

# Social housing supply: Engagement findings

September 2024

Earlier this year, the Senedd's Local Government and Housing Committee launched an inquiry into Social housing supply in Wales.

The Committee wished to understand how the shortage of social housing and the impact of long waiting lists affect individuals. The Citizen Engagement Team facilitated a qualitative approach to engagement, comprising a series of interviews with people from across Wales who are either currently on a waiting list for social housing, or who have recently been accommodated.

## 1. Engagement

- 1.** 14 participant interviews were held between 16 May and 27 June 2024. Organisations supporting tenants and the homeless in Wales were contacted to support recruitment and asked to share the opportunity with their contacts. A list of those organisations can be found in Annex 1.
- 2.** Of those who contacted the Citizen Engagement Manager to express an interest in participating, 11 individuals were selected in the representation of varying geographic locations, age and gender.
- 3.** It should be noted that a huge response to participate was received from several local authority areas. Unfortunately, given the time available to engage and the method chosen for this engagement, it wasn't possible to hear from



everyone, but the unprecedented response to the recruitment call showed an enormous desire to share stories and call for change.

**4.** In addition to the 11 interviews, the Citizen Engagement Manager attended a Salvation Army drop-in session in Rhyl, Denbighshire, where three attendees discussed their current circumstances in a group setting.

**5.** Of the 14 participants, four of the five Senedd regions were represented, both urban and rural areas. Participants also provided views from the perspectives of single-parent families, families with disabilities, employed, unemployed and retired individuals.



### **Format**

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**6.** Nine interviews were conducted online through Microsoft Teams and two interviews were conducted over the phone. The discussions held during the Salvation Army drop-in session were face-to-face.

**7.** Whilst the format of engagement was largely comparable between interviews, the drop-in session varied slightly to accommodate more of a group discussion between attendees, although still based on the discussion guide prepared for the engagement (see Annex 2).

**8.** We would like to thank everyone who contributed to the programme of engagement.

**9.** The following themes emerged from the discussions.

## 2. Key themes

### Applying for social housing

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**10.** The experiences of applying for social housing differed slightly depending on the local authority. Some participants felt the application process was relatively straightforward, others felt there was a need for a more personal approach.

**11.** One participant said she had found the online application process very straightforward but there was no opportunity to provide details about her circumstances. She also hadn't been given a contact in the council, just a reference number for when she calls them, although she noted that they don't always answer the phone. It isn't possible to see the status of the application online, and they tell you not to call to enquire about this. She has not been given any indication of how long it will take to be offered suitable accommodation.

*"I feel like I'm a number, not a person. And I don't think that our individual circumstances have been heard."* Participant from Powys

**12.** Some participants completed online applications which were then followed up with a phone call to discuss the details. Others met with officials to discuss their circumstances and their needs.

**13.** Two participants had made complaints about their application process due to administrative errors, such as losing personal details and noting incorrect information which then led to delays in being offered housing.

**14.** Some felt there was a stigma attached to the application for social housing and were not happy with the way they were treated by officials.

*"I felt very judged and dismissed by her... You're here because you're having a tough time and you need somebody who's going to be a bit kind basically, at that point in your life."* Participant from Powys

**15.** Others felt more strongly about this and were quite angry with how they were treated.

*"I went to the Council nearly every day, at least three, four times a week to try pushing for anything. But they wouldn't do anything. And despite telling them how bad my situation was, and I had nowhere to go and about my health, the treatment I seemed to get from them was so inhumane, excuse my language, they literally couldn't give a \*\*\*\*." Participant from Vale of Glamorgan*

**16.** One participant was angry that, on presenting to the council, it was suggested she had made herself deliberately homeless and was told she should go back to the local authority she had recently moved from, despite having secured a job and having moved to be closer to family.

**17.** Another participant felt she had been interrogated on approaching the council for assistance.

*"They interviewed me and I was put in a tiny room. They brought me to tears, implying it was my fault I wasn't finding anywhere else." Participant from Powys*

**18.** Individuals accessing support from the Salvation Army in Rhyl, had mixed experiences of applying for housing and the accommodation they were currently offered.

