Prioritising prevention

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Overview

1. A typology of homelessness prevention
2. Crisis-stage prevention
3. Upstream prevention
4. The protective factors of universal prevention
5. System dysfunction

Part 1

A five-stage typology of homelessness prevention

1. UNIVERSAL

Preventing or homelessness across the population at large by enhancing protective factors

2. UPSTREAM

Early-stage prevention focused on high-risk groups, such as vulnerable young people and risky transitions, such as leaving prison

3. CRISIS-STAGE

Preventing homelessness likely to occur within a foreseeable time-period

4. EMERGENCY-STAGE

Support for those at immediate risk of homelessness, especially rough sleeping

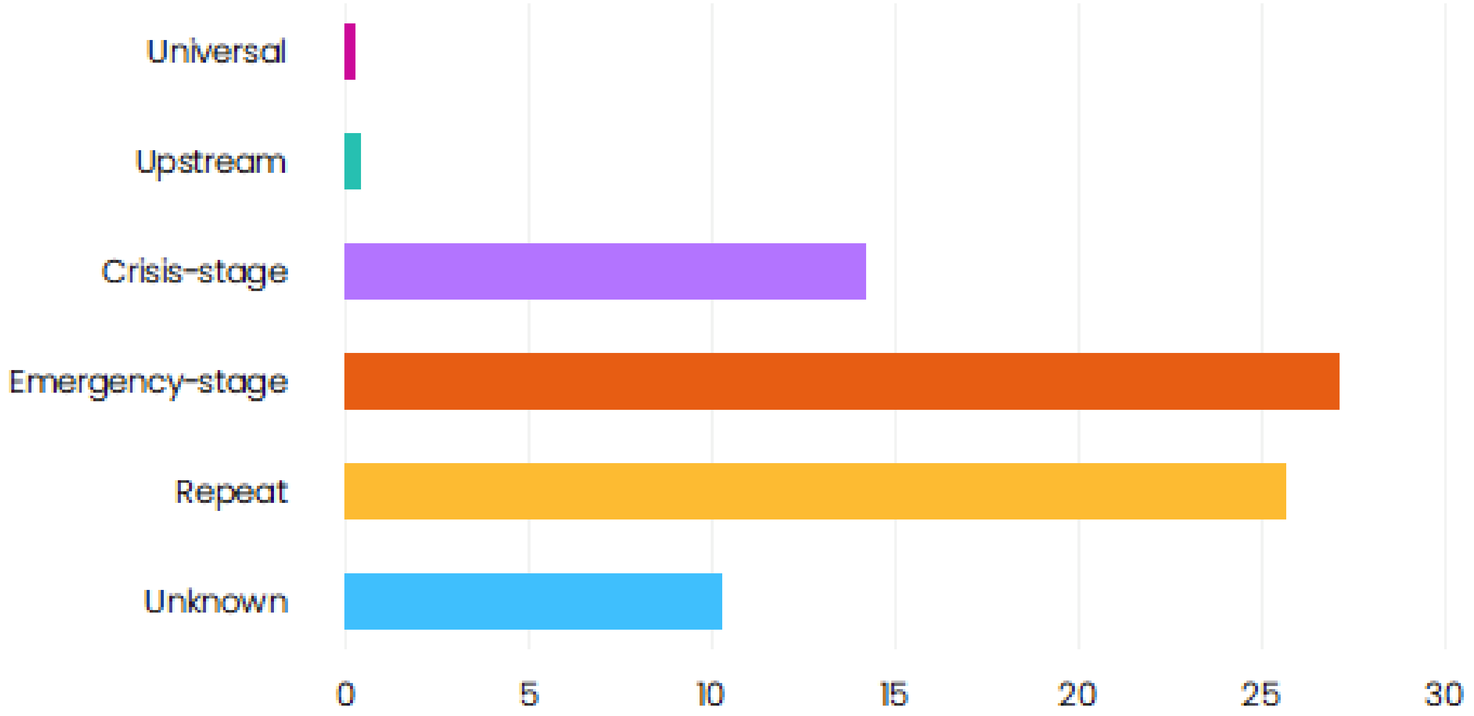
5. REPEAT

Prevention of repeat homelessness

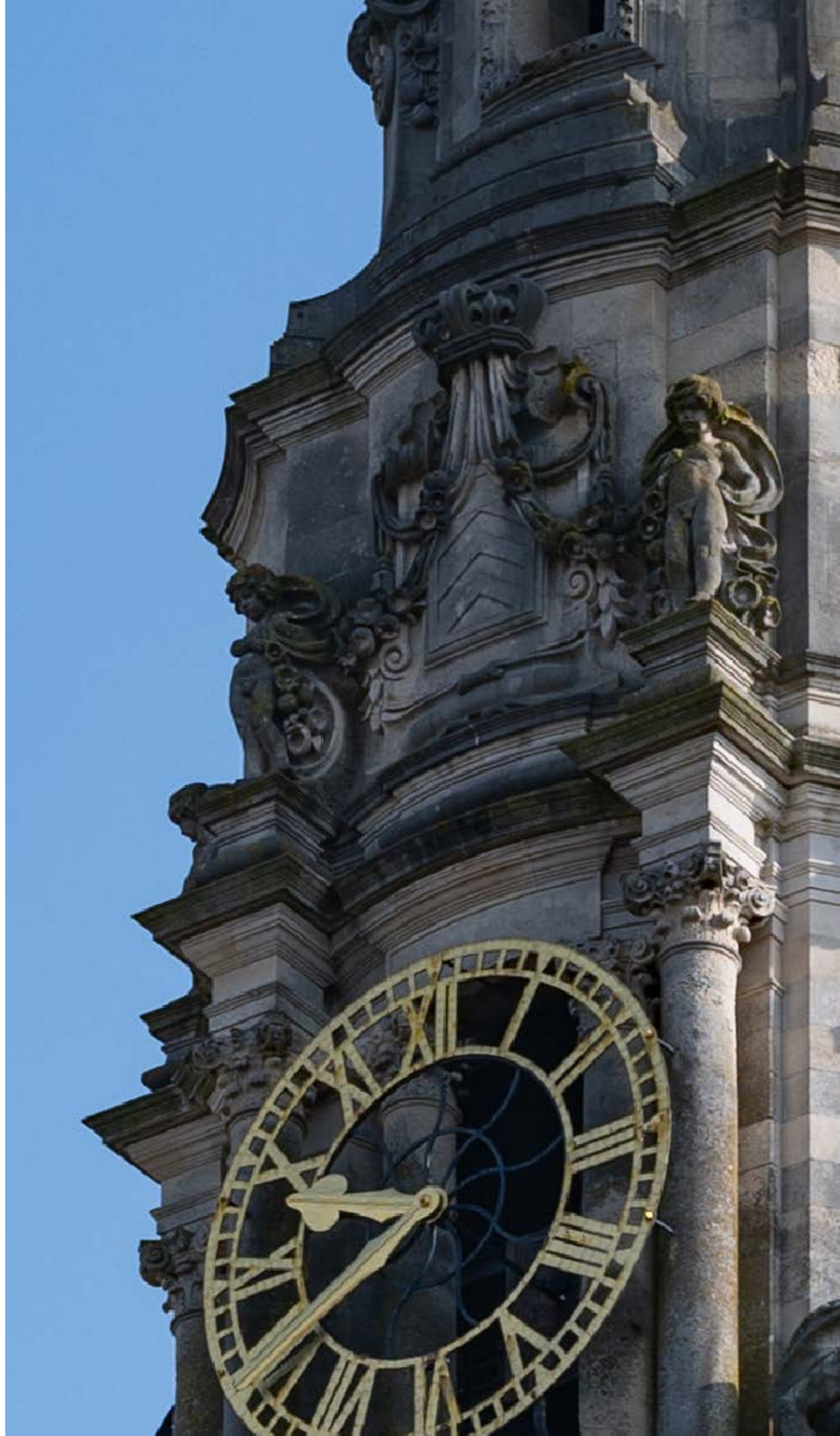
(Fitzpatrick et al 2021, Mackie et al 2024a)

Voluntary and community sector funding

Figure 1. Value of funding (£m) awarded to homelessness projects in England by grantmaking organisations 2021-2023, by prevention stage



(Mackie et al 2024b)



