

# Homelessness

## Summary of engagement

24 November 2022

\*This paper is updated to include a series of case studies from Cymorth Cymru, the Salvation Army and the Wallich. These case studies are anonymised to protect the identity of individuals and are not attributed to any one individual who participated in the focus groups.

As part of the Local Government and Housing Committee's work on homelessness, the Citizen Engagement Team arranged qualitative engagement, comprising a series of informal discussion groups.

Visits were arranged to the Salvation Army in Canton, Cardiff and the Wallich's Learning Centre, Cardiff on 15 June 2022.

### **Participants**

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Contributor composition varied and included individuals with current and past experience of homelessness, and staff working within the sector who engage with the homeless community.

Contributors were sourced exclusively by the Salvation Army and the Wallich. Many had experience of other support services in Cardiff and elsewhere.

Members may wish to be mindful that service users shared their views in the presence of staff from the Salvation Army and the Wallich. The participation of these staff members was two-pronged in nature – to support service users to participate in discussions, and to share their own experiences of supporting service users. Part of the discussion focused on the adequacy of support available to the homeless community. Whilst there is no indication that views shared by service users may have differed in the absence of staff from these support services, it may be wise to caveat such evidence accordingly.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to the programme of engagement.

### **Format**

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Engagement at the Salvation Army comprised three discussion groups involving a mix of service users and front-line staff. Engagement at the Wallich differed slightly on the advice of Wallich staff, and involved a creative session interspersed by informal group discussion.



Whilst the format of engagement varied between sessions to meet the needs of contributors, similar topics were explored at both sessions, and predominantly focused on the following:-

- Homelessness prevention
- The support available to those experiencing homelessness
- Temporary accommodation
- Long-term/permanent accommodation

The following themes emerged from the discussions.

### **Support services**

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The standard, suitability and accessibility of support available to individuals at risk of, or experiencing homelessness, was a theme discussed by most groups.

The majority of contributors with lived experience of homelessness shared positive views of the support they have received from the Salvation Army and the Wallich. Many expressed views indicating gratitude and appreciation, with some contributors explaining that they would be sleeping rough were it not for the support they received.

Some contributors with experience of accessing support delivered by other support services, not represented in discussions, occasionally shared views which were critical of those services. One contributor described sleeping on floor space amongst discarded needles at a facility managed by a homelessness charity. He explained that he felt unsafe and did not return the following night, preferring to sleep rough. Similar experiences were shared by other contributors.

In addition to discussion on the adequacy of support services, contributors also discussed the lack of awareness amongst many individuals who experience homelessness, of the types of support available to them.

### **Prison leavers**

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A number of contributors with lived experience of both homelessness and prison, were of the view that the level of support available for prison leavers is inadequate. This perceived lack of support was largely attributed to the removal of prison leavers from the list of people given 'priority need' status for temporary accommodation in Wales.

One front-line staff member participating in discussions, who also had experience of working within the prison service, explained that many prison leavers will re-offend in order to re-enter the prison system and regain the comparative stability of prison life. She elaborated that this was particularly the case around the Christmas holidays, when she recalls many previous offenders re-entering the system, with one who would exclaim, "*I'm home!*".

One contributor explained that he had no address, no bank account, and was also attempting to manage a substance misuse issue, upon his release from prison. The lack of support resulted in him sleeping rough, before eventually being hospitalised with an

infection. He has since been able to access support and is now living independently with continued support from the Salvation Army.

### ***Case study provided by the Wallich***

*S lives in Llanelli and has been supported by The Wallich for about four years. He came to be supported by The Wallich because he got placed in temporary accommodation in Llanelli after leaving prison. He's been in and out of prison since 2010. He has been out of prison for over a year, which is the longest period he has spent out of prison for some time.*

*"I've never really been in for anything serious. Pretty much every time I've been to prison, it's been because of alcohol-related stuff."*

*"I actually found it easier to cope in prison than I do on the outside. I'd get up in the morning and have a gym session, then I'd always have art class and music class. I just felt I had a better routine and I could cope better day-to-day. I'd have a cell to myself. So, I had that space to go back on my own."*

*When the support he received from the Wallich, S explained that if it wasn't for the support he receives, he'd probably be really struggling with his drinking.*

*"The support worker I've got now, he's really good. He goes out of his way to help me. So, I'm grateful."*

*When thinking about the future, S explained that he'd like to get qualifications because he does not currently have any.*

*"I like history. Maybe something in archaeology would be good for me because I'd be outdoors. Or working with animals. I need to make my mind up because I'm not getting any younger. My support worker, he was an addict until he was my age and he's managed to sort himself out. He was my age when he stopped doing heroin. So, it makes me think you know, I've got a bit of time to sort myself out. Though, he didn't have the mental conditions I've got and I think that's a lot of what I struggle with."*

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## **Accommodation**

Many contributors with experience of living in hostels, explained that they often felt unsafe and unsupported. Anecdotal accounts of wide-spread substance misuse by

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residents were shared, with some explaining that abstinence is futile in an environment where drugs and alcohol are commonplace.

