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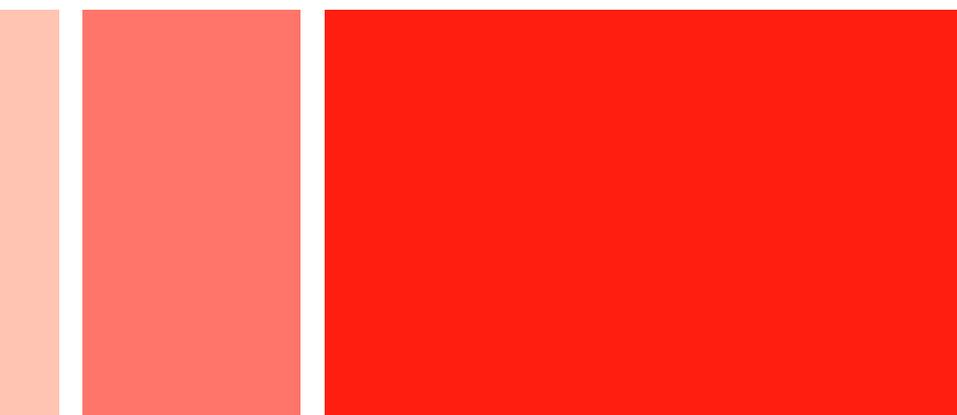
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# Case study evaluation of the local authority projects to mitigate the impact of housing benefit reform



# **Case study evaluation of the local authority projects to mitigate the impact of housing benefit reform**

## **Shelter Cymru and Cardiff University**

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

For further information please contact:

Name: Sara James

Department: Knowledge and Analytical Services

Welsh Government

Rhydycar

Merthyr Tydfil

CF48 1UZ

Tel: 0300 062 8562

Fax: (01685) 728006

Email: [sara.james@wales.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:sara.james@wales.gsi.gov.uk)

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## Table of Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Background to the study.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Key findings from the study .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>The research in context.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Methodology of the case studies .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Case studies: evaluation.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Project impact.....</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Conclusion and key lessons for projects moving forward .....</b>	<b>94</b>

# 1 Background to the study

## Introduction

- 1.1 The UK Government's package of measures to reform Housing Benefit and local housing allowance have led to widespread fear that the changes will result in many more people falling into arrears and facing the threat of eviction and homelessness.
- 1.2 In order to mitigate the impact of the Housing Benefit changes the Welsh Government provided, over the two years from April 2011, £1.4 million<sup>1</sup> to local authorities in order 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 regime.
- 1.3 The conditions of the grant specified that local authority projects should involve the following to prevent homelessness:
  - (i) identification of and work with vulnerable people to reduce the risk of tenancy breakdown and enable them to access housing;
  - (ii) work with private landlords to sustain and increase access to affordable homes;
  - (iii) work across departmental boundaries;
  - (iv) work with external partners and
  - (v) adaptation of housing benefit team practices.
- 1.4 The local authority projects are important as, despite the changes, it is crucial that decent homes remain accessible and sustainable for households across Wales. It is also imperative that the impact of the reforms upon the homelessness prevention work of Welsh Government and its partners is kept to a minimum. Thus there is a timely need to evaluate the projects and establish which projects 'work for whom, and when'. This is also an opportunity to share findings and good practice across local authorities in Wales in order to maximise the effectiveness of their local project.

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<sup>1</sup> On 13<sup>th</sup> 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.

- 1.5 Shelter Cymru and Cardiff University were commissioned by Welsh Government to independently evaluate six (out of 20) of the local authority projects to minimise the impact of housing benefit reform.
- 1.6 The study involved both a process and impact evaluation of the following six case study area projects:
  - (i) Carmarthen;
  - (ii) Swansea;
  - (iii) Rhondda Cynon Taf;
  - (iv) a partnership approach between Denbighshire, Flintshire and Wrexham;
  - (v) Caerphilly;
  - (vi) Blaenau Gwent.
- 1.7 This case study evaluation supplements additional monitoring work currently undertaken by Welsh Government on all of the local authority projects whereby a small number of standardised quantitative data items and qualitative information are being collected in respect of the six month periods between October 2011 and March 2012, April and September 2012, October 2012 and March 2013.

### **Aims and objectives**

- 1.8 The principle aim of the current evaluation is to provide the Minister with information about the approach taken in each of the case study areas, and the impact these projects have had with regard to the grant purpose criteria, and the aims and objectives set within each area.
- 1.9 The evaluation consisted of a two-phased methodology:
  - (i) a process evaluation and;
  - (ii) an impact evaluation.
- 1.10 The process evaluation primarily focussed on assessing how well each model of delivery had been working toward the project aims of preventing homelessness as a result of the changes to the housing benefit regime and the ability of each project to assist vulnerable people to sustain their homes. It examined the rationale for each project, its early development, and the implementation of the particular model.

1.11 The impact evaluation considered the impact of each project and whether it met its ultimate aims (to date). Some outcomes are expected to take some time to emerge (such as long-term tenancy sustainment, positive impact on homelessness statistics etc.), and it was therefore necessary to examine the sequence of interim processes and impacts that could indicate that the projects are having the desired effect.

## **Overview of methods**

- 1.12 The Research Team employed both quantitative and qualitative methods.
- 1.13 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 stakeholders and service users. Then, three months following the initial process evaluation consultation, a second wave of interviews and focus groups were held to undertake the impact evaluation.
- 1.14 Peer Research Officers accompanied Research Officers to undertake tenant interviews whereby we employed an assistant researcher who is able to identify with the target population to assist in completion of the interviews. The use of Peer Research Officers increases the level of engagement in the study and also provides employment opportunities for vulnerable young people.
- 1.15 The quantitative approach included analysis of secondary information (statistics, policy documents etc.) from Welsh Government and the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) individual local authorities, the utilisation of standardised data collected by Welsh Government in relation to all homelessness grant funded local authority projects, information from the individual grant applications from the six case studies and a separate small-scale data collection exercise in relation to these same six case studies.

## **Structure of the report**

- 1.16 The remaining structure of the report is as follows:
- 1.17 Chapter two details the key findings from the research.
- 1.18 Chapter three sets out the context for the Housing Benefit projects using secondary data sources and already published research studies. This section will include an overview of:
- (i) Housing and Welfare Benefit reform;
  - (ii) the impacts of reform;
  - (iii) the changing nature of homelessness in Wales and;
  - (iv) the response of Welsh Government to welfare reform.

- 1.19 Chapter four details the qualitative and quantitative methods used for both the process and impact evaluation.
- 1.20 Chapter five introduces the case study areas and summarises the projects<sup>2</sup>. This chapter also provides the results of the individual process and impact evaluation for each of the six case study areas including implementation of the projects and an evaluation of the impacts.
- 1.21 Chapter six draws out common themes and considerations from across the six case study areas. This chapter compares and contrasts projects and approaches whilst highlighting strengths and weaknesses of different approaches.
- 1.22 Chapter seven offers a conclusion following the detailed analysis of the primary qualitative and quantitative data collected during both the process and impact evaluation.

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<sup>2</sup>.However, a full description of the projects can be found in the Appendix.

## 2 Key findings from the study

- 2.1 The project approach adopted by local authorities tends 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 incorporate elements of two or more of the approaches.
- 2.2 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.
- 2.3 Each case study project is unique and the evaluation of the individual case study areas reflects that.
- 2.4 **Carmarthenshire:** The project grant has been used to provide financial assistance and loans to landlords in order to bring their empty properties into the rented sector.
- 2.5 The existence of a Social Lettings Agency (SLA) in Carmarthenshire and the use of expert staff meant that the project was set up effectively and a number of quick successes have been witnessed in terms of bringing formerly empty homes back into use.
- 2.6 Stakeholders agree that the project prevents homelessness through making more affordable housing available to tenants affected by the changes to Housing Benefit. Tenants of the project told us that the project had had a great impact on their life, including improving their quality of life.
- 2.7 However, the success of the empty homes project is constrained by local context and local landlord's willingness to rent through a SLA. The project works very well with landlords who do not wish to handle the process themselves. However, the project is less appealing to landlords who are unable/do not want to lower their rents or who wish to manage the process themselves.

- 2.8 **Swansea:** This proactive project is a partnership between Swansea County Council and The Wallich and works with households struggling to maintain private sector tenancies as a result of the welfare reforms.
- 2.9 A significant amount of work was undertaken in advance to ensure that the project ran smoothly once set up and expert staff were recruited for the post.
- 2.10 The face-to-face case work involved in the role was noted by project staff, local authority staff and wider stakeholders as being a key element and strength of the project.
- 2.11 However, there has been a low response rate from tenants and landlords engaging in the project. Nevertheless, where the project worker has seen tenants, there is evidence of homelessness prevention and the service users we spoke to reported being very satisfied with the service they received.
- 2.12 **Rhondda Cynon Taf:** Here, the grant is used to fund a Tenancy Sustainability Officer (TSO) to work with people affected, or due to be affected, by the Welfare Benefit reforms.
- 2.13 Like other case study areas, this is a proactive approach that targets tenants and landlords in advance of the changes. The project employs a proactive face-to-face case-working role.
- 2.14 Although the project worker started late, thanks to effective preparatory work and the eventual recruitment of expert staff, they were able to effectively reach out to the target groups of tenants.
- 2.15 There was agreement amongst the project stakeholders and tenants involved with the project that the post has been successful in preventing homelessness.
- 2.16 Tenant and landlord engagement was noted as a barrier to success as well as a lack of suitable accommodation for tenants affected locally.
- 2.17 **The North Wales partnership:** This partnership between Flintshire, Wrexham and Denbighshire is aimed at working with stakeholders to distribute information about the changes and empowering stakeholders to cascade the information to others including their tenants. The project

is unique in that it is an example of cross boundary/organisational working.

- 2.18 The project manager views the strength of the project in being the empowerment of organisations to deal with their own clients. Stakeholders informed us that the cascading of information works effectively to compliment what else is going on in the area.
- 2.19 Despite the partnership, roles vary slightly between the three local authority areas. However all local authorities recruited expert staff for the roles to increase the efficiency of the project posts.
- 2.20 This proactive project recognises that Housing Benefit changes cannot be viewed in isolation so has ensured that the changes are viewed in conjunction with other welfare reforms.
- 2.21 Stakeholders agree that the projects have contributed to homelessness prevention in the area.
- 2.22 A barrier was identified as lack of tenant and stakeholder (including landlord) engagement, plus a lack of suitable accommodation.
- 2.23 **Caerphilly:** The project is based around the appointment of a Private Rented Sector Access and Advice Coordinator (PRSAAC) and the aim of the role is to prevent homelessness through proactive early identification of 'at risk' households and to work actively with landlords and tenants.
- 2.24 Preparatory groundwork and the recruitment of expert staff meant that the project could run effectively once the project worker post was in place.
- 2.25 Stakeholders feel that the effective element is that rather than just saying what benefits people are entitled to, the project worker can go one step further and actually support the person. Service users stated that the most helpful element was the individual helpfulness and personal support.
- 2.26 A barrier was noted as lack of landlord engagement and lack of suitable accommodation locally.
- 2.27 **Blaenau Gwent:** The grant funding was used to fund a Tenancy Sustainment Officer (TSO). The key role is essentially twofold: firstly to raise awareness of discretionary housing payments and assess

applications and secondly to work with private landlords to try to negotiate lower rents where tenants are experiencing financial difficulties (or to seek to help them find alternative accommodation).

- 2.28 A major strength of this proactive approach is that stakeholders felt that the TSO can go 'a step further' and offer support to tenants, above and beyond what workers have been doing in the past (or currently can do due to their own workloads).
- 2.29 Service users spoke highly of the project. They noted that they were very happy with the service they received and they appreciated the 'personal service'.
- 2.30 The registered social landlords (RSLs) we spoke to reported good practice in that the Project Manager always invited them to take part in meetings so they could tackle issues together.
- 2.31 Landlord and tenant engagement were viewed as a barrier to project success.
- 2.32 **In general:** 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 for a number of projects 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 a face-to-face contact role that some projects can offer tenants.
- 2.33 Barriers for a number of projects 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 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 stakeholders to eradicate duplication of roles.
- 2.34 All of the case study areas displayed evidence that the s180 projects are 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 are only beginning to emerge later in the evaluation period.
- 2.35 The research team have also identified the relative strengths and weaknesses of each approach.
- 2.36 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.
- 2.37 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.
- 2.38 The most valued aspect of the s180 roles is the ability of the post to go 'one step further' than what the local authority could do given their current workload.
- 2.39 The majority of the evidence suggests that landlords are not likely 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.
- 2.40 The evidence suggests 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.
- 2.41 However, the extent to which we have been 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 has assisted in this respect.

2.42 The continuing success of the projects can be maximised by linking with and complementing other action by local authorities and wider stakeholders to mitigate the impact of Housing Benefit changes. This will eradicate duplication and ensure the best use of limited resources.

### **3 The research in context**

#### **Introduction**

- 3.1 This chapter sets the context for the research. It begins by outlining some of the key changes which have been made to the Housing Benefit system and highlights other changes which are in the pipeline, including the intention to introduce a new system of Universal Credit to replace the existing system of welfare benefits. It goes on to look at some of the early evidence from other published research as to the impacts of these changes and projected changes.
- 3.2 Evidence is then presented as to recent changes in the nature and extent of statutory homelessness in Wales, before the chapter concludes by briefly considering some of the actions supported at a national level by Welsh Government to measure the impact of these changes to the benefits regime in Wales and how best to try to mitigate their effects at a local level.

#### **Housing and Welfare Benefit Reform**

- 3.3 In April 2011 the UK Government embarked upon a programme of welfare reform with significant implications for housing, landlords (private as well as social) and tenants. A series of changes to the Housing Benefit system were introduced from April 2011, further changes were implemented with effect from January last year and further amendments are due to be introduced from April 2013. In addition, under the Welfare Reform Act 2012, a new simplified benefit system, Universal Credit, will commence in October 2013 and be rolled out over a four year period.
- 3.4 The overarching intention of the welfare reforms is to develop a simplified benefit system, to ensure paid employment rather than benefit dependency is encouraged and to deliver savings to the social security budget. However, the reforms are expected to have negative consequences for residents, landlords and other service providers, to place severe financial pressures on low income and often vulnerable households and increase the demands upon housing, as well as welfare

advice and support services at a local level, all of which need to respond effectively if more households are not to be faced with homelessness.

- 3.5 The changes to Housing Benefit which have already been introduced include:
- (i) reductions in maximum LHA rates;
  - (ii) the end of excess payments: from April 2011 the maximum local housing allowance was limited to the level of the rent;
  - (iii) new caps on local housing allowances, based upon the number of bedrooms;
  - (iv) the introduction of a new maximum four bedrooms' LHA;
  - (v) Housing Benefit for single people under the age of 35 restricted to the rate for a single room in a shared house.
- 3.6 Further changes to the benefits system from April 2013 encompass:
- (i) linking annual increases in local housing allowance rates to either the Consumer Price Index (CPI) or the rent officer valuation, whichever is lower;
  - (ii) applying the benefit cap to the combined income from out of work benefits, Child Benefit, Child Tax Credit and Housing Benefit, with the intention that non-working households are no better off on benefits than the average working household;
  - (iii) the reduction of Housing Benefit for claimants in the social housing sector who are considered to have too many bedrooms for their needs (the so called 'bedroom tax');
  - (iv) the replacement of Council Tax Benefit by a new localised council tax system;
  - (v) changes to the Social Fund, with the scrapping of a number of discretionary elements (e.g. Community Care Grants, Crisis Loans);
  - (vi) the replacement of Disability Living Allowance by the introduction of Personal Independence Payments;
  - (vii) changes to the Tax Credits system.
- 3.7 In addition, one further planned change is for most claimants (excluding those judged to be vulnerable) to receive payment to cover housing costs direct to them instead of to their landlord, with these payments being made on a monthly basis rather than fortnightly as at present. The

direct payment of benefit to tenants has potential impacts not only upon landlords but also for tenants in terms of how they might in future manage their finances. The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) is currently undertaking demonstration projects in six local authorities to establish how this might best be achieved (DWP, 2012).

- 3.8 The Universal Credit system will be implemented over a four year period from 1st October 2013, initially with respect to new claims. The migration of those already in receipt of benefits whose circumstances do not change will not commence until April 2014 and is planned to be completed by 2017 when it is estimated that 12-13 million tax credit and benefit claims will have been transformed into around eight million households in receipt of Universal Credit. Under Universal Credit all benefits (except Council Tax Benefit) will be administered by the DWP, including benefits for housing costs. As indicated above, housing costs will in future be paid monthly in arrears to tenants rather than their landlords, unless there are qualifying vulnerability issues in respect of the claimant.

### **The Impacts of Reform**

- 3.9 There is little question that reform to housing and welfare benefits has affected and will continue to affect many households. This may be particularly so in Wales, which tends to have a higher dependence on welfare benefits than many other parts of the UK (Welsh Government, 2012a). The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) has argued that the impact of the tax and benefit changes to be implemented by 2014-15 will mean that, on average, households in Wales might expect to see their incomes reduced by 4.1% (or £1,110 per annum), compared to a UK average of around 3.8% (or £1,170 per annum). Of course, these figures will vary across the two countries (IFS, 2011). It has also been argued (Welsh Government, 2012a) that the impacts of welfare and benefit reforms will depend upon the performance of the wider economy and the extent to which households modify their behaviour in response to these changes. However, it might also be added that there are opportunities for the

devolved administration in Wales, local authorities and other agencies to seek to mitigate the potential impacts of the reforms.

- 3.10 The Housing Benefit changes introduced in 2011 have been estimated to have had an impact on almost all local housing allowance benefit claimants in Wales (more than 48,000), and that on average these people are £9 per week worse off than previously. The 2012 change in Housing Benefit entitlement for single people under the age of 35 in Wales has been estimated to affect around 4,000 people who on average are £24 per week less well off. However, in some localities the loss of benefit is much more significant.
- 3.11 It has been estimated that the introduction of the benefit cap will impact upon around 1,500 households in Wales with an average reduction in benefit of around £70 per week. The introduction of the 'bedroom tax' for social sector tenants of working age in Wales has been estimated to affect around 40,000 households in Wales, who might lose an average of £11 per week (Welsh Tenants, 2012).
- 3.12 The National Audit Office (2012) has acknowledged the role of the DWP in managing the changes to Housing Benefit. Its recent report concluded:
- 3.13 "We see the main 'unplanned' and perhaps 'unplannable' challenges facing the DWP as being those areas where the interaction of local authority funding capacity constraints, social housing stock, rental market conditions and the local economy may produce extreme impacts".
- 3.14 Research from the Social Market Foundation (2012), examining the potential impact of the move to Universal Credit, has indicated that low income households in general are relatively poorly positioned to cope with the challenges of the economic recession, that many of those on the lowest incomes have little or no savings and many have significant unsecured debts, and that the introduction of a new system of benefits risks increasing the vulnerability of many low income households. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), whilst showing support for some of the principles underpinning welfare reform, have also highlighted a significant number of risks and the need for appropriate local financial

advice and support to assist people through the period of transition (JRF, 2012).

