

ELGC COV 43  
Ymchwiliad i COVID-19 a'i effaith  
Inquiry into COVID-19 and its impact  
Ymateb gan: The Wallich  
Reponse from: The wallich



**thewallich**  
atal digartrefedd • preventing homelessness

## How we have responded to COVID-19



# About The Wallich

The Wallich wants to create a Wales where people stand together to provide hope, support and solutions to end homelessness.

As Wales's largest homelessness and rough sleeping charity, The Wallich operates under three core objectives: getting people off the streets; keeping people off the streets; and creating opportunities for people.

Running 68 diverse projects, across 18 local authorities, The Wallich works with more than 9,000 homeless and vulnerable people every year across Wales.

## How our services looked before the Coronavirus Pandemic

1. In normal times (i.e. before the national lockdown ordered on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020), The Wallich provided a diverse range of projects and services across Wales, including supported accommodation, outreach, advice and advocacy services, floating support, and learning and skills development for employment.
2. The majority of our services are commissioned by the Welsh local authorities through the Housing Support Grant (HSG), as well as some services part or wholly funded through charity fundraising activity.
3. We also deliver a number of services in partnership with other organisations. For example, we manage a Housing First project in Swansea in partnership with the substance misuse charity Kaleidoscope, and our Building Opportunities, Skills & Success (BOSS) project works extensively with HMP Cardiff, HMP Parc and the wider probation service.
4. Our central services office is in Cardiff, where around 30 staff manage finance, HR, facilities, fundraising and communications administration, as well as hosting internal and external training and development sessions.

## The immediate actions we took to protect service users & staff

5. In the first two weeks of March, our senior leadership team developed a COVID-19 Risk Management Plan, outlining a series of actions to be taken immediately to mitigate the risks of infection as they were understood at the time, and take steps to ensure continuity of services wherever possible.
6. In the week beginning the 16<sup>th</sup> March, in line with the official advice, we advised all staff, who were able to do so, to work from home; this particularly meant the majority of central services staff, as well as those working in floating support settings.
7. By the 23<sup>rd</sup> March, we had formally closed all but 24 of our projects. Those remaining open included all our residential supported accommodation projects, as our first priority was to ensure that those who are housed directly by us were able to stay safely in their homes during the pandemic.
8. The majority of our other projects had to significantly change their ways of working. For example, all of our tenancy support workers began providing advice through regular phone or video calls with clients, our Reflections Network (our in-house counselling service) began providing telephone-only appointments and our peer mentors offered a telephone befriending service.
9. Face-to-face meetings with clients more or less entirely ceased except for emergencies, which has proved particularly challenging for some of our service users with the most complex needs.
10. We also repurposed our Nightshelter accommodation in Cardiff to be available 24/7, albeit at a significantly reduced capacity to ensure safe social distancing between clients and staff. For example, where we had previously been able to provide 23



emergency overnight bed spaces, we can now accommodate just 10 individuals, however they have been able to stay in during the day as well.

11. All premises that remained open had to undergo a rigorous risk assessment, and measures were introduced in order to maintain a two-metre distance between staff and clients at all times. Staff were also provided with PPE as recommended by Welsh Government and PHW.
12. Thanks to the hard work of local authorities and third sector partners, the vast majority of those who had been sleeping rough were brought into emergency accommodation by the beginning of April. Therefore, there was no longer the same need for our outreach teams to be providing their regular 'breakfast run' services on the streets of Wales' cities. A number of staff were redeployed to assist our residential services, and outreach geared towards supporting clients remain inside their temporary accommodation through the provision of hot meals, and delivering items donated to keep people occupied.

## *The response of the housing & homelessness support sector*

13. The overall response of the housing and homelessness support sector has been incredibly positive. Right from the beginning of the crisis, we were in constant contact with partners including Cymorth Cymru and the Welsh Government Housing Directorate, to understand exactly how we needed to change our practices in order to keep everybody safe.
14. The clearest example of this would be the work in partnership with Cymorth Cymru and other third sector organisations, where we were able to voice our operational concerns directly to Welsh Government, who were then able to produce very clear guidance that addressed our questions, backed up by the expertise of Public Health Wales.
15. We are also very grateful for the ongoing support of each of the Welsh local authorities we work with. The work to source emergency accommodation for every single person who had been rough sleeping was a truly collaborative effort, and we would not have seen the same success without the authorities' willingness and innovative approaches to commissioning.
16. A great case study of this approach is the new accommodation at Ty Tom Jones in Swansea. This was a true collaborative effort between Swansea Council, The Wallich, Caer Las, and landlords Pobl Group, to refurbish an unused old building to provide 20 self-contained accommodation units for those who had been sleeping rough prior to lockdown.
17. We are also grateful for the support we have received from partners in the sourcing of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) particularly during the early days and weeks of the crisis. One of our initial asks of government and partners was a reassurance that our staff would be able to get the PPE they needed to continue their work safely. Cymorth, Welsh Government and others were very helpful in coordinating supplies of PPE for staff across the sector.



