

# Priorities of Homeless Service Users

## Scottish Housing Regulator

Final Report

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## Key Findings Summary

### Overall priorities

The research concludes that the overall priorities of homeless service users are:

- Quick and easy access – being able to see someone who can help, and not having the ‘trauma’ of a further long wait for assistance;
- Good customer service – to be treated with dignity and as an individual – every person is different and people are often very apprehensive and vulnerable;
- ‘Getting a roof over my head’ – sometimes this need is immediate and pressing while in other cases it is the source of anxiety, but not at crisis point yet;
- Good, pro-active, communication – through-out the process; from waiting times in the office to progress in applications and likely outcomes;
- Finding a safe and secure permanent home – one that meets individual needs. Most importantly it needs to be safe and secure, and in a location near to family/friendship networks, education, employment and transport;
- Ongoing support – to meet different needs at different stages of the homelessness experience.

### Access and customer service

- The research interviews suggest that it is important for homeless service users to be able to find homeless offices quickly and easily. In urban areas this means in a central location; in rural areas it means in local offices. Long waiting times can add to the anxiety of homelessness and, for many, the preference is to be offered an appointment rather than wait for a number of hours for an interview. Homeless people expect to be treated with same dignity and respect as any other service users would be offered.

### Prevention, information and advice

- Respondents exhibited a lack of awareness of local authority preventative and wider housing advice services, with the vast majority of service users approaching homeless services at or very near the point of crisis. Some of those interviewed would have appreciated advice earlier had they known it was available.

## Temporary accommodation

- In the opinion of service users, good temporary accommodation is safe and secure, in the right location (closely associated with safety and security, and proximity to support networks and school/work), clean, in good condition and can be heated affordably. Many people experienced this type of accommodation. A good proportion of the service users interviewed also needed or wanted support in their temporary accommodation. For working households it is important that temporary accommodation is affordable, but rent levels are usually very high and so, according to some service users, are '*designed for people on housing benefit*'. The cost of heating is also a problem for many people in temporary accommodation. The fear of some types of temporary accommodation is born out by some service users' experiences, associated with drug and alcohol misuse, violence and burglary. Some people prefer to remain in overcrowded situations with friends and family rather than to stay in these types of establishments.

## Permanent housing

- A successful housing outcome for the majority of service users interviewed was a social rented home (associated with security and affordability), located near support networks (family/friends), work (or opportunity for work) and school/nurseries, or away from negative experiences in their past. Service users know that in the long term, being in the wrong place will not work and so they will often defer their permanent rehousing by waiting for further social rented offers or appeal allocation decisions in order to get the right location. For a minority of service users their desire for a specific location, and/or quicker rehousing means they are willing to explore private rented housing. Apart from finding the right permanent home, getting settled is the next priority. Furnishing a home is part of this, with increasing numbers of homeless people having absolutely no furniture, white goods, soft furnishings or kitchenware when they are allocated their tenancy.

## Support

- The service users interviewed wanted support delivered in a variety of ways to meet different needs at different stages of the homelessness experience: whether to start dealing with complex health and emotional needs before contemplating what it takes to live in your own home; to learn the basics of home safety and security; to provide support in building and keeping a home; and finally, to have some on-going support, someone to talk to and give some guidance when people 'get stuck'.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

The Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) was established on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2008 to regulate Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) and the landlord, homelessness and factoring services of local authorities. In undertaking its regulatory function, the SHR's purpose is to:

- protect the interests of current and future tenants, and other service users;
- ensure the continuing provision of good quality social housing in terms of a decent home, good service, value for money and financial viability; and
- maintain the confidence of funders.

Understanding tenants' and other service users' priorities and experiences of the services they receive is fundamental to fulfilling this purpose.

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 is intended to modernise the regulation of social housing in Scotland. It does so by establishing the SHR as a regulator independent of Ministers. The Act also gives the SHR the statutory objective of safeguarding and promoting the interests of persons who are or may become: homeless; tenants of social landlords; or recipients of housing services from landlords.

The Scottish Government is currently developing the Scottish Social Housing Charter: it is planned that the Charter will be in place by April 2012, subject to Scottish Parliament approval. This will set outcomes which social landlords should aim to achieve. The SHR's role will be to monitor and assess landlord progress against the Charter and where necessary engage with landlords failing, or at risk of failing, to meet Charter outcomes. The Charter will become a significant element of the SHR's future regulatory approach and may be the trigger for much of the SHR future regulatory intervention.

Recent years have also seen changes in the scrutiny landscape in Scotland. The SHR has moved away from cyclical inspections to a risk-based approach, enabling the SHR to make tailored decisions about the level of regulatory engagement it needs to take with each landlord. For local authorities, this means a shift towards targeted scrutiny activity and directing all regulatory work through the shared risk assessment (SRA) process with other scrutiny bodies.

This means that the SHR's traditional approach to understanding and learning about service users' priorities is changing. Inspections have to date been its

principal means of engaging directly with homeless services users and understanding their experiences:

- through case reviews of landlord homelessness applications and outcomes;
- by shadowing homeless applicants when they are interviewed and assessed by local authorities;
- by visiting homelessness accommodation and talking to service users about their experiences; and
- by talking to any local groups who represent homeless service users.

However, in future inspections will become less common, and assessing performance against the Charter will be the main part of the SHR's regulatory focus on homelessness.

## **1.2 Aims and objectives of the research**

The overall aim of the research is to give a clear picture of the priorities of homeless service users across Scotland and across different client groups. The aim is to obtain a service user perspective on the services they receive and in particular to understand what they want and value from services. The purpose is not to describe previous outcomes and experiences, but to better understand what is important for homeless service users. The findings will inform the Regulator's approach to homelessness: it will be part of the evidence used when developing draft indicators for the Scottish Social Housing Charter for future consultation, and subsequently in monitoring individual organisations' performance against the Charter.

## **1.3 Methodology**

The research involved qualitative interviews with 81 homeless service users across four local authority areas in Scotland. To complement the information obtained directly from service users, interviews were also undertaken with four organisations that support and accommodate homeless service users in each of the local authority areas.

Local authorities were selected for the research on the basis of geography (urban/rural) and on homeless service performance indicators, with the aim of reaching service users with a range of different experiences, of different types of local authority and landlord services. The SHR approached a number of local authorities to participate, emphasising that the research was not part of any regulatory process and that the identity of the local authorities would be kept

confidential in reporting. The resulting four local authority areas included a mix of city, urban, rural and remote geographies.

The local authorities assisted the researchers by obtaining a random sample of service users willing to participate in the research. Detailed guidance was provided to local authority staff on how to approach service users, and the incentive of a £20 shopping voucher was offered to service users to participate.

A topic guide for the qualitative service user interviews was developed in consultation with the SHR. In-depth interviews lasting about 20-25 minutes were undertaken face-to-face or by telephone over a four week period between the end of January and end of February 2011.

#### **1.4 Profile of respondents**

Response to the research was very positive with a total of 81 interviews achieved (against a target of 80).

The split of interviews achieved by local authority areas was as follows:

- Local authority A – City: 20 interviews
- Local authority B – Urban (close proximity to a city): 23 interviews
- Local authority C – City with rural/remote hinterland: 18 interviews
- Local authority D – Rural: 20 interviews

A total of fourteen interviews have been achieved with organisations in the four local authority areas. The purpose of these interviews was to gain further insight into the priorities of service users, based on support workers' and landlords' experiences.

