

Homelessness Scrutiny Investigation Report

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1. Context

- 1.1 Homelessness is a real challenge that has been identified by Gwynedd Council for some years. Projects to address the challenge have been part of the Council's Strategic Plan for some time with specific schemes attempting to address specific elements of the problem, aiming specifically to try to assist individuals and families to avoid homelessness.
- 1.2 In addition to this, attention was given to the field in one of the Council's pilot schemes, by using the 'systems thinking' model. This led to various improvements being put into place to improve the available provision to try to avoid homelessness.
- 1.3 However, the Communities Scrutiny Committee noted some recent matters which suggested that this field should be examined again and in more detail. Initially, some observations had been received from local members regarding the Council's provision of hostels. Also, in light of the changes to the Welfare System and housing benefits in particular, the Committee has identified the challenge that has been raised including the introduction of what is identified as 'Bedroom Tax'.
- 1.4 Of course, a local authority such as the Council has specific duties in the homelessness field and it is important to be clear about them. Briefly, it could be reported as follows:-
 - If a local authority has reason to believe that someone is homeless, or under threat of becoming homeless, it has a statutory duty to make enquiries in order to assess whether or not the applicant is eligible for support, and if so, whether or not the local authority has a duty towards them under the homelessness provision.
 - An initial decision must be made in relation to providing interim accommodation during the period of making enquiries. If there is a reason to believe that an applicant is a priority, there is a need to provide interim accommodation at a Council hostel, private hostel or a bed and breakfast (for a limited period). Interim accommodation must be suitable for the applicant.
- 1.5 In undertaking its work, the Investigation has become more aware of two further challenges that will place greater pressure on the Council as it implements its responsibilities in the area:-
 - A change in the statutory responsibility that is likely to lead within the next year or two to a substantial increase in the homelessness cases the Council has to deal with
 - The implementation of further changes in the welfare system that will mean more individuals and families finding it increasingly difficult to live and pay rent in a climate of growing cuts in benefits (See Appendix 1) and also a recent report from "Crisis" and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (published in August 2015) that foresees a growth in homelessness for which there is no adequate provision.

- 1.6 At the moment (2015/16) the full cost of the Homelessness Service in Gwynedd is £722,370 and it deals with between 550 and 600 cases of homelessness every year, not to mention the number of enquiries that do not reach that level. Although there is some uncertainty about the effects of some elements of these changes, it is unavoidable that the Council will face a growth in demand. (A copy of the Housing Service Staffing Structure is appended as Appendix 2)
- 1.7 The Investigation is keen to note that these changes will have a dual effect, firstly directly on vulnerable individuals and families. However, it will also affect providers in the area in terms of the way they fund their services. This will, in turn, affect the services to which the Council refers individuals and families.

2. Purpose of the Scrutiny Investigation

2.1 The Scrutiny Committee agreed on the scope of the Investigation which aimed to answer the following questions:-

- What is the provision pattern of the Authority and its partners in its entirety for homeless people in Gwynedd?
- How suitable is the provision of the Authority and its partners for homeless people – Families – Women – Young people – Single men?
- Does the provision for homeless people meet the user's needs?
- How accessible are the provisions to the user and is there easy access to other key services?
- Is the provision for homeless people cost-effective and sustainable?
- Is the current provision sufficient to meet the likely increase in the number of homeless people as a result of the current recession and welfare reform?
- What is the partners' role in providing for homeless people?
- Is consideration given to the location of the provision, i.e. suitability of hostels on the basis of services available?
- Is consideration given to the backgrounds of individuals staying there?
- What is the introduction process?
- Does the provision respond to local homelessness?

2.2 The Investigation aimed to formulate clear evidence-based recommendations to be considered by the Cabinet Member and to give appropriate consideration to any barriers and how to solve them.

3. Main Activity of the Investigation

3.1 A work programme that sought to address the brief was agreed upon. There were several different elements to the work programme:

3.2 First Element – understanding and analysing the current service. Considerable work was undertaken by the Strategic Housing Policy Officer and the Homelessness and Supported Housing Services Manager so that members of the Investigation could gain an understanding of the field, including consideration of scenarios prepared for the Investigation (Appendix 3). This included key information regarding:-

- The Council's statutory responsibility
- Nature and cost of the Council and its partners' provision
- Performance Results
- User Profiles (age / background / locations)
- Outcomes of any consultation on the recent 'systems thinking' work
- Summary of any internal and external audit reports
- Examples of provision / good practice in other areas

3.3 Second Element – challenging at grass roots level. Five visits to hostels were held in Gwynedd and beyond to see the type of provision available and how they could be developed. This also offered an opportunity to interview service users to gain an understanding of their experiences of the available provision. A note on these visits and the impressions from them can be viewed in Appendices 4 and 5 of this report. On the whole, users were very happy with the provision but some areas needed to be improved. It was noted by committee members that the experience of visiting and meeting users had been very valuable to the investigation.

3.4 Third Element – questioning officers working in the field. Members of the Investigation were given a series of presentations from five witnesses who appeared before them, who were professional officers representing the Council and its partners. A note on those meetings can be viewed in Appendix 6. These sessions were a great opportunity to ask about processes and also to reflect on work practices.

3.5 Fourth Element – draw up and submit evidence-based recommendations to the Cabinet Leader The Cabinet Member and Senior Manager responsible for the service were invited to appear before the Investigation on two occasions. A question and answer session was held at the beginning of the Investigation in order to find out what were their impressions of the service as it was currently. At the end of the Investigation, they were invited again so that the draft recommendations of the Investigation could be shared with them.

4. Main Findings of the Investigation

- 4.1 The work of the Investigation has proved to be a very valuable experience for members of the Investigation who have done a lot to challenge and break down some stereotypes about the field. This can include prejudices about the type of person who finds himself / herself to be homeless.
- 4.2 The Investigation has identified that there are several challenges facing this area. There are specific concerns about changes to the Welfare System that could easily lead to a significant increase in the number who present themselves as homeless. In addition, new legislation will come into force which will increase pressures on local authorities and responding to those two challenges will be clear pressures on our services in the coming months and years.
- 4.3 The next point that members of the Investigation wish to make is to note their admiration of the committed and professional staff who work for the Council and its partners in the field. It is a difficult and challenging field that deals with individuals and families at their most vulnerable and members of the Investigation have seen for themselves the excellent work that already takes place in the field.
- 4.4 However, the Investigation has identified a number of recommendations where it is considered that there is room for improvement. This is not a criticism of the employees who currently work in the field at all. However, in order to further improve on how we respond to demand and try to respond to future challenges facing the service, these recommendations are being presented, per theme.

A. PREVENTATIVE WORK

1. Changes in the Welfare System
Findings – There is a need to enable people to avoid becoming homeless in light of changes to the Welfare System.
Evidence – Information about the challenge of welfare changes, bedroom tax, a likely reduction in Direct Housing Payments and the move to Universal Credit. Evidence from the Bevan Foundation Report “Summer Budget 2015: What it means for Wales (July 2015)” summarising:- <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The shortage of affordable housing is likely to be exacerbated as the link between benefits and housing costs is broken.• There could be significant issues for young unemployed people who lose their entitlement to help with housing costs.• How people and markets respond to the changes remains to be seen
Recommendation to the Cabinet Member – It is recommended that the Senior Housing Manager leads on:- <ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Ensuring publicity to the likely impact of the changes and available

support.
b. Encouraging use of the Universal Credit System to protect rent payments.

2. Mediation Services

Findings –

There is a real need to improve access to mediation services in order to promote preventative work to address matters that could soon lead to homelessness.

Evidence –

Evidence from agencies and users that they find it difficult to get access to mediation services.

Recommendation to the Cabinet Member –

It is recommended that the Preventative Services Group and the Young People Accommodation Group map the services / referral process for service with a view to drawing up proposals to improve the provision.

B. ACCESS TO THE SYSTEM

3. Housing Service Structure

Findings –

There is a need to research the Structures of Housing Departments in other Authorities e.g. Housing Options Team / Homelessness all in one team providing housing options.

Evidence –

Observations were received about the structures of other authorities and the possibility of having one team providing options in order to make the service simpler and more cohesive for users.

** Note - Gwynedd was one of the first councils to establish an Options Team

Recommendation to the Cabinet Member –

It is recommended that the Strategic Housing Unit collects information about the structures of other Councils with a view to drawing up proposals to rationalise and simplify.

4. Council Forms and Documents
Findings –
There is a need to simplify forms in the field and look at the arrangements to complete them, bearing in mind the vulnerable circumstances of some people who complete them.
Evidence –
Housing Options Team (HOT) forms are difficult for users who are homeless or in a supported accommodation organisation to complete. Users do not always have the relevant evidence documents, and as a result, the application is incomplete and the applicant is not placed on the waiting list.
Recommendation to the Cabinet Member –
It is recommended that the Housing Options Team re-examine their forms and simplify them.

5. Establishing a Single Referral Point
Findings –
There is a need to establish a comprehensive approach as people seek access to the system.
Evidence –
Users' observations about having to complete more than one referral interview with different teams and partners and provide the same information twice. A clear impression by the Investigation that, although the different service elements were working well, there is scope to increase the feeling of "one service for the users' benefit"
Recommendation to the Cabinet Member –
It is recommended that the Strategic Housing Unit, the Gwynedd Homelessness Forum and the Supporting People Unit collect information about other authorities' arrangements to look for good practices in terms of establishing a single Referral Point for services.

6. Customer Care at the Offices
Findings –
There is a need to improve provision for individuals who present themselves to the Homelessness Team at the Penrallt Office in Caernarfon
Evidence –
Comparison with the Shelter 'Equal Ground Standard' document in terms of customer experience at the Penrallt Office in Caernarfon (See Appendix 7). There are deficiencies particularly with the interview provision in terms of

privacy and confidentiality
Recommendation to the Cabinet Member –
It is recommended that the Senior Housing Manager leads work to:- a. improve the property used by the Homelessness Team at the Penrallt Office to interview individuals. b. ensure a face-to-face interview with the Housing Options Team as well as the existing telephone arrangement.

C. SUPPLY

7. Information about available properties
Findings –
There is a need to improve the information available in order to refer people to suitable properties.
Evidence –
Confirmation through interviews that there is no up-to-date list of available private properties at hand for the Homelessness Team.
Recommendation to the Cabinet Member –
It is recommended that the Senior Housing Manager leads on:- a. establishing a database of available private and public properties that could be referred to immediately or at least an up-to-date list of properties that could be available by private and public landlords in order to question them further. b. having access to a computer in the interview room in order to look at it immediately with the applicant.

