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## **EVALUATION OF STEP BY STEP**

Final Report

for The Oak Foundation, Merthyr and the Valleys Mind and  
Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

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### PROJECT SUMMARY

Merthyr and the Valleys Mind (MatV Mind), working with Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council (RCT), was funded by the Oak Foundation to develop a responsive solution to the needs of single homeless people considered vulnerable due to their mental health and substance misuse needs in Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil – the Step by Step project. The project employs an advocacy approach to delivering services so that single homeless people can express their rights to achieve housing, health and vocational outcomes.

The project aims to bring lasting change to the lives of those considered vulnerable due their personal, social, health and housing circumstances. The advocate and support worker are working independently from the local authority's Housing Solutions Team, the NHS and vocational/training providers and remain objective in the interest of the beneficiary. They are proactively engaging and supporting those services who have a duty to work with and safeguard single homeless people, and to help them achieve sustained tenancies in suitable accommodation.

### METHODOLOGY

Working in partnership, the Welsh Institute for Health and Social Care, University of South Wales and Dr Peter Mackie from Cardiff University were approached to provide independent evaluation services to the project. Our role was to assess the impact and effectiveness of the Step by Step project in achieving positive outcomes for people accessing the service. The findings in the report below are drawn from two principal evaluation methods:

1. Inferential statistics have been used to analyse the large dataset of outcomes that the Step by Step project has collected on its service users. This included housing status, mental well-being outcomes using the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS),<sup>1</sup> and vocational/employment data. The housing status, mental well-being outcomes (using the WEMWBS score) and vocational/ employment status was completed by service users at their initial appointment with Step by Step, at two months follow-up, and again at the end of support (or four months from the initial appointment, whichever came earliest);
2. Qualitative perspectives of those involved in Step by Step were gathered throughout the project. These included 22 interviews with service users, with Step by Step staff and managers, with landlords, with local authority Housing Solutions staff and managers, and with letting agents. These interviews were semi-structured discussions focused on eliciting views about the development of the service, and the overall difference made and impact achieved.

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<sup>1</sup> The WEMWBS scale was developed to enable the monitoring of mental wellbeing in the general population and the evaluation of projects, programmes and policies which aim to improve mental wellbeing. WEMWBS is a 14 item scale with 5 response categories, summed to provide a single score ranging from 14-70. The items are all worded positively and cover both feeling and functioning aspects of mental wellbeing. More on WEMWBS can be found here: <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/med/research/platform/wemwbs/>

## **REPORT STRUCTURE**

This report contains four substantive sections. There follows an analysis of the data collected by Step by Step and compared to local authority data, and this is followed by two chapters reflecting on the interviews completed: one with the Step by Step clients, and a second with key informants. The report finishes with a concluding chapter which reflects across the different evaluation methods and identifies the key learning from the pilot project.

## 2. FINDINGS – SERVICE USER DATA

This chapter analyses the data that has been collated by Step by Step over the lifetime of the project, focusing on the housing, vocational and health outcomes of service users. It also compares it with data that which has been received from the RCT County Borough Council Housing Solutions team.

### SERVICE USER DEMOGRAPHICS

The evaluation team received a database of 308 clients who had accessed the Step by Step service between May 2016 and November 2017. Two cases were duplicate clients, leaving 306 cases for analysis. Of these, 74 were service users for whom an initial assessment by Step by Step had not been completed, and who therefore had not formally become Step by Step clients. 26 cases had been assessed and were still open to the service, eight were waiting to be assessed, and 21 were not assessed by Step by Step during a period of time when the service was at capacity. Seven people went into temporary accommodation before assessment.

The RCT Housing Solutions team provided a database of all single, non-priority need cases opened after 1st May 2016 and closed by the end of November 2017. WIHSC were able to match 105 clients between the housing team and Step by Step using telephone numbers. When duplicate client IDs were also removed, 811 unique cases were analysed.<sup>2</sup>

Table 1 presents the sample demographics for Step by Step cases and the Housing Solutions team cases.

**Table 1** · Sample Demographics

		Step By Step (n=306)	RCT Housing Solutions <sup>3</sup> (n=811)
<b>Age</b> (n=264)	16-17 years	0	6% (n=52)
	18-24 years	13% (n=35)	25% (n=201)
	25+ years	87% (n=229)	69% (n=558)
	Age (M/SD)	38 (12) years	
<b>Gender</b> (n=299)	Male	79% (n=241)	64% (n=518)
	Female	19% (n= 58)	36% (n=293)
<b>Ethnicity</b> (n=192)	White	98% (n=189)	
	BA	1% (n=2)	
	Other	0.5% (n=1)	
<b>Residential Area</b> (n=191)	Rhondda	47% (n=89)	
	Cynon	24% (n=45)	
	Taff	30% (n=57)	

<sup>2</sup> There could therefore be some Step by Step clients who are still analysed in the housing team data that we were not able to match using telephone numbers

<sup>3</sup> No comparisons available for ethnicity or residential area.

As seen, those who participated in Step by Step were primarily male (79%) and over 25 years of age (87%). Those accessing the housing solutions service were primarily male (64%) and over 25 years of age (69%). Further demographic details were available for those participating in the Step by Step program. Specifically, participants were primarily of a white ethnic background (98%), and were from the Rhondda area (47%). 40 (13%) beneficiaries were recorded to have a mental health issue.