- 3.15 The Chartered Institute of Housing (2012), in looking at whether low income working households are likely to be better off under Universal Credit rather than the current system of welfare benefits, have suggested that some 400,000 families across the UK in low paid employment will be worse off under the new arrangements.
- 3.16 The initial outputs from the UK Government's commissioned evaluation of the recent changes to the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) and Housing Benefit arrangements in the private rented sector (Beatty et al, 2012), which includes case studies in Cardiff, Denbighshire and Rhondda Cynon Taf, have shown that new claimants and those living outside of London tended to know less about the changes to LHA rates than others (e.g. existing claimants, those living in London). It has also revealed that Housing Benefit claimants who had recently moved home had done so for personal or family reasons (e.g. birth of a child) or housing reasons (desire for self-contained accommodation) or for reasons of locality, rather than financial reasons. However, the research has also shown that a significant proportion (around two-thirds) of claimants (with a higher proportion amongst new claimants and those outside London) were experiencing shortfalls, as a result of their local housing allowance being lower than their rent, putting pressure on household budgets. Over 40% of claimants reported difficulties in affording their current rent, although 10% were found to be in arrears. In terms of responding to the shortfall between rent and local housing allowance a third of respondents in this study indicated they would look at lower rent properties in the local area and a quarter would seek to negotiate a lower rent with their landlord.
- 3.17 This research is also looking at the impact of changes to local housing allowances on landlord behaviour. Landlords were generally aware of the changes (though less so outside of London). Although it is early research, and landlords' expressed intentions may not be followed by actions, the study has indicated that a significant proportion of landlords may cease or reduce their lettings to those on housing benefit. Around a

third of landlords in the study said they had or would consider reducing rents in exchange for direct payments, and this was particularly the case within less pressurised housing markets. It would seem that the prospect of rent negotiation is likely to be greatest in those areas where demand from other potential tenants is limited.

3.18 The Westminster Government has acknowledged that their reforms will cause financial hardship and, in order to help those most seriously affected by the changes have increased the Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) fund. This is financed on an annual basis by the DWP, with local authorities being able to match the allocation by up to two and a half times. However, given that funds are limited, and the number of claims for such payments is increasing, the normal period of entitlement is limited to 13 weeks. DHPs can be used to cover rent deposits, rent arrears, shortfalls between housing benefit and rent and reductions in LHA. Local authorities will usually consider individual circumstances which may contribute to financial hardship (including the likelihood of a household becoming homeless if a payment is not made). However, once the monies allocated to an individual local authority for the financial year have been spent, no more payments can be made. Notably, these have been significantly increased for next year (2013-14); for example in Rhondda Cynon Taf from little more than £25,000 in 2010-11 to over £450,000 in 2013-14; from under £68,000 in Swansea to over £474,000 over the same period.

3.19 In addition to the financial impacts of the benefit reforms there may be wider social, economic and behavioural consequences. There is the potential for increased financial pressures to lead to family and relationship breakdown with increased demands being placed upon health and social services as well as housing provision. As well as impacts on the health and well being of individuals there are the potential impacts upon the local economy (in terms of reduced local spending), on local communities (given the potential for increased crime and anti-social behaviour) and on demands for affordable housing as a result of increases in homelessness.

## The Changing Nature of Homelessness in Wales

- 3.20 The number of households in Wales accepted as homeless (those found to be eligible for assistance, unintentionally homeless and in priority need) fell from a peak of just under 9,900 in 2004-05 to just below 5,600 in 2009-10, although the number of acceptances has since been rising, reaching a level of nearly 6,300 acceptances in 2010-11 and over 6,500 acceptances in 2011-12. However, the number of recorded acceptances fell by nine per cent in the first quarter of 2012-13 and by 18% in the second quarter, compared with the same periods in 2011-12. A number of local authorities have reported the growth in homelessness prevention work as the reason for the very recent decline in the number of homeless acceptances.
- 3.21 Overall across Wales in 2011-12 local authorities took action under homelessness legislation in respect of 14,985 households, of whom 6,515 (43.5%) were found to be eligible for assistance, unintentionally homeless and in priority need. However, the figures vary across the eight case study authorities.

**Table 1 Homelessness: Case study local authorities - 2011-12**

<b>Local Authority</b>	<b>Homeless applications</b>	<b>Unintentionally homeless and in priority need</b>	<b>%</b>
Denbighshire	175	80	45.7
Flintshire	130	75	57.7
Wrexham	870	465	53.4
Carmarthenshire	1550	695	44.8
Swansea	2665	855	32.1
Rhondda CynonTaf	545	245	45.0
Caerphilly	470	265	56.4
Blaenau Gwent	500	150	30.0

Source: Stats Wales local authority level data

- 3.22 During the first six months of 2012-13 homelessness decisions taken by Welsh local authorities totalled 7,730, with 3,015 (39%) households accepted as eligible, unintentionally homeless and in priority need. Once again, the proportion of acceptances varies across the case study authorities, ranging from 27.2% in Swansea and 36.0% in Rhondda Cynon Taf up to 58.15 in Caerphilly and 63.6% in Flintshire.
- 3.23 In our case study authorities the number of households accepted as homeless increased between 2009-10 and 2011-12 in Flintshire, Wrexham, Carmarthenshire, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Caerphilly and Blaenau Gwent. The number has fallen in Denbighshire and Swansea.
- 3.24 Although the number of households accepted as homeless in Wales has generally been increasing since 2009-10, the proportion of homeless households in each of the priority need categories has remained broadly unchanged. Households with dependent children or with a pregnant woman in the household continue to be the most significant category of priority need. However, at an all Wales level whilst the numbers of households accepted as homeless due to actual or threatened domestic violence rose over the last three years, there are indications of a slight fall in 2012-13. In comparison, the number of homeless households in priority need due to either physical or learning disability or mental illness has continued to rise over the recent past.
- 3.25 The main reasons for homelessness in Wales remain parents or other relatives/friends being unable or unwilling to continue to accommodate, relationship breakdown, movement from institutional accommodation or care and the loss of rented or tied accommodation. Evidence from the most recent figures (July - September 2012) suggest 27% of homeless acceptances in Wales were due to households no longer able to stay with parents, relatives or friends, compared with just over 20% as a result of relationship breakdown, and 23% due to a loss of a former tenancy or as a result of mortgage arrears.
- 3.26 In general, the use of temporary accommodation by local authorities in Wales fell between 2005-06 and 2009-10, but has increased since as a consequence of the rise in the number of homeless acceptances. As at 31 March 2012 there were 2,770 homeless households in Wales living in

different types of temporary accommodation, compared with 2,490 households at the end of 2009-10 and 2,640 households at the end of 2010-11. This represents an increase of more than 10% over two years. However, figures for the first two quarters of 2012-13 are broadly similar to the comparable quarters for 2011-12.

3.27 Over the period 2002-03 to 2010-11 the number of homeless households in Wales accommodated in the private sector (including privately owned accommodation leased by local authorities and housing associations), each March 31st grew significantly from 175 households in 2002-03 to 710 households in 2006-07 and to 1065 households in 2011-12. In comparison, other forms of temporary accommodation, though subject to year-on-year fluctuations, have been relatively stable. However, at the end of 2011-12 the number of homeless households accommodated temporarily in the private sector was down slightly on the figure for 31 March 2011, and the figures for the first two quarters of 2012-13 are also slightly down on the equivalent quarters for 2011-12. In comparison, the numbers of homeless households accommodated temporarily either in hostels or refuges increased from 400 at 31 March 2010 to 485 households at 31 March 2012 and the figures for the first two quarters of 2012-13 are also up on the same period for 2011-12 (reaching 540 households at 30 September 2012). The numbers in bed and breakfast accommodation show similar trends, increasing from 235 homeless households at the end of 2009-10 to 310 households at the end of 2011-12.

3.28 Once again, the figures for the first two quarters of 2012-13 show slight increases over the previous year's comparable quarters, although at 30 September 2012 only 275 homeless households in Wales were recorded as living in bed and breakfast accommodation (down from 310 households at 31 March 2012). Nevertheless, this accounts for more than 10% of all homeless households in temporary accommodation.

3.29 The use of bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless families has generally been in decline since 2005-06. Although there is evidence of a significant proportionate increase in 2011-12, the numbers were still below levels seen in 2004-05 and 2005-06. The first six months of the

current year (2012-13) saw a drop in the number of family households living in bed and breakfast accommodation, with only 15 families with children in this form of temporary accommodation in September 2012 (just five per cent of those homeless households in bed and breakfast accommodation).

- 3.30 At the end of 2011-12 of the 2,770 homeless households living in various forms of temporary accommodation in Wales, 65 had been housed directly in the private rented sector, 630 in private accommodation leased by local authorities, 370 in private accommodation leased by housing associations, 485 in social housing stock, a similar number in hostel or refuge accommodation, 310 in bed and breakfast accommodation and 525 households were 'homeless at home'. During this year our eight case study authorities accounted for 555 homeless households living in temporary accommodation, of which 195 were accommodated in private sector accommodation.
- 3.31 Over recent years more than 60% of households in temporary accommodation at any given time have tended to have been there for less than six months (68% at the end of September 2012). By way of comparison at 30 September 2012 17% of homeless households living in temporary accommodation had been there for more than a year. Of these, more than half were families with children, the majority of whom were living in private sector accommodation.
- 3.32 Since the start of 2008 over 70% of those homeless households who had been living in temporary accommodation for more than 12 months were living in either private or public sector temporary accommodation (as opposed to hostel/refuge accommodation or bed and breakfast establishments).
- 3.33 The most recently available figures (July – September 2012) show that almost three quarters (74%) of homeless households leaving temporary accommodation in Wales had been there for less than six months, and only seven per cent had been there for more than 12 months. Over time the majority of those leaving temporary accommodation have been rehoused through the offer of more secure accommodation under the allocation policies of the relevant local authority.

## **The Response of Welsh Government to Welfare Benefit Reform**

- 3.34 The Welsh Government has taken a number of initiatives to assist people in coping with the changes to Housing Benefit and other welfare reforms. It set up a Ministerial Task and Finish Group to assess and monitor the implications of welfare reform and to consider the impacts across a number of policy areas. In addition, a financial contribution has been given to support an on-going DWP research programme seeking to understand and measure the demographic and social impacts of the changes. Denbighshire, Cardiff and Rhondda Cynon Taff councils have been included within this study.
- 3.35 Investment has also been made in raising awareness of the changes, through a campaign being delivered by Citizens Advice, the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), Community Housing Cymru (CHC) and Shelter Cymru. In addition, funding has been made available under the homelessness grant programme to support projects designed to assist landlords, tenants and potential service users, in ways which will help to prevent homelessness and sustain tenancies. Within this programme a monitoring system has been put in place to collect a limited amount of standardised quantitative data across all Welsh authorities and secondly (the focus of this report) to undertake a set of six evaluation case studies (examining both process and impact) to look at the different ways a number of local authorities in Wales are developing specific projects designed to mitigate the impacts of the changes in Housing Benefit (and planned welfare reform) and prevent increases in homelessness at the local level.

## **4 Methodology of the case studies**

### **The aims and objectives of the process and impact evaluation**

- 4.1 The process evaluation primarily focussed on assessing how well the model of delivery had worked toward the project aims of preventing homelessness as a result of the changes to the Housing Benefit regime and each project's ability to assist vulnerable people to sustain their homes. It examined the rationale for the projects, the early development of the projects and the implementation of the particular model.
- 4.2 The impact evaluation looked at the impact of the projects and whether it met its ultimate aims (to date). Some outcomes may take some time to emerge (such as long-term tenancy sustainment, positive impact on homelessness statistics etc.), therefore it was necessary to examine the sequence of interim processes and impacts that could indicate that the projects are having the desired impact.

### **Qualitative Methodology**

- 4.3 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 stakeholders and service users. Then, three months following the initial process evaluation consultation, a second wave of interviews and focus groups were held to undertake the impact evaluation. Who we spoke to during both round one and two of the research process is detailed below.
- 4.4 Carmarthenshire, process evaluation:
- (i) an interview with the project manager,
  - (ii) interviews with four local 'accidental' landlords who engaged in the project (one of whom dropped out of the project before completion);
  - (iii) an interview with a professional landlord;
  - (iv) an interview with Women's Aid;
  - (v) interviews with three local tenants who had used the service.
- Impact evaluation:
- (i) an interview with the project manager;

- (ii) five interviews with local landlords;
- (iii) interviews with three landlords who have used the project and
- (iv) two tenant interviews.

4.5 Swansea, process evaluation:

- (i) interviews with the two project managers;
- (ii) a local authority focus group including the homelessness team leader and the head of Housing Benefit;
- (iii) a focus group with three further local authority staff members;
- (v) interviews with four local letting agents;
- (vi) interviews with two local tenants who had used the project.

Impact evaluation:

- (i) two project manager interviews;
- (ii) a local authority focus group;
- (iii) a stakeholder focus group;
- (iv) a landlord interview and
- (v) two tenant interviews.

4.6 Rhondda Cynon Taff, process evaluation:

- (i) an interview with the project manager;
- (ii) a focus group with local authority staff including the tenancy sustainability officer, a representative from Supporting People, the head of revenue and benefits and the housing advice centre manager;
- (iii) a wider stakeholder focus group with eight key personnel including representatives from three separate registered social landlords;
- (iv) interviews with two local tenants who had used the service.

Impact evaluation:

- (i) interview with the project manager;
- (ii) a focus group with local authority staff;
- (iii) a focus group with wider stakeholders and
- (iv) two tenant interviews.

4.7 Wrexham, Flintshire and Denbighshire, process evaluation:

- (i) interviews with the project managers and tenancy sustainment officers in all three local authority areas;
- (ii) a local authority focus group with four local authority staff including the performance support manager;

(iii) a stakeholder focus group including two RSLs, a representative from the bond scheme, a private landlord and a representative from Home Start;

(iv) an interview with the head of Housing Benefit;

(v) an interview with two tenants who had used the service.

Impact evaluation:

(i) an interview with the area project manager;

(ii) a local authority focus group with project staff and the project steering group;

(iii) a focus group with wider stakeholders and

(iv) interviews with two tenant interviews.

#### 4.8 Caerphilly, process evaluation:

(i) an interview with the project manager and also the Private Rented Sector Access and Advice Coordinator;

(ii) a local authority focus group with an additional three members of staff;

(iii) interviews with two tenants who had used the service.

Impact evaluation:

(i) two focus groups with a mixture of local authority staff, the project manager and project staff and wider stakeholders

(ii) a focus group with local landlords and

(iii) two tenant interviews

#### 4.9 Blaenau Gwent, process evaluation:

(i) an interview with the project manager;

(ii) a local authority staff focus group including Tenancy Sustainability Officers, Team Leader Private Sector Housing, Housing Benefit manager, Planning and Monitoring Officer from the Supporting People team, Housing Options Team representative;

(iii) a stakeholder focus group including three Registered Social Landlords, one support provider representative and a private sector landlord;

(iv) three local tenants who had used the project.

Impact evaluation:

(i) an interview with the project manager;

- (ii) interviews with two stakeholders;
  - (iii) interviews with a local landlord and
  - (iv) an interview with two local service users who had used the project.
- 4.10 The Research Team also consulted briefly with the National Landlords Forum in order to gauge some initial views on the Housing Benefit changes and the local authority projects. We also consulted with Women's Aid and the Shelter Cymru Benefit expert to gauge further views on the changes and the projects.
- 4.11 Peer Research Officers accompanied Research Officers to undertake Tenant interviews.

### **Quantitative Methodology**

- 4.12 The quantitative approach includes analysis of secondary information (statistics, policy documents etc.) from Welsh Government and individual local authorities, the utilisation of standardised data collected by Welsh Government in relation to all homelessness grant funded local authority projects, information from the individual grant applications from the six case studies and a separate small-scale data collection exercise in relation to these same six case studies.
- 4.13 In providing the local context for the individual projects we have drawn upon published statistics on homelessness from the Welsh Government as well as information on tenure change from the Office of National Statistics census data and statistics on housing benefit payments from the DWP. Some of this information has also been used in chapter 3 in setting the context for the research.
- 4.14 The study has also drawn upon quantitative information set out in the original funding applications to examine the objectives of the individual projects, although the researchers recognise that the context has changed in the subsequent period.
- 4.15 The research has also benefitted from the Welsh Government's on-going monitoring of local authority projects using Homelessness grant funding across Wales designed to minimise the impact of Housing Benefit reform. Data collected in relation to the six case studies (from

eight local authorities) for the period October 2011- March 2012 and again from April 2012 – September 2012 has been used to consider both the changing context within which the projects have operated and their impacts (Welsh Government, 2013).

4.16 Finally, the research has collected a limited amount of additional quantitative information specific to each of the case studies, primarily in relation to anticipated and actual costs and, where possible, the project beneficiaries (households, tenants, landlords etc.). This has been done for 2011-12 and for the period April 2012-December 2012. Seven of the eight local authorities have provided at least some of this information in relation to five out of the six projects. As far as possible we have tried to ensure consistency in the reporting of quantitative data, but on occasion in relation to the individual case studies there are slight variations in the data reported, in part because the monitoring periods for this study and the Welsh Government's monitoring report for all local authority Homelessness grant funded projects designed to mitigate the impact of housing benefit reform (Welsh Government, 2013) are different and also perhaps because the data provided has been submitted at different times by different individuals.

## **5 Case studies: evaluation**

### **Introduction**

- 5.1 Each case study area in this section of the report contains a brief project description and a consideration of local factors. The section then goes on to summarise the results from the process and impact evaluation for each of the case projects.
- 5.2 Specifically, during the qualitative work we assessed the following areas<sup>3</sup> :
- Process obstacles and facilitators that have impacted on the success of the project
  - Identification of, and work with, vulnerable people to reduce the risk of tenancy breakdown and enabling them to access housing whilst sustaining and increasing access to affordable homes
  - Work across departmental boundaries including the adaptation of housing benefit team practices to prevent homelessness
  - Work with and impact upon external partners (including local landlords)
- 5.3 The qualitative information is then supplemented by quantitative considerations of the project performance to ascertain the relative success of the case study projects.

