

The Big Issue magazine launched in 1991 in response to the growing number of rough sleepers on the streets of London, by offering people the opportunity to earn a legitimate income through selling a magazine to the public. Twenty-five years on, our vendors come from a variety of backgrounds and face the myriad of problems associated with poverty and inequality.

Vendors buy The Big Issue magazine for £1.25 and sell it for £2.50, meaning each seller is a micro-entrepreneur who is working, not begging. Therefore it is vitally important that buyers take their copy of the magazine when they pay for it.

Since 1991, the magazine has helped over 92,000 vendors earn £115 million. There are currently around 1500 vendors, and last year alone we helped them to earn a total of £5.5 million. Currently the magazine is read by an estimated 379,195 people across the UK and circulates 82,294 copies every week.

In Wales we currently have 118 vendors selling the magazine, with distribution points in Wrexham, Llandudno, Bangor, Aberystwyth, Carmarthen, Swansea, Bridgend, Cardiff and Newport. Of the vendors we have selling, currently 14 are rough sleeping, 10 are in temporary accommodation (sofa surfing, hostels, B&B etc.), 15 are in housing association properties, and 79 are in private rented accommodation.

At The Big Issue we are in a unique position to work with rough sleepers as we are able to provide an accessible opportunity to earn a legitimate income. We provide various services to all vendors, but an important service we do provide which is invaluable for rough sleepers is that of a savings scheme. Vendors are able to save up to £100 with The Big Issue which means that those who are rough sleeping are able to carry less money on them when they are at their most vulnerable. It is well known that rough sleepers are more at risk of becoming victims of crime, and this service offers a reassurance to our rough sleeping vendors.

Terms of Reference

The effectiveness of part 2 of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 in preventing rough sleeping

As reported in the 2017 Crisis Homeless Monitor for Wales, the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 has certainly led to less households losing their homes. The Monitor reports that nearly two thirds of households at risk of homelessness in 2016-2017 were prevented from losing their homes.

Prevention is an area of major importance to The Big Issue. Standing in the House of Lords in July 2017, Lord Bird called for a cross-party approach to 'poverty prevention,' arguing that "We know that prevention pays off. We know that when money is spent on prevention, it reaps enormous benefits." The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 is a clear example of this and is commended by The Big Issue Cymru for its success to date.

It is unlikely, however, that the act has had a real impact on rough sleeping, or at least at this stage it is difficult to evidence any success to this effect. From our experience at The Big Issue Cymru, those that we encounter who are rough sleeping have usually come from a position of temporary accommodation i.e. hostels or sofa surfing, or are prison leavers.

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

At The Big Issue Cymru, we acknowledge the figures released in the Crisis Homelessness Monitor indicating a clear rise (16-30%) in rough sleeping in the past year in Wales. Staff report regularly of an increased visibility of rough sleeping from regular outreach across Wales.

With regards to the collection of data, The Big Issue Cymru believes there is a lack of consistency in methodology which results in challenges in making comparisons over previous years, thus making the measurement of success of schemes, projects, and policy difficult. In Wales, the most consistent form of data capture of rough sleeping comes from The Wallich who conduct regular rough sleeper counts across Wrexham, Swansea, Bridgend, Cardiff and Newport, though themselves identify the potential for statistics to be affected due to 'doubling-up' of counts in areas where The Wallich provide secondary early morning services. Recent data from The Wallich shows a further increase in rough sleeping during 'Quarter 4 2017.'

It also must be noted that the data does not include those considered the 'hidden homeless,' suggesting it is likely there are more. This includes those who are 'sofa surfing' and may not even consider themselves homeless (in particular this refers to young people who don't identify as homeless), or those who are sleeping rough somewhere that is not visible to outreach teams. At The Big Issue Cymru, we are aware of rough sleeping vendors who will 'find somewhere to stay' if the weather is poor, especially during wet weather or very cold spells. It is then seen as a priority, whereas many vendors have said they 'don't mind' sleeping outside in warm dry weather.

In order for sufficient strategies to be implemented, it is imperative that consistent and strong data is collected. This is a key area of importance.

A useful additional way to ensure vast awareness of the location of rough sleepers is to promote the use of the Streetlink app. This is an app that the public can use to notify the

appropriate services about people who may be rough sleeping. This is an easy to use service that should be more widely promoted to the public.

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

The Homeless Monitor for Wales 2017 has identified a clear shift in the main causes for homelessness in Wales. For years the root cause often cited was that of family/relationship breakdown, but now, it is that of loss of rented or 'tied' accommodation.

At The Big Issue Cymru, we often see a return to rough sleeping when someone's 'time is up' at the temporary accommodation they are accessing. This has happened to two men in Cardiff in the past week, one a prison leaver who has been staying in temporary accommodation, and another has had his 'time up' at a frontline provider's temporary accommodation. Now both have returned to the street to start the process again. This highlights the need for longer-term solutions to tackle the 'revolving door' between the street, temporary provision and the criminal justice system.

Another reason we see a return to rough sleeping is when a person has gained their own accommodation but it is 'too far away.' Due to their chaotic nature and often substance misuse, we will regularly see people choosing to sleep out in the city centre rather than make the journey home, often in part, because they don't have the money for bus fare.