## HOUSING OUTCOMES

For the following analysis, Step by Step cases which had not been assessed or were still open were removed. Therefore, 170 cases were used in the analysis. Table 2 depicts housing status outcomes for participants of Step-by-Step and those of RCT's Housing Solutions at initial appointment, and at the end of support.

**Table 2** · Initial and final housing status for Step by Step and Housing Solutions team clients

Housing Status	Step by Step (n=170)		RCT Housing Solutions (n=811)	
	Initial appointment	Final housing outcome	Initial appointment	Outcome at discharge of duty
At risk of homelessness	22% (n=37)	2% (n=4)	33% (n=265)	
Homeless	75% (n=127)	21% (n=36)	67% (n=546)	18% (n=144)
In suitable accommodation	3% (n=6)	60% (n=102)		52% (n=419)
Other <sup>4</sup>	-	16% (n=27)		28% (n=226)
Missing data	-	0.5% (n=1)		2% (n=22)

These data reflect positively on the work of the Step by Step team. As presented, at initial appointment a higher proportion of the service users of the Step by Step service were homeless (75%) than for the RCT Housing Solutions team (67%). For the RCT Housing Solutions team, one in three of their cases at initial appointment were at risk of homelessness, whereas for Step by Step this was a little over one in five people. The outcome at discharge of duty saw homeless rates fall to 18% of respondents for the RCT Housing Solutions team, whilst a greater proportion (21%) of Step by Step clients were recorded as homeless people.

Despite this difference in case mix, the Step by Step team were able to house proportionally more people in suitable accommodation (60%) than the RCT Housing Solutions team (52%). Significantly, the proportion of clients in the 'other' category was also lower in the Step by Step client group than the housing team data (16% vs 28%). It seems the Step by Step service has been more effective at reducing the number of people who withdraw from the service or fail to cooperate.

<sup>4</sup> Includes housing options of: assistance refused; non-cooperation; other reason; application withdrawn; and application withdrawn due to loss of contact.

Out of the 36 Step by Step clients whose final housing outcome was recorded as homeless, 20 were classified as 56 day expiry, one refused an offer of accommodation, and seven went into temporary accommodation and would be further supported through the hostel. All of those who were recorded as homeless at the point of the final housing outcome were recorded as homeless at the initial appointment. No clients who were at risk of homelessness at the initial appointment became homeless during their period of support from Step by Step.

Table 3 shows the proportion of Step by Step clients who found suitable accommodation at each time-point. 85% of those who found accommodation had done so after two months of support and the remaining nine clients who were housed in suitable accommodation had done so between two and four months of their initial appointment.

**Table 3** · Time taken for suitable accommodation to be found for Step by Step clients

Time when suitable accommodation found	Number of Step by Step clients (n=102)
In suitable accommodation at initial appointment	6% (n=6)
Between 0-2 months	85% (n=87)
Between 2 months and end of support (four months after initial appointment at the latest)	9% (n=9)

As shown in Table 4, housing assistance provided by the Step by Step program involved provision of housing information and advice to a majority of beneficiaries (98%). One in seven were helped to access temporary accommodation and 42% were assisted to apply for housing benefit.

**Table 4** · Housing assistance provided by the Step by Step program

Housing Data	Number of Step by Step clients (n=161)
Given housing advice	98% (n=158)
Helped to remain	14% (n=23)
Helped to secure alternative accommodation	52% (n=83)
Helped to access temporary accommodation	14% (n=23)
Assisted to apply for housing benefit	42% (n=67)

Data collected from Step by Step also reported that 26 individuals were successful in an application for a Welsh Government Discretionary Assistance Fund, and 41 individuals were successful in maximising their benefits.

## VOCATIONAL OUTCOMES

Data on the other key outcomes from Step by Step was more limited than that for the housing outcomes. In respect of vocational outcomes and as shown in Table 5, at the initial appointment around one in eight Step by Step clients were registered with an employment, training or volunteer provider, which increased to more than one in three by the end of the support provided.

**Table 5** · Vocational outcomes for Step by Step clients from initial appointment to final outcome

Vocational outcome	Step by Step clients (n=161)	
	Initial appointment	Final vocational outcome
Numbers registered with employment, training or volunteer opportunity provider	13% (n=21)	37% (n=59)

## HEALTH OUTCOMES

The majority of Step by Step clients (90%) were registered with a GP at initial appointment, and a further 9% were supported to change their GP when they moved accommodation. As shown in Table 6, some clients were referred to a variety of health services as part of the support from Step by Step.

**Table 6** · Health outcomes for Step by Step clients

Health outcome	Number of Step by Step clients (n=161)
Supported to gain a referral to Primary Care Mental Health Services	9% (n=15)
Engaged with Drug and Alcohol Single Point of Access	16% (n=25)
Commenced self-management course	8% (n=12)

In addition to these outcomes, WEMWBS scores were collected from clients across three different time points during the support they received from Step by Step.

