An unnatural disaster: five years on

Report of the Commission of Inquiry into homelessness and poor housing conditions in Wales

Report – June 2011
Introduction

In 2006 Shelter Cymru held a Commission of Inquiry to address what we saw as a significant housing and homelessness problem in Wales. The conclusion of the Commission was that housing and homelessness had a low political and resource priority at all levels, despite the clear central importance of decent homes to people’s health, education and life chances and the positive impacts on local communities.

Five years on we have reconvened the Commission to investigate the extent of progress since 2006 and the scale of the challenges that remain. We heard evidence from a wide range of individuals including youth workers, tenants’ representatives, housing industry representatives, student representatives, landlords and members of the public. Their testimony formed the basis of the Commission’s conclusions, and a selection of their comments is included throughout this report.

Five years on

The first Commission of Inquiry made a number of recommendations aimed at tackling homelessness and housing need in Wales. These recommendations, detailed in the report, ‘An Unnatural Disaster’, included the following key areas for action:

1. To set an affordable homes target for Wales
2. To increase public investment in affordable homes and identify innovative ways in which private investment can be accessed
3. To elevate responses to homelessness to a corporate responsibility at Assembly level and at a local one
4. To develop a citizen centred approach to the delivery of homelessness services
5. Responding to housing need, planning and the delivery of services on a regional basis to optimise strategic responses resources and expertise and economies of scale

Since then, of course, the economic and funding situation has deteriorated considerably. Cuts to public spending, particularly housing and other welfare benefits, and the likelihood of growing unemployment are certain to exacerbate housing problems further for many people in the coming period.

The Commission recognises that there has been important progress in some areas since the report in 2006, echoing the Commission’s recommendations in a number of respects, including:

1. A commitment by the 2007 Government to decent homes for all
2. The Welsh Government setting and achieving an affordable homes target
3. A new 10-year homelessness plan and vision
4. Legislative powers to change the law on homelessness in Wales following a review
5. A housing Legislative Competency Order, which provided powers in a number of important areas including suspending the Right to Buy
6. Protecting Supporting People funding in the recent tough budget round
7. The introduction of the very successful Mortgage Rescue Scheme, which helped hundreds of people in Wales retain their homes
8. An increased focus on bring empty properties back into use
9. Developing more regional approaches to Supporting People commissioning.

However, many of the issues and problems that were presented to the Commission in 2006 are still with us in Wales.
Key areas of concern

The particular areas of concern to the Commission five years on are:

Responses to homelessness, housing need and poor conditions are still highly compartmentalised – the need to effectively draw in other key services such as health, social services, education etc. to ensure sustainable outcomes for people facing homelessness is as urgent now as it was in 2006.

There was no particular evidence to suggest that responses to homelessness are driven any more now by a more citizen centred approach than five years ago. By this we mean engaging users in the design of services, working with users as equals and clustering services around the user rather than users having to find their way around services.

Barriers, bureaucracy and punitive responses all still seem to be aspects of official responses to homelessness.

Although the last Government’s commitment to an affordable homes target was very welcome it was still well short of the estimated need of more than 5,000 below market homes for Wales every year.

There does not appear to have been enough innovative thinking about how the Welsh Government can facilitate different ways of bringing new non-public resources into the provision and renovation of homes in order to help create sustainable neighbourhoods. New sources of funding might also help to bring back into use empty homes for people in housing need.

It is not clear if there is enough long-term investment planning to encourage housing led regeneration and providing homes in the right places to stimulate local economic development.

‘...if you talk to Assembly Members, councillors or MPs they say [...] housing is quite often the number one issue you know post box, mail bag, surgery issue [...] but you don’t always get the resources following the argument and I think that’s a challenge going forward.’

Housing Industry Representative

Ways forward

We believe that Wales needs a long-term vision for people and their homes. We need to plan to provide sustainable homes in sustainable mixed communities that are responsive to people’s needs at different times in their lives and when circumstances change.

