



June 2019

# Homelessness among trans people 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.

This study was carried out in partnership with Cardiff University. The report author, Edith England, is a doctoral candidate in the School of Geography and Planning, whose Ethics Committee approved the study. Thank you to all those who took part in the study, both trans people who had experienced homelessness, and service providers, who all gave up their time and shared their experiences generously. And special thanks to Ash England-Elbro for their contribution.

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Welsh Housing Aid Ltd (trading as Shelter Cymru)  
Registered charity number: 515902  
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# Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Executive Summary.....</b>                  | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>Introduction.....</b>                       | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>1. Routes into homelessness .....</b>       | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>2. Once homeless .....</b>                  | <b>14</b> |
| <b>3. LGBTQ+ specific services? .....</b>      | <b>28</b> |
| <b>4. Conclusions and recommendations.....</b> | <b>33</b> |
| <b>Recommendations .....</b>                   | <b>35</b> |

## Executive Summary

*'I can't stress how good the staff have been at this house, they've been absolutely incredible. A lot of them, they, some of them were familiar with trans people and others not so much but they've gone and researched and figured things out for themselves. Rather than having to ask me loads of awkward questions. And the other people living at the house have been really good as well. So like, it's been great. If I was still in the B and B, I dunno, it would, I had no support then, absolutely none. And I was really struggling to cope there after a while. It was okay for the first sort of two, three weeks but I was just losing it. I'm just so glad that I was able to get into this house.'*

- Zak

*'It was absolute hell. I got so much hate crime in the hostel. I had more hate crime in the hostel than I've had in the entire five years I've had in [home town]. I got assaulted in the hostel three times. I had, um, verbal abuse in there, I cannot count how many times I had verbal abuse in the hostel, it was a lot... I got called freak, I got called everything.'*

- Alice

There exists very little evidence on homelessness and trans people. The limited existing studies have tended to focus on young people, usually as a subsection of LGBTQ+ youth. While it is important to gain an understanding of these groups, a broader analysis of the factors contributing to trans people becoming homeless, the experiences and outcomes of homelessness for trans people, and what trans people want from homelessness services, is lacking.

This research used a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of trans people while homeless. It particularly considered:

- Why trans people were particularly at risk of homelessness
- Trans people's lived experiences of homelessness
- Trans people's preferences in terms of homelessness provision.

We spoke with 25 trans people across Wales who had experienced homelessness. Many were still homeless or vulnerably housed at the time of interview. It is believed that this represents one of the largest datasets of homeless trans people in the UK. We augmented the study with eight stakeholder interviews with key groups offering services to homeless and trans people. All interviews were conducted between January 2017 and January 2018.

# Findings

## Routes into homelessness

LGBTQ+ people as a whole are understood to be particularly at risk of homelessness due to familial rejection: confirmed by this study. However it was also clear that two additional routes existed for trans people. First, relationship breakdown was an issue for trans people of all ages, often compounded by abuse. Second, trans people often became homeless as a result of economic precarity, with loss of employment especially associated with coming out as trans.

## Reluctance to use services

Trans people were frequently unwilling to access homelessness services, believing that they would not have anything to offer them that met their needs. They were often concerned about the safety of such services. Around half of the sample had not accessed homelessness services at all despite clearly being homeless, sometimes over protracted periods.

## Variable experiences accessing services

Trans people who had accessed homelessness services had sometimes had good experiences. Some reported negative experiences due to inappropriate questioning as well as a lack of privacy, time and space given to allow them to explain their needs. However the overall picture was of services that want to help trans people, although where structures operate as a barrier, staff are not always aware of the best way to do this.

## Difficulties accessing support for transition

Being homeless made it harder to access formal support for transitioning socially, legally and/or medically. For people who sought medical help with transition, their homelessness severely disrupted their ability to engage with medical services.

## Solutions

There was considerable enthusiasm for LGBTQ+ specific services: both specific provision within existing services, and separate hostels. Overall it was felt that it would be adequate to provide for trans people within general LGBTQ+ provision, as long as specific attention was paid to meeting trans people's needs.

# Recommendations

## Space to disclose

Local authority homelessness services should ensure that people using frontline offices have time and space to share information that is personal. One suggestion is for people approaching services to be given a short questionnaire – ‘Is there anything you’d like your caseworker to know?’ This could allow participants to share information about trans status and pronouns, and could also be helpful for other applicants who might also need to share stigmatising information.

## Training

Staff in homelessness services should be trained in how to work with trans people. This training should be provided by specialist, trans-led organisations and should equip staff with a toolkit to avoid asking intrusive questions. Generic equality training is unlikely to be sufficient. Training should also address what types of prevention interventions are appropriate for trans people, including when it is and isn’t appropriate to offer mediation.

## ‘Champions’

As well as training staff in the ways outlined above, a further suggestion is to introduce LGBTQ+ and trans ‘champions’ within teams, a benefit of this being that it does not rely on people identifying themselves at the point of the homelessness application – a particularly vulnerable time – but once they are within and supported by a service.

## Improving systems

Homelessness services should ensure that their administrative systems are flexible enough to allow frontline staff to meet trans people’s needs effectively. For example, systems should include a gender-neutral option and/or titles such as ‘Mx’. Frontline staff should have discretion to exercise flexibility in requiring ID documents, which may not be possible for some trans people to produce.

## Early engagement with communities

Homelessness services should work to improve trans people’s perceptions of services, by actively promoting services to trans communities and reassuring people about the help that is available.

## Specific services

Trans people are strongly in favour of LGBTQ+ – or better yet, trans-specific – support and accommodation. Local authority commissioners should assess the viability of establishing such specialist services, not only for young people but across their lifespan.

## **Mainstream services**

Local authority commissioners should also consider the accessibility of mainstream support and accommodation services to trans people, particularly where specialist services are financially unfeasible. A person-centred approach is recommended here, in line with the spirit of the Housing (Wales) Act, rather than generic one-size-fits-all provision.

# Introduction

Trans people<sup>1</sup> are considered to be one of the most vulnerable groups within society.

There is considerable evidence that they are at much higher risk than other people who become homeless. As a group, LGBTQ+<sup>2</sup> people are believed to be at particular risk of homelessness, with some estimates that a [quarter of young homeless people identify as LGBTQ+](#). There is further evidence that trans people may be particularly at risk both of homelessness itself and of repeated, entrenched homelessness. [McNeill et al \(2012\)](#) found that nearly a fifth of trans adults had experienced homelessness, with a tenth having been homeless several times. Trans people are particularly likely to experience specific risk factors for homeless, including [family breakdown and domestic violence](#). Trans people are also much more likely to experience [economic precarity](#), being less likely to be in stable employment and more likely to be on low incomes.

There exists very little evidence on homelessness and trans people. The limited existing studies have tended to focus on young people, [particularly under 25s](#), and usually as a [subsection of LGBTQ+ youth](#). While it is important to gain an understanding of these groups, a broader analysis of the factors contributing to trans people becoming homeless, the experiences and outcomes of homelessness for trans people, and what trans people want from homelessness services, is lacking.

The last ten years have also seen some legislation introduced, notably the Equality Act 2010 which gives some protection against discrimination for trans people. This approach is incorporated into the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, which contains a unique level of commitment to trans equality. The [Code of Guidance](#) to the Act specifically recommends councils to consider the impacts of discrimination and provide trans-aware training to their staff:

*'Local Authorities and their partners should ensure that allocation processes are sensitive to particular difficulties experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people such as homophobic harassment. Further assistance may be obtained from Stonewall Cymru and Tai Pawb. Local Authorities and their partners should ensure that front line staff receive training on transgender issues.'*

Code of Guidance for Local Authorities on Allocation of Housing and Homelessness, par. 3.123

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- 1 This work follows [Stonewall's recommendation](#) of using 'trans' as an 'umbrella term to describe people whose gender is not the same as the sex they were assigned at birth'. It includes both 'binary' trans identities, particularly trans men and trans women, and 'non-binary' identities, where an individual may not have an identity which sits comfortably with male or female. Non-binary people may not identify as having a gender identity at all, as having a gender identity which includes elements of both or which sometimes includes elements of both, or as not completely male or not completely female. Some trans people undergo medical transition, for instance taking hormones and/or surgical intervention, while others do not. It is extremely important to recognise that whether a person has or has not had any medical assistance with transition has no bearing on whether they are trans, and should not in any way affect their treatment by the local authority or other service provider. It is also inappropriate for a local authority to seek this information. This is particularly important for homeless trans people, who may face particular obstacles to gaining access to medical services.
  - 2 LGBTQ+ is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer/questioning, with the + including other identities that fall under this umbrella.