**19.** One participant felt the process of applying for social housing through the council had been really positive, and the support he had been offered throughout his emergency and temporary accommodation had been welcomed.

*"I can't fault Denbighshire council. The council and the Salvation Army have helped me get back on that first rung of the ladder. It's up to me to get to the next rung now." Participant from Denbighshire*

**20.** However, two other participants felt the council had not been helpful and didn't feel they were treated well by officials, but the support they had received from the Salvation Army was commended.

*"It's not fair how they (the council) treat us. It's not right. Anyone can become homeless; it can happen to anyone." Participant from Denbighshire*

*"The council are useless. The council don't care."* Participant from Denbighshire

## Waiting lists

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**21.** The length of time people spent on the waiting list varied between participants but ranged from 1 month to 3 years. The majority of participants felt the time spent on the waiting list was confusing and more communication was needed about the progress of their application.

*"I suffer anyway with my mental health. But this was the biggest impact on my mental health I've ever experienced. It's the lack of communication with the council, the lack of transparency. It was just throughout the entire process not knowing where we were on the list. We just kept being told you're on the list, you're on the list. Then there are lists within lists, and you're at the top of this list. But then there's another list and it is frustrating."* Participant from Anglesey

**22.** Participants often talked about the difficulty in getting updates on their applications or getting inconsistent information from different officials.

*"I contacted the Council sort of periodically, I suppose, just to see if there was any news, any progress, anything available, and I found it a bit confusing because I was always under the impression that it was almost like a waiting list that you work your way up. But I was told that it doesn't work like that anymore and that when something suitable comes up, they just look at the pool of people they've got and allocate accordingly."* Participant from Powys

**23.** Another participant from Powys felt there should be more transparency in how applicants were being offered available accommodation.

*"I just feel that the council have total control. I know that with banding systems councils still decide what band people get put into. So there is always control, but then at least people can bid and have some choice. And I find it really strange that nobody knows what houses are available and that the council completely controls the*

*allocation of properties.....I don't think there's enough transparency about how they make those decisions.” Participant from Powys*

**24.** One local authority represented in the engagement asks applicants to bid on properties weekly and their priority status is taken into account when reviewing who will be offered the accommodation. The participants who live in this area felt this was actually a good system as it was fair, just that the type of accommodation on offer wasn't suitable or there wasn't enough accommodation being offered.

*“I'm sure it's not perfect, but I really think that it's pretty good the way they do it. I'm not arguing with the process, it's just that there's just not enough places and there's not enough money to build them.” Participant from Vale of Glamorgan*

**25.** Some also felt this system was difficult for some applicants such as those who don't have reliable internet or access to a laptop or smartphone.

*“They don't realise that poor people, old people, we don't have internet, we don't know this stuff. I know how to access the bidding process on the smartphone now, but I didn't even have a smartphone until lockdown. I wouldn't ever have got it, it would never have happened if I had not had help.” Participant from Vale of Glamorgan*

**26.** The banding of each council is also slightly different and many of the participants felt there was confusion around how applicants are banded and what circumstances could mean a change or escalation in banding.

**27.** One participant has been on the waiting list for three years after his wife suddenly passed away at home. They had already been on the waiting list as a family since 2014 but because he wasn't the one who made the initial application, as at the time he wasn't yet a British citizen, he was asked to start the process again following his wife's death. He is frustrated by the banding system.

*“Am I supposed to be happy that I'm Band A? I don't care about Band A, it doesn't make any difference, I am still waiting.” Participant from Cardiff*

## Support organisations

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**28.** A common theme in the discussions was the support participants were offered from third-party, not-for-profit organisations. Some were directed to this support by their housing officer at the council, others found the support themselves, but most who had received additional support said their experience of applying for social housing had been improved by their involvement.

*“The support from The Wallich was in fact absolutely invaluable. I think if I hadn't gone there, I would have had a different outcome.”*

Participant from Swansea

**29.** Participants found the support was valuable in understanding the system, including how to bid for properties in some cases, and how the banding system works.

