

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

**Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee**

**Plant a phobl ifanc sydd ar yr ymylon | Children and Young People on the margins**

Ymateb gan Cymorth Cymru | Evidence Cymorth Cymru

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### About Cymorth Cymru:

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**Cymorth Cymru is the representative body for providers of homelessness, housing and support services in Wales. We act as the voice of the sector, influencing the development and implementation of policy, legislation and practice that affects our members and the people they support.**

Our members provide a wide range of services that support people to overcome tough times, rebuild their confidence and live independently in their own homes. This includes people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, young people and care leavers, older people, people fleeing violence against women, domestic abuse or sexual violence, people living with a learning disability, people experiencing mental health problems, people with substance misuse issues and many more.

We want to be part of a social movement that ends homelessness and creates a Wales where everyone can live safely and independently in their own homes and thrive in their communities. We are committed to working with people who use services, our members and partners to effect change. We believe that together, we can have a greater impact on people's lives.

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## 1. Introduction

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- 1.1. We thank the Committee for the opportunity to respond to this inquiry. Our response will primarily focus on children and young people experiencing homelessness in Wales. While this group will include missing children and those who are vulnerable to criminal exploitation, it is important to recognise that homelessness itself pushes far too many children and young people to the margins of society. We therefore believe that preventing homelessness for children, young people and care experienced young people should be a priority.
- 1.2. We were pleased to respond to the Committee's previous inquiry '*Services for care experienced children: Exploring radical reform*', and welcome the opportunity to provide further evidence on the harms caused by experiencing homelessness to children and young people more widely.
- 1.3. We would encourage the Committee to engage with and listen to young people with lived experience as the inquiry develops.

## 2. Nature and Scale

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- 2.1. According to the latest data published<sup>1</sup> by the Welsh Government, 1,593 people were placed in temporary accommodation in Wales during January 2024. Of these, 327 were dependent children under 16, and 285 were aged 16 to 24. On 31st January 2024, a total of 11,501 individuals were in temporary accommodation in Wales and 3,104 of these were dependent children aged under 16. Although these figures have remained steady and the overall number of placements of children and young people in temporary accommodation has seen a slight decrease in previous months (excluding January which saw an increase), the number of children and young people being placed in temporary accommodation remains far too high and the length of their stays remains far too long. The data also showed the number of people in different types of temporary accommodation, with 3,709 people staying in 'bed and breakfasts and hotels', of which 702 were dependent children under 16. In the majority of cases, this is entirely unsuitable accommodation for children and young people.
- 2.2. Research<sup>2</sup> for Crisis involving a survey of 480 single homeless adults across the UK found that nearly 50% of single homeless people first became homeless before the age of 21. Further analysis of the data found that the group of single homeless adults with the most adverse life experiences (e.g. substance misuse, mental ill-health, imprisonment) were particularly likely to have first experienced homelessness as a young person, nearly all had been excluded from school, and three quarters had been in local authority care. If we want to end homelessness then we must prevent youth homelessness, and we must do all we can to ensure that young people with adverse childhood experiences do not fall into a cycle of homelessness.
- 2.3. The effects of homelessness on children and young people are far-reaching, often having a lasting impact on their life and wellbeing, including loneliness and isolation, disrupted education, issues in finding employment, and worsening physical and mental wellbeing, including the worsening of existing conditions. In particular, the impact of raising children in temporary accommodation, although still not widely explored, has been noted by people with lived experience and reflects the broader effects of homelessness on children and young people.
- 2.4. As part of our work engaging with people with experience of homelessness, the following comments were shared by parents experiencing homelessness:

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<sup>1</sup> Welsh Government [Homelessness Accommodation Provision and Rough Sleeping: January 2024](#) (March 2024)

<sup>2</sup> Crisis, [Nations apart? Experiences of single homeless people across Great Britain](#) (2014)

*“It was really upsetting. My eldest child had to have counselling.”*

*“I was on the top floor - an attic room with my 20 month old son. The room was tiny with a kitchenette. The toilet and bathroom were on the floor below me so I had to leave my son on his own if I needed to use the toilet during the night while he was sleeping. The room has 2 tiny windows the house was next to a train station. The room was boiling and couldn't open the windows as the trains would wake the baby.”*