## The challenges we have faced

18. As an organisation, we have faced a number of significant challenges throughout the Coronavirus crisis. The below is by no means an exhaustive list.
19. Our staff have noted numerous examples of difficulties building and maintaining positive relationships with their clients. As the vast majority of face-to-face meetings have had to stop, it has been significantly harder to build trust and understanding than before, and staff have been unable to pick up on non-verbal clues to their clients physical and mental wellbeing. Some of the people we support are less confident communicating by phone call than others.
20. Within our residential projects, it has been extremely challenging to encourage residents to stay indoors and observe social distancing rules. By the very nature of our projects, many of the people we support live somewhat chaotic lives and are used to going out and socialising with their support network of peers. We have done our best to offer distractions to keep them occupied indoors, including installing Wi-Fi, providing TVs, activity packs including puzzles and exercise routines, and daily hot meals.
21. At the beginning of the crisis, we were very concerned by national reports of a shortage of PPE and testing for front-line workers, and timely access to these were amongst our key asks of Welsh Government and partners in the first few weeks of lockdown. Whilst our staff were quickly confirmed as 'Key Workers' eligible for priority testing, many of our staff felt that the delivery of PPE and the ramping up of testing capacity was too slow to sufficiently meet demand at the peak of the pandemic.
22. One specific problem we encountered was poor communication with HMPPS around the early release scheme for prisoners nearing the end of their sentences, to mitigate the risk of infections within the prison estate. We do significant work with Welsh prisons to ensure that individuals are not released into homelessness, and whilst we support the policy, it has proven difficult to understand exactly which individuals would be considered for early release, and therefore put a support plan in place in a timely manner.
23. Another concern that has been raised repeatedly by staff is the sluggishness of the housing market preventing positive move-on from temporary or emergency accommodation. Whilst it can be difficult to find appropriate homes for rent at the best of times, the effective closure of much of the private and social rented sectors has meant individuals staying much longer than needed in temporary accommodation, blocking space that is needed for new incoming referrals.
24. As is the case in so many of the partner organisations we routinely work with, reduced staffing and suspension of services has made it particularly difficult to access specialist substance misuse and mental health services for our clients. The pandemic and the lockdown have naturally exacerbated anxiety, poor mental health and substance misuse amongst our service users, and our staff remain deeply concerned that they are unable to access the specialist help that they need.



25. Additionally, the mental health and morale of staff across all our services has been suffering, as we have had to adjust to working differently, often without the usual emotional support from colleagues. Where teams have been working from home, staff have kept in touch via technology such as Microsoft Teams, but for some individuals video calls cannot match regular face-to-face conversations and support.
26. Finally, we have had to cancel a number of fundraising events scheduled for 2020, meaning a significant loss of income at a time when our costs have been rising. Whilst we get a significant proportion of our funding from local authority and Welsh Government grants (and have therefore been less significantly impacted than other charities in the sector), we launched our 'Rebuild 2020' fundraising campaign in response to this significant financial challenge to rebalance our income with our expenditure throughout this time.

## How we plan to restore our services

27. In mid-May 2020, our COVID-19 Taskforce developed a restoration strategy for the organisation, to plan for the reopening of suspended services as and when the advice from Welsh Government was to change. This plan set out exactly what activity would resume through the transition from 'Red' status, to 'Amber', 'Yellow', 'Green', and finally 'Purple' status, representing a full return to business as usual.
28. The restoration strategy sets out exactly what recovery might look like in each type of service – residential, outreach, drop-in centres, and floating support, as well as participation and progression and central services. In addition, many projects have their own specific plans.
29. It is anticipated that not all services will be able to restore at the same pace. We have also tried to develop our plans to be as flexible as possible, so steps can be accelerated or decelerated, or even reversed as needed.
30. Examples of steps in our restoration plan include increasing the number of staff returning to offices and residential projects, implementing and then relaxing social distancing measures, utilising outdoor and communal space, amending staff rotas, and reintroducing more service user support activities whilst maintaining social distance.
31. Throughout this period, we have consulted staff at each stage to ensure they understand and are content with our plans. Without the fortitude and sacrifice of our staff, we would not have coped with the pandemic as well as we have done as an organisation, and we will do everything we can to help our teams back to work safely.

## The long-term effects on the people we support & our services

32. We are expecting significant long-term effects from the coronavirus pandemic on the people we support, our services, and the homelessness and housing support sector



more widely. Some of these will be global challenges, and some will be specific to the Welsh and UK contexts.