This reflects a longstanding commitment to equality within Wales, also reflected in the 'enhanced equality duty' whereby public bodies in Wales are required to actively work to advance equality of opportunity. Further, with the broadening of the remit of who can be helped under homelessness legislation to include people not in priority need, Welsh local authorities have an increasing ability to provide creative and targeted assistance to a [broader range of applicants](#).

## The aim of this research

This research used a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of trans people while homeless. It particularly considered:

- Why trans people were particularly at risk of homelessness
- Trans people's lived experiences of homelessness
- Trans people's preferences in terms of homelessness provision.

This report is primarily based on a thematic analysis of 25 interviews with trans people in Wales who have experienced homelessness. This is augmented with eight stakeholder interviews with key groups: those offering, or supporting those offering, services to homeless people (Llamau, Cymorth Cymru, and the Huggard), those offering services to trans people and trans specific training (Stonewall and Unique Transgender Network), and AKT, a charity operating in England and offering services to LGBTQ+ youth. Interviews were typically an hour or more, and utilised a narrative approach. It is believed that this represents one of the largest datasets of homeless trans people in the UK. All interviews were conducted between January 2017 and January 2018.

Participants had a range of gender identities. These included trans man, trans woman, non-binary, gender-queer and agender individuals. These identities sometimes overlapped. In particular, several participants identified themselves as both trans men and non-binary, or trans women and non-binary. Several participants also identified themselves as people with a trans history, rather than currently identifying as trans, hence, as men or women, rather than trans men or women. A smaller number of participants identified only as non-binary and/or agender. Due to the complexity of individual gender expressions, no attempt was made to categorise participants according to gender identity: however the sample contained roughly equal mixes of those who primarily identified as men/trans men or women/trans women, with smaller numbers of non-binary/agender participants. In most cases, those who primarily identified as trans women used 'she/her' pronouns, trans men 'he/him' pronouns, and non-binary and agender individuals 'they/them' pronouns. However, this was not always the case and gender identity should not be inferred from pronouns.

Coding was performed thematically, utilising an iterative approach of reading and re-reading of transcribed interviews in order to identify key themes.

# 1. Routes into homelessness

Participants became homeless for many different reasons. Family and relationship breakdown were found to be particularly important in terms of people becoming homeless. [This echoes findings for the LGBTQ+ population as a whole.](#)

It was also clear that a particular danger point existed for trans people directly after coming out as trans. For most participants, this marked the beginning of their living a life which matched their gender. Some changed their names and/or advised those around them of their correct pronouns. It was also common to start openly identifying as trans, as their correct gender. However, for people who ended up homeless, this was also typically the period at which the chain of events which resulted in their homelessness began.

## Family breakdown

[Family rejection is understood as being one of the main drivers of LGBTQ+ homeless, particularly among young people.](#) While some young LGBTQ+ people are directly told to leave their homes, for others the situation is more complex, involving threats of, or actual, violence, and psychological trauma. Lucy Bowyer from AKT described the complexities for LGBTQ+ youth for whom their gender or sexual identity was unacceptable or provocative to their families.

*'A lot of it is familial rejection, around 70% from our research. That's really quite clear. For many reasons, some people it's religious, so parents might not view being LGBTQ+ as complying with their religion and if somebody wants to live in their home. It could be a cultural thing, it could be that it's some of the young person's behaviours that the family are not okay with, or they're not sure how to deal with somebody who's transitioning. And the situation becomes very toxic and young people feel that they can't be themselves or they're going to have to hide something. Or actual violence, you know, somebody who is under the threat of violence. Or removal to a different country. And there's kind of lots of really difficult and traumatic experiences. We've had people who've been through exorcisms in different countries. You know, it's a very real situation for quite a few of our young people, who've been through things. Some of them might have been raised in a church and that's all they know, and so they have this huge loss once they have to leave as well. So looking for community in places that they're not going to find good experiences, or having had to bottle something up for years they're going to have complex mental health issues. Or PTSD as well, we've got people with PTSD.'*

- Lucy, AKT

Shon Faye, of Stonewall, confirmed that family rejection is also a major cause of homelessness in young trans people, as well as the broader LGBTQ+ population.

*'There's a youth demographic – trans people experiencing homelessness because of family rejection, and issues with parents leaving home when they're still 16, between 16 and 24. And in among that, care leavers.'*

- Shon Faye, Stonewall Cymru

Around half of this study's participants had become homeless because their familial home ceased to be safe for them when they came out as trans. In some cases, they were directly asked to leave:

*'I remember my dad saying to me, "Well go find somewhere else to live and stop destroying this family." They might not have grabbed me by the neck and thrown me out the door but that doesn't mean it's not the same thing.'*

- Joshua

In other cases, the young person was not directly told to leave, but the environment became so psychologically unsafe that they could not remain:

*'I was like, "I am leaving, I am, probably won't come back unless you start accepting me." And as I turned to go out the door, my mother was like, "Well don't come back," and she meant it, she said, "Don't you come back."'*

- Eli

*'If I mis-toed a line it would be threatened that I would be kicked out. If I didn't agree with anything they wanted, it would then be brought up, "Well you're staying in our house." And the hang over of it was it, my trans identity of that, it was used as a guilt to it, of, "Well you've come out, therefore you've ruined everyone's life, therefore we can treat you in this way."'*

- Oliver

Families which rejected young trans people were often high-conflict environments where a lack of peaceful communication made engaging in the complex discussions needed around trans identity much harder. This further meant that the young person did not receive the practical or emotional support that they needed.

*'I grew up in a household where there was always someone fighting in general, that's just what happened.'*

- Kai

*'There was a lot of, sort of, family drama when I was an adolescent, and some of that had a lot to do with my sexuality and gender identity.'*

- Oscar

*'My step-dad's a not a very nice person. And yeah, my parents are divorced so... I see my dad every once in a while but, like, he can't provide any sort of stable support either. My*

*step-father was verbally and physically abusive with my mother and my younger brother. He would be with me sometimes but only when I tried to intervene. Yeah, it wasn't good.'*

- Alex

*'I lost my real mum when I was four and I didn't get told until the age of 15. That was a big impact upon my life knowing that I have lost my Mum. Since I found that out I thought "what's the point?". No one really stays alive. I rebelled and did what I did. It put me in a position where I lost my family and I didn't know what to do, so developed a drug addiction.'*

- Owen

## Relationship breakdown

Coming out as trans is associated with [relationship breakdown](#). In this study, this was a significant factor in homelessness for nearly half the participants. A common theme was young trans people becoming trapped in unsafe or unsuitable relationships upon which their housing was dependent, with no family to turn to. These relationships also often involved abuse, [an all too common experience for trans people](#).

