

ELGC Committee Inquiry

The impact of the coronavirus on individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness and support services in Wales



Crisis evidence submission – summary of key points

We welcome the opportunity to provide insight into the effect of coronavirus on individuals experiencing (or at risk of) homelessness and on services that provide support for individuals in Wales. Our focus is on the systems and framework changes that can help Welsh Government transition to a housing-led approach to ending homelessness, as recommended by the Homelessness Action Group, as a key part of its ongoing response to the coronavirus.

We suggest the committee considers these questions relating to homelessness and the coronavirus outbreak:

- **What work is ongoing on a national and local level to assess the needs of the cohort of people newly accommodated from the street to understand the support and accommodation needs and provide for those needs to ensure that everyone is able to move on to more permanent accommodation as soon as possible?**
- **What further changes are needed prevent more people from becoming homeless in the short-medium term, and in particular once lockdown measures are eased?**
- **What actions can the Welsh Government take to working with the UK Government on measures to prevent homelessness among some groups including action on evictions, support for those with no recourse to public funds and using housing benefit to pay rent?**
- **Following the legal, operational and funding changes that have occurred as a crisis response to the outbreak, what progress can Welsh Government and its partners maintain after the crisis to help realise its ambition to end homelessness in Wales (i.e. making homelessness rare, brief and non-repeated), as per the Homelessness Action Group's recommendations that it has accepted in principle?**

Homelessness and the coronavirus

People experiencing homelessness, particularly those sleeping rough, are among the most exposed and at risk to coronavirus. People sleeping rough are for example, three times more likely to experience a chronic health condition including asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). People also face greater difficulty following the public health advice to socially distance and, if necessary, self-isolate due to either a lack of accommodation or the accommodation not being suitable for this (e.g. being overcrowded).

For many individuals and households this outbreak has added to existing pressures. Households already facing mounting pressures of low wages and high rents, housing benefit not covering the costs of rent, a shortage of truly affordable housing, and multi-agency support not being in place are at greater risk of homelessness in the current circumstances.

The emerging trends and themes from our research (to be published shortly) suggest that services are providing support for an increased number of individuals, some of whom have greater and more complex support needs. In addition, the challenges reported by services include difficulties in accessing wider statutory services, such as mental health and substance misuse services, challenges with hunger and access to food, and challenges with moving people on from temporary accommodation into suitable permanent housing.

Summary

Our submission is structured as follows:

- **The short-term actions** and measures Government and Local Authorities can take to move individuals currently in temporary accommodation onto more permanent housing.
- **The medium term actions** and measures Government can take to prevent people from becoming newly homeless as a result of the Coronavirus.
- **The long-term actions** and measures Government can take to move to a housing-led system where homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring, delivering on the recommendations of the Homelessness Action Group.

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Progress to date

It has been extremely welcome to see the range of government policy changes and initiatives in response to the outbreak, meeting the scale of the challenge. These interventions will have a significant impact for those people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. This includes:

- Accepting in principle all the Homelessness Action Group recommendations and committing, in due course, to agree a plan to end homelessness.
- Making £10m available to local authorities to secure accommodation to help those sleeping rough or in congregate accommodation access self-contained temporary accommodation.
- Providing guidance to local authorities and providers of supported accommodation on the delivery of services and support for individuals in temporary accommodation.
- Providing early clarity and direction for local authorities on the provision of support and accommodation for those with 'no recourse to public funds' status.
- Extending the period for landlords to start court possession proceedings from two to three months with the powers needed to extend this if necessary.
- Agreeing with social landlords to not evict those facing difficulties as a result of the outbreak.
- Providing strengthened guidance and clarity to local authorities on the application of priority need and vulnerability.
- Actions from UK Government on realigning Local Housing Allowance rates to the 30th percentile and a freeze on evictions from the PRS and asylum accommodation.

Short-term: a rapid rehousing response

There are ongoing and significant challenges in some temporary accommodation provision, especially where people are sharing bathroom facilities, without cooking facilities, or are unable to access wider support services such as mental health support. Food poverty and hunger are also a key challenge. To avoid the risk of some people returning to street homelessness, or experiencing prolonged stays in temporary accommodation, we need to see place-specific arrangements to allow for rapid access to permanent housing with appropriate support to meet people's needs.

A 'rapid rehousing' approach prioritises access to settled, affordable housing as soon as possible with tailored support provided according to the individual's needs. Many people will be familiar with Housing First, which is one model of rapid rehousing proven to work for people with complex needs. In a rapid rehousing system, access to permanent accommodation is not conditional on accessing services.