Part 2

Crisis-stage prevention

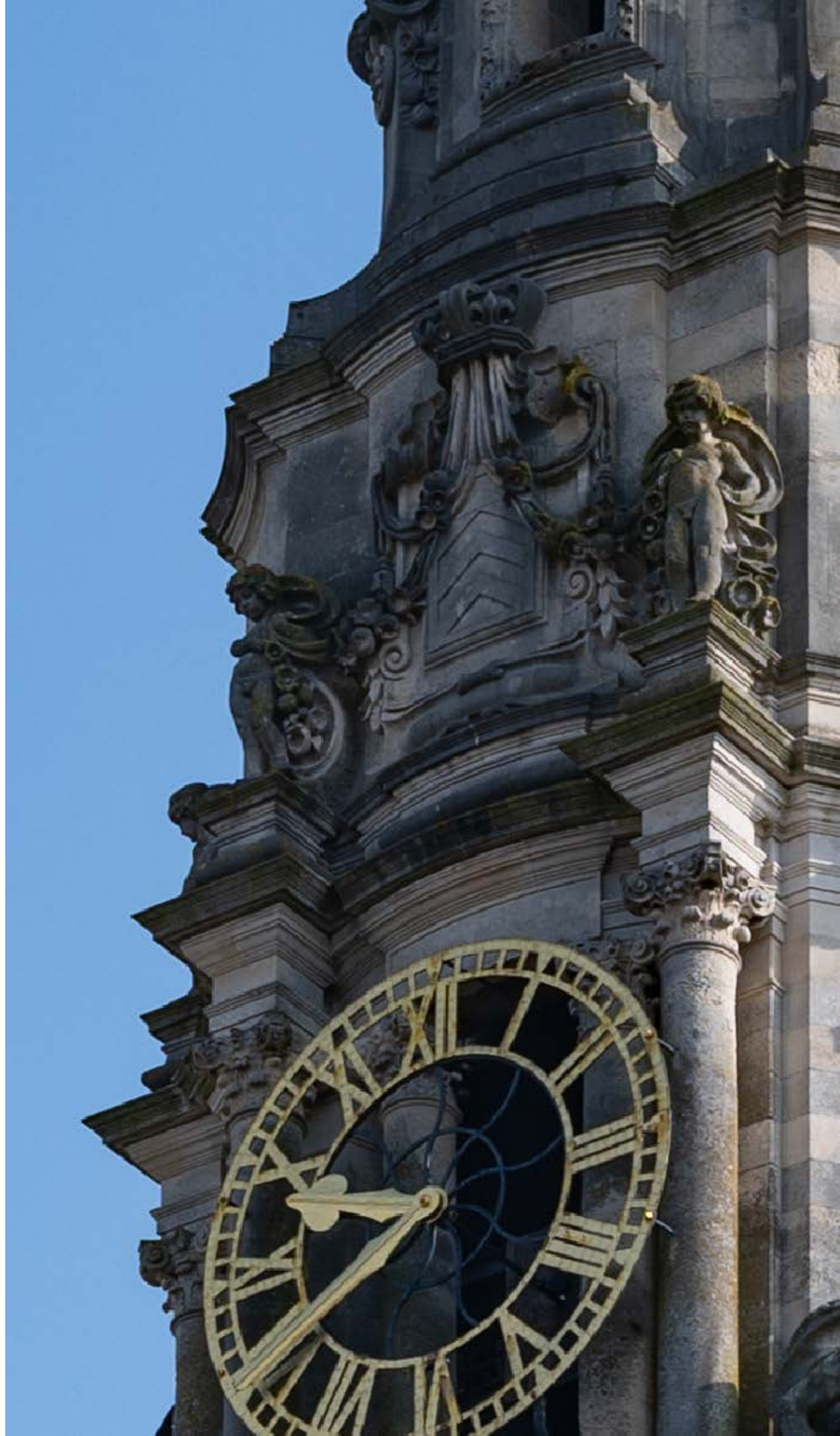
Developing prevention-oriented homelessness legislation

- Analysis of international policy
- Examined strengths and weaknesses of the existing legislation:
  - Administrative data analysis: statutory data, sample of 6 LAs, sample data from major direct-access day centre, case file data from advocacy organisation
  - 30 key informant interviews
- Explored legislative improvements:
  - 3 regional stakeholder events (120 participants)
  - 50 key informant interviews

(Mackie, 2015)

Key findings

- An unequal, ‘all or nothing’ (Priority Need) system.
- Despite increased prevention services, there was evidence of:
  - **Underdeveloped services**
  - **Selectivity and gatekeeping**
  - Considerable **geographical differences** in support
- Widespread support for a prevention duty – including on other public sector bodies.
- Support for more diverse and flexible interventions.

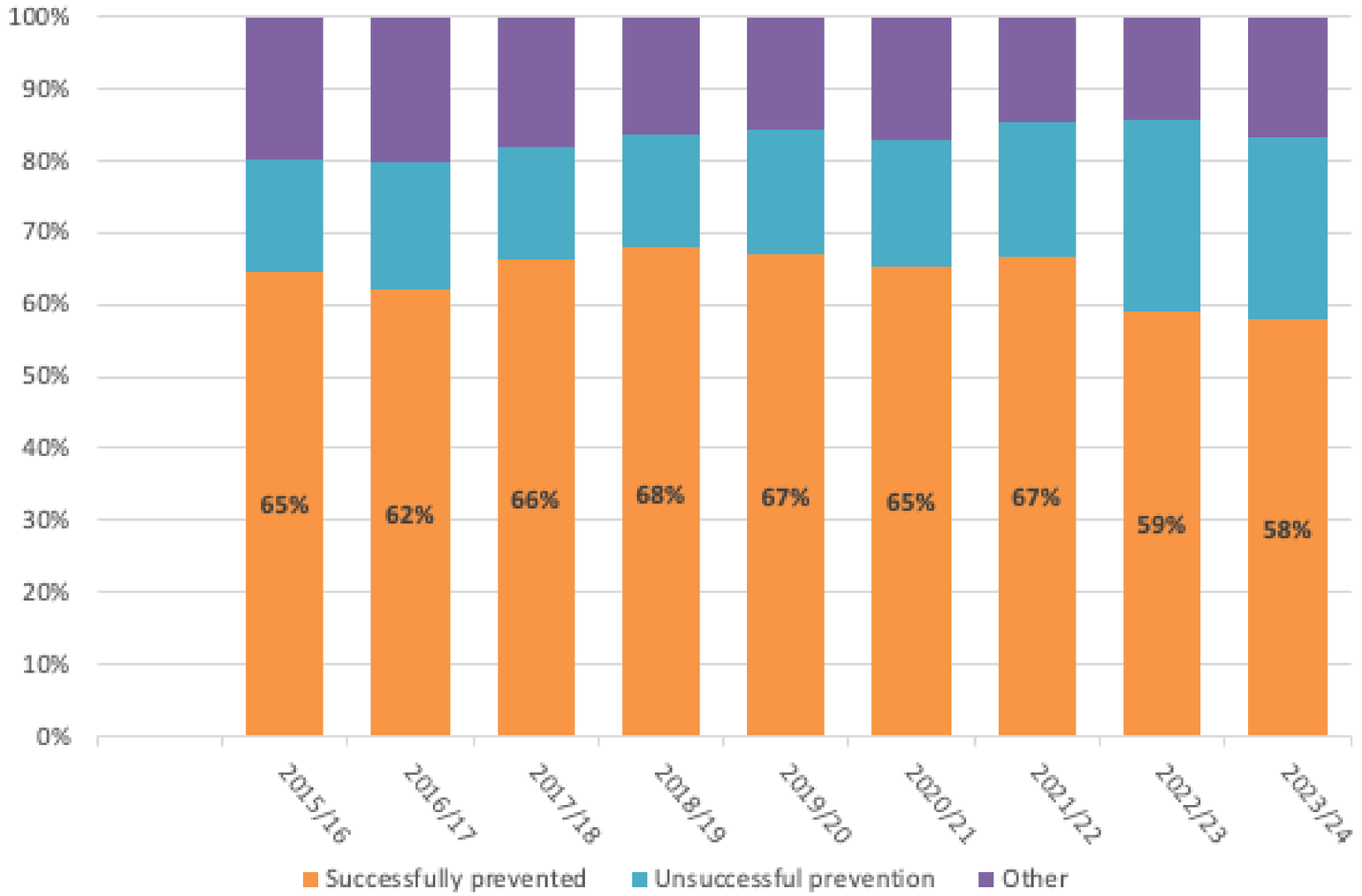


The Housing (Wales) Act 2014

- Attempted to **prioritise homelessness prevention**, reorienting services, entitlements and funding.
- Access to prevention services is a **universal right.**
- Local authorities must take '**reasonable steps**' to prevent and relieve homelessness and **should** have recourse to different mechanisms of assistance.
- Local authorities should consider appropriate interventions for **each person.**
- Homelessness is prevented if accommodation is likely to be available for **at least 6 months.**
- It fails to deal with underlying **precarity of PRS.**