*'I was living with my partner at the time who was abusive. In my head I'm like no it wasn't abusive but – yeah, it was. Big random outbursts – he would just be like "Get out!" He kicked me out when I was in my underwear once, just out in the middle of the day. I was always worried that I was going to say or do the wrong thing late at night and then just get booted out.'*

- Isabella

*'I'd been living with a cisgender partner who would have preferred being in a cisgender relationship. I had been questioning my gender, I've always questioned my gender but I had especially started exploring it a bit more deeper that year and my partner at the time was not happy with this. He didn't want to be with a trans or non-binary partner at the time and the relationship broke down to the point where it was becoming abusive. I attempted suicide. I ended up being taken to A&E by two policemen because my partner refused to take me or call an ambulance. And that's when I decided that I couldn't be in this environment anymore, it was very destructive and if I stayed there I would be dead.'*

- Bill

Abusive relationships were compounded by housing precarity. Many participants had very limited legal rights to remain in their properties and hence were much more vulnerable.

*'So we lived together but I wasn't on the tenancy or anything. And so we'd had this massive argument and a breakup and he'd told me that I had to get out, that I had to move. I think he did it on purpose because he told me I had move out but then he was like actually you can keep staying here, like because I'm so nice. It put him in a position of status over me if you get what I mean and so I had to be very, very careful not to piss him off or if I did, if I was on my way to work and I'd annoyed him he'd be like don't come back here tonight. So there were a lot of times where I had to, while I was in work, find somewhere, a friend whose sofa I could sleep on and stuff like that.'*

- Kai

One very specific issue for trans people facing domestic abuse is a lack of suitable services. LGBTQ+ people may not find their needs met or their specific experiences recognised within mainstream services. This meant that when their relationship was becoming increasingly abusive, they often had nowhere to turn.

This was particularly clear in the case of Oscar. He had been a carer for a partner with severe mental ill health, who had also on some occasions become violent towards him. He described how a shortage of support for LGBTQ+ people meant it was much harder to leave the situation. As Oscar articulated the situation, he needed services which not only recognised his relationship as valid, but also understood the specific complexities of decision-making in leaving a same-gender relationship, in a socio-economic context in which LGBTQ+ people frequently face discrimination and marginalisation in the outside world.

*'It's more difficult for trans and queer people to leave those relationships, partly for reasons of economic viability, it's just harder. Partly it's not having a safe place to go. But also our relationships are incredibly interdependent because we have all experienced difficulties with our families or difficulties with employment. We take care of each other and it's hard to recognise that somebody is no longer... it's extremely hard to stop being a person that's loving and caring for this other person and realise this person is abusing me and I need to leave.'*

- Oscar

## Economic precarity

Economic precarity is a particular issue for trans people. They are far more likely to be unemployed or precariously employed, to have long term mental and physical ill health and to have caring responsibilities. Additionally, although the UK has some employment-based protections for trans people, these tend to benefit those in secure employment and who are in a position to [defend their rights](#).

For all the trans people in this study economic precarity was a backdrop to their homelessness. Lack of employment options, mental and physical ill health and job insecurity all reduced their

ability to enter secure housing situations. For some participants however, economic precarity was an especially significant factor in their homelessness.

John was in the early stages of medical transition. Deciding to live openly as a trans man, after many years of deliberating, had caused his marriage to break down and compromised access to his child, both of which, in turn, had led to serious mental health repercussions for him. At the time of the interview he lived rurally, and, despite having several decades of employment history, was working on a casual basis. He had not told his employer about his trans identity or his decision to start medical transitioning, believing that, because his employer had no legal obligation to offer him work, being open was too great a risk. Because he could not be honest about his medical treatment, he ended up working significantly reduced hours, which led to him having to give up a tenancy. This then made it very hard to re-enter the housing market, but also made it harder for him to build back up to full-time hours. At the time of the interview, John was primarily sleeping in his van and had been homeless for nearly two years.

*'Once I'd made that step, it made it very difficult to come back again. Because in order to get a tenancy you need a deposit and first month's rent up front. You need the agency fees. Some places won't even take you, they have these "No DSS" things, I don't know what they'd think if I turned up in the van. They want to know what your current address is, they want a guarantor, this kind of thing... and I had a lot of debt. No one will lend me anything now... a lot of my debt was related to trying to maintain contact with my child. And buying things for... you try to buy a child's love I suppose. Buying gifts I shouldn't have done. I shouldn't have lived beyond my means but I was.'*

- John

For several participants, it was clear that being trans was also directly preventing them being employed, with the effect of keeping them unable to afford to take on a tenancy; yet this was seldom clear enough for any action to be taken:

*'In my life it's been consistently my experience of employment, I don't think you could ever go to anybody and say I have been discriminated against because I am transgender, because they will always find another reason. Even just stupid things like applying a job, when I just got out of university, even in a supermarket - "You don't have any experience with a university degree"- then going back two weeks later and they have employed a cisgender male who's just out of school. It's like I was just too gay or too trans for this position. That's pretty much my experience.'*

- Oscar

*'Obviously I look good on paper because I'm getting interviews but I'm just not getting the work. And it's quite gutting really, and I don't know whether it's because there's something about me personally. I've kind of lost my confidence, you know. It could be because I'm trans, it could be because when they get my CV and they see a man's*

*name and they think this is going to be a man and then I turn up and they look at me and they think this isn't a man. Whether there's something to do with that, or whether I am actually not good enough. It could be that it isn't discrimination, it could be that there's always a better candidate. But it starts to feel like, when you're not ever getting a job, it starts to feel like it's something personal. Especially when you're always getting interviews and then you're not getting a job.'*

- John

## 2. Once homeless

### Deciding to get help

In Wales, when a person is threatened with homelessness, or actually homeless, they have the right to meaningful advice and assistance from their local authority. This can take various forms, from negotiating with a landlord or parents to avoid homelessness, to offering mediation, support with benefits or debt, to offering help with securing private rented housing.

As with the other UK legislatures, trans people in Wales have the right to equality of treatment in provision of goods and services, and employment under the Equality Act 2010. In addition Wales has a [further specific duty](#) placed upon the public sector to advance equality of opportunity among marginalised groups including trans people.

Wales has a particularly strong track record of incorporating LGBTQ+ rights into legislation. The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 is a good example. Discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation is specifically prohibited under the Act, and local authorities are additionally required to ensure that all frontline workers have training in 'transgender issues'.

In Wales, therefore, there is relatively strong legislative protection for trans people who seek help from homelessness services. At the least, they should be treated no differently to non-trans people. However, this study found that the decision to get help was a very complex one, with trans people both anticipating and experiencing poor service.

Most of those surveyed had been homeless in Wales at least once after the introduction of the Act. Yet, while a few participants had had good experiences, most overall felt that homelessness services, despite the increased powers of the Act, were not well equipped to deal with the specific needs of trans people.

### Initial reluctance to seek help

Very few participants immediately sought council help on becoming homeless. Rather, most participants spent a period of time sofa surfing. This meant reliance on friends, which people saw as placing a significant burden on those around them:

*'I went and stayed with a friend, but I didn't feel like it was the right place for me to be, I didn't feel like they wanted me there. I felt like it was like my only option. Because I didn't have at the time a good friend, didn't have any friendship groups, I had one person so I relied on them a lot.'*

- Eli

*'I did have a lot of friends at the time who I'd sort of said that I was sofa surfing or whatever and they'd be like, "If you're ever in trouble just contact me..." but I just didn't like the idea of being reliant on all my friends for like constant favours. It kind of makes you feel a bit like... I dunno... like, I can't offer anything in return for this favour because I don't have anything, you know. Like if they were in the same position I couldn't do the same back. That was sort of... it made me feel like a burden I guess.'*

- Isabella

It also had the potential to become dangerous. Trans people are known to be at a higher risk of sexual exploitation, with homelessness putting people at risk from predatory behaviours:

*'I put on Facebook a couple of years ago, I was sofa surfing and I put on my Facebook as a status: "Anywhere to stay tonight?" I didn't have anywhere to go. There were no comments. I had loads of likes. People were messaging me privately saying: "What's happened? Here if you need me".'*

- Oliver

*'Sometimes... I would have to really short notice contact a friend and be like, "Can I stay with you tonight?" and stuff like that. Some people I worked with who I wasn't close to or anything, they found out about it. Young men. So I'd be getting messages at like 4am being like, "Did you find somewhere in the end because you can come chill at mine?" and it's like that's so disgusting, like I have nowhere to sleep and you're like hitting on me, like that's so gross.'*

- Isabella

The reluctance of this group to use homelessness services as soon as they became aware that homelessness was likely is a concern, as it means that this group is missing out on prevention services. This seemed often to be due to a belief on the part of applicant that the local authority was not able to address their very specific situation. One particular service that was often offered, yet seldom led to helpful results for the people in this study, was mediation. It appeared that this was being used in cases where it was inappropriate.

