



## **Trapped on the Streets**

Understanding rough sleeping  
in Wales

## Our Vision

Everyone in Wales should have a decent and affordable home: it is the foundation for the health and well-being of people and communities.

## Mission

Shelter Cymru's mission is to improve people's lives through our advice and support services and through training, education and information work. Through our policy, research, campaigning and lobbying, we will help overcome the barriers that stand in the way of people in Wales having a decent affordable home.

## Values

- Be independent and not compromised in any aspect of our work with people in housing need.
- Work as equals with people in housing need, respect their needs and help them to take control of their lives.
- Constructively challenge to ensure people are properly assisted and to improve good practice.

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# Introduction

Street homelessness in Wales is an increasingly visible and pressing issue. Anybody walking the streets of our cities and towns can't fail to notice how many people are bedding down in the open air.

Evidence suggests there has been an increase in rough sleeping of 10 per cent in the space of a year, from 313 to 345. This is on top of a 30 per cent increase the previous year. And it confirms what many service providers in Wales, including ourselves, have been reporting.

We know that there is good work being carried out across Wales to prevent and tackle homelessness. However, for people sleeping rough something has gone wrong and the solutions available have clearly failed.

Current responses to street homelessness don't seem to be fully working, and the frustration of service providers is all too clear. Increased use of public space protection orders, dispersal orders, hostile architecture, and schemes to discourage begging all point to a deepening official intolerance of rough sleeping.

To successfully address the issue we first need to fully understand it. Why are the numbers of people sleeping rough increasing year on year? What are the factors that are keeping people on the streets – and how can we overcome them?

We acknowledge that there is a great deal of good practice taking place in Wales that is not represented within this report due to the aims of the study, which are to:

- Examine who is currently sleeping rough
- Investigate how people who were sleeping rough had initially become homeless
- Explore the challenges and barriers facing people who are sleeping rough in Wales.

## How we did the research

We spoke to 100 people who are currently sleeping rough in Cardiff, Swansea and Wrexham. We also interviewed 25 professionals involved in homelessness and related services, and we held two events where we presented the testimonies of street homeless people and worked together with 70 professionals to reflect on the findings and develop a raft of solutions.

A total of 100 ethnographic conversations were conducted – these inform the report, with case studies and stories used to illustrate experiences throughout.

A subsample of 35 people also completed a structured survey.

## Who is on the streets?

We found that certain groups were particularly prominent among the people we spoke to:

- **Prison leavers** – Priority need status was given under Welsh legislation in 2001 to people leaving prison who had a local connection to the local authority. However, changes to the priority categories under the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 mean that now a person is only in priority need if they have a local connection with the area and are vulnerable as a result of being an ex-prisoner
- **Care leavers** – often due to loss of a tenancy, exclusion from support services and difficulties linked to shared accommodation housing benefit rates
- **People with complex unmet support needs** – including but not limited to people with poor mental health, substance misuse issues, offending, learning difficulties and domestic abuse
- **Couples** – a lack of couple's provision was often cited as the cause of them sleeping rough.

The professionals we spoke with share a perception that the age profile of people sleeping rough has lowered in recent years, with increasing numbers of younger people on the streets in Wales.

One of the possible factors behind this apparent increase among 25-34 year olds may be the more prevalent use of tenancies in shared accommodation, and the failure of those tenancies. We spoke to a number of people within this age group who actually had a tenancy within a shared setting, but due to antisocial behaviour (ASB) or other issues felt they were unable to stay there. We also spoke to people who had previously held a tenancy within shared accommodation and had lost their accommodation for a range of issues including rent arrears, ASB and abandonment.

Professionals also told us that they struggled to find appropriate shared accommodation that is affordable and private landlords willing to accept housing benefit. The majority of people under the age of 35 who we spoke to told us that they didn't want to live in shared accommodation and wanted their own home.

## Journeys into homelessness

The research found that causes of homelessness are wide-ranging and include a mix of individual, structural and social factors. There is extensive evidence to explain the causes of both homelessness and rough sleeping: the rise in both can be explained by increasing financial pressures such as welfare reform, the rising cost of living, and low-paid job insecurity, coupled with increasing numbers of people struggling with complex unmet support needs.