*“The children couldn't have friends over or tell anyone the address. I would have to travel if I had to see other family because they couldn't come to see me at the refuge. My eldest was 7 and she had a birthday while we were in refuge. That was really hard for her. We couldn't have a party or have her friends round. I couldn't afford to [hire] a party place.”*

*“One child is autistic, so the change of scenery was really difficult. I would feel bad about disturbing other women in refuge.”*

- 2.5. One person also talked about the impact of being placed in temporary accommodation far away from her children's school and their extended family. It took several buses to get to the school but the child has a disability so they had to get a taxi, which had a significant impact on her finances. She also said that she would be unable to take her children to visit family at Christmas, because the temporary accommodation was too far away from her family and there would be no buses running.

### 3. At risk groups

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- 3.1. It is important to note that children and young people experiencing homelessness have also been found to be at a greater risk of becoming homeless in later life by numerous longitudinal studies in the UK and abroad, particularly when considering childhood homelessness as an adverse childhood experience (ACE).
- 3.2. It is unsurprising that there are links between missing children and homelessness. A study by Shelter Scotland<sup>3</sup> found that the vast majority of young homeless people (84%) had also run away before the age of 16. Almost two thirds (63%) of young homeless people who had run away had also experienced sleeping rough. Most respondents said that support to sort out problems at home or school might have helped prevent them from running away. Around a quarter of the respondents also said somewhere safe to stay would have helped.
- 3.3. Children and young people experiencing homelessness are often more at risk of criminal exploitation, most significantly county lines. The Home Office reports that 15–17-year-olds make up most vulnerable young people involved with county lines, however primary school children are also known to have been involved. Among the factors increasing a person's vulnerability to involvement in county lines, the Home Office lists being homeless or without secure accommodation due to the lack of a safe environment to provide security and privacy.<sup>4</sup>
- 3.4. The Home Office, also lists several other factors, including having contact with the criminal justice system, having a physical or learning disability, or being neurodivergent, having a mental health issue, and being in or leaving care to name a few, which are also simultaneously linked to a heightened risk of homelessness. Research carried out across Wales and the UK by numerous organisations have referenced the 'cliff-edge' and the inaccessibility of the homelessness and housing system for children and young people in

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<sup>3</sup> Shelter Scotland, [Running away and future homelessness – the missing link?](#) (2011)

<sup>4</sup> UK Government [Criminal Exploitation of Children and Vulnerable Adults: County Lines](#) (updated 2023)

these situations. For example, a report by Public Health Wales, highlighted that leaving care is considered as a 'predictable route into homelessness'<sup>5</sup> with around a quarter of homeless young people being care experienced.

- 3.5. For young people and children with protected characteristics, their risk of homelessness and the associated risks are often heightened due to the numerous barriers they face day to day. A recent report<sup>6</sup> from End Youth Homelessness Cymru identifies for many homeless young, their neurodivergence is a principal factor in their being homeless, with peer researchers recounting leaving home due to family and relationship breakdown, often because of marginalisation and neglect by family members. For example, one peer researcher said:

*"I am a neurodivergent young person. At the age of 16 I left an unsafe home due to a childhood of neglect and marginalisation on the basis of my neurodivergence. My experience is not an isolated one. In fact, it is far more common than many would be inclined to believe, but a lack of research and information means that our stories have gone unheard for far too long."*

- 3.6. Alongside their reasons for becoming homeless, many also cited difficulties in accessing help within the homelessness and housing system, often exacerbated by their neurodivergence. For example, many stated they lacked awareness of support, while also finding accessing support stressful and emotionally overwhelming due to the nature of services. Equally, these experiences were noted by practitioners, with some highlighting they felt unable to provide the necessary level of support to an individual who was required specific support related to their neurodiversity.
- 3.7. Similar examples can be seen among the LGBTQ+ community, with many young LGBTQ+ individuals reporting fleeing home due to family breakdown, abuse by family members and mental ill health, relating to their sexuality and the vulnerability they felt because of coming out.<sup>7</sup> In their experiences of homelessness, many LGBTQ+ young people felt uncomfortable coming out to services, often because of the negative response received from family members, and because of the systematic barriers within services, such as sex-segregated programs and practices. In many instances, homeless LGBTQ+ youth reported a distrust towards services and a greater likelihood of relationship breakdown with services. Equally, the risks to homeless LGBTQ+ youth are heightened due to their associated vulnerability, including being victims of sexual exploitation and violence.
- 3.8. Although the experiences of young people with the mentioned protected characteristics are not isolated or unique, they do highlight several ongoing issues for young people facing homelessness across the board. As such the nature of homelessness among children and young people facing certain vulnerabilities, must be addressed for the purpose of prevention of both repeated homelessness and the associated risks mentioned with the individual needs of every young person taken into consideration on a case-by-case basis.

