

Social Justice and Regeneration Committee

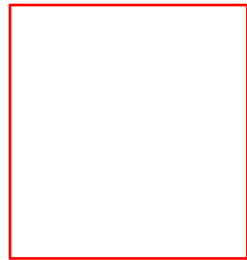
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Venue: Senedd, National Assembly for Wales

Policy Review: Youth Homelessness



**Youth Homelessness in Wales – Social Justice and Regeneration Committee Review
A consultation response from Cymorth Cymru
31st October 2006**

Cymorth Cymru is the representative body for supported housing and homelessness providers in Wales, and as such has two overarching objectives:

To improve the links between policy and practice by ensuring those working in front line service delivery understand the wider policy context, and those working in policy development understand and are influenced by the experiences and knowledge of those working on the ground.

To ensure that supported housing maximises its contribution to the lives of service users and the communities in which they live by helping to build and develop the sectors capacity and professionalism.

For further information on this response please contact:

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1 Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this review.

Although not an exhaustive nor fully comprehensive account, this paper presents an overview of some of the key issues affecting youth homelessness in Wales.

A range of voluntary and statutory sector providers have contributed to this paper, including both generic and specialist young people's services across the country. Contributors words appear in italics.

2 General comments

Youth homelessness remains a serious concern in Wales. Although recent years have seen some significant and very positive developments in services for young homeless people, particularly in the field of homelessness prevention and specialist support, there remains the perception that support for young people is not consistently available throughout Wales, and that in many cases existing services do not have the capacity to fully meet demand.

More rural areas, in particular, appear to suffer from a lack of, or limited, provision, with young people in these areas being required to relocate in order to access support.

3 Specific comments

Some young people in Wales are able to access a comprehensive range of homelessness services, including housing advice, hostels, foyers or Night Stop provision (where a young person in housing crisis may stay, for a limited time, with a local family), or other accommodation services.

Advocacy and mediation services for young people and their families have been found to be highly effective in preventing or delaying young people leaving home unnecessarily or in an unplanned manner, and schools-based programmes are promoting awareness of homelessness and housing issues among younger people. Other services offer support accessing training, education and employment, and several Welsh homelessness organisations also offer arts and sports activities, which encourage young people to develop their skills and confidence.

Evidence suggests that effective cross-sector and multi-agency working is developing well in some areas of Wales, and that the pockets of excellent service provision which do exist (often having developed over many years) appear to be influencing service developments further afield.

Where they take place, regular and well-attended local homelessness forums, at which all statutory, voluntary and private sector partners are represented, appear to effectively promote best practice and encourage joint working.

Often, young people have low aspirations and have difficulties with their basic skills. Many of the young people that live here leave school early and have a very negative impression of learning. They also have low confidence. We try to empower young people, and indeed all people, to raise their aspirations. We offer job workshops as well as basic skills tuition for those who need to improve their reading and writing. We also have 'Learn Direct' once a week, as well as many social and sporting activities.

We have excellent relationships with the young person's advisor at the Job Centre, and this allows many benefit issues to be resolved. Due to this relationship the advisor understands the consequences of living in a hostel without benefits, and does try to resolve issues as quickly as possible.

Whilst noting the provision of these services and recognising the developments in some areas of local practice, it should be stressed that these services and relationships are by no means universal in Wales, and that in some areas only minimal support exists, if any at all.

3.1 The nature of homelessness accommodation services

One respondent, writing from a specialist youth homelessness hostel, outlined some of the support they offer and the ethos they work to:

Many young people have never had a tenancy before and can arrive at the hostel without any experience of living alone or managing a tenancy. Young people often need reassurance during the transitional period into their tenancy, as they do not know what to expect. We provide cooking workshops, and part of our resettlement process would be to work on other areas, depending on the level of need of the individual. Most importantly, we would be looking at our support work always being led by the individual, and at their own pace.

However, dedicated services of this kind are not available to young people in all parts of Wales; and where they are available, access may be limited.

The general viewpoint is that the specific young people's homelessness projects within [our authority area] are overrun and often young people are in general needs hostels as they either cannot access these projects (due to long waiting lists) or have been evicted due to their behaviour.

With regards to the priority needs category (16-17-year-olds), many young people are living at general needs hostels with all other age groups. This often leads to young people not receiving the specialist support that they may have received in a young persons' hostel.