*“Without my tenant support worker, I don't know how I would have got to this point. I was really struggling to get my head around how on earth I was going to go about moving from here and what was necessary. And then she was introduced to me by someone and she's helped me for two years and I'm still here.”* Participant from Vale of Glamorgan

**30.** Others found the advocacy support was valuable to them.

*“But then we were given a lady for tenancy support from Cais and she was the best thing ever. She was amazing. And then she could deal with the Council on our behalf.”* Participant from Anglesey

*“But you definitely need the support of Platform and people like that, because at least then they can put their foot down and go oh actually no, that's not good enough.”* Participant from RCT

**31.** But for some, they hadn't known where to get this additional support. They hadn't been directed to it by their housing officers and as a result, had found the application process more difficult. Others were not eligible for the support as organisations had to prioritise individuals with additional needs.

*"I think what's the big barrier up here is knowing where to go for help because you kind of go round in circles all of the time when you just need the basic information."* Participant from Anglesey

**32.** One participant in emergency accommodation in the Vale of Glamorgan, had tried to access support from not-for-profit organisations such as Shelter and Pobl but had felt they were so busy, that they weren't able to offer the type of support he needed.

### **Impact on the individual or family**

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**33.** Almost all of the participants felt the process of applying for social housing and being on the waiting list had been very stressful for them and their families.

**34.** Many noted the negative impact this time in their life had on their mental health.

*"Well as I said, my husband couldn't take the strain of it. He walked out on us in February 2023. But it has affected everybody's mental health, especially when they learnt they might not be able to keep their dogs, and with the little ones, it was really quite bad on me because a lot of it then fell on my shoulders. I was diagnosed with depression."* Participant from Anglesey

**35.** For those who had children, the disruption this had caused during important periods in their childhood was particularly stressful.

**36.** One participant, whose wife passed away at their current property, explained how the trauma was still affecting his family almost 4 years on.

*"I can't help my children or myself because of my mental health. I have been to counselling but I have stopped because it isn't helping. Nothing will help until I move from this house."* Participant from Cardiff

**37.** One family has a daughter who is disabled and she explained how the period they spent on the waiting list had impacted her family.

*"We thought, are we going to end up in temporary accommodation? Is it going to be safe for our daughter? Obviously, with her breathing issues, she's got to be somewhere safe and it put a lot of pressure on all of us, even my eldest daughter, it affected her mentally as well because she was scared because we were living out of boxes for six months."* Participant from Anglesey

**38.** Participants who were seeking social housing as a result of a Section 21 from their current landlord, talked about the stress of waiting to be evicted.

*"Essentially, I felt quite frustrated. I can understand that there are a lot of people waiting and, probably a lot of people may have higher needs than we were at that time. But, the effect it had on me was, I was feeling increasingly anxious about the rent going up and panicking about how I was going to manage that. So that was hard."* Participant from Powys

**39.** Those who were looking for more suitable accommodation because of poor quality housing or a change in circumstances talked about the stress of accepting their current living arrangements for an unknown period.

*"It does make you realize that you feel frozen. You're not actually living your life. You're just surviving the situation, you're just going round the mouse wheel, you're just marking time."* Participant from Vale of Glamorgan

*"I'm normally the family fixer, but I'm really struggling at the moment. So to have the threat of not having secure housing come the winter is a real worry."* Participant from Powys

**40.** The unknown was a source of stress for many of the participants. The time spent on the waiting list led to worry about where they would be offered and the unknown location, suitable spaces and safety they would be offered eventually.

*"I don't think about the fact that there's 8000 other people bidding with me. You'd be better off buying a lottery ticket, you've got more chance, frankly."* Participant from Vale of Glamorgan

*"It's just a constant worry about where we'll end up."* Participant from Powys

**41.** In several cases, the council were able to offer accommodation, but it came down to the final days before eviction. Participants explained how this had been extremely difficult, one of whom was preparing to go to court with the support of Shelter to oppose the eviction, and although the council were able to find her a property in time, she feels there was little support or empathy throughout the process and it took a threat of going to the media before something was offered.

*"The experience was actually so, so traumatic. I understand that for the council this happens every day but you don't really get any empathy or sympathy from them. It's just a job, just a number."*  
Participant from Anglesey

**42.** Several participants mentioned the complications of owning pets, their importance to the family and the worry of having to rehouse them.