## 4. Practice

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- 4.1. Cymorth Cymru commends the work carried out by our members to both prevent homelessness among children and young people, and to help children and young people experiencing homelessness to rebuild their lives.
- 4.2. Our members who work with young people deliver high quality, specialist young people's accommodation projects, provide a safe home and providing invaluable support to many care experienced young people and other marginalised young people. This includes emotional

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<sup>5</sup> Public Health Wales, [Preventing homelessness in care experienced individuals](#) (2022)

<sup>6</sup> End Youth Homelessness Cymru, [Youth Homelessness Through the Lens of Neurodiversity](#) (2024)

<sup>7</sup> End Youth Homelessness Cymru, [Out on the Streets: LGBTQ+ Youth Homelessness in Wales](#) (2019)

support and help to develop independent living skills, alongside a range of wellbeing, social, recreational and educational activities. These services are predominantly funded through the Housing Support Grant, commissioned by the local authority housing department, often in partnership with social services.

- 4.3. Housing First for Youth services have recently been established in Wales and are delivered in line with the Housing First for Youth principles<sup>8</sup>. This is a model of housing and support for young people, aged 16-25, who have experienced or are experiencing multiple complex issues (e.g. trauma, mental health issues and/or substance use issues) and are homeless or at risk of homelessness. These are often young people for whom existing services have proved ineffective or who have been failed by established systems. The model has been shown to be effective when offered to care-experienced young people and requires intensive multi-agency support to be provided.
- 4.4. One of our members, Llamau, has run independent mediation and debriefing services for young people and children who go missing in Gwent and Dyfed Powys<sup>9</sup>. Their Missing Children's Team has delivered direct interventions for Missing Children, Child Exploitation, Trafficking and Modern Day Slavery, alongside tailored interventions. In 2020, they said that: *"25% of all referrals for de-brief by Llamau display signs of possible child sexual exploitation (CSE). In addition to CSE, we also identify issues during debriefs where young people are at significant risk due to criminal behaviour. Independent debriefing services following missing episodes are crucial in identifying the underlying reasons why children and young people go missing. Without these interventions, children who go missing once are very likely to go missing again, putting them at significant risk and increasing their risk of homelessness in the future."* They reported that missing incidents for under-18s in Dyfed Powys reduced by 30% between 2015 and 2019, equating to a reduction of over 550 individual missing episodes.
- 4.5. The ongoing development of the Upstream Cymru project through research from Cardiff University, in conjunction with Llamau serves as another example of early intervention and prevention practice by identifying children most at risk of homelessness. The project, which is currently being piloted in several south Wales schools, utilises collaboration between schools, youth services, homelessness services and Llamau to identify and help those at risk, often through interventions such as family mediation. The approach has been modelled on the Australian Geelong Project, which resulted in a 40% reduction in youth homelessness and a 20% reduction in the number of young people leaving school early.<sup>10</sup>

## 5. Policy

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- 5.1. Cymorth Cymru continues to strongly support the development of new legislation to end homelessness in Wales. In 2022, the Minister for Climate Change established an Expert Review Panel to make recommendations on legislative change to improve how we prevent and respond to homelessness. The panel's report<sup>11</sup> was finalised in September 2023 and included numerous recommendations focused on protecting homeless young people and children. This was considered by the Minister, who published a White Paper<sup>12</sup> in October 2023.
- 5.2. Consultation with Experts by Experience was at the heart of the Expert Review Panel's decision-making process, and we were heartened to see a large majority of these reflected in

