



Preparing to Prevent

**How prepared are local
authorities for the
homelessness changes?**

November 2014

Contact

Welsh Local Government Association

The WLGA's primary purposes are to promote a better local government, its reputation and to support authorities in the development of policies and priorities which will improve public service and democracy.

It represents the 22 local authorities in Wales with the 3 fire and rescue authorities and 3 national park authorities as associate members.

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Executive Summary

Context

The Welsh Government's Housing (Wales) Act 2014 will have significant implications in relation to how local authorities tackle homelessness. With its emphasis on prevention, local authorities will need to ensure their services are structured and modelled appropriately to deliver on preventing homelessness.

Local authorities feel there are 3 key changes in the Act which will have the most major implications. These being;

- i. The new duties to take reasonable steps to prevent / alleviate homelessness
- ii. The change to allow the discharge of any housing duty into the private rented sector
- iii. The change in the 'priority need status' of those homeless leaving prison

Methodology

To inform this report all 22 local authorities in Wales have been visited and a day of discussion has taken place with each. As well as the Council's

homelessness managers and teams, these discussions included staff from Housing Benefit, Environmental Health / Public Protection and Supporting People. Where possible, the Head of Housing and the local Housing Portfolio Holders were also engaged.

Understanding Existing Demand

Homelessness acceptances in Wales continue to reduce. This is an indication that current prevent activity is having a positive impact. The report explores the current levels of homelessness acceptances, (where the local authority has a housing duty), which equated to 5,210 over 2013.

However, there are large disparities between authorities when one examines their levels of acceptances compared to their populations. One purpose of the work was to explore why this might be the case.

Developing a Deeper Understanding of Demand

In light of the different emphasis of the Act and the expectation to take

reasonable steps to prevent homelessness, it was considered appropriate to explore in more detail the nature and type of current demand.

An in depth exercise was undertaken with Denbighshire, where the cases who approached housing options over a one month period were explored. This exercise found the following;

- 13 cases (18.6%) were simply seeking housing advice and were not at threat of homelessness
- 6 cases (8.4%) were homeless on the day, (e.g. sleeping in their car, etc.)
- The remaining 51 cases (73%) were threatened with homelessness, but a window was available in order to prevent

This information gave authorities food for thought in relation to how they set services up in light of the changes proposed.

Responding to Demand

The following gives some key findings in relation to how local authorities are planning to respond to demand and

considers the services which need to be in place to deliver the 'reasonable steps'.

Of the 22 authorities,

- 16 have now set up a generic service which focuses on prevention.
- 4 are establishing generic teams through restructuring processes
- 2 have accepted it is the way forward and are working to adopt the 'generic' structure
- All authorities have mediation services in place. These are either delivered by an external agency, or part of the housing options role
- A 'homelessness prevention fund' was available in 21 of the 22 Councils visited
- All authorities saw basic financial advice as part of the role of Housing Options staff. Some have specialist officers as part of the team
- Shelter Cymru deliver services across 21 of the 22 local authorities in Wales
- The current relationships between authorities and their Housing Association (HA) partners would appear to be mixed. There are

those who are playing a key role, (North Wales HA is a good example), but there are some areas where authorities feel HA's are not contributing enough

- Awareness raising with health and social care about the role of housing, how this role will be changing with the implementation of the bill and how we can work in partnership to find solutions was seen as essential
- Although it was difficult to determine with any evidence, most authorities felt, with the change in legislation discussed, approximately 70% of those prisoners who are currently entitled to a housing duty will not receive the duty following the implementation of the bill

In terms of responding to demand, all local authorities have recognised the need to realign their service in light of the expectations of the Housing Act. They recognise the importance of working with households as early as possible, focussing on prevention and making full use of existing services of partner agencies to ensure the objectives of the bill are met.

Delivering Supply

Having the services in place to respond to demand will be essential to meet the objectives of the Housing Act. However, just as essential will be delivering the suitable and affordable accommodation options which will allow homelessness to be prevented or alleviated.

The Private Rented Sector

In relation to working with the Private Rented Sector (PRS) the visits found the following;

- 2 established in-house social letting agencies (Neath Port Talbot and Carmarthenshire)
- 1 external social lettings agency working very effectively (Pembrokeshire)
- 1 recently established PRS access / Social lettings agency (Flintshire)
- 6 looking to develop Social Lettings / PRS Access (Swansea, Conwy, Wrexham, Caerphilly, Gwynedd, Anglesey)
- 6 identify need for better partnership with external Social Letting Agency (SLA) (Ceredigion, Newport, Monmouthshire, Torfaen, Vale of Glamorgan)

- 6 developing in-house access / management service (Bridgend, Vale of Glamorgan, Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Denbighshire, Blaenau Gwent)

Whatever approach an authority takes engaging the private rented sector, what is key is that the landlords who the authority is working with have an understanding of what exactly is on offer. This needs to be marketed and landlords made aware of each 'offer' available.

However, once an authority has agreed its 'offer'. They need to be sure they have the resource and staff to deliver on what they have promised.

Temporary Accommodation

Another element of supply which local authorities will need to consider in the run-up to the implementation of the legislation is their supply of temporary accommodation.

With the changes in priority need for prisoners and the emphasis on prevention, local authorities need to consider their use of temporary accommodation and whether it, and

linked support services, will need to be remodelled.

Shared Housing Options

With the changes introduced through welfare reform, single people under 35 who are reliant on Housing Benefit have little option other than shared housing. However, these options need to be explored within social housing as well as the private sector. With the introduction of the 'bedroom tax' the demand for 3 bedroom accommodation is diminishing. There is scope for HA's to utilise this stock as shared accommodation and local authorities need to work with HA's, (as well as private landlords), to develop these options.

Linking with Supporting People

In 10 of the 22 local authorities there are now support workers who are part of the authority's Housing Options Team. The evidence from the visits suggests these workers offer a fast and responsive service to those households who have an identified support need and are working effectively to prevent homelessness.

Many of the households who approach local authorities have underlying support

needs. Housing Options staff will be expected to undertake a support assessment as part of the new duties being introduced through the Act. Supported housing gateways are now in place in 9 local authority areas in Wales and 4 more are developing them. The purpose of the supported housing 'gateway' is to ensure that any information gathered can be sent to one place and a place with the knowledge and intelligence to secure the right support for the household.

Evidencing and Reporting New Duties

With the new duties, it is imperative local authorities are able to measure how successful they have been in preventing homelessness and which of the reasonable steps are proving most effective.

Local authorities were asked to consider their current systems as part of the visit and consider how they will develop their systems in the run up to the changes in 2015. All are exploring it and the Homelessness Network is working with authorities to explore where they can work in partnership to avoid the development of 22 different systems.

Working with other agencies

The Bill will expect all local authorities to develop a Homelessness Strategy and this offers a good opportunity for local authorities to ensure the 'sign up' of all agencies in their strategic goals.

However, the visits findings suggest it is not just a fuzzy commitment of strategic intent which authorities will need to receive. Evidence suggests it is those authorities who exert the most control and work in closest partnership with outside agencies, which are delivering the most successful homelessness prevention.

