Building on the past
Ending homelessness in Wales
Who we are:
Shelter Cymru, the housing and homelessness charity.

What we believe:
Bad housing wrecks lives and everyone should have a decent, suitable home.

What we do:
We help people find and keep a home.
We campaign for decent housing for all.

What we are
■ independent
■ challenging and authoritative
■ positive
■ inclusive
■ responsive
■ passionate and knowledgeable.

What we want:
■ an end to homelessness
■ a greater say for people over their homes and lives
■ a suitable, affordable and secure home for all
■ access to support for anyone who needs it
■ neighbourhoods that are safe, well served and where people choose to live.

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Introduction

We are having a new 10 year Homelessness Plan, a new Supporting People Strategy and an overarching new Housing Strategy for Wales. You can’t argue any more that housing and homelessness are not on the political agenda.

With impeccable timing the issue of affordable housing has also shot up the media agenda as the credit crunch bites, house prices fall and mortgage products disappear. Seldom has Shelter Cymru been in so much demand by the media to comment on the housing crisis, and it’s difficult not to fall into “I told you so” mode when asked why it has happened and what happens next.

But the market correction so long predicted by many of us may have a silver lining if it means that a wider recognition of housing need and homelessness and the need for more affordable housing takes hold. Most importantly a mood of “something must be done” among the public of Wales could help to not only keep the issue high on the political agenda but also provide the consensus for increased investment so vitally needed.

At all levels the call is for government intervention to save banks and to prop up markets. This mood may also be translating into the need for increased help for people facing or experiencing homelessness.

This could be the moment when we take tackling homelessness out of its often disregarded and misunderstood little compartment and make it central to our efforts to create sustainable communities, rebuild lives, combat poverty and ill health and develop new approaches that work with the aspirations and hopes of people in housing need.

With new powers and commitment the Welsh Assembly Government can take the lead on this new approach, but all partners in Wales, statutory and third sector will need to fully commit to playing their part.

That will mean a change in how all of us think and work. That’s the debate our 2008 conference wants to start.

The journey so far

The legal framework relating to homelessness is now over 30 years old and has helped many thousands of people in Wales since its inception in 1977. Homelessness however is still here. 6,336 households experienced statutory homelessness in Wales during 2007. There are no official figures for those dealt with under the homelessness prevention agenda and those sleeping on friends’ floors or in other hidden homelessness situations do not appear in any statistical returns.

The debate continues about:
- Who is homeless?
- Did they cause their own homelessness?
- Should they be helped?
- When should we assist people and how? and
- What about those awkward people who fall outside the legislative safety net?

This report charts the introduction of homelessness legislation and the major developments in terms of housing and homelessness in Wales since 1977. Finally, it outlines Shelter Cymru’s vision for a framework to end homelessness in Wales.

John Puzey
Director
**Pre 1977**
The National Assistance Act 1948 laid the foundation for the Welfare State.

The Act terminated the existing Poor Law, and The National Assistance Board and local authorities were to provide help for persons in need.

Section 21, National Assistance Act 1948 - Duty to provide residential accommodation to those people aged 18 years or over ‘who by reason of age, illness, disability or any other circumstances are in need of care and attention which is not otherwise available to them’.

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**1977**
The Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 places the first ever duty on local authorities to help homeless people.

The Act provokes much debate not least from those who thought it signalled the demise of waiting lists and the over prioritisation of homeless households. An invitation to be irresponsible really: ‘Having pregnancy as a criterion for allocating a flat surely is an invitation to the irresponsible. In effect, that is what is being said to a young couple who years ago may have waited patiently with their name on a housing list to get a home and then waited a few more years before starting a family. What is being said to girls in that position is “Get pregnant, and you will get a home”.’

David Mellor, MP for Putney

14,481 houses were completed during this year. 6,991 were social housing units.

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**1979**
Housing explodes onto the Welsh scene as Meibion Glyndwr begins its campaign against second homes. Around 300 are targeted in the next 25 years.

‘Someone somewhere knows something.’
Investigating Police Officer.

In the political spectrum, Welsh devolution is rejected by 4 - 1.