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<sup>8</sup> Cymorth Cymru, [Housing First for Youth principles](#) (2021)

<sup>9</sup> Llamau, [One child is reported missing every hour in Wales](#) (2020)

<sup>10</sup> Cardiff University 'Upstream Cymru' [Upstream Cymru - Research - Cardiff University](#)

<sup>11</sup> Expert Review Panel, [Ending Homelessness in Wales: A Legislative Review](#) (2023)

<sup>12</sup> Welsh Government, [White Paper on ending homelessness in Wales](#) (2023)

the Welsh Government Ending Homelessness White Paper. As part of this process we wrote a specific paper on young and care experienced people.<sup>13</sup> The report covers young people's experiences of approaching the council for help, temporary accommodation, finding a settled home, and the role of other public services.

- 5.3. Young people had shared very mixed experiences of temporary accommodation. Those who had been placed in specialist young people's temporary supported housing tended to speak very highly of their experiences there, with a particular focus on help to develop independent living skills, the quality of support and activities provided.

*"This hostel is the best. There's 24-hour care and they're trying to give us things to do – activities, volunteering, art."*

*"No-one will ever understand how beneficial this hostel was to me."*

- 5.4. However, other young people had been placed in unsuitable temporary accommodation. This was evidenced in one of our earlier Experts by Experience papers which included example of young people being placed in hostels with people using substances and becoming violent, or having to sleep in staff rooms due to lack of appropriate temporary accommodation. This has been reinforced by research published by End Youth Homelessness Cymru, which features direct quotes from young people.

*"There have been times when ambulances and police vans have been here, at my home."*

*"Doesn't feel safe. I don't feel stable (like I can relax). Can be noisy or chaotic with other tenants."*

- 5.5. Supported accommodation can be vital to young people's wellbeing, safety and journey to independence. We are greatly supportive of the proposal in the Welsh Government's White Paper on Ending Homelessness that no 16 or 17-year old should be placed in unsuitable or unsupported accommodation. However, we are also clear that this proposal must be implemented alongside additional investment to the Housing Support Grant which funds the large majority of specialised supported housing for children and young people.

- 5.6. Staff within housing support services are highly skilled and make a tremendous difference to young people's lives. However, it is important that their roles are respected and understood by other professionals. Housing support services are not a replacement for statutory social services, but should complement them. Multi-agency support is essential to ensure that care experienced young people get the support they need, and it is critical that statutory services such as health and social care continue to play an active role in the young person's life when they are living within supported accommodation services. Improved collaboration and communication should be a priority, to achieve the best outcomes for the young person.

- 5.7. Through our engagement with experts by experience, some young people shared their experiences and views of how other public services could play their part in preventing homelessness:

*"Other services could have got involved sooner."*

*"School and social services had chances to see the abuse I was telling them about at home, but did nothing. This led to me being kicked out of home."*

*"In my situation, I feel like social services could have done more to prevent me from being homeless. They knew what problems I had going on at home and how much it all was affecting me I had to live between friends because I didn't want to go home due to what I was going through but social services forced me to go back home. If social services had done something sooner rather than later, I think I would be in a different position now."*

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<sup>13</sup> Cymorth Cymru, [Experts by Experience: Report to the Expert Review Panel: VAWDASV and Young People](#) (2023)

5.8. Through our work with the Frontline Network Wales, some frontline workers talked about young people being 'bounced' between social services and housing, something that we have also heard from people with lived experience. This highlights the importance of providing clarity about lead agencies when young people and care experienced young people are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

| *“Young people are being bounced between social services and housing.”*

5.9. Another point raised by some of our members is the need to consider young people who are not formally recognised by the care system, but have experienced some form of family relationship breakdown and become homeless. They often experience similar trauma and lack of traditional support networks as other young people in the care system, but may not 'qualify' as care experienced when considering prioritisation for housing or support.

5.10. The White Paper proposes a series of new duties on other public services, including the requirement to identify if someone is homeless, act within the capacity of that public service, and make a referral if appropriate. There is also a proposal for case coordination for people who are engaged with three or more public services, to try and ensure a more joined up approach for people who face multiple disadvantages. We believe that these legislative proposals would be of great benefit to young people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness, exploitation, mental health crises and other challenges.