Inspection of these data shows that the mean WEMWBS scores increased over time, from 32.09 at initial appointment to 44.73 at the two months follow up point, with a further increase to 46.12 at the end of support. This is a positive upwards trend across the time that clients were supported by Step by Step.

To put these numbers in context, the 2016/17 National Survey for Wales (with a sample size of n=8,684) showed a mean WEMWBS score for the general Welsh population of 50.9; a mean score of 49.3 for those living in the most deprived areas in Wales; and a mean score of 48.5 for those who are unemployed or economically inactive in Wales.



**Table 7** · Mean Step By Step client WEMWBS scores over time

	<b>Timepoint 1</b> Initial appointment (n=157)	<b>Timepoint 2</b> Two month follow up (n=126)	<b>Timepoint 3</b> End of support (or four months) (n=83)
Mean WEMWBS Score	32.09	44.73	46.12

Analysis (using Friedman’s Test) indicates that these differences over the three time points are statistically significant.<sup>5</sup> Whilst there were no significant differences between the Timepoint 2 and Timepoint 3 WEMWBS scores ( $p = .034$ ), there were statistically significant increases in WEMWBS scores from Timepoint 1 to Timepoint 2 ( $p = 0.00$ ) and from Timepoint 1 to Timepoint 3 ( $p = 0.00$ ).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Friedman’s Test  $\chi^2(2) = 88.54$ ,  $p = 0.00$ . Post hoc analysis with Wilcoxon signed-rank tests was conducted with a Bonferroni correction applied, resulting in a significance level set at  $p < 0.017$ .

<sup>6</sup> It was the original intention of the evaluation team to collect Timepoint 4 WEMWBS and housing outcome data, nine months after the initial appointment in order to consider the longer-term impacts of the Step by Step service. In practice however it proved very difficult to reach this client group over the telephone. A very small number of clients were reached and WEMWBS scores collected, but these have to be discarded due to the limited sample size.

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### 3. INTERVIEWS WITH STEP BY STEP CLIENTS

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The following chapter represents the key themes that have emerged from interviews with 12 Step by Step clients.

#### FINDING OUT ABOUT STEP BY STEP

Interviewees found out about and were referred to Step by Step in a variety of ways. Four interviewees were referred to the Step by Step Program through the housing solutions team. One participant clearly described the process: *“When I went to the Council office one of the council guys said he should pass me on to the Step by Step programme”*. The process of referral was immediate: *“Basically there were people in the office that day that could help me”*. Other sources of referral were Shelter Cymru, Job Centre, and Cruise Bereavement service. Some of the interviewees were unclear about how they had come into contact with Step by Step as they had been supported by a variety of agencies in relation to their housing, employment and other needs.

#### FACING ADVERSITY

Many clients agreed to have help from Step by Step as they were facing homelessness due to a variety of adverse circumstances including bereavement, mental health issues, financial difficulties, loss of employment, increasing rent and relationship breakdowns. As demonstrated in the following quotes, some individuals struggle to cope with these events due to a lack of available support:

*“I think I was suffering with depression due to the bereavement of the wife. At that time I was living alone in the house and my mortgage and one thing and another....my finances went to pot because of the bereavement. The house was repossessed.”*

*“I was living in a bedsit and the Landlord took out this thing on the bedsit. What it was the students were coming and he wanted me out. So I went to Housing Solutions and they said I had 28 days to get out of there. I went out one day and he put the latch on so I couldn't get back in there so I had to arrange with them then to get my stuff out of there and that's how I got involved with Step by Step then....”*

The interviews demonstrated that many of the clients did not know who would be able to support them with their impending homelessness and had a degree of doubt in the ability of local services to be able to help them.

*“I didn't know where you go to or who to go to. Once I got in touch with the Council [Step by Step] got involved with me and that was that.”*

*“The last flat I had with the Council was repossessed and I had debt with the flat and the Council said no we can't help you, you got outstanding debt. So basically you're just a step away from living on the streets then. [I agreed to have help] because I had nothing at all. I was going to be homeless.”*

*“I've got no family support and I'd split up with my ex-girlfriend at the time. I'd been homeless for 6 months or more just living on sofas here and there of friends and family and I had to bite the bullet and I went down to see.”*

One participant described how they refused the help from Step by Step because they felt that there would be time constraints on the service:

*“Well I was facing homelessness but then I just realised there was no way anyone was going to help me in time.... I had to make decisions to help myself because there was no way that the housing people were going to get around to it in time were they and I could sort it out myself....”*

However, many other interviewees stated that their housing problems were resolved quickly by the Step by Step team: *“I got a number and passed it on to them and I was in my flat a month later”*

## **IMPACT UPON HOUSING STATUS**

Most of the clients who took part in an interview were successful in finding privately rented housing with support by the Step by Step service. Participants described how Step by Step assisted them with finding privately rented housing. One interviewee reported that there were three agencies involved in finding him suitable accommodation, which demonstrates the importance of joined up working between different organisations:

*“They helped me with finding housing.....there were three lots involved: Step by Step, Shelter Cymru and there was another one....Rhondda Cynon Taff Housing I think it was.... All in all though it’s all worked. Between everyone it did work.”*

Some of the individuals who were interviewed had previously been offered housing in a location which was not practical or desirable for them. These interviews highlight the importance to service users of living close to family and friends and being close to where they had lived previously. Many reported not having access to a car or lack of public transport and would rather delay being housed in suitable accommodation than live too far away from their social networks.