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**1980**
The Housing Act 1980 introduces security of tenure in social housing, the Right to Buy for council tenants, and a shorthold tenure for the private rented sector.

A property owning democracy.
Wales has long been hot on home ownership and the Right to Buy was too good an opportunity to miss. The Prime Minister of the time spells out the reason and the ideology behind the reform.

‘Michael Heseltine has given to millions - yes, millions - of council tenants the right to buy their own homes. It was Anthony Eden who chose for us the goal of “a property-owning democracy”. But for all the time that I have been in public affairs, that has been beyond the reach of so many, who were denied the right to the most basic ownership of all - the homes in which they live. They wanted to buy. Many could afford to buy. But they happened to live under the jurisdiction of a socialist council, which would not sell and did not believe in the independence that comes with ownership. Now Michael Heseltine has given them the chance to turn a dream into reality.’

Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister, in her speech to the Conservative party conference in Brighton on 10 October 1980.
Shelter Cymru is established as Welsh Housing Aid (at that time part of the Shelter National Housing Aid Trust).

The 1982 conference report sums up the principle behind the organisation’s establishment and it has remained as the underlying reason for its work since.

‘In the complex field of housing rights, housing aid is about supporting and helping people to unravel their housing problems and pursue the best course to improve their situation.’

1982
14,943 homes are sold under Right To Buy at an average price of £7,516.

The Social Security and Housing Benefit Act establishes the housing benefit system - aimed at simplifying the complex arrangements that had been previously developed and helping low income households to pay their accommodation costs.

1983
In the wake of the Falklands war, the Conservatives win the General Election and take a record 14 seats in Wales. Neil Kinnock becomes the new Labour leader.

8,674 homes are sold under the Right to Buy while local authorities and housing associations complete 2,267 properties.

5,008 homeless cases - out of 9,191 - are accepted by local authorities.

1984
The Miners strike hits communities across Wales.

Welsh Housing Aid becomes independent from Shelter in England.

Chief housing officers in south Wales bemoan the lack of investment into improving housing in Wales.

Around 341,000 people in Wales receive Housing Benefit. (Hansard January 1984).

1985
The Housing Act 1985 introduces the housing fitness standard.

Housing Benefit is derided as the ‘biggest administrative fiasco in the history of the Welfare State’ (The Times).

Welsh Housing Aid opens its Wrexham housing advice service.

1986
Welsh Housing Aid changes its name to Shelter Cymru.

Housing conditions are a big issue and 199,000 houses in Wales are said to be unfit for human habitation. This is 19.5% of the stock.

The conditions of houses in multiple occupation is in the news with the death of a man in a bedsit fire in Pontypridd.
Some separate structures for Welsh housing are established: Tai Cymru opens for business with the remit of increasing the supply of well managed, good quality housing for those unable to meet their needs through purchase or rental at open market prices.

The Welsh Federation of Housing Associations is established.

12,468 homes are sold under the Right to Buy at an average price of £12,319.

Shelter Cymru claims the official homelessness statistics for 1989 - when there were 14,450 enquiries, 11,489 cases presented and 7,805 cases accepted - are just the tip of the iceberg.

With the advent of the 1988 Housing Act and house price increases, Shelter Cymru’s Director Val Feld paints a bleak picture of the future: ‘Looking ahead to the 1990’s it is hard to see hope for homeless people. Despite our efforts, homelessness in Wales increased by 17% last year and in May 1989 the National Housing Forum pronounced the housing problems in Wales “the worst in the UK”. Our fears are that massive house price increases in Wales and high mortgage rates will bring increased homelessness in the future.’

The Children Act is introduced but, in practice, it fails to resolve the conflict between housing departments and social services teams as to who helps whom.
1991
The housing market crash takes hold and over 10,000 households in Wales face possession action.

The Welsh Office publishes Housing in Wales: An Agenda for Action with three key Welsh objectives:

- Increase home ownership to around 80% by the year 2000 (no similar target existed for England). This was quietly abandoned in 1996.
- Create diversity and choice for people who could not, or did not want to, become home owners.
- Improve the quality of housing and the lives of occupants.