Recommendations

- Housing Options services should deliver a generic prevention / assessment service so that each staff member offers a prevention service, as well as undertaking decisions around any housing duty (to most effectively comply with the requirements of the Act)
- All local authorities need to develop a clear 'landlord offer', including a range of incentives and support, encompassing all

agencies working with the private rented sector and market it effectively

- Ensure the right amount of resources are available to deliver this 'offer' effectively
 - Consider the role of temporary accommodation and whether remodelling and redirection of resources may be required following the implementation of the Act
 - Work in partnership with housing associations, support providers and private landlords to develop shared housing options to help meet the need for single person accommodation
 - Explore how short term support services can contribute more effectively to the prevention of imminent homelessness and be part of the 'reasonable steps approach'
 - Establish a central referral point / Gateway for supported housing services
- Explore whether partner agencies receiving S180 funding can work in partnership with authority to deliver prevention and alleviation duties
 - Where necessary, seek to strengthen links with housing associations working locally to ensure they contribute fully to achieving the goals of the Act

1. CONTEXT

The Homelessness and Supporting People Networks Coordinator has now visited all 22 local authorities in Wales to discuss how prepared they are for the forthcoming changes in homelessness legislation.

During 2013, the Housing Consultant Andy Gale visited each authority to consider the extent their services were set up to deliver a prevention of homelessness service. Each authority was left with an action plan to take recommendations forward. These action plans acted as the basis for each visit and common themes which emerged were explored in each authority.

Now the Housing Act has received royal ascent, local authorities are in a position where they are aware of exactly what will be expected of them in April 2015. The visits have evidenced how all local authorities are preparing for the legislation changes and it is apparent that staff and managers are committed and proactive. All authorities want to ensure the legislation is a success and are working in partnership, both internally and externally, to ensure this is the case.

They welcome the emphasis on prevention and are focussing services accordingly.

For local authority homelessness teams there are 3 key changes to the legislation contained within the Housing Bill. These will have a significant impact on their current service. These are;

- i. The duty to take 'reasonable steps' to prevent homelessness for all households, (as long as they are eligible), who approach the authority for assistance in retaining or obtaining accommodation; regardless of their priority need, local connection, any intentionality, etc
- ii. The change to allow local authorities to discharge any housing duty by offering a private rented sector property, as long as it is likely to be / is for a period of 6 months and is 'suitable' and 'affordable'
- iii. The change in 'priority need' status for those leaving prison. The withdrawal of automatic priority

need is likely to have a significant impact on the type of demand. The duty to take reasonable steps will call for greater emphasis on delivering prevention

forthcoming changes, the role of partners in helping them meet the new duties and examples of how other authorities are preparing in order to learn from each other.

The impact of these changes was the focus of discussion and the visit explored how each authority was preparing, (although in terms of those leaving prison there is a distinct piece of work being undertaken by the LA Homelessness Network which is exploring this in greater detail).

It was emphasised to each that this was not intended to be an 'inspection' or 'audit'; the purpose of each visit was to support the authority and identify areas where they may need to particularly focus in the run up to the changes in April 2015.

The purpose of this report is to feedback on these discussions and focuses on the following areas;

2. METHODOLOGY

In order to understand the position in every authority, each was visited over a day. During the visit interviews took place with local authority (LA) homelessness managers and staff as well as staff from other departments / sections. These included Housing Benefit, Environmental Health / Public Protection and Supporting People. Discussions also took place with the authority's Head of Housing and, where possible, the Councillor with the Housing portfolio.

These discussions focussed on how prepared each authority was for the

- Considering existing demand on services in light of the future changes
- Exploring how LA's are responding / will need to respond to this demand
- Evidencing how LA's are delivering on supply of accommodation options
- Feeding back on how Supporting People services are being utilised to prevent and manage homelessness

- Considering whether local authorities have the ICT capabilities to submit the required data to Welsh Government and be able to evidence they are complying with the new duties
- Exploring the extent local authorities are working with their partners and whether this can be developed in light of the new legislation
- Conclusions and recommendations

The report considers each of these in turn, considers the position across Wales and highlights good practice examples in particular authorities.

homeless, the more effective the prevention service has been in focusing work to avoid it.

In terms of getting a picture of demand and how effective prevention activities are it is worth considering the homelessness figures for each local authority area.

The following table illustrates the number of homelessness acceptances over 2013 for each local authority in Wales and lists them in order compared to the acceptances as a proportion of the population.

3. UNDERSTANDING EXISTING DEMAND

Over the last year the Welsh Homelessness statistics indicate homelessness acceptances continue to fall. This is despite the challenging context created by factors such as welfare reform and the recent recession. The reasons for this are complex and it is not in the remit of this work to develop a deeper understanding. However, it would suggest prevention of homelessness is proving effective, i.e. the fewer households who are accepted as

Local Authority	Acceptances (Homeless, priority need and unintentional) 2013	Acceptances as % of population 2013
Swansea	860	0.360%
Newport	420	0.288%
Carmarthenshire	495	0.269%
Monmouthshire	210	0.230%
Cardiff	730	0.211%
Blaenau Gwent	140	0.201%
Vale of Glamorgan	205	0.162%
Ceredigion	120	0.159%
Bridgend	210	0.151%
Powys	200	0.150%
Torfaen	135	0.148%
Gwynedd	170	0.140%
Wrexham	185	0.137%
Pembrokeshire	150	0.122%
Caerphilly	215	0.120%
Conwy	135	0.117%
Merthyr Tydfil	65	0.110%
Neath Port Talbot	145	0.104%
Isle of Anglesey	65	0.093%
Denbighshire	80	0.085%
Rhondda Cynon Taf	190	0.081%
Flintshire	85	0.056%

In simplistic terms, if you have accepted a household as homeless you have failed to prevent their homelessness. Therefore, these figures might indicate those who have the lowest proportion of homelessness acceptances, (Flintshire, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Denbighshire, Anglesey, Neath Port Talbot and Merthyr Tydfil), are providing the best services to prevent homelessness.

The purpose of this report is to consider why this may be the case. Why do these authorities have the lowest homelessness figures? Are they providing prevention

services which are the most effective? If so, how can other LA areas learn from these in light of the forthcoming legislation changes which will place so much emphasis on the prevention of homelessness?

In relation to demand and prevention, it was also worth considering the current performance indicator which supposedly measures the rate of prevention in each local authority area. The figures for 2012-13, (the latest published), are not particularly illuminating.

Prevention of Homelessness	
Local Authority	% cases where homelessness prevented
Denbighshire	100%
Neath Port Talbot	97.1%
Ceredigion	96.5%
Carmarthenshire	95.5%
Gwynedd	92.5%
Torfaen	92.0%
Conwy	91.7%
Merthyr	91.6%
Isle of Anglesey	88.6%
Caerphilly	88.2%
Rhondda Cynon Taf	88.3%
Pembrokeshire	84.1%
Vale of Glamorgan	83.7%
Flintshire	83.4%
Powys	65.3%
Newport	61.6%
Bridgend	52.9%
Swansea	49.3%
Cardiff	33.9%
Monmouthshire	21.4%
Wrexham	12.8%
Blaenau Gwent	1.2%

The figures submitted vary enormously. It is difficult to believe one authority prevented homelessness with 100% of households, any more than another authority prevented homelessness with only 1.2%.

There appear to be a variety of ways of collecting the data and each authority seems to argue the way they do it is indication of the true level. The figures submitted do not appear to correspond with the findings of the visits. The level of acceptances, discussed earlier, 'felt' far

more indicative of how LA's were performing around prevention than these figures. (However, this is a subjective view).

Therefore, when considering what is most effective in relation to prevention, it is more valuable to reflect on levels of acceptances, rather than the levels of prevention submitted through the performance indicator.