An important objective of the research was to capture the experiences of people at different stages of the homelessness process, i.e. those who have gone through the homelessness assessment process and those that have experienced a cross section of homeless accommodation and related services such as hostels, supported accommodation, day centres, information and advice services. The service user interviews achieved have been categorised as follows:

- Applicants or those seeking information and advice
- Emergency, short-term temporary / hostel accommodation residents
- Temporary accommodation / supported accommodation residents

- Permanent accommodation residents

In practice there is an overlap between short-term temporary residents/hostel residents and those living in longer term temporary accommodation/supported accommodation as some hostels also provide support and can be 'longer' term (e.g. over 12 months), and some temporary accommodation can be shorter term (less than six months) and unsupported. In some instances those interviewed preferred to remain temporarily housed with friends and family rather than moving into hostel or bed and breakfast accommodation, and so these are included in the applicant category. Table 1 below shows that a good spread of interviews were achieved at the different stages of homelessness experiences.

**Table 1: Service user interviews achieved by stage of homelessness**

<b>Stage of homelessness</b>	<b>No. of interviewees</b>
Applicants or those seeking information and advice	21
Short term temporary / hostel residents	9
Temporary / supported accommodation residents	30
Permanent accommodation residents	21

The main reason for the interviewees' homelessness is shown in Table A2 in Appendix 1. It shows that there is a broad correlation to Scotland's overall population of homeless applicants in 2009/10<sup>1</sup> although there is a greater proportion of respondents leaving secure accommodation and leaving prison/other institution and lower proportion of non-violent relationship breakdowns and 'being asked to leave'. The household type and age of the respondents is shown in Tables A3 and A4. Again there is a broad correlation to the Scottish homeless applicant population, but with a greater proportion of households with children. Over a quarter of the respondents had some previous experience of homelessness. It should be noted that a large proportion of the respondents were priority homeless service users, which will account for some of the differences in household profile when compared to the general population of Scottish homeless applicants.

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<sup>1</sup> Comparison made using Scottish Government Homelessness statistics: annual reference tables: 2009-10.

## 1.5 Structure of the draft final report

This report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 – sets out the findings of the research under the themes of access and customer service; prevention, information and advice; assessment; temporary accommodation; permanent accommodation; information and communication; support; and, looking to the future.
- Chapter 3 – provides conclusions with implications for the development of the Scottish Social Housing Standard.

## 2 Homeless service user priorities

### 2.1 Overall priorities

The research shows that the priorities of service users correspond to their current situation, and so priorities change as they move through their homelessness experience. A summary of the over-arching priorities follows the path people make through homelessness services:

- Access - being able to see someone who can help, and not having the 'trauma' of a further long wait for assistance;
- Customer service - to be treated with respect, as an individual – every person is different and people are often very apprehensive and vulnerable;
- 'Getting a roof over my head' – sometimes this need is immediate and pressing while in other cases it is the source of anxiety, but not at crisis point yet;
- Communication - good, pro-active communication through-out the process – from waiting times in the office to progress in applications and likely outcomes;
- A sustainable permanent housing outcome – one that meets individual needs – most importantly one that is safe and secure, and in a location near to family/friendship networks, education, employment and transport;
- Ongoing support – to meet different needs at different stages of the homelessness experience: whether to start dealing with complex health and emotional needs before contemplating what it takes to live in your own home; to learn the basics of home safety and security; to provide support in building and keeping home; and finally, to have some on-going support, someone to talk to and give some guidance when people 'get stuck'.

### 2.2 Access and customer service

The most important issue for the homeless interviewees, in accessing the service, is to find the homeless service offices quickly and easily – for most people this means the service being in a central location, or in more rural areas in a local office. Generally, respondents had no problems in finding and reaching offices. The most common way that people find out about the service is by phoning local authority main offices and being directed to the specialist teams. Sometimes this contact may have first involved making a general social housing application and being advised that they should contact the homeless service team due to their

circumstances. Other routes are through word of mouth, doctors, Citizen Advice Bureaux, solicitors, and local colleges. In rural areas, access is more difficult and can lead to some delays in getting an appointment, or requires travelling to get an earlier appointment. This was true in one rural local authority, where the main homeless office was over 40 miles from some parts of the authority. One respondent waited three weeks for the next local appointment which she felt added further anxiety to her situation, as she was approaching the end of her private let.

The majority of the respondents had approached the service at the point of crisis, or at the point of applying for social housing. Only a handful of those interviewed had approached the service for general housing information and advice service and very few knew that this broader advisory service existed before they had an interview. A number of respondents said they wished that had known about the advice service before crisis point, and thought they may have come earlier had they known about it.

There was an instance of a young single parent who approached the local housing department about 'how to get a house' but was not asked any questions to establish that she was vulnerable (aged 17, with a young baby) and inadequately housed (in overcrowded accommodation with her Mum). As it was, she was overwhelmed by the form to apply for housing, so opted for private renting instead, but this is not her preferred, long term option. Had her needs been better assessed in the first place, she may have accessed the homeless service and been guided through the best housing options available to her, at the right time.

The research has revealed that first impressions are very important to help put people at ease right from the start of the service experience. Many people were very nervous about approaching homeless services, especially those that had not previously experienced homelessness or a housing crisis. They were conscious of the stigma of homelessness, about what people may think of them and how they would be treated. On reaching offices, most were pleasantly surprised and thought the offices were well presented and clean, with adequate waiting facilities. This helped put people at ease. Private interview facilities and a discrete approach are also important for service users: all respondents had received private interviews but a few had experienced less than discrete conversations at reception desks which were not appreciated. In one area, there were no public toilet facilities in the homeless reception area. For those waiting for hours to see someone, often with small children, this was felt to be a poor level of service.

Interviews showed that the attitude and approach of staff is critical for homeless service users. The majority of respondents talked positively about being treated with dignity, and being made to feel that they 'were a real person' and 'normal'.

Others spoke about being treated with the utmost respect, with compassion and understanding of the difficult situation they were in. A significant minority of respondents had bad experiences at reception and at initial interviews – this involved staff being rude and discourteous, with ‘bad attitudes’ and ‘making me feeling like I’m a second class citizen’.

Service users are clear that the speed of service is important. Most service users also stated that they preferred interviews to be appointment based, and if this was not possible interviews should be offered quickly, especially for those with nowhere to stay that night. A common complaint is long waiting times, with some people waiting an hour or more, and in the very worst cases, waiting from morning until late afternoon for an interview. This long wait annoyed people, to the extent that some mentioned that it put the interview on the wrong footing once they eventually saw someone.

In some areas, respondents were seen by one named adviser who acted as their key contact throughout their case. This was welcomed, and associated with building up trust in someone and being given a consistent approach. In comparison, bad experiences were described as having up to three visits with three different officers, three different approaches and attitudes, and different advice each time. However, most service users are realistic and while the preference is to have continuity through one officer, service users also want to be able to get advice or an update, when they need it. One person gave an example of poor service where a homeless officer had been on annual leave and the service user had not been given the option to talk to someone else.

### **2.3 Out-of-hours services**

Very few of the respondents had experienced the out-of-hours services in their areas. Those that had said that the services provided all that they needed – they were straightforward, responsive and most importantly, helped in getting a roof over their head for that night. One respondent who had been experiencing violence and aggression from neighbours had found the out-of-hours service invaluable, offering practical advice about safety and security.

The research suggests that in some areas there may be a lack of ‘crisis’ accommodation, or at least a lack of awareness about crisis accommodation and out-of-hours services. A few service users had slept rough before visiting the homeless service the next day, having been unaware about any crisis accommodation or out-of-hours services.

