



June 2020

Hwyl Fawr to Homelessness:

how to end
homelessness in
Wales, by people with
first-hand experience

Shelter
Cymru

www.sheltercymru.org.uk
Registered charity no. 515902



Supported by
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Shelter Cymru

Shelter Cymru is the people and homes charity 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.

Our 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.

Our 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 own lives.

Constructively challenge to ensure people are properly assisted and to improve good practice.

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Nobody understands the realities of homelessness better than people who have gone through it themselves. This fundamental fact was recognised by the Homelessness Action Group, set up to make recommendations to the Welsh Government on the steps needed to end homelessness for good.

This report is based on the findings of a widespread consultation exercise that brought the voices of people into the heart of the Homelessness Action Group's investigations. This work helped to ensure that the Welsh Government heard recommendations that were solidly grounded in real life experience.

What is the Homelessness Action Group?

The Welsh Government set up the Homelessness Action Group in June 2019 and tasked it with answering the following four questions:

1. What framework of policies, approaches and plans are needed to end homelessness in Wales? (What does ending homelessness actually look like?)
2. What immediate actions can we take to reduce rough sleeping between now and the winter of 2019/20, and to end rough sleeping altogether?
3. How do we put the delivery of rapid and permanent rehousing at the heart of preventing, tackling and ending homelessness?
4. How can we ensure joined-up local partnerships and plans are put in place to prevent, tackle and end homelessness throughout Wales?

Members of the group were drawn from across the housing sector:

- Jon Sparkes (chair) – Chief Executive, Crisis
- Bonnie Navarra, Director for Wales, Housing Justice
- Clare Budden – CEO, Clwyd Alyn Housing Association
- Clarissa Corbisiero – Director of Policy and External Affairs, Community Housing Cymru
- Frances Beecher – Chief Executive, Llamau, and chair of End Youth Homelessness Cymru
- Gaynor Toft, Corporate Manager (Housing), Ceredigion County Council
- Glynne Roberts – Programme Manager, Well North Wales, Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board
- John Puzey – Chief Executive, Shelter Cymru
- Katie Dalton – Director, Cymorth Cymru
- Lindsay Cordery-Bruce – Chief Executive, The Wallich

- Naomi Alleyne – Director of Social Services and Housing, Welsh Local Government Association
- Dr Peter Mackie – Reader, Cardiff University
- Tamsin Stirling – Freelance homelessness and housing consultant

You can read the Group's reports to the Government here: <https://gov.wales/homelessness-action-group>

Thank you...

... to the many people with experience of homelessness who gave their time and expertise to identify the best solutions for ending homelessness in Wales

... to the five local authorities that granted us access to speak to people using their housing services

... to the service providers that worked with us to ensure that people using their services had their say

... to the Welsh Government for funding this work, and

... to the Homelessness Action Group for putting people first.

What did we do?

The consultation exercise was led by Shelter Cymru in partnership with other members of the Group. We worked with peer researchers who'd had experience of homelessness themselves to do research in a number of phases:

- Phase 1: a survey conducted in September 2019. This phase was carried out at an early stage to inform what the Group focused on. We went out to speak to people in five local authority frontline housing offices in Pontypridd, Newport, Merthyr Tydfil, Cardiff and Swansea. At each site a researcher assisted people to complete the survey on a tablet. The survey was also shared widely online and face-to-face by Homelessness Action Group partners. A total of 284 people completed the survey, including 152 people who had been homeless or were currently homeless.
- Phase 2 survey: a second survey was carried out in February 2020 in order to sense-check the Group's draft recommendations and give feedback on whether they were the right ones to make. The survey was distributed by Cymorth Cymru to its membership organisations, by Crisis and other members of the Group. The survey was completed by 101 people, including 78 people who had been homeless or were currently homeless.
- Phase 2 focus groups: the second survey was carried out alongside three focus groups attended by a total of 23 people who were living in hostel accommodation in Swansea, Pontypridd and Aberystwyth.

What did we hear? Phase one

In phase one **90%** of the 152 people who had experienced homelessness in the last five years told us that they still worried about their housing situation.

This is very concerning as it highlights the impact of homelessness on people's continued feeling of housing insecurity which can lead to anxiety and insecurity in much wider aspects of life.

People gave us their views on three main areas of homelessness through ranking a list of options in a survey and attending focus groups.

How to end rough sleeping

People's most popular choice (at 57%) was that there should be accommodation that can be accessed by anyone immediately in emergency situations, and there should be no barriers to accessing emergency accommodation.

The second most popular choice was that people should be able to get support wherever they need it, rather than just in their 'home' area where they have a local connection.