However, when considering how councils are meeting the demand presenting it is

not simple. Those who accept the most households as homeless are not the worst at prevention. How and when these figures are recorded differ across authorities. The cities appear to have high acceptance rates which probably reflect both high levels of demand and difficulties in supply. These figures are 'interesting' and as the visits were progressed it was worth comparing the services on offer in those authorities with lowest acceptances, how these were focussed, etc.; and how these potentially differed from those with the highest levels of acceptances.

From April 2014 new indicators to measure demand and the success of interventions are being introduced. The Homelessness Network will be working with the Welsh Government to ensure these are meaningful.

4. DEVELOPING A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF THE 'TYPE' OF DEMAND

As discussed, the new legislation introduces a duty for local authorities to take 'reasonable steps' to prevent homelessness for all households who approach a local authority who are found

to be at threat of homelessness within 56 days.

All local authorities, without exception, had services and processes in place to prevent homelessness. This agenda has been adopted in Wales since 2005, following and replicating the approach taken in England. However, it was worth understanding the extent to which prevention was possible. When were households approaching authorities? Do they approach at a time which allows prevention activity to take place?

In order to develop a deeper understanding, some detailed work was undertaken with Denbighshire County Council over a number of days. The purpose of this was to explore the type of demand and ensure the county had a staffing structure which would be fit for purpose following the introduction of the Bill.

Firstly, the coordinator went through 70 cases who had presented to the authority in December with a housing enquiry. By considering the type of this demand we were able to break them down into the following;

- 13 cases (18.6%) were simply seeking housing advice and were not at threat of homelessness
- 6 cases (8.4%) were homeless on the day, (e.g. sleeping in their car, etc.)
- The remaining 51 cases (73%) were threatened with homelessness, but a window was available in order to prevent

These figures and the proportions of those presenting were fed back to other authorities and the Homelessness Network to determine if they were a reflection of demand across the country. All other councils felt these were a true reflection (approximately) of the type of demand they encountered in their LA area.

So what does this information tell us and how should it be used by councils in the light of the changes in legislation and drive to the focus on prevention?

5. RESPONDING TO DEMAND

Generic Staff?

Following on from the work in Denbighshire, the team recognised the majority of their demand allowed for

prevention activity to take place. For 73% of households approaching the council, there was a window to prevent their homelessness, by either retaining their current accommodation or finding them an alternative.

The current staffing was split into those officers who were offering prevention and those who were assessing households to see if they were 'eligible / entitled' to a housing duty. Managers recognised that this split was not sustainable under the new legislation. They felt, with the majority of demand requiring prevention the staff team needed to be set up to deliver this. Denbighshire are now remodelling their service to reflect this. Each officer will take reasonable steps to prevent homelessness, assess if there is a housing duty (if necessary) and then take reasonable steps to alleviate homelessness once the decision has been made.

Staff and Managers in Denbighshire feel by taking this approach and 'hanging on' to the case throughout the 'homelessness' process they are far more likely to deliver a successful outcome.

They are not alone in adopting this approach. The 'generic' staff approach was advocated by Andy Gale throughout his visits in 2013.

Of the 22 authorities,

- 16 have now set up a generic service which allows the focus on prevention (one of whom has merged the Housing Options role with that of Common Housing Register officer)
- 4 are establishing generic teams through restructuring processes
- 2 have accepted it is the way forward and are working to adopt the 'generic' structure

Ensuring the first point of contact is responsive to need

By its very nature, the prevention of homelessness is time limited. If a household has had notice from a landlord, the council has a set amount of time to try and resolve the housing issue before the household becomes homeless.

As discussed above, it is likely approximately 70% of those who present to housing options with a housing issue are in a position where homelessness is preventable. It is therefore imperative the service is set up to act as quickly as possible, identify the threat and put the services / activities in place to prevent.

There are examples of authorities who still have an appointment system when dealing with those presenting. This would appear counter-productive. If a household approaches with only three weeks before they are due to lose their tenancy and an appointment is made for the following week, you have lost 1/3 of the potential time to prevent.

Ensuring staff are responsive and able to respond as soon as possible is imperative to successful prevention work.

Good Practice Example

Flintshire County Council operates a triage service which assesses the nature of housing enquiry and will immediately flag up with a housing options caseworker if there is a threat of homelessness within 56 days.

The Housing Options caseworker will then interview the household and agree a housing plan which aims to prevent homelessness. This is taken away by the household on the day and the council and the household work in partnership to resolve the housing issue before it results in homelessness.

Contact: Pam Davies - Housing Options Manager, Flintshire County Council
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Are the services in place to take 'Reasonable Steps'?

At the time of writing, the Welsh Government's Guidance was still being developed. However, there is likely to be a list of services which would be expected to be in place to ensure the appropriate 'steps' are taken to prevent / alleviate homelessness.

The following section considers the services which will be included in the Guidance, assesses their availability across Wales and indicates where there are particular good practice examples.

The draft guidance is expecting to see the following services in place;

- **Services to resolve disputes between different parties, such as mediation and conciliation – to assist clients to resolve relationship issues via mediation and conciliation services. This might include family, spousal or neighbourly relationships that have resulted in a threatened eviction, etc**

All local authorities have mediation and conciliation services in place. Some are specialist, e.g. mediation services are provided by Llamau and Barnardos for young people in many LA's, Gisda and Digatref Ynys Môn (Anglesey) provide a similar service in Gwynedd and Anglesey. The Wallich deliver a more generic mediation service (less age specific) in North East Wales and Carmarthenshire.

Across Wales the Welsh Government funds mediation services to the tune of approximately £375,000. As the implementation of the Bill approaches it is imperative that each of the services funded are utilised by the local authority to support them meet its objectives.

However, many HO officers consider mediation as part of their generic role, especially when undertaken between landlord and tenant. Managers identify that training may be necessary for some staff and there is scope in some cases to develop a closer partnership between agencies providing mediation services and housing options teams.

Good practice example

Carmarthenshire County Council has brought in the mediation provided by Wallich so the post-holder sits with the Housing Options Team.

The change has led to a far more proactive and direct relationship. When the worker sat outside the team referrals were rare and caseworkers would try and mediate themselves. Now the worker is seen as part of the team; caseworkers bring in their expertise on a regular basis.

Contact: Chris Beer - Housing Options Manager, Carmarthenshire County Council CPBeer@carmarthenshire.gov.uk

- **Financial payments from a homelessness prevention fund – potentially financial assistance to assist those with financial issues to clear possible debts and/or assist them to move to other accommodation [this intervention should be considered alongside debt/money advice below to tackle the underlying causes and break the potential for a cycle of debt;**

The use of a fund to be used flexibly to help make small payments to prevent homelessness has been used by Welsh authorities for a number of years. This practice is widespread and although not all actually call it their 'prevention fund' this type of assistance was available in 21 of the 22 councils visited.

- **Specialist advice on welfare/benefit rights and debt/money advice, including access to independent advice**

– to support an individual to make the appropriate decision in light of benefit entitlements and other financial considerations, support an applicant to downsize or support an individual to negotiate with lenders and set a realistic household budget;

The visits revealed a mixed approach to this particular service. All authorities saw basic financial advice as part of the role of Housing Options staff. All will undertake basic income and expenditure exercises and support households to make decisions around affordability, etc.

