

RS 11

Ymchwiliad i gysgu ar y stryd yng Nghymru

Inquiry into rough sleeping in Wales

Ymateb gan: Peter Mackie

Response from: Peter Mackie

I welcome the opportunity to inform the ELGC Committee inquiry into homelessness, with a particular focus on rough sleeping. The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 has had a significant positive impact on the assistance offered to many homeless people but it has had limited impact on the lives of rough sleepers – it is right that we should pay particular attention to this subgroup of the wider homeless population. Ending rough sleeping is not an insurmountable problem. In this written statement I have endeavoured to respond to the five main issues identified by the committee.

The effectiveness of Part 2 of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 in preventing rough sleeping

What is working?

- Statistics consistently show that around 62-64% of households who seek help from local authorities have their homelessness successfully prevented. This is a significant success of the legislation and is a key reason for international interest in the Welsh approach.

What is not working as effectively as it might do?

- Prevention efforts are a little less successful with single people than families – with success rates around 60% compared to 64% (albeit this gap has narrowed). This is important for the current inquiry as single people are more likely to make up our rough sleeper population.
- We might be more successful in preventing homelessness with single people and rough sleepers if local authorities were required to offer a more effective set of prevention interventions (eg. Housing First, swift access to intensive support etc).
- Additionally, we need to recognise that single people are far more likely than families to seek assistance after they have already become homeless – taking away the possibility of prevention. While the data does not allow us to directly support this claim, we know that single people make up 48% of all prevention cases, compared to 70% of all relief cases.
- To further support this concern, research I undertook for Crisis in 2014¹ showed that most single homeless people had experienced three or more homeless experiences before they approached the local authority.
- A key deficiency in the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 is that it only requires local authorities to assist those who seek assistance. It does not require local authorities to proactively identify and assist people at risk of rough sleeping or those who are rough sleeping. Moreover, the duties on other public and private bodies to identify and refer people to local authorities are weak or non-existent. A more proactive approach would increase the number of people assisted at the prevention stage and for those who do end up sleeping rough it would reduce the time spent on the streets.
- Finally, while the Act requires local authorities to take reasonable steps to assist all homeless people, the duty to provide interim accommodation and to ultimately secure accommodation (section 75) is only owed to people in priority need and unintentionally homeless – rough sleepers do not generally pass this hurdle/test.

The scale of rough sleeping in Wales and the adequacy of data

The scale of rough sleeping

- Welsh Government very usefully reintroduced a rough sleeper count in 2014/15 and has published results for the most recent two years of the count: 2015/16 and 2016/17.
- Results were: 240 people in 2015/16 and 313 in 2016/17
- Rates of rough sleeping relative to population size are highest in Wrexham (2.0), followed by Cardiff (1.5). This compares to an average rate of around 1.6 in England (excluding London) and 2.7 in London.

Data adequacy

- The methodology used in Wales includes a two-week data gathering exercise and then a point in time count on a single night. A point in time count is the typical methodology employed in most European countries.
- There are many weaknesses with point in time counts. Two are particularly important. First, it provides a snapshot only – it does not provide any indication of the ‘flow’/total number of people in need of support. Second, it is resource intensive ie. service providers are spending significant time planning and undertaking counts (rather than delivering services).
- There are alternatives and these are currently being explored in Wales – developments are being led by The Wallich. The Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN) database in London (and several other areas in England) provides a single record of rough sleepers and is populated daily by outreach teams, accommodation projects, day centres etc. The system allows users to share information about work done with rough sleepers and about their needs. However, the system could be improved by a) linking the data with statutory homelessness data and b) making the individual data available for data linkage (eg with health data).

The causes of rough sleeping and of the apparent recent increases in rough sleeping

- In broad terms we know a great deal about the complex causes of homelessness and more specifically rough sleeping. These have been researched fairly widely. My own researchⁱⁱ is amongst a strong evidence base documenting the pathways/journeys people take into rough sleeping – documenting interactions with various state institutions (prisons, hospitals, local authority care), relationship breakdowns, loss of employment, and personal support needs such as substance misuse and mental health issues.
- Additionally, recent research by Suzanne Fitzpatrick and her team on the Crisis Homelessness Monitor Wales has explored the broader structural causes behind changing levels in rough sleeping and homelessness more widely. The Homelessness Monitor concludes that homelessness in almost all Welsh local authorities is perceived to have risen due to post-2010 welfare reform, particularly the extension of the Shared Accommodation Rate of Local Housing Allowance. It is also possible the removal of priority need for homeless prison leavers has had some impact.
- However, the recent visible rise in rough sleeping in Wales is not fully understood. Research being led by Shelter Cymru should help to answer this question.
- Additionally, I would like to add that despite the strong evidence base on causes, there is a need for a more sophisticated examination of the relationship between homelessness and interactions with key institutions such as prisons, care, hospitals etc. This information might inform a more effective set of interventions that prevent homelessness for rough sleepers.

The effectiveness and availability of services including emergency accommodation

In December 2017 I published an international evidence review, documenting what works to end rough sleepingⁱⁱⁱ. The review draws upon over 500 sources and provides a very useful indication of what works and what does not. I draw heavily on this research to inform my views on the key limitations of current services in Wales.