This means breaking away from the rigidity of current tenures and developing a greater range of intermediate housing options. We believe that many of the ideas and proposals that we made in our 2006 report ‘An Unnatural Disaster’ are still relevant for the current and future situation in Wales and wish to present again the original recommendations conclusions in that context.

But we also want to focus on a number of new emerging issues that have arisen since the last report.

Responding to homelessness

‘I think certainly at the beginning it would have helped me to know what was out there to help me, because I went into it blind [...] it wasn’t a case of, “We can’t help you but these may be able to help you.” To get that response out of the Council I had to go to Cheshire Council and ask them to get that response. My local Council weren’t willing to give me a helpful response. It was, “I’m sorry, you’re not within our local area, we can’t help you,” that was it.’

Youth Peer Educator

We believe it is vital that the review of homelessness law promised by the last Government now takes place.

The outcome of this review should be the creation of a new legal framework that crosses traditional service compartments and establishes a duty to respond corporately to homelessness. Such a response should compel Health, Social Services, Education and Housing Departments to collaborate on the subject of homelessness and related support. This would provide the opportunity to develop sustainable and holistic solutions for people facing or experiencing homelessness.
Preventing homelessness

‘...staff have, over the past twelve months, reported increased levels of risk presented by young people of the service, manifested in many different ways and high numbers of young people now we feel have multiple risk-factors present in their lives. These include higher levels of substance misuse, higher levels of alcohol use, more chaotic and challenging behaviours...’

Children’s Services Manager

A key concern for the first Commission was the need for greater resources to tackle homelessness. Today the economic situation is far worse than it was in 2006. The UK Government’s programme of welfare benefit reform and public sector spending cuts are highly likely to cause rises in housing problems and homelessness in years to come at the same time as services suffer severe cutbacks in resources.

Housing is the foundation of people’s well-being and in order to help people weather the economic storm we must safeguard access to housing-related advice and assistance. This means committing to protect spending on housing and homelessness services, including homelessness prevention in local authorities and the third sector.

Early and expert advice is an essential element in preventing homelessness. We commend the Welsh Government for its support of independent housing advice in Wales, particularly given the likely reduction in funds available to such services from legal aid. In addition, funding innovative schemes such as the ‘Work it Out’ homelessness prevention project, which takes information and advice into the workplace, is to be welcomed.

However, we also believe that there is a need for a national single independent triage service to assess people’s individual advice and support needs and signpost, when necessary, to the relevant specialist agency. Such a service should be promoted as widely as possible and be closely linked to the existing Welsh advice network. Such a service should include an in-built mechanism to promote and monitor the quality and consistency of the advice given.

‘At this time there’s no viable option open to these young people in terms of providing stable accommodation while their complex and multiple needs are met. The chaotic nature of their lives make it very difficult to maintain tenancies without the kind of intensive and coordinated support which would require substantial further investment.’

Children’s Services Manager
Health and homes

‘I regularly find couples who are in flats and you often find flats in rural areas above a garage or something like that, and it might be a one bedroom flat and they’re paying £400 a month and they’ve got a couple of little electric heaters in there, it’s incredibly damp, the floor is absolutely freezing cold and, of course, if the husband does go off to work or the partner goes off to work […] the stairs are often very difficult to get up and down so they’re practically housebound, you know, with kids all day in freezing damp conditions.’

Rural Enabler

Given the particular relationship between people’s housing conditions - or even if they have a home at all – and their physical and mental health, we also recommend that clear statutory links are made between health and housing in Wales.

The recent Shelter Cymru / Building Research Establishment report estimated that treating illnesses and accidents caused by poor housing costs the NHS in Wales £67m every year. Developing a clear link between health and housing is not only good for people’s well-being – it makes economic sense as well.

The private rented sector has a greater proportion of poor housing than any other sector in Wales. There needs to be a renewed focus on appropriate enforcement against landlords who endanger the health of tenants by persistently failing to provide decent quality accommodation.