For instance, Elizabeth, a young trans woman, was offered mediation under the Welsh prevention duty, meaning that she was categorised as 'threatened with homelessness' (s66) rather than actually homeless (s73). Yet Elizabeth was in a situation where her family refused to use her correct name or pronouns, or acknowledge her trans identity, all factors associated with much poorer, even life threatening, mental ill health outcomes. Arguably, Elizabeth was, in fact, homeless, since her accommodation was emotionally and mentally unsafe for her to occupy. Elizabeth felt that the mediator did not do enough to insist that her gender was treated as real and valid by her parents, rather seeing her expression of her gender identity

as negotiable and non-essential. It seemed that Elizabeth's local authority appeared to be clearly underestimating the effect of misgendering and refusal to acknowledge a person's correct gender upon their mental health, and in her case this led to her being channelled into inappropriate services: those for people not yet homeless.

## Experiences of help: Housing Options services

Some participants spoke from prior experience of Housing Options, or of other council services. However, others had no direct experience but were basing their concerns on other trans people's experiences of these services.

### *Time and space*

Privacy was a key concern. Trans people facing homelessness may need or wish to tell their caseworker that they are trans for a number of reasons. First, it can be critical to being treated as a member of the correct gender, for instance use of correct pronouns or allocation to correct services, especially as trans people are often in the early stages of transition when they become homeless. This can be extremely important psychologically, especially given the fact that people applying as homeless are typically under a great deal of stress. Also, as seen above, it is frequently relevant to their claim, for instance in explaining why they may be making an application in an area where they have no local connection, or to demonstrate that they have a high need for non-hostel accommodation.

Similarly, applicants needed time to disclose difficult information, and to feel that the space was a safe and comfortable one, where they were listened to. Unfortunately, for most participants who had approached Housing Options, neither sufficient privacy, nor space, nor time were forthcoming, and this adversely affected their experience.

Alex described his local Housing Options office as a space where he felt hurried.

*'It's kind of like the only people we really spoke to there were kind of like a bank of people sat behind desks. So, yeah. And you could hear everybody's business while you were waiting. And, like, every meeting we had with someone there was maybe ten minutes long. I get dysmorphic, when people use the wrong pronouns for me... but in amid all that – well it just went to the back of the queue. I didn't know how to talk about it.'*

- Alex

Several stakeholders articulated a commitment to visual representations of diversity, for instance posters stating the organisations commitment to equality. However, participants were less convinced of the importance of these.

*'Rainbow stickers, a poster to say we don't discriminate, things like that... I mean yeah they help but... to be honest I always expect anyone to say they don't discriminate. Everyone says that. Although people say that, it doesn't tell you how things are then*

*dealt with afterwards if you do need to bring up a complaint about discrimination. I want to know, how's that going to be handled? Who do I go to? How many people have complained about this? I want to see that they are actually showing their values visibly in all aspects.'*

- David

David articulated a point made by several participants, that diversity acceptance material is a baseline, but one which does not tell people much about the situation at the front line. Several participants expressed concern about the gap between stated intention by higher management, and the attitudes of individual workers, feeling that the latter was far more important in terms of their safety. Angela, for instance, described witnessing an incident in a hostel where a resident was using anti-LGBTQ+ slurs, and which occurred directly in front of a Stonewall poster which professed a commitment to LGBTQ+ equality. Yet the frontline staff did nothing to counter the homophobic/transphobic language, making Angela feel that, although the organisation at the highest levels clearly did have a commitment to equality, at the level on which she interacted with it, staff would not or could not keep her safe.

## **Training**

Trans awareness was perceived as likely to be a particular problem among staff, with staff anticipated to be relatively likely to be untrained and lacking knowledge. This appeared to be a result of two factors. First, participants who expected trans people to be treated badly by Housing Options staff had often heard stories of bad treatment by Housing Options staff toward trans people, and were extrapolating from these. Second, participants had sometimes had bad experiences of other council services and believed that Housing Options would treat them in the same way.

However, it is important to recognise that many local authorities are in fact taking steps to improve their staff's skills in dealing with trans people. As part of this study, a Freedom of Information Act request was sent to all 22 local authorities in Wales. This revealed that over half were offering some form of training to staff in trans awareness, although this was highly variable. In some cases, this training was from trans-specific organisations, such as the Unique Network in North Wales, although in others this was part of general 'equalities training', in some cases via computer.

The same FOI request however also found that around half of local authorities in Wales did not currently provide training in trans awareness to staff. In most cases, this was understood as unnecessary because of the presence of generally high levels of inclusive attitudes. Further, while the guidance to the legislation does suggest that all frontline staff should be trained in 'transgender issues', it does not specify the nature, extent or form that this should take.

Participants were specifically asked what they felt that local authority staff needed to know in

order to provide high quality services to trans people. They identified three key areas of training need: first, improving understanding of what it means to be trans; second, for staff to understand what trans people were likely to have experienced, including for staff to recognise the ways in which trans people were likely to be especially vulnerable when homeless; and thirdly, to have the necessary skills to ask questions relevant to a homelessness application, without making trans people feel intruded upon, humiliated or embarrassed.

### **Understanding trans experience**

Participants felt that it was important that staff understand trans experience. For Oscar, this was partly about straightforward acceptance, and treating trans people as people:

*'Maybe to be quite blunt about it, if you're talking to a cis person and you look at them in the face and say I am a trans person, don't then go (pulls "shocked" face).'*

- Oscar

Owen felt that staff needed to understand that being trans wasn't a choice, and that he shouldn't therefore be treated as someone who had created his own problems. This speaks to a wider concern among participants, a fear that staff might perceive that they had brought their problems on themselves by openly identifying as trans.

*'Not a lot of people understand what we go through, they just think it's a decision that you can just change around but it's not.'*

- Owen

Sophia also felt it important that staff did not make assumptions:

*'I think there is this layer of transphobia. The second you start behaving in a way that doesn't conform to gendered expectation... whether somebody says something explicitly which is so gross and irritating – or when you see them doing the maths in their head. It's like – it's none of their business! But... even if they are not showing it, it becomes humiliating and gross.'*

- Sophia

Non-binary identity was felt to be particularly poorly understood:

*'I think that the world in general is a lot more understanding about what it means to be trans than what it means to be non-binary. So if you told someone you were (binary) transgender they would know what that meant but there's still a sort of ambiguity surrounding what non-binary is. So I think knowing the difference and accepting why they're different and stuff kind of needs to be a thing. Yeah, I feel that people are a lot more accepting about being (binary) transgender because it's easier to understand I suppose. I think it's the lack of understanding that's the issue.'*

- Oscar

*'It is primarily a safety concern I think, because you don't know how people are going to react to that, because a lot of people still don't understand it. There's a lot of misconceptions of what it means. Like, if someone's not accepting of it or whatever at best you'll have an argument – but at worst – who knows? It's a risk. So definitely a safety thing. That's why I wouldn't immediately disclose it.'*

- Isabella

There was also a clear perception that if people did not go into detail about their life experience and how they were trans, they would not get help – yet to do so was both potentially psychologically difficult and physically dangerous. Overall, participants felt that their experience would be much improved by speaking to someone who 'gets it'.