- Unsuitable hostels and shelters: Hostels and Shelters are intended to fulfil an emergency function and they vary substantially in terms of size, client group, type of building, levels and nature of support, behavioural expectations, and nature and enforcement of rules. In relation to larger-scale hostels, with limited support, evidence indicates consistently that homeless people find them unpleasant environments. Significantly, a lack of move on housing stymies the system, preventing hostels from fulfilling their intended emergency or temporary functions and forcing them to operate as longer-term but unsuitable solutions to street homelessness. Unfortunately, this form of intervention continues to play a role in some Welsh towns and cities.
- Unsuitable, absent or inadequate support: Too often, services for rough sleepers, and the wider homeless population, lack adequate and appropriate support. Local authorities are dependent on Supporting People funded services to fund support for rough sleepers – a fund which has no long-term commitment. Moreover, the housing (Wales) Act 2014 does not require local authorities to meet the housing-related support needs of homeless people – therefore many go unsupported. Time limits on support can be particularly problematic.
- Inappropriate/single offer reconnections: The international evidence review conducted for Crisis raises concerns about reconnection policies, employed heavily in the US, England and prominent in Cardiff. Reconnecting an individual with positive social networks outside of the area where they seek help can be a very positive response but

where a reconnection is the single offer, support in the receiving authority is hardly explored, and alternatives within the local authority are not considered, this response can be highly problematic. In Welsh local authorities some rough sleepers are choosing to remain homeless and unsupported, rather than reconnecting to another area.

The steps to prevent and tackle rough sleeping in Wales.

I again draw heavily on the learning from my international evidence review for Crisis, alongside my wider views, to identify key principles of a more effective approach to the prevention and relief of homelessness for rough sleepers.

- **Recognise heterogeneity:** Rough sleepers have different experiences and different support needs. Some will have spent only a short period of time on the streets, with few support needs, whilst others may have entrenched street lifestyles. This means a blanket response/one-size fits all approach will not work. For example, while Housing First may be appropriate for entrenched rough sleepers, a less costly PRS access scheme with less intensive support is likely to be more appropriate for those rough sleepers with fewer individual support needs. The current legislation, at least in principle, embraces this approach.
- **Seek to prevent and relieve:** A key deficiency in the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 is that it only requires local authorities to assist those who seek assistance. This needs to be reversed as many rough sleepers and people at risk of rough sleeping will not seek out services. Local authorities need to proactively identify and assist people at risk of rough sleeping and those who are already rough sleeping. Moreover, other public and private bodies should be expected to identify and refer people to local authorities where there is a housing issue. Using an assertive outreach approach would also help to identify and end homelessness for rough sleepers.
- **Take swift action:** Interventions such as No Second Night Out (NSNO), used widely in London, have highlighted the significant positive impacts of acting swiftly to identify and support rough sleepers. This principle does not underpin current services in Wales. However, swift action alone is not sufficient - this action must be accompanied by an offer of accommodation and support where appropriate.
- **Housing-led:** Unfortunately in Wales, where rough sleepers are assisted into accommodation they tend to follow a staircase model of support, with individuals progressing slowly from temporary to settled accommodation only when deemed 'accommodation ready'. We know there are more effective responses. Having swift access to settled housing has very positive impacts on housing outcomes when compared to the staircase approach. Housing First is particularly effective, most notably with homeless people with complex needs.
- **A duty to provide person-centred support and choice – including cross-sector collaboration and commissioning:** The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 set out to move away from a standardised response to homelessness. Pathway plans were intended to individualise support and incorporate the views and needs of individuals themselves. While we have seen improvement in Wales, local authorities continue to offer a fairly standard response with often limited hand-holding and support. Interventions such as Personalised Budgets, which are based on individually determined support, have proven to be effective at meeting the needs of some of the most entrenched rough sleepers. Support must also be a right. I strongly recommend that consideration is given to the introduction of a 'duty to support' all homeless households. This will be particularly important for rough sleepers and it will almost certainly require actors outside the housing sector (health, social care) to collaborate.
- **A duty to accommodate all:** The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 retains the priority need test. This test should be abolished, therefore entitling all households to settled accommodation. While the abolition of priority need should be a priority, consideration must be given to the entitlements offered to someone found to be in priority need. A person in priority need today would enter a staircase system which we know does not work – it failed many prison leavers previously. Priority need status should entitle households to the sort of support described above ie. much swifter unconditional access to housing with appropriate support.

If these principles are to be embedded in the Welsh response to rough sleeping and we are to overcome the major deficiencies of the current system we are likely to require a further iteration of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. If we make improvements to the system of services without making these a statutory requirement, rough sleeping will not be ended – changes in political priorities and funding structures will undermine any successes achieved. Furthermore, I reiterate previous recommendations made to the National Assembly for Wales and Welsh Government that it would be highly beneficial to introduce a regulator with sufficient power to hold local authorities to account for their implementation of homelessness duties.

Finally, I take the opportunity to once again recommend the collection and reporting of individual level statutory homelessness and rough sleeping data as it would enable us to answer very many more questions about homelessness and the support provided by local authorities in Wales.

ⁱ Mackie, P.K. and Thomas, I. (2014) Nations Apart? Experiences of single homelessness across Great Britain, Crisis: London

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Mackie, P., Johnsen, S. and Wood, J. (2017) Ending rough sleeping: what works? An international evidence review. Crisis: London