Other authorities had a more specialist financial advice service based within the team. Torfaen have two 'Financial Inclusion Officers' based within the team, Carmarthenshire host a specialist financial worker employed by Shelter Cymru. Others had close links with in-house welfare rights and advice teams, whereas some refer households to agencies such as Citizen's Advice for specialist advice. Without exception, all authorities indicated they had seen greater demand for these services in recent years. More households were approaching with debt

issues and these issues are becoming ever-more complex. Welfare reform appears to have exacerbated some of these issues.

Many authorities recognise this is an area of their service which may need strengthening. Some are looking to utilise the transition funding in this area, either to employ new staff, or develop training programmes for existing staff.

Good practice example

Torfaen County Borough Council have utilised Supporting People funding to employ 2 financial inclusion officers as part of their Housing Options Team.

These officers support those with financial hardship and at threat of losing their home. Much of their work is focussed on those affected by Welfare Reform.

Short term support plans are formulated and the officers work with households to work through the issues and ensure they are either able to remain in the current home, or secure a more affordable alternative.

Contact: Sheryl Thomas - Homelessness Manager, Torfaen County Borough Council Sheryl.Thomas@torfaen.gov.uk

- **Independent housing advice – refer individuals to a relevant local advice service such as Shelter Cymru, which may be the most suitable agency to provide specialist advice;**

Shelter Cymru deliver services across 21 of the 22 local authorities in Wales, but local authorities recognise there are other agencies also in place to provide housing advice.

Staff accept Shelter Cymru have a role to challenge the authority and welcome this to ensure continuous improvement of services. However, the relationship appears to work best where Shelter and Council staff work in partnership to prevent and manage homelessness. Good examples include Rhondda Cynon Taf, the Vale of Glamorgan and Carmarthenshire. In all these counties the relationship is strong and workers from

Shelter hold surgeries / are based within the Housing Options Team.

Emerging practice example

Flintshire County Council are currently working with Shelter Cymru on a 'reasonable steps' pilot. As part of the pilot a local member of Shelter staff is sitting with Housing Options staff and together they are piloting the 'reasonable steps' approach.

The pilot is still in its early stages, but early feedback has been very positive and appears to be leading to a far more productive relationship, an understanding of each other's roles and a pooling of different skills to ensure homelessness is prevented.

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The following table illustrates the level of S180 funding in each local authority received by Shelter Cymru in 2013-14.

Local Authority Area	Shelter Cymru Funding
Neath Port Talbot	£28,935.06
Bridgend	£19,458.26
Vale of Glam	£28,935.06
Rhondda Cynon Taf	£58,525.51
Merthyr Tydfil	£26,571.90
Caerphilly	£22,771.34
Blaenau Gwent	£28,935.09
Torfaen	£28,935.09
Newport	£86,076.88
Monmouthshire	£57,581.40
Wrexham	£13,046.11
Flintshire	£13,511.67
Denbighshire	£90,847.12
Conwy	£58,525.51
Gwynedd	£58,525.51
Isle of Anglesey	£28,861.32
Ceredigion	£28,935.09
Pembrokeshire	£28,935.06
Carmarthenshire	£80,696.96
Total	£788,609.94

In examining these figures, local authorities were confused in relation to the different levels of funding in different authorities. They are hoping that the recent S180 Review will explain these disparities and allocate the funding on a basis which makes sense to the authority and the level of service they receive. (Indications are the Welsh Government is changing to a regional funding structure).

However, what is crucial moving forward is that we ensure this significant resource is utilised to meet the objectives of the Act and that, (like in the pilot taking place in Flintshire), Shelter Cymru are working

in partnership with Councils to prevent homelessness.

- **Joint working between local authorities and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) to prevent homelessness – this support could potentially range from helping to secure an applicant's place on a waiting list, giving them added priority on choice based lettings, to discussing and resolving rent arrears;**

Housing Associations and their role in preventing homelessness will be a vital

component in making the Housing Act a success. The current relationships between authorities and their HA partners would appear to be mixed. There are those who are playing a key role, (North Wales HA is a good example), but there are some areas where authorities feel HA's are not contributing enough.

Welsh Government's role as the Regulator for Housing Associations presents an important opportunity for Regulation staff to ensure that Associations are playing a full and effective role with local authorities in preventing homelessness, wherever possible.

It is worth further exploring this relationship and utilising Housing Leadership Cymru to see if they can influence Community Housing Cymru and develop a better understanding of how HA's can play a more proactive role in the prevention of homelessness, both in the run up to the Bill's implementation and beyond.

Awareness needs to be raised in relation to the changes in the Act. For example, there are still HA's who will not allocate until a household has their 'homeless points'. With the emphasis on prevention

these type of allocations policies need to be questioned.

- **Joint approaches with other services such as Social Care and Health – work in partnership with colleagues both corporately within the local authority and with relevant local health boards to assess an applicant's social care, health and other needs in order to develop a holistic plan to prevent their homelessness;**

The role of Health and Social Services in preventing homelessness is another key element in making the Act a success. There are a variety of areas which need to be considered in partnership. For example, the housing needs of those leaving care, the needs of those with mental ill health / leaving psychiatric hospital, the housing needs of those leaving A&E who are street homeless. In all these cases Health and Social Care will need to work in partnership with housing and work with them to meet the household' housing needs.

However, there are also households who Housing Options teams are working with

who have unmet health and care needs. In these cases it is vital that services are brought in to ensure these needs are met and make any housing option more sustainable.

The key feedback from the visits was that gaps exist for those with the most complex needs. Many authorities are having difficulty accessing suitable accommodation and support for those with mental health issues. Concerns were expressed around those households who might not fit criteria for health and social care, but still have needs and what services are in place to meet these needs. Those who have convictions for arson was another case flagged up as particularly difficult to deal with.

There are no easy solutions to these issues, but more awareness raising with health and social care about the role of housing, how this role will be changing with the implementation of the Act and how we can work in partnership to find solutions was seen as essential.

The Social Services and Well Being Act places a similar emphasis on prevention as the Housing Bill and authorities will need to explore with Health and Social

Care colleagues how they can work in partnership to meet joint objectives.

Good practice example

Powys County Council has changed the criteria for their Children's Services Post-16 Team. Whereas previously a child needed to have been in care for the team to work with them, they have now opened their doors to all young people in the County. This means they work in far closer partnership with the Housing team to support young people who become homeless and are developing a joint assessment.

This change has led to young people's issues being picked up far earlier than previously. Since the changes in the criteria the Council has seen a significant decrease in homeless presentations from young people and the number of young people assessed as Tier 3 by Children's Services has more than halved.

Contact: Rob Powell - Homelessness Manager, Powys County Council
Rob.powell@powys.gov.uk

- **Working with Housing Benefit (HB) / Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) – support an applicant to access the local authority’s DHP fund. Support should also be considered to tackle the underlying issue as to why the intervention was required initially;**

From the visits there were some excellent examples of councils working in close partnership with their Housing Benefit colleagues to prevent homelessness.

With the DHP pot reaching an unprecedented size, the relationship between HB and Housing Options teams is essential in order to utilise this funding to prevent homelessness. Excellent examples are evident in Cardiff, Pembrokeshire, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Flintshire, Neath Port Talbot, Caerphilly, Merthyr Tydfil, and many others.

However, there is also scope to work in partnership with HB colleagues to deliver and develop the supply of private rented sector accommodation. (For example, working with the Housing Options service to guarantee direct payments, fast track applications, etc).