Tenants should be able to rely on local authority public protection services to enforce statutory standards and should not have to fear eviction for challenging their landlord.

We propose that the Welsh Government give consideration to introducing a general statutory duty that requires co-operation between local health boards and local housing authorities and their partner organisations such as Registered Social Landlords. This would enable the impact of the lack of affordable homes, homelessness and poor conditions on local people’s health to be assessed more effectively and would provide the structure for a strategic response within a public health remit.

The need for more affordable homes

‘…it’s about supply, you know whichever way you cut it, whatever sort of good practice you want to bring in here, if there’s simply not enough homes to go round you’re always going to have a problem with people being squeezed out at the bottom end.’

Housing Industry Representative

It is clear that demand for affordable homes is outstripping supply and that the gap is going to grow over the coming years.

In our last report we urged the then Welsh Government to seek new ways of levering in additional finance to help meet housing need, and this must continue to be a priority. But we also believe that there is an urgent need to shift historic spending patterns so that more public funding is directed at providing affordable homes and stimulating increased levels of private finance.

However, we do not think that there is one mechanism or lever alone that can resolve the issue of the lack of affordable homes in Wales. A number of approaches to financing homes should be encouraged and piloted. In particular we suggest that mutual and co-operative housing models are explored, an approach that works well with the culture and values of Wales. We believe that such models can apply equally to new build and to bringing back into use empty homes, so contributing to sustainable neighbourhoods as well as affordable homes. There are examples of good practice in the UK and Europe that could provide a blueprint for a distinctly Welsh model.

‘…the landlord decided in the middle of the winter when you’ve got below freezing in the middle of the day, to change all the windows in the house and it was a two bedroom house and three young children living in the house […] And they were too afraid to actually speak up[…] But, the good news story is that we’ve actually had an exception site of six houses and they’ve been allocated a new affordable home and they are overjoyed and the difference it’s made to that family. I went to see them and it’s just…you know, it makes my job, that’s what it’s all about to see the rewards.’

Rural Enabler
The new Welsh Government should establish an approach to homelessness that is truly citizen centred. This means:

- Prioritising a review of homelessness legislation
- Sweeping away compartmentalised approaches and developing a corporate response that reflects the cross-cutting nature of homelessness
- Bringing prevention activity within the statutory framework
- Investigating new and effective ways of providing advice and support, including exploring the feasibility and benefits of a national single triage service with inbuilt quality standards.

In difficult economic times it is more important than ever to focus on effective provision of services that help people in housing need. The Welsh Government and local authorities should:

- Commit to protect spending on housing and homelessness services
- Protect spending on housing advice and support
- Protect spending on homelessness prevention.

The Welsh Government should address housing supply with a strategic approach built on innovative thinking around investment models, including:

- Mutual and co-operative models of home ownership
- Long-term investment planning for the provision and renovation of homes in the right places to create sustainable neighbourhoods
- A more ambitious target for affordable homes that meets the estimated need of over 5,000 below market homes every year.

In order to maximise the health-related cost savings of housing investment the Welsh Government should create clear statutory links between health and housing in Wales. We propose that this should include a statutory duty for Public Health Wales, NHS Health Boards, local authorities and their partners to:

- Assess the status and inequalities in health and well-being of local and national populations in relation to housing and homelessness
- Provide and share usable information on known interventions from within the international research and evaluation field of health, housing and homelessness
- Collaborate and pool resources to provide effective services and programmes to improve health and well-being within the field of housing and homelessness, and to facilitate others, including third sector and private sector bodies, to do the same.
Commissioners

The Archbishop of Wales, Dr Barry Morgan
Meri Huws, Pro Vice Chancellor of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David
Peter Owen, Head of Member Services at the Principality
Jonathan Adams, Special Projects Director for Capita Architecture
Robert Maskrey, Founding Director Maskreys Furnishings
Dr Dyfed Wyn Huws, public health physician and academic
Peter Johnson, freelance broadcaster & journalist
Dr Heledd Hayes, NUT Cymru Education Officer (retired)