I'm Alice Tibbert, Director at Housing Matters, where we offer advice, support and advocacy to people facing homelessness or housing crisis in Bristol.

As you can imagine, demand is higher than ever. Across the UK, we're facing a housing and homelessness crisis, and Bristol wasn't prepared for the scale of what we now see.

Although Housing Matters has existed for sixty years, just five or six years ago housing advice wasn't a major need. For many years we had just one adviser working on a few hundred cases a year. But since the pandemic, rents have soared, evictions have risen, and more people than ever are turning to us because they simply have nowhere else to go. Today, housing advice is the second most requested form of advice in the city. And we have done our best to grow our organisation to meet that need, now 7 advisers, projected to work on close to 1,500 cases this year. But as demand has grown, so has another challenge: recruiting skilled housing advisers. It's not just us – this is an issue for our housing partners at Bristol Law Centre, Shelter and local authority teams. The city simply doesn't have enough trained advisers to meet the need.

So, we decided to do something about it.

We thought, if we couldn't recruit experienced advisers, we would develop our own.

In 2022, we launched the *Housing Matters Trainee Scheme* - a paid, structured route into housing advice for people who might not have formal experience, but who have the passion, empathy, and commitment that this work requires.

Because the heart of this job isn't just technical skill - it's people who care deeply about preventing homelessness and are willing to walk alongside clients through really difficult situations.

So, how does it work?

Our trainees join us for a year of intensive learning - combining formal training, close supervision, and real frontline experience. They start by shadowing our advice team, then gradually take on their own clients as their skills and confidence grow. It's an investment, but it pays off. This is now the fourth year of our programme, and five out of seven of our advice team have been trained through the scheme. They are now delivering complex housing casework and achieving incredible results for clients right across the city.

Let me give you one example.

Nancy was reaching the end of her training when she met Rich at one of our advice drop-in sessions. When Rich arrived, he was terrified of losing his home. His landlord was upping the rent and had threatened him with a Section 21 notice. However, Nancy quickly discovered that the notice was full of errors, making it invalid. He wouldn't be forced out illegally. She advised him on how to take action to halt the eviction. But, months later, he returned - the landlord was trying to evict him again, this time using a break clause that wasn't valid either. The consistent harassment had taken its toll, and his mental health was suffering.

After exploring all his options, Nancy supported him with a rehousing process, and soon after, helped him secure a new tenancy with a Housing Association.

That's what a well-trained adviser can do.

At the end of her year training, not only can Nancy assess the legal technicalities and explain your rights, but she can also holistically assess a client's needs. She knew that Rich was in a downward spiral and by hook or crook, by eviction or harassment Rich

would be leaving this property and given his circumstances, likely end up street homeless.

So, she took action, assessing his options, finding a more suitable home, helping him to secure a deposit and working in partnership with another advice centre to manage his other outstanding debts.

This all means that Rich is now settled in his new flat and ready to make a fresh start with opportunities to thrive.

Why does this matter nationally?

We've proved that local trainee schemes can work. They build capacity, create meaningful jobs, and ensure that communities have the skilled advisers they need. But small organisations like ours can't fix this problem alone. And I know we're not alone in facing these issues or putting in the effort and investment. I look around the room at my incredible advice sector peers who have joined us in this mission to develop the next generation of advisers. However, training advisers properly takes time and long-term investment.

If we want a sustainable advice sector that can respond to crisis when it hits - not just in Bristol, but across the country - we need a national advice workforce strategy.

One that recognises advice work as a skilled public service, provides structured routes into advice careers, and funds the training and supervision that makes it possible.

At Housing Matters, we're so proud of our small but mighty team. Together, we've developed so many incredible individuals, who joined us as trainees and are now changing lives every day.

We'll keep doing our part in Bristol, both with the aim to grow our own team but also to continue to equip the city with the experts it needs to address the crisis it faces.

But more widely, with national leadership and investment, this approach could help build the advice workforce our country urgently needs.