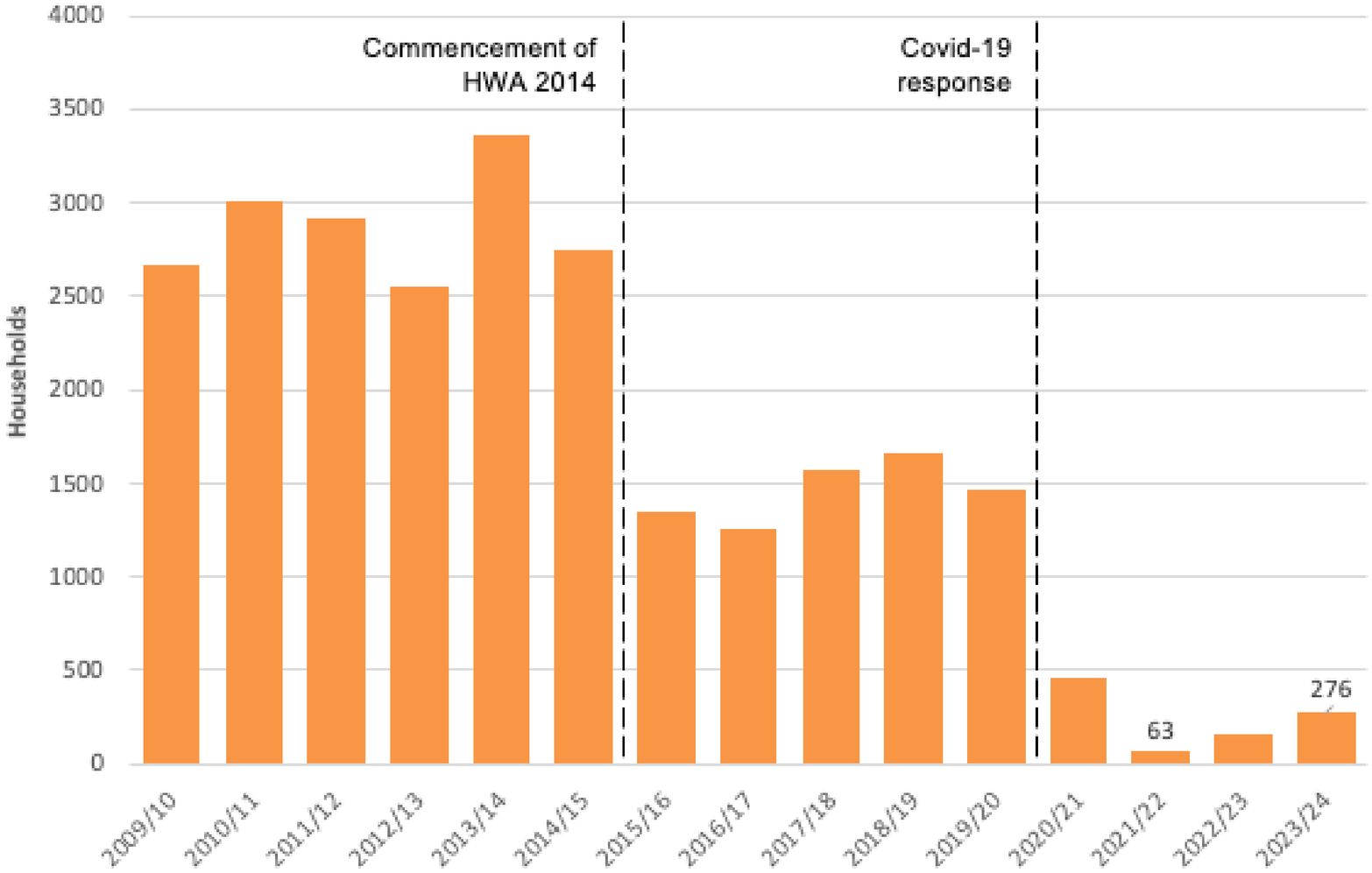
Homelessness prevention outcomes

Figure 2. Statutory homelessness prevention outcomes in Wales, 2015/16-2023/24



Households not in priority need

Figure 3. Households determined not to be in Priority Need in Wales, 2009/10-2023/24

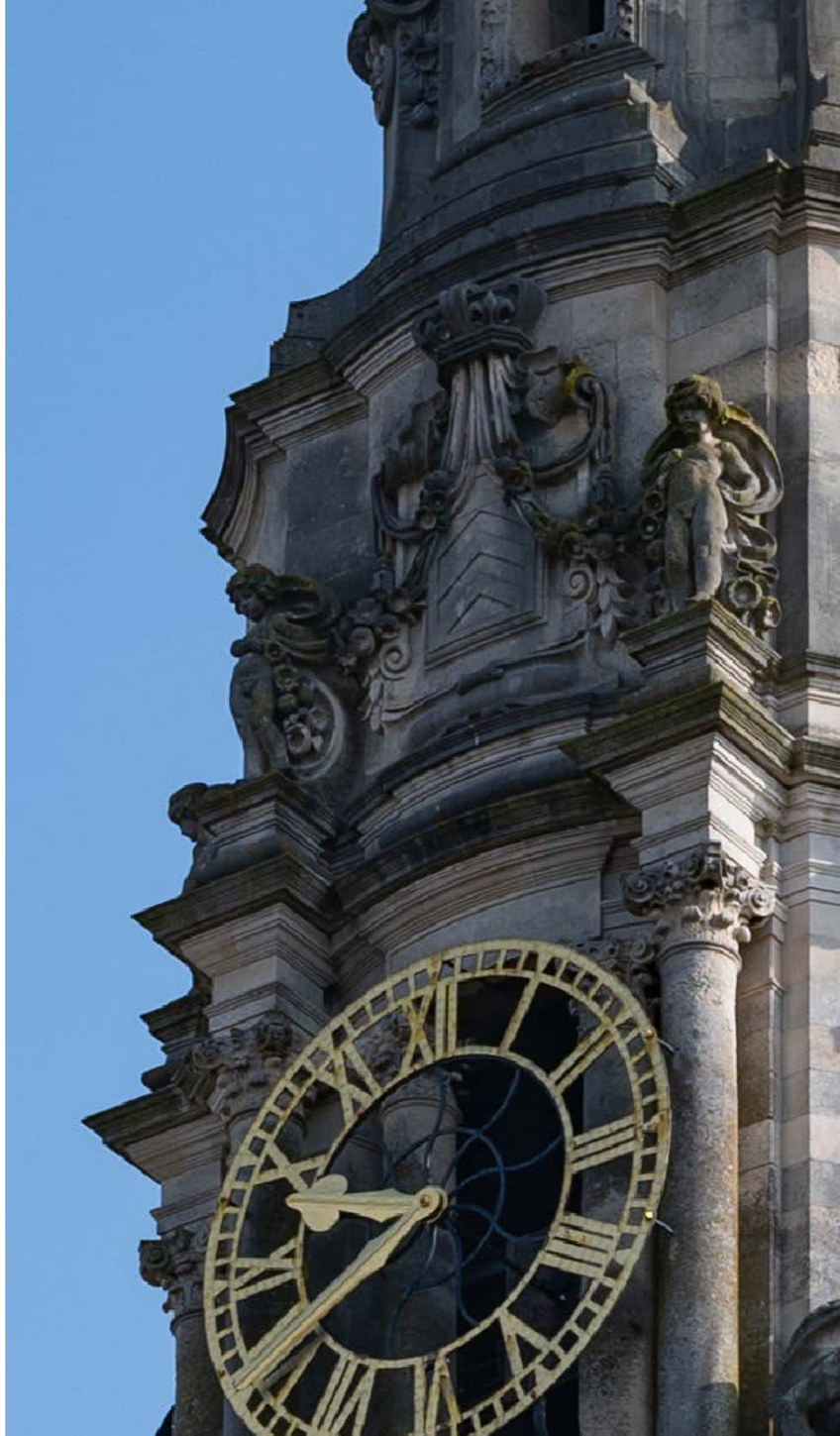


Part 3

Upstream prevention

High risk of homelessness

- We are not all two pay cheques away from homelessness (Bramley & Fitzpatrick, 2018).
- Some groups are at an elevated risk, including those leaving state institutions.
- 13% of people left prison into homelessness in England (2023/24) and rates for ageing out of care are reportedly higher (1 in 4 in Wales).
- The Lisbon Declaration recognises the need to act in institutions.