People's overall solutions to ending rough sleeping were to

- increase the amount of affordable and secure housing
- improve emergency accommodation and
- improve the way in which services treat people who are homeless.

Rapid Rehousing

Rapid Rehousing approaches to homelessness have become recognised as a practical approach to prevent the negative impacts to mental health and wellbeing that come from extended periods of homelessness. The Rapid Rehousing approach encourages joined up services to respond quickly when allocating housing to anyone who is faced with homelessness.

People's most popular choice (at 52%) was that permanent homes should be provided (with support when needed) as quickly as possible, reducing the amount of time spent in temporary accommodation.

The second most popular choice was that the type of temporary accommodation should change so as to avoid using B&Bs to house people who are homeless.

People's general comments in the focus groups reinforced these preferences. They told us there is a need to

- focus on improving access to, and the quality of, temporary accommodation and
- increase the number of permanent homes.

How to end homelessness

The most popular choice (at 28%) was that public services should be improved so that they are kind, compassionate and treat people with dignity. This is a foundation for providing the help that is needed.

The second most popular choice was that the welfare system should be changed so that people can afford to pay their housing and living costs.

People's general comments had one very common solution on how to end homelessness:

increasing the amount of affordable and secure housing.

What did we hear? Phase two

The questions for the second survey and focus groups were based on the following six themes that had emerged from the Homelessness Action Group's work.

- (i) the importance of Rapid Rehousing and Housing First
- (ii) a need for joined up services
- (iii) more members of staff in housing and homelessness services, all of whom are respectful, well trained and supported
- (iv) a need to prioritise people for housing
- (v) more prevention of homelessness
- (vi) how homelessness and housing services should operate.

Within these six themes, we found that people supported many of the recommendations proposed by the Group, although had **concerns and apprehension based on many years of seeing interventions and changes in homelessness policy fail to deliver positive outcomes** for people using these services.

The importance of Rapid Rehousing and Housing First

Rapid Rehousing means quick access to suitable and affordable housing. Part of this includes Housing First, which has been shown to be a particularly effective model to meet the housing needs of people with multiple or complex unmet needs¹.

People agreed that Rapid Rehousing is a practical solution to homelessness: **86%** of the survey respondents agreed with the statement that 'Organisations working with homeless people should help people to find a suitable home very quickly and make sure they have the right help for as long as they need it.'

However, there were some practical concerns about providing Rapid Rehousing because of insufficient amounts of suitable housing. People discussed the importance of being provided with accommodation immediately, but also pointed out some challenges that people with complex needs would face in sustaining a tenancy.

'You can't throw someone who's never been in a decent home into a home and expect them to be okay.'

People raised concerns about the length of time that intensive support should be provided. Several said that people would be able to live alone if they had the right support for as long as they need it.

¹ <https://housingfirsteurope.eu/guide/what-is-housing-first/>

‘Support for as long as you need it is the most important thing. When support is dropped that’s when you mess up.’

‘I don’t think there should be a time limit as people’s needs are different.’

Some people felt that support is often not at the right level and is not individualised enough. They told us that sometimes generic tenancy support services miss the personalised nuances that can make all the difference to tenancy sustainment and quality of life.

Some people felt strongly that support is often not intensive enough in supported housing, especially for finance management, and that support is inadequate in length and quality when people move into independent housing.

A need for joined up services

Good quality connected services are very important to people accessing homelessness services. One of the main frustrations that people expressed was the need to explain their situation every time they met a different agency, and that staff from different agencies did not seem to communicate with each other. People found this tedious and believed it contributed to people stopping asking for help, which may even result in some people sleeping rough.

‘Services don’t talk to each other. There’s just a lack of communication everywhere.’

‘Services need to get the right balance and work together. The communication would be better if they were open with each other. We wouldn’t have to keep repeating ourselves going around in circles.’

Some people said that there was not enough help when being discharged from hospital, and that some staff lacked basic training around this issue.

‘I told the hospital I had nowhere to go. They said I needed to go to Housing Options and there was nothing they could do. I stayed on the streets for weeks before I had any help’.

‘I have a chronic health condition; I was discharged back onto the streets from the hospital. I was discharged so late on a Friday I missed my appointment with Housing Options so was back on the streets. It’s common; it happens all the time.’

People told us that hospital and prison services failed to plan ahead efficiently, sometimes resulting in people being released from prison without having a planned pathway into housing. People who had spent time in prison complained about the lack of support and housing on their release and that this made going back to prison an appealing alternative. This was a particular problem for people with mental health or substance misuse problems.

‘It feels like services leave it all to the last minute; then it is too late. They know you will be homeless and wait for it to happen before they do anything.’