In the Spring of 2006 we conducted a study of homeless people's access to healthcare services, as reported by homelessness service providers. 60 projects across Wales contributed to the research, and in doing so described both the age ranges and support needs of their clients.

Cross-referencing these two data sets gives a useful insight into young people's experiences of homelessness services, with the over-whelming majority (95%) reporting that they work with

homeless people aged 17-25. A small number of these services will have been specialist young people's services, though since a similar proportion of agencies reported working with older people too, we can deduce that the majority of these services are 'shared' by both younger and older homeless people.

We can also see that homelessness services, in the main, are working with people subject to a broad range of support needs, particularly with regards to alcohol and drug related problems. Please see below:

Homeless clients by age:

	0-4 yrs	5-16 yrs	17-25 yrs	26-54 yrs	55+ yrs
Proportion of projects	35%	43%	95%	93%	87%

Homeless clients by support needs:

	None	Few	Some	Most	All
Mental health needs	0%	8%	62%	27%	3%
Substance misuse needs	0%	12%	52%	33%	3%
Physical disabilities	18%	48%	32%	2%	0%
Physical health needs	5%	19%	28%	8%	0%
Learning disabilities	13%	57%	28%	2%	0%

Although it is recognised that the provision of generic, rather than specialist, homelessness services provides benefits in terms of the efficient use of limited resources, a number of our members feel that young people are being let down by this approach and consider that there is a need for dedicated, specialist provision to compliment existing services in their areas.

I generally work with adults. However, we have had over the last couple of years a number of chaotic care leavers with substance misuse problems who at the age of 16 and 17 have been placed at adult

hostels. I understand that it is difficult to place these youngsters in young people's hostels where there are non-drug-using people, but I feel that the adult hostels are not the place for them either. There seems to be a gap in services for these very needy teens.

It should also be noted that similar concerns were raised with regards to accommodation other than homelessness hostels. For example, some bed and breakfasts and other temporary accommodation used by Homelessness and Social Services departments to house young people are also used by the Probation Service and other agencies.

3.2 Gaps in provision

As well as the apparent need for more specialist young people's provision in some areas of Wales, there are wider, geographical variations in the availability of homelessness services.

The centres of homelessness provision in Wales are concentrated in urban areas, corresponding to the highest levels of homelessness among the general population. However, the apparent lack of local need in some rural areas, which is understood to explain the relative scarcity of provision, may be misleading.

Service providers in urban areas report that a significant proportion of their clients are originally from outside their areas, but had been obliged to travel in order to access support. In the case of young people, in particular, this can be a disruptive and difficult process in which local, established support networks, such as friends and family, are left behind. This creates further difficulties for some people in that they may then be unable to demonstrate a 'local connection' with the authority, and may therefore experience additional problems.

One provider in a rural area explained:

16- and 17-year-olds are usually accepted as being in priority need by the local authority, and therefore would usually be housed in B&B. However, we manage a project for 16- to 24-year-olds, and all clients accepted as statutory are referred to us. For anyone not accepted as in priority need there is no emergency accommodation in [our authority area], and young people have to access services in [neighboring authorities].

Other identified gaps in services include:

- Support groups for young pregnant women, and specialist information regarding homelessness and parenting.
- Anger management courses for people aged 16-18.
- Life skills projects, or interim housing, for those that may not be ready for a tenancy.

One respondent noted that there was no emergency accommodation, for people of any age, available in their authority area.

3.3 Access to services

3.3.1 LA presentations

A number of respondents reported recent positive developments in the way their local authority was responding to homelessness cases, though others raised concerns about the manner in which others authorities continue to assess young homeless people.

There is a lack of common assessment for young people [in our authority area], and a reluctance by statutory services to assess young people who have not been through the care system.

It was noted by agencies working across a number of local authority areas that approaches to youth homelessness were not always consistent across different homelessness departments. For example, some reported positively that Children's Services (located within Social Services departments) and Housing departments demonstrate effective joint working arrangements, and also worked closely with voluntary sector providers; though others raised concerns that this was not seen in their areas.