### **Lorraine**

Lorraine is a single parent living in temporary accommodation. After her relationship broke down, she stayed with her Mum but they were very overcrowded, with her and her children alongside her Mum and younger siblings. When she initially approached the Council, her priority was to secure accommodation. She was told, after waiting 4 hours with her children in an office without a toilet, that there was no accommodation available. She even would have taken B&B, but there was nothing. She was advised to go back to her Mum or to friends.

After this, she decided to phone them regularly, which she thinks annoyed them a bit. She would phone every day and have to wait 3-4 hours to be called back.

She feels that the access to the service is poor. The alternative to waiting for hours is to try and get an appointment, which will be a 2-week wait.

Since being housed a few weeks previously, she has been 'just left to it' with no contact from a homeless officer or other support. She feels that it would be useful to get a phone call to see how you are, how you're coping and whether you need any help with anything. She needs to find a dentist and a nursery but she is new to the area, so would like help with this.

She thinks that the temporary accommodation is not affordable for single parents. She relies on bulk-buying to keep her food budget on track but the accommodation has no freezer. The heating is also very expensive - she is paying £40 a week to heat the property.

In the future, she would like 'a decent tenancy'. She has a friend who has recently been housed with her children in a really rough area, with heroin users injecting in the common areas. For this reason, she has been selective about where she will take a tenancy. Ideally, she would move away and make a new start but she doesn't have the money to do this.

### **Kate**

Kate initially contacted the housing service a couple of months ago to find out how to go about getting housing. She was given the mainstream registration form but the option of applying as homeless was not discussed, despite the fact that she was a 17-year old with a baby living in over-crowded accommodation at her Mum's property. She admits that she found the form very daunting, so didn't bother completing it.

She decided to approach a private landlord, who sign-posted her back to the homeless service to see about rent deposit schemes. She contacted them but was a little confused about the scheme, so ended up borrowing the deposit from her Mum instead.

Kate is now settled in her private rented tenancy and feels that it has been much quicker than waiting for a Council tenancy.

The Council did talk to her about accessing housing support - budgeting advice and a furniture scheme, so she benefited from a 'housing options' approach in this respect. She also has some contact with Social Work to make sure she is coping ok with the baby.

She is not planning on staying in the private rented sector but has not yet 'completely registered' with the Council. She admits that she still finds it a little difficult to understand.

She feels that she would have liked to have had more help. She would have liked the Council to have talked to her about what to do to get a social rented property and to have been more supportive.

## 2.4 Prevention, information and advice services

The research shows that very few service users approach homeless and housing advice services for prevention advice, and normally their main priority is getting some immediate accommodation, or assistance in finding longer-term accommodation. Few users have a 'prevention' option – they approach the homeless service due to a crisis; whether due to relationships breaking down, unaffordable accommodation, eviction or the tenancy ending, or are 'outstaying their welcome' with family or friends. Approaching the service is done as a 'last resort' or 'only option'.

Interviews revealed that some service users are not interested in preventative advice and wider housing options – they approach the service for temporary and permanent re-housing, and are usually only interested in the social rented sector. However, in a good proportion of cases, respondents appreciated the range of housing options advice that was provided (and in some cases advice on welfare benefits), even though their immediate priority was accommodation. Respondents found the advice useful and informative, and frequently commented that they had a more positive outlook on their housing options than they had before approaching the service. Often, information and advice works well after the initial interview. Once the service user is out of the crisis position then housing options can be more fully considered. One service user admitted that the initial interview was a 'fog' and he needed to now re-visit some of the advice and information he was given because 'it did not sink in at the time'.

The research suggests that there is a lack of awareness about wider preventative and advice services. There are instances of people falling into arrears or having disputes with landlords, but not knowing that the Council could help them negotiate with their landlord. In one instance, a man was evicted by his landlord after building up rent arrears, after being made redundant. In fact, had he approached the local authority earlier, he could have applied for Housing Benefit. However, since he had no knowledge of the benefits system, he was not aware of this.

The importance of mediation to prevent homelessness was mentioned by one support provider, suggesting that some young people would have appreciated this type of intervention had they known about it before they left home. Some respondents had experience of mediation with parents in the cases of very young service users (those aged 17-18 years old) being asked to leave home. This had had varying degrees of success but sometimes had delayed homelessness.

For service users experiencing repossession or eviction proceedings (whether from owner occupied or private rented housing), the biggest concern was what many called 'waiting in limbo' until their actual date of eviction. This was a

considerable frustration for many of those service users who had experienced eviction, who, although they had approached the council at the point of notice, were told to return two months later at the point of eviction at which point their temporary housing would be allocated. This worried many of the service users in this situation, who required more information to help them resolve their situation or more notice of where they were to be re-housed to enable planning for the move, and to familiarise themselves with their temporary location. This was particularly important for those with children at school and/or nursery.

The research demonstrates that a minority of service users are interested in the private rented sector as a permanent housing option and for these people the rent deposit or bond schemes are seen as a positive option to access the private rented sector (see 2.7 below). It is seen as a good way of bypassing the slow social housing allocation process, or providing a wider choice of area, particularly for those who want to live in specific areas for proximity to schools and/or work.

The majority of interviewees previously in custody found a visit from the homeless officer before leaving prison extremely helpful. They valued friendly but clear advice on exactly what they should do when released. This relieved many service users' anxiety about their immediate re-housing and future options.

#### **Rebecca**

Rebecca contacted the homeless service when she was given a notice to quit from her private landlord. This was the sixth time she had had to move in ten years living in the private rented sector. She has four children and has had enough moving around. *I never want to move again, I need to get somewhere settled for my children.* For that reason she is looking for a social rented home.

She knew about the service from her college course - so she knew what to do and what her options were. She found the assessment ok, and the service very good, but was very frustrated when she was told to come back in two months at her eviction date. This concerned her as she wanted to get things sorted for the children's school and would have no idea where they were going to be until they were all actually evicted. On her eviction date she was allocated a flat that was too small for the family and 20 miles away from school. After a month or so she was allocated a house, with a garden and drive within walking distance to the school. This temporary house is *perfect* and all she is hoping for now is that her permanent allocation is as good.

## **2.5**

## Assessment

The research shows that most people have a good experience of the assessment process – this requires the right attitude from interviewing staff (as discussed in 2.2 above), a clear and understandable interview with everything fully explained in plain language. The assistance in completing the assessment form was particularly welcomed by those with literacy problems.

Respondents suggested that a fast decision for temporary re-housing is the most critical aspect of the assessment process. In terms of formal decision letters, three to four weeks is thought to be reasonable by most service users, so long as their immediate housing situation has been resolved.

As discussed above, clarity and consistency in assessment and advice is very important to service users, with poor experiences involving a number of different visits and conflicting and confusing advice on the possible assessment outcome. Service users value on-going communication from homeless officers so that they know what is likely to happen next, what the likely timescales will be and reasons why key decisions are made. This all helps to manage expectations and relieve anxiety. This is true for those in immediate crisis, and those living in temporary accommodation and awaiting permanent re-housing decisions.

The research found two examples of poor practice in the assessment process involving women who were victims of domestic violence. For these women, the most important thing was to be taken seriously on the first instance they approached the homeless service, rather than being put at risk from further violence, or having to find their own temporary housing accommodation.

