

## 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 more than 100 diverse services, across 18 local authorities, The Wallich has worked with more than 5,000 people experiencing or at risk of homelessness between April and October 2022.

## Our response

We would like to thank the Local Government and Housing Committee for the invitation to share our views on the current situation of homelessness in Wales, in particular the current use of temporary accommodation and the transition towards rapid rehousing.

## The supply, suitability and quality of temporary accommodation currently being used to house people experiencing homelessness and the support services made available to them.

We remain deeply concerned about the high numbers of people in temporary accommodation (TA) across Wales (8,545 according to the latest official figures for August 2022), and these numbers are continuing to get higher each month. More new people are presenting to the system than are being successfully resettled, is resulting in increased pressure on staff and resources. Because of the shortage of appropriate housing for people to move on to, they are waiting for far too long in TA; in some cases we are aware of, up to twelve months in bed and breakfast accommodation.

Whilst in TA awaiting rehousing, we believe that significant numbers of people may be unable to receive sufficient support. People experiencing homelessness are much more likely than the general population to have experienced trauma and will therefore require more intensive wrap-around support. This might include addressing mental or physical health needs, substance use, financial advice, or managing family conflicts and relationship breakdowns. The Wallich is able to rapidly provide this support for clients referred into our projects, however given the high number of presentations, we do worry that some individuals will not get an equal level of service.



We are also deeply concerned about the quality of TA options. We know that local authorities are relying heavily on bed and breakfasts, and in some cases are once again using camping beds and sleeping bags as the only option to keep people indoors. Some local authorities are still using converted hotel accommodation procured at the height of the pandemic, and many of these rooms do not have cooking facilities beyond kettles and microwaves, which has a deskilling effect, really undermining the ability of residents to live independently with dignity.

There are of course additional pressures on the TA sector from the Ukrainian refugee programme. We are entirely supportive of the work of Welsh Government and local authorities to provide a sanctuary to Ukrainians fleeing war. Sadly, we have however noted that this is leading to increased competition for limited housing stock in some areas. There can also be complications arising from different pots of funding to support these different cohorts of people needing housing and support.

HSG commissioned support services are generally doing excellent work to support people in TA, but they are struggling to keep up with high demand and are unable to successfully resolve experiences of homelessness due to a critical shortage of appropriate permanent housing to move people on to.

## *The impact that living in temporary accommodation has on individuals and families.*

Any experience of homelessness will be traumatic for the person involved, but lengthy stays in accommodation not intended for long-term occupation will likely only exacerbate this trauma. The overall effect is that failing to provide sufficient levels of support now, will build up problems for the future. Problems which could require more intensive interventions from a whole range of other public services.

Long stays in TA also undermine the ability for individuals and families to plan for their futures. Many people are working or want to work, however this can have adverse impacts on the levels of housing benefit they receive, limiting their housing options for move on. Shockingly, we have had cases where our support workers have had to advise clients against taking on work until their housing situation is resolved, which of course can take many weeks or months.

On a simply practical level, many TA properties do not have internet connectivity, but residents need to get online in order to apply for their benefits, set up bank accounts, register with GPs, and manage a wide range of other responsibilities. Our support workers do excellent work supporting clients with all this admin, but once again it undermines the independence of those who would be quite capable of managing this themselves provided they could get online easily.



## *The impact of the ongoing demand for temporary accommodation and support services on local authorities, their partners and communities.*

We believe that a number of local authorities are currently at or over capacity for available accommodation options, which could mean that new individuals presenting as experiencing or at risk of homelessness may be turned away with no alternative accommodation offered. This could lead to increasing numbers of people forced to sleep on the streets, one of the most dangerous forms of homelessness, particularly as we move into winter.

Oversubscribed and overcrowded TA is also likely to push more people onto the streets if they feel it is too chaotic or otherwise falls short of meeting their needs. For example, an individual trying to maintain their abstinence or reduce their drug use may find it difficult to live in close proximity to others who regularly use substances.

Large TA properties such as hostels or converted hotels can be difficult for staff to manage when they are at full capacity, and the volume and complexity of residents' needs can very quickly lead to incidents which will have negative impacts on the local community, damaging neighbourhood relationships. Oversubscribed accommodation will generally lead to worse outcomes (and higher costs) across health services, policing and criminal justice, and other public services delivered by local authorities.

## *Options to increase the supply of affordable and appropriate housing in the short to medium term to reduce the use of temporary accommodation.*

Across the housing and homelessness sector, we are all committed to a real change in approach; moving away from TA and the staircase model of 'housing readiness', and towards rapid rehousing and Housing First instead. However, in order to achieve this radical change we must build significantly more capacity across the system. This means investing in more TA with wrap-around support in the short term, as well as building more new homes and converting under-occupied and empty buildings into suitable housing.