Ask (identify) and Act

- Following recommendations of expert review panels, legislative changes underway in Scotland and Wales
- Wales review panel sought the view of 300 people with lived experience and a wide range of key stakeholders.
- A new duty to on public bodies to **identify, act, refer, and co-operate**
- Social services, health boards, prisons, social landlords, and job centres are included
- Making representation to UK Government regarding Department of Work and Pensions, Home Office etc

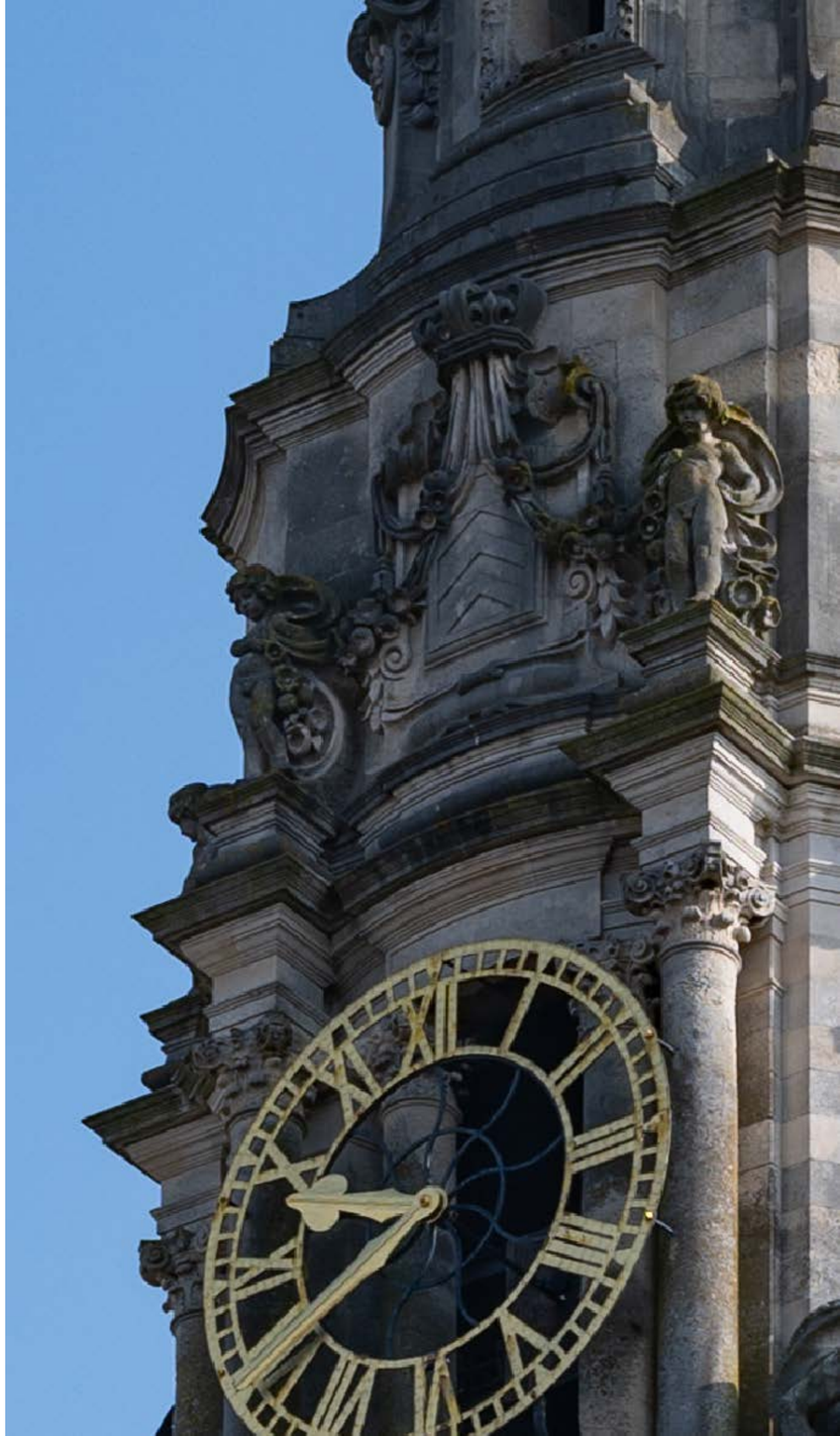
Challenges of upstream identification: an education case study

- The current paradigm focuses on the ‘observable’
- Research, policy, and school practice (where it exists) all focus on attendance, behaviour, attainment etc as predictors of homelessness
- My own research has fallen within this paradigm
- Upstream Cymru seeks to address this challenge, moving beyond observable indicators

Upstream Cymru screening tool secondary data analysis

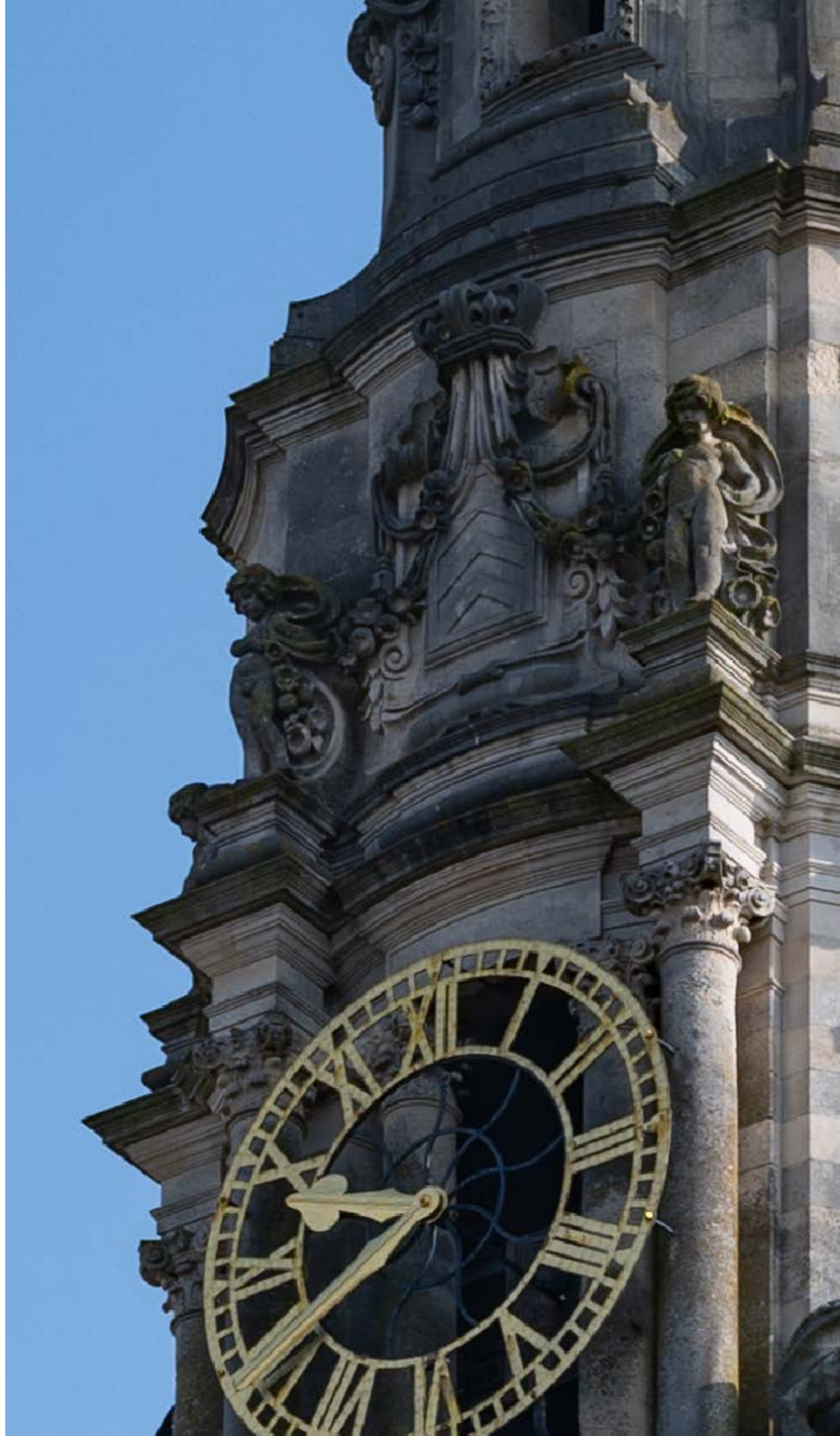
- Upstream Cymru aims to identify and work with young people at risk of homelessness in Wales. Based upon The Geelong Project.
- Universal screening tool, completed in schools by pupils aged 11-16 years
- Undertook secondary analysis of data for the period Sep 2020 – May 2024
- The survey includes questions on homelessness, educational engagement, wellbeing, & resilience
- Data included responses from 4,550 pupils

(Thomas and Mackie, 2025)



Young people who experienced early indicators of homelessness were…

- 4.6 times more likely to report school exclusion[1]
- 4.2 times more likely to report truanting[2]
- 3.8 times more likely to report getting into lots of trouble[3]



Logistic regression results

[1]Odds Ratio (95% confidence interval) = 4.6 (3.5 - 6.0); $p < 0.001$

[2]Odds Ratio (95% confidence interval) = 4.2 (3.1 - 5.7); $p < 0.001$

[3]Odds Ratio (95% confidence interval) = 3.8 (2.9 - 5.0); $p < 0.001$

false negatives...