For example, in cases where a statutory duty to house a young person under homelessness legislation is not identified by Homelessness officers, clients in some authorities may not always be referred on to Social Services, although a duty of care may apply there. Others reported cases where young people had been referred across to Social Services following the identification of a particular vulnerability, only for them then to be referred on to voluntary sector homelessness services without ever being assessed. It was felt that these authorities did not properly fulfill their role as a 'corporate parent', and that the Children's Act (1989) was not being consistently applied.

Another area of key area of concern regards 'intentionality' – that is, decisions regarding the degree to which applicants are personally responsible and liable for their homelessness. Applicant found to be intentionally homeless are not considered eligible for statutory housing support.

This issue is for some a growing concern for people in housing need of all ages, though it presents particular difficulties for some younger people. For example, cases have been reported in which 16- and 17-year-old people leaving home are considered to be intentionally homeless by housing departments on the grounds that they had previously been warned by their parents not to continue behaving in certain ways prior to being asked to leave the family home. Similarly, young people being required to leave temporary accommodation by landlords of B&Bs, for example, may also be considered to be intentionally homeless in some areas.

Respondents feel that such critical judgements must only be made on a balanced, case-by-case basis, with all pertinent information being considered, and not by the systematic application of a general principle. In particular, it is felt that the account of a parent, for example, must not always be assumed to be more reliable than that of a child.

Cases where young people are expected to produce a 28-day Notice to Quit from their parents, proving that they have been formally asked to leave the family home, are considered to be particularly inappropriate and unhelpful in some cases.

3.3.2 Accommodation providers

The issue of ‘silt-up’ - that is, the inability of hostel providers to identify move-on accommodation for their residents in a timely way – is an acute problem in many areas of Wales. Some of the causes and consequences of this are discussed below, though one of the key problems it generates is a lack of available bed spaces for those who urgently need to access emergency accommodation. This has a particular impact on non-statutory, single homeless people, as those in priority need are likely to be prioritised for support over them.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that clients with higher support needs, such as those with drug or alcohol problems, or with a history of disruptive behaviour, often find themselves particularly marginalised and experience the greatest difficulty accessing accommodation or other support services. Clients who have previously been evicted from services, due, for example, to arrears, drug use or other rule-breaking, may find themselves banned from those services for significant periods of time.

In areas where services are particularly limited, this may have serious implications. In some cases these are clients affected by mental health or emotional problems, and/or drug/alcohol dependences, and may therefore be particularly vulnerable.

3.4 Availability of permanent accommodation

It should be noted that the current shortage of permanent accommodation affects many homeless people of all ages in Wales, though the issues as discussed below are presented from the perspective of young people’s experiences.

3.4.1 Move-on

The key issue is still the same for us – that is, the need for more single person move-on units. The problem continues to be acute, and the lack of move-on causes frustration and limits the progress of young people who are ready to move on to more independent lives.

A common issue raised across the country concerns this ‘silting up’ of hostel accommodation due to a lack of appropriate, affordable, move-on opportunities.

A proportion of homeless people accessing hostel services require intensive support which goes beyond the simple provision of accommodation; others may require only limited support, and ideally would hope to move on to more settled accommodation within a relatively short timeframe.

Hostel rents are high (generally in excess of £140 per week), and are therefore unaffordable without Housing Benefit, which effectively prohibits many people from finding employment or accessing full-time education. Being "stuck" in a hostel beyond the time required can be deeply frustrating for residents who are ready to move on with their lives.

There is also the risk that prolonged stays in homelessness hostels can lead to an institutionalised

outlook, and that young, often impressionable, people may be exposed to behaviours and lifestyles which could present further risks.

Young people, whose issues are often less severe than for older residents, end up staying longer in hostel accommodation than necessary, which may result in issues increasing. While we work hard to ensure they remain as independent as possible, the fact is that socialising for a long time with people with heightened issues can have a detrimental effect on young people.

As noted, a number of services are providing highly developed support packages to young people, including training and skills programmes which provide valuable support in preparation for independent living and employment, etc. However, in other cases the requirement that residents remain, inappropriately, in accommodation of this kind may impact negatively on their self-esteem, motivation and long-term welfare.

Many projects will prioritise younger people for resettlement in these circumstances, and attempt to move them on as quickly as possible, though this does not address the underlying issue, and may, regrettably, be unfair to older people who are also ready to move on.