5.11. The Welsh Government's White Paper also proposes reforms to the legal tests which determine whether people have access to temporary accommodation, such as the abolition of intentionality and making local connection more trauma-informed. For example, removing intentionality will help protect young people and children that have become homeless because they or their parent has left the family home for their own safety. By removing intentionality, it removes the blame on young people for 'making themselves homeless' and instead opens the door to young people access the necessary help and guidance to protect them from further vulnerability. The proposal to make the local connection test more trauma-informed includes a suggested exemption for care experienced people, and a consideration of how local housing authorities could adopt a more flexible approach for groups such as young people aged 25 and members of the LGBTQ+ community.

## 6. UK Government Powers

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6.1. Welfare policy has a significant impact on poverty and homelessness in Wales. Recently, the Bevan Foundation highlighted that the freezing of Local Housing Allowance by the UK government was a significant barrier towards the Welsh Government's efforts to reduce child poverty. Their research<sup>14</sup> into LHA rates, published in March 2023, showed that only 32 properties advertised across Wales were available at LHA rates, which equates to just 1.2% of the market. 16 local authorities did not have a single property available at LHA rates. This is preventing people from finding affordable housing in the private rented sector and keeping too many families with children in temporary accommodation.

6.2. Although, the rate of LHA has seen a welcome uplift as part of the UK Government's Autumn Statement, therefore opening doors for families on low incomes to access private rented accommodation across Wales, many will still face a shortfall in the rent payable. Although powers around LHA rates pose a limit to how much the Welsh Government can reduce child poverty and the risk of homelessness to families with children, we agree that the Welsh Government is not prevented from developing other mechanisms or arguing for change to the current system, including further uplifts to the local housing allowance.

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<sup>14</sup> Bevan Foundation, [Local Housing Allowance and the private rental market in Wales](#) (2023)

## 7. Trauma-informed approaches

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- 7.1. It is important that all services understand the impact of trauma and adverse childhood experiences on young people who are at risk of or who have experienced homelessness. This can have a significant impact on their ability and willingness to trust services, and can also impact on their ability to regulate their emotions when they are upset or frustrated. Services must have an understanding of this and ensure that they deliver a trauma-informed approach so that no-one is left behind.
- 7.2. It is vital that all services working with, or likely to come into contact with young people, invest in training to ensure all staff are trauma informed and have an understanding of the impact that trauma has on emotional development and regulation, as well as how to support people to cope with trauma.
- 7.3. The work of the ACE Hub Wales and the implementation of the Trauma-Informed Wales Framework<sup>15</sup> will be important over the coming years to try and encourage all public services to adopt a trauma informed approach.
- 7.4. In addition, the Welsh Government should ensure that a trauma-informed approach is embedded in all of its policy and legislation.

## 8. Recommendations

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- 8.1. As highlighted throughout our response, there are major repercussions to children and young people who have either been at risk of or have experienced homelessness and this should be considered within the Committee's consideration on how to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children and young people in Wales. We appreciate the Committee's past considerations in this area and urge for this at-risk group of young people to be considered in any future work and recommendations to government.
- 8.2. In our view, the following actions should be prioritised to prevent children and young people from becoming homeless or marginalised:
  - a) Ensuring that trauma-informed approaches are embedded across all Welsh Government policy, strategy and legislation.
  - b) Ensuring that trauma-informed approaches are embedded in the design and delivery of all public services in Wales.
  - c) Greater collaboration and multi-agency approaches to providing care, support and housing.
  - d) Ensuring that the proposals in the Ending Homelessness White Paper are supported through the legislative process and appropriately resourced.
  - e) Prioritising the reduction in the number of children and young people in inappropriate temporary accommodation, and ensuring they move into settled accommodation as quickly as possible.
  - f) Ensuring the housing and support needs of young people are considered and acted upon as Wales continues the transition to rapid rehousing, including access to social housing and the private rented sector, and the provision of specialist young people's supported accommodation and Housing First for Youth.

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<sup>15</sup> ACE Hub Wales, [Trauma Informed Wales Framework](#), 2022