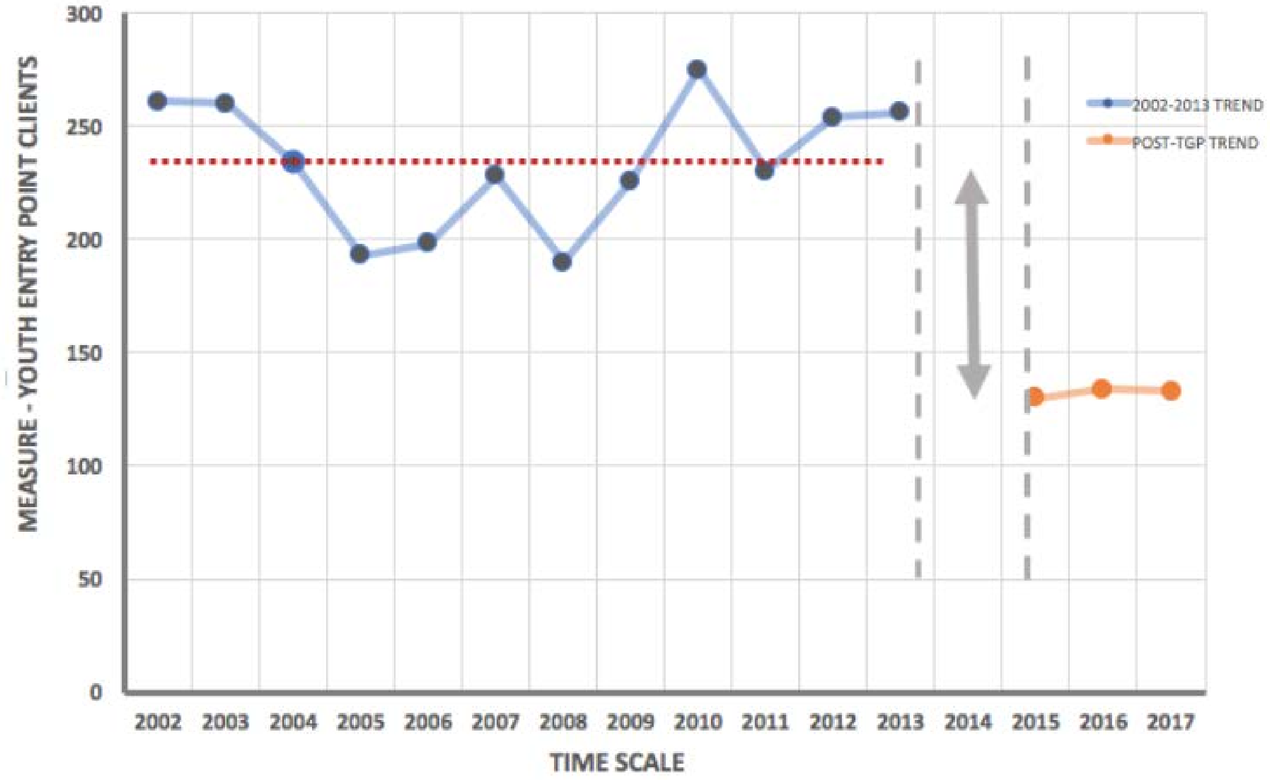
However, 48% of pupils who experienced early indicators of homelessness showed no signs of educational disengagement.

… false positives

85% of pupils who reported some form of school disengagement demonstrated **no early indicators of homelessness**.

The Geelong Project outcomes

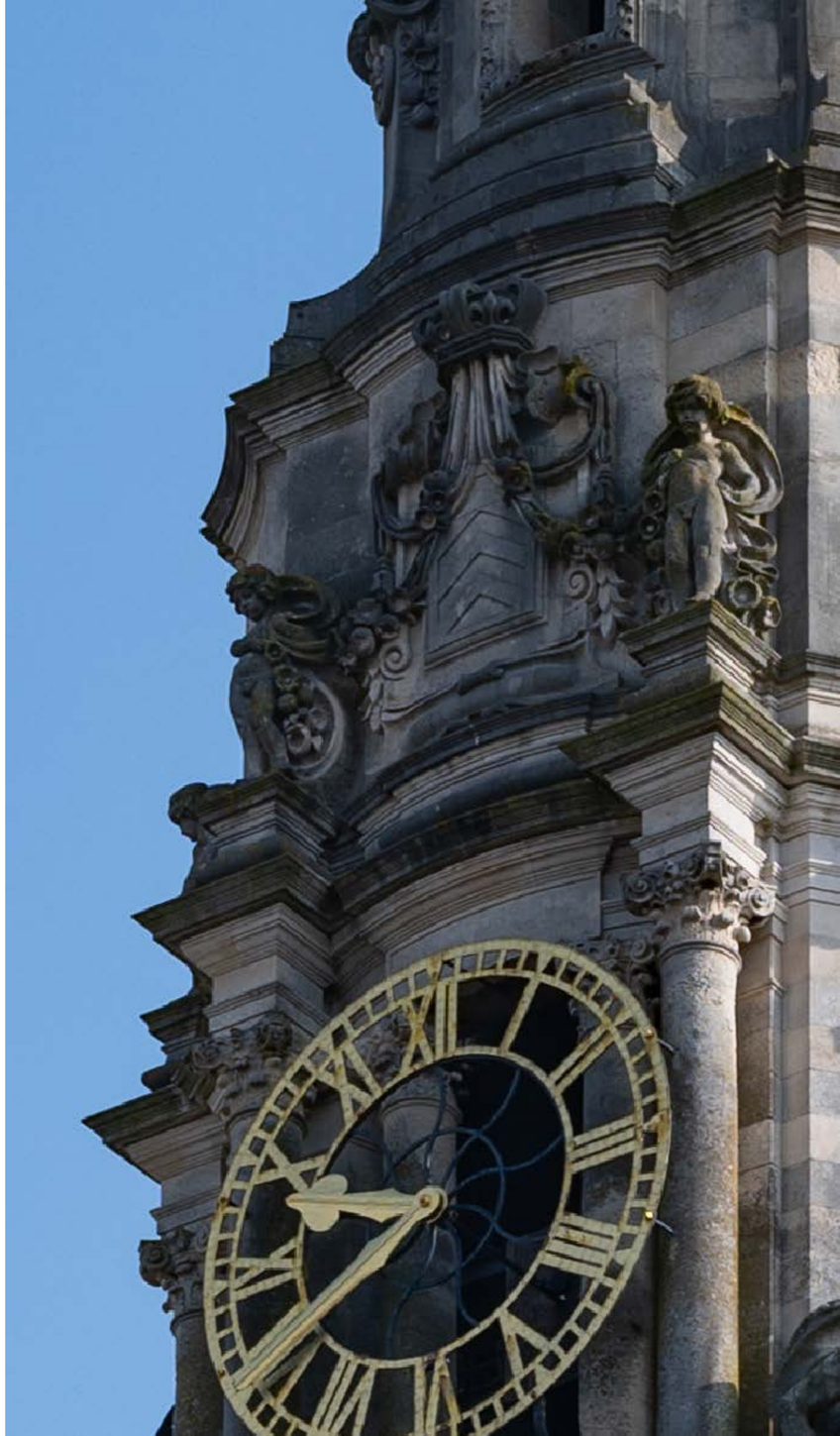
Figure 4. Youth entry point clients pre- and post-The Geelong Project, 2002-2017



40% reduction in entries into homelessness services

20% reduction in early school leaving

(MacKenzie, 2018)