There were only a few examples of a homeless decision appeal, with one due to a non-priority decision, another because a woman was 'intentionally homeless' for leaving her property to flee domestic violence from her ex-partner and a third due to intentionality due to rent arrears. The first appeal on the non-priority decision took four weeks, which in the respondent's opinion was far too long, causing him considerable anxiety over that time. The second appeal was more protracted, taking four months to resolve and involving intervention from other agencies talking to the local authority on the applicant's behalf. The final appeal was ongoing, with three weeks having elapsed since the appeal was lodged. In the last case, the man who had been in rent arrears with his private rented tenancy would have been eligible for Housing Benefit, as he had become unemployed. In all cases, the priority for service users is to have a fast and fair decision so they can quickly plan their next course of action.

### **Valerie and Craig**

When Valerie first approached the homelessness service, she found them 'very unhelpful and inconsiderate'. *They should sympathise with people more. They should take time out to understand people. I know it is their job, and they deal with it every day, but you feel judged.* Valerie had a tenancy as a single parent and had a violent ex-partner, who was harassing her and her new partner. She had initially hoped for a management transfer but was advised to stay in the property, record all the incidents and have alarms installed.

Valerie decided to leave the property and was assessed as intentionally homeless for doing so. Her view was that she was not willing to wait for something to happen to her and her children.

At that stage, she was sign-posted to Women's Aid but not told about her right to an appeal. After months of engaging with an advocacy agency and her MP (*Everywhere I was turning to with the Council was a brick wall*), she and Craig were accepted as homeless and provided temporary accommodation. This is secure temporary accommodation with a warden and secure entry.

Initially, Valerie's priority was the safety of her family. When entering temporary accommodation, it is also important that it is clean, she thinks (which the temporary accommodation is). She feels the flat they are in is not ideal for families as it has an open plan living room/kitchen, with no scope to use a barrier to keep her baby son out of the kitchen. Valerie has worked with a housing support worker who previously helped her Mum, who was experiencing anti-social from neighbours. That woman has now left the Council so they don't have a support worker at the moment.

She would like to know how far along they are and when they may get a tenancy. She lost her job through her ex-partner harassing her and her workmates but cannot work until they leave the temporary accommodation, as it is too expensive without Housing Benefit. The Job Centre suggested they move to a B&B instead but she doesn't want the children there.

## David

David has been staying in B&B accommodation for about 4-5 weeks, after about a month staying with friends and then about a month staying in his car. He was trying to sort his accommodation out himself rather than 'going homeless' but the weather was starting to get too cold to keep sleeping in his car. David is aged 60 years old and was sleeping in his car in the freezing temperatures in the run-up to Christmas. A friend finally encouraged him to approach the homeless service.

The homeless assessment seemed ok but he was told they could not provide him with permanent accommodation. He was homeless after being evicted from a private rented property with rent arrears. He has appealed this decision and is awaiting the outcome of the appeal.

His first experience of temporary accommodation had been 'pretty terrible' as he was very far from friends so very isolated. He is now in B&B closer to friends so getting along better.

David has seasonable employment and was unemployed from December to July 2010. He tried to start paying back arrears once he was working again, trying to pay 2 months rent every two weeks but the landlord had already started eviction proceedings.

David has no experience with benefits, so did not know that he would have been eligible for Housing Benefit when he lost his job.

He has a homeless support worker who visits him once every two weeks. She has been helpful and encouraged him to approach his doctor for a supporting letter about his depression.

In future, David would just like his own place - something privately rented. However, he thinks there is nothing available for single people locally. He would like to have more information from the Council, to know how the appeal is going and when he might hear the result of this.

## 2.6 Temporary accommodation

### *Availability*

The research shows that the over-riding priority for the majority of service users is to obtain accommodation and quickly. Those people needing temporary accommodation immediately were usually provided with it that day, although there were instances of people waiting for temporary accommodation over a number of days. Some people who were looking for temporary accommodation were asked to 'try again tomorrow', so they could be waiting for hours each day, for a number of days in a row.

Occasionally people were offered accommodation in a different local authority area, which was usually not taken up, as they preferred to stay locally, or feared the accommodation being offered due to its poor reputation. In one rural area, there was felt to be a lack of crisis accommodation, with a few respondents referring to the fact that bed and breakfast (B&B) was not often used and that there was the lack of any 'walk-in' provision like a night shelter or hostel. There were instances of service users travelling to the nearest city (approximately 50 miles away) to use night services there.

## *Safety*

The interviews showed that a very important aspect of temporary accommodation is safety and security, to the extent that a significant proportion of homeless people will reject certain offers of accommodation if it is perceived or known from experience to be unsafe. For many young, often single service users their priority is to stay away from gang culture and exposure to drugs and alcohol, which may have been the reason they fell into homelessness in the first place. Service users with families define safety as being in the right type of area or environment where they feel comfortable for their children to live. In either case, safety and security is usually associated with living 'in a decent area', 'away from the wrong area' or somewhere with 'a secure entrance'. This means that homeless people are sometimes not willing to take the first emergency or temporary accommodation that comes available, and some prefer to live with friends or family, often in overcrowded conditions until the right offer is provided.

## *B&B experiences*

In one local authority, B&B use was still fairly common as there is a lack of other emergency accommodation, with no hostel provision at the time of interviewing. This meant that 'culturally' B&B accommodation was viewed as part of the homeless 'scene' in that local area, to the extent that a few respondents complained about a lack of B&B provision as well as the lack of hostels. One respondent bemoaned the fact that he wasn't able to find a B&B himself and have that funded by Housing Benefit.

In that area, B&B accommodation appeared to be used as an emergency or stop-gap measure, with people moving on to dispersed temporary accommodation as it became available. The experience of B&B provision was mixed, with the quality of accommodation being generally acceptable, although one interviewee did complain about her room's size, condition and cleanliness. A few respondents gave the feeling that the landlord or the landlady of the accommodation was very amenable and supportive. There were no reported instances of violence or aggression in those B&Bs.

However in comparison, these generally positive experiences may be compared with more negative ones in two other local authorities (one urban and one rural) where B&Bs are used as a last resort. Here the service user complaints were about condition of the property, the restricted type of living that the often small and sparsely furnished bedroom offered, the prevalence of drug and alcohol use, and lack of attention and support from the B&B employees or owners.

B&B accommodation was felt by service users to be less suitable for families. In one case, two parents and their teenage son were sharing a family room. The

mother had been a little uncomfortable about this as she felt that her son was too old to be sharing a room with her. Some B&Bs do provide more practical support to help residents. In one case, a family had access to fridge and microwave facilities so that they did not have to spend too much money on eating out. However, generally service users pointed out that the lack of cooking facilities makes eating on a very low income difficult while living in B&B accommodation. The lack of other household facilities – such as somewhere to wash and dry clothes – also makes it a difficult place to live for families. In one example, the need to wash large volumes of baby clothes made B&B accommodation impractical for mother and baby.

### *Hostels*

The research shows that some emergency hostel provision is less popular due to the relative cost – in one case food brought in by an outside agency could cost around £40 a week, which put some service users off that service. One respondent who was on a methadone programme pointed out the need to shoplift while staying there to make ends meet.

A few hostels that provide no or low levels of support are associated by service users with poor conditions, drugs and alcohol misuse, burglary, vandalism, bullying and assaults/muggings. In one hostel, renowned locally as a bad place to stay, a homeless person encountered a warden who was drunk on duty, which he reported to the Council. The hostel has since closed down.

The support offered in more formal 'hostel-type' emergency accommodation is mixed, with some very good experience with support/advocacy services in place, positive relationships with wardens/them going 'beyond the call of duty' but other examples of no support or sign-posting to services and very little social contact. One man had been in the hostel for three weeks and had not seen a key worker yet. He did admit that he had been in and out of prison on various charges so the hostel workers possibly did not expect him to stay.