*'Having to sit in front of somebody and not having to say your life story just to be understood, would be nice.'*

- Eli

### **How being trans affects homelessness**

Participants felt that homelessness staff were likely to be unaware of the impact of being trans, and their likely prior experiences. Where people had to hide their identity for safety reasons, the psychological impact of this needed to be acknowledged.

*'How could you be your true self on the street? It's not possible, how could you be that when you're living in someone else's house in the sofa, when you haven't got the space to store anything of yourself? So understanding those little complexities is the key, because no-one's story is the same... but we have a lot in common...'*

- Oliver

*'I didn't just not have a home or an address, I also had to sacrifice a part of myself to get by. I had to be strategic, I think, and it got me where I needed to be but it wasn't necessarily nice. It was a bad situation but what made it feel even worse was that I felt like I had no identity on top of it or that I had to stifle a part of myself and that I didn't have the right to be myself.'*

- Isabella

Joshua made the point that trans people are frequently disbelieved, and may operate from an expectation of being distrusted.

*'With trans people... we get it a lot, [being told] "oh my god you're overreacting". Okay, but we might have been raped, sexually assaulted, and mis-gendered... we might have a good*

*reason to react. So telling a trans person that they're overreacting is just making the trans person feel worse for being upset about something, and that's wrong.'*

- Joshua

Trans people also perceived themselves to be particularly vulnerable when homeless. This is borne out by hate crime statistics which confirm that trans people are at particularly high risk of attack. Talking about why they avoided the local night shelter, Kai explained that they were worried about being attacked:

*'I ain't good at fighting. I'm gangly. I know myself. I'm a little bit too much of a femme to go up against people. So, you know, I don't think I'd be very happy there. I don't think it would have been best for me because my mental health was bad at that point as well. So it was all just a lot of things. I didn't want to take that risk.'*

- Kai

### **Asking appropriate questions**

Both stakeholders and participants identified the standard questions asked by frontline staff in routinely processing a case as a particularly difficult issue. Stakeholders were afraid of asking the 'wrong' questions and causing offence. Participants were afraid of being asked intrusive, difficult questions, particularly where this was not relevant to offering help.

As a rule, trans people disliked the same kinds of questions non-trans people also found intrusive, for instance questions about their genitals, their medical past and future, and questions which indicated that they were regarded with pity, horror or as abnormal. Most participants did not wish to engage in detailed discussion of their identity with council staff, unless it was directly relevant to their case.

*'What questions not to ask, what is intrusive. I think people think it is really necessary to know what genitals you have to work out your gender, that it's okay to just be really explicit. It is not necessary, just like it's not necessary for someone to (medically) transition if they are trans.'*

- Sophia

*'I know it's genuine interest and I know it's sincere, but it's the sort of things like questions that people don't need to know. It's things like it doesn't affect my situation at all, it doesn't affect how they can help me, but it's like they just want to know and there's no... you can't justify why you're asking.'*

- Eli

Participants pointed out that homelessness was an especially vulnerable time for trans people, as everyone else. Therefore it was important to avoid a situation where trans people

were having to explain or justify their experiences at an already psychologically very difficult time. Having to explain and justify themselves was seen as adding an additional emotional load at a time when people were already feeling highly vulnerable.

*'It would be a lot easier if they knew what the terms meant and that I didn't have to go out of my way to explain things when I'm already in that state. Having to explain the basics of my identity is quite distressing. It is a distressing process, it's like I'm reaching out for help and this person doesn't even understand who I am at a most basic level.'*

- Eli

*'If you are threatened with homelessness or you are homeless you are not in the best emotional state to go into Housing Options and explain a lot of actually quite personal stuff.'*

- Sophia

## Experiences of help: temporary accommodation

Most homeless applicants who do not have anywhere at all to live, however unsuitable, spend time in temporary accommodation. There is a considerable range of temporary accommodation available. However, for single people across much of the country, a great deal of temporary accommodation is in the form of hostel accommodation.

Prior research on trans people's experiences of the homelessness system has particularly focused on the unsuitability of homelessness hostels. This was substantiated by this study, which found clear evidence that large hostels and night shelters were not a safe space for trans people. The majority of adverse experiences originated with other service users; however this was often compounded by lack of proactive action by staff.

Alice entered a hostel very soon after beginning to identify as trans, and in the very early stages of her transition: *'I was very obviously trans. I had no idea how to dress, how to act. I was still quite masculine. My voice was still very low. I still had lots of stubble.'* She describes the reaction from the other residents:

*'I had long hair. I'd had long hair for about eight years at that point, seven, eight years, [but] I had them saying, "I bet it's a wig", and they tried pulling my hair off. It was absolute hell. I got so much hate crime in the hostel. I had more hate crime in the hostel than I've had in the entire five years I've had in [home town]. I got assaulted in the hostel three times. I had, um, verbal abuse in there, I cannot count how many times I had verbal abuse in the hostel, it was a lot... I got called freak, I got called everything.'*

- Alice

She had a good relationship with staff, who did intervene. However, the approach they took only served to isolate Alice still more.

*'I was put in the annexe at the back. For my own safety. But it was made worse because I had to go through the smoking area to get to the annexe. So every time I went out or to go back in, I had to go through the area where everybody congregated. Instead of just going straight in through the front door to my room, I had to go through the front door, through their smoking area and then to my room.'*

- Alice

Joshua also had a very negative experience when staying in hostel accommodation. Under 18 at the time he first became homeless, Joshua was sexually harassed while staying with a family, to whom he had been allocated by social services. The response to this was to send him to a highly secure hostel.

*'I tried to explain to them that I need to be put somewhere where I'm surrounded by supportive people, and their idea of that is putting me in a hostel with cameras everywhere and support workers but that's not what I mean. What I really needed was to be around a supportive family-like atmosphere.'*

- Joshua

Despite the hostel itself being relatively secure, Joshua continued to receive abuse, including from other residents. He also felt very unsupported by staff at the hostel, feeling that they were not proactive about ensuring tenants' safety. He described one incident where *'these girls were throwing rocks at one of the other tenant's windows and the staff just stood there and said please leave, please leave, we might call the police. They never called the police.'*

For Joshua the situation culminated in a hate incident, where he was verbally assaulted on the street and where the police became involved. Even here, he received very little support, as a young trans person who had experienced a distressing incident. For instance, he was left to contact the police alone, and received no support from staff with reporting what had happened. He was extremely dissatisfied with how the police had dealt with the incident, feeling it to be dismissive: *'He said, "Oh you shouldn't have told them [you are trans] in the first place.'"*

Both Joshua and Alice's experiences highlight a fundamental issue in how trans people are often dealt with by hostels. Despite LGBTQ+ people being over-represented in the homeless population, services are not always set up with an expectation of LGBTQ+ people using them, and consequently little attention may be paid to creating services where trans people and LGB people can feel safe. One consequence of this is that the onus is placed upon trans people themselves to identify and report difficulties, rather than services being set up to anticipate and avoid difficulties. Zak's experience highlights this especially well.

Zak was sent to a bed and breakfast initially, and while there experienced another resident expressing anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment. However, even when made aware of this, homelessness services did not take action until pressed by Zak, preferring a 'wait and see' approach.

*'A guy moved into the bed and breakfast, so we had to have breakfast with each other each morning. It was the only cooked meal I had during the day. And he was very vocally homophobic and I'd just started hormones and I was thinking, when I start looking more "trans" in quotation marks, I'm going to have issues. So I got in touch with the housing again, and they said "Ah, no if there's an incident, just report it to us and we'll have him kicked out." And I said, "Well I don't want it to get to that point where there's an incident."'*

- Zak

It was also clear that even in hostels which were overall very supportive, trans people still often faced some difficulties for which they needed support. Eva, who overall found herself in a relatively supportive hostel, still found that she was not treated with appropriate respect by all residents. She described one incident where she was misgendered by another hostel user.