### **Carmarthenshire**

#### **The project approach (summary)**

- 5.4 The project grant has been used to provide financial assistance and loans to landlords in order to bring their empty properties into the rented sector. This in turn links into the local Social Lettings Agency (SLA) project, as the SLA is the vehicle which enables the local authority to get the properties into the social lettings market.
- 5.5 The broad indicators of housing need and demand (demographic change, household characteristics, patterns of employment and income

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<sup>3</sup> We used this standardised format however the focus of the analysis differed slightly from one case study area to another.

and the costs of housing) show the pressures within the Carmarthenshire housing market. The evidence locally is of increasing housing needs over the medium and long term. The Council's most recent housing market assessment (2009-10) showed that renting opportunities in the stock of affordable housing had not been increasing and that the average annual provision of new affordable housing over the last decade had been noticeably less than in the previous time period. Although there is evidence that average house prices have fallen during the recent period of economic recession, entry-level house prices in many parts of the Borough are still unaffordable. The number on the housing register (and in particular the number of family households) has been rising and the most acute indicators of housing stress – homeless households unable to access and sustain affordable housing – have also shown signs of increasing. At the end of 2011-12 85 out of 105 households living in temporary accommodation were living in privately owned housing, leased either by the local authority or a housing association. During the same year the number of applicants on the Carmarthenshire Housing choice register (shared between the local authority and local housing association providers of affordable housing) was almost 7,900 (up from under 6,900 two years previously). With only just over 900 social housing lets in 2011-12, the ratio of applicants to lettings (almost 9:1) was one of the highest in Wales.

- 5.6 Within this context of increasing demand and reducing supply of affordable social sector homes the private sector is an increasingly important player in the overall Carmarthenshire rented market. According to the 2011 Census some 12% of households are resident in the private rented sector, compared with just 8% in 2001, although these figures are lower than for Wales as a whole. As elsewhere in the UK the growth of buy-to-let housing in the new housing market has contributed to increased supply in this sector. However, much of the investor interest (e.g. in buy-to-let) is in older existing homes (including former council housing), which is now making an increased contribution to the supply of affordable housing in the Borough. There has also been recognition that there is a potential to encourage the re-use of empty privately owned

housing to contribute to the supply of affordable housing. In April 2009, almost 1800 privately owned properties in Carmarthenshire had been identified from council tax records as having been empty for more than six months. During 2010-11 37 long-term empty private properties were brought back in to use as a result of direct action by the Council. Of these, 12 were afforded grant aid for conversion or renovation, with (as a condition of grant) the local authority securing nomination rights in respect of properties suitable for homeless people.

- 5.7 It has been reported by the Authority that at the end of September 2012 some 3,897 tenants in the private rented sector were in receipt of housing benefit for which LHA was payable. During the financial year 2012-13 the local authority was given a DHP allocation of almost £117,000. In the first half of the year it spent £46,429 worth of this allocation (40%); some 20% less than in the previous monitoring period (Welsh Government, 2013).
- 5.8 As previously noted, the project aims to facilitate an increase in privately rented accommodation affordable for those in receipt of benefits. The project has been funded over two years at an annual cost of £35,000. In 2011-12 the actual running cost of the project was a fraction over £35,000. The bulk of the annual funding has been used to support loans to owners/landlords and other elements of financial support to assist in the process of bringing empty homes back in to use. Over half of the financial support given has been for relatively low cost work (up to £1,000 per property). The balance of the resources has been used to provide an enhanced Housing Portal<sup>4</sup> and to contribute to the cost of publicising the scheme. Just 10% of the financial resources have been devoted to annual running costs to support 10% of the private sector housing development post.
- 5.9 Additional staffing and operational costs in respect of the project have been met from existing resources and no other staff have been associated with the project.

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<sup>4</sup> The Housing Portal is the Carmarthenshire Housing Options website which provides guidance, options and support for those seeking affordable housing, as well as to landlords and advice workers

## **Process obstacles and facilitators that have impacted on the success of the project**

- 5.10 During the process evaluation, one of the strengths of the project was deemed by project workers to be the variety of the empty home accommodation being brought back into use by the project. As the empty housing stock being identified is of varying sizes, including bungalows, houses and flats and in a range of areas, the project helps to address the needs of a wide range of people who are otherwise in temporary accommodation or at risk of homelessness.
- 5.11 Nevertheless, during the impact evaluation, it was suggested by stakeholders that there is a lack of one bed flats brought back into use through the project, so families are helped considerably more than single people and those that could be deemed as 'high-risk' (for example ex-offenders) or vulnerable single people.
- 5.12 In addition, the project manager told us that it has proved difficult to source properties in the Carmarthen area as the demand for rented properties is higher there (driven partly by the University and Hospital); consequently landlords can achieve higher rents via the commercial market, and would be suffering a more substantial loss in income if they were to switch to the SLA. LHA rates in Carmarthen, combined with a buoyant rental market have meant that landlords there have not found the scheme attractive.
- 5.13 "It has not proved possible to get any properties in Carmarthen into the Project (there are only two SLA properties in the whole of Carmarthen). This is because Carmarthen property prices are much higher, it commands much higher demand for rental property with the Hospital and University, and consequently has higher rents; this means that letting a property at LHA levels is simply not attractive to those landlords." (Project manager).
- 5.14 This sentiment was echoed in discussions with some local landlords that the research team spoke to during the impact evaluation. Three out of five landlords we spoke to at the landlords' forum we attended stated that they would not rent through the SLA.

- 5.15 They identified a number of barriers to them engaging in the Carmarthenshire project such as
- (i) the SLA leads to a lack of control over the property and tenants;
  - (ii) the project is not publicised enough so they do not have enough information on it;
  - (iii) low rents and
  - (iv) the project being too bureaucratic.
- 5.16 “The eight per cent management fee combined with low rents is not that attractive“(Carmarthenshire landlord, landlords’ forum)
- 5.17 “It would not be economically viable in Carmarthen and we also prefer to manage our own properties.” (Carmarthen Town landlord, landlords’ forum)
- 5.18 Four of the five landlords we spoke to at the forum stated that they are very concerned about the introduction of Universal Credit and the direct payments to tenants – this is a barrier to landlords becoming involved in an SLA or indeed renting to benefit claimants. Indeed, for those in areas where there is a buoyant rental market, the project would be less likely to see the success witnessed in other parts of Carmarthenshire so far.
- 5.19 “I [would be] concerned if tenants’ benefits went straight to them. If that were to happen I would only let to private non-benefit tenants as it would not be worth the trouble or risk. Or I would sell up.” (Landlord).
- 5.20 Hence the success of the empty homes project is constrained by local context and the local landlords’ willingness to rent through a SLA.
- 5.21 A final potential obstacle is that the current and future success of the project will be directly affected by the number of empty homes available and should this reduce it would have an impact on the project. In addition, if rents in the area were to increase substantially it could mean that landlords would be tempted to leave the SLA and switch to commercial lets. A further reduction in LHA levels would also make the SLA less attractive.
- 5.22 An important facilitator of the project process was the fact that, in Carmarthenshire, workers were able to build the project up very quickly because of the existence of the SLA. This ensured that the set-up of the

project was swift and effective and led to what the project manager described as a few 'quick wins' in bringing properties back into use.

- 5.23 The expertise of the project staff and the efficiency of the process facilitated the process considerably. The project staff report having been successful in negotiating with a number of empty home owners to persuade them to bring their properties up to standard and to place them with the SLA. The project manager also reported being successful in getting the necessary renovations completed as quickly as possible. Once agreement with the owner of the empty property has been reached it has proved possible to get that property on the market within four weeks provided it has only needed low level work. This was verified by a number of empty property home owners we spoke to during the process evaluation, bar one who dropped out of the process. The tenants we spoke to found the process of the project very satisfactory also.
- 5.24 "Yes, very satisfactory. In our opinion nothing more could have been done. The helpfulness of those in the Council was what was most valuable to us. In particular the alterations and moving of the old shower to better suit our needs. Our individual needs were met and all our concerns were resolved. We think we're lucky to have got the place."  
(Service user)
- 5.25 "We had a phone call from [the project manager] and we then met at the property and met the owner too once or twice. Everything was explained to us and we were given choice. Just the help was more important than anything. It was quite efficient and on the button. [The project manager] was very helpful, he was always back and forth and contacting the offices was no problem either." (Service user)
- 5.26 Other service users are empty home owners who have signed up to the project. During the process evaluation, we spoke to four empty home owners of the subsequent homes brought back into use by the project. One landlord of a previously empty home described the project as 'a lifesaver'.
- 5.27 "I spoke to [the project manager] and they handled the whole process from there; they assessed the property, decided it was not too expensive for their scheme, organised the repairs and then let it out through the

SLA. They will also be responsible for the tenants. This is important to me as I live in England and have been let down by tenants in the past.”  
(Landlord)

5.28 During the research we spoke to a landlord who had initially engaged in the project then dropped out of the project process:

5.29 “They sent people out to do surveys of the work that needed doing and to give quotes. It all seemed to take a long time. Initially I was told that everything could be completed by April but it seemed to drag on. I was given the impression that they would get three quotes, don’t know if they did but I was only made aware of one. They wanted to do a lot of additional work to the property that I did not feel was necessary – rendering the outside walls, work on the guttering, changing the rubbers around the PVC windows – and this was adding to the costs and I was worried how long it would take to pay such a large amount back.” (Empty home owner who dropped out of the process)

5.30 The landlord told us that he felt there was a lack of direct communication with him and he felt he wanted more say in what was happening to his property. Nevertheless, the homeowner did state that he also had personal life issues at the time that also resulted in his decision to withdraw from the process, not simply dissatisfaction with the service received.

5.31 A final barrier noted by the project manager was the time it took to deal with each enquiry in to the project. There were some teething problems negotiating with empty property owners, especially those who are very nervous of placing their property on the rental market and this has proved very time consuming, sometimes taking three to four months, and in some cases people have ultimately not been prepared to follow through and commit. Other empty home owners have taken the advice available, followed it and then decided to go for a commercial let. What the project did not anticipate was the lengthy amount of time that would need to be spent reassuring/negotiating with empty home owners, a number of which decided not to continue with the project. Similarly, negotiations with building and other contractors have also proved very time consuming. However, due to an increase in both skills and

confidence, the project workers have been able to refine the procedure over the course for the project to make it more time-efficient.

- 5.32 The project adds value as it approaches tenants' problems holistically: "We try to help tenants through a range of difficulties that they may have – this is not available for those who rent via a high street letting agency." (Project manager)
- 5.33 A facilitator of the process is that as loans are starting to be repaid, the money is being used to pay for additional properties. This makes the project sustainable in the future.

**Identification of and work with vulnerable people to reduce the risk of tenancy breakdown and enable them to access housing whilst sustaining and increasing access to affordable homes**

- 5.34 The evaluation team accrued evidence that the project was working proactively to identify new and innovative ways to use the grant money to help prevent homelessness amongst those affected by Housing Benefit changes.
- 5.35 "The impact of this [the project] has been to increase the housing stock available to those who are homeless or at threat of homelessness." (Project manager)
- 5.36 The properties brought back into use and rented through the SLA are then let to people who are experiencing or threatened with homelessness and are targeted at people impacted by the changes to Housing Benefit. They do this by ensuring that all of the empty homes brought back into use are rented at, or below, LHA levels. The project also offers contracts of between three and five years, offering tenants a degree of security of tenure.
- 5.37 This proactive approach adopts early identification of potentially vulnerable people who could benefit from the project. Hence the potential to prevent homelessness and unnecessary moves into temporary accommodation.
- 5.38 "It has helped the Housing Options Advisors who are aware when a property is being worked on to be introduced into the stock and so they can identify tenants early on." (Project manager)

- 5.39 Both project staff and landlords we spoke to believe that the project prevents homelessness through making more affordable housing available to tenants affected by the changes to Housing Benefit.
- 5.40 “The project is resulting in an increased pool of affordable, secure, long-term rented accommodation.” (Stakeholder)
- 5.41 “In my opinion it has certainly helped prevent homelessness and sustained their tenancy, just by the feedback from my tenants,” (Landlord involved in the project)
- 5.42 Due to the increase in affordable homes, the project staff believe that the impact of the project has also increased the speed in access to suitable accommodation.
- 5.43 The project manager noted that, due to the project, more tenants are becoming aware of the SLA and are contacting them directly to enquire about affordable housing. The tenants of the project we spoke to told us that the project had had a great impact on their life, including improving their quality of life.
- 5.44 “It has certainly impacted on the well-being of my [disabled] husband.” (Tenant in a formerly empty property brought back into use by the project).
- 5.45 In terms of introducing new properties, the original target was that an additional five properties that had been empty for more than six months would be brought back in to use each year through this project. The target was that three quarters of these properties would be let to those who were homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- 5.46 The indications are that between October 2011 and March 2012, 10 properties were brought back in to use and were being let and managed by the Council’s social lettings agency (Welsh Government, 2013). Five of these were let to families (two lone parent families), two to single people and three to couples. During the first nine months of 2012-13 a further 13 properties were brought back in to use, 11 allocated to single parent families and two to other families, once again exceeding the target for the year.
- 5.47 In the year from April 2011-March 2012, 80% of the properties acquired as a result of the project were let to homeless households or those at

risk of homelessness. In the first half of 2012-13 the figure reduced slightly to 60%, but nevertheless over this entire period almost 70% of the properties brought back into use assisted those who were homeless or threatened with homelessness.

- 5.48 The project assisted landlords directly (via the provision of loans) and indirectly (via advice and services). In terms of direct assistance, the project assisted some seven landlords in 2011-12 and a further 11 in the first nine months of 2012-13. In terms of indirect assistance, the project provided advice and services to around 130 landlords and 671 tenants between October 2011 and September 2012 (Welsh Government, 2013).
- 5.49 During 2011-12 some £31,500 was advanced to landlords in terms of repayable loans. During the first nine months of the current financial year (2012-13) a further £18,000 has been loaned to landlords to support the costs of repair and improvement. More than half of the financial support has been given for relatively low cost work of up to £1,000 per property. The position at May 2013 is that some of the earlier loans to landlords (usually made over a period of between one and four years) are being repaid, generating additional income which can be recycled to assist in bringing other properties back in to use.

**Work across departmental boundaries including the adaptation of housing benefit team practices to prevent homelessness.**

- 5.50 There was considerable evidence of work across departmental boundaries as part of the project. A joint working group has been set up between the Housing Benefit Service and the Housing Options Team. The Housing Benefits Liaison Group has a draft set of Terms and Conditions and is working together to give specific advice to tenants about benefit changes and to landlords around LHA and rents – this includes the development of leaflets for landlords on the topic. They have bi-monthly meetings and one of the areas they focus upon is monitoring the impact of housing benefit changes and developing actions to help mitigate those changes. They also work in partnership with the Communications Team who do their marketing and are also

working on how to get the message out about Housing Benefit changes. The Communications Team also ensure items are placed in Community News and, where appropriate, local radio. Prospective tenants to the properties brought back into use via the project are referred on by front line council staff, the Housing Options Advisers/Waiting List. Tenants make speculative enquiries but are encouraged to follow normal procedures.

- 5.51 The project manager noted that the Housing Benefit team are starting to identify which tenants are going to be affected by the changes in order to give prior warning to tenants.

### **Work and impact with external partners (including local landlords)**

5.52 The project appeals mostly to 'accidental landlords', i.e. they became unintentional landlords following the death of a family member or failure to sell their property in the current market when they wished to move away. A major strength of the SLA process was cited by these landlords as the SLAs ability to 'take over' and manage the process from start to finish and deal with all tenant issues. This was most valued by empty home owners who lived some distance, and sometimes in a different country, to their property. The impact of the projects on participating landlords has been:

- (i) peace of mind that everything is being catered for;
- (ii) satisfaction that their property is no longer empty and is being used for social good.

5.53 "You don't make a lot of money from letting these days; you just want peace of mind." (Landlord involved in the project)

5.54 "What's important to me is that they [the tenants] are happy, not the money. That's success in my book." (Landlord with the SLA).

5.55 Thus the project works very well with landlords who do not wish to handle the process themselves. However, the project is less appealing to landlords who are unable/do not want to lower their rents or who wish to manage the process themselves.

5.56 A final point of note with regards to the landlords involved in the project that we spoke to was that there was a low level of awareness of the

changes to Housing Benefit. The majority of landlords involved in the project were unaware of these changes.

- 5.57 The project links in to a wide range of local organisations such as Gwalia, Drug Aid, Women's Aid etc. as well as working locally to promote the use of Credit Unions.
- 5.58 There has also been demand from Women's Aid clients, which they have helped on several occasions. We spoke to someone from Women's Aid about their views on SLAs:
- 5.59 "We've only had positive experiences with the social letting agency, they relay to us basic information that we may need to know about our clients. What we try to achieve is long term lets for our clients and ensure that they stay in the area for as long as possible. They (the SLA workers) are easy to get hold of and we've worked with them for many years now, and in my opinion we have worked together well. Obviously with the lack of housing in the area the need to contact them increases. Overall we have a lot of respect for the job they do." (Women's Aid).

## **Swansea**

### **The project approach (summary)**

- 5.60 The project is a partnership between Swansea County Council and The Wallich that works with households struggling to maintain private sector tenancies as a result of the welfare reforms. The post was created to deliver a service which involves managing the process of change for tenants and liaising with landlords.
- 5.61 In terms of housing stock, Swansea is the second largest local authority in Wales (after Cardiff), with an estimated total of just over 106,000 dwellings at the end of March 2011. Traditionally, the private rented sector (PRS) has been a relatively small part of the local system, but as in other parts of Wales it has grown steadily over the last ten years. The 2011 Census indicates that the PRS accommodated 15% of households, compared with just eight per cent in 2001. The Council's last local housing strategy indicated that the sector had a much higher turnover of occupants than other sectors of the housing market (five times greater than in the owner-occupied sector). It was also estimated

that a third of households in the PRS in Swansea were in receipt of Housing Benefit and a further 385 of households in this tenure were paying more for their accommodation than was recommended. There was also a substantial gap between private rental market entry costs and the net costs of owner-occupation in the City, though this may have narrowed in recent years, as average rents in the PRS have increased.

5.62 Within the local housing strategy there is a commitment to improving the overall quality of private rented housing and its management. Swansea, like all Welsh local authorities, is a member of Landlord Accreditation Wales, which seeks to ensure that landlords are managing their properties appropriately. The Council has well developed relationships with private landlords in the city through its regular landlord forums. As part of its Homelessness Strategy the prevention of homelessness remains a key priority. There has also been activity to increase housing options for those in housing need by opening up opportunities in the private rented sector, not least through the expansion of the Wallich Clifford private sector bond board (which at the time of the funding application supported approximately 200 tenancies). However, the project funded by the Housing Benefit impact project, as a joint initiative between the City and County of Swansea and the Wallich, has been designed to work with non-Bond Board tenants and landlords as well.

5.63 In 2012-13 the local authority was awarded an allocation of £217,609 to support DHP, and within the first six months just over £126,000 was spent. At the end of September 2012, Swansea had some 5,094 private sector tenants in receipt of housing benefit and it has been estimated that almost two-thirds of these were paying rents which exceeded the LHA levels, though this may be a slight overestimate since the authority may not always be advised when a reduced rent is negotiated. Private landlords are in receipt of direct housing benefit payments for just over 1,000 tenancies (actually 1,051 at November 2012).

5.64 The original estimated revenue budgets for this project were just over £27,550 in 2011-12 and £37,000 in 2012-13, to support the costs of two workers. An officer was appointed to the post in September 2011.

