



TAKE NOTICE!

#7

DECEMBER 2024

Written by and for people who have experienced homelessness, or know what it's like to live in unsafe, unaffordable, unsuitable housing. Together we can make a real difference to the housing emergency in Wales.



Confronting Shame My Journey Through Homelessness

by Chris J. Birch

In the financial crisis of 2008, like many others, I faced an unexpected and harsh reality. I was made redundant from my position, a job I had built my career around. Naively, I thought it would be easy to find another job. Yet, I quickly found myself with no immediate opportunities, no job prospects, and a rapidly shrinking group of friends and colleagues. As my support network dwindled, I found myself adrift and alone.

Money began to run out, and I made the difficult decision to move out of the home I had rented from a friend. This was an attempt to 'save face' rather than fall behind on payments. At the time, I was unaware that I could apply for benefits to help me through this tough period.

Compounding my troubles, my mother had recently cut ties with me after I announced that I was gay. Suddenly, I had nowhere to go. The shame was immediate and overwhelming. I didn't approach my dad, who worked away frequently, or any other more distant relatives who could have helped. I felt too ashamed to admit my situation.

In truth, I ended up sleeping in my financed, untaxed, uninsured two-seat car on private land at night, occasionally interspersed with 'sofa surfing' at friends' places. I refused to acknowledge that I was homeless. To me, homeless people were those you saw on the streets begging—people who were nothing like me. But the reality was that I was homeless, and the shame of that reality kept me from reaching out for help.

Weeks went by, and with the knowledge that my car might be taken from me at any moment, I finally mustered the courage to speak to my grandmother and my dad. I didn't tell them the full truth; I simply said I might need somewhere to live. The truth was, I desperately needed a place to stay, preferably immediately. Thankfully, they responded with immediate support. Within six weeks, I had a home, and in the meantime, I stayed with them.

Those twelve weeks of homelessness left a deep impression on me. The shame I felt was so profound that I couldn't talk about it for years. It wasn't until a year ago, when a friend faced a similar situation, that I finally opened up. I began to question why I had kept silent for so long. The shame I had felt about my failure, my circumstances, and my homelessness had become intertwined with my character.



Looking back, I realise that I shouldn't have felt ashamed about being homeless. Instead, I should feel a bit of shame for not talking about it sooner, not using my experience to help others who might think they are alone in facing such challenges. The truth is, we are all only months away from potentially finding ourselves in a similar position. Finances and circumstances are fragile and can change rapidly.

My advice to anyone facing similar circumstances: Talk. Speak up. Tell people what you're going through. Educate them and inspire change in society. Be the model of support and understanding that you would want if the roles were reversed. By doing so, we can ensure that no one feels ashamed to speak up about their struggles.

My journey through homelessness taught me valuable lessons about resilience, empathy, and the importance of communication. It's crucial to share our experiences, not only to heal ourselves but to help others who might be silently suffering. Together, we can create a society where no one feels ashamed to seek help and where everyone has the support they need to overcome their challenges.

“The truth is, we are all only months away from finding ourselves in a similar position. Finances and circumstances are fragile and can change rapidly.”

VALUING DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

By Lauren Strawford
People Partner at Shelter Cymru



What are the biggest challenges we face around inclusion?

Staff are the key asset for our charity, we all want to do a good job for the people we help and we want to be supported in doing so.

In order for any organisation to truly support the communities they serve, they need a diverse workforce that reflects those communities, with motivated, skilled and flexible individuals who have a commitment to social justice who can advise and support the people they help on a daily basis.

In the last 12 months we, like others in the housing and advice sectors, have continued to face the recruitment challenges of the post-Covid period. The labour market has been extremely tight (meaning employers have more jobs to fill than people looking for those jobs) which has had an effect on most industries, but perhaps has hit charities particularly hard. Difficulties in recruitment have a direct impact on recruiting diverse workforce, which can have knock on effects on retention. Recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce is a fundamental aspect for us as a charity to support our communities.

What are our aspirations as an organisation and any key achievements when looking at Diversity & Inclusion?