8. Developing the Private Sector
Findings –
There is a need to develop the private sector and have affordable rents.
Evidence -
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private sector rents are higher than the Local Housing Allowance. • Service users having difficulty obtaining a deposit and / or paying the difference in rent from their benefits.
Recommendation to the Cabinet Member –
It is recommended that the Homelessness and Supply and Enforcement Teams:- a. re-start meetings with private landlords b. develop a Gold / Silver / Bronze Scheme for landlords to receive tenants

<p>9. Improving the range of properties</p> <p>Findings –</p> <p>There is a need to improve the range of available properties to meet the need.</p> <p>Evidence –</p> <p>Confirmation from interviews about properties that are difficult to let in some areas and where there is an insufficient provision of properties in other areas.</p> <p>Particular attention was given to the high number of vacant properties under the control of Gwynedd Community Homes</p> <p>Evidence presented to the Gwynedd Council Planning Committee by Councillor Lesley Day on what seems to be over-provision of accommodation targeting students in the Bangor area when measured against the need, in an area where there is a “sleeping out” problem</p> <p>Recommendation to the Cabinet Member –</p> <p>It is recommended that the Housing Service:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. encourage landlords to adapt properties that are difficult to let in order to make them more suitable for the need and make use of available properties (e.g. student properties in Bangor). b. the Department should hold early discussions with Gwynedd Community Homes to address the reasons for the number and to co-operate on seeking creative solutions to that problem c. continue to target the work of the Empty Homes Team to meet the needs of homeless cohorts.
<p>10. Provision for 25+ year old people</p> <p>Findings –</p> <p>There is a lack of accommodation provision for single 25+ year old men.</p> <p>Evidence –</p> <p>Users noting that there is insufficient provision if you are a single man and 25+.</p> <p>Does not appear to be a priority for social housing.</p> <p>Recommendation to the Cabinet Member –</p> <p>It is recommended that the Homelessness and Housing Options Teams collaborate with the Private Sector to try to increase the supply for single 25+ year old men.</p>

CH. TEMPORARY PROVISION

11. Emergency Accommodation for young people
Findings – There is a need to investigate short term emergency placements e.g. by looking at the stock of Cartrefi Cymunedol Gwynedd and the possibility of establishing a ‘Night Stop / Crash Pad’ scheme in Gwynedd.
Evidence – There is a lack of provision for emergency temporary accommodation, especially for young people.
Recommendation to the Cabinet Member – It is recommended:- a) that the Preventative Services Group and the Young People Accommodation Group investigate the possibility of extending the ‘Night Stop / Crash Pad’ provision in the county. b) that the Housing Service holds a specific discussion with Cartrefi Cymunedol Gwynedd regarding use of their stock for homelessness purposes.

12. Storage for Personal Belongings
Findings – An investigation should be conducted into establishing a temporary storage for personal belongings.
Evidence – Observations from users and employees in the field about a lack of storage provision while individuals are between placements and no budget to pay directly.
Recommendation to the Cabinet Member – It is recommended that the Homelessness Team investigates the possibility by creating a business case to attract a further budget to fund such provision and the possibility of using the Council’s own resources to store.

D. HOSTELS

13. The Council’s Provision of Hostels
Findings – There is a question about the existing location of the Council’s hostel in Corris but there is a need to look at the facilities at both Council hostels and a need to invest and modernise
Evidence – Following visits, there is a need to improve the facilities. The Corris site does

<p>present a problem with accessibility but the main problem on both sites is the facilities. There is also an issue at the Corris site with access to the building for elderly and disabled users</p>
<p>Recommendation to the Cabinet Member –</p> <p>It is recommended that the Senior Housing Manager and the Homelessness Team seek resources to address the accessibility and facilities issues that could, in the case of Corris, lead to looking for another location.</p>

<p>14. Hostel Fees</p>
<p>Findings –</p> <p>Research on inconsistencies in the fees of hostel services is required.</p>
<p>Evidence –</p> <p>Each hostel (Council and its partners) has a different rent amount and service charge. There is a real problem of affordability for those on benefits (Appendix 8 shows the levels of benefit it is possible to pay)</p>
<p>Recommendation to the Cabinet Member –</p> <p>It is recommended that the Supporting People and Homeless Teams explore different rents set by the organisations / the Council</p>

<p>15. Hostels of the Council and Local Communities</p>
<p>Findings –</p> <p>Local Members need to familiarise themselves with the hostels in their areas.</p>
<p>Evidence –</p> <p>During visits to Council hostels, it was noted that some local councillors had not visited the establishments.</p>
<p>Recommendation to the Cabinet Member –</p> <p>It is recommended that the Senior Housing Manager makes arrangements for local councillors to visit the establishments.</p>

16. 'Hwb' Provision
Findings – There is a need to investigate the possibility of developing a provision such as the Hwb / Hafod (Denbigh) in Gwynedd.
Evidence – Members of the Investigation have seen the innovative development of Hwb and Hafod in Denbigh.
Recommendation to the Cabinet Member – It is recommended that the Preventative Services Group and the Young People Accommodation Service, jointly with Economy, discuss whether or not it is possible to develop a business case to establish such provision with a Registered Social Landlord as a partner.

The homelessness budget

View all posts by Giles Peaker

→

After several days of a mixture of swearing and incredulity, I am finally ready to write about the 'emergency' budget (the emergency apparently being the pressing need to raise inheritance tax thresholds). For housing, the budget will have a significant impact, and one which will get worse in future years. It will, without a shadow of a doubt, cause a significant rise in homelessness, while making it harder for councils to deal with that homelessness. Beyond that, it will make adequate rented housing for families, social or otherwise, a problem – a risk – in a previously unknown way. And it seriously changes the plans and direction of the social housing sector, even before any extended right to buy.

So, to the detail of this farrago.

Benefit Cap

As well as the £23,000 benefit cap for London, an out of London cap of £20,000 was announced, with lower figures for single people.

London: £23000 per year or £442.31 for families, £15,410 per year or £296.25 per week for single persons
Outside London: £20000 per year or £384.62 per week for families, £13400 per year or £257.69 per week for single persons

My detailed post on the £23K cap is [here](#). Even that figure, if applied nationally, meant that households with 3 or 4 children would find social housing rents for 4 bed properties becoming unaffordable, or possibly 3 bed places too in some circumstances. A £20K out of London cap simply confirms this. For households subject to the cap, it would seem pretty certain that any household with more than two children will find social, affordable or private rent for a suitable property unaffordable.

The single person cap, certainly for London, looks very likely to make even a room in shared property unaffordable at private rents.

The result will be a significant increase in homelessness from unaffordable properties. First an initial spike from terminated private sector tenancies (which in London had already risen from 11% of accepted homeless applications in 2010 to 39% in 2014), followed by a slower rise in homelessness from social tenancies.

Suitable temporary accommodation will also be caught by the cap, meaning that Councils will have to either lower rents for temporary accommodation, or blow their DHP budget on supporting it (Westminster City Council, for example, recently went £1 million over budget on DHP very largely through funding benefit capped temporary accommodation). It will, of course, become increasingly impossible to find suitable affordable accommodation by which to discharge duty – in the social or private sector.

Here, borrowed from Joe Halewood, are the figures.

Under 21 Housing Benefit

Having apparently learnt nothing at all from the 1980s, the Government are to stop HB for under 21 year olds from 2017, unless in employment or education (with vague 'vulnerability' exceptions). This will obviously result in a huge increase in under 21 homelessness. It did before and there is no reason to think it will be any different this time.

Benefit freeze

HB and LHA rates are to be frozen for the next five years. In the private sector in particular, this will simply see the amount of properties available and affordable for LHA claimants shrink significantly year on year, as rents continue to rise. The rate of homelessness from private sector tenancies will inevitably increase as a result. Shelter calculate that after two years of freeze, the bottom third of the PRS market will be affordable in just 20 local authorities nationwide. Rents in England went up by 2.1% on average last year .

Two child cap

Both tax credits and housing benefit/LHA are to be changed from April 2017 so that only two children in a household are taken into account. This will apply to any existing claimants with a third (or more) child born after April 2017, or to any new claimants (new being not claimed in last 6 months) In addition, the 'family premium' element in HB/LHA calculation will be scrapped from April 2016 – meaning a reduction of £10.47 pw.

This means that HB/LHA will be effectively cut for working households or those getting CTC, with the child/family premium income disregards being removed. According to the IFS, it means losing the average of £3,670 a year that currently goes to 872,000 families (548,000 of them in work).

That said, the Government aren't complete monsters. If you can prove that your third child was the result of being raped, there will be an exception. They actually said that. They really did.

'Pay to stay'

For tenants of social housing (Council or RSL), mandatory upper income limits will be set, above which a 'market rent' must be charged. This was of course brought in previously as a discretionary power for tenant households earning over £60K. Nobody but nobody took it up because it was a silly and expensive idea. Now, it will be a mandatory silly and expensive idea. What is more, the 'higher income earners' [sic] are households with gross income of £40,000 in London and £30,000 elsewhere. A couple working full time on the new 'national living wage' (the minimum wage) rate would earn £26,000, which makes £30,000 an interesting definition of higher income.

RSLs will get to keep any additional rent. Councils will have to pay it to the Treasury. However, the mechanism for this is 'to be consulted on' – how landlords are to get income details, what amounts to 'market rent' etc. are all a fog. But whatever the mechanism, there will be substantial administrative burdens and costs on the landlords.

As far as I can see, given that households on £30K income are entitled to an element of housing benefit at certain rent levels, the net effect will be to put up the housing benefit bill. It is also, of course, a huge disincentive for people to increase their employment income, amounting to a huge marginal tax increase. A stroke of genius.

Rent cuts

It might seem odd to be castigating rent cuts. But...

Social landlords (RSL and Council) will have to cut rents by 1% every year for the next 4 years. This after a '10 year deal' in 2013 for rent increases of CPI plus 1%. While a limited rent reduction at least won't hurt existing tenants' ability to pay the rent, RSLs' business and finance plans predicated on CPI plus 1% have been torn apart. Their ability to get loans is somewhat jeopardised and their building plans at the least will have to be shrunk. Fewer new social rent properties. For councils, looking at funding repairs out of the rent income, there is a real maintenance problem looming.

The only saving irony is that central government legislating for RSL rent levels may mean that RSLs' debt ends up on the public balance sheet, adding £60 billion to Government debt overnight.

Private Sector

Even the PRS took a hit. Tax relief on mortgage interest for BTL landlords will only be claimable at basic rate – 20% – not at higher rates. To be phased in over 4 years

In addition, the 'wear and tear' tax allowance will no longer be set at 10% of the rental income, but will be based on actual costs.

Unsurprisingly, landlord bodies like the RLA insist that any losses in these changes will be passed on in higher rents.

Whether this will slow the BTL buying frenzy remains to be seen. I suspect it will be of marginal effect overall.

Conclusions

If I was managing a council homeless persons unit, I would be frankly terrified. There will be a very significant and sustained increase in applications, from households with children becoming homeless through unaffordability and from under 21 year olds, who may be vulnerable in post-Johnson terms. The council will simply have to subsidise the costs of temporary accommodation. Although the DHP pot from central Government will increase by between £100 million and £55 million up to 2020 over the originally proposed £85 million for 2015, this is unlikely to be anything like enough to either keep people in their homes or provide for the costs of temporary accommodation over the capped HB level. The experience of London Councils confirms this. And then, there will be the simple impossibility of finding suitable, affordable accommodation for discharge of duty. For households subject to the benefit cap, London councils won't even be able to rely on out of London accommodation as being cheap enough any longer.

For non-London councils and Housing Associations who haven't really had to deal with these issues before, things are going to get very tricky, pretty quickly.

For some family households, there will be nowhere suitable to go. At all. Anywhere. This is not something that we have had to deal with for many years.

As for the rest, the slow death of social housing continues, now somewhat accelerated, with extended RTB still to come. The Government also announced that social 'tenancies for life' are going to be reviewed. You might think that the introduction of 'flexible' tenancies had done that already, but apparently not. So we have that to look forward to.

And private rents aren't going anywhere but up, faster...