Another hostel resident felt the relatively 'social' environment of his hostel was important, as many of the residents were ex-drug users who he felt needed social contact to prevent them from becoming depressed. Another respondent, in contrast, purposefully spent most time away from the hostel at friends to avoid the hostel. Keeping 'yourself to yourself' is a common 'survival' technique in these hostels.

Homeless applicants who have had repeated homeless experiences are more likely to have moved between numerous hostels and know which ones are better or worse. This means that some people avoiding drugs or alcohol avoid certain hostels. In some cases people who have no experience of hostels are still fearful

of the environment, told 'stories' from the experiences of friends or family or making connections between hostel living and some of the people they have seen in homeless offices – drug or alcohol users who come across as scary to people who have no experience of 'that sort of thing'.

The fear of emergency accommodation is born out by the experience of some service users. These places are in the minority but nevertheless are thought to be 'horrendous places to live'. A number of service users commented that 'recovering addicts would have no chance in those places' while others said they had started drug misuse in a hostel.

#### *Supported and dispersed temporary accommodation*

The research reveals a distinguishable difference between the experience of some of the poorer emergency/unsupported hostel type accommodation and the supported hostels/accommodation or mainstream scattered flats that are used for temporary accommodation. Most service users were very pleasantly surprised by the standard and cleanliness of the accommodation and furniture, and welcomed the inclusion of all the necessary small items e.g. kitchen utensils, towels, bed linen etc. However, there were also a few instances of faded/worn-out furnishings or mattresses that would benefit from replacement or having mattress covers added.

#### *Location*

The evidence demonstrates that the location of temporary accommodation is not only important to provide a safe environment. It is also important to ensure proximity to childcare, school, family support and work. In one rural area, the location of the temporary accommodation affected whether people accepted it, and across all areas some households preferred to stay with friends and family because they needed to stay in their preferred area. The worst case of discord (involving an ongoing attempted legal action) was due to repeated offers of temporary accommodation far from the 'host' community of one homeless applicant and his pregnant partner. Accepting the temporary accommodation available may mean being very far from work, family and friends and many applicants did this only as a last resort. Those with no choice but to take temporary accommodation away from family and friends and their familiar surroundings are often very isolated, depressed and negative. They are more likely to need a greater level of support.

#### *Property condition and heating*

The condition of temporary accommodation is also important to service users. Housing standards can be good and bad with around half of respondents saying

conditions were 'surprisingly good'. Where the standards were poor, this involved fungal spores, mould, poor heating, condensation and dampness, poor accessibility for wheelchair users, structural defects/damaged property as well as a lack of cleanliness. Some people were willing to put up with these issues in the hope for something better in their permanent home, while others have long-standing disputes with landlords over property condition.

The wheelchair users interviewed felt that it is important that they are allocated accessible temporary accommodation. One disabled service user lived in a first floor temporary flat for four weeks until a ground floor flat became available. During that time the only means of exit was by her son carrying her in her wheelchair downstairs. This situation worried and depressed her as she was unable to get out of the flat without assistance of others.

A particular area for concern for a good proportion of service users interviewed is heating – where it is inadequate and costly it has a very negative effect on service users' quality of life. Some respondents reported that the heating provided through electric storage heaters used in many temporary establishments could lead to electricity costs of £40-50 per week.

#### *Affordability*

A number of interviewees suggested that rent levels in temporary accommodation are not affordable for working service users. As one service user commented '*the system is not designed for people who are working – it only works for people on housing benefit*'. There were instances where mainstream tenancies had to be quickly found for use as temporary accommodation to make it affordable, or where large weekly service charges had to be removed to make the temporary accommodation feasible for one working family.

#### *Support*

The availability of support, whether provided through supported accommodation, or as visiting support was seen as vital by about half the service users interviewed. The priority for some service users is to stay away from aspects of their past that led them to homelessness in the first place, and for many they need and want fairly intense levels of support to achieve this, at least in the short-term. Other people want lower levels of support with someone visiting regularly to 'put them in the right direction', while a small proportion value an occasional visit, or just knowing they can 'pick up the telephone for a chat' to give them reassurance that they need.

One of the support providers noted that for many of his clients, the need for support was paramount, since without the support to tackle dependency issues

and the associated problems that entailed (loss of control of the property, anti-social behaviour by children, child neglect, rent arrears, etc.) the prospect of avoiding eviction or being able to manage a tenancy in future was remote.

### **Derek**

Derek and his partner are very annoyed and bitter about their experience. Although they now have a permanent tenancy, they are very negative about their experience and are considering legal action against the Council.

Their assessment was straight-forward but they were moved to unsafe temporary accommodation which was structurally unsound, resulting in an accident involving Derek's pregnant partner. They moved out of that property and stayed with friends on settees and floors, while the Council offered them what they believed to be unacceptable temporary accommodation, 60 miles from his pregnant partner's midwife/hospital service.

They reached a point where they had no money and nowhere to stay. He spent a fortune in mobile phone credit and was always being told his homeless support officer was on leave, at lunch or not in the office.

*The Council failed me and my partner. We needed help and we didn't get it*

After they got their tenancy, there was no ongoing support. The homeless support service helped with a grant and they had one visit but after that the weather was an issue or it was 'too far' to go.

Derek thinks that people need better quality temporary accommodation, there needs to be more temporary accommodation available, more contact from the service and more feed-back on complaints.

### **James**

James and his partner and baby are living in temporary accommodation. They have been living there for 8 months but have just got the keys for a permanent social tenancy. James left a previous tenancy with arrears caused by not claiming Housing Benefit. He is now paying those arrears off. He stayed with his mother for a while but approached the homelessness service when his partner became pregnant.

James had previous experience in a homeless hostel and so knew all about the homeless service. The current temporary accommodation is very different than the homeless hostel, where there were more drug users. The staff in the temporary accommodation are supportive and helpful - their treatment is more 'personal' than he experienced in the hostel or at the homeless service. They always address you by name, for instance.

James thinks it is important that homeless officers don't pre-judge applicants as they are not all 'down-and-outs'. *Treat every person differently. This is the first time they have done it and they are terrified. People have been in the job so long, they treat them like cattle.*

He valued the effort that the Homeless Officer made when he and his partner presented - it was quite clear that she was phoning around lots of places to try and get them accommodation. He felt that she was honest and up-front about what could be done.

He thinks the quality of the temporary accommodation is 'amazing'. It is a self-contained family flat within a block with controlled entry and wardens/CCTV. This means it is quiet and safe/secure.

The support on offer has also been 'amazing', with the temporary accommodation staff providing lots of information about services on offer. Support workers visit the accommodation weekly to see if any of the residents have anything they want help with.

James and his partner have the keys to a property and are waiting to move in. He admits to being happy but 'a wee bit scared' about the future. His main concern is the need to produce 'a houseful of stuff'. Help with that is now the main priority.

## 2.7 Permanent housing

The research shows that priorities of service users for permanent housing are broadly similar to those of temporary accommodation, but with the addition of tenure choice. Again, the over-riding concern is to get a permanent home as quickly as possible, but while a significant minority will take any house anywhere, a large proportion have one or two clear criteria that must be met.