*“I got my own place [now]. They offered me one in [place] which I turned down because I don’t drive and then they offered me one in [place] which is easier for me because it’s just a train ride down – my family live in [place] see.”*

*“I’ve got a three year old son. They could have housed me straight away in [place] or [place]...I’d rather hold out and have something closer to my son. I couldn’t have gone further than [place] because it would have been too awkward to get back and fore with my son.”*

One client also commented that he was looking to move because the accommodation that he found himself was too far away from his family: *“I’m isolated from my family and the area as well I’m not too fussed on.”* In addition to securing housing, the Step by Step team also assisted clients with getting furniture for their accommodation and in setting up payments for bills and council tax:

*“The flat came with carpet but didn’t have no furniture in it so he took me to ‘Too Good To Waste’ to get my settee and wardrobes and that. He was very helpful”*

*“He helped me out a lot. He sorted my TV licence, my gas and electric.”*

In this way the Step by Step team were providing a more holistic service than simply securing accommodation for their clients. For example, one client described how Step by Step staff came with him to meetings with the housing board: *“They got me a cooker, a fridge, bed, towels... [Step by Step] have been a god send. I went to the board and [Step by Step] came with me. I broke down. I told them my story.”*

Participants also described how Step by Step assisted them with pre-existing health conditions: *"[Step by Step] said I need long term support because of my mental health and that's why I'm going to the psychiatrist now and hopefully the psychiatrist can get me support."*

They further were offered help with training and employment: *"[Step by Step helped with] filling forms in, took me up the hospital, showed me this place. He used to take me to Ponty library for a course to try and get back into work. I tried to go every week, sometimes I couldn't"*

However, the majority of participants were not able to work due to varying health conditions. As described by one individual: *"I'm a HGV driver by trade....I couldn't go back driving anyway. My mental state wouldn't allow me to do that."* A couple of interviewees also stated that they refused the assistance offered by Step by Step in terms of their education, training or employment: *"He offered me courses and things like that but I didn't want to do it at the time. It's hard to explain"*

Interestingly, one individual who was able to work, described some challenges which they faced: *"I find it quite hard the job searching every day basically. If I had a job everything would be sweet but I'm struggling I am to be honest, but so is everybody else."* Notably, they were not having any employment support from Step by Step.

## **SUPPORTIVE AND ACCESSIBLE**

Service users were very positive about the support received from the Step by Step caseworkers in terms of their housing needs:

*"Very good, very good..... I couldn't fault them at all. There was no hassle nothing – lovely."*

*"The [case worker] is brilliant. They helped me out a lot."*

One client also commented that the support from Step by Step increased his confidence to liaise with housing organisations and letting agencies: *"They just gave me confidence to prove that I could get the place. The [case worker] stood next to me and made me feel comfortable."* Many acknowledged that without the support from Step by Step they would not have successfully secured their accommodation and may have become homeless or remained homeless for longer: *"I wouldn't have a roof over my head now if it wasn't for them basically.... I can't praise them enough because if it wasn't for them I probably would be on the streets of Cardiff or whatever. You felt like [the case worker] couldn't bend over enough backwards to help you and I really appreciated that at the time. I did say a massive thank you to [the case worker]. [The case worker] was really really good. Marvellous."*

As such, they praised the staff and were grateful for the assistance they had received. There were mixed opinions about how accessible the Step by Step service was. On one hand, many interviewees stated that they felt that they could contact the staff from Step by Step at any time, even after their service had ended as their housing was secured:

*"Once I was in the flat [Step by Step] job was done. He said I can't leave you like this, I'll still be in touch, and he has been....I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for [Step by Step]"*

Similarly, another client felt that the service was accessible and that he could contact Step by Step again in the future if needed: *"If I need it I can always ring them"*

However as the following quote demonstrates, one participant was unaware that the service had ended: *"I had no letter to say you are on your own type of thing. Nothing at all that was the bit... I don't understand that part."*

The first time this service user became aware that the service had ended was when he sent a text message to the case worker and received no reply. As such, this could be an area for improvement. In contrast, one individual said that he was well informed in advance of the service ending as he was becoming more independent: *“They could see I was beginning to sort myself out and then it would stop. Then they said they would finish it in a short period of time.”*

When asked if they would recommend the Step by Step service to others, all of the interviewees said that they would, which suggests the service is valued by those in need of housing support and advice: *“I said ask to speak to someone from Mind because they are the people that got me my flat, so I’ve recommended to a friend already.”*

## **SUMMARY**

The clients that took part in an interview were mostly facing homelessness when they came into contact with Step by Step. The Step by Step team were widely praised for quickly assisting clients to secure accommodation, and the extra support in accessing furniture, helping with form filling, household bills, and support with health care was valued by participants.

Whilst support with education, training and employment needs was offered, many clients did not accept it. For some, their health status meant that employment was not viable. Many of those interviewed did not know where to go for support with their housing issues and were grateful for the support of the Step by Step staff. A few individuals reported difficulties getting responses from staff and uncertainty over the end of the support, which may be due to capacity within the team.