A number of contributors also explained that many hostels will often have a policy in place, whereby residents are effectively “kicked out” during the day. This meant that residents, many of whom will have complex issues, find themselves roaming the streets, with little to do.

One contributor had spent six years in and out hostels, explaining that he only felt supported and engaged when he joined ‘Compass’, a four bed complex needs service intended for people who struggle to engage with the Salvation Army’s main Lifehouse. The waiting list for accessing this service was described as “huge.” This need for tailored support was discussed amongst different groups, with many explaining that putting a roof over someone’s head is only one piece of the jigsaw.

The Housing First model, a specialised service that combines affordable housing with tailored support to address issues such as substance misuse and/or mental health, was considered vital. Some contributors participating in discussions had benefitted from the Housing First project, explaining that it had helped them turn their life around.

#### ***Case Study provided by the Salvation Army***

*C was a street homeless person who had been rough sleeping, camping and sleeping in his van in and around Cardiff for six years.*

*C\* had become isolated, underweight, physically unwell and was facing daily challenges with his mental health. He was referred to the project by outreach services and began to build a rapport with the team over the winter months. In January 2018 The Housing First Team supported C\* to move into his new home, helping to set up bills, shop for food, run errands and discover his new community.*

*Since settling in his home, C\* has made tremendous improvements in his mental health and general wellbeing. He is now on stable medication and has been positively discharged from his local community mental health team. His physical health has improved and his outlook on life has changed. He is positive and hopeful and has settled well into his new community. C\* has begun learning new skills, has attended yoga and volunteers for the local football club.*

*C\* continues to engage effectively with all aspects of support offered to him and always expresses gratitude for the support he has received, and voiced an interest in giving back to the service; C\* attended a Salvation Army Regional Conference with the team and has spoken publicly about his experience of the service.*

*C says "Housing First enables you to immediately reclaim a place in society rather than remain on the margins. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity".*

Whilst the experiences of those who had lived in hostels were predominantly negative, contributors were keen to emphasise that this was not always the fault of staff working at those hostels. A lack of resource and expertise which, in turn, impacted upon stress levels and staff turnover, were cited as the main reasons why a hostel environment is not suitable for many. Some contributors also explained that staff turnover will often have a detrimental impact upon the level of trust between service users and those who support them.

One contributor explained that many hostels will often reward a resident's good behaviour by offering better accommodation or living conditions (for example, by moving from floor space to a pod or supported accommodation). However, the contributor criticised the approach, querying why people, some of whom may be consumed by addiction, are rewarded for a basic need.

### **Mental health support**

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Ensuring that mental health support is readily available and adequately resourced was considered key by many contributors.

Poor mental health is not always necessarily the result of homelessness, but may also be the cause. Loss of employment, visa issues, relationship breakdown and adverse childhood experiences were some of the reasons offered by contributors as causes of homelessness.

A number of contributors, particularly those who work in roles supporting the homeless community, were of the view that mental health services are "*spread too thinly*." One contributor explained that the chaotic lifestyles of many homeless individuals can mean that they will miss appointments, are subsequently considered disengaged by those providing the support, and end up "*falling in and out of services*."

#### ***Case study provided by Cymorth Cymru***

*When 59-year-old M's children moved out of her council property, she was required to pay the £18-per-week 'bedroom tax'. With her health deteriorating and bills getting more expensive, she was desperate to downsize. M reached out to her local councillor who, through the Cardiff Council Gateway, was introduced to Cath, Senior Community Link Worker at United Welsh. She helped M submit an application to the local authority to transfer to a smaller property.*

*They provided evidence from GP and mental health services about the need for outdoor space for her mental health and ground floor due to her mobility issues. While she waited for the outcome, M was*

*also able to receive discretionary housing benefit, meaning she no longer had to pay the 'bedroom tax'. Cath then wanted to address M's health issues, as she had anxiety over her seizures and falls - worrying that she would not be found for some time in the event of either happening. Cath arranged the fitting of a community alarm system linked to M's daughter, and a key safe to ensure access in an emergency. This has given her peace of mind and reduced her anxiety considerably. In addition to this, they successfully applied for a Severe Disability Premium which gives M extra income to support her health and other support needs.*

*Today, M lives in a one-bedroom bungalow, and Cath helped in every step to ensure she would settle in okay, including putting in an application to the Discretionary Assistance Fund for an accessible fridge freezer as the new kitchen would not accommodate her old one. This support will not have been possible had it not been for continued existence of the Housing Support Grant. As a result of this, United Welsh - with the Salvation Army - launched the 'Cardiff Floating Support Service' which offers families vital support through offering tailored financial and health support, preventing them from becoming homeless.*