

RS 06

Ymchwiliad i gysgu ar y stryd yng Nghymru

Inquiry into rough sleeping in Wales

Ymateb gan: Shelter Cymru

Response from: Shelter Cymru

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.

Introduction

Shelter Cymru welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to this inquiry. We are currently conducting research with people who are street homeless in Wales: since November 2017 we have spoken with around 100 people who are currently sleeping rough in Welsh towns and cities. While this research will not be ready for publication until later this spring, we are able to share emerging findings. We're grateful that the Committee has created this opportunity to look into such an important issue.

Shelter Cymru's main purpose is to give people the advice and advocacy they need to avoid homelessness and sleeping rough. However, we do work with several hundred people sleeping rough every year. This puts us in a strong position to evaluate the current system around rough sleeping and make robust recommendations.

Effectiveness of part 2 of the Housing (Wales) Act in preventing rough sleeping

The Housing Wales Act should have led to improvements in the way that people sleeping rough are assisted. Even if people sleeping rough are found to be not in priority need, they should still have more rights than before the new legislation was introduced thanks to the duty under section 73 to ‘help to secure’ accommodation for all homeless households regardless of priority need.

However, most rough sleepers should be treated as priority need: the statutory Code of Guidance says that people sleeping rough ‘are likely to be vulnerable for an “other special reason” due to the health and social implications of their situation.’ This should mean that rough sleepers are likely to be owed a priority need and therefore be offered suitable interim accommodation while the council works with them to help find a permanent housing solution.

Unfortunately we have not seen this part of the guidance fully implemented in Wales. During our research, participants frequently mentioned a lack of priority need as a key reason why they were street homeless. This was particularly prevalent among prison leavers, who no longer have priority status and are often released without any offer of accommodation in place.

Priority need is still creating a barrier, because local authorities don’t have a duty to provide suitable interim accommodation for people who are apparently not in a priority need group. It is hard for local authorities to work effectively with people who don’t have an address – and it is harder for individuals to engage with the process and cooperate if they have to worry about where they will sleep that night.

There is evidence that in some areas local connection decisions are also problematic as they are being used inconsistently and in some cases unfairly and without proper assessments.

Our research has found that many people need more support to engage with local authority services than is currently available: many people we spoke to said they had lost track of their application and didn’t know where they were in the system. Other people were unwilling to try the council having tried in the past and been disappointed.

The scale of rough sleeping and adequacy of the data

Throughout the study we have spoken to around 100 people sleeping rough. The numbers do vary and there is a lot of churn – some people had been on the streets a few nights, others for years. The Welsh Government-led data collection does not provide a consistent picture and often only covers people sleeping within the town

centre. In our study we have met people who are sleeping outside of the town in parks and other suburban areas. We also understand that the count does not always include people who are awake and walking around when they are seen. We welcome the development of the Street Homeless Information Network (SHIN) and feel that this will be an invaluable tool to show the true extent and cycle of homelessness in Wales.

Causes and recent increases in rough sleeping

Part of the remit for our study was to examine why numbers of people sleeping rough appear to have increased in the last two years. We found that the causes of homelessness among people we have interviewed reflect those found in the majority of literature and evidence in this area. Relationship breakdown, loss of tenancy and loss of job are highly common and often co-occurring. Leaving prison and a lack of a support network is also another frequently cited cause; substance misuse issues and poor mental health are often present and add to the situation. Bereavement has also emerged as a trigger. There are some groups that seem to be particularly vulnerable to rough sleeping: prison leavers, care leavers, perpetrators of domestic abuse and couples. In short, the causes of homelessness have not significantly changed in the last few years; rather, it is the prevalence of these causes that has increased.

In some areas the levels of rough sleeping are linked to a lack of emergency provision, while in others it is due to the quality of provision. Many people told us they are too afraid to go into hostels because they perceive them as dangerous places. In one area in particular there are other macro level pressures such as the rate of population growth of the city in comparison to the housing stock levels, creating competition and increased rents which may be leading to people being squeezed out of the market. This leads to a lack of move-on accommodation and prolonged periods of time in temporary accommodation.

Exclusion from supported/emergency and temporary accommodation is also widespread and leading to rough sleeping. People felt that often these exclusions are unfair and that arbitrary decisions and rules 'set them up to fail'. We found that being banned in this way can lead to people gaining a reputation among housing providers making it harder for them to find accommodation. More needs to be done to ensure that supported accommodation meets the needs of different people, such as for example couples who want to be housed together, and people with active substance issues.

The idea of Housing First is beginning to penetrate housing and homelessness services in Wales, with numerous pilot projects currently being established thanks to Welsh Government funding and policy direction. However, by and large mainstream services are still delivered in the opposite model: 'staircasing' people from the street,

into supported accommodation where they may be required to keep to rules about avoiding drugs and alcohol until they are deemed ‘housing ready’ and suitable permanent accommodation becomes available.