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## 4. KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

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As established above, the project has enjoyed success, with many people supported to achieve sustainable housing outcomes who would otherwise be left with nothing. The fact that people are more engaged with Step by Step than would have been previously is a huge positive, and a vote of confidence in the vision behind the model. The following themes emerged from interviews with 10 key informants – whether Step by Step managers and staff, local authority staff, landlords, or letting agents – all of whom we questioned about the processes involved in the development of the service, the impacts of the service and the implications for the future of Step by Step.

### PROJECT PROCESSES

#### THE INTEGRATION OF STEP BY STEP

Key informants from the local authority and the Step by Step team were asked to reflect on the extent to which Step by Step was integrated with local authority homelessness services. During the interim evaluation we found inconsistencies in levels of referrals to Step by Step by local authority Housing Solutions officers and difficulties with the referral process. The situation has changed significantly, with all key informants claiming that the service is now fully integrated, with all ‘non priority’ single homeless people who are in need of support being referred on.

*“I think initially there was a kind of confusion and initially Housing Solutions didn’t know the role but when they knew it’d help the referrals increased.”*

Significantly, the successes of Step by Step documented in the interim evaluation spurred the local authority to commission a similar supportive service for single people in priority need. Hence, in RCT there is now a support service available to all single people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. While there are inevitably cases where there is some uncertainty about the appropriate service to refer into, in the vast majority of cases it seems Housing Solutions officers have a firm idea of which of the three support services to refer into: Step by Step (non-priority), HIP (priority), Gofal (significant mental health issue).

*“HIP was inspired by Step by Step. I think we always knew key working would be good but didn’t know quite how good it would be.”*

*“There’re always one or two referrals that wrongly go to Gofal or Step by Step but generally the team are good at identifying the appropriate service. There have only been one-two cases where Gofal handed a person back to Step by Step.”*

From the point of view of the Step by Step staff, the co-location of a third sector organisation with a statutory agency has allowed for the partnership to flourish. Having good lines of communication with the RCT Housing Solutions team and developing relationships and building respect for each other’s roles has happened naturally as a result of working closely together. The service clearly represents additional resource and capacity which has been important in developing trusting relationships between Step by Step and Housing Solutions. In this regard, the Step by Step staff used soft skills to make connections between themselves as ‘outsiders’ and the local authority team:

*“A big part of it is that we don’t challenge very often. If we were in there three or four times a day challenging every little bit it would be quite shut down and I suppose part of it is doing ‘favours’, not*

*literally but supporting each other where we can. That means that when we do challenge...it's listened to. It is a relationship where you can go in and have those conversations."*

The notion of having challenging conversations in a constructive and positive way has underpinned the success of the relationship. It has allowed for trust, understanding, clarity and respect to build on both sides, and ultimately has contributed to convincing the local authority of the value that the Step by Step service brings. The softer approach has certainly been successful.

## REFERRALS

The referral process is described by key informants as straightforward, with the initial assessment undertaken by Housing Solutions officers, who also develop a personal plan with the individual. A referral is then made to the Step by Step team. There have been changes to the detail of this process throughout the life of the project. In the interim evaluation we found that the Step by Step team were generally able to see individuals on the same day and this was felt to be key to retention of people within the service. However, key informants explained that currently a member of the step by Step team will try to meet the individual on the same day to make face-to-face contact but the formal support appointment will be scheduled for the following Thursday. It seems the decision to have all initial Step by Step support appointments on a Thursday is driven by room capacity issues resulting from the move to the One4All advice centre. Key informants continued to highlight the importance of some form of contact with the step by Step team on the day of the initial application and questions were raised about the potential detrimental impacts of waiting up to a week for a support appointment.

*"Someone comes in and we do the initial assessment to establish if they are homeless or at risk of homelessness. We try to identify if they are priority need or not. If they're non priority it's just a case of completing the WEMWBS form and emailing the team (Step by Step) and they come down and have a chat. We do the personal plan."*

*"The process and identifying people is straight forward... We (Housing Solutions) email through the WEBWMS form and Lwys undertakes assessments on a weekly basis."*

*"They are flexible – if someone is downstairs they often do an assessment there and then. I think a week long wait is a long time – we used to do it there and then but we only have 4 rooms available to our service. The physical space is a limit. A week is a long wait."*

## CAPACITY

In the interim evaluation we pointed towards emerging capacity issues. It seems the project did indeed hit capacity on two occasions, causing the project to stop taking referrals for short periods of time. In many ways, the service was a victim of its own success in that: *"generally nobody has said no to our service."* There was a perception that establishing a single day each week for support appointments has assisted the Step by Step team to manage their workloads more efficiently.