On its 10th anniversary, Shelter Cymru estimates that 65,000 people experience homelessness in one form or another in Wales and calls for a radical answer to the Welsh housing problem - ‘house prices in many areas would be pegged by law within a narrow band set by people’s ability to pay.’

Housing is again a subject of protest.
The lack of affordable local housing in communities in Wales hits the headlines as two Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg activists receive prison sentences as the result of protests in support of a Property Act.

1992
Neil Kinnock resigns as Labour leader after the Conservatives win again in the General Election.

The recession in the housing market continues to bite, with falling prices and increasing interest rates.

Cynog Dafis MP seeks the repeal of intentional homelessness but is told in the Commons that this will not happen. His request that the Secretary of State for the Environment ‘make it his policy to provide funding for local authorities and housing associations to enable them to take on mortgage debts’ is similarly rejected. (Hansard, November 1992).

1994
The homelessness legislation has helped 250,000 people in Wales since 1977 but reform is imminent. Shelter Cymru campaigns against the proposals to reduce the rights of homeless people.

Shelter Cymru launches its legal casework service and a national housing telephone helpline.

Government reorganisation is coming with the Local Government (Wales) Act 1994 setting the stage for 22 local authority areas.

1995
Negative equity affects households across the UK including around 17,500 in Wales.

2,434 units of social housing are completed, 2,258 by housing associations. 2,265 homes are sold under the Right To Buy at an average price of £17,000.
Following intense debate, the Housing Act 1996 erodes some of the rights provided by the 1977 Act and introduces short-term assistance.

‘Investment in housing cannot be measured only in terms of money and finance; the value of investment in homes has a tremendous effect on people’s lives. To be homeless can be crippling. Not only is it very stressful: it is also very damaging to people’s physical health. Homelessness means that people are often excluded - they are divided from society and shut out from opportunity, education, meaningful work, health care, financial support and, fundamentally, decent housing. Quite apart from everything else that the Government are proposing, these reforms are really something of a con trick. Putting homeless people into temporary accommodation and then on to the waiting lists will not make the waiting lists any shorter or make any difference to the speed with which most of the people currently on them will be housed. The Government’s proposals will not reduce housing need or housing demand and they will not increase housing supply.’ (Diana Maddock MP, Hansard 20 Nov 1995: Column 377).

Despite opposition, the Single Room Rent that restricts the amount of housing benefit that single people under 25 years of age are eligible for is introduced. At least some of its consequences are foreseen at the time:

‘The limitation of housing benefit amounts for young people under the age of 25 will have a series of malign consequences. It will force young people out of bedsits and one-bedroom flats into inadequate, unregulated and potentially dangerous multi-occupation dwellings.’ (Chris Smith MP, Shadow Social Security Secretary, Hansard, House of Commons, 29 Nov 1995, Col 1216).

Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reveals the need for additional ‘social’ housing will average between 4,000 and 5,000 new homes a year in 1991-2001 and 5,000 a year in 2001-2011.

The Labour Party wins a landslide victory in the General Election after 18 years of Conservative rule. Its devolution policy means a new future in Wales.

This is what one eminent Welsh Conservative MP said about devolution barely 15 months earlier:

‘My real complaint against the Opposition and their obsession with devolution is that they distract attention from Wales’s real need to strive and battle ever harder to develop its economy and to bring increased prosperity to its people. A Welsh assembly will not create jobs, except for the boyos of the Labour party perhaps. It will not bring a single foreign or British investor to Wales - it will scare them away. It will sap such power as Wales has in Westminster and in Whitehall and dissipate scarce resources in what will prove to be a petty squabbling shop rather than a talking shop. Wales will be torn apart. We shall see north versus south, the valleys versus Cardiff, and unitary authorities versus the assembly. Of course, I wish that it were all going to be different and that we would be inspired by our own assembly to achieve the great advances that our people need and are capable of achieving, but our history is against it, and I fear the worst.’ (Sir Wyn Roberts MP, Hansard 20 Nov 1995: Column 373).

On 18 September 1997 Wales goes to the polls and decides with JUST over 50% to establish a devolved assembly.