A further consequence of the problem of move-on, as noted above, is the impact it has on the frequency and number of vacancies which providers can offer other people who need their services. This is particularly felt by people sleeping rough in areas where there are too few vacancies to go around.

One respondent noted that housing associations in their area have committed to making 5% of their annual allocations available to people in hostel accommodation, provided that applicants can prove that they have been unable to access private sector housing. This initiative is welcomed by hostel providers.

It is noted that many of the concerns noted above are recognised by the Welsh Assembly Government, which is funding a Cymorth Cymru conference in the Spring of 2007 to examine these issues in more depth.

3.4.2 Housing benefit

Contributing to the difficulties associated with the lack of appropriate move-on accommodation, and often severely compounding it, is the Single Room Rent (the 'Under-25 Rule') which places a cap on the Housing Benefit entitlement of people under the age of twenty-five.

The table below compares the Single Room Rent Allowances with corresponding local rents in five areas of Wales. Agencies in these areas reported that it is not possible to find private sector accommodation at rent levels payable by Housing Benefit.

	Single Room Rent allowance (per week)	Local rent in shared accommodation (per week)
Aberwystwyth	£45.00	£60 - £65
Bangor	£38.00	£50 - £60
Barry	£42.50	£47.50 approx
Cardiff	£45.00	£55.00 approx
Wrexham	£38.00	£50 - £60

A single, unemployed person under the age of twenty-five receives approximately £44 per week in Job Seeker's Allowance. In many areas of Wales a young person may be considered fortunate if they are able to find shared accommodation at only £10 per week more than their Housing Benefit allowance, despite the fact that they will be left with a mere £34 per week to pay for food, utility bills and all other expenses.

People who are twenty-five or older may receive more than double the Single Room Rent – in Aberystwyth, for example, older people may receive Housing Benefit of up to £87 per week.

The Single Room Rent causes real hardship, pushing young people into acute financial difficulties and the worst standards of accommodation. It forces some young people to relocate away from their local areas, and prohibits others from accessing the private rented sector altogether.

Young people have no less need for a flat than older people, and it is very difficult to get them secure, affordable, good quality move-on flats in the private sector due to the Single Room Rent. Young people often dismiss the private sector entirely due to the discrimination they face.

The bond board is often not open to young people due to the high rents charged, and will not give a bond if housing benefit is not covering the rent sufficiently, which is often the case with young people.

In recent correspondence with the Department of Work and Pensions, in which we raised concerns about the Single Room Rent and the impact it is having on youth homelessness in Wales, we were told:

"We have no plans to abolish this, as while we recognise your concerns we believe that its abolition could result in single, young people on benefits being able to afford a level of housing that their

working peers could not."

We believe this is a discriminatory, arbitrary and deeply flawed principle, and that the Single Room Rent should indeed be abolished.

3.4.3 The private rented sector

In the context of the limited availability of social housing in Wales, the revised National Homelessness Strategy places a renewed emphasis on the need to fully explore opportunities which the private sector may provide in securing appropriate accommodation for homeless people.

Recent years have seen some excellent work being carried out across Wales to develop links and build relationships between homeless services and private sector landlords, including the establishment of landlord forums and commitments by homelessness services to ensure that apparently 'risky' tenants will receive appropriate on-going support if accepted into a property. The willingness and ability of some bond boards to provide rent in advance as well as bonds has had a positive impact, enabling some young people to access accommodation which they would otherwise have been excluded from. However, these services are not available throughout the country (or may not be adequately publicised), and evidence suggests that there is still work to be done in promoting this emerging good practice more widely.

As noted above, some private sector rent levels are prohibitively high for many young homeless people, and some areas of the country report a growing trend of private landlords passing their properties over to be managed by estate agencies or similar firms. This is an area of concern, as estate agents' charges, administration costs and management fees are often passed on to the tenant, which further pushes up rent levels.

Furthermore, there remains real concern about the systematic exclusion of people on benefits from much of the private sector in some areas. Explanations for this vary between pre-conceptions and value judgments about people who have been homeless and/or on benefits, and a general mistrust of Housing Benefit departments, some of which are still considered to be slow and inefficient at processing claims.