Senior Housing Manager

				Administrative Assistant		Clerical Assistant			
Homelessness and Housing Support Manager				Senior Supporting People Officer		Gypsies and Travellers Liaison Officer		Private Sector Housing Manager	
Homelessness Prevention Officer x 2	Landlord and Tenant Liaison Officer	Homelessness Service Officer x 2	Supporting People Project Officer	Payments Officer	Traveller Site Support Officer	Principal Renewals Officer	County Principal Housing Officer		
Private Sector Rental Properties Liaison Officer	Housing Support Officer			Senior Assistant Officer	Grants Officer	Renewals Officer (North)	Renewals Officer (South)		
Private Leasing Scheme Officer	Tenancy Support Worker x 3			Assistant x 3	Disabilities Liaison Officer	Clerk of Works (North)	Clerk of Works (South)		
Homelessness Officer (North)	Homelessness Officer (South)	Accommodation Officer x 2	Noddfa Hostel Senior Warden	Rhianfa Hostel Warden					
Assistant Homelessness Officer x 2	Assistant Homelessness Officer	Support Workers + Sleep-in Workers x 5		Support Worker + Sleep-in Worker x 2			Licencing Administrative Officer	Administrative Assistant	
					Environmental Health Officer - Housing	Environmental Health Officer - Housing (North)	Environmental Health Officer - Housing (South)	Technical Housing Officer x 4	
					Empty Houses Officer				

SCENARIOS FOR THE HOMELESSNESS SCRUTINY INVESTIGATION 3/3/2015

'You are two pay packets from the streets, they say. Well, it's true' –

<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2009/mar/22/homeless-middle-class-recession>

Scenario 1

- Jack is 19 years of age and lives at home with his mother, stepfather and younger sister who is 13 years of age.
- At present Jack is not in education, employment or training (NEET) and is finding it hard to find employment in the area
- Jack has a BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance qualification.
- Unfortunately Jack and his stepfather don't get on and this causes arguments in the family home which has an effect on the mother and younger sister.
- The step dad suggests that Jack is not trying to find employment and is not doing anything with his life;
- Jack strongly disagrees with this and states he had not had any luck at all interviews.
- Over the weekend the stepfather has given Jack's mother and ultimatum either Jack goes or he goes.
- Due to the pressure Jack's mother is under she asks Jack to leave.
- Jack is unable to stay with his grandparents as both have health issues and live in a one bedroom bungalow.
- Jack has no contact with his father as he left Jack and his mother when Jack was child.
- Since the weekend Jack has stayed at his friend's house on the sofa (sofa surfing) but has to leave within a week due to lack of space and having an effect on their family members.
- When Jack attended a meeting with the DWP (Department of Work and Pension) he broke down and told the member of staff of his situation.
- The member of staff referred Jack to the Homeless Department, Gwynedd Council for an assessment.

Scenario 2

- Bethan is a single mother of two children aged 2 and 5 years.
- 2 months ago Bethan was issued a Notice to seek possession as the private sector landlord want to sell the house
- Bethan has depression and she has not been able face dealing with the situation
- Now Bethan and her family must leave within a week, leaving the property empty.
- If the property is not empty the landlord will remove and dispose of the furniture.
- Bethan's parents are very supportive but have no room in their house and don't have

sufficient savings to give to Bethan as a deposit for another property.

- The depression is having an effect on Bethan's health and wellbeing and the current housing situation is making her health worse.
- Unfortunately, the children's father now lives with his new partner and had very little contact with his Bethan and the children.
- Bethan does not work at present as childcare costs are higher than the wage she would earn.
- Bethan's mother has suggested that she visit the Housing Department for advice and support.

Scenario 3

- Paul is in prison and will be released in about two to three weeks.
- Paul is a prolific offender and steals to support his substance misuse addiction.
- Following his release Paul will need to work with the Probation Service as he will be on a license and he will need to be drug tested by ARCH every week.
- Prison Link has sent a referral to the Homeless Department and they have also received a Risk Assessment from the prison Resettlement team.
- The risk assessment states that there is a high risk of re-offending but low risk to others.
- Paul cannot be housed in the Caernarfon and Felinheli area as he has offended in the areas and people know of him.
- Paul has no accommodation to return to and his family cannot accommodate him because they live in Caernarfon.

Homelessness Scrutiny Investigation

HOSTEL VISITS

DATE	HOSTEL	MEMBER 1	MEMBER 2
04.03.2015	Hafod & Hwb, Dinbych Cynefin Group	Stephen Churchman	Angela Russell
12.03.2015	St Mary's Hostel Bangor North Wales Housing	Stephen Churchman	Angela Russell
13.03.2015	Noddfa, Deiniolen Gwynedd Council Hostel	Stephen Churchman	Eric M. Jones
18.03.2015	Rhianfa, Corris Gwynedd Council Hostel	Stephen Churchman	Louise Hughes
19.03.2015	Hafan and Tre Gof Caernarfon Gisda Hostels	Stephen Churchman	Eric M. Jones

Councillor Stephen Churchman agreed to visit every hostel as this will ensure a consistent opinion and that one other member nomination is needed for each visit.

Hwb/Hafod – Denbigh – Cynefin 03.03.15

- **Cllr Stephen Churchman**
 - **Cllr Angela Russell**
 - **Catrin Roberts, Housing Strategy Development Officer, Gwynedd Council**
 - **Walis George – Chief Executive, Cynefin Group**
 - **Mair Edwards – Community Development Manager – Cynefin Group**
 - **Osian Elis – Yr Hafod Senior Officer, Cynefin Group**
 - **3 x service user**
1. Two elements, namely Hwb – community resources and Hafod – Accommodation and Support Units
 - a. Bought the site in 2010 – Tai Clwyd did this and took the risk (Tai Clwyd is now the Cynefin Group)
 - b. Received Lottery Funding in 2012
 - c. Work started on the site in 2013
 - d. Site opened in 2014
 2. They have undertaken consultation work with the young people in order to identify their priorities, namely:
 - a. To learn locally
 - b. Flexible service
 - c. Access to other services in one central location
 3. Statistics / information collected in terms of need for the service in order to confirm the location.
 4. A Steering Group was established with Councillors / Young People etc. and to hold drop-in sessions as part of the consultation process in different sites / times.
 5. The building is worth £2.2 million.
 - a. **Housing Units** - Social Housing Grant - have thought about the future in terms of design should the Supporting People grant come to an end and they will have to be let as general flats. - 6 flats on the site for young people aged 16-24. Stay period between 6 and 18 months. Link Hafod with Hwb in order to create training opportunities etc. for those who need support.
 - b. Coleg Menai – have a lease for the top floor and the Music Room – short / part-time courses to prepare people to go to full-time education/training.
 - c. Ground floor - Lottery funding / youth service (rent free for ten years) / Cyfenter / Freeman / Garfield

6. When a person comes in, the Hafod Manager identifies his/her needs and then refers the person to the most suitable service. This ensures that the person does not have to repeat the process again.
7. Work with the Job Centre / local businesses in order to arrange work experience.
8. If the person receives a good reference from Hwb, they do not have to go to the DWP in Rhyl to sign on.
9. 10/12 agencies use Hwb e.g. youth clubs/ Urdd/ Job Centre Plus/ Careers/ health etc.
10. Hwb opening times – 8:30 – 21:30 (Staff from Hafod lock up)

Hafod

1. Referrals received through the Denbighshire Supporting People Unit i.e. shortlist of 5 people. This is okay, but they are not able to fill the room as quickly and then lose income from rent and possibly voids which can lead to the Supporting People Unit clawbacks if the voids are more than 10%.
2. Hafod is a service that is staffed on a 24/7 basis and has one member of staff sleeping in.
3. Users have a self-contained flat.
4. There is a communal lounge and kitchen available for joint activities.
5. Staff members implement the support plans with individuals and support them with skills to live independently and the ability to sustain their tenancies.
6. CCTV is in operation and there are Rules in place in the hostel e.g. no alcohol/drugs/1 friend at a time etc. There are no set times for locking the door / time to come in.
7. Have to sign in and out in terms of safety.
8. Staff Office in the building.
9. Staff bedroom in the building – for staff who sleep in.
10. Rent of £226.47 a week, for rent and service charges.

Service Users

1. No suitable property to move on to;

St Mary's Hostel – (North Wales Housing) – Bangor 12.03.15

- **Cllr Stephen Churchman**
- **Cllr Angela Russell**
- **Catrin Roberts , Housing Strategy Development Officer, Gwynedd Council**
- **Robert Parry – St Mary's Hostel Manager, NWH**
- **Louise - Project Worker, NWH**
- **Rhian – Project Worker, NWH**
- **Aled Bebb – Outreach and Rehabilitation Worker, NWH**
- **2 x Service User**

1. A person can refer him / herself to the hostel.
2. Their concerns regarding lack of provision in the area was noted – there is always a waiting list;
3. Deal with high risk/medium service users
4. Hostel is manned 24/7 with two members of staff on every shift.
5. Two members of staff sleep in – and there is an on-call service for staff
6. Service users have to be in the hostel by 11:00pm - if not, they have to stay out until morning.
7. Users with mental health problems – but also noted that there is a lack of provision for those with severe mental health problems, which are too severe to be placed in a shared hostel.
8. At times, when the service user is referred for a specialist service e.g. counselling, due to the waiting list for the service they could move on from St Mary's Hostel and staff are not able to contact them if an appointment comes through.
9. Ensures safety and security by implementing a system of rules - if a person goes through the notice system and staff have to ask the individual to leave, this means they are 'intentionally homeless' and the council does not have a duty to provide them with a service. They could wait three months and then be referred back to North Wales Housing.

10. If they have to leave the hostel (by breaking the rules and receiving notice to leave), the team at St Mary's hostel refers them to an outreach and rehabilitation service for support.
11. On average, an individual will stay at the hostel for 6 to 12 months.
12. Before a place at the hostel can be offered, the risks must be considered along with the situation of the users already at the hostel.
13. If they are able to move on successfully, they can be given support in their new accommodation for a six week period.
14. Lack of moving on provision especially for 19+ year old males.
15. Need to look into shared housing to make them affordable.
16. Bangor has a high number of students; therefore private landlords tend to stick to students.
17. Need to work with private landlords to develop a plan to attract them.
18. Reasons for referral:-
 - a. Substance misuse problems
 - b. Relationship breakdown
19. The outreach and rehabilitation officers work with CAB and visit different areas to offer advice on Housing related matters.
20. Work with people sleeping on the streets in order to try to find them suitable accommodation. There is a minority who wish to live on the streets.
21. Some people are sofa surfers – these are the hidden homeless.
22. People are familiar with the services available from North Wales Housing
23. Cuts in the DWP service – users not able to use a phone or computer there - NWH hoping to offer this.
24. Consideration must also be given to whether users are able to use computers. Do they need support to use them?
25. Have identified that mobile phone charging facilities are needed – NWH is looking into it.

26. A very good relationship with staff at the Homelessness Department - need to strengthen the relationship with the Housing Options Team.
27. The Housing Options Team form does not gather information about the need for support – but it has been given to understand that work is ongoing in addressing this matter.
28. The weekly rent is £169.10 and it will increase to £178.28 on 1/4/2015.
29. Utility is £8.71 and will change to £7.25 on 1/4/2015.