Despite the wide range of causes of homelessness, there are clearly opportunities to improve prevention work. People who took part on our research had a diverse range of suggestions for interventions that might have prevented them becoming homeless. Improved prevention activity is likely to reduce the number of people becoming homeless, however it is also likely that some people will still experience crisis and lose their homes. What happens at that point is hugely important.

## Could anything have prevented people becoming homeless?

Despite the complexity of people's issues, most felt that their homelessness was not inevitable and could have been prevented. A large majority of people were able to point to interventions that could have prevented their homelessness. Most people felt that they may have needed multiple interventions but that either the service was inadequate or inaccessible.

### Emergency accommodation, hostel provision, and the lure of the street-based lifestyle

We found significant problems with the way that emergency accommodation is provided. In two of the local authority areas there was a distinct lack of emergency accommodation which led to people relying on bed and breakfasts. In these areas the accommodation was either just totally scarce or was managed in a way which meant that the rules were inconsistent with people's needs and situations, particularly for those with active addictions.

In the other area the main reason people were sleeping rough was due to a reluctance to access the available accommodation. The reasons for this included fear of other residents, exposure to substances, risk of sexual exploitation and negative perceptions of the service. This was particularly evident with larger scale shelters.

# Trapped on the streets: the 'glue' of street homelessness

Once people were sleeping rough, there were a number of issues that worked together to form a 'glue' which, by placing hurdles in the way of accessing effective assistance, was trapping people on the streets. In looking at the solutions to end rough sleeping the focus needs to be on addressing the factors that create this 'glue' while also improving the solutions available when people initially become homeless.

### Navigating the system

The current housing and homelessness system is incredibly complex. People described trying to navigate their way through housing, welfare, health and employment services, all of which are under pressure and struggling with the increase in demand of their services. Accessing these services often takes considerable time and effort; for people who are sleeping rough this is time, effort and resilience that they just don't have. This was one of the most significant factors in people struggling to break the cycle of homelessness and particularly rough sleeping.

As well as the barriers to making a homelessness application, we found that once an application had been made there were gaps in the legislative framework that were presenting very real and perceived barriers to people. Priority need, local connection and intentionality decisions were frequently cited as reasons why people who were sleeping rough were unable to solve their homelessness. This was an incredibly complex issue to unpick due to people's incomplete understanding of these legal concepts, both among people sleeping rough and among professionals.

## **Accessing Support**

Nearly every person we spoke with reported having a support need of some description. Most prevalent was a mental health issue coupled with a substance misuse issue: often known as 'dual diagnosis'. We also spoke with people who had other wide ranging health needs and struggled to access support and treatment. We frequently heard of services being under pressure resulting in longer waiting times, higher thresholds for care, and reduced accessibility for people on the streets.

## **Moving on from an institution**

Resettlement from an institution (such as hospitals, prisons or children's homes) emerged as a huge issue for participants. We heard evidence that pathways into, out of and between services are often dysfunctional and ineffective for this group. These failures of services to act in a joined-up way are key causes of homelessness and rough sleeping and can be the first step into a lifetime of insecure housing for some people.

## **Trauma**

We asked people who were sleeping rough about their childhoods and particularly Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and the findings were astounding. Nearly every person we spoke to disclosed numerous ACEs. A significant number had experienced sexual abuse as a child. The 35 people sleeping rough were the parents of approximately 31 children.

Even though professionals said that they recognised the impact of trauma on people sleeping rough, quite often their responses and actions didn't reflect the principles of trauma informed practice.

## **Rough sleeping and enforcement**

People described being re-traumatised by negative experiences with enforcement agencies including housing, police and health.

Among the numerous experiences we heard of were interactions with police and local authority enforcement officers. These interactions often involved use of enforcement powers such as dispersal orders under section 35 of the Anti-Social Behaviour Crime and Policing Act 2014, as well as confiscation of possessions such as tents and sleeping bags.

## **Professional attitudes**

One of the most unexpected themes to emerge from our study related to professional attitudes. Although we heard evidence of many positive and person-centred attitudes, we also found evidence of moral judgements, personal opinions and gatekeeping among some people working within the housing and homelessness sector.