*"It (Step by Step) shut down for maybe a week just to clear things up but that's ironed out since we now refer on a specific date and time – before we weren't giving people specific times and there were too many people."*

In practical terms, this is a function of two issues intersecting – the size of the caseload that Step by Step carries, and the length of time for which they support different individuals. Staff reflected that they have had to be more rigid and a bit more realistic about what they can do and how far they can carry people. When the waiting time was just a few weeks things were easier, but as these waiting times have grown,

and cases can be 'on the books' for longer, people can become a little stuck in the service. In part this has required a degree of recalibration away from being 'too kind' to having a much firmer view of the appropriate form of support that is needed: *"we needed to tighten things up because we were undoing ourselves especially around that point when we were getting close to capacity."*

In response, Step by Step established a maximum caseload of 30 individuals at any one time for the 2.0 WTE staff – i.e. a notional caseload of 15 per WTE staff member. If they reach the limit of 30 active cases (which happened once in Spring 2017), they close down for a short time to clear the backlog. The typical caseload is around 25. In talking about this issue, it is clear that Step by Step feel that they are carrying quite a high caseload, especially when compared to some other comparable services who cap at around 10 per WTE staff member. There was a recognition however that some of the people coming through are quick and just have very basic housing needs and they are not on the books for long. The amount of time available does dictate what level of support can be offered, and managing a complex caseload has been (and continues to be) one of the ongoing challenges for the service.

## **PROJECT IMPACTS**

Key informant interviewees unanimously agreed that Step by Step has improved the housing outcomes for non-priority need homeless single people in the borough. They echo the quantitative findings from our analysis of administrative data. Key informants pointed towards two reasons behind the positive housing outcomes: 1] excellent liaison between Step by Step and private landlords, and 2] a very effective single point of support for homeless individuals.

### **LIAISON WITH LANDLORDS AND LETTING AGENTS**

Key informant interviewees reiterated findings of the interim evaluation that the Step by Step team has very effectively engaged local landlords and lettings agents and these relationships have been managed well and trust has been built. The primary outcome is a sufficient supply of suitable housing for the single people being assisted. This new supply of accommodation was described as 'changing the game' by one key informant. Step by Step has managed to engage and gain access to landlords that the local authority has not previously engaged. It was claimed landlords are now approaching the Step by Step team to seek tenants. The key factors here are the proactive work done to meet with landlords and then the hand-holding of new tenants, including form filling, income maximisation and accompanying them to interviews with landlords.

*"What they've done in the PRS has changed the game. We had always struggled to find PRS housing but they (Step by Step) actually meet landlords. They know the clients better and it has opened up so much more PRS."*

*"The big impact for us is their (Step by Step) work in identifying accommodation options. Lwys and Stewart have been really proactive at getting landlords on board – some who have been reluctant to get on board in the past. Since they have gone out to landlords, there has been trust developed. Now, if we have someone street homeless an email is often enough from us – it is having a positive impact."*

From the perspective of letting agents, Step by Step have done a very good job of breaking down some previously entrenched barriers to accessing the private rented sector. The scale of the challenge was not lost on the staff who did not think at the outset of the programme that they would be able to place people into the private rented sector at all. Part of the reason for this success has been challenges to



some of the stereotypes associated with the Step by Step client group. Previous experience from letting agents has meant that homeless people have been perceived as a problem. Some of the identified barriers related to the fact that many people hold preconceived ideas about homelessness which are not right. Working with Step by Step however has brought about a change in that mindset such that where people might have thought there would have been problems and issues, *“we haven’t had any, which isn’t what we expected.”* Crucial to this process of changing minds have been the security of the first couple of tenants that have been placed in the private rented sector, and the professional role that Step by Step has played in support of its clients:

*“We did a trial and made sure that this worked before we took on lots of people. The first one has been a secure tenant for years so we had no problems in deciding to work with their other clients. This confidence has been built on the basis that Step by Step clients have had to show willing to Step by Step first, it means that people are in a good place and they want to be housed permanently. Having to keep engaged with Step by Step means that by the time they are ready to be housed, they are really ready to be housed. It’s been a very positive experience and they’re really efficient – and it’s quite nice to be chased up by someone rather than us doing the chasing. They’re completely on the ball.”*

This view was mirrored by Step by Step staff who described how they have been challenging and fighting with barriers and that this has been an area of success. They noted that they now have landlords and letting agents that will come to them first when they have got a property available before they go anywhere else, because they know that the Step by Step team will support their clients through the early stages of the tenancy: *“Because that’s the important thing. It is about finding people homes but it’s not about just throwing them in and saying crack on. Because there is a reason why they’ve become homeless and you’ve got to dig a little deeper and find out what that problem is because you don’t want that happening again. It’s like you are selling a product – the product is the Step by Step project. This is what we do and what we can offer, we don’t just chuck someone in a house and leave them to it, and once you’ve got the first one in the rest comes.”*

## EFFECTIVELY SUPPORTING INDIVIDUALS

Fundamental to the success of Step by Step is the support they provide to individuals – far more than Housing Solutions officers are able to give. The service is described as hand-holding and supportive, with actions including: accompanying individuals to property viewings, taking people to meetings and appointments, supporting income maximisation, and much more. These actions are determined on the basis of individual need – there appears to be no blanket approach:

*“They accompany people to viewings, help them sign up for benefits - doing all the day to day tasks.”*

*“They have managed to secure outcomes for some challenging individuals who have been repeat service users, and often reject engagement with other support providers. At least two repeat service users in a constant cycle have been accommodated/effectively supported by this service.”*