*"I was offered a place and the minute they knew I had a dog, it was withdrawn. So I would have been in a place down on the Barry Marina by now.... I've had this animal for 13 1/2 years. What am I supposed to do? I'm not breeding pit bulls in the basement, you know, he's a support dog."* Participant from Vale of Glamorgan

*"We had a visit from a housing officer. I'll never forget it as long as I live. We had two dogs. And she came out, and the first thing she said was we've got no obligation to house your pets. So your pets are going to have to go unless you can find another home for them. Bearing in mind, I've got three children with disabilities and the dogs have made such a difference in their lives, and one of them, the one we've got left now, he's so mild-mannered, he was like a buddy dog to my daughter. So we had to deal with that shock. And I did tell them, look, we might have to get rid of the dogs. And then we were told, there's no council kennels on Anglesey, so the nearest they'll be placed is Abergele. And you're going to have to pay for that."*  
Participant from Anglesey

## Housing in your area

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**43.** Every participant said they didn't think there was enough housing in their area.

*"It's not enough. There's nowhere near enough."* Participant from Anglesey

*"There are no properties at all today on the bidding list. None whatsoever. It comes out every Thursday. There are only ever half a dozen on there, but you bid on the suitable ones. And this week the advert is nothing. Nothing at all. Not one single property. Usually, these are about two or three. Sometimes there's six amongst 8000 people."* Participant from Vale of Glamorgan

**44.** In addition, the type of housing available often wasn't the sort of housing needed by those on the waiting list. For example, some of the older participants felt there was very little stock for retirement-age applicants.

*"There needs to be more housing for the elderly because they are taking up three and four-bed houses and there's only one person living in there."* Participant from Anglesey

*"I know that they are building social housing for older people and that is just fantastically commendable. But there is just not enough of it, and there's none in the Vale. Hardly any at all. There's absolutely nothing but the same old council houses, big, old 3-bedroom council houses in various villages, but nothing in the rural Vale. They're not building anything at all."* Participant from Vale of Glamorgan

**45.** Some single participants also felt they would be on the waiting list much longer than everyone else as not only were they not considered as high priority as applicants with children, but there were also very few 1 bedroom properties available.

*"They're just not building flats and apartments. They're only building houses and just large-scale buildings for people, which is why they seem to be in this issue and not rectifying anything."* Participant from Vale of Glamorgan

**46.** The quality of housing was also felt to be very poor in most areas represented in the engagement. Those participants who had already been offered accommodation talked about properties being in poor condition when they moved in, despite being told all repairs would have been carried out in between tenancies.

*“The kitchen ceiling needed replastering and in a lot of the rooms, the beading was rusty, plaster was missing off the sides of the walls, there was a hole in my bedroom wall and it was just filthy. It was supposed to be deep cleaned. One of the drawers was full of loose dog biscuits. There were things like cotton buds and a razor shoved down the radiator in the bathroom that had obviously been there for years. The kitchen cupboards had a lot of rust. It was dirty and I was shocked.”*  
Participant from Powys

**47.** Some participants had felt they had to say yes to a property offered to them without viewing it, given their circumstances. They were then disappointed with the quality of the property and attempts to get issues sorted were often lengthy and frustrating.

*“But because we were rushed into this property, things were rushed in the house. The kitchen wasn't replaced. It's old. The bathroom. They just painted over dirt and dog hair. And so there's a lot of issues in the property. Things that should have been brought up to standard, they were just rushed and signed off.”* Participant from Anglesey

**48.** However, some participants were very happy with the properties they had been offered, and the support offered when issues arose. Some participants had been offered new build properties which were in much better condition than other stock available.

**49.** This in turn presented additional challenges to some participants, however. Some felt that there was a feeling of bitterness between those families who were offered newly built properties and those who were offered older properties that weren't being properly maintained. There was a strong feeling that older properties needed to be brought up to current standards to help applicants feel there wasn't such a difference between the social housing offer.

*“On our street alone, people are getting incredibly jealous and bitter and upset by the fact that we are being left behind. The attitude is the council just doesn't care about us. It's frustrating. You do see it when you see the new builds go up, they've all got soundproofing, water collection, light panels, solar panels, new insulation, air circulation, and better heating systems. Yeah, they are significantly further ahead than these properties and you can understand why people are getting upset with it.”* Participant from Anglesey

## Living in social housing

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**50.** Of those participants who had been on a waiting list and had now accepted a property, many felt very lucky and appreciative of their new home, regardless of their experience in getting there.