Meeting with two NWH service users:-

1. Note that at times due to staff turnover they feel that they have had too many Key Workers – very difficult to trust people at times and as soon as the trust is established, they get a new worker.
2. Organisations to look at methods of encouraging service users to save as the service payment does not prepare them for the true cost of independent living.
3. Find it difficult to get a suitable place to store belongings i.e. they may have belongings they have collected in preparation for when they move, because the rooms are too small. Also, if they have to leave a property for any reason and have to take their belongings with them, they are not able to afford to pay to store the items, and without a place to store them, there is a danger of losing them.
4. Need more notice if they have to move from one property to another – feel at times that they have to leave within a day or two and need more time to prepare.

Noddfa, Deiniolen (Gwynedd Council)

- **Cllr Stephen Churchman**
- **Cllr Eric Jones**
- **Anne Smith, Homelessness Service Officer, Gwynedd Council**
- **Denise Williams, Support Worker, Gwynedd Council**
- **Catrin Roberts, Housing Strategy Development Officer, Gwynedd Council**

1. Hostel has been established since approximately 1974.
2. Hostel regarded as a 'Place of Change' - i.e. gives service users an opportunity to receive support to improve their situation.
3. Service users have to refer through the homelessness department.
4. If they are in priority need and/or while an investigation of the situation is ongoing - they will then be placed at the hostel.
5. Complete a risk assessment and discuss the suitability of the placement with the hostel staff.
6. Support individuals and families.
7. Hostel is manned 24/7.
8. 3 Support Workers work at the hostel and staff sleep in every night (1 member of staff sleeps in).
9. Support Workers regularly complete support plans with individuals.
10. Case Worker in the Homelessness Department at the Caernarfon/Bangor office works with the individual along with a Support Worker e.g.
 - a. Budgeting
 - b. Cooking
 - c. Craft nights
 - d. DIY nights
 - e. Moving on.
11. Service is monitored by Supporting People on an annual basis.
12. Noddfa weekly rent:- £117.60

13. Utility amount is:-
 - a. Single person - £7.00 a week
 - b. Single with Child - £9.80
 - c. One or two parents with one or more children - £12.25
14. If a Room is empty, then one day should be counted as void and Supporting People can ask people for their money back.
15. Training for staff is provided (rolling programme) e.g. First Aid
16. Tests the fire alarm every Monday - important because of service user turnover.
17. Hostel Rules in place – outlined in the handbook.
18. If they move on to their own property, they could receive support from the Tenant Support Worker.
19. Works with private landlords and approximately 60 temporary properties where the council manages the properties.
20. Considering a package for private landlords to take on people as tenants (moving on) namely a package on a gold/silver/bronze level – packages to be confirmed by the Homelessness Department.
21. Supports service users to complete HOT forms.
22. Bus stop at the bottom of the road so that they can travel to Bangor / Caernarfon to gain access to services.

Rhianfa Corris (Gwynedd Council)

- **Cllr Stephen Churchman**
- **Cllr Louise Hughes**
- **Susan Griffith, Homelessness and Supported Housing Manager, Gwynedd Council**
- **Paul Cross, Warden, Gwynedd Council**
- **Jayne Tyson, Support Worker, Gwynedd Council**
- **Catrin Roberts, Housing Strategy Development Officer, Gwynedd Council**

1. Service users have to refer through the homelessness department.
2. If they are in priority need and/or while an investigation of the situation is ongoing - they will then be placed at the hostel.
3. Complete a risk assessment and discuss the suitability of the placement with the hostel staff.
4. Support individuals and families.
5. Case Worker in the Homelessness Department works with the individual along with a Support Worker e.g.
 - a. Budgeting – benefit payments etc.
 - b. Cooking
 - c. Living independently
 - d. Moving on.
6. Weekly rent:- £117.00
7. Utility amount
 - a. Single person - £7.00 a week
 - b. Single with Child - £9.80
 - c. One or two parents with one or more children - £12.25
8. Some move on from the hostel to private sector property which is managed by the Council, still on a temporary basis, but is more independent.
9. The nearest services are in Machynlleth or Dolgellau e.g. DWP and some agencies give back the individuals' bus fare.
10. They do not have internet access but with the support and supervision of staff they can use the office computer to look for properties/work etc.

11. Some partners they work with:-
 - a. Cefni lettings
 - b. Cais
 - c. Gisda etc.
12. The Food Banks in Barmouth and Machynlleth support the hostel by giving them packs.
13. Start-up pack - they are able to give essentials to those who arrive with nothing e.g. toothpaste/toothbrush/shampoo etc. Do not receive many donations, but do not ask for them either.
14. The difficult part of the job for hostel staff is dealing with service users who are not happy with the Council's decision.
15. The reward of the job is being able to support service users - listening to them to understand their situation.
16. Many services users have mental health problems i.e. depression, self-harming, Schizophrenia.
17. Staff receive training on:-
 - a. Child Protection
 - b. First Aid
 - c. Drugs and alcohol
 - d. Personal safety
 - e. Support Plan
 - f. Fire
18. POVA training was discussed - have not received the training thus far.
19. The hostel is not manned overnight; however there is an on-call service in place.
20. 3 staff members work at the hostel and are on-call.
21. Of the opinion that a service user needs a home first, before being able to address any other issues - depression/job seeking etc.
22. On average, people stay in the hostel for around 6 to 12 months.
23. Tenant Support Officers support them when they move on.

Gisda, Caernarfon

- **Cllr Stephen Churchman**
- **Cllr Eric Jones**
- **Catrin Roberts, Housing Strategy Development Officer, Gwynedd Council**
- **Siân Tomos, Chief Executive, Gisda**
- **Siwan Williams, Supporting People Project Manager**
- **Andrew Smalley, North Gwynedd Team Manager**
- **2 x service user**

1. 16-24 year old service users are able to refer themselves to the service and referrals are also received from other agencies with the individual's permission.
2. A specific officer will take the details, but if there is no room at the hostel, they are placed on a waiting list. Gisda is looking to support service users in future who are on the waiting list until accommodation becomes available.
3. At present, there are approximately 8-9 people on the waiting list.
4. On average, service users stay at the hostel for around a year but are allowed to stay for up to two years (under Supporting People guidelines).
5. The main reason for people becoming homeless is a breakdown in their relationship with their family - and some have issues relating to substance misuse.
6. Gisda is able to offer Mediation and can refer to other services that provide support.
7. Note that they see a purpose for the hostel but also like the idea of dispersed housing - community integration.
8. Hafan is a 24/7 service with a few hours in between day and night staff (occasionally) where there is no one on site.
9. On-call service available – currently being reviewed.
10. Support the young people with:-
 - a. Budgeting
 - b. Cooking
 - c. Giving them start-up packs - i.e. tooth paste etc.

d. Working on the Outcomes Star – a method of measuring a person's progress as they receive support

11. CCTV on site and a Gate with a buzzer to control who enters and who leaves. Service users have a fob.
12. There is no set time for closing the hostel doors – they can come and go as they wish.
13. Weekly rent at Hafan is £144.00
14. Utility amount is £12.00 a week - if they are working and contribute to the rent we do not pay the utility.

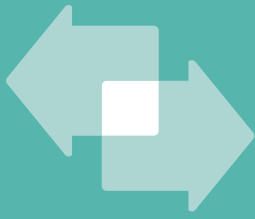
Tre Gof

1. Staff are able to work from Tre Gof during the day – there is an office in one of the flats.
2. Washing and laundry facilities at Tre Gof and Tŷ'r Ysgol.
3. Weekly rent is £129.00 per week – pay for electricity etc. themselves.

Scheme	Weekly rent	Service Payment - weekly	Staff cover	Single/double cover	Doors Locked	Referral process	Access to services	Service Group
Hafod, Denbigh	£226.47 (£129 rent / £106.57 service charge (sustainable building)	£15.25	24/7	Single	No specific time	Through the Supporting People Unit	Yes	Young people 16-24
St Mary's Hostel, Bangor	£178.24 (01.04.15)	£7.25 (01.04.15)	24/7	Double	Locked at 11pm	Self-Referral	Yes	16+ singles but they are usually 18+
Noddfa, Deiniolen	£117.60	Single £7.00 Single with Child - £9.80 1 or 2 parents with 1 or more children £12.25	24/7	Single	Locked at 11pm	Through the Gwynedd Council Housing Department	Bus at bottom of the road to go to Caernarfon/ Bangor	Single and families
Rhianfa Corris	£117.60	Single £7.00 Single with Child - £9.80 1 or 2 parents with 1 or more children £12.25	24/7	Single	They are asked to be back by 11pm	Through the Gwynedd Council Housing Department	Bus to Machynlleth /Dolgellau	Single and families
Hafan, Gisda	£144.00	£12.00	24/7	Single	No specific time	Self-Referral	Yes	Young People 16-24 years old Single/young parents
Pendinas, Bangor	£186.82	£6.31	24/7	Single	Locked at 11pm	Through other agencies	Yes	16+ singles but they are usually 18+

Members of the Investigation were given a series of presentations from the witnesses below who appeared before them, who are professional officers representing the Council and its Partners.

Date	Officer	Function
15.4.15	Sheilla Phillips	Supporting People Senior Officer
12.5.15	Osian Ellis	Chairman of the Gwynedd Homelessness Forum
12.5.15	Gareth Parri	Housing Options Team Leader
02.6.15	Dafydd G. Jones	Benefits Manager
02.6.15	Carys Fôn Williams	Housing Manager – Supply and Enforcement



EQUAL GROUND STANDARD

Registered charity no. 515902

A guide to the service user standard for Welsh homelessness services

January 2015



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1. Introduction

The Equal Ground Standard is a tool for embedding person-centred principles in frontline homelessness services. It has been developed by service users themselves and includes:

- Outcomes for good customer service
- Guidelines for involving users in service design and evaluation
- How to monitor the impacts of the Standard.

The Equal Ground Standard sets out guidelines to the standard of service that people should receive when they approach Welsh homelessness services. We hope that all organisations in Wales providing frontline homelessness services will find this a useful tool. Organisations who sign up to the Equal Ground Standard will demonstrate their commitment to providing a quality, person-centred service.

The Standard was developed by past and current users of housing and homelessness services through the Shelter Cymru Citizen Panel, now known as the Take Notice Project. The Take Notice Project is a Wales-wide group of people who are integrated into the fabric of Shelter Cymru to help guide our policy, campaigning and practice.

Project members design and implement research, mystery shop our own services, deliver findings at conferences and seminars and have started to feed their expertise into the organisation at strategic level, helping Shelter Cymru move towards being a more user-led organisation. The Take Notice Project is a resource that local authorities and other organisations can access to help refine customer service and user involvement practices.

Service users are best placed to tell us what it is like to use homelessness services in Wales. Their expertise is an important resource for driving up standards. Recent research has shown that Welsh housing and homelessness service users do not always feel like they are treated with courtesy and respect when they present to the local authority.¹ Research has also found that service users have very clear ideas about how they would like services to look in terms of customer service delivery.

Panel members have developed a set of outcomes for frontline services – the Equal Ground Standard (Appendix 1). The Standard describes the kind of service that users want to access. In order to adopt the Standard, local authority homelessness services need to identify their own solutions and draw up their own action plan, in consultation with users, with the aim of achieving the Standard outcomes.

This project has been designed, led and implemented by the Citizen Panel with extensive support from Shelter Cymru's Research Team, the Homelessness Network and Cymorth Cymru. Special thanks go to Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) local authority who piloted the Standard in the summer of 2013.