I think we all have to remember that when talking about diversity and inclusion, we can't just draw up a check list to tick off and then claim we are fully diverse. Diversity is a growing journey and there are key things organisations can do to aid the journey. I think organisations run the risk of implementing processes or policies then thinking they have plugged the gap when really they've only scratched the surface.

As an organisation, we have been focusing on our recruitment and training, and while there are areas we still need to develop, we have achieved some positive outcomes. We have strengthened our recruitment process, in reducing unconscious bias practices, such as anonymising applications, reviewing our equal opportunities data collection and extended this out to staff. We are also in the process of implementing a new Application Tracking System (software that manages the recruiting and hiring process), which will further enhance this. We have expanded where we place adverts to include diversity focused online platforms, such as [LGBTjobs.co.uk](https://lgbtjobs.co.uk), [BMEjobs.co.uk](https://bmejobs.co.uk) and disabilityjobs.co.uk.

In partnership with Unite (our recognised union) we have rolled out a variety of different training, such as disability, LGBTQ+, menopause, wellbeing awareness sessions. We are also continuing to work with Welsh Government funded third parties to expand our training package even further.

This is just a small snapshot of our diversity and inclusion journey, which doesn't end with a check list, we will continue to make positive improvements to promote diversity and inclusion.

What does having a diverse workforce do for an organisation?

It goes without saying that there are endless benefits for having a diverse workforce, but let's take a look at just some of them:

When people from different backgrounds come together they bring unique perspectives and experiences which can enhance creativity and innovation. Diverse teams are better equipped to evaluate different options and make informed decisions, which will have positive impacts on organisations, especially in challenging times.

As a charity we want to represent in our workforce the communities we serve, to do that we need to have a diverse group of people. A diverse workforce can better understand and cater to the needs of our clients and we will be equipped to better support and understand our clients' needs. Having individuals from different backgrounds and with lived experience of housing difficulty can help promote a more inclusive culture that can help us learn, relate and support each other as well as to our clients.

If you are interested in working with us, please keep checking our [Current Vacancies](#).

ASK THE TRAINERS!

Like so many things, the housing sector is FULL of jargon. Shelter Cymru's training department tries to help us all make sense of it.

WHAT IS RENT SMART WALES?

Rent Smart Wales is the centralised landlord registration and licensing scheme for all of Wales. The overall aim is to improve property standards, management practices and relationships between landlords, agents and tenants in Wales. It was set up after the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 came into force.

All private landlords of occupation contracts in Wales must be registered with Rent Smart Wales. This means that if you have a fixed term standard contract or a periodic standard contract your landlord should be registered. Your landlord should also be registered if you have a regulated tenancy.

In order to register, a landlord must provide accurate and up-to-date information about themselves and all of the properties that they operate in Wales. They also have to pay a fee. If they are not registered then they are committing an offence and can face penalties.

If you would like to check that your landlord or letting agent is registered you can do so by using the the public register [here](#).

You can report an unlicensed landlord / agent / property to Rent Smart Wales [here](#).



Our friends at EYHC have been working hard over the last few months to create a podcast series dedicated to youth homelessness.

You can listen, subscribe and show your support here:

[Apple](#)
[Spotify](#)
[Amazon](#)
[Podcast Addict](#)
[Podcast Index](#)

DEBT RESPITE SCHEME – BREATHING SPACE

The Debt Respite Scheme (Breathing Space) has been developed to give people in problem debt the right to legal protections from their creditors.

There are two types of breathing space:

- a standard breathing space
- a mental health crisis breathing space

Standard breathing space

A standard breathing space is available to anyone with problem debt.

It provides legal protections from creditor action for up to 60 days. The protections include pausing most enforcement action and contact from creditors and freezing most interest and charges on their debts.

Mental health crisis breathing space

A mental health crisis breathing space has some stronger protections, but is only available to someone who is receiving mental health crisis treatment. It lasts as long as the person's mental health crisis treatment, plus 30 days (no matter how long the crisis treatment lasts).