Part 4

Universal prevention: protective factors

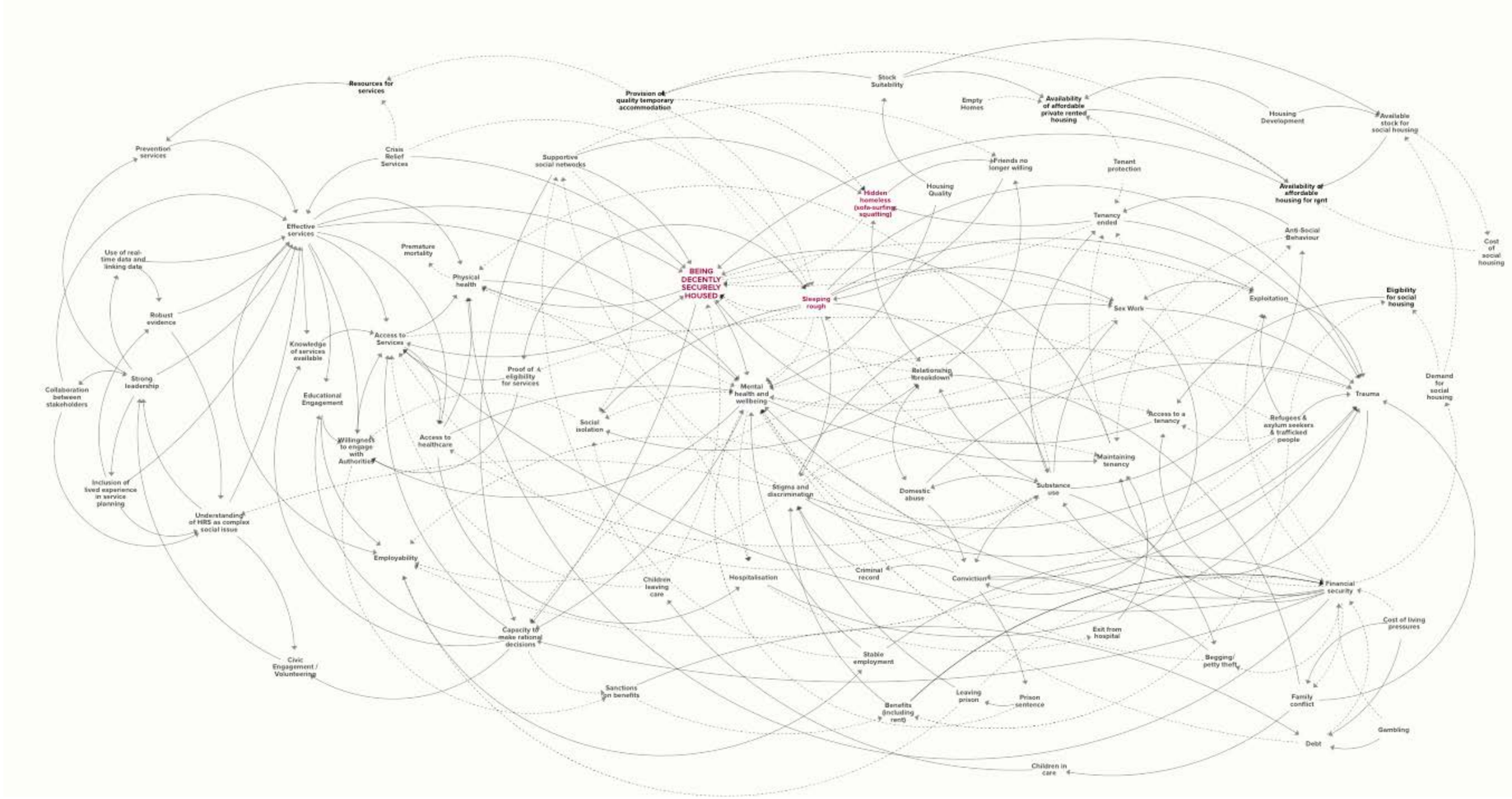
Conceptualising universal prevention

- Mainstream societal supports that reduce population-wide risks of homelessness.
- **4 key protective factors**: decent income, access to affordable housing, supportive social relationships, and good health / health care… *education*?
- Emphasis on “progressive” or “**proportionate” universalism** - population-wide action but priority given to those furthest from realising core supports.
- Relates to national **AND local** policy.

(Fitzpatrick and Mackie, Forthcoming)

Part 5
System dysfunction

Figure 5. MHCLG/CHI Homelessness system map

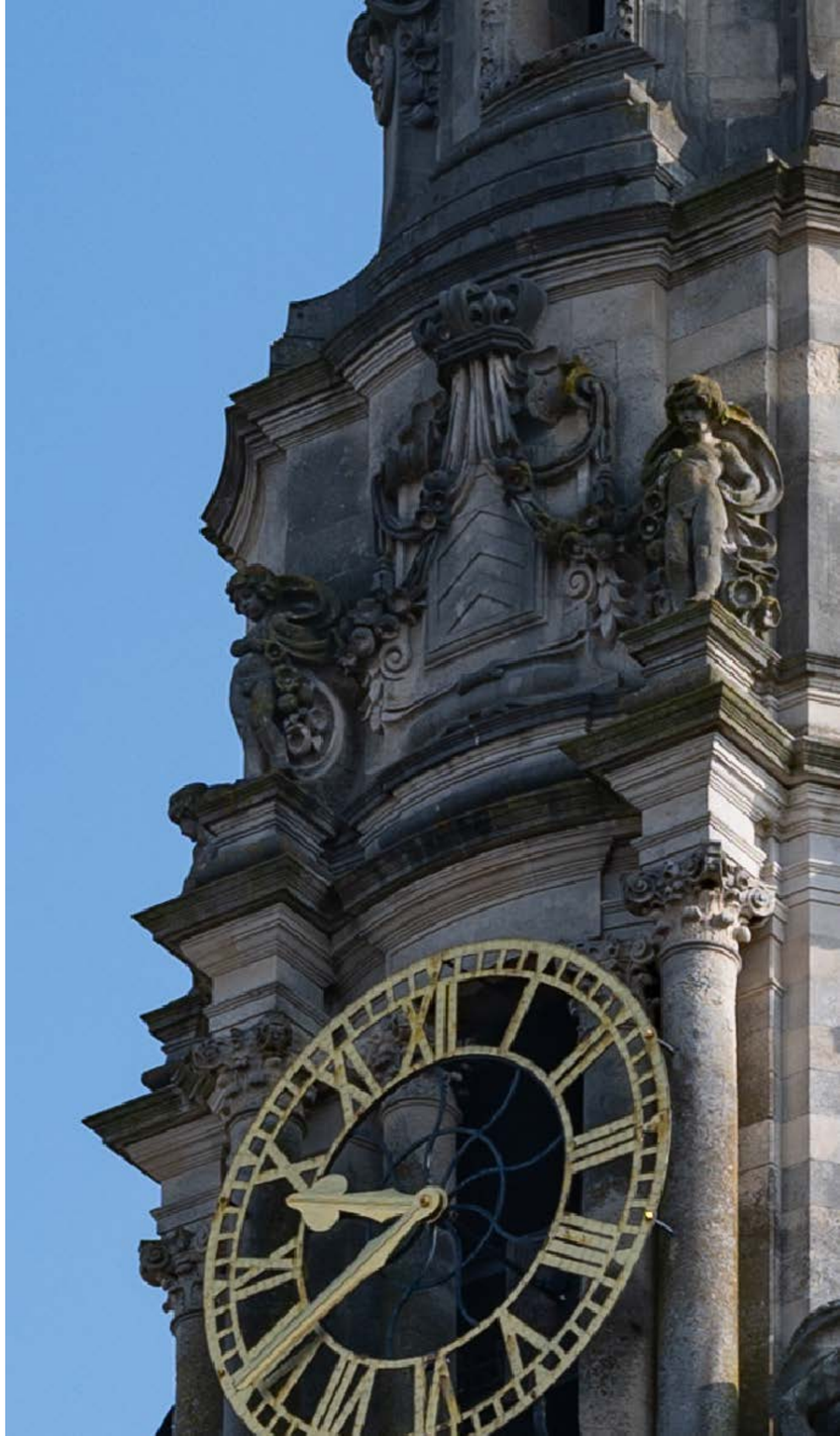


(MHCLG/CHI, 2024)

System dysfunction

- A cross-cutting issue relevant to all levels of the prevention typology is that of system dysfunction: **systems not working properly together** to prevent homelessness as they should.
- We identify **four key system failings** that undermine homelessness prevention efforts and consider possible responses

(Fitzpatrick and Mackie, 2025)