1. <http://www.sheltercymru.org.uk/campaigns/research/homelessness-legislation-review/>

Shelter Cymru has won funding from the Big Lottery Fund for a three year project that will support the implementation of the Equal Ground Standard across Wales. The Take Notice Project is taking the work of the Citizen Panel to the next level by developing the skills and confidence of service users, educating communities about homelessness and offering a service to local authorities and other providers to help them check the quality of services they provide to people, including free 'mystery shopping' services.

Take Notice project members look forward to working with service providers between now and 2017 to roll out the Equal Ground Standard across Wales.

2. How to implement the Equal Ground Standard: at-a-glance guide

- **Read the Standard at Appendix 1** to understand the outcomes that service users want to see
- **Consult with staff and service users** on how to reach the Standard outcomes
- **Define an action plan** with short-, medium- and long-term goals
- **Implement the action plan** as resources allow
- **Display the Pledge** in offices or give customers a copy
- **Monitor and record progress** to provide evidence that you are working towards the outcomes; collect customer feedback using the form provided
- **Does your service already have a policy** on customer service and/or service user involvement? If so, consider how the Equal Ground Standard may complement what you are already doing
- **Read this report** to understand the background to the project
- **Contact Shelter Cymru** to get support from the Take Notice Project on setting up the Standard and evaluating progress.

3. The Equal Ground Pledge

Service users are sometimes afraid to tell the truth of their situation due to fear of repercussions resulting in them missing out on the support they need.

At the same time stakeholders told us that service staff require courtesy, truth, honesty and openness from service users to allow staff to provide the best possible service.

The Equal Ground Standard is intended to be a partnership approach. As part of the culture change to a more reciprocal relationship, two-way pledges have been designed by service users and stakeholders to describe to each other what they need to ensure a successful working relationship. These expectations are set out at the beginning of the relationship, so that users have a better understanding of why the service is making the inquiries that it is.

One of the principles of the Standard is to display these pledges in your office or provide them to service users.

Provider pledge: ‘My job is to listen to you, treat you with respect and assist you to the best of my ability. If you provide me with the documents and the honest, correct information that I need to assist you, then I promise to do everything in my power to help you. If I can’t help you, I will help you find someone who can. I am not here to judge you; I am here to help. Because you are treating me with respect, I will treat you with respect. Let’s work together to ensure a good solution for you.’

Service user pledge: ‘I promise to be open and honest with you and provide you with all requested information in order for you to help me. In return, I trust that you will believe what I say and that you will do your best to help me. Because you are treating me with respect, I will treat you with respect. I will actively take part in the process so that you are able to help me find a good solution to my housing need.’

‘The service user has rights, as they should, but they also have a responsibility to tell the truth, for them to give us the documents we need in time to progress the case. We need you to be engaged with us and have reasonable expectations that we cannot provide the world.’ [Stakeholder]

‘We will believe you in what you are saying so now tell us the truth.’ [Stakeholder]

4. Thoughts on the Standard

'It is impossible to provide good customer service without service user participation. To provide a good service we need to know whether we are meeting their needs. This framework can definitely help organisations in achieving this because it has been designed by service users themselves – it will help organisations to focus their efforts on what is most important to people they serve.'

(Tai Pawb)

'Tenantiaid Cymru / Welsh Tenants welcomes the Standard for minimum service user standards. We fully support the principle that people are better served when they have the opportunity to shape the service being provided, be that information, advice, accessibility or direct use. People who offer their time and resources should be treated with dignity and respect regardless whether they have protected characteristics. People should also be supported to play a role according to their capacity – but should they wish to evolve their learning and influence, they should be properly resourced to do so. In supporting this approach, we are committed to making available our network of fellow volunteers in a friendly and supportive environment so that they can make the best of their shared experience finding collective support and mentoring to do so.'

(Welsh Tenants)

'The Service User Framework has enabled us to focus on the needs of our customer helping them to have a better experience when using our services and tell us what they like and don't like, helping us adapt our services accordingly.'

(Stakeholder)

'The [Standard] is an excellent tool and I was very glad I was involved with the design. In March 2013 a group of us service users met and discussed past experiences (good and bad) and what our expectations were when approaching housing and homelessness services in Wales. The [Standard] will help allay all fears for staff and service users and will help give clearer messages and not raise expectations. There is still a long way to go but I am positive that the [Standard] will be accepted and implemented across Wales.'

(Take Notice project member)

'I have worked for many years in housing and I am so encouraged by the [Standard]. It is a shame it has taken so long but I am looking forward to the changes being implemented and the difference it will make to people at the most difficult of times.'

(Stakeholder)

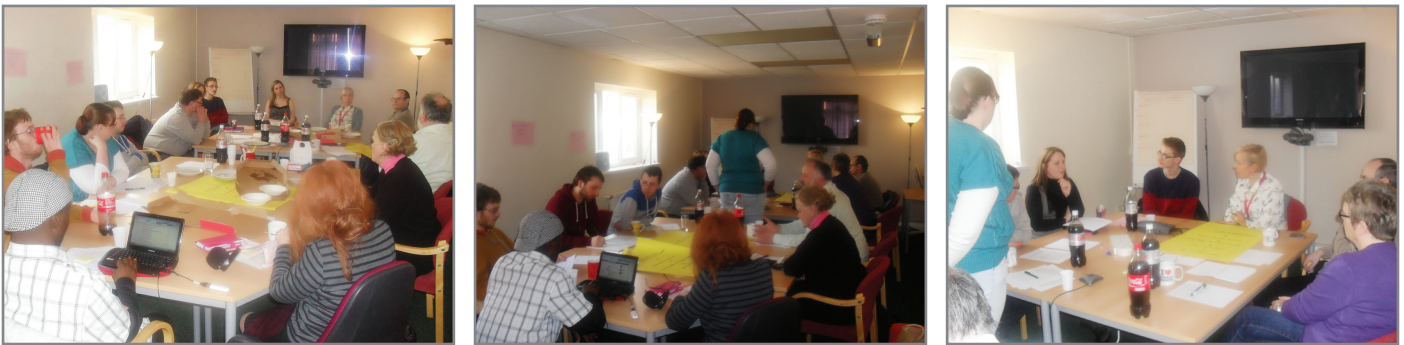
'I personally think service users should be more involved with decisions made about homelessness and housing standards, this will be ideal for good practice and improving the service we could all call upon one day. I had some real fun taking part in this project and met some really interesting people who had some inspirational stories about themselves and others who had been in a difficult situation, all due to the current principles that are mandatory today. Shelter Cymru also acknowledged these issues and gave us an opportunity to get our point across to the decision-makers. I believe we should be working holistically with all of the different services.'

'I feel it is important that high standards are met and that all principles should be upheld. Some of us service users feel decision-makers should interact with vulnerable and difficult cases that go on every day. Treating every case with the utmost respect and empathy, also listening to any issues that are causing peoples difficulties in their lives is important. I feel that there are still so many people out there suffering because they cannot get their point across. Working closely together would improve communication between services and service users and, most importantly, we would become a better society for it.'

'I am a former care leaver and felt that most of the decisions in my life were out of my hands, so to be involved with the Standard principles that would benefit others for the better is uplifting for me and I really feel it is important that service users should have a say. After attending meetings with other service users I see the passion people have in their homes and being involved in the decisions services are making for them. So I plead to the Welsh housing and homelessness services to adopt the Standard and maintain joint working with the service users so that we can improve the quality service that is supplied daily and that impacts on so many people's lives.'

(Take Notice project member)

5. Developing the Standard



Method

- A service user event where the Citizen Panel came together to develop the Standard outcomes
- Follow-up consultation with the Panel to ensure that the Standard outcomes accurately reflect what they expect from services
- Focus group and interviews in the pilot area for stakeholders
- Focus group and interviews in the pilot area for service users
- Follow-up interim evaluation in the pilot area
- Wales-wide consultation including:
 1. Online survey open to all housing and homelessness services
 2. Email consultation open to all housing and homelessness services
 3. Focus groups in north and south Wales for stakeholders
 4. Focus groups in north and south Wales for service users.

During the service user event we found that a number of key values and principles were essential to service users. These principles focus on five themes:

- Presentation at the service
- Speaking to staff
- The information given
- Delivery of outcomes
- Service user input into design and delivery of services.

Presentation at the service

Service users think that the initial atmosphere of the frontline office sets the scene for the remainder of the experience. Service users feel that physical barriers get in the way of good communication.

Therefore, service users would like to see a bright, airy, welcoming open-plan office with desks widely spaced apart (this will allow for an element of confidentiality when discussing personal problems). They would also like the option of a private room to discuss really sensitive matters. This atmosphere will foster a partnership working approach and two-way relationship. This will lead to a culture change in delivery with hostility and frustration reduced.

Service users understand that services cannot be open at all times; however, they would appreciate information on housing/homelessness services that they can access outside of office hours. Service users want to know where to go for housing and homelessness advice, both in terms of the local authority and other third sector services. They want you to assist them in these matters.

Service users would like to be greeted by someone when they come into the office. This is because some people feel intimidated by office buildings. Also people do not know what to do when they enter the office and could feel apprehensive and 'on-guard'. Service users would like to be greeted by a friendly face who can show them where to go for the help and advice they require.

Due to the trauma that some people are experiencing, service users would like access to an independent advocate when they present as homeless. Service users have two preferences:

- An independent, knowledgeable legal advocate on site who can offer advice upon presentation
- A homelessness mentor, someone who has been through the experience to offer moral support through the trauma of the process.

Service users often have to bring their children to the service. They would like the office to be child-friendly, for example with toys in the waiting area.

In addition, wherever possible, BME people should be represented among frontline service staff.

Service users want to know from the outset what your service offers:

'This is what you can expect from me; this is what I expect from you.'

Speaking to staff

It is important to service users that they are treated with respect and courtesy regardless of their current situation. Service users told us that respect and courtesy translate as the following:

- Being treated with compassion
- Being treated with understanding and empathy (but not pity)
- Being treated with a non-judgemental attitude
- Being listened to.

'Staff should talk and help service users in the way that they would talk to, and assist, respected members of their own family.'

'Everyone deserves a voice... no matter what background. And people from all walks of life should be treated equally.'

The Research Team received 48 responses from the online survey targeted at stakeholders. We asked stakeholders how important they think it is that Welsh housing and homelessness services provide good customer service to people seeking advice and assistance and 98 per cent of stakeholders agreed that it was very important.

Service users want staff to understand their situation and wider support needs (if applicable). They would like staff to be knowledgeable in the following areas as a minimum to aid understanding of service users' situations:

- Customer service training
- Training in dealing with vulnerable people who might be in distressed states; It is important that staff can create an environment whereby service users feel they can share their story with the staff member
- Acknowledging and addressing additional support needs (such as literacy or numeracy difficulties)
- Training in mental health
- Equality and diversity training.

Service users want knowledgeable staff to give them accurate information to minimise any prolonged trauma of homelessness. Service users want staff to be fully trained in current housing law and to keep up-to-date with case law.

Service users want consistency in the application process and information given so that they can expect a similar progress no matter where they present. They do not want to repeat their stories to a number of people. They want to tell their story once and have staff implement good communication between the team to save them having to go through their story again. Ideally service users would have one person to deal with their case throughout.

As a minimum, service users would like staff to wear a name badge so they know who they are talking to.