Tenure choice is usually the first consideration in choosing a permanent home. For the majority of the homeless service users interviewed their tenure preference was the social rented sector and in fact, for a good proportion of these people it was more of a presumption or 'given' that they would be living in the social rented sector. The main reasons for this is security and stability, with a desire to have 'a home of my own', and 'knowing we don't have to move again'. This is particularly important for families who want to get the household settled and stable, without having to worry about a move in the near future. The other important aspect of social renting is affordability and this is important across all household types, for the employed and unemployed. For the majority of unemployed people interviewed there was a perception that private renting was unaffordable and usually not considered as an option. For those in (often low paid) work there was a belief that the only way that they could continue working was by living in the social rented sector as higher private rents would mean they would be better off reducing their hours or stopping work altogether, with a higher proportion or all of their rent paid through Local Housing Allowance (in other words, falling into the poverty trap). These people had a strong desire to keep working. A minority of people thought a council house was the best option because 'everything was done for you', including rent and repairs.

Based on the interview evidence, many people take social rented housing as the starting point, with the next most important criteria being location. The desire to be secure, get settled and avoid another move means that the choice of location is even more important in permanent housing than it is in temporary housing. The reasons are the same as for temporary housing: safety and security – being in a 'good' or 'decent' area, or away from the wrong area, proximity to family, friends, support networks, school and work (or opportunities for work).

Location was more important than tenure choice for a significant minority of service users interviewed, with people looking to the private rented sector to give greater choice of area. Speed of access to housing is also part of the decision to use the private rented sector, with people stating that they could access a private rented property in weeks or a month or two, rather than a year or more.

The rent guarantee or bond schemes are welcomed for those service users interested in the private rented sector, and one person saw this as providing something more reliable and permanent than the usual private rented sector. However, another service user had looked at five properties, all with an estate agent on the Council's rent deposit scheme list but none of the property owners would accept the scheme. The applicant felt that this showed a lack of transparency and a lack of communication. She had expected that if an estate agent were part of the scheme, any properties they had on their books would be eligible. She also felt that the homeless service did not have a good enough grasp of how well (or not) the deposit scheme worked in practice, as she was given no warning that some landlords/owners may not be interested even though the estate agent had 'signed-up' to the scheme. The number of agents involved in the scheme does not appear to be an adequate measure of the availability of properties.

Based on the four local authority areas involved in the research, the range of waiting times for permanent social rented accommodation varies hugely, from a few weeks to 18-24 months. Waiting times were not necessarily longer in rural areas, as might be expected: in fact, some of the rural respondents had some of the shortest waiting times. However, many respondents spoke about there being less choice in social rented properties and less offers in particular areas. Some respondents in urban and rural areas admitted that they were waiting longer because they were 'picky' on areas. Applicants are thinking about longer-term tenancy sustainment when they make bids or choose areas where they would consider an offer.

The research shows that generally people think it is reasonable to have only one or two offers of housing as long the policy is the same as applied for people on the general waiting list. However, in practice service users do refuse and appeal allocation decisions, usually on the grounds of location. Support workers of young and other vulnerable service users see the location of the permanent home as very important to avoid recurring crises and homelessness and so will encourage and support service users in the use of appeal systems to get the right location. As noted above, the experience is that access to private rented housing is much quicker and is preferred by some for this reason.

A few respondents admitted that the area that they have been housed was not their ideal area, but they were resolved to make an effort, usually making a trade-off between the property and the location, saying 'its fine when I'm in my flat' for example. One respondent was a bit wary that her teenage son may 'get in with a bad crowd' due to where they have been allocated a tenancy. However, she, like others, was pragmatic about her situation and the over-riding need for a stable home.

Interviews suggested that the condition and standard of permanent housing can be very good, but from the service users' experience it seems more often bad when compared to their temporary housing experience, especially in the local authority sector. Some are delighted with the condition of their new homes, while many are disappointed with poor conditions but do not have the option to reject what may be their only or last offer of housing. A good proportion of service users take a pragmatic, longer term view, waiting for planned improvement programmes that are promised when they view the property (particularly kitchens, bathrooms and heating), and 'making it their own' over time. However, for others the condition of property depresses them, particularly when they may have had a good experience in temporary accommodation. With no, or very little, means to improve the property and continual delays to improvement programmes, some people start wishing for a different home but know they have no chance of a move.

Heating is a particular problem with a notable proportion of people interviewed living in permanent local authority housing having very poor and expensive heating when they moved in. However, a number of these had since had replacement heating systems installed (either due to a planned improvement programme, or as a result of their complaints) and are now paying £10 per week for an effective heating system compared to £40 per week for an ineffective system.

Findings from the research show that having an accessible and suitably adapted home is vital to service users with physical disabilities. One very positive example was provided by a service user who was allocated an accessible housing association flat within three months, whereas a poor experience involved a disabled man still waiting to be housed in adapted or adaptable accommodation after 15 months. His property had a bath, which he could not use, but he accepted it because it was near his children.

Views of service users and service providers confirm that basic furniture and fittings are a necessity for all service users, and while some people do have their own furniture and white goods from their previous accommodation, many do not. According to landlords and support providers the proportion of service users with absolutely nothing is increasing. While Community Care Grants assist with furniture costs, a number of service users and support providers commented on

the length of time it takes to secure the grants (6 to 12 weeks) and the prevalence of loans now instead of grants.

Based on the areas involved in this research, local authorities do have second hand furniture schemes, but according to service users and providers there is a significant unmet need for basic furniture and white goods. Two landlords discussed the introduction of furnished lets funded through service charges and housing benefit to meet the increasing demand. In some areas, local authorities or voluntary agencies had developed 'starter packs' for vulnerable homeless households, including 'the basics' to enable people to start the tenancy. Depending on the area this included a microwave, kettle and toaster and bedding so that the tenant could at least live in the property and cook until they are able to get a cooker. In one area, tenants could be loaned 'emergency pack' items including a two-ring cooker and an inflatable bed.

#### **Jane**

Jane waited 4-5 weeks for a permanent tenancy, which she now occupies. She had to give up her previous tenancy after being attacked in her property by her ex-partner. After that attack she spent some time in hospital with mental health issues. She then moved to her Mum's with her baby daughter. Her homeless assessment was very straight-forward. Everything was explained very well and her homeless officer spoke to her over the phone regularly. She was offered B&B accommodation but decided to stay at her Mum's as she felt it would be awkward in a B&B with her baby, for washing clothes and so on. She has been in her permanent tenancy for about a month or so now and 'loves it'. She had most of her furniture and so on from her previous tenancy and got support in setting up things like the gas/electricity.

Her homeless support worker 'will be there for her, for as long as she needs her'. She thinks that she will maintain this support for a while.

## Lucy

Lucy became homeless following relationship breakdown. The house was in his name so she had no option but to leave. She had been staying with friends for about a month, and had never heard of any housing advice service before - then one her friends told her to try the council.

Lucy was very anxious about going to the homeless service, because of the stigma of homelessness and what she might find in the offices. But she was pleasantly surprised; the offices were clean, the people were polite and nice. Once they established she had no-where to go that night she was seen very quickly - much quicker than she thought she would.

The assessment interview was fine, and they took her through the options but didn't give her any false hopes of what she may be able to get either. Lucy was given temporary accommodation within 4 hours and left the office feeling a lot less anxious than when she arrived. Her temporary accommodation was a self contained flat and it just so happened that a flat was available in the area she wanted - that was important because she helped her brother with childcare, and she needed to be near her family for support.