A report by the Institute of Welsh Affairs says that:

‘Wales has the worst housing in Britain, and the oldest in Europe. And it will get worse, jeopardising hopes of economic recovery, without fresh investment.’

It calls for more investment in social housing and ‘the creation of local housing companies with a mixture of private, local authority and community involvement.’ (Malcolm Fisk and Dale Hall, Institute of Welsh Affairs) Reported in the Times 7/3/1997.

With devolution on the horizon Shelter Cymru begins the call for a National Homelessness Strategy for Wales.
### 1998

**The Government of Wales Act establishes the National Assembly for Wales.**

8.5% - or 98,000 occupied homes - of the Welsh housing stock is unfit.

### 1999

**On 6th May 1999 Wales elects its first National Assembly for 600 years.**

Shelter Cymru calls on the Assembly to extend the homelessness legislation in Wales and increase the priority need categories.

### 2000

**Paul Bevan’s Rough sleeping in Wales report is published and makes wide ranging recommendations, including the introduction of local homelessness champions and reiterating the calls for a national homelessness strategy.**

Homelessness figures rise with 12,804 applications and 4,156 cases of priority need. This trend continues for another 4 years.

### 2001

**Extending priority need**

Following lobbying by Shelter Cymru, the Assembly passes its first piece of homelessness legislation and introduces new priority need categories under s189 of the Housing Act 1996. This legislation gives priority need for homelessness assistance to groups including 16 and 17 year olds and prisoners released as homeless.

Although the Order caused controversy and misinformation is rife, research supports the need to tackle housing need, even amongst the most controversial group in the order.

‘Research suggests that stable accommodation can make a difference of over 20 per cent in terms of reduction in reconviction. This is unsurprising as the need to look for housing makes it hard to find a job and earn money legitimately - over three times as many ex-prisoners with an address on release were in paid employment as those without an address.’ (Home Office)

The Homelessness Commission is established. Shelter Cymru continues to call for a National Homelessness Strategy and one of the Commission recommendations is that: ‘The National Assembly should adopt a strategy for addressing homelessness in Wales that should form part of the wider National Housing Strategy for Wales’.

The Assembly Government sets a target that all social housing must meet the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) by 2012 but - with the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement rules - where does the finance come from, and will this herald a rush to stock transfer?

House prices have been increasing year on year since 1996 but in 2001 the increases begin to get steeper. The roller-coaster is underway everyone aboard or not.

**Shelter Cymru introduces its Education Service to provide young people with vital information about the difficulties they could face when leaving home.**
2002
The legislative safety net is again amended with the introduction of the Homelessness Act 2002 and the changes made to Part VI on the allocation of accommodation and Part VII on homelessness. It includes new duties on local authorities to:
- Carry out a review of homelessness in their area.
- Publish a strategy to tackle and prevent homelessness.
- Provide settled accommodation for unintentionally homeless people in priority need; and
- Reforms to the framework by which councils allocate housing.

2003
It's a big year
The Assembly Government launches the National Homelessness Strategy for Wales 2003-2008 - the first strategy in any of the UK countries. The strategy aims to set a national lead for tackling homelessness at a local level and has 22 strategic objectives.

‘The Welsh Assembly Government believes that everyone in Wales should be able to live in a good quality, affordable home. People need this to live stable, constructive lives. It recognises that homelessness is one of the most serious forms of social exclusion, and has a major effect on all other aspects of a person’s well-being. A home is more than a physical structure; it represents a sense of belonging, security and of personal affirmation.’ (National Homelessness Strategy, 2003)

It also publishes the first separate Code of Guidance for Local Authorities on the Allocation of Accommodation and Homelessness.

Following a vote by tenants, Bridgend County Borough Council becomes the first to complete a large-scale voluntary transfer of its housing stock. Valleys to Coast Housing is created as a result.

411 social rented units are built and 6,839 units are sold to the Right to Buy.

2004
The Housing Act 2004 introduces new regulation for the private rented sector, tenancy deposit protection, HMO licensing (finally) and a new housing fitness regime (with the introduction of the Housing Health and Safety Rating System).