Service users told us that they want to be asked key questions early in the process. For example, 'Do you have any language or communication needs before we start the process?'

Service users want to be communicated with in clear dialogue in the language of their choice. If communication difficulties exist then they want to be offered support to overcome them.

Service users want to be spoken to in plain language. They want staff to avoid jargon (or if jargon is necessary then explain what it means).

Service users want transparency in the questions they are to be asked. If they were to see a copy of the questions they are to be asked, they would feel less like they were being 'interrogated'.

Key concepts to emerge from the service user and stakeholder consultations



The information given

'If I knew where I was, how long I would have to wait or if I was expecting a phone call at least it would make it more bearable, I can aim for something.'

Service users want a succinct but informative visual (for example a flow chart) of 'the way the system works' and information in writing about what the service can and cannot offer. This should also clearly set out the service users' legal rights. It is preferable that information is given verbally in the first instance; however, as it can be hard to retain information taken in during a high stress situation, then it might also be preferable to produce written information for people to digest at a later date.

At present, service users feel that they have to provide all of the information and the service does not. They want the relationship to be more reciprocal. The key issue is that service users are given a choice in how they receive the information.

Service users want to know that they can appeal any decision and how they can go about the appeal process.

Service users would like assistance to complete forms if required, but they do not want people to fill in forms for them. They want information explained to them in an accessible way and want to be empowered to complete their own forms.

Service users want jargon free information delivered in a format that is right for their individual needs.

Service users want a clear explanation of the process and timescales involved set out in writing as well as verbally.

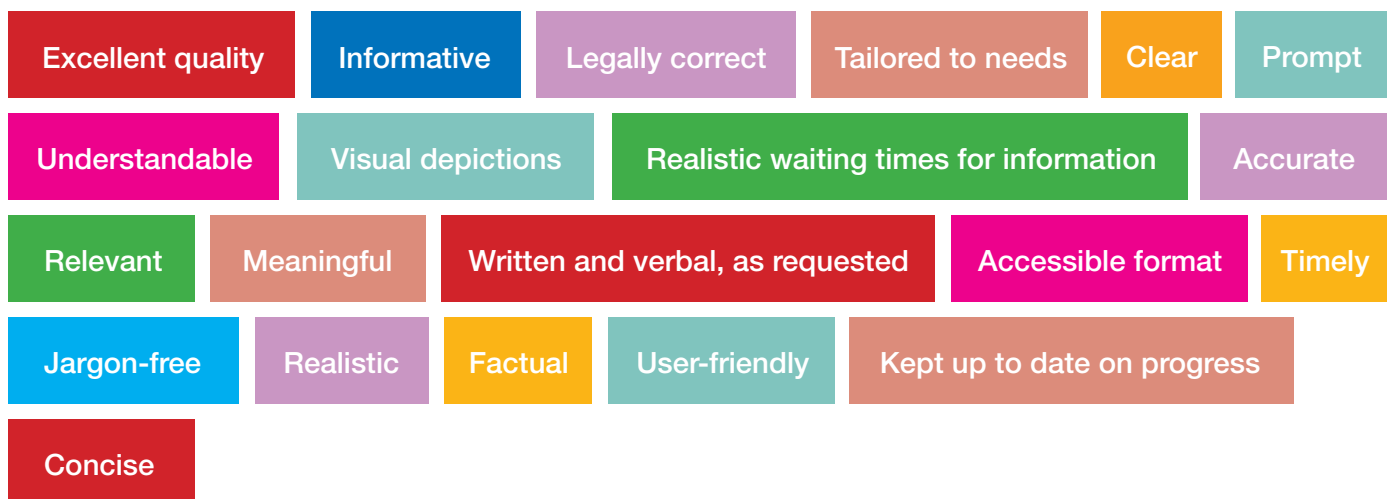
Service users want to be given information on other issues such as welfare benefits, moving furniture, access to direct hostels etc.

Service users would like a copy of their application form.

Service users want good quality information; they told us that quality information translates as:

- Accurate
- In a flexible format of the service user's choice
- Clear
- Concise
- Practical.

Key concepts to emerge from the service user and stakeholder consultations



Outcomes

'Some matters cannot be resolved but providing that person feels that the organisation has done its best... that certainly would be satisfactory for me.'

'Even if they have lost their home through their own fault, made a mistake, it is not about saying sorry no duty bye bye, it is about exploring other options for them, other avenues so we can assist. We don't want them on the street.'

'Simple, crystal clear language that says this is the decision; these are your options now.'

Service users want more joined up working between services. People want to be referred, or at least signposted to, other support services as and when needed. Service users want to be signposted and supported to access other agencies if the outcome at their service is not the desired outcome.

Service users want their other support needs acknowledged and communicated (with permission) to other providers so there is a joined-up response to their housing needs.

Service users want to be kept up-to-date on their case.

Service users want more support after they have their tenancy – they want to be offered information on other support services, how to access benefits, money management etc.

If service users are placed in temporary accommodation, then they want to be kept up to date with what is happening with their case.

Service users want standards of temporary accommodation to be more heavily enforced.

Service users were adamant that although some people are in desperate situations it does not mean that they should live in poor quality accommodation. Sometimes particular types of temporary accommodation are not suitable for certain service users.

Service users want a focus on homelessness prevention. They don't want to wait until they become homeless before they are assisted.

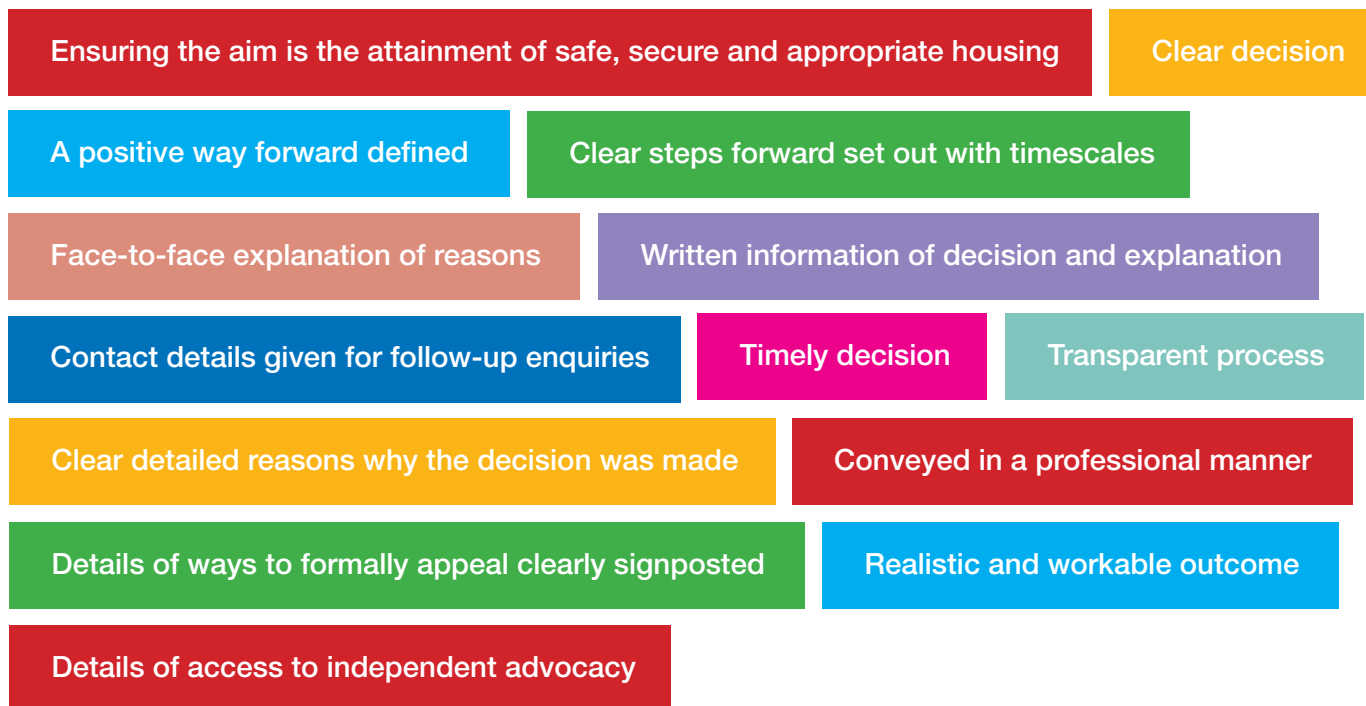
Service users want to have their decision made in as brief a time as possible. Where possible, they do not wish to wait until the deadline.

Service users want truth and honesty. They want to be told honestly why the decision was made.

As noted previously, service users want the outcome explained verbally, but then repeated in other formats (such as written) to suit their needs.

Service users want to know about the appeal process and be reassured that appealing will not result in a more negative outcome for them.

Key concepts to emerge from the service user and stakeholder consultations



Service user involvement in the design and delivery of services

'Any service user should be able to have an input, as they are the only ones able to give honest feedback, not some Minister in Westminster - the users themselves.'

Service users do want input into the design and delivery of services, but:

- They want the choice whether to do so or not – not all service users want to input
- They want to choose how they input – there should be various means of input available depending on service users' needs
- They want to choose when to do it – some service users do not wish to input at the time of crisis but would like to do so afterwards
- They want to be given the knowledge of the service – so they can meaningfully input on a scale wider than their own personal experience
- They want to be empowered to input in order to overcome barriers such as distrust of 'the system', fear of repercussions and lack of confidence – for example, feedback to an independent third party has been mentioned as a useful way of facilitating service user involvement.

Service users need to know of their right to input into services. At present, many service users do not know of this right or how they would go about participating.

Service users want to be involved in various ways such as:

- Reviewing service policy documents (online or in hard copy)
- Being asked to feed back their experience verbally
- Completing a service user feedback form following presentation
- Completing a service user feedback form post-homelessness crisis
- Research, for example mystery shop exercises, service or policy evaluations
- Focus groups
- Surveys
- Events
- Informal gatherings
- Open forum (perhaps online)
- Becoming 'homelessness mentors' for other people experiencing homelessness.

Service users want input to be driven by bottom-up, rather than top-down, processes.

They want to feel assured that they'll be listened to and that their input is making a difference to services.

6. Piloting the Standard

'The Service User Framework has enabled us to focus on the needs of our customer, helping them to have a better experience when using our services and telling us what they like and don't like, helping us adapt our services accordingly.'

(Housing Advice Centre Manager)

We implemented the pilot study of the Standard in Rhondda Cynon Taff local authority in June 2013. The pilot ran until December 2013, and we undertook a progress evaluation in August 2013.

The Housing Advice Centre Manager made the following points about progress of the Standard:

In general the implementation of the Standard had gone well. They have not been able to implement each of the recommended actions because some are more medium- to long-term goals. A medium goal for the pilot area to achieve is to update their website and online information in line with the Standard.

The issue of further staff training is to be discussed within the team and the possibility of staff being trained in 'motivational interviewing' is something that they are considering. Such training can help diffuse situations and take the personal emotion out of the interviews and process and lead to a professional, standardised response from staff. The idea of an advocate in the housing service is being seriously considered. Again, this is more of a medium- to long-term goal.

'I have had this conversation with somebody who works with a mental health charity and they wanted to do some sort of funding of an advocate as part of the service. I think it would be really good, the gold star service and something we hope to take forward. At the minute a general advocate is difficult but something which I believe is a fantastic idea.'