## **Process obstacles and facilitators that have impacted on the success of the project**

- 5.65 This case study area is unique in its approach in that the bid for the grant funding proposed a partnership between the local authority and the voluntary sector bringing together a wealth of knowledge and the chance to 'bounce ideas' between team members. The local authority asked the Wallich to apply for the funding directly as they noted that the internal procedures are simpler and more straightforward than going through the local authority and allowed the project post to be filled quickly.
- 5.66 Due to the on-going partnership work in Swansea, all of the initial groundwork was covered in first three months and we were told by workers that the project was able to 'hit the ground running' once clients came through. The project manager told us that the role was well thought through in advance and fully supported in set-up and implementation. The remit of the project has remained very specific and focussed on mitigating the impact of Housing Benefit changes in the PRS.
- 5.67 Stakeholders reported that there has been a lower response rate from service users than expected. This was hypothesised to be for several potential reasons:
- (i) the full impact of the housing benefit reforms were not yet hitting tenants;
  - (ii) the project worker being based within the local authority being off-putting for tenants;
  - (iii) tenants being reluctant for the project worker to liaise with the landlord for fear of reprisals; and
  - (iv) the fear that some tenants are not reading the housing benefit letters they receive to inform them of the changes and the project.
- 5.68 "Many tenants only wish to bury their heads in the sand regarding the changes." (Project worker)
- 5.69 There has been a low buy-in from local landlords - despite the scale of the private rented stock in Swansea rising in the last nine months. In fact the project reports that its biggest obstacle to successful progress is getting landlords to engage with the project. It was reported that the

planned landlord forums have not been as successful as the project hoped and they have witnessed a low turn-out of landlords at the forums. It was also noted that there has not been a successful landlord forum since the last Tenancy Relations Officer left (the post holder left in 2008 and was not replaced).

- 5.70 The project worker told us that they have offered landlords and agents assistance with DHPs to keep the rent up to date whilst they facilitate a move to cheaper accommodation but many landlords and agents have not responded. It was suggested by stakeholders that the lack of buy-in from the landlords could be due to a number of reasons such as
- (i) a lack of awareness of benefit changes;
  - (ii) a lack of awareness of the project and
  - (iii) competition from other projects that landlords have engaged in - for example, Houseshare;
  - (iv) It was also hypothesised that landlords are not engaging as they simply cannot afford to 'take a hit' on their income in rent reductions. Stakeholders fear that landlords might simply decide not to rent to those in receipt of housing benefit in the future.
- 5.71 We spoke to four landlord agencies in the area about why they were not engaging in the project. The reasons given were
- (i) they were not aware of the project;
  - (ii) only a small proportion of their tenants are housing benefit recipients;
  - (iii) that they have yet to experience rent problems with their existing tenants or
  - (iv) that they are negotiating directly with tenants.
- 5.72 The face-to-face case work involved in the role was noted by project staff, local authority staff and wider stakeholders as being a key element and strength of the project:
- 5.73 "The case work face-to-face has been crucial. There is a lot of generic information out there, and there are plenty of people who can get the help from different sources. The people we have seen almost without exception appreciated that we conduct the interviews and take the time to visit." (Project staff)

- 5.74 “In terms of spreading the word of welfare reform, a face-to-face service is probably the most productive way to inform people of the changes.”  
(Key stakeholder)
- 5.75 “I think face-to face is the best approach [...] I am not one for the large scale model, I think things can get lost in the system easier.” (Local Landlord)

**Identification of, and work with, vulnerable people to reduce the risk of tenancy breakdown and enable them to access housing whilst sustaining and increasing access to affordable homes**

- 5.76 It was reported that the project has not had the expected throughput of tenants impacted by the housing benefit changes to date.
- 5.77 The project manager hypothesises that uptake of the project has been quite low so far due to the transitional protection that tenants have enjoyed, also followed by a number of successful applications for DHP in line with the additional funds made available to the local authority. Project workers also believe that tenants have also been managing on their current income in the very short term, but will fall into greater difficulties as time moves on and even further cuts are implemented. Therefore, they believe the bulk of tenants are yet to approach their service for help.
- 5.78 Nevertheless, project workers reported that the post has prevented homelessness amongst those tenants the project has helped by ensuring that their tenancies are sustainable.
- 5.79 “I think we’ve managed to avoid homelessness in many instances and provided much in the way of sustainable tenancies.” (Project manager)
- 5.80 “The main impact has been to give at least a section of those people affected by the cuts a long-term sustainable tenancy.” (Project staff)
- 5.81 “It’s allowed me to retain my current accommodation.” (Service user)
- 5.82 The service users we spoke to during both the process and impact evaluation reported being very satisfied with the service they received.
- 5.83 "I valued it all, the whole process. It was like getting blood out of a stone trying to contact my landlord. So now I feel much more at ease."  
(Service user)

- 5.84 One service user's mental health worker told us that the most valuable aspect of the project was the organising of DHP for her client in order for her to remain somewhat financially stable until moving accommodation.
- 5.85 There was agreement between the project staff, wider stakeholders and the landlord we spoke to that the project was assisting with speed of access into affordable homes.
- 5.86 "If landlords don't agree to reduce their rents and the tenant's most affordable accommodation is shared accommodation then House Share Wales provides an easier route to finding landlords/properties." (Key stakeholder)
- 5.87 The focus group held with local authority staff indicated that the project has seen some success with negotiating lower rent with landlords. However, they also feel that tenants are successfully negotiating lower rents themselves. In addition, it was reported by project staff that tenants appear to not want to move but to look for solutions to remain in their existing property as opposed to going into shared accommodation.
- 5.88 "There has been a greater willingness for people in tenancies to try to find people to share with them." (Project worker).
- 5.89 The project had an annual target of assisting 150 tenants each year. Over the year it was anticipated that a number of these tenants (a target of a third) would be provided with a service beyond just advice. The Welsh Government monitoring return shows that in the year to September 2012 this target was exceeded, with almost three quarters of those referred and accepted by the project provided with additional services (Welsh Government, 2013). The intention of the project is that as many tenants as possible are able to remain in their homes after benefit payments have been reduced.
- 5.90 In the six month period October 2011-March 2012, according to the Welsh Government's monitoring return, 59 tenants were referred and accepted. Eight tenants did not have to leave their homes as a result of benefit changes and a further six were found alternative accommodation in the private sector. In the following period (April – September 2012) 40 additional tenants were referred and accepted, 33 tenants were enabled to remain in their homes and 11 further tenants were found alternative

accommodation in the private sector. Whilst the number of tenants assisted is relatively low, and below targets, the Authority believes the availability of transitional protection is assisting many tenants in the private rented sector, allowing them to maintain their tenancies (Welsh Government, 2013).

5.91 At the end of 2011-12 more than two fifths (42%) of housing benefit recipients in the private rented sector in Swansea were in receipt of transitional protection. Some 63% were paying rents which exceeded the local housing allowance levels. According to the monitoring return to the Welsh Government during the first six months of the project's operation (October 2011- March 2012) it was able to provide support and advice to 34 tenants and 12 landlords, three of whom reduced their rents to the new local housing allowance levels. In the first six months of 2012-13 the Authority spent 63% of their DHP allocation and provided 37 landlords and 7 tenants with advice and support during this period (Welsh Government, 2013).

5.92 Evidence from the Welsh Government monitoring return showed that in the period October 2011 – March 2012 a total of 8 households in the private rented sector in Swansea became homeless due to rent arrears (and that arrears were a contributory factor in 34 investigations of homelessness). In the following period homelessness statistics showed that 14 households were found to be homeless in Swansea due to rent arrears in a private tenancy (Welsh Government, 2013).

Although these early figures, in terms of support for tenants and landlords, and the sustainment of tenancies, fall short of the overall targets, it is anticipated that demands on the project will grow, particularly as further changes in benefit entitlement begin to have a wider impact.

**Work across departmental boundaries including the adaptation of housing benefit team practices to prevent homelessness.**

5.93 Local authority staff reported good partnership working at senior and front-line level within the housing department. Local authority workers told us that there is a culture of openness and commitment that has

been fostered over a number of years and is complimented by the new post.

5.94 Stakeholders we spoke to reported that the most valuable aspect of the project to them is the direct link with team members who are responsible for awarding DHPs resulting in a more streamlined process. It was noted that the project has helped to simplify the DHP process.

### **Work and impact with external partners (including local landlords)**

5.95 The project managers told us that communicating with landlords is critical to the success of the project. The project holds focussed events for landlords both for the project and to raise awareness of the housing benefit changes.

5.96 However, as noted, engagement with landlords has been a barrier to the success of the project. The project manager noted that more landlords have been engaged in rent negotiation recently but it's difficult to determine if that's a direct result of the project or not. They believe that the project has in some cases contributed to landlords reducing their rents ( this is backed up somewhat by the quantitative findings – see paragraphs 5.92 – 5.98 above).

5.97 We also spoke to the landlord forum who stated that they actively promote the Wales Co-operatives Local Housing Allowance scheme<sup>5</sup> “...as this truly does help both tenant and landlord equally.” (Landlord Forum).

5.98 Despite the vast majority of research participants we spoke to stating that they found the project excellent, one landlord we spoke to stated that they would like more communication from the project:

5.99 “Overall the project has been good and had some good successes, but it certainly needs some improvements on the communication side of things.” (Private landlord)

5.100 There was evidence of considerable joint working with external partners to help mitigate the impact of Housing Benefit changes. With universal credit changes set to take effect they are establishing a customer

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<sup>5</sup> For more information, please see <http://www.walescooperative.org/thfitoolkit>

working group with the DWP. They are also working hard to get Credit Unions involved locally.

5.101 Information on the benefit changes and the project are sent out to clients by a number of different teams within the local authority such as: Housing Benefit; Environmental Health; and the Social Inclusion Unit. All stakeholders were visited by the project worker in the initial months of the project to make them aware of its existence.

## **Rhondda Cynon Taf**

### **The project approach (summary)**

5.102 Here, the grant was used to fund a Tenancy Sustainability Officer (TSO) to work with people affected, or due to be affected, by the welfare benefit reforms.

5.103 RCT is the third largest local authority in Wales in terms of its dwelling stock which, at the end of March 2011, was estimated at more than 103,000, of which almost 15,300 were rented from housing associations (the Council transferred its own housing to a newly created Registered Social Landlord, RCT Homes, in 2009). The 2011 census showed 14% of households living in the social rented sector (down from 15% in 2001) and a further 14% living in the private rented sector (up from seven per cent in 2001).

5.104 The project meets a number of the key objectives of the Authority's Homelessness Plan including the key challenge to 'ensure that everyone can receive the help they need to avoid becoming homeless and ensure that the amount of distress, deprivation and disadvantage that can be caused is kept to an absolute minimum, by the provision of easily accessible readily available responsive services'. At the heart of the project is the objective of preventing homelessness wherever possible, reducing repeat homelessness and assisting people to remain in their current homes. It is also designed to reduce the numbers of households in various forms of temporary accommodation. At the end of September 2012, RCT had the lowest rate of homeless households in temporary accommodation at 4.9 per 10,000 households.

- 5.105 At the end of September 2012 there were an estimated 6,366 tenancies in the PRS where Housing Benefit was payable, and it was estimated that 17% of these tenants were paying weekly rents in excess of the LHA. Private landlords were in receipt of direct Housing Benefit payments for around 1660 tenancies at this point.
- 5.106 During the financial year 2012-13 RCT were allocated just over £170,000 to support DHP by the DWP. During the first six months of the financial year the authority spent just over £50,000 of this allocation (29%). This represented a fall from the previous monitoring period when some 40% of DHP allocation had been spent (Welsh Government, 2013).
- 5.107 As noted, this project was set up to fund an advice worker to liaise between the Council's Housing Benefit Department and the Housing Advice Centre. The main role of the adviser is to assist clients affected by benefit changes (both new applicants and those already in receipt of housing benefit but coming out of the transitional arrangements) in both the private and social rented sectors across the borough. The project is also designed to support landlords and help minimise the effects of the changes.
- 5.108 The original timescale for the project was 1 August 2011 to 31 March 2013. The original budget for the project was £39,594 for 2011/12 and £37,594 for 2012/13. Unfortunately, no project co-ordinator was in post until 31 May 2012. The actual cost of the project for 2012-13 is estimated to be £30,797 and almost £30,800 had been spent during the first nine months of the financial year. Almost the entire cost of the project (98%) is devoted to salary.

### **Process obstacles and facilitators that have impacted on the success of the project**

- 5.109 A strength of the project has been that, despite the project starting later than planned, the time before the TSO was in place was used to identify those people who would be most affected by change in the area (i.e. the under 35s at the time of the project start).

- 5.110 “I know we didn’t start ‘til late but to be honest we have picked up on all the people that have been affected so far so I don’t know what we would have done a year in advance.” (Project worker)
- 5.111 The project team worked with the Housing Benefit team in advance of the TSO position to ‘lay the foundations’ for the project work. Therefore, when the TSO came into role there was already an effective system set up, allowing them to effectively ‘hit the ground running’.
- 5.112 The project team also felt by recruiting a person with a homelessness/housing advice background, no additional training was required as the TSO had the necessary skills needed to get up and running straight away, thus saving time. Other local authority staff described how they really value the TSO as someone to whom they can have a direct link and can make referrals when they identify a client who could benefit from the project’s help. It was also noted that a dedicated, project worker could efficiently address the fast-paced changes coming in.
- 5.113 Another strength of the project approach is the proactive practice of going out and visiting clients, which was perceived by stakeholders to be more effective than explaining the changes and project via a leaflet or flyer. A service user in RCT helped by the TSO was also very impressed with the process and the service they received. They told us that the TSO’s ‘personal touch’ was the most valued aspect of the whole process. This ‘personal touch’ was also corroborated by wider stakeholders such as housing benefit. The project manager stated that the key success of the role is the extra resource .
- 5.114 “I think it is just having the resources to make direct contact with applicants themselves. We wouldn’t have had that ability without the role.” ( Project manager)
- 5.115 “For me it’s the face to face work, as we have an issue with people ignoring the advice sent to them through various mediums. Knocking doors and speaking directly to people means that they have to address the issues. It gives them the opportunity to ask questions and get answers straight away rather than sitting and stewing with worries.” (Wider stakeholder)

- 5.116 One obstacle to the process was identified as difficulties of engaging tenants with the project. Engaging with tenants has been described by project workers as 'time-consuming' and more labour intensive than anticipated. The project team feel that clients are 'burying their head in the sand' and have yet to feel the full impact of the cuts.
- 5.117 It was noted that there is a lack of successful engagement with local landlords. The TSO has tried to engage through the landlord forum and also through letters and personal visits – all with limited response and success.
- 5.118 A major barrier to the success of the project is the lack of available suitable housing into which tenants affected by the changes may move. There is a need for more single person accommodation in the borough.
- 5.119 "The problem with RCT is that our private rented sector is massively under-developed in terms of a reasonable and suitable housing option. [...] At this point in time it is a problem so in reality there are not many options for them. We are giving them some very unpalatable choices, telling someone to go and live in a bedsit miles away from where they are established. It is hard to swallow and these are the only places they can go to." (Stakeholder).
- 5.120 "I think there are barriers like lack of affordable housing. You know it doesn't matter how many times we work with an under 35s if we can't get them in because that resource is unavailable [...] there are barriers that are down to the circumstance rather than the project." (Project manager)
- 5.121 This lack of resource puts financial pressure on the limited DHP pot and means sustainable housing is harder to obtain in the area.
- 5.122 "The problem is in other LAs they can use the DHP and find an alternative solution in the time frame it allows. In ours we have to revisit it a second time as there are very few options for where people go to next. It is a massive challenge." (Stakeholder)
- 5.123 "The DHP is a limited pot of money and giving it to them for three months is all well and good but the whole idea of the welfare reform is that people have to change. You can't keep getting DHP because it goes

against what we are doing. The long term use of it is not right, its a stop gap not permanent solution.” (Stakeholder)

5.124 There are fears that as numbers of people affected by Housing Benefit reform grows, the project resource will not be sufficient to impact on all of the people affected by the change.

5.125 “I am not sure how our role can accommodate that much face to face work. I suppose we need to review how we are working and how we are linking in with other agencies.” (Project Worker)

5.126 “You can’t get more than knocking doors but that resource cannot continue with the more and more people needing to be helped. Coordination is the key here.” (Stakeholder).

**Identification of, and work with, vulnerable people to reduce the risk of tenancy breakdown and enable them to access housing whilst sustaining and increasing access to affordable homes**

5.127 Like other case study areas, this is a proactive approach that approaches tenants and landlords in advance of the changes. There was widespread agreement amongst the project stakeholders and tenants involved with the project that the post has been successful in preventing homelessness.

5.128 “From a Housing Benefit point of view we can write to tenants 10 times but they ignore the letters so with [the project worker] being able to visit these people at least we know they understand the changes. If they need help and they are vulnerable then [the project worker] will help them with DHP etc. Without that we would not have had the resource and these people would just have had the letters. In the end they would be homeless.” (Housing Benefit)

5.129 “To be honest with you I am in a place where my children are staying with me on the weekend. If I was thrown out because I couldn’t keep up with the rent I would never had been able to see my children. It is part of the agreement that they stay over you see. It [the project] has had a real good impact really.” (Service user helped by the project)

5.130 It is thought that the project can lead to the sustainability of tenancies by creating a good working relationship between staff and tenants.

- 5.131 “It makes something longer term for these people because of the personal contact they have made and they will be more likely to come back as last time they were given personal assistance. If it happened again it won’t be the head in the sand mentality, it will be ‘I had a good experience last time’ and they will come and ask again.” (Housing solutions)
- 5.132 However, due to the lack of suitable resources available to everyone that the project wants to target, the project is viewed as having an impact on improving the speed of advice rather than necessarily providing new accommodation per se.
- 5.133 When asked was there any way the project could be improved, one tenant answered:
- 5.134 “...there is not much you can do is there, the government are doing this and we are left feeling it...” (Service user)
- 5.135 The project worker believes that the work has had an impact on tenant behaviour:
- 5.136 “ If you look at some of the outcomes for under 35s then some have done house share, others have moved their partner in, some have found work and some have found alternative accommodation. It is hard to say ultimately but I would like to think that us going there and explaining the impact has reinforced that message and hence someone did something about that.” (Project Worker)
- 5.137 Nevertheless one outcome witnessed locally is that some tenants are moving in with partners so that they are no longer affected by the Shared Accommodation Rate. Local stakeholders question whether this is really the best option for tenants and whether people are being forced into housing situations that they would not have otherwise chosen.
- 5.138 “I could have either moved my partner in or rented out the rooms that were spare in my place. I didn’t want to have strangers living with me so I moved my partner in.” (Service user)
- 5.139 Some stakeholders we spoke to believe that it is due to the widespread impact of the project that there is no marked increase in homelessness in the area.