33. Firstly, we are anticipating a significant economic shock which could lead to a deep recession for months and perhaps years ahead. During recessions, we typically see job losses, restrictions on public spending and competition for resources, and consequently a rise in precarious housing and homelessness. We are deeply concerned about the numbers of households that may find themselves unable to afford rent or mortgage payments for the first time, and call on all levels of government to do what they can to support these people before they become homeless.
34. We may also see an increase in homelessness arising from family breakdown. The lockdown has been an exceedingly stressful time for many families, and we are concerned that local authorities should do everything they can to rehouse those who are unable to stay in their family homes.
35. Whilst we welcomed the immediate moratorium on possession orders being seen by the courts system (effectively freezing all evictions from rental properties), we remain concerned that as soon as the moratorium is lifted and judges process the backlog of new and historic cases, we could see a significant spike in the numbers of households evicted into homelessness. We would like to see the Welsh Government pass and implement the amended Renting Homes Act 2016 before the moratorium is lifted, with transitional protections put in place if necessary.
36. One of the most notable aspects of the response to the pandemic from local authorities has been the tremendous effort to provide emergency accommodation for over 800 individuals who had been sleeping rough in Wales in March. Through emergency funding and the additional public health powers granted by the Coronavirus Act 2020, local authorities requisitioned empty hotels and B&Bs to provide safe shelter for those with no home in which to isolate. Whilst this is hugely welcome, we are determined that these individuals should not face returning to the streets once the funding for the emergency accommodation ends. Local authorities must do everything they can to rapidly rehouse the service users into sustainable accommodation.
37. A definite positive outcome of this work has been the first-time engagement of some individuals who had not engaged with support services for a long time, if ever before. The opportunity of the crisis meant that some clients with complex needs are now engaging with mental health, substance misuse, and other support services for the first time. We hope that this engagement will be sustained for as long as is needed after the crisis recedes.
38. Another group of people we are concerned about are those who have leave to remain in the UK but with 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF) as a condition of their visa. We support a number of clients in this position, and are deeply concerned that although they were supported under public health legislation, they are not eligible for housing support and are, therefore, at significant risk of returning to the streets once the pandemic is over. This policy is not devolved to Wales; therefore,



we strongly call for the UK Government and the Home Office to scrap this harmful policy.

39. We are also hopeful that we will not see an immediate return to the overly bureaucratic approach to managing homelessness presentations once local authority services resume fully. We have called previously for the scrapping of both the 'priority need' system, and the arbitrary 'local connection rule' which act as barriers to providing housing support and relief services.
40. More broadly, we are closely observing the wellbeing of all the different people we support, as anecdotally we are observing a number of clients whose mental health has been deteriorating over the lockdown period, and cases of alcohol and substance misuse seem to be increasing. Reasons for this can be a complex range of interconnected factors, but we anticipate an increasing demand for specialist mental health and substance misuse services.
41. On an individual level, we have noticed that a number of our service users have lost progress with developing skills for independent living, as their routines have broken down and they are having less direct contact with our support workers. This has been a real shame to see good work being undone as more chaotic habits and behaviours have begun to return in some instances. We have also seen unfortunate examples of individuals relapsing from their rehabilitation programmes.
42. Returning to the issue of economic recession, we are concerned that the current sluggishness in the Welsh housing market will only deteriorate, making it ever harder to arrange positive moves on for our service users. We need more affordable housing to be built as soon as possible, as the only long-term solution to one of the key drivers of homelessness. We would like to encourage local authorities, housing associations and construction firms to continue their positive cooperation and partnership working to meet this growing need.
43. We also need to consider the effects of a potential recession on private landlords in Wales. A protracted economic downturn could mean fewer good landlords are able to maintain affordable properties for low income households. This is of particular importance for Housing First projects, as they require stable landlords able to commit to housing tenants with complex needs.
44. There have definitely been some unforeseen positive outcomes which have arisen from our response to the coronavirus pandemic; many of our staff and service users have noted an increased sense of community and solidarity; clients have become more self-reliant and confident to do things without the level of hands-on support that they had become accustomed to; and we have changed some working patterns to better suit the flexible needs of our staff. We hope that the positive outcomes will continue for a long time.
45. We hope to build upon all this good work to grow more cooperative, caring, and sensitive to the needs of our staff and service users. We cannot ignore that our staff have gone above and beyond during this crisis, and we need to recognise the stress and vicarious trauma that they are exposed to, and do all we can to improve staff retention.



## Conclusions & next steps

46. The global situation since March 2020 has represented an unprecedented challenge for The Wallich, as it has for all organisations in the housing sector and beyond, however we feel we have risen to that challenge in a way that might never have seemed possible before.
47. The work of local authorities and partners in housing more than 800 individuals who had formerly been sleeping rough on the streets of Wales means that for the first time in a generation, we appear to be within touching distance of ending rough sleeping once and for all. We will do everything we can to work with our colleagues and partners to make this vision a reality.
48. The unique situation of a national lockdown has thrown other issues into the spotlight, including the high levels of demand for specialist mental health and substance misuse services, residential accommodation for those with chaotic lifestyles and complex needs, preventative services for those at risk of losing a tenancy, and of course the need for more affordable housing of all types.
49. The pandemic has starkly demonstrated the centrality of a good home to public health and to physical and mental wellbeing. The crisis has exposed massive inequality between households and communities, and in some cases the inadequacy of temporary and emergency accommodation. It is clear there is lack of investment in sufficient social housing and the repair or upgrade of existing homes of all tenures. We need to put good homes and the human right to a home at the heart of the recovery plan for Wales.
50. We sincerely hope that like us, the Welsh Government and other public bodies will learn from this crisis, and work to address the deep underlying issues within our society: poverty and inequality, poor housing, mental and physical health, substance misuse, criminal justice, immigration rights, and much more besides.
51. We at The Wallich stand ready to share our experience and expertise to assist in this national effort in any way possible.

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