We were told that some of the actions were simple to implement and intuitive:

'Some of it as easy but I guess it is about officers being clearer and managing expectations and being very specific on what we can and can't do, what information we give out etc. Introducing yourself and name badges were easy to implement along with being clear, we expect that to happen already. The bigger stuff like website information needs work.'

Barriers to the success of the Standard include the expectations of clients and keeping in regular contact with the clients due to the volume of clients that they see. However, these are barriers that the housing service can work toward as the Standard progresses.

Quantifying success was noted as a challenge for the progress of the Standard:

'This was hard and I still think we are struggling. We are not getting the feedback from clients we would have hoped for. This is a massive area for us to measure as how can we measure what is success? Is it, say, coming in to me saying you can't get into that area and you saying thanks a lot I really understood that and I understand my options, or is it handing over the keys to a house or thanks I am in a really good placement?'

Following this feedback, the decision was made to add additional questions to the Service User Feedback Form as follows:

- What help did you want from us?
- What help did you get?
- Were you satisfied with the help we gave you?
- Could we have helped you more? If so, how?

'It can be very scary for some services around some of the wording, for example "a bright and airy reception area". Most would offer that in a civic centre arrangement but some would say, "Can we be expected to provide this?" when many local authorities are having spending freezes.'

Following this feedback, the decision was made to colour-code actions into short, medium and long-term goals for services:

- Short-term goals depicted in **green** – those actions that can be implemented easily within one year
- Medium-term goals in **amber** – those actions that might involve more resources to implement but should be achievable within three years
- Long-term goals in **red** – those actions that could take considerably more resources but should be worked towards within five years.

We collected feedback from service users in the pilot area after the Standard had been implemented and 100 percent strongly agreed that the location of the office was accessible, they were spoken to well by staff and were given the information the way they wanted it. This demonstrates the commitment of the Housing Advice Centre to the Standard. In addition, 88 percent of service users agreed or strongly agreed that they would like to be more involved in how the service is delivered.

Wider consultation

As well as piloting the Standard in Rhondda Cynon Taff local authority we also consulted more widely in south and north Wales. Every service user we spoke to wholeheartedly backed the Standard.

'It all makes sense; it's just trying to make a crappy situation better for those who are going to go through what we have been through.'

Among stakeholders there was widespread agreement that the Standard largely represents a view of what good customer service should look like. Some pointed out that there is an overlap with many corporate customer service and service user involvement frameworks that are used within individual authorities.

Homelessness services that already have policies in place on customer service and user involvement may not wish to duplicate this work by adopting the Equal Ground Standard. They may nevertheless choose to cross-reference existing policies with the Standard, in order to ensure that the principles are already covered, updating policies and practices if necessary. It may be appropriate to adopt the Standard as a complementary measure.

One stakeholder raised concerns that the ‘problem’ is with the ‘system’ and implementing the Standard without considering the system that drives the original behaviour ‘smacks of solving the wrong problem in the wrong order’. They argued that, from the customer perspective, achieving a ‘first time fix’ is the key performance indicator.

The Equal Ground Standard needs to be seen in the context of the new statutory prevention duties introduced by the Welsh Government. It is a tool to build person-centred values in service delivery and as such as well suited to a more collaborative problem-solving approach to services, as the new legislation and accompanying Code of Guidance aims to promote.

One stakeholder told us that an issue with the Standard is that it cannot change outcomes for people and that some service users are never going to give ‘good’ feedback to a service that did not resolve their issue:

‘Evictions and “no duty” are never going to be seen in a positive light or as providing customer service but are unfortunately part of the role. You’re never going to have good feedback: “Thanks for evicting me, it was done in a sensitive manner.”’

On the other hand we also spoke to numerous service users who approached services that were unable to resolve their housing issue (both in this study and previous studies). Research demonstrates that delivering bad news in a sensitive and courteous manner does matter to service users. Similarly, we spoke to people who were owed a full duty by the service but were still not happy with the service they received due to the way they had been treated by the service.

It was noted that there is a potential tension between providing transparency in the form of standard questions, and the problem-solving approach which requires flexibility. We suggest that both approaches are necessary: providing a list of questions to establish standard information such as personal details, age, support and health needs etc. Any additional questions are explained to service users so they know the relevance of providing that information.

Stakeholders noted that there is no mention of telephone services in the Standard which can help with demand and ease of access to the service. Service users were not keen on telephone services, preferring face-to-face help. However, a telephone or online service could form part of a holistic service that gives users a number of points of entry to the system.

‘I think local authorities are definitely changing. In [local authority] it is all about customer focus, it is about having someone there to take the forms, staff there to go to people, not just meet and greet but to help people fill out forms. They are trained in Housing Benefit and planning and other services so they can give basic information out and then make sure they are linked through to the correct person. I think it needs to be written down so there is a uniform approach.’

‘There needs to be a little bit more detail in the quality and diversity stuff in terms of what the LA has to provide but also what the service users can expect. I know it was mentioned that a hand-out should be given telling them of their rights but maybe also the Equality Act should be mentioned, especially if the person has a protected characteristic then they are not allowed to be discriminated against. If there are any barriers because of these characteristics then it is not right, making sure the service is aware of their obligation.’

Finally, there were a number of suggestions from service users and stakeholders for large-scale service improvements. These suggestions might involve substantial resources and are therefore included here as suggestions for future service reforms, rather than integral elements of the Standard:

- The arrangement that one person deals with the service user's enquiry from start to finish, to build trust.
- The use of an appointment based system in all services so that there is less waiting around which raises tensions and causes frustrations. A simultaneous drop-in option plus appointment based system, whereby people could choose which route to use, could be implemented. Any wasted appointments caused by people not turning up could be offered to people on the drop-in queue. Another idea was to have an estimated waiting time displayed in the office so that service users could go away and come back later.
- The introduction of a system where any documentation is copied and a receipt is given to service users. Service users and stakeholders also felt that a separate person needs to be in place to take ownership of any documentation given in. This is useful when there is a long waiting time in order to prevent people having to wait a long time just to hand over a piece of paper.

7. How to implement the Standard

The outcomes defined by service users have been brought together into the Equal Ground Service User Standard (Appendix 1). The Standard includes a number of suggestions for practical actions to implement the Standard.

These suggestions are intended as a guide only: the task of defining exactly which short-, medium- and long-term actions are necessary to reach the outcomes should be set at a local level, involving staff and service users.

In order to subscribe to the Standard services need to:

- Consult with staff and service users on how to achieve the Standard outcomes
- Define an action plan with short-, medium- and long-term goals
- Implement the action plan as resources allow
- Display the Pledge in offices or give customers a copy
- Monitor and record progress to provide evidence that you are working towards the outcomes (see Chapter 8). This should include collection of customer service feedback using the format Appendix 2.

Action plan timescales are defined as follows:

- Short-term goals depicted in **green** – those actions that can be implemented easily **within one year**
- Medium-term goals in **amber** – those actions that might involve more resources to implement but should be achievable **within three years**
- Long-term goals in **red** – those actions that could take considerably more resources but should be worked towards **within five years**.

There are no surprises in the Standard. There are no actions that are not common sense. We expect most services are already working towards many of the outcomes already.

Developing service user involvement

Involvement in the design, delivery and evaluation of services is a core component of the Equal Ground Standard. There are a variety of ways in which services can choose to do this, including:

- Consulting service users on defining the Action Plan to reach the Standard outcomes
- Involving users in process and impact evaluations
- Involving users in developing Homelessness Strategies and other policies
- Carrying out mystery shopping exercises.

Principles for User Involvement – defined by service users

Service users want:

- the choice of whether to input or not, how to input and when to input
- the chance to have their opinions heard on the service they received
- opportunities to feed in early and at planning stage
- opportunities to feed in anonymously
- varied options to participate to suit preference and ability
- engagement opportunities to be well publicised
- to help monitor the delivery of your service
- each service to have a 'service user involvement' champion
- to have outcomes of involvement fed back to them
- a cross-section of service users to input
- involvement to not be tokenistic or a 'tick-box' exercise
- to participate in an accessible and supportive environment
- a range of events and opportunities to become involved
- services to have a budget for involvement, including travel expenses, venue hire and refreshments
- to be empowered to share their views.

Shelter Cymru's Take Notice Project has won funding from the Big Lottery Fund until 2017 to develop service user involvement in homelessness across Wales. The project, which began in August 2014, has expanded the Citizen Panel in both the south and the north making available a cohort of service users trained to evaluate and feed into homelessness services.

The Take Notice Project is available to all services wishing to develop service user involvement. Alternatively, to make involvement easier to do on an ongoing basis services may wish to consider setting up their own local Citizen Panels. While there is a small resource implication associated with this, the benefits can be considerable in terms of access to Panel members' independent expertise.

Take Notice project members and Shelter Cymru staff are available to advise on how to set up a local Citizen Panel. However, as a starting point you may wish to consider the following:

- It is important to maintain a rolling programme of recruitment, in recognition of the fact that Panel members will come and go. Numbers need to be replenished occasionally.

- In our experience, it can be beneficial to recruit not only from your own service users but also from other local sources, such as support services. This will ensure a wider base of experience for the Panel as well as making recruitment considerably easier.
- It is a good idea to develop a varied programme of activity in order to keep people interested and meet people's different preferences. Panel members need to have input into what the programme includes.
- Communication with the Panel needs to be through a range of channels. Shelter Cymru uses telephone, email, texting, social media and the post to communicate with people.
- While it is good to have a main point of contact for Panel members, it is also beneficial for Panel members to be able to develop relationships with several different members of staff from within the service. This gives Panel members a better 'feel' for the service as a whole and increases potential for meaningful engagement.

How to measure and evaluate the Standard

There are two aspects to evaluating the Standard – a process and impact evaluation:

- Process evaluation: measurement of your service's progress towards the successful implementation of the Standard.
- Impact evaluation: measurement of the outcomes of the Standard for service delivery and user satisfaction.

We recommend an annual process and impact evaluation of the Equal Ground Standard.

There is a steady move away from the extensive collection of performance indicator data towards a focus on outcomes such as customer satisfaction. We recommend that service user led evaluation is the most effective and efficient approach to both process and impact evaluation of the Standard.

Services should record and monitor several key performance indicators. Due to the individual nature of each service we do not think it is appropriate to identify the exact measures to collect for each service. Measures for your service will depend on what elements of the Standard are being currently implemented and what data you already collect as a service. The aim of the Standard is not to place a burden on already busy staff.

Examples of data your service might want to collect to demonstrate progress include:

- Changes made to front offices
- The accessibility of your service by looking at:
 - Customer addresses
 - Customer demographics
 - Customer protected characteristics
 - Languages requested by customers
 - Requests for support to access and engage in your service
 - Staff diversity

- Data from Service User Feedback forms (Appendix 2)
- Training courses attended by staff
- Complaints data
- Reduction in jargon
- Changes made to advertise and explain your service to service users
- How you are promoting the Standard (your website, displaying the pledges etc...)
- Referrals and signposting to other services
- Access to advocacy for service users
- Provisions to ensure that correct information is given to service users
- Reductions in successful appeals
- User involvement in the design and delivery of services
- Efficiency of processes – for example, waiting times, decision times etc.