The Westminster Government establishes pathfinder areas to test a new way of paying housing benefit to households in the private rented sector. Conwy and then Pembrokeshire participate.

Statutory homelessness reaches its highest level in Wales since records began in 1978, with 10,017 households homeless and in priority need.

There is a 23% increase in average house prices between 2003 and 2004 and the trend of increasing mortgage possession claims and orders begins.

Stock transfer remains contentious with a ‘no’ vote by tenants in Wrexham. It leaves the council with the dilemma of how to fund improvements to the stock.

The Richard Commission considers the future structure, powers and role of the Assembly and Welsh Government.

Shelter Cymru’s Education Service introduces a 3 year peer education project to involve young people who have experienced homelessness to relate their experiences to their peers.
The advent of the Prevention Agenda heralds a drop in statutory homelessness but at a time of housing market pressure, expensive rented accommodation and diminishing social housing, where have the people gone?

Housing affordability continues to worsen and research shows that the price of a 2/3 bedroom house in Wales is 4.6 times the average annual income for those in full-time employment compared to the 2.9 ratio during the early 1990’s.

43% of younger working households are unable to buy a 2/3 bedroom house within the lowest quartile of house prices while 22% cannot afford to buy within the lowest decile of prices.

The Living in Wales Survey shows that unfitness has decreased - 57,000 occupied homes are unfit compared to 98,000 in 1998.

2006
The work of Shelter Cymru and partners pays off and the Assembly introduces legislation on B&B and temporary accommodation.

The second National Homelessness Strategy is published with homelessness prevention top of the agenda.

‘The aim should be to enable people, as early as possible, to locate their own solutions to their housing problem, which will very often be in the private rented sector.’ (National Homelessness Strategy 2006-2008).

As activity in the owner occupied housing market continues to grow, by the end of 2006 the average house price in Wales has increased by 115% since 2001.

The Government of Wales Act 2006 heralds the new face of devolution and greater Assembly powers.

Realising the need to provide coordinated and specialist support to people faced with homelessness because of alleged anti-social behaviour, Shelter Cymru introduces its groundbreaking Valleys Inclusion Pilot Project in Caerffili and Rhondda Cynon Taf.

In Shelter Cymru’s 25th year John Puzey identifies the work of the organisation and the challenges that are faced.

‘The nature of the problems Shelter Cymru was set up to tackle has changed, but the scale is still daunting with many thousands of lives in Wales blighted by homelessness. This is unjust and wrong and we remain firmly committed to the need for change and our belief that everyone should have a home. The lack of affordable homes is creating a more divided Wales and threatening social cohesion and stability. Many more people are now unable to buy or rent suitable homes, not only seriously affecting the health and life chances of increasing numbers of people, but also potentially creating an atmosphere of discontent and intolerance.

Housing inflation is widening the divide - increasing the wealth of many at the expense of others who are unable to afford to get on the first rung of home ownership. Wales is now the least affordable region for housing outside of London and southern England. This, in turn, increases pressure for scarce rented accommodation leading to many people experiencing homelessness’.
2007

The Assembly elections come and go but the question of who will govern Wales is not settled. A period of intense discussion leads to the Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru coalition and the One Wales agenda.

The One Wales document commits the coalition to ensuring that there is enough housing to meet people’s needs in all communities. There is a commitment to provide 6,500 new affordable homes over the term of the Assembly.

A snapshot survey by Shelter Cymru finds that there are over 80,000 households on waiting lists in local authority areas across Wales.

In the home ownership sector, with over 9,000 claims issued, mortgage possession actions continue to rise and reach their highest since 1992 as Welsh households face high house prices and unmanageable debt.

Prices continue to rise - a holiday chalet is on sale in Abersoch in Gwynedd for £500,000 - but there are signs of falling house prices to add to the increasing repossessions.

‘In some ways the housing market has resembled a drunk standing at the bar in some back-street boozer. With every drink he has, people think he must soon stagger and tumble over. But he doesn’t. He keeps drinking and he remains standing. He stays up for so long that eventually people decide they were wrong to think he would fall over. But then, just as they decide he will never fall, he takes the last drink and finally tumbles to the ground.’ (Ashley Seagar, The boom is over, the price must yet be paid, The Guardian, 19 February 2007).