A mental health crisis breathing space is only available in very limited situations

Someone is classed as receiving mental health crisis treatment if they are:

- detained for assessment or treatment under the Mental Health Act 1983
- removed to a place of Safety under the Mental Health Act 1983
- or
- receiving crisis, emergency or acute care or treatment in any setting from a specialist mental health service
(this would be a mental health service provided by a crisis home treatment team, a liaison mental health team, a community mental health team or any other specialist mental health crisis service).

An approved mental health professional (AMHP) needs to confirm that someone is receiving mental health crisis treatment.

In Wales, all mental health breathing spaces applications are supported by Citizens Advice Cymru

You need to get debt advice from an approved organisation to apply for breathing space. If you are getting support from Shelter Cymru, and would like more information, please ask and we will refer you to our Arian service.

For some useful additional information, please have a look at [Step Change's website](#).

SUPPORT AT CHRISTMAS

Homelessness is at a record level in Wales. There are currently 11,363 people living in temporary accommodation, such as bed & breakfasts, in Wales.

This article by the BBC highlights some of the challenges that so many people are facing:

[Homelessness in Wales reaches record levels - BBC News](#)

If you are struggling this Christmas or you know someone who is, *please* reach out.



Samaritans are open 24/7 for anyone who needs to talk
116 123 (freephone) or email jo@samaritans.org
Samaritans also have a Welsh Language Line on 0808 164 0123

There are MANY other support services in local areas and they want to help.
[Our website](#) lists some of these.



Mind provides a lot of information about organisations that might be a good fit for you;
you can look on line [Useful contacts - Christmas and mental health - Mind](#)
or give their info line a ring on 0300 123 3393.

Dydych chi ddim ar eich pen eich hun.

Get housing help and advice

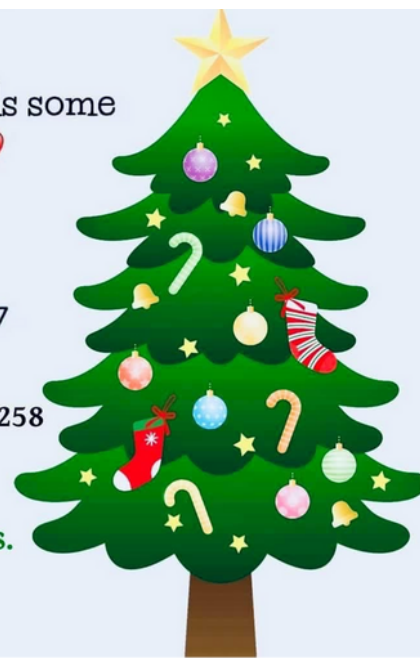
- Call Shelter Cymru's urgent [helpline](#) (9am – 4pm Monday to Friday)
08000 495 495
- Visit our [housing advice](#) pages and find the topic which you need advice on
- Use our [webchat](#)
- Phone or visit a Shelter Cymru [advice centre](#)



For anyone who needs some support right now. ❤️

CALM - 0800585858
Mind - 03001233393
No Panic - 08449674848
Bereavement - 08088081677
PAPYRUS - 08000684141
Samaritans - 116 123
SHOUT - Text SHOUT to 85258
Abuse - 0808 2000 247
Refuge - 020 7395 7700

Stay safe this Christmas.



Our Winter Appeal is an incredibly important part of our fundraising calendar, generating much-needed funds to ensure our vital work can continue. If you would like to share your story for future appeals or can spare some time to help our fundraising team with their programme of activity in 2025, please get in touch.



THE GIFT OF HOME

HOME... it's somewhere safe and secure. It's a place to be happy and healthy and to put down roots. It's a human right.

But this winter, more than 11,000 people in Wales are already homeless and facing a Christmas in temporary accommodation. Imagine the practical struggles of having the whole family in one room, having just a kettle to prepare meals, or queuing to use a shared washing machine or microwave. The burden of homelessness weighs even more heavily during the holiday season on parents who are trying to shield their children from such harsh realities.

OUR PREVENTION WORK HAS NEVER BEEN MORE VITAL

We support people at all stages of homelessness, and much of our work is focussed on stopping homelessness before it starts. Our housing advice and legal representation are free of charge, and available to anyone in Wales who needs it.