- 5.140 “The true test is how the market reacts to the changes. The fact that we are not seeing an increase in homelessness suggests that landlords are adapting their business models or adjusting their rents to take into account the changes.” (Stakeholder)
- 5.141 However, other stakeholders in the area believe that the failure to see an increase in homelessness yet it is simply because the impact of the benefit changes have not yet hit. They stated that everyone they have made contact with they are supporting through DHPs at the moment – the concern about the real impact will be felt if long-term solutions for these tenants are not found.
- 5.142 In the period 1 April - 30 September 2012 the project reported assisting 211 tenants, 78 in the period before the project officer was appointed and 133 after the appointment was made. Over the April - September 2012 period advice and support was also provided to 38 landlords (Welsh Government, 2013). The local authority’s return in respect of this evaluation reported assisting 200 households in the period April – December 2012 (over 70% single people) and provided assistance to 50 landlords.

**Work across departmental boundaries including the adaptation of Housing Benefit team practices to prevent homelessness.**

- 5.143 The project manager noted very close working between the project and the Housing Benefit team which has improved since the post has been in place.
- 5.144 There is a steering group within the local authority to set up an action plan for mitigating the impact of welfare reform. This involves representatives from the Housing Benefit team, housing strategy, public health teams and their One For All centres (which sets out to ascertain who will be affected by the reform and to work with those individuals) meeting to discuss strategy and take partnership working forward.
- 5.145 The project workers are currently conducting briefings with many local authority front line workers and other local authority staff to instruct them about not only the project but welfare changes as a whole, which they hope will improve communication between the agencies.

- 5.146 The project is thought to have eased the pressure on the homelessness team:
- 5.147 “It’s an additional resource to target households that are being affected by the welfare reform. Without it, it would have had to be brought in under the remit of the exiting homelessness team, which is already over-stretched.” (Stakeholder)
- 5.148 The project workers are aware that the local authority Housing Officers are also being proactive in their approach to benefit changes; therefore, they are ensuring the TSO does not duplicate the work of the housing officers – rather they work together in partnership to provide advice and support.

### **Work and impact with external partners (including local landlords)**

- 5.149 The project workers told the Research Team how they have been writing articles about the changes and targeting landlords in their newsletter and also on the landlord website. The TSO is also attending the landlord forum to try to engage with landlords locally. However, as noted earlier, engaging with landlords has been a barrier to the success of the project.
- 5.150 There is also a fear locally that landlords will not drop their rents in line with LHA rates. Some landlords have told the project worker they will not reduce rents but find different tenants who are not in receipt of LHA.
- 5.151 “Landlords are very reluctant at the moment to lower their rents. They have their own obligations to meet.” (Project manager)
- 5.152 “The landlords that I have spoken to have basically said they will not be reducing their rent to the £45 limit, and I don’t blame them. The thing is that they are still mortgaged. It is easier if not as it is income but these have to pay their mortgage and there are always others who will pay.” (Stakeholder)
- 5.153 Nevertheless, another local stakeholder stated they did believe that some landlords were reducing their rents to the 30th percentile so that they can receive direct payments. They also say that there is evidence of rent negotiation locally.

- 5.154 The local authority stated that they are working with their registered social landlord partners to identify vulnerable client groups. Nevertheless, we spoke to several local housing association stakeholders in the process evaluation who were unaware of the post and project and have since requested that they join the strategic group and requested for more information sharing and joint working between the organisations. However the project manager told us that the project has been discussed at director level and expressed concern that it has not been publicised to managers and front line housing officers. The next stage will be to invite all key partners including housing associations to be part of the Steering Group.
- 5.155 In our wider stakeholder focus group during the impact evaluation with representatives from local housing associations, stakeholders felt that there was a lack of communication between the project and them.
- 5.156 “The idea was we were going to use this role to coordinate with and get figures together and shared out but it didn’t work that way.” (RSL stakeholder)
- 5.157 Thus local RSLs have set up their own projects which are clearly leading to duplication of efforts within the local authority area.
- 5.158 “We set up our own project and are still doing it.” (RSL stakeholder)
- 5.159 “Effectively I was there when the grant application was put together we knew that one person was not going to be enough for the door knocking, and also be a roving saviour for us all. Instead it was going to be a conduit of good practice amongst all the RSLs in the area, be a sort of oracle of some of the changes that are there, and to chair sessions so I know what the other RSLs are doing. [...]. It was meant to help pool resources instead of being a door knock thing. [...]. It’s too late now; we are doing our own thing. We have all blown our marketing budget instead of working together to get generic information out there.” (RSL stakeholder).
- 5.160 There was, however, evidence that the project and local authority are working with external partners to help mitigate the impact of housing benefit changes.

- 5.161 “It is about using the resources we have to target these people in the best way. We meet on a quarterly basis: The project manager and TSO, Supporting People, Welfare Rights, Customer Services, Public Health and Protection, Housing strategy, and we look at the impact on those service areas to see how well our plans and strategies are working.”  
(Stakeholder)
- 5.162 “We set up some quite stringent joint working protocols between Housing Benefit [team], us and homelessness. Wider than that we have the landlord forum and out in RSLs, supporting people etc.”  
(Homelessness Team)
- 5.163 “One of my tasks is to work with the DWP, their team and their resources, as we cannot link in with the 3,000 people that are going to be affected by the bedroom tax. So for me the role will be how can we work in partnership?” (Project manager)
- 5.164 The projects are also making people aware of Credit Unions but are not promoting them per se. There were mixed thoughts from stakeholders on the use of credit unions.
- 5.165 “From a Housing Benefit [team] point of view we have to be careful promoting it as there are charges involved in it. Some of our landlords are using it currently but there are a number of charges on them as people could come back to us and say ‘you never told us about the £5 charge’ etc. or that they had to pay a pound every time they used a card. For that reason we can’t push it.” (Housing Benefit).

## **The North Wales partnership**

### **The project approach (summary)**

- 5.166 Denbighshire, Flintshire and Wrexham is a sufficiently self-contained functional sub regional housing market based upon the number of people living and working in the locality. In addition, there are strong special and economic relationships between Flintshire and Wrexham and English local authorities over the border, in particular Chester and Ellesmere Port. At the same time, each of the Welsh local authorities has their own housing sub markets.

- 5.167 Dwelling stock estimates at March 2011 suggest a total housing stock of just over 166,000 properties; around 26% in Denbighshire, 35% in Wrexham and almost 39% in Flintshire. The most recent Census of Population showed that in 2011, 16% of households in Denbighshire were living in the private rented sector (compared with 12% in 2001), and the rate of growth in this sector was even higher in the other two authorities, where in 2011 some 11% of households in Flintshire were resident in this sector (six per cent in 2001) and 12% of households in Wrexham (seven per cent in 2001). Overall, 12% of households across the three authorities were living in private rented accommodation in 2011.
- 5.168 Evidence from published DWP data (April 2011) indicate significant differences between the three authorities in terms of both the numbers of housing benefit claimants and the proportions of these accommodated in the private rented sector. At the end of September 2012, 21.8% of private rented sector tenants in receipt of housing benefit in Denbighshire were paying rents in excess of local housing allowance. In Flintshire there were fewer private sector tenancies underpinned by housing benefit, but a much higher proportion (77.4%) were paying rents in excess of local housing allowance. However, it has been noted that this figure is difficult to estimate, as many tenants do not report a fall in their rent to the local housing allowance since this will not impact upon their claim for housing benefit.
- 5.169 The North Wales partnership project is aimed at working with stakeholders and distributing information about the changes and empowering stakeholders to cascade the information to others including their tenants. This project did not envisage that the team members would be active case holders; face-to-face work was always to be delivered by housing options, support workers etc.
- 5.170 The project team's job is to coordinate the activities, monitor uptake, respond to demands for information and support the extended team to have the skills and resources to meet the overall outcomes.
- 5.171 Despite the partnership, roles do vary slightly between the three local authority areas. More details of this are in the project descriptions in the

appendix, however, the North Wales approach is primarily one of a coordination of information rather than a case-holding role (although there is some element of case holding in one of the local authorities, please see Appendix for more details).

5.172 The project is an example of cross boundary/organisational working. It fits within the context of another project, a single access route to housing (SARTH) which is being developed and involves the same three local authorities, plus Conwy County Borough Council, and five housing associations operating in the sub region. This is aiming to provide a single access route to a range of affordable housing opportunities.

5.173 In 2012-13 the DWP allocated almost £103,000 to Denbighshire, over £114,000 to Flintshire and just over £57,500 to Wrexham to support DHPs. During the first half of the financial year the three authorities spent respectively almost £42,000 (40.8%), just over £47,000 (41.2%) and more than £15,500 (27.0%) from these allocated sums.

5.174 The funding for this collaborative venture (£105,000 over the period from June 2011 to March 2013) was to fund three housing co-ordinator posts, one in each of the three local authorities (Denbighshire, Flintshire and Wrexham). In Denbighshire the co-ordinator was appointed in September 2011, in Flintshire an officer was appointed in February 2012 and in Wrexham the co-ordinator joined at the end of May 2012. In 2011-12 the cost of the project was £43,568 in Denbighshire, of which 62.5% was given over to salary costs, In Flintshire only £6,666 was spent (77% devoted to salaries) and no expenditure was reported in Wrexham (since the co-ordinator was not in post during the financial year. During the first nine months of 2012-13 a further £25,524 was spent in supporting the project In Denbighshire (90% on salaries), with an expectation of costs for 2012-13 being £38,000. In Flintshire expenditure totalled £30,000 in the period April-December 2012 (90% given over to salaries), with an anticipated cost for the project of £35,000 for 2012-13. In Wrexham the anticipated cost of the project in 2012-13 is £31,000, with just over two thirds of this having been spent in the first nine months of the financial year. Both Flintshire and Wrexham indicated

that there were small contributions (around 10%) made to the running costs of the project incurred by the two authorities.

### **Process obstacles and facilitators that have impacted on the success of the project**

- 5.175 A facilitator has been the partnership working across the three local authority areas. There are structural differences in the authorities so a 'one size fits all' approach was not appropriate, nevertheless, they are sharing a lot of work and good practice between the partnership areas. They are also a source of support to each other.
- 5.176 The local authorities have employed people for the project who can 'hit the ground running' – all of the staff employed for the role (Housing Benefit and Housing Options Liaison Officers: HBHOLOs) worked in Housing, Housing Benefit and or Tenancy Support previously so have established links and know the processes in their local authorities, this had led to increased efficiencies in the process.
- 5.177 The partnership recognises the need to be adaptable to reach the larger number of people they want to target. Part of the approach of getting the changes and the project known has involved visiting schools. This has been reported by project workers as being successful. The team adopt how they approach people to fit the client group. For example, under 35s were previously written to twice by the Housing Benefit team with little success but the HBHOLOs found texting gets a better response so use this approach with this population. Simple things like dressing 'down' when you visit service users so as to be approachable and not too intimidating make a difference to how the workers are received. In addition, the project tailors presentations to the audience in order to increase engagement. For example, when undertaking presentations to Supporting People providers and Women's Aid they had more information about the Housing Benefit cap as this was more applicable to the audience at the time. The ability to tailor the mode of delivery to the audience is a real strength of the approach.
- 5.178 A barrier to the project success was that the project staff reported a sense of 'apathy' from tenants and some agency support workers

around the fact that housing benefit changes are being implemented. Project workers report that tenants have not been getting in touch themselves, rather they are getting in touch two months after the change hits them. Workers report that tenants at Tenant Conferences seem to have taken it on board and are shocked by the changes but the most vulnerable tenants do not go to the conferences.

- 5.179 One of the obstacles has been that each of the three local authorities has been at different stages of the project process and some corporate priorities over-ride the partnership model. Nevertheless, there has been a robust defence of this, and the team are working on a matrix of performance standards which will drive the approach.
- 5.180 The HBHOLOs told us that they are exploring further ways to target hard to reach groups. However, they note that there is a challenge in contacting so many people impacted by the change. In addition, budget restrictions make reaching larger groups through activities such as advertising and open days difficult.
- 5.181 Another major barrier is that project workers have found it difficult to engage with landlords. They told us that landlords have told them that they are not interested in the Housing Benefit changes if they do not have tenants in receipt of benefits. The project worker reported that the housing market is flat locally and landlords can pick and chose their tenants. They stated that there are a lot of absentee landlords in one local authority with many of the landlords living in the south of England and using heavy-handed rent managers. The project workers told us that these are the landlords renting to Housing Benefit recipients and so they are not interested in negotiating or coming to forums to discuss the changes.
- 5.182 A project strength is that they have looked at the impending changes holistically. They understood from the start that the issue was wider than just Housing Benefit:
- 5.183 “Especially the Disability Allowance (DLA) budget being cut by 20% when it transfers to Personal Independence Payments (PIP). The numbers affected by the benefit cap will increase as people lose DLA but by then the project will be finished and so there will be no one for

them to go to for information. We realised there would be this impact with other Welfare Reform changes and so took this on board from the start.” (Project worker)

5.184 “Decided early on it couldn’t just be a Housing Benefit project – couldn’t look at it isolation without Universal Credit and PIP so always knew it was a big job. It had to encompass everything. (Project worker)

5.185 The lack of accommodation available for those affected by the changes was viewed as another barrier to the project’s success. There is a need for more single-person accommodation in the partnership areas.

5.186 “Available accommodation for prevention work has significantly fallen though and landlords can afford to be more choosy. People cannot afford the accommodation that is available. So there is less accommodation out there for vulnerable people.” (Stakeholder)

5.187 A barrier to the project success was that it lacked direction initially, resulting in the role not being proactively disseminated to all departments of the local authority – especially in Wrexham where the s180 staff member started later and some internal departments had started to carry out similar work of their own already, leading to duplication and some confusion of roles. In addition to this, the project workers are now without management direction.

5.188 A further barrier to the project success that was identified was that the three s180 staff members did not have experience in the area of designing information leaflets (layout / graphic design etc.) therefore they had to ‘start from scratch’ in finding out what information needed to be included in dissemination material which they reported lost them time at the start of the project. Project workers feel strongly that it left a lot of ambiguity and inconsistencies in the information being disseminated to people and also meant replication of work across Wales. The project workers felt this information template should have been done centrally by Welsh Government to be adapted to each local authority’s purposes and would have saved a lot of time and money for the project staff.

**Identification of, and work with, vulnerable people to reduce the risk of tenancy breakdown and enable them to access housing whilst sustaining and increasing access to affordable homes**

- 5.189 Again, this case study area demonstrates a proactive approach with workers targeting tenants before they find themselves homeless. The project manager views the strength of the project in being the empowerment of organisations to deal with their own clients:
- 5.190 “Communicating the information regarding changes and giving that knowledge to the Housing Officers, RSLs etc. so they can contact their effected tenants / clients directly (face to face) where possible.” (Project manager).
- 5.191 The main impact of the project was reported by the project manager as the ability of the project to raise the awareness of the changes amongst local authorities, registered social landlords, wider stakeholders and the public regarding the changes and the potential impacts.
- 5.192 Stakeholders told us that the cascading of information works effectively to complement what else is going on in the area.
- 5.193 “A co-ordinator role, especially as there is only one person. No point in that person repeating the jobs that we already do. We have those links with the coal face, so what we need is someone up there trickling the information down. As long as the people out there doing the face to face service know where to get more information and the quality of the training has to be good.” (Stakeholder)
- 5.194 Service users who had been assisted by the HBHOLE (in Flintshire where there is some case-holding capacity) were very pleased and described the worker as very helpful, explaining in detail the consequences of going into arrears. The service users had been worried about the Housing Benefit changes and the HBHOLE had helped to put their minds at rest. One service user reported that the HBHOLE took into consideration their individual housing preferences and helped the tenant with budgeting. Service users most valued advice on changes in Housing Benefit and being warned in advance so that they could receive help with putting together budget.

- 5.195 “I feel like I am taking a calm pill when dealing with [the project worker]. She helped with my previous landlord, and gave me the number for the housing crisis centre. She got everyone working together for me.”  
(Flintshire service user).
- 5.196 “I would have been made homeless” (Flintshire service user).
- 5.197 Stakeholders reported that it is too soon to robustly evaluate whether the project has had an impact on sustainable homeless prevention “So far, where they can help individuals, then yes. But really it is too soon to say as yet. The offers Allocations make to new tenants are changing so they will not face the problem of under-occupying, and tenancies should be more sustainable because the Homeless officers / Allocation Officers have this knowledge now.” (Stakeholder)
- 5.198 As noted earlier, there is a barrier to the success of the project in terms of tenant engagement reported by project workers and wider stakeholders.
- 5.199 “People are not telling us the true extent of their debt when we go to see them, but the amount of debt they have elsewhere will become much more apparent when they have to start paying £10 towards the rent. There is not enough support out there for general budgeting. Financial Inclusion has not been placed high enough on the agenda.”  
(Stakeholder)
- 5.200 “Unless it affects you now you don’t want to know. And a lot of people are still in the dark about it so unless that money has been cut from their weekly / monthly money they aren’t going to plan for it. Plod along with daily life and suddenly the change will hit and they won’t be expecting it.”  
(Stakeholder)
- 5.201 “We recently had a lady offered a three bed property – just herself and two young boys - and were trying to explain there may be repercussions down the line with bedroom tax – but she wasn’t interested, she was leaving refuge, she was happy. She said she will deal with that when she comes to it but its going to be a big shock.” (Stakeholder)
- 5.202 There are some limited reports locally of tenant behaviour as a result of the Housing Benefit changes and the project. For example, single people in two bed houses (mainly those with access to their children at

weekends etc.) have asked to downsize as they can't afford the top up in housing benefit, nevertheless, there is a shortage of one bed properties for them to move to.

5.203 Stakeholders reported that tenants in three bed houses don't want to move and have said they will try and stay and pay the top up. They generally have children and so have more money coming in. Workers reported that the most vulnerable will lose out as there is no appropriate accommodation for them to move in to.

5.204 Stakeholders told of the expense of moving tenants under-occupying social housing into the private rented sector, pointing out that it is often less expensive to pay the under-occupancy than pay at private rented rates.

5.205 "I set up a tenancy the other day with two Keyring members (a couple) and they were offered a two bed flat and that was their one offer. That was the only accommodation available but that will still be more affordable even with the 14% under occupancy charge than going private. " (Stakeholder)

5.206 Some stakeholders in our focus group believe that welfare advice will no longer be the only issue; money management and budgeting advice will be just as important. They stated that giving people the right advice at the first point of contact is vital and making sure they are signposted to the right support/advice at this point is where homelessness prevention can be effective.

5.207 Data for this period showed that at 31 March 2012 more than a third (36%) of housing benefit recipients in the private rented sector in Denbighshire were in receipt of transitional protection, whilst 80% were being charged rents which were in excess of the LHA rates. The comparable figures for Flintshire were slightly lower, with 30% of Housing Benefit recipients in the PRS receiving transitional protection and 59% paying rents in excess of LHA rates. Denbighshire spent more than two-fifths (41%) of its DHP allowance for 2011-12 during this period. In Flintshire the comparable figure was similar. No data was provided by Wrexham for the first monitoring period (October 2011-March 2012). In the second monitoring period the Authority reported that

just 5% of housing benefit recipients in private renting were in receipt of transitional protection (Welsh Government, 2013) .