*'One of the residents was climbing in, got stuck climbing into the refuge, she lost her key and got locked out. She was climbing in through the window and was calling me a man because she got stuck. "You're a man, use your strength" – that kind of thing.'*

- Eva

However, a few participants had had good service experiences. In all cases this was a result of staff members being aware of, and open to, trans identity. Zak described how the staff in his current hostel had proactively ensured that they had the understanding to provide him with support.

*'I can't stress how good the staff have been at this house, they've been absolutely incredible. A lot of them, they, some of them were familiar with trans people and others not so much but they've gone and researched and figured things out for themselves. Rather than having to ask me loads of awkward questions. And the other people living at the house have been really good as well. So like, it's been great. If I was still in the B and B, I dunno, it would, I had no support then, absolutely none. And I was really struggling to cope there after a while. It was okay for the first sort of two, three weeks but I was just losing it. I'm just so glad that I was able to get into this house.'*

- Zak

The fact that they had taken the time to understand Zak meant that he not only felt that the service he received was appropriate, but he felt valued as a person. In order for staff to be able to offer this service, they themselves need not only to have the interpersonal skills and enthusiasm

necessary to upskill themselves, but to be operating within a culture which valued their spending time on support for trans residents, which is likely to occur within a setting that values both inclusivity, and staff learning.

## Those who did not get help: Self-solving

Not everyone who becomes homeless makes a homelessness application. However, if people do not apply, they are unable to access the range of help on offer from councils.

### *Deciding not to use council services*

Around half of those interviewed did not apply to the council at all in their most recent experience of homelessness. In almost all cases, this prolonged homelessness: they ended up spending a protracted period of time sofa surfing, or sleeping rough or in vehicles. Indeed, many of this group were still homeless at the time of the interview.

*'I think when it first started and it was, like this is a temporary thing. But it's been over a year now and it's been two winters. Winter is always worse. Sleeping in the van in the winter is not good.'*

- John

Some participants had complex housing arrangements, which were still notable for their lack of tenure security. Kai, one of the youngest interviewees, was living with their flatmates without the knowledge of their landlord.

*'I just live with them and I pay them what I can every month. So it's more like I'm living there but our landlord doesn't know that I'm living there. I do quite a good job of hiding my stuff if they've got a viewing or anything.'*

- Kai

From Kai's perspective this was a relatively stable situation, particularly relative to their previous psychologically distressing and precarious housing. However, they had no tenure security at all, and were entirely dependent on the goodwill of their flatmates. Kai, who was only just 18 at the time of the interview, was very clearly in a situation where they could become roofless again extremely easily.

To some extent, those who avoided council services did often have a lack of awareness of services which might assist them in exiting homelessness. For instance, John, who was experiencing long term rooflessness, was unaware of what he could get from the council in terms of help to secure private rented accommodation (such as a bond scheme). Similarly, several participants had become homeless prior to age 18, and not utilised youth services. In these cases, they had ended up squatting, sofa surfing or in some cases sleeping rough, which then contributed to longer term housing precarity and difficulties in exiting homelessness.

For instance, Alex had become homeless at the age of 15 after his mother told him to leave because he was in what she perceived as a same-gender relationship. He then spent a period of time squatting, before returning to live with his family temporarily. However, his stepfather was abusive and violent and Alex left again, entering a relationship which was also abusive. Alex continued to experience homelessness and housing precarity into his late twenties, with poor housing contributing both to employment difficulties and health problems.

### ***'Families of choice' and 'friendly shares'***

One particular route out of immediate homelessness utilised by several participants was shared accommodation with other LGBTQ+ adults. In most cases this offered more than just housing, but rather emotional and practical support. In many cases, the situation described was very similar to the 'families of choice' situation common among LGBTQ+ adults, where family-like support is provided by very close friends.

Several participants identified sharing accommodation with strangers as something unsafe and to be avoided. This reflects the much higher than average likelihood of trans people to experience violence both at home and on the streets.

*'With what I could afford I would probably choose not to go with shared for safety reasons, it's living with a bunch of people I don't know in a bedsit situation.'*

- Oscar

In contrast, a 'friendly share', where the participant had actively sought LGBTQ+ housemates, offered multiple advantages.

*'I was being really specific. I was looking for households without cis men and who were intersectional and stuff and that's actually where I ended up, which was really not just lucky but exactly what I wanted and exactly what I needed because I ended up in a place where I was just completely free to be myself and not just free to but encouraged to and validated for doing so.'*

- Isabella

Those who had spent prolonged periods of time sofa surfing had often also stayed with LGBTQ+ people. LGBTQ+ people were understood to be both especially likely to be supportive, and able to provide meaningful support. John, who alternated sofa surfing with sleeping in his van, explained:

*'It's always non-straight people that I stay with. And this is the beauty of our community is that they are supportive like that. And a lot of them will have had some experience themselves, even if it's years ago, maybe when they were a teenager their parents kicked them out, you know a lot of people in our community know what it's like to be*

*needing somewhere to stay. So I think it's a good community. That's probably why I didn't end up in a shelter, because they were so cool about it. So yeah, they're really cool.'*

- John

For Kai, who had become homeless before they were 18, living with other LGBTQ+ people was a significant source of practical and financial support:

*'The people I'm living with they're also not cishet so it's like so much easier, so chilled. All the time. So yeah, it's kind of, I'm very lucky really considering. Getting myself to each appointment and making sure I'm there and I've got the medication I need is quite difficult. But luckily my housemates are super good for it and they'll be like, "I'll give you the train money for today, pay me back when you can but if you can't it's no bother."*

- Kai

## **Impact of homelessness on transitioning socially, legally and/or medically**

Most people who became homeless did so at the beginning of their transition to openly living in their correct gender. This meant that they needed to navigate the complexities of transition alongside housing precarity and homelessness. For those who sought medical care in relation to transitioning, this was a particular issue. In Wales, access to medical care related to transition is controlled via a complex protocol, with much medical care currently occurring at Gender Identity Clinics in London. Gatekeeping of services is considered a serious problem, particularly for those whose gender presentation may be non-binary, and those who may have other complicating factors, for instance economic precarity and homelessness.

For participants in this study who needed to access gender identity services, maintaining access while homeless was a general issue. The chaotic nature of homeless existence was a particular issue, resulting in practical obstacles, such as the lack of an address.

*'Not having an address meant for a while I couldn't see any psychotherapist because I couldn't get referred to the adult clinic, the child clinic messed me over. I was in the Tavistock (child clinic) but they dropped my case. So I couldn't get referred for the adults, so now I have to do it myself. Yeah, I have to re-enter the system, the two year long waiting list.'*

- Kai

*'Yeah, it's keeping everything all in one place of dealing with it. It's like I have to regularly interact with medical care. I have no choice for that. So it's keeping that as stable as possible. And making it so that I don't feel like I'm being an inconvenience to everybody around it. When you're already getting that at home. But yeah, they had to be made aware that nothing could be sent home.'*

- Oliver

A related difficulty was that homelessness compromised the passage of individuals through the system. For Joshua, his poor relationships with his family directly affected the willingness of medical services to accept his case.

*'My referral was sent last year. I don't know why it was sent so late because I was asking from the age of only just turned 16 to get a referral. But they kept refusing because I had issues with my family.'*

- Joshua

There was some evidence for self-medication among those who felt that their homelessness meant that they could not access the already complex and difficult to access pathway. This usually took the form of buying hormones off the internet.

*'I've done a bit of this, a bit of that. A bit of testosterone bought over the internet, a bit of private consultations that then I stopped being able to afford. So I'm kind of just in the waiting.'*

- John

### 3. LGBTQ+ specific services?

*'Oh my god! If there were a trans hostel or even an LGBTQ+ hostel – that would probably be the best thing ever!'*

- Joshua

One key question in terms of supporting LGBTQ+ people who are homeless is whether services should be provided specifically for this group, or if it is adequate to provide for them within general homelessness services. It is important to note that almost all participants expressed strong enthusiasm for LGBTQ+ and/or trans specific provision.