LAST YEAR, WE HELPED 63 PEOPLE – INCLUDING 18 CHILDREN – IN HOUSING NEED EVERY DAY

Getting the right help, at the right time, can mean the very real difference between keeping a roof over your head or sleeping on the streets. If we can help people to keep their home, we can avoid more families having to put their lives on hold, and give children a better Christmas – and a better future

HANNAH'S STORY*

Hannah was a single mother who had just given birth to a daughter. The reduction in her income while she was on maternity leave meant she could no longer afford to keep up with her rent. Because of her arrears, the council were looking to take possession of her home.

Hannah and her newborn daughter were on the brink of homelessness.

Shelter Cymru gave Hannah the one-to-one support she needed. While fighting for her and her daughter's rights to stay in their home while the situation was being resolved, we also helped Hannah to get on top of her finances. Hannah has now cleared her arrears, is able to meet her monthly payments in the future, and she and her daughter have kept their safe place of refuge – their home.

//

I CAN'T EXPRESS HOW MUCH EASE WE FEEL NOW. THE SUPPORT I WAS GIVEN HAS BENEFITTED ME IN SO MANY WAYS. NOT ONLY HAS SHELTER CYMRU HELPED TO KEEP A ROOF OVER OUR HEADS, WE CAN NOW MOVE FORWARD WITHOUT THE FINANCIAL STRESS.

I WILL FOREVER BE SO GRATEFUL FOR THE HIGH STANDARD OF SUPPORT I RECEIVED.

THANK YOU FOR EVERYTHING.

No-one should face homelessness alone.

*Name changed to protect Hannah's identity.



THANK YOU!

**to the customers and staff at
Dunelm in Wrexham**

As part of Dunelm's **Delivery Joy at Christmas** Campaign, Shelter Cymru Staff were asked to request gifts for the people they support who might be struggling this Christmas.

A large Christmas tree covered in gift tags was put up at the front of the store.

Each gift tag represented a person and provided information about their interests and needs.

Customers removed a gift tag, bought a gift to match and returned it to the store to be distributed.

People's generosity has been incredible and the whole process has been heart-warming and incredibly appreciated by all involved.

One of our supporters said:

"It's so important that we all do what we can, this can be such a hard time of year for many people."

GET INVOLVED WITH SHELTER CYMRU AND JOIN THE FIGHT FOR HOME

- Join Take Notice to work with local authorities to help them understand how to improve their housing services.
- Our Fundraising team organise regular events across Wales to help us raise funds and spread the word about our fight for home. Why not join us?
- We need your help to review our Shelter Cymru Advice Online webpages to make them as accessible, useful and informative as possible.
- We run regular focus groups with people who have used Shelter Cymru services to help us continually improve what we do. We are looking for participants and facilitators to help to run these sessions.
- We are recruiting Peer Researchers to speak to staff, service users and the public to better understand the barriers to housing and inform our campaign work.

To find out more, email
getinvolved@sheltercymru.org.uk



DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Email getinvolved@sheltercymru.org.uk if you are interested in any of the following:

9 January

Webinar: Talking About Homes

15 January

Webinar: Building Support for Social Homes

21 January

Webinar: Talking About Private Renting

24 January

Consultation Deadline: Fair Rents and Affordability

25 January

Bucket Collection: Rodney Parade, Newport
Newport Gwent Dragons v Munster

8 February

Event: Winter Warmer Run, Bute Park, Cardiff

13 February

Focus Group

Join us online to discuss ways to improve our services so we can help more people.

5 March

Take Notice Team Meeting - Swansea

- to work on Shelter Cymru's infosheets
- for free training
- to share experiences

7 March

Newsletter Content Deadline

If you have ideas or content for the December edition of this newsletter, please let us know by 7 March.

16 March

Event: Great Welsh Marathon
Pembrey Country Park

We're so grateful to our brilliant volunteers, who help to power the fight for home and make a huge difference to the lives of people in housing need across Wales. We exist to defend the right to a safe home, but we can't do it without you.