Sometimes these attitudes were voiced by people who had key roles working with street homeless people. In essence, what this means is that some decisions are being made about assistance for entrenched rough sleepers by professionals who have an entrenched cynicism and mistrust of the people they are responsible to help and support. This mistrust stood out as particularly stark among other professional attitudes that put trust and relationship-building first.

# The way forward

The findings from this study echo a growing body of robust international evidence in ‘what works’ to help people sleeping rough. What is needed is a much swifter, more assertive, and more person-centred response from services.

The focus needs to be on getting people into a good home with the right support as quickly as possible. ‘Staircasing’ people from the street into hostels and from there into move-on accommodation does work for a proportion of people, but there are too many others who end up falling off the staircase and back into homelessness, with even fewer options available to them than before.

## Recommendations

### Recommendations for providers of housing and housing-related services:

- All providers of housing and housing-related services have a role to play in ending rough sleeping. All providers should review their services to ensure they are truly accessible for people who are street homeless.
- All providers should ensure that their staff are sufficiently aware of trauma informed practice and Adverse Childhood Experiences. Frontline staff and senior staff who have not already had ACEs training through the PATH project should be trained.
- All professionals who work directly with people sleeping rough should be trained in the provisions of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, including how to support people to apply for reviews of homelessness decisions.
- Social landlords should actively cooperate with local authorities in addressing homelessness, including working to increase nominations from homelessness and getting involved in the roll-out of Housing First and other supported accommodation projects.

### Recommendations for local authorities:

- Local authorities should work towards establishing Housing First schemes at scale so that Housing First becomes the default approach for street homeless people with complex unmet needs, supported by assertive outreach and personalised budgets.
- Local authorities should ensure they accept a duty to assess homelessness without unnecessary requirements to produce ID and other documentation. They should be pro-active and flexible when considering accepting a duty to assess and ensure that people who may be homeless or at risk of homelessness are not being turned away at the first point of contact.
- Local authority commissioners of Supporting People services should work closely with local homelessness teams to ensure that service gaps are addressed. Commissioners should ensure that people are not being unduly excluded because of restrictive policies on ‘house rules’ and risk assessment.

- Local authorities that are not working in a multi-agency way to address the needs of people who are street homeless should consider doing so, referring to the Wrexham Crisis Café as an example of good practice.
- Local authorities should review their policies on removal of street homeless people's possessions, ensuring that possessions are not removed unless they present an immediate danger to the public or have been abandoned.
- Local authorities should exercise extreme caution in the enforcement of Public Space Protection Orders against people who are street homeless. Local authorities should monitor and report on numbers of dispersal notices issued.
- Local authorities should ensure they are setting a good example to the public in how they work with people who are street homeless, modelling values of compassion and empathy.

### **Recommendations for Welsh Government:**

- Welsh Government should ensure that responsibility for delivering the Welsh Government's Rough Sleeping Action Plan is shared between the Minister for Housing and Regeneration and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Services.
- Welsh Government should immediately strengthen the Code of Guidance for Local Authorities on the Allocation of Accommodation and Homelessness to ensure that people who are street homeless are always treated as priority need.
- Welsh Government should bring forward an Order under section 72 of the Housing (Wales) Act to specify that people who are street homeless are a priority need group.
- Welsh Government should work in cooperation with the housing and homelessness sectors to develop a phased plan of action to abolish priority need entirely.
- Welsh Government should take action to address the numbers of people becoming street homeless on release from prison.
- Welsh Government should establish rapid referral pathways for street homeless people to quickly access drug and alcohol treatment and mental health treatment. Welsh Government should ensure that services are provided for dual diagnosis.
- Welsh Government should work with police forces in Wales to agree principles for how police staff interact with street homeless people, including the use of body worn cameras.
- Welsh Government should ensure that funding for housing related support continues to be protected. Support is an integral part of preventing homelessness and ensuring vulnerable people are fully supported to maintain a tenancy.
- Welsh Government should commission further research to a) assess the effectiveness of hostels currently operating in Wales and small-scale supported accommodation projects; b) explore the experiences of people sleeping rough via mystery shopping exercises across Wales; and c) replicate this study in rural areas of Wales.