It must also be noted that a large portion of our vendors who are rough sleepers are EEA Nationals and have no recourse to public funds.

At this point it is important to raise the issue of complex needs and those who have endured adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Without getting to the root causes and providing specialist support for people to resolve issues experienced by these we believe a 'revolving door' of rough sleeping and homelessness is likely.

The effectiveness and availability of services including emergency accommodation

The Big Issue Cymru would like to take this opportunity to highlight the fantastic work of the frontline service providers across Wales who provide a brilliant service on limited resources and are a regular support to our vendors in need. This is why it is imperative the Supporting People funding is protected from 2019/2020 onwards. The Big Issue Cymru is in support of its colleagues and partners in receipt of SP funding across Wales who provide vital services to those in need.

Though there is emergency accommodation available, at The Big Issue Cymru, we are told regularly by rough sleeping vendors that they do not wish to access such accommodation due to fears of their safety and excessive drug they would be surrounded by, this may explain in part, the reason for 24% of emergency bed spaces lying empty on the night of the count. We are aware that this is a commonly cited reason for not accessing services and acknowledge that it is unlikely to be the sole reason. Our experience of working with rough sleepers is that often they are living in such a chaotic manner often linked to substance misuse, which means that they struggle to adhere to the deadlines to express the need for emergency accommodation.

The steps to prevent and tackle rough sleeping in Wales

At The Big Issue Cymru we acknowledge the increase in young people rough sleeping and as a consequence of this, an increased focus on youth homelessness. Though this is vitally important, we would like to stress a need to maintain focus on the single homeless, predominantly male, who if not already, are at risk of becoming entrenched rough sleepers. The recent figures from The Wallich rough sleeper counts highlight that 76% of rough sleepers in Cardiff, 53% in Bridgend, 65% in Newport and 47% in Swansea are aged 36-50, with the next biggest group aged 26-35. From our experience at The Big Issue Cymru, this demographic have real complex needs, predominantly mental health and substance misuse, tend to struggle to stay in accommodation, and spend time in the CJS. Also, in this age group, they are approaching the age identified as the average age at death for rough sleepers, 47 compared with 77 for the general public.

As suggested by Tim Worstall from the Adam Smith Institute, there is a need to look at alternative methods of working with those rough sleeping, it is not just about accommodation. Worstall calls for taking the treatment to the streets, referring to the “outsourcing of mental health treatment to the night air.” This has been echoed by Cardiff Council who trialled an outreach project with drugs agency Taith resulting in reasonable engagement. At The Big Issue Cymru, we conduct regular outreach across Wales and would welcome the company of specialist agencies to provide further support to those we meet both vendors and those begging or rough sleeping.

We would like to take this opportunity to stress the importance of partnership working. For a successful outcome to tackling rough sleeping in Wales organisations must work together. As an organisation originally established to provide rough sleepers with the opportunity to earn a legitimate income, we find referrals from other organisations thin and far between, though we regularly refer out to organisations to provide support for our vendors. We are aware of many organisations not only third sector but also local authority, who are aware of clients begging but do not refer them to sell The Big Issue. We have found that close partnership work with organisations can provide a close network around clients where information is shared, meetings can be attended at any partner’s location leading to an increase in attendance from the client, and outcomes are more successful. People selling The Big Issue tell us that they find selling the magazine gives them a ‘sense of purpose’ it is something to ‘fill the days’ and provides vendors the opportunity to interact with the wider public, building confidence and relationships.

In order to work closely with our partners, it is imperative that they receive sufficient funding, and we would like to echo our previous comments about the importance of maintaining the Supporting People fund.

As our founder Lord Bird argues, ‘prevention should be at the heart of policy,’ and we acknowledge the success of this in the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. However, at The Big Issue Cymru, we see a lack of prevention from the return to homelessness of those on the brink. These are the people who have experienced rough sleeping, substance misuse, have complex needs and have sold The Big Issue, but are now ‘alright.’ They are housed, free from addiction, and in employment, but they are vulnerable. We have experienced that many of these experience mental health issues such as depression and/or anxiety and provision to

tackle this is lacking. Vendors and ex-vendors we have referred to mental health services are met with six-month waiting lists for counselling services which is plenty time for a full relapse and return to rough sleeping. Alternatively they may be offered 'group sessions' which for anyone who has an understanding of anxiety would appreciate is a terrifying prospect. This is where the importance for accessible mental health provision is vitally important.

At The Big Issue Cymru we acknowledge the success of Housing First projects across Finland and the US and welcome this approach across Wales. We believe that Housing First has the potential for much better outcomes for tackling rough sleeping and would support this approach in opposition to some of the more linear 'treatment first' to provide better retention.

Finally, we feel that there needs to be improved public awareness about rough sleeping. People struggle to differentiate between those who are begging and those who are rough sleeping, people don't understand the causes of homelessness, people don't know about ACE's or complex needs and this leads to a lack of compassion, or on the other end of the spectrum, leads to unhelpful or at times dangerous generosity. This is also where the promotion of Streetlink comes in and the need to raise awareness of the app to the public.

The Big Issue Cymru would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to deliver evidence at the inquiry and look forward to the findings and the next steps on tackling rough sleeping in Wales.

Report prepared by Bethan Thomas, Regional Manager for The Big Issue.

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