

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

I welcome the extension of the definition of threatened with homelessness to within 56 days of losing their tenancy which allows agencies more time to work to rescue the tenancy or to secure a new tenancy for the person.

However, for many young people this often doesn't apply since they are more likely to have been living at home, sofa surfing or leaving care and as a consequence will be already homeless or made immediately homeless and not find themselves within 56 days of homelessness.

We welcomed the recent debate in the Senedd of the ending of priority need, arguably anyone who does not have access to suitable accommodation or support and who is either homeless or at significant risk of homelessness should be considered to be priority need. It is simply unacceptable to suggest that any vulnerable person without access to accommodation or support does not require support under the Act to secure stable accommodation with support to access that accommodation.

However we believe that when we are talking about children, ie under 18's, who are homeless and do not have family with them, they are at significant risk and their need should be dealt with as a child in need.

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

There are significant issues with the current approach to establishing a view of the scale of rough sleeping in Wales. Snapshot counts from local authorities provide information only on those people who are known to the local authority or who have approached official services for help. Even so, the snapshot counts show a significant increase in rough sleeping across Wales between 2014 and 2016, which is backed up by evidence from third sector charities.

We cannot rely on the current data or the official stats, since official homelessness figures are not capturing the extent of the homelessness crisis – particularly among rough sleepers and young people

It is worth adding that statistical information available to assess the scale of hidden homelessness doesn't really exist and as a consequence is even less reliable than the information relating to rough sleeping. Young people and women particularly are vulnerable here and our experience shows that for every woman or young person you see rough sleeping, there will be six or seven times as many whose homelessness is hidden. It is vital that we also look at ways to establish a more accurate picture of the scale of hidden homelessness in Wales – something which the End Youth Homelessness Cymru campaign has committed to doing.

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

The causes of rough sleeping are complex, and it is important that we remember that each individual's circumstances are different, therefore requiring a flexibility of support tailored to the individual's needs. It doesn't serve anyone if we look at rough sleepers as one homogenous group, it is an umbrella term that covers a range of cases, needs and circumstances, all needing individualised understanding and support.

Llamau's focus is on ending youth homelessness as a means to ending homelessness more generally. There is a significant link between youth homelessness and homelessness as an

adult, with poverty and youth homelessness being strong predictors for a future of rough sleeping, with many people experiencing several cycles of homelessness throughout their lives.

We believe that it is therefore crucial to invest in primary prevention projects which deal with Adverse Childhood Experiences, such as neglect, experience of the care system and parental drug and alcohol abuse, while the person is still young, supporting them to develop the skills and attributes that will allow them to live independently in the future. Identification of young people vulnerable to homelessness at 16+ is essential. We estimate that over 50% of these young people are known to services and if we develop an indicator, education, social services and YOS can use these and put in primary prevention programmes earlier. Again this is something that the End Youth homelessness Cymru coalition is working on.

We think it's important to acknowledge that the recent increases in rough sleeping, as well as the undoubted increases in hidden homelessness, are directly linked to UK Government policy, particularly welfare reform and benefit sanctions, along with the prevalence for young people of zero-hours contracts and rising rental costs. Much of the UK Government's welfare reform and inaction to control rising rental costs and zero-hours contracts, has disproportionately affected young people, leading to a significantly increased risk of homelessness for people under the age of 35.

The effectiveness and availability of services including emergency accommodation

The snapshot rough sleeping statistics show that, while there is emergency accommodation available, it is not accessed to full capacity, suggesting that it is not sufficiently meeting the needs of the people who need it. People who are rough sleeping are all individuals with unique support needs and unique strengths, and therefore a flexibility of support is required which meets each individual's needs.

Having spoken directly to people rough sleeping across our three main cities in South Wales, I have heard from many vulnerable people that they have not wanted to access some of the emergency accommodation available because they simply do not feel safe or are worried about the decisions they may make while accessing it. We have heard from women, who feel particularly vulnerable in a mixed-gender environment, given their history of gender-based violence and abuse and who therefore choose to sleep rough rather than access emergency accommodation. Furthermore, people who have a history of drug and alcohol misuse but who are trying to avoid further use often find the environment of emergency accommodation a threat to their attempts to stop their substance misuse. Younger people are simply scared of these environments and it is one reason why Llamau has always refused to run hostel type provision for the young people we work with.

The steps to prevent and tackle rough sleeping in Wales

There are intervention teams that do a great job in building up trust with people and getting them to access the support and accommodation they need. However, while it is vital that we make attempts to tackle rough sleeping in Wales, we must also make sure that as much focus is placed on preventing homelessness, and not simply focus on supporting people at the point of crisis. In order to both successfully prevent and tackle homelessness, we must ensure that services are allowed to take account of individual's unique needs and strengths, and which therefore deliver better outcomes. There are groups of people more vulnerable to homelessness, for whom more primary preventative support would reduce the number of people who become homeless. This includes young people, veterans and single women who do not have their children with them.

In recent years, commissioning processes have increasingly prescribed specific ways of working for set periods of time, with little or no flexibility for service providers to take account of individual needs. This often results in repeat referrals to services which, if allowed flexibility in the first place, could have supported the individual to live independently in the longer-term. Many services are directed to deal with the individual's 'lead need' only, not recognising that people have a range of needs, which, if dealt with holistically, would allow the person to move on successfully from homelessness.

We would also like to mention the efforts made in recent years to introduce Housing First approaches, but feel that we must recognise both the advantages and disadvantages of this approach and the need to further refine the approach in order to deliver the best outcomes for the individual.

We also must not lose sight of the fact that life expectancy for rough sleepers is 30 years lower than average. This was brought home to me by a woman I spoke to collapsed on the street. Over a hot coffee and toastie, I learnt this old lady, who I estimated to be in her 70s, was in fact 48. She was ill, frail and bone cold. She had night accommodation in a shelter, but during the day she had nowhere to go other than to sit on a cold pavement.

We need to face this issue head on. We need not to try to hide the facts or move rough sleepers on – I have personal experience of orders being used at peak times or during events.

I would encourage Wales to try and get a true figure and to look at the frightening increases we will see as we face still more years of cuts to public services and as mentioned before welfare reform and benefit sanctions, along with the prevalence for young people of zero-hours contracts and rising rental costs. We need a coalition much like EYH Cymru to bring together all agencies and all local authority areas to tackle create Wales-wide solutions.