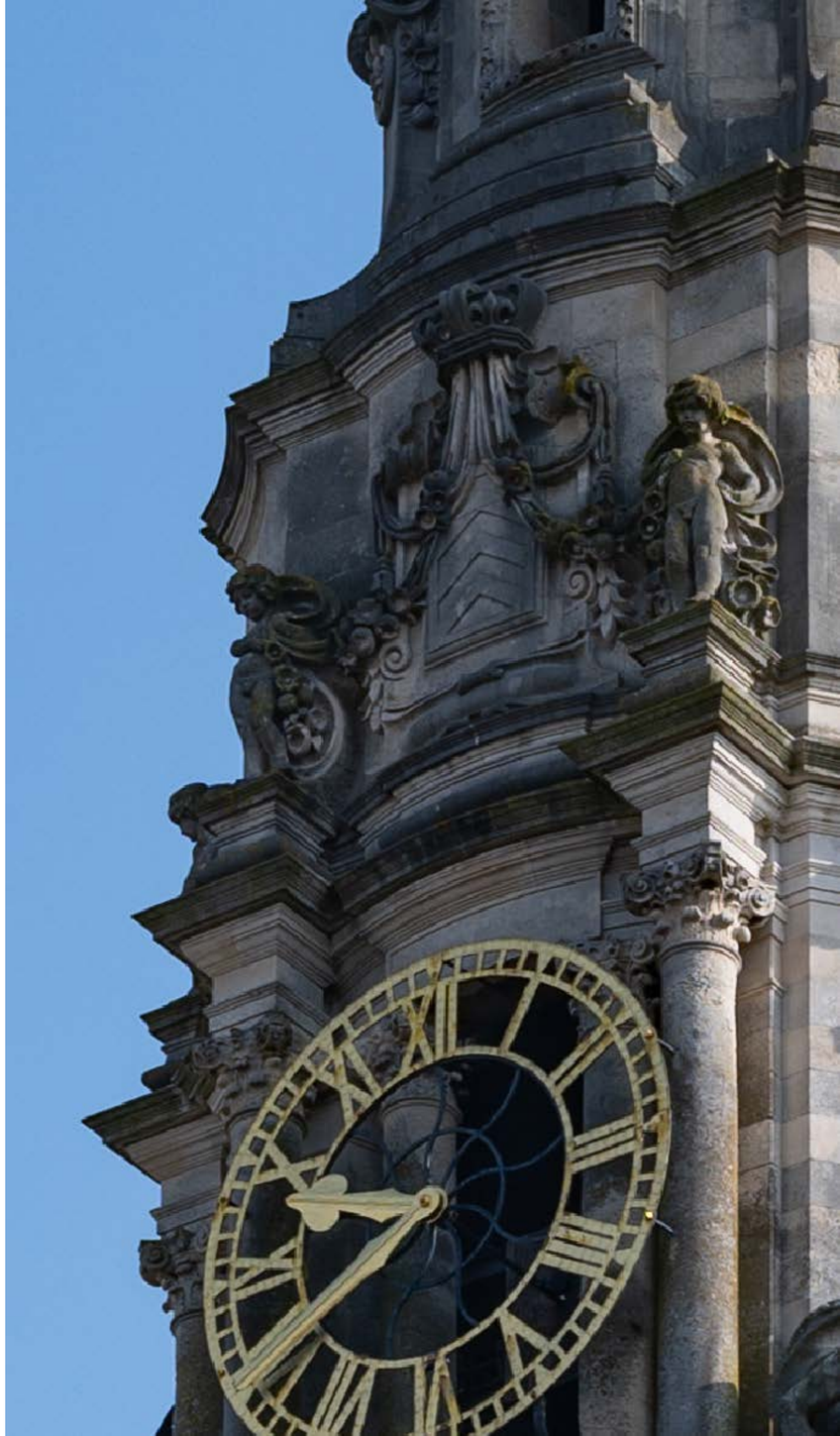
1. Shunting

- Synonymous with problematic ‘signposting’
- Driven by resources, policy ambiguity, personal values
- A solution here is to unambiguously place primary responsibility on one part of the system.
- Shunting of homeless families between local authority social services and housing departments was exactly the problem that the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 set out to solve:

  ‘…the series of Amendments are designed to ensure that no one will be left on the streets or shuttle-cocked between authorities…’ (Hansard, 22nd July 1977)

2. Withdrawal

- Once responsibility is placed on one part of the system, other key actors often withdraw.
- Prison leavers were designated as a Priority Need group in Wales in 2001. Prisons and probation services increasingly withdrew.
- Ask and Act legislative proposals in Scotland and Wales seek to address this.

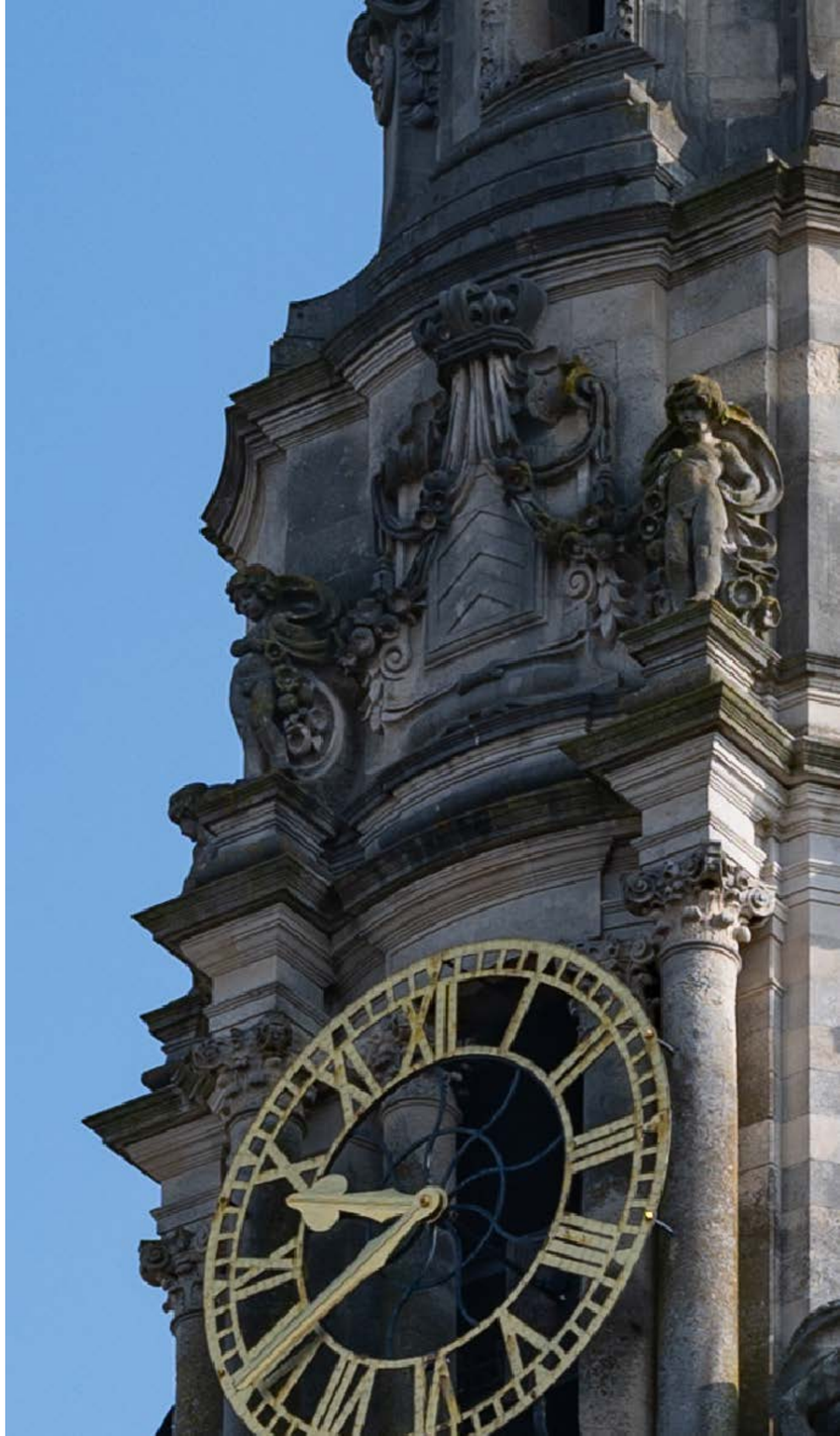


3. Uncoordinated

- Where homelessness prevention efforts are left in the hands of a multitude of services, system failure occurs when these efforts are uncoordinated.
- Most widely documented at point of emergency (e.g. Continuum of Care in the US).
- Organisations can get in each other’s way, duplication services, and failing to effectively assist those in greatest need.
- One solution is to require an overarching coordinating body and sometimes a unified point of system access

4. Contradiction

- Even more damaging than lack of coordination are instances where systems act in contradictory ways.
- E.g., one part of a local authority striving to prevent someone's homelessness, while another part pursues them for rent or council tax arrears.
- One interesting solution is a 'due regard duty' that requires all public services to give consideration to a particular issue (usually a social issue) and to consider this in all decision making (e.g. equalities or children's rights).