The temporary flat was *basic, but fine, with all brand new sheets and kitchen equipment*. She was offered a permanent council place within a month again, much quicker than she thought and in the area she wanted. Private renting wasn't an option for her because she is a student and she wouldn't be able to afford the rents. She thinks it's a fantastic flat - it needed some repairs when she moved and a lot needed to be changed. She was shocked by the state of the kitchen: *it was literally only a sink*, but within a year had been renewed as they promised it would be. The heating still needs to be done but she was told that was in the programme. Overall, Lucy thought the service was great - courteous, quick and provided housing that was adequate and will get improved in time.

## 2.8 Information and communication

There are various points at which some respondents felt that the homeless service could communicate better with homeless service users. These are at various stages, when common 'unanswered questions' emerge:

- How long am I going to wait to see someone? As noted in 2.2 above, it is important for service users to know how long they will have wait and where possible to be given an appointment time for later that day. This avoids people being made to feel looked down on, like their time has no value.
- When will I get temporary accommodation? For those who want to access temporary accommodation but for whom there is none available, the constant visits and phone-calls can be exhausting, expensive and frustrating.<sup>2</sup> Information about crisis accommodation is also felt to be lacking, with some people sleeping rough due to lack of crisis housing options and information about what to do in a crisis situation.

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that local authorities have a duty to provide temporary accommodation when it is required

- What does my homeless status 'mean'? Some of the respondents interviewed were confused about how the system worked and why they had to wait so long to be housed. How does their number of points compare with the average number?
- How long will I wait for permanent housing? There is an acceptance that there is not enough social housing, particularly in the higher demand areas. However, there was still a concern among many applicants that they had been 'forgotten about'. Lots of applicants spend time chasing their homeless officers for information about their progress (or lack of it).
- What kind of help/support can I get? Some people do not feel that they are getting enough support, or all the support that they could be getting but are unsure of what help or support they could be getting.

The research shows that the period between applying as homeless and receiving word of a permanent tenancy is possibly the most fraught period, after the initial 'roof over my head' moment. This is eased where there is periodic contact initiated by the homeless support worker assigned to an applicant. This contact may be a 'catch-up' or might involve discussion of properties coming up, bidding strategies and so on.

## 2.9 Support

Around half of the respondents received and welcomed support while living in temporary accommodation and some wanted this to continue at least for a short time in permanent accommodation. The majority of those people receiving support were young people, service users with drug and alcohol, and those with mental health issues. For those with more complex needs, on-going support is absolutely vital and for some of these service users the thought of removal of this support is a frightening prospect.

The majority of the remaining half of service users interviewed said they were offered support, but didn't feel they needed it. Support providers suggest that many service users reject support when they actually need it if they are to sustain successful independence. Those that may be 'too independent' will seldom ask for help until crisis point.

The styles of support that the interviewees appreciate vary considerably according to individual needs which change over time: intensive supported accommodation; regular visiting support; occasional visiting support; an occasional phone call to 'catch up'; dropping into a centre; or participating in some group work.

A number of support providers and landlords mentioned that for those people that initially reject support, an offer of support a number of months into a temporary and permanent tenancy might avoid risk of tenancy failure or crisis later. Many of those without very complex needs still have emotional issues to contend with relating to the loss of homes and relationships. This means some people who are not 'classic' support cases may have lower level depression. Having a low level of ongoing contact can be useful to these people.

The type of support that people want and need varies by client group. For many people the first requirement is often to learn to 'manage the front door' for their own safety and security. This is a basic skill that is essential for vulnerable young people when they move away from the protection of supported accommodation and into permanent accommodation.

Another priority that support providers often see in their initial engagement with service users is the need to stop the vicious cycle of 'day=night and night=day', to get daily routines established, learning to keep a diary and so establish some of the basic skills required to move into education, training or work. Other issues which vulnerable young people, those with mental health issues and drug and alcohol abuse often have to deal with is complex emotional needs, dealing with self harm and rebuilding self confidence. It is only once these fundamental issues begin to be dealt with that people can start contemplating some of the more practical skills of how to run a home and keep a tenancy.

Many people also need and want support in their financial affairs – tackling debt, maximising welfare benefits and learning to budget. This is an area where many service users thought they had, or would benefit from support. Even older service users often felt they lacked the skills needed to manage their money well in the early days of a tenancy. A common issue for those applicants experiencing relationship breakdown is having a reduced household income combined with responsibility for budgeting, which may have been handled by their ex-partner before.

There are some positive examples of young parents living in supported accommodation specifically targeted for that client group. These service users were commonly anxious about the prospect of moving into a 'hostel', thinking it would be like other establishments with a poor reputation in the area. In fact their experience was positive, and a number of people particularly valued the 'early years' support provided before and after their baby was born.

Apart from those living in supported accommodation, there are examples of some younger single parents feeling that they may benefit from a bit more support, but not being offered it because of there was no clear 'child protection' issues. Those parents that have received support have valued it, especially when alone with

children for the first time after a separation or living with family. One young single parent in her 20s said “I expected more support. It was like – here’s your keys, here is this and here is that”. The Council had said someone would come and see her but no one had in the first two weeks. She felt that things could have been explained to her better and she was feeling very out of her depth, housed in a multi-storey flat with neighbours taking drugs and the police constantly at the door with warrants for the previous occupant. She says now that if she had known where she would end up, she would have begged her Mum to stay there.

#### **Michael**

Michael is a single man who has been living in a self contained temporary flat for four months. He has just been allocated and has accepted a permanent tenancy.

Michael originally approached the Council when he was in hostel accommodation - he had been moving from hostel to hostel which he felt were grim places to live. He had previously had his own home, *but I lost it and everything else in my life, because of drugs*. Michael’s previous employment left him with posttraumatic stress disorder, which he said, led him to drugs.

Michael was allocated temporary accommodation in a nice area which he knew was safe, and away from drug dealers. When it came to a permanent home he had to reject the first offer because it was near the drug dealers. *It’s like putting an alcoholic behind a bar - you can’t do it, you just send people back to what they are trying to get away from*.

Michael feels his support worker is *the best government worker ever - he gets things done and helped me every step of the way*. He let him know what was happening every time he had to wait for a decision and how long it was going to take. He has helped him with things over and above housing, like getting confidence to go and see the doctor. Michael sees his support worker every two weeks, and can call him any time for some extra help, which he often uses. He doesn’t think there is anything more he could do for him to make the service better.

Looking forward, Michael wants to get back into work, get his life back and start paying his own way. *I want to pay my own rent, pay my own bills and stop getting government help*. He thinks the service he has received from the Council all the way along has been fantastic.

## **2.10 Looking to the future**

The research shows that the vast majority of service users look forward to the prospect of a permanent home as a way of alleviating their current poor housing situation and to make other things in their life better. For those already housed most are happy with their home, or planning in a positive way to make it better.

*“The most important thing is getting a secure place. A decent house starts it all, it will improve a whole spectrum of things in our life”.*

*“We’re in a terrible situation. We need a secure place so we can get our stability back, especially for my son”.*

*“Now that we’ve got a house we need to get it in decent order”.*

*“The most important thing for me is to keep drug free. Housing is part of that, and I can only see it getting better now, now that I have got my house sorted out”.*

*“Finally I have got somewhere that is my own place – that’s a real luxury. It’s security, as long as I stick to the rules. That’s a nice thing to have when you’ve never had it before”.*

*“Now that I have my housing situation sorted its important to start looking for some work. I want to pay my own way, I want to start paying my own rent”.*

However, for a minority of people the future looked less positive. This was because they were unhappy with their permanent housing outcome, or because the prospect of permanent housing was a daunting or distant prospect.

