Health and well-being research

Everyone knows being homeless or living in poor housing is bad for your health, don’t they? Research has shown that people who are street homeless, living in temporary or overcrowded conditions or in unsuitable, cold and dangerous housing have worse physical and mental health than those in the general population.

Hidden
Thousands of people experience homelessness in Wales each year. People, including families with children, living in emergency accommodation, dangerous or poor conditions, short-term lets, with rent or mortgage debts, or quite simply homeless because of the lack of any affordable and suitable housing. The causes of homelessness and acute housing stress are diverse and the effects on people are immense, but the crisis still remains virtually hidden to those on the outside.

This briefing shows that homelessness in its broadest sense affects many more people than is usually realised and also impacts on the whole community. Using the results from a survey of families with children who approached Shelter Cymru’s advice services across Wales, this report puts the spotlight on the wider impact of the problem in terms of health, education and stress to families, and shows how homelessness comes at a cost to us all.

Homelessness – on the health agenda in Wales?
Building a sustainable and inclusive future for Wales is at the heart of the constitution of the National Assembly for Wales. This means forging a cross-cutting approach to social policy. Improving health is a strategic priority within this agenda and homelessness and housing appears to be at the centre of the Assembly Government’s vision of developing sustainable and cohesive communities and promoting social inclusion.

This paper considers the links between homelessness and mental and physical ill-health and the importance of combating homelessness and poor housing within the health agenda in Wales. The paper cites the links between homelessness and health identified in UK and international research and highlights the growth in homelessness witnessed during the late 1990s and beginning of the 21st century. The paper considers the significant increase of homelessness and assesses whether, in reality, sufficient practical measures are being taken to combat homelessness as a means to tackling ill-health in Wales.

We conclude that although Wales is making progress towards a more integrated approach to health and well-being and that there is a recognition of the need to tackle broader health determinants, there is a need to invest in more effectively tackling homelessness and exclusion. Integrating the broader housing, homelessness and health agendas could contribute to health gains in Wales.