- **Specialist welfare services for armed forces personnel / veterans – support armed forces veterans to access the specialised services available to them;**

From the visits, the evidence suggests Housing Options Teams across Wales are not experiencing significant demand from those who have left the armed forces. All were aware of the services available in their area, such as the Royal British Legion. When the need arises teams work in partnership with these agencies and they welcome the extra support they bring.

- **Working in prisons prior to release in order to prevent homelessness – work proactively with partners such as the Prison and Probation Service, along with local health boards, third sector organisations and local authority social service and private landlords to help prisoners to either secure accommodation upon release or help them to retain existing accommodation;**

As discussed, a separate report is being produced on behalf of the Prisoner Accommodation and Resettlement Working Group to develop a deeper understanding of the housing needs of ex-prisoners following the implementation of the Act.

With this in mind, the visits did not investigate the needs of this group in great detail. However, it inevitably was a topic of discussion and it is worth considering the findings from the visits.

Authorities felt, with the change in legislation discussed, approximately 70% of those prisoners who are currently entitled to a housing duty will not receive the duty following the implementation of

the Act. (This figure was not backed up with any clear evidence, but was based on the experience of those working with released prisoners on a daily basis)

However, authorities were very aware of the new duties and how they would need to be applied for those who are likely to lose accommodation in prison, or are without accommodation when they leave. They could see the need for remodelling existing services and working in close partnership with criminal justice to meet these duties.

The following table indicates the number of ex-prisoners who were found priority need and unintentionally homeless over 2013.

Local Authority	Number prison leavers accepted for a housing duty (2013)	Local Authority	Number prison leavers accepted for a housing duty (2013)
Swansea	185	Gwynedd	25
Cardiff	135	Wrexham	20
Newport	70	Powys	15
Rhondda Cynon Taf	70	Flintshire	10
Caerphilly	50	Pembrokeshire	10
Conwy	45	Torfaen	5
Carmarthenshire	40	Monmouthshire	5
Neath Port Talbot	35	Isle of Anglesey	5
Blaenau Gwent	35	Denbighshire	0
Bridgend	30	Ceredigion	0
Vale of Glamorgan	25	Merthyr Tydfil	0
Total		815	

As the table indicates, there were a total of 815 prisoners released over 2013 who were assessed as being entitled to a housing duty. If we see a similar level of demand following the implementation of the Act, then a sizeable proportion will fall out of the housing duty. If it was 70% this would fall to 244 households.

Those authorities with significant numbers, such as Swansea, Cardiff, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Newport are considering what impact this might have on their current provision of temporary accommodation. This might be in far less demand from April 15 and some remodelling may need to be considered in the run up to the changes.

However, authorities are aware that although they might not have the same number of ex-prisoners to accommodate, there will still be a duty to take the 'reasonable steps' to prevent. This will still require resource and where specialist officers exist, such as in Swansea, Cardiff, Rhondda Cynon Taff and Neath Port Talbot the intention is to retain them, but with an adapted role focusing on prevention and housing solutions. Local authorities are also aware of the duty included in the Social Care and Well

Being (Wales) Act 2014 which will give prisoners a right to have their care and support needs assessed / met. A partnership, integrated approach to meet all these new duties was seen as essential.

Some confusion remains in relation to the future role of 'Prison Linc Cymru'. Can this service work in partnership with councils following the new legislation, or would it be better to redirect the funding and allow local authorities to utilise it? The work commissioned by the Prisoner Accommodation and Resettlement Working Group (PARWG) will resolve this.

Emerging Practice Example

Isle of Anglesey County Council have recently received S180 funding to develop a pilot, working with prisoners to both prevent them losing their tenancy at the point of sentence; and where it can't be saved, developing alternative accommodation options for when the prisoner returns to the area.

This pilot is still in its early stages, but with the emphasis on prevention it is hoped the learning from the pilot will be shared across Wales to help other LA

areas focus their services in line with the expectations of the Housing Bill.

Contact: Heulwen Roberts -
Homelessness Manager, Isle of Anglesey
County Council
HeulwenRoberts@anglesey.gov.uk

- **Employment and training options advice – where an applicant’s housing situation would be improved by enhanced employment and training;**

The links to employment and training were recognised as important by staff, but were not seen as their key priority. They saw partner support agencies as better placed to deliver these links.

However, there were certainly examples of strategic intent to ensure services were linked and opportunities available through employment and training initiatives were available to those households presenting to Housing Options. For example, Newport had developed a particularly strong emphasis around this agenda.

Summary around Responding to Demand

All local authorities have recognised the need to realign their service in light of the expectations of the Housing Act. They recognise the importance of working with households as early as possible, focussing on prevention and making full use of existing services of partner agencies to ensure the objectives of the Act are met.

In order to meet the changes in demand created by the Act they are all considering their existing service and how they will need to respond. However, in order to respond to demand they recognise they also need to consider supply. The next section considers how local authorities are looking to deliver the supply of accommodation to meet the demands they are likely to face.

6. DELIVERING SUPPLY

As discussed, having the services in place to respond to demand will be essential to meet the objectives of the Housing Act. However, just as essential will be delivering the suitable and affordable accommodation options which will allow homelessness to be prevented or alleviated.

There are various elements of supply to consider before the implementation of the Act. During the visits, three specific elements were considered; the use of the private rented sector, the use and provision of temporary accommodation and the development of shared housing.

Delivering Options in the Private Rented Sector

Every local authority in Wales has a long tradition of responding to demand for housing and the emphasis on homelessness prevention has been embedded for over 10 years. Less entrenched is specific work among teams to develop and bolster supply within the private rented sector.

With the legislation allowing authorities to discharge any housing duty into the PRS, authorities recognise they need to develop the supply within the sector to ensure they have the options available. They also understand that if this is going to be effective they will need to work in partnership with their colleagues from Public Protection / Environmental Health, Supporting People and Housing Benefit.

So how are local authorities developing the private rented sector / landlords so

that they see working with the council as a business opportunity?

From the visits it transpired that the development of the private rented sector was a priority for all. In terms of current progress, this was mixed. However, all authorities are working hard to have a service that is fit for purpose by next April.

In terms of how local authorities chose to engage the private rented sector there are a variety of services already in place;

- **'Social Lettings Agency'** This approach develops a portfolio of properties / landlords which are managed for the landlord, but with a charge. Some authorities have developed / are developing this in-house; others are utilising outside agencies
- **'PRS Access Agency'** This approach develops a portfolio of properties / landlords which are 'co-managed' by the local authority with the landlords involved. In this scenario the landlord retains overall management, but is supported by staff working within

the authority. There is no charge for the landlord

- **The 'Bond Scheme'** The service will issue a paper bond to landlords and offer some management and support. Usually this sits with an agency operating outside the Council, but there are some Councils who issue their own bonds and one who retains the bond scheme in-house although managed by an outside agency

It is worth looking at these in turn and exploring how where these services exist and how they are being developed in light of the imminent changes.

The Social Lettings Agency

There are currently three local authorities who are operating their own social letting agency. Carmarthenshire and Neath Port Talbot's are the most established in-house schemes. Carmarthenshire has a portfolio of 160 properties and Neath Port Talbot have 85. Both services raise income through their management charge and the Carmarthenshire agency is self-funding.