*“It did change our lives, our lives are better.”* Participant from Anglesey

*“Even now, something as simple as wandering into my kitchen and making a coffee or thinking ‘I'll make a stew in my slow cooker today’. I was housed last January, January 2023, and I'm still appreciating it every day. When you don't have a home when you haven't had a home, you know, that security has made a big difference to my life.”*  
Participant from Swansea

*“We're extremely grateful, the day we got offered this house, to us it was like winning the lottery because we had never had a council house before and I've never lived in a council house until now. And honestly, we felt so lucky to be offered it. It was honestly like winning the lottery.”* Participant from Anglesey

**51.** However, as previously discussed, a number of the participants felt the quality of the properties they had been offered was poor and needed significant repairs or maintenance to bring them up to standard. Others felt security needed to be improved at their properties.

**52.** At least two participants said they were grateful for the accommodation that was offered but felt the council could have offered some continued support.

*“So yes, we’ve got the house, we’re grateful, we don’t want to be in that position again. But there does need to be some continued support after you’ve got the house and recognition that there are other issues being made homeless causes. It’s caused my mental health, it’s caused a breakdown of my marriage. I wasn’t given any counselling or the children weren’t offered any counselling to deal with their father going or anything like that. We’ve had to deal with those emotions as well. There needs to be a support mechanism in place for once you’ve got the house and not just thinking, that’s that problem dealt with, they’re off our list.”* Participant from Anglesey

### **The Welsh Government’s housing targets**

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**53.** When told about the Welsh Government’s targets for 20,000 new homes by 2026, participants all said that this wasn’t enough.

*“It’s doesn’t scratch the surface.”* Participant from Anglesey

*“That’s not going to happen. It’s 20,000 homes, you can’t do that. That’s just not feasible.”* Participant from RCT

*“When I read that I thought, gosh, we could do with almost tripling that easily. I feel like they should be building on the outskirts of every town and village now, consistently.”* Participant from Powys

**54.** Although some were happy to see a target and action being taken, they also felt this number wasn’t enough to make a difference to the current waiting lists.

*“Well, obviously, I think it’s absolutely brilliant because that’s like 20,000 people, 20,000 families, 20,000 stories that are going to have a happy ending. And that’s absolutely wonderful. And hats off to the Welsh Government for doing it. But I think it is sadly a drop in the ocean because people are getting section 21s every day. It’s like drip, drip, drip, isn’t it?”* Participant from Swansea

*“And is it enough? No, it’s not. It’s the tip of the iceberg and I’m not blaming the Welsh Government, maybe they want to set a realistic target with the money and resources that they have.”* Participant from Powys

**55.** One participant felt there was a need to look at other solutions in addition to building new homes.

*“My feelings are we do need to build houses, that's a given. But I think what they should do first before setting the target of saying 20,000 they should be looking at the housing stock we've got and the housing resources...So I think first of all, before they commit to building however many houses, they should tackle the holiday home problem and the amount of empty houses that there are, empty buildings that could be converted into places for people to live.”*

Participant from Anglesey

### 3. Ideas for our future

**56.** In this section, a collection of ideas and proposals suggested by participants during engagement sessions are presented. These ideas represent diverse perspectives aimed at improving the current situation. It is important to note that while these suggestions reflect the creativity and concerns of participants, they have not been unanimously agreed upon. Rather, they were brought forward during discussions as potential pathways for positive change and are shared here to inspire further dialogue and consideration.

**57.** In discussing solutions to the issues raised with participants, the following suggestions were made.

#### **Bringing old stock up to standards**

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**58.** Many of the participants talked about the quality of the housing they had experienced and said that bringing the older accommodation up to current housing standards should be a priority.

#### **Application process**

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**59.** In addressing the complaints participants had regarding the application process, a number suggested the use of online systems so applicants could see the progress of their application and document conversations with officers.

## **More communication**

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**60.** Further to this, many felt that more communication from officers was key to feeling more secure about the process of applying for accommodation and could help alleviate many of the worries and insecurities of being on a waiting list for housing.