‘People use jail to come off drugs because with all the other services you have to wait three to six months to get any help.’

One participant described how he had taken a pro-active approach whilst in prison. He had requested to phone the council prior to release and arranged with them to obtain a property.

‘I’m lucky, I started whinging a couple of weeks before I got out ... I was on the phone to the council and so when I came out I was already given [a house].’

It is concerning that some people still do not have a planned route into housing, as the Welsh Government provides guidance on helping people into housing from prison.² People also suggested that tenancy support workers should be working with them before release from prison (and discharge from hospital). This is consistent with the Homelessness Action Group’s suggestion for ‘Housing/support experts [to be] located in other services.’

² https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-03/homelessness-services-for-children-young-people-and-adults-in-the-secure-estate_0.pdf

More members of staff in housing and homelessness services, all of whom are respectful, well trained and supported

People talked a lot about the way they were treated. Some people were concerned that housing and homelessness staff viewed them differently, and some people felt alienated because they were homeless. There was a consensus that, to a certain extent, the public and some staff in homelessness services stereotype people who are homeless.

'People turn their children's heads away. Hold their bags a bit tighter when they walk past you. But we feel that judgement from services too and it shouldn't be like that. I have cried about it, looked at like I am a monster.'

'There needs to be the right people in jobs that help us, not people that judge you and look down at you.'

Many people felt that staff did not see them as individuals with individual needs.

'Everyone is individual. There are not enough services that treat you like an individual.'

'You need to stop putting people in a box and provide support required by the individual. You must show homeless people dignity and respect. Stop treating them like criminals.'

Many people told us that services lacked empathy, and that services should consider all aspects of a person's life.

'There's a reason why people are homeless. Look at the reason, not the homelessness. [Homelessness] is just a symptom. House the person and give the person holistic support.'

'Life can change really quickly. If it's a vulnerable person that's under the care of their parents, and their parents die suddenly and they

become homeless, it's not through any fault of their own. You can't predict life; you don't know what's going to be around the corner. People can be in good circumstances, earning a good living but they can soon find themselves in a difficult situation.'

Some people requested to be treated with more compassion, and for an understanding of the barriers and difficulties they face.

'More compassion, understand the impact on people's mental health. Understand the barriers more. Less barriers take a huge stress off a homeless person. Often they are made to feel worthless like they don't matter. They give up hope and end up suicidal'.

Although there were some criticisms of staff, people appreciated that there were often insufficient numbers of staff and they were under a lot of pressure.

'I believe those working in temporary accommodation are well trained. Those providing temporary accommodation need more funding to increase the level of staffing.'

'Services only lean towards being uncompassionate when the support workers are overworked and stressed. No one is in this job for the money, clearly. The support workers need support.'

A need to prioritise people for housing

A very high proportion of people (**89%**) agreed that people in Wales should have a legal right to a home.

However, many people recognised that this was hard to achieve because of insufficient suitable affordable housing, and consequently priority needs to be given to those who need or deserve it most.

‘Not all homeless people should just get priority need. It depends on the circumstances. It will need to be assessed on a case by case basis I think.’

Many people felt that women and households with children should have priority for housing. A lot of people said that children should not have to experience homelessness. Some people commented that a right to housing reduces as people get older.

‘I am a single man. I should not get priority over a woman or a family just because I am homeless.’

‘I know for children it [housing] is a right, you have to have it, and then the older you get, the less it becomes a right.’

People told us that tenants must fulfil their responsibilities, but that some people need help with this. Some people sympathised with landlords, saying that evictions were important deterrents to not paying rent. Others recognised that if people don't pay their rent it can be part of a larger problem. They stressed the importance of early intervention and support to stop people building up arrears, which could prevent them from becoming homeless.

‘Lots of people I know have a flat, they can't cope with it so still beg on the streets. That's down to not enough support.’

‘I don't think anybody wants to be homeless. Nobody wants to make themselves homeless really. If they do, if they genuinely want to make themselves homeless, then they are mentally ill or something. Or there is a major problem there.’

‘Depending on what is behind the cycle [of homelessness], if it's addiction or mental illness, etc.... they could step in with that type of help, additional help.’

More prevention of homelessness

The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 places a statutory responsibility on Welsh local authorities to prevent people from becoming homeless whenever possible. As well as initiating Rapid Rehousing, people suggested other practical steps to prevent homelessness.

- Identifying people who might need help and giving them the support they need to maintain their tenancy

‘They should help people. It’s obvious someone is struggling if they can’t pay their rent. It’s pointless evicting them, what is that solving? It just creates another person using homeless services.’