We note the significant challenges facing the house-building sector at the moment, including labour shortages, increased costs and logistical challenges with supply chains, and the need to decarbonise. On top of these challenges, there are significant difficulties encouraging private housebuilders and developers to build genuinely affordable one-bedroom homes to meet the needs of single people in TA. In some areas, the only affordable options for move on are large, shared HMOs in the private rental sector, which are often low quality and not appropriate for the needs of the individual.



Without some sort of positive state intervention, builders will continue to build only larger family homes, luxury apartments, or high-density student accommodation, rather than the less profitable, affordable homes that meet the genuine demand in the system.

There are significant failings in the planning system from our perspective. Under the current Section 106 system, local authorities are not empowered to reject unsuitable developments and demand investment in affordable, sustainable communities.

We also experience some difficulties moving our clients into permanent housing, as a result of high qualifying criteria imposed by landlords, both private and housing associations. We typically support clients with the highest support needs who may have been turned away by many other services, and they may have had multiple failed tenancies in the past, or issues with anti-social behaviour or substance use.

We can find it difficult to convince landlords to accept our clients, as they tend to cherry-pick the more stable potential tenants. This undermines the principles of the Housing First or rapid rehousing approaches, which state that anybody should be considered 'tenancy-ready', so long as they are provided with the appropriate level of support. In Scotland, the Government have legislated to force RSLs to accept tenants to whom a homelessness duty is owed, meaning they cannot sit on voids until a better offer comes along. We would like to see Welsh Government consider something similar, as well as working with RSLs to turn over voids more quickly.

There is no getting around the fact that Welsh Government and local authorities need to spend significant sums of money, both to relieve the pressures on TA services (both buildings and support staff) at crisis point, and on building and repurposing more suitable homes for people to move on to.

## *Progress implementing Ending Homelessness in Wales: A high level action plan 2021-2026, and in particular the move towards a rapid rehousing approach.*

There has been little information made public about progress implementing the Welsh Government action plan. However, we are aware that there is a lot of work is going on behind the scenes, some of which we have been involved with.

The first action on the plan was for each of the 22 local authorities to develop a rapid rehousing transition plan, to be in place by the end of September. At time of writing (early November 2022), only five authorities have published their plan on their public websites.

Whilst we understand that local authorities are facing significant pressures on both their frontline staff and back-office resources, this is a frustrating delay, as each month sees more and more people entering TA and fewer successful move-ons. It is vital that all local authorities publish their Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans as soon as possible, including



detailed needs assessments, upon which we can begin developing partnerships to deliver genuine multi-agency, person-centred support.

We would also like Welsh Government to publish all 22 transition plans in one place on their website, to make it easier to locate and compare the different plans which will be operating across Wales.

We have been involved in some of the work to develop the Welsh homelessness workforce, including, recruitment and retention, training, and recognition. After a particularly challenging recent period, supporting people through the pandemic, staff are in many cases burned out and demoralised. As a result, it is more important than ever that we recognise their enormous value and do our best to retain them in the sector. The priority for improving recruitment and retention of staff should be using HSG funding to increase staff pay, rather than allowing the commissioning process to create a race to the bottom through competition between providers.

We are also aware of the work going on to develop a new Homelessness Outcomes Framework, as well as data-collection arrangements to support this shift. We have long advocated for a move away from historic outcomes monitoring, from the days of the Supporting People programme, to something which better recognises that success looks different for different people. For some of our clients, success might mean living independently and managing a tenancy, but for others it might mean long-term supported accommodation and reducing their use of drugs and alcohol, for example.

It is also vitally important that the outcomes framework becomes a truly Wales-wide model: as an organisation that works across 18 different local authority areas, we would much prefer working to a single set of common outcomes, particularly where we have clients who move between county areas.

We also feel that the development of the new framework is an excellent opportunity to move towards more trauma-informed data collection. Asking individuals to repeatedly disclose their personal details must not be retraumatising, and we must improve our data-sharing processes so that clients only need to tell their story once.

The final actions from the Welsh Government plan that we want to highlight are Actions 9 and 10; improving services for people with mental illness and/or neurodiversities, and those with co-occurring substance use issues. We believe that a majority of the people we support have experienced mental ill health of some kind, and there are particular barriers to mental health services which exist for those with the most severe and complex conditions. In a recent survey of our staff, 90% of respondents said that they have found it difficult or impossible to access the right mental health support for their clients, and 76% felt that there are not appropriate referral pathways in their area for clients with severe mental health needs. 72% of respondents believe that people experiencing homelessness have worse access to services than the general population, and 60% felt that access has become worse since the outset of the pandemic.



In order for the action plan to be a success and realise our ambition of ending homelessness, we must build effective partnerships across the housing sector, health boards (including in particular mental health and substance use services) and other public services. If this work is seen as the sole responsibility of housing departments, it will not be successful. Without genuine commitment to non-judgemental, problem-solving, person-centred working from everyone involved, models such as rapid rehousing or Housing First will not succeed.