The Welsh Government has championed the concept of ‘culture change’ among homelessness services to encourage a more person-centred ethos in line with the Housing (Wales) Act. This process of culture change is still happening among services for rough sleepers. It’s vital that we listen to people’s voices and take on board their views about what is and isn’t working, rather than become defensive about current provision and blame individuals for not fitting with the system – an approach which is not in line with the person-centred ethos led by Welsh Government.

Effectiveness and availability of services including emergency accommodation

There were differences among the case study areas with quantity of emergency accommodation being the issue in two authorities. Indeed, in desperation people in one local authority were asking for the workhouses to be brought back, and while in another people were having to beg to raise enough money to stay in B&Bs overnight due to the absence of emergency provision.

In another area there was an issue of quality of provision with nearly all rough sleepers saying that they felt the current provision was too unsafe, unhealthy and intimidating. Issues such as drug use, bullying and criminal activity (being robbed, sexual exploitation) were frequently reported.

Access to treatment programmes for substance misuse was also highlighted as being problematic, although many felt that it was impossible to tackle their issue while being homeless as they needed it to cope. Mental healthcare also appeared to be difficult to access and some of the people spoke to disclosed diagnosis of serious mental illness but were unable to obtain medication. In one area people described serious issues with access to physical healthcare with cases of people with Hep C and HIV being unable to get treatment because they do not have an address.

The steps to prevent and tackle rough sleeping in Wales

Provide the right accommodation and support

We welcome the Housing First pilots as every person we spoke to said that ideally they would like their own home. However, there is a need for all services and sectors to be more trauma informed and ACEs aware as the majority of people we spoke to

had experienced ACEs and in many cases were struggling to cope because of those experiences.

Supported accommodation was often a choice for people but they prefer smaller scale projects specific for particular needs. There is a need for existing provision to be more closely aligned with local housing needs, particularly for couples and people with more complex unmet needs including active substance issues.

Housing First as a principle needs to be embedded across the housing and homelessness system. We need to move away from the current system of emergency accommodation and ‘staircasing’ people into permanent housing. Although there will always be a need for some emergency beds, the emphasis for public spending should be on the provision of suitable permanent homes. We need other services to play a full part in this including health, social services and the police. We also need genuinely assertive outreach services and rapid re-housing, with social landlords playing a much bigger role in the provision of homes on a Housing First basis.

Honour the principle of housing as a human right

The Housing (Wales) Act has achieved great improvements in the prevention of homelessness. This puts us in a stronger position to take the next step towards a housing system that honours the principle of the human right to housing. The homelessness tests of the old system – priority need, intentionality, local connection and so on – are still creating barriers and stopping people getting the homes they need. The Welsh Government should set a timetable for the abolition of priority need over the next five to ten years and this should provide a focus for the reform of our current system, enabling Wales to maintain our edge on homelessness and further develop our world-leading approach.

Be extremely cautious about use of enforcement powers

Our research uncovered numerous examples of enforcement being used in heavy-handed and inappropriate ways. For example:

- One man was banned from the city centre on Christmas Eve, which meant he had to miss Christmas dinner and in fact had nothing to eat on Christmas Day
- One woman told us that her tent and her belongings were confiscated, which included personal items such as her baby’s hospital wristband, baby photos and her own birth certificate
- Another woman told us that her tent had been cleared away by park rangers leaving her with no possessions apart from her pyjamas, thin coat and trainers.

The use of enforcement needs to be completely proportionate to the quantity and quality of the services available. We cannot use enforcement and deprivation to drive people into provision where they do not feel safe or secure. Doing so is likely to re-traumatise people and make it even harder for services to build trust.

One solution is for Welsh Government to play a more active part in setting outcomes and guiding the work practices of Police Community Support Officers to ensure they are supporting and not undermining Welsh Government aims to prevent homelessness. Many of our research participants said that individual PCSOs and Rangers were supportive and helpful but their attitude often changed when another officer joined them. It would be beneficial to harness officers' instincts to help in a positive way.

We also voice caution about the introduction of 'diverted giving' schemes which encourage the public to not give to people who are begging. In at least one local authority in Wales there is a genuine need for people to beg as it is their only chance of affording emergency B&B accommodation. We are concerned that depriving people of this income while there are such gaps in service provision could lead to more serious consequences both for homeless people and the wider community, as well as increased stigmatisation of people with no choice but to beg for income.

Help people to navigate this complex system

The homelessness system is complex and difficult for people to navigate and requires levels of engagement, understanding and effort by the individual that is almost impossible to achieve whilst living day-to-day with complex unmet needs on the streets. Practical issues such as proof of ID, proof of being a couple and GP certificates also present barriers to people accessing help and assistance.

There is a need for more hand-holding and intensive support through the system – although the right offer of the right accommodation has to be there in order for people to even want to engage.

There also has to be a degree of flexibility around support as people may go through peaks and troughs of cooperation and capacity and the level, type and intensity of support should be able to respond to that without penalising them or jeopardising their accommodation.

Fundamentally a one-size-fits-all approach to tackling rough sleeping in Wales won't work and we need to work together across sectors to develop a raft of sustainable and viable solutions that gives people options and respects choice.