5.208 In 2011-12 Denbighshire reported that the project directly assisted 132 homeless or potentially homeless households. In the first nine months of 2012-13 this figure rose to 640 households, including helping a small number of households to sustain their existing tenancies. During the six months from October 2011 to March 2012 Denbighshire provided 40 tenants and four landlords with support and advice through this project (Welsh Government, 2013). Flintshire reported significantly smaller numbers of households assisted through the project in 2011-12 (only 10), although of course the project did not begin in Flintshire until February 2012. However, they also reported the project helping 13 accredited landlords/agents in 2011-12. During the first nine months of 2012-13 Flintshire reported that the project benefitted 176 homeless or potential homeless households and helped sustain 21 households in their existing tenancies. No comparable figures are available for Wrexham for 2012-13.

5.209 From October 2011 to March 2012 75 tenants in Flintshire were identified as at risk of homelessness as a result of housing benefit reform, of whom 84% were given advice and support with a view to preventing homelessness (Welsh Government, 2013). Twenty-four landlords were also provided with support and advice by Flintshire during this period. In the subsequent six month period (April - September 2012) Denbighshire reported assisting eight tenants and 19 landlords, Flintshire provided support and/or advice to 63 tenants and 37 landlords and Wrexham to 400 tenants and 85 landlords (Welsh Government, 2013).

5.210 In the period 1st October 2011-31st March 2012 Denbighshire reported that the project enabled training and awareness to be increased for support workers, for more effective support to be given to vulnerable clients and for a protocol to be established which has allowed discretionary housing payments for those under 35 to be fast tracked.

**Work across departmental boundaries including the adaptation of housing benefit team practices to prevent homelessness.**

- 5.211 Flintshire local authority Housing Benefit team identify and signpost affected tenants both internally (for example, to the project) and externally for further assistance to prevent homelessness.
- 5.212 The partnership hold quarterly s180 meetings to share good practice across the whole of the North Wales area and the partnership team are in contact on a more frequent basis.
- 5.213 Within one local authority, the HBHOLE has found some difficulty making the links to work with homelessness, housing options and other staff in the local authority. This is because all of the other local authority staff have their own jobs and the HBHOLE does not wish to 'stand on anyone's toes'. At present there is a need for all of the departments to link up more effectively to establish what is being done and how the HBHOLE can complement, not duplicate, what is being done.
- 5.214 There is reported better communication between Housing Benefit staff and the local authority staff in some of the partnership areas as a result of the post. In one of the areas we were told by project staff that they now receive referrals from Housing Benefit of tenants deemed vulnerable to homelessness due to the Housing Benefit changes.
- 5.215 "In the past I found Housing Benefit quite obstructive [...] now they come back and say tell us what you need." (Project worker)
- 5.216 The impact of the project is purported to have been felt by other workers in the local authority.
- 5.217 "Other teams in the LA have been impacted – like the Estate Officers who are going out to visit tenants now." (Project worker)
- 5.218 "The work done to date has stopped some people needing to see the Homeless Team / Officers and so taken some pressure off them so it is possible to see the impact of the work." (Stakeholder)

**Work and impact with external partners (including local landlords)**

- 5.219 The project actively engages with landlords (and view landlords as customers also). They are also preparing a toolkit of services for landlords to create vacancies whereby people on Housing Benefit can

remain in or access PRS accommodation as a realistic, affordable option. They work with local landlords and their representative body to agree principles for letting at affordable rates. They have targeted landlords within each county and cross-boundary. Some of the areas have reasonable links already with landlords due to the Bond Scheme links that have been established for a while.

5.220 However, as mentioned above, the project noted the engagement of some landlords as a barrier to the success of the project. Stakeholders are reporting not seeing many landlords lowering their rents locally.

5.221 “S180 staff in all three LA areas have presentations at landlord forums. The changes shocked the landlords and they understood the implications but they have not changed their behaviour. At the end of the day they just want to ensure they receive their rent and have stable tenants RSLs are more responsive.” (Project worker)

5.222 “We have worked with landlords and attended forums and generated interest in what’s going on – landlords wanted the knowledge but they are a business at the end of the day and have not changed their practices. (Project worker)

5.223 Some landlords have also stated that if they decrease their rents then the 30<sup>th</sup> percentile figure in the area will fall too and it’s not going to help.

5.224 “To have a thriving PRS we will have to look at how we engage with the PRS to guide them through Welfare Reform, giving them the confidence that their tenants will be supported by financial capability, budget management, setting up accounts with credit unions, that there are resources such as tenancy support to help them but it is time consuming. We need the resources to do that – it’s not something you can leave to private landlords. It is going to be intensive. They will need a lot of handholding to help them and inform them. We know it has worked with one or two landlords but we need to expand on that.” (Stakeholder)

5.225 The project reported that they tried to use some money to grant 10 National Landlord Association memberships to landlords who rented out at LHA rates as an incentive but not one landlord signed up for it.

- 5.226 Like other case study areas, landlords in the area are reported to have concerns regarding direct payments when renting to benefit claimants.
- 5.227 The stakeholders noted that the external factors are generally out of their control and that the economic climate in North Wales means that landlords prefer tenants who do not require access to housing benefit. Thus the local authority team need to ensure that their landlord package is robust enough to still encourage landlords to rent at LHA rates to people who claim Housing Benefit.
- 5.228 It was reported that there is some evidence that there has been duplication in some services both internally and external to the local authority - mainly in information dissemination and advice. This was thought to have arisen for a number of reasons including:
- (i) one partner was only recruited 10 months after the project started, so there was another service set up in that local authority to bridge the gap and
  - (ii) two of the partners' HBHOLo appointments were delayed due to local authority corporate procedures, meaning that one HBHOLo was in place before the other two.
- 5.229 Nevertheless, the external stakeholders we spoke to were extremely happy with the project:
- 5.230 "[The project worker] has been supporting me in with benefit advice so that we know how changes will affect eligibility for the NEST scheme."  
(Stakeholder)
- 5.231 "It's great to have a direct link to go to for advice." (Stakeholder)
- 5.232 In the focus group we held with external stakeholders, 100% of attendants agreed that the project has impacted on their tenants in terms of helping to prevent homelessness. They also agreed the innovative way in which the project disseminates the information is highly effective.
- 5.233 "My colleagues within the service benefited immensely from her [the project worker] coming in and doing that work with them, I think the methodology she used worked well – she made it quite fun, she did a quiz - because the topic is heavy but she brought a fun element to it. She did it justice and I can't praise her more because I was worried what the teams might think of it as it's not their every day issues but they took

a lot from it and they remembered it rather than a normal training event. She's very approachable – practitioners went away feeling comfortable that if they had any further queries they could just pick up the phone. Her approach has worked really well.” (Stakeholders)

5.234 In terms of reaching tenants, the project has held a number of open days but has not found these to be the best way to reach people and they were not getting the numbers of people they wanted. They have attended tenant conferences so they are taking the opportunity to meet their own council tenants and doing presentations there as well. They have been assisting the Tenants' Federation build their own website and getting the information about the changes out to tenants. They spread the word of the project via internal and external agency staff, in conjunction with other agencies via roadshows and event based activities. The partnership has also used other agencies to deliver the message too, so information about the changes is widely understood and services better accessed.

## **Caerphilly**

### **The project approach (summary)**

5.235 The project is based around the appointment of a Private Rented Sector Access and Advice Coordinator (PRSAAC). Although some of the work was already in progress when the project started, the PRSAAC works with private landlords to explore opportunities for tenancies within the private rented sector and assists and supports tenants impacted by the housing benefit changes.

5.236 The post was for a period of two years from 1 April 2011 to 31 March 2013. The estimated annual cost of running the project was just over £22,000 in 2011-12 and almost £29,000 in 2012-13. However, a project co-ordinator was not appointed until August 2011. The actual cost of the project in 2011-12 was £16,210, with almost 83% of the costs devoted to salaries. The Welsh Government grant met almost 93% of the costs with the local authority covering the remainder. In 2012-13, the anticipated cost of running the project is £28,937 and by 31 December 2012

expenditure represented just over 74% of the anticipated annual cost. In the first nine months of 2012-13 salaries accounted for just over 89% of the running costs of the project. In 2012-13 it is expected that Welsh Government grant will meet almost 79% of project costs, with the remainder being supported by the local authority.

5.237 Caerphilly County Borough Council had a housing stock of almost 76,000 dwellings at the end of March 2011. At the time of the last Census some 11% of households were resident within the PRS in the borough (though this is compared with just five per cent in 2001) .

5.238 The availability of accommodation for single people locally is in very short supply and the welfare benefit changes are likely to have the greatest impact upon single people.

5.239 In April 2011, according to DWP figures, there were just over 15,000 housing benefit recipients in the borough, just over a quarter (25.5%) in the PRS. At the end of September 2012 the local authority reported that some 3,388 tenants in the PRS were in receipt of Housing Benefit. In almost two-thirds of cases (63%) the rent payable by these tenants exceeded the local housing allowance. At this time some 17% of private tenants in the Borough on housing benefit were in receipt of transitional protection. In addition, private landlords were in receipt of direct housing benefit payments in respect of some 655 tenancies (19.3%). The local authority has an allocation of £66,516 from the DWP for 2012-13 to support DHPs, and had spent just over £28,711 (43%) during the first six months of the financial year (Welsh Government, 2013).

5.240 The local authority has already established excellent partnerships with the PRS and social lettings and leasing arrangements have been developed with housing association partners. The Caerphilly Private Sector Landlord Forum is also active in developing relationships with local landlords and letting agents. As part of its private sector renewal strategy, the authority has been actively involved in bringing back in to beneficial use long term empty privately owned dwellings. In 2010-11, 37 such properties were brought back in to use, and nomination rights secured so that properties could be let to homeless households.

## **Process obstacles and facilitators that have impacted on the success of the project**

- 5.241 There has been concern at the lack of engagement from some landlords. A number of stakeholders believe that many local landlords will not be able to, or willing, to drop their rents accordingly.
- 5.242 “Of course, we can’t control the market; landlords are there to make a profit.” (Stakeholder)
- 5.243 The local authority has cited that a low level of DHP is a barrier to assisting tenants impacted by the welfare reform
- 5.244 “For example, Cardiff can afford to give DHP for a year so that gives their support workers a lot more time to find a housing solution for them and there are more housing solutions in Cardiff anyway.”<sup>6</sup> (Stakeholder)
- 5.245 Further long-term solutions need to be sought in the local authority given the short-term nature of DHPs and the lack of single person accommodation.
- 5.246 “The problem is you’re not offering people a long term solution. What you’re saying to people is that you can help them for that short period of time but after that we’re not sure if we can do anything for you. So I think they’re appreciative of the fact that at least we’re trying but I think in the long term there is that affordability issue so we’re looking at those other options like house sharing and so on.” (Stakeholder)
- 5.247 Like other areas, the sheer number of people requiring support was seen as a barrier to the successful impact of the project
- 5.248 A final barrier is that the project started late compared to the other local authority areas. However, the project manager does not believe this has gone on to have a detrimental impact on the success of the project.

## **Identification of, and work with, vulnerable people to reduce the risk of tenancy breakdown and enable them to access housing whilst sustaining and increasing access to affordable homes**

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<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the DHP pot has been substantially increased this year.

- 5.249 The housing benefit changes and the resulting project has led to a more pro-active approach to engaging with tenants to ensure that they are maximising their benefits and fully exploring their options.
- 5.250 The project aims to prevent homelessness through a pro-active approach of early identification of at risk households and going one step further to work actively with landlords and tenants.
- 5.251 “Before we perhaps never thought along those lines – it was sort of wait your time until this property becomes available but the affordability issue has driven change.” (Stakeholder)
- 5.252 “We’re better at prevention rather than waiting until they’re homeless.” (Project manager)
- 5.253 “From a macro point of view yes – [the project worker] is improving the quality of landlords and facilitating getting properties on the market so definitely improves homelessness in my opinion.” (Landlord)
- 5.254 One service user we spoke to described the PRSAAC as ‘fantastic from the beginning’. They stated that the most helpful element was the individual helpfulness and personal support. The service user spoke of how the PRSAAC personally came to their house a couple of days before they had to move and assisted with form filling and reassuring the service user.
- 5.255 “People like [the PRSAAC] stop you worrying.” (Service user)
- 5.256 Another service user described the process as very helpful. They described how the process and service was explained fully and clearly to them. They reported that the most helpful element of the was that they didn’t have to struggle with the issue on their own and they had the PRSAAC to assist them with for filling etc.
- 5.257 Stakeholders spoke of the need to manage expectations of tenants. We were told that Caerphilly does not have enough single person accommodation to meet the demand and that there are fears that there is not a culture of accommodation sharing amongst tenants in Caerphilly.
- 5.258 “That sort of HMO, university type mentality in Caerphilly – this notion of living collectively for example, house sharing, isn’t as well developed here as it is for example in Cardiff.” (Stakeholder).

- 5.259 Thus there is a mismatch between what people want (single person accommodation) and what they have to offer. Due to the lack of shared accommodation the authority are to look at encouraging landlords to start renting out rooms or splitting two bed houses, for example.
- 5.260 The first target of the project was to work with others to produce a directory of information and resources for homelessness prevention in order to better advise and signpost service users. This was completed in October 2012.
- 5.261 The second objective was to increase the number of direct housing allowance payments to landlords in the PRS via the existing credit union partnership. In the period October 2011- March 2012, 14 new landlords used the Smart Money Credit Union direct payments to landlords facilities. During the first nine months of 2012-13 an additional six joined this scheme. Links were also established between the Credit Union and claims for DHP, thus helping with financial management for tenants in the private rented sector (Welsh Government, 2013).
- 5.262 The third objective has been to promote spending on DHP. By 31 March 2012, Caerphilly had revised the DHP and financial capability forms and information about the availability of payments to landlords in the private rented sector and users of the Bond Scheme. Evidence for the period October 2011 – March 2012 indicates that at the end of this period, two fifths of Housing Benefit recipients in the PRS were in receipt of transitional protection and just over a third (35%) were paying rents in excess of LHA rates. During the second monitoring period (April-September 2012) the proportion of housing benefit recipients in the private rented sector in receipt of transitional protection had fallen to 17%, and a higher proportion were paying rents in excess of the LHA rate. In the first period Caerphilly spent 52% of their DHP allocation for the year and in the second monitoring period the spend was 43% (Welsh Government, 2013). In October 2011 – March 2012 the Authority reported in its monitoring return that the project had assisted 99 tenants and 64 landlords. In period 2 (April – September 2012) the project provided advice and support to 98 tenants and 56 landlords (Welsh Government, 2013).

- 5.263 The fourth objective of the project was to promote the Landlords Accreditation Scheme and by 31 March 2012, 48 new landlords had been identified and contacted about accreditation and invited to meetings with landlords. By the 30 September 2012 this number had grown by 56 to 104. (Welsh Government, 2013).
- 5.264 The fifth objective of the project has been to promote shared housing options. By 31 March 2012 the local authority had undertaken a research exercise amongst landlords and prepared a brochure highlighting house sharing opportunities.
- 5.265 The final objective of the project has been to produce advice and guidance for tenants affected by welfare reform. By September 2012 information had been published providing guidance in relation to the welfare reform changes being introduced under the Welfare reform Act 2012 and separate guidance in relation to the changes to Housing Benefit for social housing tenants as a result of under occupation.
- 5.266 In 2011-12 the project assisted 99 homeless or potentially homeless households (in the main single persons) and helped to sustain 55 tenancies. During the first nine months of 2012-13 it assisted 149 households, either through discretionary housing payments or other funding applications and helped to sustain a total of 40 tenancies (three quarters of which were single person households), primarily through discretionary housing payment awards.
- 5.267 The project was also able to identify and assist 48 private landlords operating in the borough in 2011-12 and a further 147 in the first nine months of 2012-13.

**Work across departmental boundaries including the adaptation of housing benefit team practices to prevent homelessness.**

- 5.268 The local authority approach to mitigating the impact of Housing Benefit changes has become a lot more proactive and joint working has increased with the set up of the project.
- 5.269 “What the TSO has allowed is better communication/information sharing between our team and Housing Benefit because of the single point of contact.” (Stakeholder)

- 5.270 What has worked well so far includes the development of a very good working relationship between the project worker and the benefits department, meaning that DHP applications are more effective and the process runs far more smoothly. This also includes a more inclusive role of Supporting People working together with the local authority in order to link in support workers to assist in issues such as maximising benefits, decreasing debt, looking at what people's housing options are.
- 5.271 The local authority have set up a Welfare Reform Agenda Group – incorporating benefit change and project information – but it was noted that this has only just been set up and the delay has resulted in information being distributed more slowly as an authority than planned. Nevertheless, this is now up and running now so information should be reaching those that need it.
- 5.272 The project is reported to have had a positive impact on other areas such as Housing Benefit (including improved DHP processes and spend) and Housing Options.
- 5.273 “The biggest impact has been coordination of services together, better communication, linking services, cooperation of teams to work together.” (Project manager)
- 5.274 “Prior to project there wasn't much structure; there is a much better structure now.” (Housing Benefits)
- 5.275 “We're finally spending the budget, which we never even got close to spending in the past.” (Housing Benefits)
- 5.276 “[The project worker] has been successful at stopping an awful lot of cases from coming through to us.” (Housing Options)

### **Work and impact with external partners (including local landlords)**

- 5.277 A landlords' forum has been set up and has been running since 2007, and there has been some success at engaging with landlords to resolve issues that arise. Despite the cited barrier of engaging with landlords in the area, there has been a degree of success via the project and improved landlord relationships reported.