*“I think if they periodically contacted me just to give me an update that would have been really helpful. Even if it was just ‘we can't give you news as such, but we're still looking for you’ - that would have been helpful. You're on that list for a reason, and usually, I think people are feeling very uncertain and unsettled in their situation. So it becomes even more important to have some idea that you may be moving, moving closer to something.”* Participant from Powys

## **More compassion for applicants**

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**61.** Many participants also wanted to see more compassion for applicants for social housing. Many had felt stigmatised or judged by officials and weren't happy with how they had been treated during a very difficult time in their lives.

## **More housing**

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**62.** In discussing the need for more available housing, there were suggestions of more rent to buy or help to buy schemes and to build more houses. Some participants suggested the need for more consideration of the type of housing available and the need for more affordable houses to buy.

## **Rental restrictions**

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**63.** As many of the participants had applied for social housing following a Section 21 from a private rental, suggestions were made for more private rent restrictions. Many were being asked to leave because the landlord was selling the property or had increased rents, which they felt was then putting pressure on the social housing system.

**64.** Many had been issued Section 21s and then realised the landlord hadn't sold the property, they had just relet for a much higher rent. Others lived in areas where there were high numbers of holiday lets but a shortage of social housing. These participants felt more could be done on these issues.

## Council support

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- 65.** In discussing the application process for social housing and the support available, many applicants felt more was needed in terms of the guidance provided to applicants either from the council themselves or signposting to supporting organisations.
- 66.** Some felt more cohesion was needed in the council instead of separate departments dealing with different elements relating to the application process.
- 67.** Most participants felt that more support and understanding were needed for the emotional side of applying for social housing.

*“The mental health side...was definitely a struggle, and that's coming from someone who works there (in mental health). I had basically done a lot of work on myself before that point mentally, and emotionally, to be in as good a place as I can to help other people. And I was struggling. So, the impact on people's mental health and then the knock-on effect to that. If people are in this sort of situation where they're homeless or they're so unsettled they're facing eviction, that's going to have a knock-on effect to their ability to work, their ability to earn money, which is going to get you into a vicious cycle...and before you know it, you've lost everything.”* Participant from Powys

## Security

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- 68.** Finally, several participants talked about security in their new homes and what they would like to see in terms of improvements. One participant felt doorbell cameras should be standard additions to all social housing properties, to help tenants feel more secure.
- 69.** There were also several suggestions to mix social and private housing properties to avoid too much anti-social behaviour.

## 4. Thank you

- 70.** The Citizen Engagement Team would like to thank all those who contributed to this work, including the organisations who helped to source participants. Thank you. Your experiences can help make changes across Wales.

## 5. Annex

### Annex 1 – Organisations supporting recruitment

- TPAS Cymru
- Shelter Cymru
- Community Housing Cymru
- Salvation Army
- Cynon Taf Community Housing Group
- Pobl Group

### Annex 2 – Interview discussion guide

#### Background

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1. Could you tell me a bit about yourself and your background?
2. Could you tell me about your current housing situation?

#### Applying for social housing

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3. How did you find the process of applying for social housing?
  - Is there anything you think worked well?
  - Is there anything you think should be improved?
4. How long have you spent on a waiting list for social housing?
  - What impact, if any, has the wait had on you?
5. What do you think about the housing in your area?
  - Are there enough homes of the type that people need?
6. Have you been offered a home since you applied?
  - If so, how did you feel about the home(s) being offered to you?

## Living in social housing

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7. How do you feel about the home you are living in now?
  - Quality, security, affordability, accessibility and location
8. What impact did moving into this home have for you?
  - What difference has it made to your life?
  - If you could change one thing about your home, what would it be?

## Solutions

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9. In your view, what are the main things that the Welsh Government and local councils should focus on in order to improve our housing system?
10. The Welsh Government wants to increase the number of social homes available in Wales, and has set a target of delivering 20,000 new homes by 2026.
  - Do you think this will help to address the housing problems faced by people in Wales?
  - Do you have any concerns about their plan to build more social homes?
11. Is there anything else you would like to talk about that we haven't covered yet?