*“The tasks vary on individual need.”*

Significantly, key informants stressed the importance of having a single point of contact who was available to help fairly swiftly should an issue arise. Moreover, the Step by Step team proactively maintain contact with individuals – they do not necessarily wait for individuals to approach them for

help. This proactive single point of contact differs markedly to the approach of Housing Solutions Officers: *“The difference in outcomes (between Housing Options and Step by Step) is that they have the service to rely on. Officers in housing solutions may not be available for two - three days. Lwys and Stewart are there as a support provider but officers aren’t. Having that extra support means it’s going to last... The support providers continuously chase.”*

*“Keeping people engaged. We (Housing Solutions) used to have loads of people would disappear because we couldn’t provide temporary accommodation. We don’t have the drop off that we used to. If we had no temporary accommodation that’d be it. Now it seems there is more on offer and you must feel more can be done to help you. The potential for something means you stick around.”*

A key factor in the success of Step by Step is the way in which they have provided flexible support. Step by Step staff recognise that the RCT Housing Solutions team are often having to deal with strict ‘black and white’ rules – there’s very little scope for them: *“those are the rules and they’ve got to work to them. We benefit from being a little bit wavy – we know the rules but because we’re outside the local authority we can step around them a little bit. Not to break any, but work our way through for the best for the client. If we had to run like the Housing Solutions team does we wouldn’t be half as good as we are now. It’s that flexibility and allowing us to do these little things that makes the difference...so if we’d come in with a very black and white thought process it wouldn’t have worked so well. You have to be a little bit grey and you have to be a little bit cheeky but in a nice way.”*

## MEETING WIDER SUPPORT NEEDS

Achieving housing outcomes for Step by Step clients was always the priority for the team. They quickly realised that people were not interested in talking about vocational or health outcomes until their housing circumstances had been considered and addressed. They asserted that clients are not realistically going to look at their vocational opportunities until they have got a roof over their head and that the people coming through the door are all looking for housing support – the other parts are discretionary.

There was surprise that so many of the Step by Step clients were registered with GPs. It was envisaged that a lot more time would be spent with clients getting GPs to register them, and that there would be a need to make connections with community mental health services. The level of mental health need was never high enough to mean that these services were required. Internal referrals to other Merthyr and the Valleys Mind services have been quite an important factor in supporting people.

## DIFFICULTIES WITH SOME POPULATION SUBGROUPS

While Step by Step has had positive impacts with most single homeless people, key informants identified two subgroups where particular challenges have emerged. First, there is a consensus that where prison leavers are not met by the Step by Step team on the day of release, the outcomes are perceived to be worse. Second, people in receipt of Universal Credit are proving to be difficult to support because it takes far longer to get claims in place and sanctions limit their options.

*“Prison leavers. We’ve had a couple who have ended up back in custody. For that client group we could review the appointment system. For that group we could do immediate appointments.”*

*“I have noticed with prison leavers – if they’re (Step by Step) not free on the day of release – even though the housing solutions officers do their assessment – the early intervention is critical.”*

*“People getting universal credit is an issue. With housing benefit we can get things up and running*

*quickly but it's tougher with universal credit. With universal credit there's no back office number and sanctions affect them. We can't get a direct answer from the DWP – they won't give us information anyway."*

## **PROJECT FUTURE**

Overall, a clear set of success criteria for the projects were articulated through key informant interviews: *"Don't promise the world but do what you can the best way you can do it. Be honest and have integrity. Be there and be understanding of clients, their journey and their story. Understand why they are doing the things they do. Work with the local authority effectively. Develop good relationships so that if you need their support, you have it. Those are the important things."*

There is unanimous support for Step by Step to continue. Key informants in the local authority expressed significant concern about likely outcomes should the service and support no longer be available. However, it was suggested that the range of support services for single homeless people may be recommissioned to a single service provider, with responsibility for working with priority and non-priority need individuals:

*"I generally don't know what we'd do and what it would be like to work without it. We wouldn't have the time that they've got to support people through – they meet them to do the viewings and things. It's little things. One woman couldn't get to a viewing – they sorted it and before she'd have lost the property. There'd be a lot more negative outcomes if they weren't here."*

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## 5. CONCLUSIONS

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The Step by Step project, delivered by Merthyr and the Valleys Mind, in partnership with Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, sought to develop a solution to the housing, employment and health needs of single homeless people. This pilot project was timely. It began a year after the commencement of new duties under the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 which require local authorities to assist all single homeless people – not just those deemed to be in priority need (as was the case before).

Step by Step appears to have played a key role in enabling Rhondda Cynon Taf to more effectively meet these duties. In this concluding chapter we draw together the key findings of the evaluation, reflecting on who the project has assisted, the processes of implementing the project, the nature of the assistance provided, and perhaps most importantly on the project impacts.

### WHO IS BEING ASSISTED?

- The majority of single people accessing both Step by Step and Housing Solutions services were men (79% and 64% respectively) aged over 25 years (87% and 69% respectively).
- Significantly, it seems the Step by Step team worked with a more challenging group of single homeless people, in that a greater proportion of people were homeless (75% vs 67%), rather than threatened with homelessness (22% vs. 33%) on initial appointment. Welsh Government statistics show that homelessness services are far more likely to find suitable accommodation/a successful outcome where the person is at risk of homelessness rather than homeless, hence the Step by Step service might be expected to achieve worse outcomes than the Housing Solutions team.