Equalities concerns

- Recent and overdue research attention paid to the structural and systemic racism that places some minoritised communities at highly disproportionate risk of homelessness in the UK
- The political context in the UK, Europe and North America is, alarmingly, pushing in the wrong direction.
- There is an urgent need for the homelessness sector to mobilise against this threat to equalities agendas.

Part 5
Conclusion

Preventing homelessness is challenging when the sector is busy saving lives at point of crisis — but if we don’t look upstream, who will?

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Thank you

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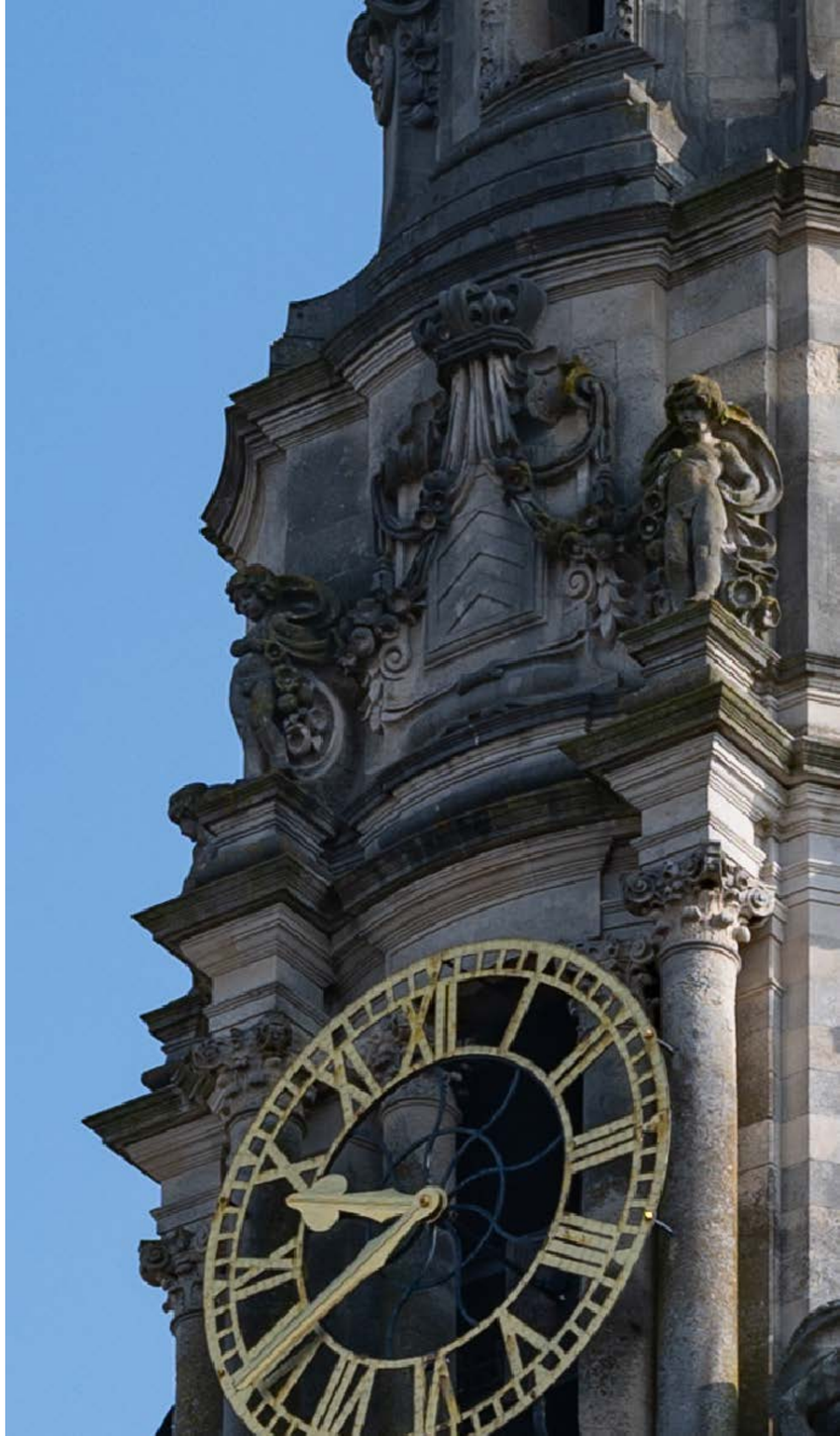

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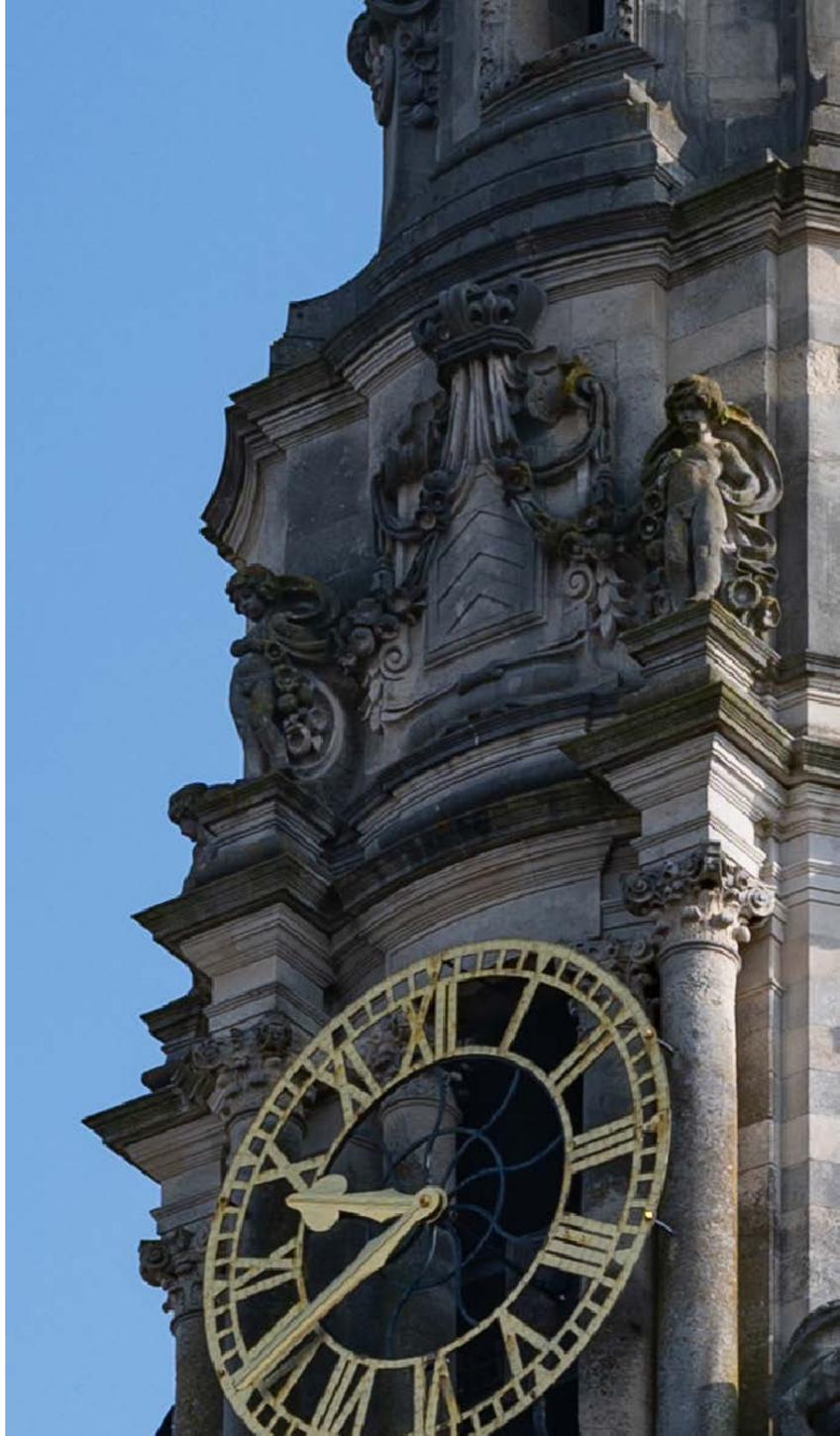
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