities in how impact on homelessness prevention is achieved. The key elements of success are:
- (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.
14. Success has been achieved via effective joint working both within the local authority, especially between teams dealing with homelessness prevention and housing benefit, and also with wider stakeholders including some landlords and tenants.
15. The most valued aspect of the project worker roles is the ability of the post to go 'one step further' than what the local authority could do given its current workload
16. The majority of the evidence suggests that landlords are not going to lower their rents in line with local housing allowance rates 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.
17. The evidence also suggests that there is a lack of awareness amongst tenants of the housing benefit changes and the likely effect upon them.
18. The continuing success of the projects can be maximised by linking in, and complementing, what else the local authority, and wider stakeholders, are also doing to mitigate the impact of housing benefit changes. This will eradicate duplication and ensure the best use of limited resources.

Next steps:

This bulletin presents emerging findings from two monitoring and evaluation exercises. Further details will be published in May 2013, when the research is complete, in the form of a monitoring report and a full evaluation case studies report. The reports will be available on the Welsh Government website at: <http://wales.gov.uk/about/aboutresearch/social/?lang=en>