Flintshire have recently established their agency 'North East Wales Homes'. This agency plays a large role with the private rented sector and the management of properties for a fee is part of its 'offer'. For more details visit the website <http://www.northeastwaleshomes.co.uk/>

There are also many external agencies who are operating social lettings agencies. In the North these include Pennaf who operate Offa Lettings and Agorfa who operate Cefni Lettings (they also operate in Powys). The Ceredigion Care Society operate social lettings in Cerdigion and through South Wales there are schemes delivered by Cadwyn HA (Can Do Lettings, which has been particularly successful in Cardiff), Hafod Housing who operate in Rhondda Cynon Taf and Charter Housing who deliver social lettings in Newport, Monmouthshire and Torfaen.

Feedback from the visits was that in many cases the properties they secure are often very difficult for those approaching housing options team to access; some charge the tenants fees for credit checks, etc.; others are securing properties in areas where there is little demand; others are very difficult to engage and authorities are unsure how

many properties they manage and where they are located.

There is one particular exception to this in Pembrokeshire who work very closely with local social lettings agency run by the Pembrokeshire Care Society.

Good Practice Example

Pembrokeshire County Council has developed a very strong partnership with the Pembrokeshire Care Society to deliver supply within the private rented sector.

The Care Society run a bond scheme, social lettings and support for tenants within the PRS. This whole systems approach and the close links they have with the council's Housing Options Team are worth exploring in more detail for those who are looking to develop a partnership approach with external agencies working with the PRS.

The feedback from both managers and staff within the council is very positive and they will be building this relationship in the run-up to the implantation of the new legislation in April 2015.

Contact: Emily James - Housing Manager, Pembrokeshire County Council
Emily.james@pembrokeshire.gov.uk

As well as the social lettings agencies already established, there are also LA areas that are looking to develop their own in-house agencies before the Act is introduced. Swansea, Caerphilly, Conwy, Wrexham, Gwynedd and Anglesey are all developing the business case and are hoping to have them in place before next April. Some of these will follow the Flintshire example and be broader than simply 'social lettings'.

A recent report produced by the WLGA around social lettings agencies and how they should evolve, should be borne in mind by those authorities who are exploring this route.

The PRS Access Agency

The visits found that not all authorities had decided to explore the social lettings route. The Vale of Glamorgan, Merthyr Tydfil, Bridgend, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Denbighshire are establishing agencies and dedicated staff to help deliver supply in the private sector, but they will not be

taking on the management of properties and will not be charging for their service.

The staff deployed will still work very closely with the landlords they attract to the scheme and assist in the management of properties, but they feel they are more likely to attract landlords without charging.

In Denbighshire the decision to take this route reflected their intensive consultation with landlords which aimed to get at the heart of what landlords wanted from their properties and their relationship with the council.

Good Practice Example

Denbighshire County Council have spent a lot of time developing a deeper understanding of the local PRS market and making sure they have a full understanding of what landlords want and how the council can deliver it.

They received survey responses from 136 landlords which evidenced their key concerns:

- Rent paid on time and in full
- No ASB issues

- Property looked after
- Polite communication with tenant, repairs and checks
- Planned move out at end of t/a
- Partnership with LA, more openness and support

They are using the information they received from this consultation to develop their landlord offer.

Contact: Stephen Convill - Homelessness Manager, Denbighshire County Council
Stephen.convill@denbighshire.gov.uk

There certainly is some merit in developing a service which does not charge the landlord. However, without generating income these councils will need to consider how they retain staff and ensure these agencies are sustainable.

The Bond Scheme

Bond schemes are provided across Wales. They are in place in and being provided by an outside agency in 18 of the 22 LA areas. These schemes work with households to help them access private rented sector accommodation through the use of a bond to reassure landlords.

In many of these schemes the relationships they develop with landlords and the support they offer them is a large proportion of their work.

schemes across Wales to cover their revenue costs. There are services in most local authorities in Wales and the below table lists them and the revenue funding they received during that financial year.

Over 2013-14 the Welsh Government allocated approximately £1.288m to bond

Provider	Area in which it operates	Funding over 2013-14
The Wallich	Swansea	£34,626.24
Dewis	Neath Port Talbot	£38,067.12
The Wallich	Bridgend	£57,708.66
Home Access Trust	The Vale of Glamorgan	£9,605.13
The Wallich	Merthyr Tydfil & Blaenau Gwent	£70,000
Gwalia	Caerphilly	£78,486.03
SOLAS	Torfaen	£48,171.41
SOLAS	Newport	£65,133.40
SOLAS	Monmouthshire	£80,710.37
Gwalia	Powys	£48,094.14
Barnardos Cymru	Wrexham	£120,475.31
YMCA	Flintshire	£125,232.73
NACRO	Denbighshire & Conwy	£27,500
Agorfa	Gwynedd	£159,528.82
Ceredigion Care Society	Ceredigion	£44,955.81
Pembrokeshire Care Society	Pembrokeshire	£202,276.65
Gwalia	Carmarthenshire	£77,934.84
	Total	£1,288,506.66

Following the recent S180 Review the funding levels for some of these services may change. However, what emerged from the visits was the importance of these services in light of the forthcoming changes and how important it is for local authorities to see each scheme as a 'resource' to help them develop and sustain the private rented sector. Similar

to the advice services provided by Shelter Cymru, these are services which need to be harnessed to meet the objectives of the bill and be working in full partnership with local authorities to help prevent homelessness.

Emerging Practice Example

City and County of Swansea Council are exploring whether the Wallich service working with the PRS can be brought in to the council and become part of its Housing Options Team.

This would entail a far closer relationship between the council and the bond service. One working on demand and one working on supply, but doing this in partnership, rather than in isolation. Evidence suggests many households fall out of the system when they are assessed, referred and assessed again. By bringing these services together much of this will be avoided and the housing needs of households are hoped to be met more successfully.

Contact: Steve Porter - Housing Options Manager, City and County of Swansea Council Steve.porter@swansea.gov.uk

Developing a clear 'offer' for landlords and ensuring you deliver

Whatever approach an authority takes engaging the private rented sector, what is key is that the landlords who the authority is working with have an understanding of what exactly is on offer.

If they have an out-sourced social lettings agency or bond schemes they need to be included as an option. The council, in its role as strategic lead needs to make the offer clear and market / publicise it effectively.

However, once an authority has agreed its 'offer'. They need to be sure they have the resource and staff to deliver on what they have promised. As the consultation exercise in Denbighshire highlighted, landlords will expect support and clear lines of communication with the council if they are going to work in partnership. Evidence from the visits suggest that some agencies have put too much emphasis on securing properties and not enough focus on 'handholding' and supporting landlords once they are let. This has led to tenancy failure and frustrations from landlords.

The following example in Bristol shows how the staffing structure needs to be balanced to ensure it reflects the need of landlords in terms of the management and aftercare service which is so important to the landlords engaged.

Good Practice Example

Bristol City Council has run its 'Bristol Tenant Finder Service' for a number of years. They do not charge for any of their services and market the service through a clear offer and raise awareness through the internet / brochures and postcards.

The service has responsibility for 300 private rented properties. 1.5 FTE equivalent work to secure properties and attract landlords to join the scheme. 6 FTE then work with landlords to help with management issues, arrange repairs, access support etc.

Contact: Olly Allcock - Accommodation Services Manager, Bristol City Council
olly.alcock@bristol.gov.uk

Working in partnership with Public Protection / Environmental Health Colleagues

The visits engaged staff from public protection to develop an understanding of their views and the implications for them of the Housing Act.