A housing-led, rapid rehousing system is built on permanent solutions to homelessness, with temporary solutions forming a smaller part of our response to homelessness with temporary accommodation limited to emergency responses whenever possible.

We would invite the committee to consider:

1. **What work is ongoing on a national and local level to assess the needs of the cohort of people newly accommodated to understand the service, support and accommodation supply needs to ensure that everyone is able to move on to more permanent accommodation as soon as possible?**

This includes interventions such as:

- Multi-disciplinary approaches to undertaking **rapid assessments of people's support and accommodation needs** with rapid move on to more suitable accommodation, with independent housing with support as the default.
- Maximising the **supply of accommodation** across tenures, including increasing the allocation of social housing to those experiencing homelessness and providing financial support for individuals to access and sustain private rented tenancies.
- Strengthening and, where appropriate, formalising new **place-based partnerships** to meet needs and support move on for people in temporary accommodation.

Medium-term: Preventing homelessness

We know that in most cases we can stop homelessness from happening in the first place. However, there are concerns about a potential increase in the number of people seeking homelessness and housing support in the

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short-medium term when the current crisis protections and measures are lifted. These concerns relate to relaxing measures to protect people from evictions, the removal – or loss – of some temporary accommodation provision without appropriate move-on accommodation, and changes in flexibilities around supporting those with no recourse to public funds (NRPF). It is possible to prevent people at risk of returning to homelessness or becoming newly homeless if we have the right policies and approaches in place on a local and national level.

We would invite the committee to consider:

1. What further changes are needed prevent more people from becoming homeless in the short-medium term, and in particular once lockdown measures are eased?
2. What actions can the Welsh Government take to work with the UK Government on measures to prevent homelessness among some groups including action on evictions, support for those with NRPF and on housing benefit?

This includes interventions such as:

- Introducing – in the first instance working with UK Government – a **pre-action protocol requirement for the private rented sector**. This should provide discretion for judges to on whether to award possession, requirements for referral to housing and debt advice and include a duty on private landlords to notify the local authority when notice is served (as already happens with Section 11 notices in Scotland).
- **Extending the current time-related measures** on evictions including extending stay on court possessions and making mandatory arrears grounds discretionary.
- Working with social landlords to maximise the supply of available accommodation, including increasing **social housing allocations** to people experiencing homelessness and reducing evictions into homelessness.
- Understanding and detailing the options available for public services and others to **support those with NRPF**, short of the UK Government lifting restrictions on entitlements for this group.
- Understanding the cohort of people at risk of homelessness who either may not be in contact with services or identify as being at risk of or experiencing homelessness, such as those sofa surfing, and **continue public communications campaigns** targeted at these groups.

Long-term: Moving to a housing-led system

The undertaking by Welsh Government and local authorities to accommodate those sleeping rough or unable to access self-contained accommodation is significant. Local authorities undertake similar activity during the winter. The work of the Homelessness Action Group sets out the range of changes needed to move to a more sustainable homelessness system, detailing how we move to a housing-led system where rapid rehousing into permanent and secure accommodation with support is the default approach to ending someone's homelessness.

We would invite the committee to consider:

1. Of the legal, operational and funding changes that have occurred as a crisis response, what progress can Welsh Government and its partners maintain after the crisis to help realise its ambition to end homelessness in Wales (i.e. making homelessness rare, brief and non-repeated), as per the Homelessness Action Group's recommendations that it has accepted in principle?

This includes:

- **Extending prevention practices** across the public sector and public services, ensuring that homelessness is rare. This includes no discharges from public institutions into homelessness and no evictions into homelessness from publicly funded housing.
- **Undertaking rapid regional assessments** of housing supply, support needs and future homelessness projections to maximise and deliver the appropriate supply mix and ensure best use of existing housing supply, across the private and social rented sector.
- Improving measures that allow for people with experience of homelessness to **access and sustain accommodation**, including revisiting approaches around historic rent arrears, anti-social behaviour

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and requiring rent up front, and widening eligibility for financial assistance to access accommodation such as rent deposit schemes.

- Minimising any potential barriers to accessing support once lockdown measures are lifted, including **removing priority need, local connection and intentionality** tests and appropriately resourcing local authorities to do so.

About Crisis

Crisis is the national charity for people experiencing homelessness. We help people directly out of homelessness, and campaign for the changes needed to solve it altogether. We know that together we can end homelessness.