- Providing people with suitable homes and tailored support that meets their needs

‘Services designed around people and their real needs, rather than designing services which people have to fit into. Not congregating people with problems together i.e. not placing recovering alcoholics with drinkers; the same in relation to drugs’.

- Ensuring that any move to end evictions into homelessness does not result in restricting who gets a home in the first place.

There were mixed views about ending evictions into homelessness. Some people thought this shouldn’t apply to everyone and some were concerned that, due to an insufficient number of homes, people regarded as potentially ‘problematic’ would not be offered a home at all, particularly in the private rented sector.

‘I think they should make it illegal to evict people into homelessness if they have children, but not for everyone.’

‘If it was law that you couldn’t be evicted then we would never get somewhere to live, who would rent to us? It’s hard enough as it is.’

- Building more homes and using empty buildings

Most people recognised a lack of housing stock as a fundamental cause of homelessness. Many complained that there are too many empty buildings and that action should be taken to ensure they are used.

‘There are many abandoned buildings, many council properties that the council refuse to do up... it’s ridiculous, there is space; they just don’t seem to do anything with it.’

‘Between all the organisations there is enough support and housing for everybody. I count hundreds of empty flats around Swansea.’

How homelessness and housing services should operate

People told us that there should be consistent, straightforward, empathetic and co-ordinated homelessness and housing services across Wales.

Homelessness services

Many people told us that the current homelessness system is too complex and rigid, that this was a barrier for staff trying to direct people to services, and a barrier for people who are homeless trying to manoeuvre through services.

Many people talked about barriers they had faced, such as living in remote/isolated temporary accommodation, no digital equipment or internet, and not having enough money to use public transport. They said that sometimes homelessness services did not take these difficulties into account, that they were inflexible and took a 'process-driven' rather than a 'person-centred' approach.

'You should have the same services wherever you go. Not have to jump through hoops to try and get the help you need.'

'They should be looking at another way to give that person an appointment, find out what the difficulty is and help them.'

One person highlighted the big difference that a flexible approach had made.

'I had a great probation officer who knew I'd just mess up again around here so he arranged for me to enter a programme in Scotland. It helped having the choice of moving away and breaking old habits. That's why things are better for me now.'

Some people said more suitable accommodation for people sleeping rough was needed. Some people told us there was insufficient 'wet' accommodation. Others said that people were sleeping rough as a last option to avoid sharing with people who were drinking/using substances.

'Consider wet "monitored" accommodation new builds in carefully considered areas.'

People said that there needed to be sufficient numbers of staff in homelessness services, all of whom should take ownership of enquiries and be fully accountable for their decisions.

Housing services

As in earlier parts of the consultation, many people acknowledged that tenants should act responsibly, but said that many evictions could be prevented if the right support is in place.

‘People fall on hard times and do not intend or want to be homeless. Some need support to be able to maintain a tenancy or even understand their rights as a tenant.’

‘It’s the real world - don’t pay rent then get evicted. By allowing people to repeat problematic behaviour you are allowing them to continue with a cycle of eviction. They get evicted, you move them, they get evicted, you move them. What are they learning?’

People told us that landlords should offer more help to tenants: 65% said that if social landlords are evicting tenants they should work with other organisations to ensure that people do not become homeless.

‘The landlords should work with people if something is going wrong. Not just evict them.’

‘Can’t just kick people out - there are reasons why someone isn’t paying their rent.’

What did we learn?

This work reinforced the importance of asking people who have lived experience of homelessness about how to address it, and for policy makers and service providers to fully take account of their views.

The key lessons that people told us during the consultations were:

- Work to prevent homelessness needs to be improved
- More affordable and secure housing is needed, including making use of empty buildings
- There should be a legal right to a home
- When there is a limited supply of housing, priority should be based on people's needs
- Permanent homes should be provided quickly for homeless people, with support if needed that is tailored to each person's situation for however long it is required
- More staff are needed to provide the right level of help and support for homeless people
- Staff working with homeless people need to be kind, compassionate and should always treat people with dignity and respect
- There should be consistent, straightforward, empathetic and co-ordinated homelessness and housing services across Wales
- Services need to work more closely together and communicate better to prevent and respond to homelessness – this includes prisons, health, housing, homelessness and support services
- Significant improvements are needed to ensure people are not homeless on leaving hospitals and prisons
- Tenants who struggle to pay their rent should be offered support very quickly
- Making it unacceptable to evict people into homelessness must not result in people being refused housing in the first place
- The quality of temporary accommodation needs to be improved, and using B&Bs as temporary accommodation for homeless people should be avoided
- People sleeping rough should have easier access to emergency accommodation and should be supported irrespective of whether they have a local connection with the area
- The welfare system needs to change so that people can afford their housing and living costs.