There are a number of significant changes within the Housing Act which will have an impact on the private rented

sector. All landlords will be expected to register as a landlord and all those who manage properties, (including lettings agencies), will need to be licensed.

In relation to the quality of accommodation, officers will continue with their current enforcement role, but there will be no need for properties to be of any particular standard for the proposed licensing regime.

However, these changes do offer some fantastic opportunities for developing contacts and bringing more landlords on board with what ever 'offer' each local authority develops.

In Scotland, when registration was introduced, they found they had 6 times as many landlords as they thought they had. If we have a similar result in Wales we will have significantly more landlords to approach and develop partnerships / relationships with. Joint working with colleagues, across disciplines, is essential if councils are going to make the most of this opportunity.

Another way, in which staff from Housing Options and Private Sector Housing must work in partnership, is in relation to

ensuring the quality of private sector properties. In order to discharge its housing duty in the PRS, the local authority will be expected to inspect each property to ensure it meets a certain standard and does not have any Category 1 hazards. These inspections could be done by enforcement staff, housing options staff or staff from partner agencies (as long as they receive sufficient training). In what ever way local authorities proceed a partnership approach is essential and hopefully this

partnership will drive better standards within the sector.

Provision of Temporary Accommodation

Another element of supply which local authorities will need to consider in the run-up to the implementation of the legislation is their supply of temporary accommodation. The following table indicates the number of households who were in temporary accommodation in each County in Wales at the end of 2013.

Local Authority	Households in Temporary Accommodation at end of 2013	Numbers of those in Bed and Breakfast (B&B)
Cardiff	575	0
Newport	160	10
Gwynedd	110	5
Caerphilly	100	30
Conwy	95	5
Monmouthshire	95	0
Carmarthenshire	90	0
Ceredigion	85	0
Neath Port Talbot	85	5
Wrexham	80	10
Bridgend	80	15
Swansea	75	25
Vale of Glamorgan	75	0
Torfaen	70	0
Isle of Anglesey	70	35
Rhondda Cynon Taf	45	25
Flintshire	35	25
Blaenau Gwent	35	0
Denbighshire	30	0
Powys	25	0
Merthyr Tydfil	20	20
Pembrokeshire	10	0

As the table indicates there are relatively high levels of temporary accommodation use in the cities of Cardiff and Newport. Feedback from the visits suggests this reflects extremely high levels of demand for accommodation in the two areas.

The levels of B&B use continue to be relatively low, especially when compared to the use in the early 2000's. A large proportion of those households accommodated in B&B were ex-prisoners and this is likely to fall off quite dramatically following the changes in legislation.

Many prisoners are also accommodated in other forms of temporary accommodation. As part of the visits local authorities recognised they may not need to continue with the same amount of temporary accommodation for single people and may need to re-model this accommodation along with related support services.

In the current financial climate, the reduction of the use of B&B continues to be a top priority for many authorities. Ceredigion have established excellent partnership arrangements with local housing and support providers to secure

placements for those leaving prison and the Vale of Glamorgan have developed alternative temporary options with the private rented sector and seen their use of B&B reduce to none from quite significant levels only a couple of years ago.

Good Practice Example

The Vale of Glamorgan Council has seen its Bed and Breakfast use reduce significantly in recent years.

The Housing Options Team has worked hard to develop alternatives with private landlords and have developed services within these properties to support households both in maintaining the temporary accommodation, as well as moving on to more permanent options.

Contact: Ian Jones - Housing Options Manager, Vale of Glamorgan Council
ILJones@valeofglamorgan.gov.uk

The Development of Shared Housing Options

With the changes introduced through welfare reform, single people under 35 who are reliant on Housing Benefit have little option other than shared housing.

Local authorities recognise this and have the majority have been working hard on setting up shared options, mostly within the private rented sector. The visits would suggest that in most cases this has been a struggle. Shared housing is notoriously difficult to manage and it is not always the first choice for private landlords; and if it is they can often receive better returns by focussing on the student market.

In order to develop this option, local authorities recognise the need for a strategic approach which is planned and engages the right partners. Local authorities are exploring whether specialist 'young people' support providers could work with them and develop models for the management and support of shared housing.

However, these options need to be explored within social housing as well as the private sector. With the introduction of the 'bedroom tax' the demand for 3 bedroom accommodation is diminishing. Is there scope for HA's to utilise this stock as shared accommodation for 3 young people? This had not been explored in many authorities, but there was a feeling HA's would be reluctant. However, with

the Act placing a duty on Housing Associations to assist in meeting their housing duties, this is an option which needs further exploration.

Good Practice Example

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council are working in partnership with Merthyr Housing Association to develop shared options within stock which is currently experiencing low level demand.

Through partnership work with a local support provider people moving on from supported accommodation are brought together and chose friends who they will share with. They are then supported into the tenancy and the support remains open to access for the length of the tenancy.

Contact: Rob Haggett - Housing Options Development Officer, Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council
Robert.Haggett@merthyr.gov.uk

Summary around Delivering Supply

In summary, there is still some work to do for authorities in relation to developing their services around supply before the implementation of the Housing Act.

Services are being set up, but are not yet bedded in. Many authorities are exploring the use of the forthcoming 'transition funding' in assisting them to develop services which are fit for purpose.

Findings from the visits suggest that the private rented sector remains a resource which has not been fully exploited and authorities need to take a strategic lead in ensuring they develop a planned response and include partners to develop a clear and understandable 'offer' for landlords working in their area.

In relation to temporary accommodation, authorities will also need a strategy. This needs to be flexible and allow them to remodel and adjust its use following on from the impact of implementation.

Shared housing remains a tough option, but its development is inevitable.

Authorities do not need to take on this challenge alone and need to bring in the expertise and resources of partners to help it succeed.

7. LINKING WITH SUPPORTING PEOPLE FUNDED SERVICES

The prevention of homelessness is one of the key objectives of Supporting People services. When Carl Sergeant AM, the then Minister for Housing and Regeneration, wrote to local authorities to inform them of this year's Supporting People (SP) budget announcement he stressed to LA Supporting People Leads the "need for greater emphasis on preventing homelessness and the early intervention which is the thrust of the new homelessness duties proposed in the Housing Bill".

This message has been received in most authorities in Wales and there is clear evidence of services being proactively realigned to support authorities meet the new duties.

This section explores how Supporting People services are being used to support Housing Options teams in the prevention of imminent homelessness, explores how Housing Options services can access support services for those households in need through the provision of 'Gateways' / Central Referral processes and explores

the accessibility of support services in the private rented sector.

The Embedding of Support within Housing Options Services

In 10 of the 22 local authorities there are now support workers who are part of the authority's Housing Options Team. Some of these are employed directly by the council, where others are seconded in from other agencies.

The evidence from the visits suggests these workers offer a fast and responsive service to those households who have an identified support need and are working effectively to prevent homelessness. The following is an example of how this service operates;

- A household approaches Housing Options to tell staff they are being evicted by their landlord in 3 weeks
- Investigations by options staff uncover the household has an issue with hoarding
- They work in partnership with the embedded support worker to develop an immediate short term support plan to avoid the imminent eviction

- The support worker works intensively with the household to help return the property to a state the landlord is happy with
- The landlord accepts the work undertaken and allows the household to stay in the property (Homelessness is prevented)
- The support worker embedded within housing options refers on / brings in a longer term support service to develop a longer term support plan and ensure the tenancy is sustainable

This is just one example. This sort of quick-fire intensive support is proving invaluable to those who have these workers embedded within their team. All authorities who have taken this approach are unanimous in how they value their input.