Support for trans or LGBTQ+ specific services was especially marked among those who avoided using services. This is to be expected: fear of being misunderstood was a very significant reason for reluctance to use services among this group. While participants overall felt that services could substantially improve, particularly through providing additional training, the advantage of LGBTQ+ specific services was that they were designed and run for LGBTQ+ people. In an LGBTQ+ specific space, the needs of this group were therefore more likely to be understood and anticipated, and psychological and physical safety less likely to be compromised.

#### Separate services?

Different options exist for LGBTQ+ specific services. One option would be deliberately employing staff to provide homelessness services who with lived experience of LGBTQ+ identity.

*'I'd feel more comfortable speaking with someone who actually is in the LGBTQ+ community because I'd feel more comfortable with speaking with someone who understood my experience. Someone who is LGBTQ+ just understands the sort of things you have gone through.'*

- Seren

Similarly, for Ruth, despite her (non-Welsh) hostel experience being good overall, there was a specific value in having LGBTQ+ workers. In her case, management of her case was provided by a dedicated worker, who liaised with other services for her.

*'There were LGBTQ+ staff working there, you know. Like, they had a dedicated LGBTQ+ person, a guy, an LGBTQ+ guy and like, he was the one who first talked to me and took all the details and started everything and he handed me off to the case worker. But the fact that they had visible lesbian staff who were like, they wore rainbow lanyards and stuff, they were openly lesbian and openly trans accepting, it was just a lovely environment to be in.'*

- Ruth

For participants, the main reason that having staff with lived experienced was seen as important was that disclosure of trans identity was seen as more likely to be received with understanding

and acceptance if the individual themselves was also LGBTQ+. It was more likely to be safe. Additionally, an LGBTQ+ person was felt more likely to be able to offer meaningful support.

For Kai, simply knowing that the person he spoke to had shared experience meant that he felt more likely to be understood, and regarded positively:

*'That added safety, that they have gone through a lot of the same things as you and that there's just an understanding.'*

- Kai

Several participants also mentioned the utility of a shared vocabulary and bank of experience to draw on as making them more comfortable.

*'It would just be a lot easier if they knew what the terms meant so I didn't have to go out of my way to explain them.'*

- Eli

*'I'd just feel more comfortable speaking to someone who is actually in the LGBTQ+ community because they've maybe gone through or going through some of my experiences.'*

- Elizabeth

For Oscar, knowing that the person he spoke to was also LGBTQ+ was partly related to safety. He articulated how, even in a space that should be safe such as a council office or a homelessness service provider, he still felt nervous.

*'I don't like awkward conversations with people. People, when they are made to feel awkward... there's that fear. When people are made to fear awkward, they do become more extreme, verbally violent, physically violent, pushy... you don't know, you never quite know.'*

- Oscar

Similarly, Cal articulated a general sense of lack of safety that they felt as a result of being "visibly trans"

*'I'm not at all safe out there. Not. I mean, occasionally I get to be around other trans people and then I do feel safer and sometimes I'm around cis people who are friends and family that I feel more or less safe with but even they do stuff to make me feel, like they don't realise what they're doing.'*

- Cal

As several participants pointed out, homelessness was already a very stressful time, and anything which made this harder was difficult and reduced the chance of engagement. At this point, having a staff member to whom a person could talk who had an understanding of what it meant to be LGBTQ+ might make the difference between a homeless trans person engaging, and not.

Lucy, of AKT, articulated the impact of feeling welcome for the LGBTQ+ youth attending the Trust's services.

*'You see young people relax. They may never have had like interaction with an LGBTQ+ service before. A few years ago when I started, someone told me about someone walking through the door and saying, "You're the first LGBTQ+ person I've ever actually met." So for me, that's it. And so our advice and guidance service, I think, is really good. Because it is empathetic to young people's needs and we can kind of fight their corner a little bit.'*

- Lucy, AKT

The nationally recognised model for LGBTQ+ specific services this are the services offered by AKT. The charity provides support for LGBTQ+ youth at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness in a number of different ways. It is particularly focused upon prevention services, offering advice and support targeted at young LGBTQ+ people to prevent them becoming homeless, for instance through offering advice about how to come out safely, and obtain support from colleges and other organisations. It also offers financial and practical assistance with helping young LGBTQ+ people into housing, for instance by supplying a deposit and first month's rent for those not eligible for statutory assistance, and helping them develop the skills needed for independent living. As a service, they are keen to recognise the specific factors that predicate LGBTQ+ youth to homelessness, and prevent them entering the cycle as far as possible.

*'Sometimes it is a case of throwing money at it. Some people don't need to be in the homelessness system, they're actually quite capable, but when you've got no family support, you can't get a deposit at short notice. You know, if you get into a job and you're a bit short of money and you can't feed yourself, that doesn't necessarily mean you need to be long term into the homelessness system. You just need a little bit of help. So for us it's about being able to do that and that flexibility.'*

- Lucy, AKT

Overall, while having trans-specific services was seen as an ideal, participants understood funding and organisational constraints and saw umbrella LGBTQ+ services as an attractive option, provided that the specific needs of trans people were considered. One popular suggestion was provision of trans-specific services within broader LGBTQ+ services.

*'Obviously you do get some tension between different sexualities and stuff. But maybe if some of it were separated...'*

- Elizabeth

Sam Austin, of Llamau, suggested that one way to do this might be through creating 'champions' – individuals within support teams who were identified as people who had particular expertise and who might be able to offer additional specific support to young LGBTQ+ people. This was seen as likely to work especially well with the existing local authority gateway. An additional benefit of this model is that it does not rely on people identifying themselves at the point of the homelessness application – a particularly vulnerable time – but once they are within and supported by a service.

*'LGBTQ+ champions within each team, across areas. So we're not saying that someone can't come into that service, because the gateway is mostly through the local authorities, so we don't have that control over having a specific service. But actually if we can do it in a different way, so if there's an LGBTQ+ champion within teams so if colleagues and particularly the young people and women that we work with can know that that person is there and go there and get support that way. I wonder if that would be better, particularly in the way that referrals come into our services.'*

- Sam, Llamau

Lucy, of the AKT, suggested that deliberate recruitment of trans people to roles would also help, and that to do so might in some instances require organisations to take steps to upskill trans workers, recognising that the lived experience they brought to the role was valuable.

*'I think one of the real issues is that there's not enough trans people who are working on the front line either. It's about being able to give trans people the confidence and the skills to do that role. And we're aware of that and we have gone out specifically to recruit trans and people of colour mentors because you know, our young people want to see people or have people that have had experiences similar to them.'*

- Lucy, AKT

## **LGBTQ+ specific hostels?**

Hostel provision is particularly complex for trans people. A large amount of prior research has focused on hostel provision as an issue in provision of services to trans people. This study found, in common with the majority of prior research, that trans people had often had poor experiences in hostels. Further, an expectation that accommodation offered would be unsuitable was a factor in preventing some trans people from approaching homelessness services.

Very few LGBTQ+ specific services exist in the UK. One of the main providers is AKT, which offers a hostel service to a small number of young LGBTQ+ people. Hostel support is provided as part of a wider package of support, enabling young LGBTQ+ people, including trans people, to access not only help but also support from others.

*'Once they're with other young people, the trans people, the LGBTQ+ people, being recognised in the right gender, being able to feel confident that people will respect that and just having that as a part of them that's just them, and whether they want to share things or not that's up to them as well. And just kind of, just feeling a bit relaxed I think. That's what we try and do in the housing services, is just try and recognise and acknowledge their gender, which some people have never experienced.'*

- Lucy, AKT

One of the key outcomes of this is that young people are able to experience living in an environment where their gender is not their defining characteristic.