- 5.278 “In terms of the project, it has allowed us to take on more risky people and help house them with help of the local authority [project worker].” (Landlord)
- 5.279 “Private landlord relationships have improved a lot and they are developing all the time.” (Housing Options)
- 5.280 “The PRSAAC has promoted the scheme with every landlord on our database and introduced the future requirement for accreditation to new landlords as well as coordinating two training sessions for local landlords. Since the PRSAAC has started in the role, they have increased the number of local accredited landlords by 119.” (Project worker)
- 5.281 “The other help is if I have a query about anything, [the project worker] is there. In the past, as far as I was concerned, I was alone.” (Landlord).
- 5.282 “[The project worker] has facilitated relationships between landlords and council.” (Landlord)
- 5.283 Nevertheless, further work is required in this area. The fear locally is that LHA levels are already too low to be attractive to landlords and this might pose a problem for getting further landlords to sign up. Without landlords signing up there will continue to be a shortage of suitable accommodation.
- 5.284 “The challenge is to target landlords that aren’t taking responsibility and not coming to forums and not being educated.” (Landlord focus group)
- 5.285 “The truth of the matter is there are some bad people out there who perhaps don’t deserve our help, why should we help them – as landlords we need some security too so perhaps there is a barrier there.” (Landlord)
- 5.286 The project workers told us that a previous barrier has been issues with Smart Money Credit Union in regard to direct payment to landlords. However, these have been resolved through the landlord forum. Nevertheless, they still report some issues with landlord take up regarding the Credit Union.
- 5.287 “They seem to be pushing it [credit unions] quite a lot in landlord forums but landlords aren’t really interested as we don’t have the need to use them.” (Landlord)

- 5.288 One fear is that the more the local authority works with the private rented sector, the more problems it may lead to for those impacted by welfare benefits.
- 5.289 The main benefit of the project in terms of impact on other organisations has been that the PRSAAC has been able to coordinate across departments and organisations. The role also means that other departments and organisations have someone to refer cases to – this has been seen as invaluable by stakeholders. A stakeholder told us that rather than just saying what benefits people are entitled to, the project can go one step further and actually support the person.

## **Blaenau Gwent**

### **The project approach (summary)**

- 5.290 The grant funding was used to fund a Tenancy Sustainment Officer (TSO). The TSO primarily targets tenants who are housing benefit and council tax benefit claimants; however referrals are made to the TSO from external bodies for customers who are not in receipt of HB/CTB also.
- 5.291 The project was intended to run from April 2011 to March 2013 at a total cost to the Welsh Government of just over £30,000. The Tenancy Sustainability Officer was appointed in July 2011. The actual cost of the project was £23,315 in 2011-12 (of which 75% was devoted to salary costs) In 2012-13 the anticipated cost of the project is £36,536, of which just over £21,000 had been spent by the end of March 2012 (58% on salaries).
- 5.292 The key role is essentially twofold: to raise awareness of DHPs and assess applications and to work with private landlords to try and negotiate lower rents where tenants are experiencing financial difficulties (or to seek to help them find alternative accommodation).
- 5.293 At the time of the 2011 Census, 24% of households in Blaenau Gwent were living in social rented accommodation (down from 29% in 2011), though still significantly above the average for Wales (16% in 2011). A further 13% were resident in the private rented sector, up from seven per cent in 2001.

5.294 At the end of September 2012 there were a reported 1,621 tenants in the private rented sector in the borough in receipt of Housing Benefit, of whom 86.7% were paying weekly rents in excess of the LHA. Information from the Welsh Government's monitoring return showed that 25% of housing benefit recipients in the sector were in receipt of transitional protection in the period October 2011-March 2012, but that this figure fell to just 3% in the subsequent 6 month period (Welsh Government, 2013).

### **Process obstacles and facilitators that have impacted on the success of the project**

- 5.295 Despite a degree of engagement from landlords, one of the biggest process obstacles cited was getting landlords to engage. Of the successful landlord meetings that have taken place, it is reported that it is the same 'good' landlords than turn up each time. It is reported that RSLs are more likely to attend these meetings than private landlords. There is a feeling that some private landlords do not fully understand the extent of the changes and how they might be affected. It is thought that once the changes are implemented they will be in touch with the local authority.
- 5.296 Another obstacle noted was a change of personnel (the TSO) at the start of the project but this was resolved fairly quickly.
- 5.297 A further obstacle voiced was a fear that the changes are going to hit the very vulnerable in society and these people were cited as sometimes being the most chaotic and difficult to engage with. As such, the project work can be very time consuming, especially if the client has multiple issues. Some stakeholders feel that this may be too much for one person and when the full impact of the cuts hit then more resources may be needed.
- 5.298 There is also some reluctance amongst tenants to work with the project or their landlords as they are fearful of reprisals.
- 5.299 Again there are fears that the project isn't going to be big enough to help everyone affected. The Project Manager stated that they were shocked to see the amount of people affected by under-occupancy.

**Identification of, and work with, vulnerable people to reduce the risk of tenancy breakdown and enable them to access housing whilst sustaining and increasing access to affordable homes**

- 5.300 A major strength of the approach was that stakeholders felt that the TSO can go ‘a step further’ and offer support to tenants, above and beyond what workers have been doing in the past (or currently can do due to their own workloads).
- 5.301 “For me being proactive is always better than being reactive. It makes sense to knock doors, especially when people are hard to get hold of; I mean how many people actually read, in depth, leaflets that are posted to them from us or the council. And if they did it is likely they will bury their heads in the sand.” (Stakeholder)
- 5.302 A note of good practice with regard to DHPs was that the TSO will also contact tenants halfway through their entitlement to assist/advise them on budgeting and to prevent eviction due to poor financial planning.
- 5.303 One service user told us they really appreciated the help they received from the TSO. The service user contacted the local authority following a rise in her rent. The TSO helped the client to apply for a short-term DHP to make up the shortfall. The service user told us that she had been concerned about benefit changes but the TSO had made her feel better. She told us that everything had been fully explained to her by the TSO.
- 5.304 We spoke to two other service users, a couple, who had been assisted by the TSO. The service users told that they were very happy with the service they received and they appreciated the ‘personal service’ and felt the TSO understood their personal needs.
- 5.305 “We have prevented homelessness rather than fire fighting when they become homeless.” (Project manager)
- 5.306 Other stakeholders also noted the speed in which the project worker worked in order to meet with identified clients.
- 5.307 “The face to face. The individuality of the service is important. People like to have a name – he’s not known as the TSO [...], I suppose if he left tomorrow we might have a problem!” (Stakeholder)

- 5.308 “It has probably helped to turn things around quicker. Homeless performance indicators have reduced- this can be attributed to (the TSO) and the project.” (Project manager)
- 5.309 In 2011-12 the authority received 148 DHP applications of which just over 56% were approved. During the first nine months of 2012-13 some 125 applications for DHPs were received, of which just over 75% were granted. Information for the period 1 October 2011 to 31 March 2012 indicates that 25% of housing benefit recipients in the PRS in the borough in this period were in receipt of transitional protection whilst over half (51%) were paying rents which exceeded the local housing allowance levels.
- 5.310 The local authority spent almost all of their DHP allocation for 2011-12 during the period October 2011 - March 2012. Its allocation from the DWP for 2012-13 was almost £50,000 and within the first six months of the current financial year it had spent more than £29,000 worth of this allocation. Directly through this project the council has been able to assist 10 landlords and 73 tenants with advice and support during the period October 2011 - March 2012 and a further 21 landlords and 139 tenants during the first six months of 2012-13. It has also been reported that the work of the Tenancy Sustainability Officer in relation to DHP has resulted in improved efficiencies, with applications being assessed at a significantly faster rate. Some 82 claims were decided in the period October 2011 - March 2012 and on average took 12 days or less for a decision, compared with periods of typically 16 -17 days prior to October 2011 (Welsh Government, 2013).

**Work across departmental boundaries including the adaptation of housing benefit team practices to prevent homelessness**

- 5.311 Housing Benefit told us that they inform the TSO when a new claim has been set up if they believe that there could be issues such as the need to take a homelessness application, additional support issues around engagement etc.
- 5.312 “Can only speak from personal perspective and, yes, I do. I’ve always had a good relationship with the council but more so now as they come

out to meet tenants and I get to know them better. Also got to know HB people – that was also an unexpected outcome. We're all working towards the same agenda.” (External stakeholder)

### **Work and impact with external partners (including local landlords)**

5.313 Relationships with RSLs are reported as very good and working groups have been set up which they are all linked in to in order to share information and to keep up-to-date with benefit changes and the project. The local authority has liaison meetings with the RSLs and the RSLs feel this is good to keep the project fresh in their mind. By linking in to each other's strategic meetings it has reportedly saved the local authority time as it has resulted in fewer meetings being needed. However, they do also keep email and telephone lines open for on-going communication when needed.

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5.315 Amongst the RSLs there was reported good practice in that the Project Manger always invited them to take part in meetings so they can tackle issues together.

5.316 “I guess it is working together. If we know the people who are going to be affected and we pool our resources, educate people and get bank accounts up and running, inform people about direct payments etc., just having that link is helpful.” (RSL Stakeholder)

5.317 There was a strong sense of joint working and information sharing between the local authority, RSLs and other stakeholders.

- 5.318 A local private landlord we spoke to stated how getting in contact with the TSO meant he could keep a tenant that he was very fond of in the property as the TSO successfully helped the tenant to apply for a DHP.
- 5.319 Nevertheless, some stakeholders requested that they would like a greater level of communication.
- 5.320 “I keep myself up to date with what’s going on via the internet etc. but had no communication from the [project worker] whatsoever.”  
(Stakeholder)
- 5.321 It was reported that the changes implemented by the DWP have been a huge culture shock for some private landlords and it has affected their investments. We were told by a stakeholder that they know of two local landlords that have handed several properties back to the mortgage companies as the changes in benefits have had a detrimental financial impact on their investments.
- 5.322 Some landlords stated that they were unable to reduce their rents in line with the LHA.
- 5.323 “From our point of view our business plan is based on the rents as they are plus a percentage increase. I mean we have lenders who gave us money at a certain rate because of that; we can’t turn around and change the conditions of that.” (RSL stakeholder)
- 5.324 A local landlord we spoke to said he tries to get quality properties that he would get some pay back on. It would not be an option to lower his rents but he felt tenants would be forced into sub-standard properties where landlords don’t do repairs or improvements etc.
- 5.325 It is vital for private landlords to engage more and to get more private landlords on board. It was explained that the ‘good’ landlords are always willing to engage; however the ‘bad’ landlords are becoming apparent within the system as they do not reply or engage with the project. A system is currently being developed within the team to get more landlords on board.
- 5.326 There was further discussion about credit unions and using them for rent payments. A stakeholder explained that this is currently under review. The local authority is very keen for credit unions to be used; however, the credit unions will deduct £10 per month. The credit union in

question are reviewing the charge as there are concerns amongst stakeholders that landlords would be unwilling to accept the charge.

5.327 “We have had a private landlord session where someone from the Credit Union spoke – it was more of an awareness thing. The big deterrent is the actual cost of each transaction so our private landlords weren’t that enamoured – it costs £10 per transaction. The CU is doing a pilot of 20 customers and paid their benefits into an account then directly to the landlord. The pilot is on-going so the outcome is not clear.”

(Project administrator)

## 6 Project impact

6.1 This section summarises differences and common themes across the case study approaches and discusses the relative strengths and weaknesses of the projects.

### Main strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches

6.2 The project approach tends to focus on :

- (i) a primarily a face-to-face advice and case-hold role;
- (ii) an information dissemination role or
- (iii) an empty homes role<sup>7</sup>.

There are overall strengths and weaknesses of any of the adopted approaches.

- *Face-to-face advice and assistance for landlords and tenants (case holding).* The main strength of this approach is that it maximises the ‘personal touch’ – cited in the research as the ‘effective element’ of a number of the projects. However, the main weakness of such an approach is that, given limited resources, it is unlikely that such a front-facing role can target all of the tenants affected by the Housing Benefit changes.
- *Cascading information.* The main strength of this approach is that it is more likely to be able to target more people impacted by the changes to Housing Benefit. However, a weakness is that there is an increased chance of information not reaching its intended audience (i.e. tenants) compared to more case-holding projects. A too ‘hands off’ co-ordinating and training role could also leave the contact with tenants to non-specialists who will not be able to assist effectively at all levels.
- *Bringing empty homes back into use.* The main strength of this approach is that it is a practical and effective way of increasing the pool of affordable local housing for those affected by Housing

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<sup>7</sup> Although most incorporate a mixture of all approaches

Benefit changes. This approach also has potential to generate income and become self-sustaining. The main weakness of the approach is that such an approach cannot be expected to assist every person affected by the Housing Benefit changes. In addition, the case study project success was facilitated by the existence of the already established SLA. Thus the successes of the current project cannot be extrapolated to other areas. The Carmarthenshire project should also be seen in the wider context of the Welsh Government's 'Houses into Homes' programme, which commenced in April 2012 and is the subject of a separate evaluation.

### **Common process and impact obstacles and facilitators to s180 project success**

- 6.3 There were a number of themes across the projects in terms of facilitators and barriers to the project process and impact.
- 6.4 At least four out of the six case study areas told us that a major facilitator of the project process was to ensure that preparatory work was undertaken in advance to ensure that once the project was set up then the staff could 'hit the ground running'. This proactive work was in the form of preparation work with Housing Benefit teams or building on existing work and relationships both within the local authority departments and with wider stakeholders. It was reported that this led to a time and cost effective process that offered service users a seamless and efficient service.
- 6.5 A facilitator of the process for the majority of the case study projects was cited as the recruitment of 'expert' staff i.e. people who had extensive experience of housing, Housing Benefit and homelessness. Hence the project workers were highly knowledgeable and this improved the speed, accuracy and efficiency of the service. Although only three case study areas talked of this as a particular facilitator of the process, it is obvious from the data collected that other case study areas had also employed knowledgeable workers for the project posts.

- 6.6 At least two of the case study areas were specific in their claim to addressing the Housing Benefit changes holistically with tenants<sup>8</sup>. This was either in the form of looking at the Housing Benefit changes in conjunction with other changes, for example changes to other welfare benefits, or in the form of looking at the other support needs of the individual tenants to see whether homelessness risk could be reduced overall.
- 6.7 Addressing the changes holistically is important, as Shelter Cymru's Benefits expert notes:
- 6.8 "There is an occlusion of disability benefit changes (introduction of Personal Independence Payment and abolishing of Disability Living Allowance) and Housing Benefit changes that, in combination, will have a massive impact upon maintaining tenancies. All of the local authority areas will be affected by change but it is likely that Blaenau Gwent, RCT and Caerphilly will be pre-eminent"
- 6.9 In addition, as almost all tenants in the social housing sector will, from October 2013, have to follow PRS tenants in receiving payment of their housing benefit and making rent payments, money management skills are going to be critical. Many social housing tenants will choose not to move and to suffer financially instead from their under-occupancy. They may need help with realistic budgeting and debt advice. It is imperative that the projects look at homelessness prevention holistically.
- 6.10 A facilitator of the project process was cited as the partnership approach by two case study areas. This was either in the form of the North Wales partnership joint working across three local authority areas, or in the form of the local authority and voluntary sector partnership in Swansea. The main benefits of partnership working were cited as:
- (i) the ability to bring different experiences and strengths to the project, and
  - (ii) the ability to support each other and share good practice.
- 6.11 An unexpected obstacle cited by 50% of the case study projects was that the role was more time intensive than first envisioned. This has

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<sup>8</sup> Although it is expected that more case study areas were doing this.

resulted in a decreased ability to see as many tenants as they would have liked. It was noted that tenant and landlord engagement was taking a lot longer than hoped and this had an impact on the resource available.

- 6.12 It is noted that there has been excellent use of DHP funding, however, there needs to also be a focus on long-term solutions to the issues of affordability. In at least four of the six project areas there is an emphasis on advice and increasing access/the uptake of DHPs. While this is valuable work and will all help to reduce homelessness it is a very short term solution for individuals.
- 6.13 The majority of the case study areas state that a lack of single person or appropriate accommodation is a major barrier to the success of the project. Thus a project can have a highly successful model of delivery but if there is a lack of affordable accommodation then the projects cannot succeed in preventing homelessness long-term.
- 6.14 All of the case study areas cited that landlord engagement is a barrier to project success. The crux of the issue is that local authorities have a lack of appropriate stock for tenants impacted by the changes to Housing Benefit. Therefore, it is imperative to increase the availability of appropriate and accessible stock in Wales via private landlords being willing rent to Housing Benefit claimants in order to prevent homelessness. Nevertheless, landlords are not engaging in the volumes that the projects had envisioned.
- 6.15 Evidence suggests that landlords are reluctant to engage in the projects due to two primary reasons:
- (i) the low rent levels at LHA rate. Low rents at LHA level are not attractive to many landlords, either because the landlord cannot afford to drop their rent or because the local context means that there is no incentive for landlords to drop their rent when they can have tenants willing to pay higher, and
  - (ii) concern about direct payments to benefit claimants and a preference to rent to those not in receipt of benefits. There was some qualitative evidence of landlords reducing their rent, but the vast majority of

qualitative evidence suggested that landlords have not, and will not be, reducing their rents in line with LHA rates despite the projects.

- 6.16 An example of good practice that Blaenau Gwent are intending to implement to increase landlord engagement is as follows:
- 6.17 They wish to target a portfolio landlord (with the biggest amount of housing benefit properties) and work with them and each of their tenants looking at the 'bigger picture' with regards to their finances. For example, are they on the correct tariffs for gas / electricity, budgeting advice, debt advice (if required), encouraging the landlord to work with the credit union or work with each tenant to open basic bank accounts if the credit union was not an option.
- 6.18 They also hope to look at digital exclusion and see if they could progress with enabling tenants to access things online so that they would benefit from opportunities such as price comparison websites to get the best deals. This would help to maximise a tenant's income and potentially secure their tenancy and prevent homelessness.
- 6.19 Once completed, the hope is that the landlord would attend the Landlord Forum and speak about their experience to promote working with the local authority to mitigate the impact of housing benefit changes.
- 6.20 Four out of the six case study areas stated that tenant engagement was a major barrier to the impact of the project. The main theme was that stakeholders feel that tenants are 'burying their heads in the sand' when it comes to benefit changes. Project workers feel that until the changes actually affect the tenant then there will be a reluctance to engage with the project. Project workers also feel that there are a lot of short-term measures in place such as transitional protection, DHP support and the insidious incremental roll out of the changes that is resulting in many tenants yet to feel the real impact of the housing benefit changes.
- 6.21 Four out of six case study areas stated that a major obstacle to the success of the projects is whether the s180 project resource is sufficient to target and assist all of the tenants expected to be impacted by the changes. Many stakeholders feel that the changes to housing benefit have yet to be felt fully, and that projects are likely to become very busy once the full impact hits tenants. Thus a project could have a successful

model of delivery but it might never reach its intended aim due to a lack of staff resource to fully tackle the issue. Hence an increased urgency to work in partnership locally in order to pool resources, eradicate duplication and ensure that as many tenants can be targeted as possible.

### **The impact of case study projects**

- 6.22 All of the case study areas displayed evidence that the s180 projects are meeting (or at least working towards) their aim of preventing homelessness due to changes in Housing Benefit.
- 6.23 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.
- 6.24 Each of the case studies shows that the level of support which the individual projects are able to provide to households, tenants and landlords has increased as the projects have become more established. However, delays in recruitment to posts may be a brake on the potential for delivery, as may the capacity of officers associated with individual projects, particularly if demands from service users and other stakeholders increase.
- 6.25 There is a small body of published evidence which shows that preventing homelessness is both cost effective and value for money, as well as contributing to positive outcomes for individual households and communities (NAO, 2005; Pawson et al, 2007; Pleace et al, 2008). The savings are based on the assumption that the cost to the public purse of providing temporary or permanent rehousing are significantly greater than the costs of different preventative interventions such as those we have seen in each of the case studies. The research done by Heriot Watt University for the Department of Communities and Local Government (Pawson et al, 2007) concluded that preventing

homelessness avoids substantial social disruption and resettlement costs and that different preventative measures provide avenues to alternative settled accommodation, often in the private sector. This research also showed that different preventative measures could be between 3.5 and nine times less expensive than the costs of meeting their own homelessness duties directly.