Very few private sector landlords will accept unemployed/DSS – most stipulate working professionals. In the absence of advance rent and deposits/bonds, it is almost impossible to rent accommodation – this is usually one month in advance and a similar sum for a bond, which could be anything from £480 to £800 in advance. There is a real lack of rented accommodation available for single occupancy in the area.

We would anticipate that the apparent reluctance of some landlords to accommodate people on benefits will be further exacerbated by the introduction of the Local Housing Allowance and the removal of direct rent payments for many claimants. This will doubtless present new challenges for homeless people and the agencies supporting them, and will need to be carefully prepared for.

If there were more options available to young people in the private sector, including the same level of

HB as over-25s, this would impact on homelessness and also the amount of time spent in homelessness hostels. But the issue is more complex than just raising HB for this age group – the private sector needs to have more regulation in order for young people to feel secure and see private sector housing as a real option for them.

We hope to see some of these issues alleviated by the recent legislation introducing licensing of houses of multiple occupation, though remain concerned about the discretionary nature of elements of this provision, and the lack of regulation regarding smaller properties. We feel that the nature and quality of private sector housing should undergo further review.

3.4.4 Stock transfer

The further, possible transfer of local authority housing stock to housing associations is raised both as a potential opportunity and risk for the future.

As yet, the likely impact of further stock transfers in Wales is uncertain, though homelessness agencies highlight the importance of ensuring that the needs of homeless people are fully accounted for in any future arrangements. In particular, respondents raise the need to ensure that reasonable levels of appropriate, affordable accommodation are accessible to young people across the country.

3.5 Healthcare

Issues concerning homeless peoples health needs and access to healthcare services have been discussed in some detail in previous Cymorth Cymru and Homeless Link Cymru papers, and will be further addressed in forthcoming research.

In the context of youth homelessness and the preparation for this paper, many members again raised the central importance of effective and coordinated links between homelessness and health services, particularly with regards to primary care, mental health, drugs/alcohol use and dual diagnosis support.

In contrast to some Homelessness hostels elsewhere in the UK, projects in Wales do not generally benefit from in-house, specialist mental health or drugs workers within their staff teams. The absence of this provision requires that homelessness services must have the full and active involvement of local healthcare services to ensure that appropriate support is available to all hostel residents who require it, though this is far from the norm in many areas.

Again, whilst acknowledging the excellent health provision available to homeless people in some parts of Wales, at present many homelessness services continue to report that their clients feel excluded and stigmatised by mainstream health services - both primary and specialist providers - and are not receiving appropriate care. This gap in services impacts not only in terms of individuals health, but in their ability to access and sustain accommodation.

In those areas where dedicated nursing, mental health or GP surgeries are available, services note significantly improved client access and welfare.

Cymorth Cymru welcomes the news that a Health and Homelessness Coordinator is to be appointed by the Welsh Assembly Government. We hope that this development will bring about greater joint-working across the health and homelessness sectors, and benefit homeless people of all ages throughout Wales.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

Responses from the sector demonstrate significant developments in youth homelessness services in some parts of the country, though many young homeless people continue to find that appropriate services are not available in their local areas, or that they are difficult to access.

Specific recommendations would include:

- That local needs assessments are conducted to consider the expansion or development of targeted youth homelessness services, including the provision dedicated young peoples temporary accommodation.
- The promotion and development of training flats and other second stage accommodation to support young people in their transition from supported housing to independent living.
- Measures taken to improve the consistency of approach among local authorities with regards to homelessness provision, according to best practice particularly with regards to intentionality decisions and the relationships between Social Services and Homelessness departments.
- To further urge the full participation of all statutory, private and voluntary sector partners in local homelessness forums, to further promote joint working and effective local responses to youth homelessness.
- To support the Health and Homelessness Coordinator in promoting the further development of links between the sectors, considering local need for enhanced GP practices, together with dedicated CMHT and drug support services.
- To urge the DWP to reconsider its position on the Under-25 Rule and to bring an end to discriminatory practice.
- To closely monitor the impact of the Local Housing Allowance scheme and to encourage the development of appropriate local arrangements.
- To develop further regulation in the private rented sector, and to drive up standards.
- To ensure that any future transfer of local authority housing stock takes full account of the needs of young homeless people.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to this review. Please contact me if you would like any further information, or to discuss in more detail any of the issues raised.

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