### PROJECT PROCESSES

#### PROJECT INTEGRATION AND REFERRAL PROCESSES

- In the interim evaluation we found inconsistencies in levels of referrals to Step by Step and some uncertainties about who should be referred to the service, however this final evaluation found the project was well integrated, with a clear referral process in operation.
- The success of Step by Step in the interim evaluation spurred the authority to commission a similar supportive service for single people in priority need. It seems Housing Solutions staff have a firm grasp of which service to refer into.
- There have been changes to the referral process throughout the life of the project. In the interim evaluation we found that the Step by Step team were able to see most individuals on the same day and this was felt to be key to retention of people within the service. The process now differs. Currently a member of the team will try to meet the individual on the same day but the formal support appointment will be scheduled for the following Thursday. It seems this delay may be having some impact on retention rates with service users.

#### REACHING CAPACITY AND ENDING SUPPORT

- In the interim evaluation we pointed towards emerging capacity issues and tensions relating to when the service should end support. The project did indeed hit capacity on two occasions, causing the project to stop taking referrals for short periods of time. In the interim evaluation, where the project team were not at capacity, and where they ‘held on’ to and supported cases for

a longer period of time, the housing outcomes were significantly higher. There is clearly a balance to be struck between the number of people assisted, the duration of the assistance, and subsequent housing outcomes. Moreover, some service users would like to have been better informed that support had been ended.

## ASSISTANCE PROVIDED

- **Overview:** The majority of the assistance offered by the Step by Step team relates to housing, however service users and Step by Step staff did discuss actions taken to secure employment and referrals were made to other Mind Cymru mental wellbeing services.
- **Effectively supporting individuals:** Fundamental to the successes of Step by Step is the support they provide to individuals. Service user perceptions of this support is incredibly positive. Support is determined on the basis of individual need – an approach required under the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 but so rarely employed by local authorities. Service users described how the team would listen to and take on board their concerns about the locations where they would prefer to live. Significantly, Step by Step provides a single point of contact and they proactively maintain contact.
- **Housing:** The Step by Step service provided housing assistance to nearly everyone who sought help (98%). More specifically, 52% of people were helped to secure alternative accommodation, 42% were assisted to apply for housing benefit, 14% were helped to remain and 14% were helped to access temporary accommodation.
- Key informant interviewees reiterated findings of the interim evaluation that the Step by Step team has very effectively engaged local landlords and lettings agents and these relationships have been managed well and trust has been built. Many of the landlords engaged have not previously worked with the local authority. The key factor here is the volume of hand-holding provided by the team both with tenants and landlords – filling in forms, accompanying people to interviews with landlords etc.
- **Health:** It was anticipated that supporting people to register with a GP would be a key form of health assistance. However, at initial appointment the majority of respondents (90%) were already registered with a GP. In terms of assistance, 9% were supported to change their GP when they moved accommodation, some beneficiaries were referred to primary care mental health teams (9%), The Drug and Alcohol Single Point of Access (DASPA) (16%), and self-management courses (8%).
- **Difficulties with some subpopulations:** Key informants suggested that prison leavers are not necessarily met on the day of release by the team and this may impact on outcomes. There are also challenges supporting universal credit recipients due to delays in getting claims in place.

## PROJECT IMPACTS

- Step by Step has improved the housing outcomes for non-priority need homeless single people in the borough. The project has managed to secure outcomes for some challenging individuals who have been repeat service users.
- **Housing Outcomes:** Despite Step by Step working with a more challenging group of people than the Housing Solutions team, we found that at discharge of duty the Step by Step service had more people in suitable accommodation (60%) than those supported by Housing Solutions (52%).

However, it is worth noting that a greater proportion were housed at the time of the interim evaluation.

- The Step by Step service had significantly fewer service users classified as having an ‘other’ housing status (16% vs 28%). This is an important finding and suggests the pilot project was more effective at enabling people to remain in contact with services, preventing a withdrawal or failure to cooperate.
- **Employment and Training Outcomes:** The majority of service users we interviewed were not able to work due to various health conditions, however, during the period of support, 37% of people were registered with an employment, training or volunteer opportunity provider. This was a significant increase on the 13% registered at the initial appointment but less than the increase identified at the time of the interim evaluation.
- **Health Outcomes:** In relation to mental wellbeing, we documented an increase in WEMWBS scores from 32 at the initial appointment to 46 at the end of support, which is much closer to the average score for the general population of 52.
- **Empowerment:** There is evidence that the support provided by Step by Step empowers service users, helping them to develop confidence to liaise with landlords and letting agents independently.

## PROJECT FUTURE

- There is unanimous support for Step by Step to continue. Key informants in the local authority expressed significant concern about likely outcomes should the service and support no longer be available. However, it was suggested that the range of support services for single homeless people may be recommissioned to a single service provider, with responsibility for working with priority and non-priority need individuals.

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