*“It’s horrible. There is no way of getting things sorted and I have no money to sort it. They say “there’s you keys, see you later”, but I have no way of improving the place. I thought once I got the house things would get better, but it’s depressing me and it’s not what I want. But what choice have I got?”*

*“Happy, but a wee bit scared at the same time. We have to produce a houseful of stuff”*

*“I don’t want to even stay in (the area). I just don’t have the money to go elsewhere”*

*“There doesn’t seem to be much housing coming up. I have absolutely no idea how long it’s going to be”*

*It’s alright. But I have an ASBO now. I’m only allowed three people in the house, I need to limit the music and no-one is allowed in the hall-way. I seem to be getting on alright with the neighbours, now.*

*I’m quite scared. I suppose I’ll get used to it, being on my own, money-wise and everything. I’ve started saving.*

### **3 Conclusions**

The following conclusions draw out key findings from the research.

#### **3.1 Access and waiting times**

The research shows that homeless service users want and need easy and quick access to services: for urban areas this means a central, accessible location and for rural areas this means local offices. For all areas, there needs to be access to 'out of hours' emergency accommodation options. This all has marketing implications for homeless and housing advice services, ensuring it is continually reviewed, updated and monitored for effectiveness.

Long waiting times can add further trauma to a very difficult experience. A good proportion of service users need immediate access to temporary accommodation, while for others a satisfactory service at the beginning of the process means being given an appointment within a few days of the enquiry to help work out their best temporary and permanent accommodation requirements. Homeless service users should be given some options for interviews whether drop in, or appointment based to work around their commitments. Improvements in services may include the creation of other access options such as conducting initial interviews/pre-assessment by telephone.

#### **3.2 Customer service and communication**

Homeless people want to be treated like anyone else using a public service – with some dignity and respect. This means courtesy, privacy, good communication and responsiveness from staff to meet particular needs. This is particularly important in the delivery of homeless services due to the vulnerability of a large proportion of homeless people and to help people with the initial apprehension of dealing with what is generally a stigmatised experience. The research has shown that while the majority of service users are treated in the way they wish to be treated, some people do experience discrimination and bad staff attitudes, especially those with more chaotic lifestyles.

Communication is an area where there is clearly room for improvement. There should be proactive and on-going feedback on waiting times, progress of applications and likely housing outcomes and timescales. There is also some evidence that complaints and appeals from homeless people are not taken seriously, or not dealt with timeously. In summary – homeless people are entitled to receive good customer service, even though they may feel powerless and have very few choices to resolve their situation.

### **3.3 Prevention services**

There is a lack of awareness of prevention services, with many homeless service users wishing they had known about advisory services earlier. Many cases showed that had the person approached the service earlier then their homelessness would certainly have been prevented. There is a considerable marketing effort required on the part of local authorities to 'rebrand' their homeless services, to increase the emphasis on housing advice and homelessness prevention, and advertise their services more widely.

### **3.4 Temporary accommodation**

It is concluded from the research that in general, expectations of service users regarding temporary accommodation are met or exceeded. Good temporary accommodation is usually self-contained, clean, in good condition, in a safe and secure location, close to support networks, school and work, and can be heated affordably. However, there is a problem with the cost of temporary accommodation which does not meet the needs of working people: local authorities should provide a wider range of temporary housing options that meets their needs and encourages those looking for work to continue doing so.

The experience of some service users is that some of the poorer B&B/hostel accommodation has improved over the last five to ten years, but evidence suggests there is still scope to improve some remaining poor quality establishments. There is also clear evidence that temporary accommodation is sometimes not available for people when it is needed, despite local authorities' duty to provide temporary accommodation when it is required.

### **3.5 Letting sustainable permanent tenancies**

Successful housing outcomes for a large proportion of homeless service users are those where their home is located near support networks (family/friends), work (or opportunity for work) and school/nurseries, or away from negative experiences in their past. They know that in the long term, being in the wrong place will not work and so they will often defer their permanent rehousing by waiting for further social rented offers or appeal allocation decisions in order to get the right location. This has implications for local authorities and housing associations in considering how best to allocate housing for homeless people, considering their priority against others on the general housing register and at the same time contribute to the creation of mixed and sustainable communities.

For a minority of service users their desire for a specific location, and/or quicker rehousing means they are willing to explore private rented housing: in the context

of scarce resources this is an option for which homeless services should continue to develop access through rent deposit schemes.

Apart from finding the right permanent home, furnishing it is the next priority: there appears to be a growing number of homeless people moving into permanent housing with absolutely nothing, and with it a growing demand for furnished accommodation in the social rented sector to mirror the common convention in the private rented sector in Scotland.

### **3.6 Offering ongoing support**

The research has shown that different types of support are needed at different stages of the homelessness experience: whether to start dealing with complex health and emotional needs before even contemplating what it takes to live in your own home; to learn the basics of home safety and security; to provide support in building a home – finding furniture, decorating, paying bills and maximising benefits; and finally, to have some on-going support, someone to talk to and give some guidance when people ‘get stuck’.

One important finding is that it should not be assumed that someone who says ‘no’ to support initially might not need and/or want it later. A few good practice examples are systems to identify those tenants vulnerable to tenancy failure/recurring homelessness with mechanisms to engage with them regularly for some time after their tenancy has started. Ultimately the overall aim of housing support should be to provide a stable foundation to move on in life – to gain employment, ‘make a new start’, perhaps away from drugs and alcohol, to gain or regain independence.

## APPENDIX 1: PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

Table A2: Service users' main reason for homelessness

Reason for homelessness	No. (%) of interviewees	% of applicants in Scotland 2009/10
Termination of tenancy/mortgage due to rent arrears/ default on payments	5 (6%)	5%
Other action by landlord resulting in termination of tenancy	8 (10%)	7%
Applicant terminated secure accommodation	6 (7%)	1%
Loss of service / tied accommodation	-	1%
Discharge from prison / hospital / care / other institution	10 (12%)	5%
Emergency (fire, flood, storm, closing order)	3 (4%)	1%
Sale of matrimonial home	1 (1%)	1%
Other reason for loss of accommodation	-	5%
Dispute with household – violent and aggressive	9 (11%)	10%
Dispute with household / relationship breakdown: non violent	10 (12%)	19%
Fleeing non-domestic violence	6 (7%)	3%
Harassment	-	2%
Overcrowding	7 (9%)	2%
Asked to leave	16 (20%)	26%
Other reason for leaving accommodation/household	-	12%

Source: Service user interviews, and Scottish Government Homelessness statistics: annual reference tables: 2009-10, Table 22b

**Table A3: Household type of service users**

<b>Household type</b>	<b>No. (%) of interviewees</b>	<b>% of applicants in Scotland 2009/10</b>
Single person male	31 (38%)	41%
Single person female	8 (10%)	21%
Single parent male	1 (1%)	7%
Single parent female	25 (30%)	17%
Couple without children	3 (3%)	6%
Couple with children	12 (15%)	6%
Other household without children	-	1%
Other household with children	1 (1%)	1%

Source: Service user interviews, and Scottish Government Homelessness statistics: annual reference tables: 2009-10, Table 19b

**Table A4: Age of service users**

<b>Age</b>	<b>No. (%) of interviewees</b>	<b>% of applicants in Scotland 2009/10</b>
Under 18 years	5 (6%)	7
18-24 years	22 (27%)	29
25-retirement age	53 (65%)	61
Over retirement	1 (1%)	3

Source: Service user interviews, and Scottish Government Homelessness statistics - specific data provided by the Scottish Government.