In the financial year ending in March 2007 there were 9,934 housing completions. 346 of which were social housing units. A further 391 social housing units were started.

Swansea tenants vote ‘no’ in the stock transfer ballot.

The Assembly, as the Assembly Government, applies for a Legislative Competence Order on affordable housing and controlling the Right to Buy in Wales.

2008

The credit crunch is here
Possession actions continue to rise, banks pull mortgage offers and house prices fall. The word CRASH tentatively re-emerges and house prices in Wales fall by 4.7% during the first three months of the year. The biggest fall since the early 1990’s.

The Local Housing Allowance revolution is here for households in the private rented sector.

Funding the Welsh Housing Quality Standard
Seven local authorities have approved transfer and three others are planning to ballot tenants. Seven authorities have decided they have sufficient resources to improve stock and three continue to debate the options. The high profile no votes in Wrexham and Swansea still leave these authorities considering their position with less than four years to go until the deadline of 2012.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation Commission on Rural Housing in Wales reports that there is increasing unmet housing need in rural areas with the problems of affordability becoming more acute.

The Assembly Government gears up for a 10 year plan to tackle homelessness and starts work on the new National Housing Strategy.
Tackling homelessness in the future

Is it now time for a fundamental change? The homelessness legislation has helped, and continues to help, thousands of households in Wales every year. It is however over 30 years old and was introduced in a very different environment certainly as far as housing is concerned and, it could be argued, people’s aspirations. It is a restrictive and inflexible all or nothing package, it gives people little control over options and it maintains a basically punitive approach.

Shelter Cymru does not believe that changing the law in itself will end homelessness. But it does believe that changing the legal framework can make a huge difference to how services are delivered, resources deployed and how services and citizens interact.

A new citizen-centred approach, incorporating both changes to the legislative framework and developing a broader cooperative partnership framework between a range of services must be the way forward. The key aspects of this will be that all homeless households are assisted into suitable homes which meet their immediate needs and, when necessary, are provided with a package of support that can help address their longer term aspirations in a sustainable way.

Helping people acquire the skills required to live independently is crucial. Homelessness assistance needs to be integrated with help to access other services such as employment/training, education and health.

The system will incorporate incentives and rehabilitation rather than knee jerk exclusion. The removal of the ‘priority need’ barrier and a fundamental reform of ‘intentional homelessness’ are key elements of these changes.

Clearly resources and capacity to deliver this new approach are fundamental, but equally much can be done now to ensure services are optimised and partnerships developed.

The underlying elements of any new legislative and service framework should include:

- **Universality** - All people facing or experiencing homelessness should have the right to assistance to secure a suitable home. We should ensure that all people in Wales have a right not to be homeless.

- **Preventing homelessness** - Prevention and options work should become part of the statutory framework and be linked to flexible tenure responses.

- **Flexible responses** - The home option could be a short-term lease in a private or social rented property, a longer-term lease, a low cost home ownership scheme or a secure or assured social tenancy depending on needs, circumstances and availability.

- **Accountability** - Services must be accountable to the people who use them. The aim must be to support citizens so they are able to engage with services as equals, so that options are mutually agreed increasing the likelihood of sustainable outcomes.

Information and knowledge - A public information and education campaign to ensure that people understand their rights and what they should do if they are experiencing housing difficulties. Such a campaign should reach out to all citizens so that a greater understanding and tolerance of housing need and homelessness is encouraged.
Shelter Cymru remains convinced that the essential elements in combating homelessness are more affordable housing supported by a framework of law and rights. Part of this is to reform and re-energise the current legal system that means-tests and restricts homelessness assistance.

We believe this provides the foundation for an inclusive and progressive framework to tackle homelessness and exclusion in Wales. A framework that increases rights but also increases the opportunities for independent living and the exercising of responsibilities.

We need a well resourced approach based on working with aspirations and hopes and building a partnership with people. This approach could transform the experience of homelessness and housing need from one that is often the start of a downward spiral of poverty and deprivation - to one that signals a new start in life.