*'I think what we found there is that we then had young people who were able to verbalise what they wanted to do, so the fact that they're LGBTQ+ kind of gets taken out of the equation as being the main, so they have a supportive environment it's the one thing that they can just be themselves... And they come to us and we can help them with all the other things they want to do, so it could be going to university or it could be getting a job. All of those kind of supportive things, or just getting help...'*

- Lucy, AKT

## 4. Conclusions and recommendations

The picture that emerges from this study is of services that want to help trans people, but where structures operate as a barrier, staff are not always aware of the best way to do this. Consequently, trans people are wary of presenting as homeless.

Compounding this, when trans people do present, there is considerable variation in how well people felt they had been helped. However, it is also clear that services do have a will to help trans people, and were in some cases successful. In particular, where staff had engaged well with applicants, given them time and space to discuss their needs, been able to offer appropriate support, and treated their identity as valid, experiences were generally good.

The aim should be consistently good, accessible services for trans people. In order to achieve this, however, there are a number of obstacles to overcome. Services need to be set up to ensure that trans people feel that they are welcome and that their needs can be accommodated and are valid. This was a considerable concern, and certainly was substantiated by those who had used council services, who reported that they felt hurried and that they did not have time to make council staff aware of all their needs. Substantial increases in homeless applicants, along with an additional bureaucratic load created by the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, mean that services are likely to be increasingly pressured and frontline workers are subject to increasing pressure of both time and space. However, this research shows that people with marginalised and stigmatised protected characteristics are disproportionately affected by a lack of privacy within council offices (particularly at the point of first presentation) and a lack of time for applicants to discuss applications with caseworkers. It is therefore important to consider staffing, resource and capacity shortfalls in terms of their impact upon particularly marginalised groups, such as trans people.

To a lesser extent, people were also put off making an application because of a fear of being asked intrusive questions. Being asked inappropriate or overly personal questions is a daily experience for many trans people. This experience is invalidating and unpleasant. Because it amounts to differential treatment of a protected group, it can be considered as a form of discrimination under the Equality Act 2010. To some extent, it is straightforward to avoid asking offensive or intrusive questions. However, caseworkers do need to ask difficult questions in order to obtain sufficient information from applicants to process their applications fairly. This indicates a need for training in this particular area.

Two other concerns were particularly evident. First, there was a fear among trans applicants that their needs would simply not be recognised – that they would be considered too low a priority and that others were ‘more deserving’. In some cases, participants themselves felt that their needs were insignificant compared to others. Yet in some of these cases, needs were objectively considerable. For instance, John, who had been primarily living in his car for the last two years, felt that he would not be treated as a priority by the council (mainly

because he was working a few hours a week) and hence it was a waste of his time to present – particularly given the belief that it would be an unpleasant experience in which his gender would be scrutinised and questioned. Isabella did present, but was told that they were not a high enough priority to be helped, although they were remaining in an abusive relationship to avoid street homelessness or sofa surfing.

There was also evidence of a strong community-level belief that the council was not inclined to help trans people. In several cases, participants formed their belief that the council would not help them as a result of an LGBTQ+ friend also having a negative experience. The idea of the council as unwilling to help them, and/or their trans identity deprioritising them for help, was therefore an entrenched one.

Second, there was a general belief that the council would simply not be able to offer a space in which they were safe. For instance, participants questioned whether the services as they were currently set up were structurally capable of keeping them safe.

There was also a considerable appetite for spaces where LGBTQ+ identity was anticipated and normalised – where, in the words of Lucy from AKT, *‘the fact that they’re LGBTQ+ kind of gets taken out of the equation.’* In such spaces, applicants can generally assume much higher levels of safety. However, with targeted services and peers and staff with high levels of understanding, often derived from lived experience, young LGBTQ+ people were also often able to move on, and ideally exit the cycle of homelessness permanently. Trans people are also at risk of homelessness throughout their lifespan, and services need to reflect this rather than being targeted only at those under 25 and operating as a subset of youth services.

# Recommendations

## Space to disclose

Trans people are particularly disadvantaged by physical spaces where confidentiality and time are restricted. This study highlights the importance of increasing the time available for all applicants. However, one workaround for this suggested by several participants was, for those applying in person to Housing Options offices, to give new applicants a short questionnaire – ‘Is there anything you’d like your caseworker to know?’ This could allow participants to share information about trans status and pronouns, and could also be helpful for other applicants who might also need to share stigmatising information. This could then be used to help Housing Options staff decide to give applicants an individual interview or spend more time on their case.

## Training

A need for staff training was identified by both staff and trans people who had experienced homelessness, in order to ensure that trans people receive the same level of service as non-trans people. Several organisations did already have such training in place. It is strongly advised that training is provided by specialist, trans-led organisations, such as the UNIQUE Transgender Network in Flintshire; and that it improves understanding in a number of core areas. In particular, frontline staff should have a toolkit to avoid asking questions which are intrusive and/or which make trans people feel uncomfortable. It may not be enough for them to have general or cursory training in trans rights, especially if under a broad equality training: they need to have training which is specific to their job.

A further training need is to ensure that homelessness staff are aware of the types of prevention interventions that are appropriate for trans people. In particular, non-specialist mediation services are not always appropriate and can be detrimental to trans people where families refuse to acknowledge or respect their identity.

## ‘Champions’

As well as training staff in the ways outlined above, a further suggestion is to introduce LGBTQ+ and trans ‘champions’ within teams, a benefit of this being that it does not rely on people identifying themselves at the point of the homelessness application – a particularly vulnerable time – but once they are within and supported by a service.

## Improving systems

For trans people, bureaucracy can present a particular obstacle. Records can be in a prior name or use incorrect pronouns. It can be particularly difficult for them to evidence their identity. In some cases, workers were able (and willing) to over-ride systems in order to ensure that applicants had records in the correct name and using the correct pronouns. Where this was done with little fuss, and without stigmatising questions, participants reacted

extremely positively. It is recommended that thought is given to how this might be done across homelessness systems, for instance by including a gender-neutral option and/or titles such as “Mx”, and considering the necessity of identity documents and/or the level of proof acceptable. For instance, Ruth’s caseworkers waived the requirement for her to produce identity documents, which made a big difference to her – ‘they just asked me, are you trans and do you live as a woman. That was it!’ Since a great deal of the administration of any discretion will be performed by frontline staff, it is also important to ensure that they understand the parameters of use of any discretion, and particularly that this does not lead to applicants having to prove or justify trans identity.

## Early engagement with communities

There was clear evidence that trans people facing homelessness were often reluctant to engage with local authorities. This was primarily because they anticipated a poor experience, from staff without much training or awareness of what it meant to be trans. While some participants had had bad experiences, it was also clear that at least some local authorities are able to offer high quality services to trans people.

The issue here seems primarily to be around trans people’s perception of services, meaning that there is a clear need to improve awareness in this group about what local authorities can offer and also what protections are in place where things go wrong. One suggestion is that local authorities connect with trans communities to try to catch people before homelessness has occurred. For instance, homelessness council workers could visit trans support groups, festivals and events to ensure that the community is aware of them and what they can offer, and particularly any procedures they may have in place to ensure that trans people do not experience discrimination.

## Specific services

Almost every participant expressed a strong desire for LGBTQ+ – or better yet, trans-specific – support and accommodation. These were seen as important not only in terms of ensuring physical and psychological safety, but also to provide a springboard from which to move on. It is recommended that service providers and councils consider whether this is something which they are able to offer. If so, AKT provides a good model for setting up and running a dedicated service. However, trans people in particular are at risk of housing precarity throughout the lifespan, and LGBTQ+ (or if possible, trans) specific services should be considered to cover the whole lifespan, not just for young people.

## Mainstream services

It is recognised, however, that it may not always be financially possible to commission specialist services that meet need in every part of Wales. Local authority commissioners should also consider the accessibility of mainstream support and accommodation services to trans people. A person-centred approach is recommended here, in line with the spirit of the Housing (Wales) Act, rather than generic one-size-fits-all provision.