- 6.26 Almost 10 years ago, other research (Kenway and Palmer, 2003) estimated that the individual cost of single homelessness could be as much as £24,000 per annum, in terms not only of providing temporary accommodation but also of associated health costs, resettlement, tenancy failure, support services and potential costs to the police and criminal justice system.
- 6.27 Given the nature of the data available, and the different local contexts and approaches taken in each area to prevent homelessness, it is difficult to assess the relative cost effectiveness of the different interventions. The majority of the project costs incurred, with the exception of the Carmarthenshire project, have been revenue expenditure, and in particular salary costs. However, the quantifiable impacts of the individual projects have varied considerably.
- 6.28 By way of example, in Blaenau Gwent in the period October 2011 - September 2012 the average cost of advice to tenant was £70. A similar figure (£65 per tenant) was reported in Denbighshire (the North Wales project) over the life of the initiative up until December 2012. Although the average cost per tenant was higher in Flintshire, this no doubt reflects that the project did not begin until later and the numbers of tenants provided with advice has been, as yet, significantly less.
- 6.29 What is less clear is the extent to which individual projects have actually sustained tenancies. One project reported in the quantitative return for this research that 130 tenants were able to remain in their current homes over the period April - December 2012, which suggests an average cost of £236 per household/tenancy (though the project also provided advice to more households than this, as well as to landlords/letting agents). Over a similar period in a different local authority the number of reported current tenancies actually sustained was much lower (21), and therefore

the average costs significantly higher (£1285 per tenancy), but again the project provided advice to a wider group of tenants and landlords, which makes direct comparison very difficult. However, what is clear is that, in aggregate, 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.

- 6.30 The success of the projects has been achieved via effective joint working both within the local authority, especially with the Housing Benefit department, and also with wider stakeholders including some landlords and tenants.
- 6.31 Overall, the projects have enabled the local authority to go 'one step further' in order to assist clients and prevent homelessness.
- 6.32 Stakeholders now 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.
- 6.33 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.
- 6.34 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.

## **7 Conclusion and key lessons for projects moving forward**

- 7.1 This brief conclusion section discusses how the projects can work with other local authority departments and wider stakeholders to maximise the effectiveness of their efforts to prevent homelessness as a result of changes to Housing Benefit. It concludes with some caveats of the current study.
- 7.2 The s180 posts are evolving in line with Housing Benefit changes and local need. We accrued evidence in this research that the projects are meeting their aim to prevent homelessness due to changes in housing benefits. However, we have also identified the relative strengths and weaknesses of each approach and where improvements can be made.
- 7.3 To ensure that the s180 projects are most appropriate to the area, each local authority should ensure that the following work is being undertaken locally so that the s180 posts can complement, rather than duplicate, these existing roles.
- 7.4 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 <sup>9</sup>.
- 7.5 As evidenced in the case study research, we presented some evidence that other local authority departments and external stakeholders are also undertaking homelessness prevention (as a result of the changes to Housing Benefit) work. Further joint working and communication is required to link in with other work being undertaken locally.
- 7.6 Close working with local authority Housing Benefit teams can lead to the early identification of tenants affected by the housing benefit changes.

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<sup>9</sup> The Research Team went further and made an attempt to start mapping local services and projects. However, the team found that the information was patchy and not easy to obtain. Therefore, given the time and budget constraints, and with a risk of the omission of important projects and work, the research team did not attempt to demonstrate all of the local work being undertaken to mitigate the impact of Housing Benefit changes. We did, however, report on work or projects that were brought to our attention during the research process.

- 7.7 In order to ensure the time and cost efficiency of the s180 roles, sharing Housing Benefit changes via a generic information template (which can be amended for each local authority) and dissemination of good practice between areas is likely to increase performance of the projects.
- 7.8 Whilst the monitoring of standardised data across local authority projects supported through 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. 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
- 7.9 There is also a need for a local ‘beacon’ of good practice to help coordinate, disseminate and train other stakeholders and frontline staff in the Housing Benefit changes and provide clear signposting to supporting officers.
- 7.10 Due to the importance of landlord engagement, there needs to be a person in the local authority who deals 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.

- 7.11 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.
- 7.12 It is imperative that there is an element of face-to-face tenant working in each authority. This could be a s180post, frontline local authority staff, other social landlords or wider stakeholders. Examples of good practice and innovative ways of engaging with tenants need to be sought. Working in partnership is the best and, given the size of the changes, the only way to ensure that each tenant has the opportunity of assistance.
- 7.13 Shelter Cymru's Welfare Benefits Adviser noted that there will be a paucity of provision following Legal Services Commission changes. The Tenancy Support Officer approach appears attractive but is likely to be under resourced and ill equipped or indeed not designed to engage in tribunal work for which there will an ever increasing demand. This issue is something that local authorities should prepare for and consider in the future direction of the project posts.

### **Caveat of the research**

- 7.14 There are a number of potential confounding variables of the current study that need to be acknowledged when interpreting the results of this research.
- 7.15 The difficulties of assessing the projects in a changing climate need to be acknowledged. For example, the changes to Housing Benefit were being introduced whilst the team were undertaking the evaluation, leading to a changing context and some temporal differences in how the project was being run during the process evaluation compared to the impact evaluation. Projects were 'evolving' somewhat continuously, not only because the project workers were refining their methods as they went along, but also because the context in which the projects were set was changing.
- 7.16 Our ability to generalise the findings to other case study areas in Wales warrants caution. There was evidence of successful impact in each of the case study areas we examined. Nevertheless, that is not to say that

we could assume a similar success if the particular approach was adopted elsewhere due to

(i) the varying context between local authorities and how suited each approach is to local requirements and

(ii) the chance that the case study areas 'over performed' due to increased attention on them over the evaluation period.

7.17 The projects have evolved considerably since the grant application, therefore the original targets they set for themselves were less applicable at the time of evaluation.

7.18 It is also imperative to remember that there is a lot of homelessness prevention work currently being undertaken in local authorities. Therefore, it is difficult to ascertain that the findings are a direct result of the projects alone and not a combination of all of the local work being done to mitigate the impact of Housing Benefit changes.

7.19 It is unlikely that the long-term aim of 'sustainable homelessness prevention due to changes in Housing Benefit' could be measured accurately at this point – hence we have examined the interim sequence of events that could indicate that homelessness has been prevented in a meaningful way.

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## **Appendix 1: Project descriptions**

### **Carmarthenshire**

The Carmarthenshire project comprises the project manager, who is employed as a Development Officer with specific responsibilities for developing projects, and one other member of staff. In addition to other responsibilities that they have, a key project that they have set up and are responsible for running is a Social Lettings Agency (SLA) the objective of which is to provide good, affordable accommodation (i.e. below LHA rates) in Carmarthenshire.

The SLA has developed over a four year period and now has 150 properties (100 landlords) on its books. Of those properties, broadly speaking 70% are in Llanelli, 25% in Ammanford and five per cent in Carmarthen.

The grant has been used to provide financial assistance and loans to landlords in order to bring their empty properties into the rented sector. This in turn links into the existing SLA project as the SLA is the vehicle that enables the local authority to get the properties into the social lettings market. Some of the grant has also been spent on mail shots which have been sent out targeting owners of empty properties in specific areas - this is still on-going.

We were told that each mail shot generates a lot of telephone enquiries and these then have to be worked through by the project staff. Once the empty property owners make contact the project manager goes out to the property to make an initial assessment of the scale of renovations and the demand for properties in that area. Large/costly projects are usually referred on to the Empty Homes Officer.

Properties that the project takes on may just need cosmetic improvements, together with Gas and Electrical Certificates and a Gas Contract etc., or they may need more significant improvements, for example to the kitchen, bathroom, wiring or plumbing.

As part of the project, the owner can receive up to £1,000 financial assistance towards the costs of improvements. If needed, they can receive a loan from the SLA (usually up to a maximum of about £10K) to cover the remaining costs which are then repaid as a deduction from rental income over an agreed period of time.

The owners then enter into a five year management agreement with the SLA; although if for some reason they do need the property back (for example to live in it themselves) then they can give six months notice to terminate the agreement. In addition, the project can arrange for contractors to do all the work for the owners, thus ensuring it is done to an acceptable standard.

In order to qualify for the programme the property in question must have been empty for a minimum of six months (in reality some have been empty for much longer). Those who subsequently move into the properties are identified by the Housing Options Advisers, they may be at risk of homelessness, they may be in temporary accommodation, or it might be preventative work.

The project is now also getting direct enquiries from tenants, although they would only normally deal directly with them if they were potentially interested in a property that the local authority were finding difficult to let – for example in a rural area.

As well as tenants, those benefitting also include empty homeowners, buy to let investors, landlords and in some cases the neighbourhood, when they are able to improve and let a property that may have been empty for some time.

The project manager told us that the reintroduction/introduction of empty properties into the social lettings market helps to address the lack of housing stock in the county borough.

## **Swansea**

The project is a partnership between the City and County of Swansea Council and The Wallich that works with households struggling to maintain private sector tenancies as a result of the welfare reforms. The post was created to deliver the service which is about managing the process of change for tenants and liaising with landlords. The project provides a new service that did not exist previously.

The project focuses on homelessness prevention. The main aim of the post is to identify and assist individuals before the homelessness stage and prevent homelessness happening. Where people cannot remain in their homes, the project aims to assist them to successfully move to an affordable home in the private sector without the need to present as homeless to the local authority.

There is a specific focus on the most severely affected families, i.e. single under-35 and families in receipt of the five-bed rate. With four months of transitional protection remaining, of the 72 clients where an assessment has been made, the project officer has undertaken some level of direct work with 40 of the 262 single under-35s and four of the seven families formerly in receipt of the five-bed rate.

The project concentrates on contacting claimants and making them aware of what housing benefit changes may affect them and what they can do to mitigate them. The project also aims to identify local landlords who will accept clients if the existing rent cannot be reduced - specifically landlords willing to

accept tenants on benefits. The project also negotiates terms for new tenancies in existing properties based upon sharing or subletting so moving home has not been required.

The process very much depends on the needs of the client. The process could be very brief and result in a quick resolution; for example, a short client interview with advice and signposting. Or it could be a longer-term process, for example, help with budgeting, landlord negotiation, application for DHPs etc.

The project aims to offer a holistic approach and they make referrals to other agencies such as tenancy support and health professionals when needed. Initial assessments are generally undertaken by telephone and then the project manager usually states that face-to-face interviews are essential to get a general picture and obtain detailed information to be able to fully assist the client.

There is one member of staff on the project who is managed by The Wallich but based at Housing Options at the local authority. This location means that the project worker is in the same place where individuals come for housing advice and allows the project worker to access all the local authority databases and information systems.

### **Rhondda Cynon Taff**

In RCT, the grant was used to fund a Tenancy Sustainability Officer (TSO) to work with people affected, or due to be affected, by the welfare benefit reforms. The TSO has been in place since May 2012. This start date is somewhat later than other case study area projects.

Like other case study areas, the TSO adopts a proactive approach that aims to prevent homelessness and loss of accommodation wherever possible. If needed, the TSO will assist the tenant to find alternative suitable accommodation and, if required, apply for DHP until alternative accommodation can be found.

“For us it has been about starting with the under-35s and then working with partners in respect of the other client groups that will be affected as of next year. We want to work with them in advance of the changes, raising awareness, making sure the tenants/clients are aware of the impact that it will have on them and they know then where to go for help.” (Stakeholder)

The funding was directly used for the salary of the TSO. Due to delays in recruitment, the project manager had to ensure that the TSO had the correct

skillset for the role. The process involves the TSO approaching tenants, rather than waiting for tenants to contact the authority.

The Housing Benefit department sends information through to the project on those tenants that meet the criteria (i.e. people in a certain age bracket on benefits), then the TSO telephones the tenants and goes out to 'knock on doors'. The Housing Benefit team is able to identify those people affected by other changes such as under-occupancy etc., which the project has found very helpful. Tenants are also able to self-refer through housing advice and via the homelessness prevention officers.

The project also works to engage with landlords to update them on the changes and the potential impact of housing benefit reform.

### **The partnership approach between Wrexham, Flintshire and Denbighshire**

The partnership model was considered to have attractive elements in terms of being able to be more influential / persuasive both within the local authority structure and externally to other stakeholders. The approach also allows the team to standardise good practice across all three local authorities. It was recognised that the three local authorities had within their structures good practice and expertise in diverse areas which could be shared to produce a cohesive whole.

The project has evolved throughout the process from what was described as 'too frontline focussed' at the beginning to now being more about coordinating and cascading information.

The grant funding was used to put into place Housing Benefit and Housing Options Liaison Officers (HBHOLOs) in the local authority areas. The funding was deployed in accordance with financial project plan, but there was an under-spend identified and utilised to upgrade the housing website (there is a common format for all of the local authorities). This involved incorporating more facilities specifically for private rental tenants and landlords and includes vacancy advertising.

The HBHOLOs do not see their job as case holders – they state there would be too many customers for them to approach in that way - but more of a co-ordinator role. Their main work is to inform, educate and support all stakeholders by publicising the changes and training local authority staff and service providers. The training and presentations they deliver are not just covering what the changes will be but also to give advice on what organisations could / should be doing in response. The training and advice

goes beyond the Housing Benefit changes and covers all welfare benefit changes which is a much wider remit.

The team have also been looking at what external agencies already exist and what they are doing. They are looking at where the gaps in service are and how they can be filled internally or externally. The HBHOLE posts are only temporary so some of the changes may need to be internal, operational changes or looking at what the Citizen Advice Bureau (CAB) or Shelter Cymru, etc. is doing so that they can be part of a long term solution.

The work the partnership approach undertake involves the following four points:

- (i) Landlord liaison in the Private Rented Sector: Landlords are offered incentives such as direct payment of Housing Benefit in exchange for decreasing rent to Local Housing Allowance levels or half price House of Multiple Accommodation licences in exchange for landlords undertaking accreditation.
- (ii) Targeting vulnerable groups: i.e. those potentially being made homeless by the Universal Credit / Housing Benefit changes. They work mainly with Housing Benefit to identify these groups.
- (iii) Training service providers on the changes so they can help their own clients.
- (iv) Raising the profile amongst frontline staff; housing officers, Housing Benefit staff, support services, mental health workers, schools, local councillors etc.

A selection of options is developing, in conjunction with other s180 projects currently funded from s180 underspend. For example, lodger packs, credit union savings/loans, pooled budgets and innovative use of DHPs to provide a 'kick start' or a 'temporary respite' for tenants whilst work is on-going to resolve either a short-term or longer term problem.

There has been a great deal of advertising using various media, website, adverts in the local community, special events with refreshments provided, small localised delivery of information to stakeholders and attendance at landlord forums and National Landlord Association events etc.

There were all-Wales projects last year that developed websites across Wales for the PRS (DenbighshireHousing.co.uk and the equivalents Flintshire housing and Wrexham housing.) The Denbighshire HBHOLE has tied into this scheme and worked again on its website so that landlords are now directed to three options:

- (i) they can put their property on the website themselves and the local authority adopts a hands-off approach,
- (ii) they offer a light touch management service provided by their housing officers (take photos, put in any support a tenant might need, etc) and the only thing the landlord needs to do for that is to rent at LHA rates, or
- (iii) the local authority will offer a full managed letting service via Cefni or Offa letting services. The HBHOLOs co-ordinate this work rather than dealing with it directly.

Flintshire is still more face to face in the support provided but this is not the case in DCC and WCBC. They have been moulded by their local authority working structures, who has bought in to the scheme, which directorate has had most input to the scheme, initiatives running in individual authorities such as the Bond Scheme and how willing staff are to work with the S180 project.

## **Caerphilly**

The project is based around the appointment of a Private Rented Sector Access and Advice Coordinator (PRSAAC). Although some of the work was already in progress when the project started, the PRSAAC works with private landlords to explore opportunities for tenancies within the private rented sector and assists and supports tenants impacted by the Housing Benefit changes.

The PRSAAC looks after the day to day operation of the project to develop partnerships that have already been established. The aim of the project is to lead to a more coordinated approach and improved linked up services based on good relationships with the benefits section of the local authority and the Housing Options Service.

The PRSAAC helps tenants to look at their options and, if required, apply for a DHP. The PRSAAC also looks into more long-term options for the tenants affected by the Housing Benefit changes.

The PRSAAC works closely with the Housing Benefit management (and works in the benefits section for one morning each week and administers the DHP applications).

The DHP is provided for a short term only to maintain the existing tenancy, then the PRSAAC signposts to more affordable accommodation options and explores the various financial assistance options such as Transitional Funding to facilitate the physical move, pay agency fees, assist with deposit etc.

The PRSAAC, having worked with the tenant, also promotes the use of the credit union, CAB and makes referrals to Supporting People where required. It is reported that Caerphilly are on track to spend its full DHP allocation for the first time ever through this coordinated approach.

There are numerous ways that the project is communicated and promoted to tenants and landlords. For example, through housing advice, support providers, social services, housing associations, and mortgage rescue.

Channels of communication also include the local authority website, the DHP route, the benefits team, and the distribution of leaflets. The project worker reports a very successful DHP working group involving staff in the benefit section.

There is also a lot of in-house work to address under-occupancy and the department works with the voluntary sector to adopt a proactive approach. They also report that there is a regional property officers group in order to increase joint working.

## **Blaenau Gwent**

The grant funding was used to fund a Tenancy Sustainment Officer (TSO). A TSO was first appointed in July 2011 with a change of personnel in January 2012.

At present the TSO works four days in Housing Benefit and one day in Housing although this is a flexible arrangement and is under review as the issue of Housing Benefit and welfare reform is growing.

The TSO primarily targets tenants who are Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit claimants; however referrals are made to the TSO from external bodies for customers who are not in receipt of HB/CTB also. The TSO works with clients to ensure they are receiving their full entitlement to benefits and to address other relevant issues.

The TSO also helps with DHPs for people and this has been particularly successful in assisting those affected by the welfare reform changes, this is currently being seen by those affected by the under-35 Shared Accommodation Rate. The emphasis of the project is on homelessness prevention by liaising with tenants and landlords.

The project is communicated internally from benefit advisers and externally from RSLs and support providers such as the CAB, the Wallich, and Speakeasy.

There is also a leaflet which is distributed widely by these organisations and others about the benefit changes and the project. The TSO also refers people onto further agencies like the CAB if they need further support.

The project is based in the Housing Benefit team and the TSO works well with the Housing Department also. It was stated that the two departments work very well together. They report that thinking is 'local authority wide' rather than by department in order to save money across the local authority.