With the introduction of the duty to take 'reasonable steps', we are effectively looking at a short support intervention. There are still those who see this as "ineligible" for Supporting People funding, but if the programme wants to evidence how it is contributing to the prevention of homelessness, this is exactly the type of service it should be looking to deliver.

Good Practice Example

Caerphilly County Borough Council have embedded two support workers within their Housing Options Team, one employed by Gofal and one employed by Gwalia. However, they are full members of the team, have the aim to prevent homelessness, attend team meetings and work in partnership with Housing Options staff

Evidence suggests these workers are providing an effective prevention service. They are able to work intensively with households who present and have done a lot of work around debt and financial problems with households. Staff suggest households are far more likely to open up with the support workers than they are with what they perceive as 'the Council'.

Contact: Sue Cousins - Housing Options Manager, Caerphilly County Borough Council COUSIS@CAERPHILLY.GOV.UK

The Supported Housing Gateway / Central Referral Process

Many of the households who approach local authorities have underlying support needs. Housing Options staff will be expected to undertake a support

assessment as part of the new duties being introduced through the Act.

What is important as we approach 2015, and these assessments being required, is where this information goes once it has been completed.

The purpose of the supported housing 'gateway' is to ensure that any information gathered can be sent to one place and a place with the knowledge and intelligence to secure the right support for the household. (This avoids the potential of Housing Options staff having to complete 9 different referral forms for 9 different providers).

These gateways are now in place in 9 local authority areas in Wales and 4 more are developing them. The evidence suggests they are most effective when they are well resourced and when the council works in partnership with providers to place households in supported accommodation / support services.

Good Practice Example

Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council has a supported housing gateway operated and placed within their Housing Advice Centre. They are beginning to control all allocations to hostels and supported housing to ensure those households in greatest need are receiving the support they need.

The gateway is staffed by 1FTE member of staff, funded through Supporting People, who regularly reviews the process with the Housing Advice Manager and through regular meetings with providers and housing option staff.

Contact: Cheryl Emery - Housing Advice Centre Manager, Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council
Cheryl.A.Emery@rhondda-cynon-taff.gov.uk

Delivering Support in the Private Rented Sector

With the Housing Act allowing housing duties to be discharged within the private rented sector it is inevitable more vulnerable people will be housed within this sector.

It is therefore imperative floating support services are working across tenure and are able to follow need. Most, but not all, local authorities have broken links between support services and particular landlords, such as tenancy support restricted to council tenants.

The visits indicated that all had recognised the need to develop tenure neutral support and were working to ensure support services were available for those in the private rented sector.

8. EVIDENCING AND REPORTING NEW DUTIES

With the new duties, it is imperative local authorities are able to measure how successful they have been in preventing homelessness and which of the reasonable steps are proving most effective.

The Welsh Government will also so be expecting statistical returns to evidence how the work being undertaken and as taking reasonable steps to prevent homelessness is now becoming a duty, Councils will need to be sure they can evidence what they have done with each household.

All of these will require systems and ICT to ensure these measures and evidence are consistent and meaningful.

Local authorities were asked to consider their current systems as part of the visit and consider how they will develop their systems in the run up to the changes in 2015. All are exploring it and the Homelessness Network is working with authorities to explore where they can work in partnership to avoid the development of 22 different systems.

Good Practice Example

Newport City Council has purchased a system which is cloud based and allows any citizen of Newport to have their housing needs assessed remotely. This can be used by the individual, or agencies working with an individual.

If there is a threat of homelessness this is immediately passed on to the housing options team who will contact the household and look at how they can work together to prevent the homelessness. The system will formulate a plan and both household and Council will have tasks they need to complete as part of this plan.

The system also hosts the City's supported housing gateway. Therefore, any support needs can be assessed and passed through to enable an appropriate service to be accessed. For more details contact: Simon Rose - Housing Needs Manager Newport City Council
simon.rose@newport.gov.uk

9. WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP WITH OTHER AGENCIES

As discussed throughout this report, the role of other agencies will be absolutely essential if the objectives of the Housing Act are to be realised.

The Act will expect all local authorities to develop a Homelessness Strategy and this offers a good opportunity for local authorities to ensure the 'sign up' of all agencies in their strategic goals.

However, the visits findings suggest it is not just a fuzzy commitment of strategic intent which authorities will need to receive. Evidence suggests it is in those authorities who exert the most control and work in closest partnership with outside agencies, which are delivering the most successful homelessness prevention services.

If one examines those authorities with the lowest levels of homelessness acceptances, it would appear it is these authorities who are most effective at 'brining in agencies' to work with them to prevent homelessness.

Here are some examples;

- Flintshire have their bond scheme based in Housing Options; have Shelter operating their 'reasonable steps' pilot; have their Welfare rights service based in-house alongside their options team; have embedded housing support and a supported housing gateway
- Rhondda Cynon Taf operate their own bond scheme in-house, have Shelter, Gofal and other support agencies embedded within their Housing Advice Centre; operate their supported housing gateway and focus support on need; operate their own bond service

Good Practice Example

Neath Port Talbot Borough Council has developed a 'Personal Housing Plan' pilot which has brought in all their S180 funded providers to assess all households

in a consistent way and develop a housing plan which will be tackled in partnership with the Housing Options Team.

By taking a common approach to assessing and preventing homelessness the council is effectively pooling its resources in light of the changes in the Act by ensuring all agencies are working consistently and are focussed on preventing homelessness.

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At this stage, the argument that the more control an LA has over its partner agencies will lead to a more effective prevention service is only a hypothesis. However, it is one worth exploring further and the Network will continue to work with LA's to see how all can bring their partners 'in' to work more collaboratively in the run up to the legislation change.

With the Housing Act introducing a new duty to 'take reasonable steps to prevent homelessness' there is a danger it will

create far higher levels of demand for local authority housing options teams.

By ensuring that all partners are fully signed up in undertaking these reasonable steps; councils and their partners are far more likely to meet this demand and deliver on the prevention of homelessness which is such a key objective of the legislation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of the visits undertaken was to develop an understanding of the progress councils had made in preparing for the legislation changes. In effect, they were given a framework to do this through the visits of Andy Gale during 2013 and the accompanying action plans.

The evidence suggests all local authorities are progressing. The following are recommendations for all local authorities to consider in the run up to the introduction of the Act.

- Housing Options services should deliver a generic prevention / assessment service so that each staff member offers a prevention

service, as well as undertaking decisions around any housing duty

- All local authorities need to develop a clear 'landlord offer' encompassing all agencies working with the private rented sector and market it effectively
- Ensure the right amount of resources are available to deliver this 'offer' effectively
- Consider the role of temporary accommodation and whether remodelling and reductions may be required following the implementation of the Act
- Work in partnership with housing associations, support providers and private landlords to develop shared housing options to help meet the need for single person accommodation
- Explore how short term support services can contribute more effectively to the prevention of imminent homelessness and be part of the 'reasonable steps approach'

- Establish a central referral point for supported housing services
- Explore whether partner agencies receiving S180 funding can work in partnership with authority to deliver prevention and alleviation duties
- Where necessary, seek to strengthen links with housing associations working locally to ensure they contribute fully to achieving the goals of the Act.