However, the main source of evaluation of the Standard should be user-led. The evaluation should include qualitative elements such as:

- Focus groups and follow-up interviews with your service users, using trained Peer Research Officers to allow objectivity and ensure that service users are comfortable and open.
- Interviews with staff and wider stakeholders regarding the process and impact of the Standard.
- Mystery shopping of services by users.

The Shelter Cymru Take Notice Project will be available to support services to carry out evaluations of the Equal Ground Standard.

Services can choose to be evaluated directly by Take Notice project members, or alternatively services can receive training in order to carry out their own evaluation which may include elements such as mystery shopping, carried out by services' own users.

'I think mystery shops need to be done across the board.'

(Stakeholder)

For more information, or to make contact with the Take Notice Project, please contact:

Carey Hill, Take Notice Project Co-ordinator (South Wales)

careyh@sheltercymru.org.uk

Lucy Beavan, Take Notice Project Worker (North Wales)

lucyb@sheltercymru.org.uk

Appendix 1. The Equal Ground Standard

Key: ■ = short-term goal (up to one year) ■ = medium-term goal (up to three years) ■ = long-term goal (up to five years)

The outcomes

An open and welcoming office

Suggested examples of actions to achieve the outcome

Enough suitable chairs for everyone

Clean bins provided

Disability considerations clearly displayed - for example, accessibility, physical, visual, hearing impairments

Remove glass (or equivalent barrier) between staff and service user

Brightly painted

Decent sized tables and enough room for multiple people to complete their forms

A private room if needed, clearly advertised

We want to feel welcome

Ensure that the service is accessible to people in rural areas

We want the service to be accessible to all service users

Ensure that the service is accessible to those with protected characteristics

Ensure that the service is available to people whose first language is not English by providing a telephone (and ideally a face-to-face) translation service for service users. Also look at potential volunteer (eg law students) who could help out with other languages on site

Somebody to welcome and guide service users when they first approach the service

Ensure that there is an equality and diversity champion within your service but also ensure that all staff are trained in equality / diversity issues

Ensure all communication and language needs are met

Link in with outreach services for those with accessibility requirements

Language facilities need to be available and made clear

<p>We want to know about your services (and other support services)</p>	<p>Offer correct information on other services such as housing services, moving furniture, furniture recycling shops, mental health, substance misuse access to direct access hostels etc. Offer this verbally and also in written form. Service users would like to see a map of local services alongside a description of how each service can assist them</p> <p>Advertise your services widely including online and also via other means such as social media</p> <p>Consider not only the person's housing needs but also any additional support needs</p> <p>The advertisement of other related support services displayed in your office (including opening hours)</p> <p>Provide a resource pack of information in an accessible format about local organisations and services (to be viewed in the office area)</p>
<p>We want access to advocacy if we want it</p>	<p>Allow speedy access to a Shelter Cymru case worker (or other independent service) for independent legal advice</p> <p>Asked if they want to be accompanied by anybody – friend, family, advocate, support worker etc... (not just for legal representation but also because it might be helpful to remember what they have been told)</p> <p>Effective signposting to advocacy</p> <p>Having staff attend courses on:</p>
<p>We want to be spoken to with courtesy and respect</p>	<p>(i) Customer service training</p> <p>(ii) Training in dealing with vulnerable people who might be in distressed state</p> <p>(iii) Supporting additional support needs (such as literacy or numeracy difficulties)</p> <p>(iv) Training in mental health</p> <p>(v) Equality and diversity (including disability equality training)</p> <p>(vi) Domestic abuse training</p> <p>Allowing service users access to someone who has been through the homelessness system for moral support</p>

	<p>Senior Management to monitor the quality of frontline staff in terms of quality control of information provided. Senior staff to 'shadow' frontline workers on occasion to understand some of the challenges that frontline staff face.</p>
<p>We want to speak to knowledgeable staff</p>	<p>Visiting projects that help vulnerable people and speaking to service users is often a really good way of understanding some of the needs of vulnerable people/ those with chaotic lifestyles</p> <p>Staff attending courses on housing law and keeping up with current case law</p> <p>The use of Regional Collaborative Committees as part of new Supporting People Programme to get a regional approach</p>
<p>We want to see consistency of response across Wales</p>	<p>Compare your application process to other local authorities and services</p> <p>Ideally, service users to deal with one person throughout the process from the moment our case opens to closes</p>
<p>We want good information sharing between documents and, sometimes, organisations</p>	<p>Review policies and implement good internal information sharing systems (and enable the monitoring and measurement of the success of this)</p> <p>Review external processes – develop better processes for obtaining consent from service user for sharing information outside of the Local Authority</p>
<p>We want to know who we are speaking to</p>	<p>Staff to wear name badges</p>
<p>We want our communication needs met</p>	<p>Service users to be asked early in the process if they have any communication or language needs</p>
<p>We want to be communicated with clearly</p>	<p>Avoiding technical terms or jargon, but where it cannot be avoided, provide service users with a sheet detailing technical terms. Check the spelling of all template letters to ensure they are easy to understand</p> <p>Service users would like to be kept up-to-date on how their case is progressing</p> <p>Give service users (and their advocates) realistic expectations</p> <p>Provide a user-friendly flow-chart showing the 'system' in terms of the particular service. For example, provide a copy of the flow-chart included in the Code of Guidance</p> <p>Provide receipts for everything that the service user hands in</p>

	<p>Give people waiting at your service a realistic timescale of how long they have to wait before they get seen on the day</p>
<p>We want to see a transparent process</p>	<p>Provide service users with a copy of the questions they are to be asked and what information they are going to be expected to give</p> <p>Give a realistic picture of the outcome that the service user is likely to achieve at the service but ensure that this is coupled with a reassurance of further support to resolve the current issue. Ensure a positive way forward is defined</p> <p>Ensure information is given in a timely manner, when it counts and is helpful to the service user</p> <p>The distribution of the ‘information sheet’ or this information displayed on the wall. Should be given to, and explained verbally, to all (take into consideration literacy and sight issues).</p> <p>Ensure information is concise and informative</p>
<p>We want information given to us in a way that we understand</p>	<p>Give information both verbally and also in written form</p> <p>Ensure the service user has a choice regarding what format the information is given and it best meets the person's access requirements</p>
<p>We want to know our rights</p>	<p>Let services users know of their right to appeal via setting out the appeal process, and having it displayed clearly for service users</p> <p>Provide contact details with the frontline staff member for any follow-up enquiries</p>
<p>We want a clear statement regarding what the housing service provides</p>	<p>A code of standards that is offered to all people who present as homeless or for housing advice, explaining “this is what you can expect from me, this is what I expect from you,” this can be extended to what can be done for the client and what cannot, what the service needs from the client etc.</p>
<p>We want more joined up work</p>	<p>Link in with other internal departments and external agencies</p> <p>Cross-organisational training</p>
<p>We want good quality temporary accommodation (when needed)</p>	<p>Consider the suitability of accommodation offered to service users (e.g. Consider substance misuse needs)</p> <p>Ensure that temporary accommodation is suitable and of a good standard and is accessible for service users</p>

<p>We want more homelessness prevention</p>	<p>Start working with people earlier to prevent homelessness</p>
<p>We want a quick as possible decision time</p>	<p>Ensuring that written information on why decisions are made is presented clearly</p> <p>Review policies and streamline services so that decision times can be reduced as much as possible</p>
<p>We want to know that we have a choice whether to input into services and when</p>	<p>Clearly advertise in accessible formats service user involvement opportunities to service users</p> <p>Hold focus groups (and other means of communication) with your service users to find out how they would like to be involved in your service</p>
<p>We want a choice of how and when to input into service delivery and design</p>	<p>Give service users an opportunity to input in a number of ways such as documentation review, focus groups, mystery shopping, email communication, suggestion boxes in frontline offices etc...</p>
<p>We want to be reassured that our input is making a difference</p>	<p>Give feedback to service users on their involvement</p> <p>Demonstrate how input has made a difference</p>
<p>We want you to show your support to the Equal Ground Standard</p>	<p>Display the framework in the office in an accessible format</p> <p>Provide hard copies in reception</p> <p>Place the Equal Ground Standard on your website</p> <p>Ensure that the Equal Ground Standard is embedded in management and that there is a Equal Ground Standard champion within the organisation to lead and maintain the standard</p>

Appendix 2: Service User Feedback Form

Housing Service Feedback

In order for us to understand the effectiveness of our service we would appreciate it if you would complete this brief evaluation form which rates the service you have just received. All of your answers are strictly anonymous. Please speak to a member of staff if you would rather feed back your views via a different format.

Please read the statements below and indicate the extent to which you agree using the 5-point scale provided.

1 I was spoken to politely and respectfully by staff.

Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree
1	2	3	4	5

2 The information I was given by staff was clear.

Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree
1	2	3	4	5

3 I was informed about how I could get involved in improving the service.

Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree
1	2	3	4	5

4 I was advised where to go if I needed help with other matters the service could not help me with (leave blank if not applicable).

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	2	3	4	5

What service did you want from us? For example, how did you want us to help you?

What service did we actually give you? For example, how did we help or advise you?

Were you satisfied with how we helped or advised you?

Could our service be better? If so, how?

Thank you for taking the time to feedback your thoughts.

Optional section - leave out if service has no Citizen Panel.

We are always looking for people to help us improve our service. Our Citizen Panel is a group of service users who tell us how we can make changes to improve the service that people receive. If you think you might be interested in taking part please fill in your contact details and someone will be in touch to talk to you to talk further about it.



Local Housing Allowance rates – Gwynedd

The Local Housing Allowance or **LHA** that you will be paid depends on which LHA area you live in within Gwynedd, and the number of bedrooms that you, and everyone else who lives with you, need according to the rules.

These LHA areas are called Broad Rental Market Areas, [**BRMA**], and there are two BRMAs within Gwynedd from the 1st February 2010 onwards. These areas have been reviewed by The Rent Officer Service from the 1st February 2010, there were previously five BRMAs affecting Gwynedd.

The BRMAs in Wales have been established by The Rent Officer Service, which is part of the Welsh Assembly Government, and is totally independent of Gwynedd Council.

The LHA rates are provided yearly by The Rent Officer Service from 1 April 2012 and will be published on our website each time the rates are changed. ***The figures shown below for 1 April 2015 will remain in force until April 2016.***

To establish which bedroom rate applies to you, count each occupier once only and in the first group in which they appear below. One bedroom is allowed for:

- every adult couple
- any other adult aged 16 or over
- any two children of the same sex under the age of 16
- any two children regardless of sex under age 10
- any other child
- a bedroom used by a carer (or team of carers) who doesn't actually live in your home

These weekly rates apply from **1 April 2015**

Broad Rental Market Area (BRMAs)	The size of the accommodation required				
	1 Bedroom with shared facilities	1 Bedroom self contained	2 Bedrooms	3 Bedrooms	4 Bedrooms
North West Wales	58.11	71.41	91.43	110.41	133.32
South Gwynedd	56.00	66.31	84.21	97.81	113.92

Please note: that there is no 5 bedroom rate from 1 April 2011. See [Changes to Housing Benefits for Private Tenants - April 2011](#)

To find out which BRMA you reside in, see the map(s) on our website at www.gwynedd.gov.uk/ or make inquiries at any of our benefit offices.

Contact us if you think that your post code on any benefit letter or council tax bill from us is wrong as this could affect your Housing Benefit. There is no right of appeal against the BRMA or LHA rates used to calculate Housing Benefit, apart from those arising from errors.