

# ENDING HOMELESSNESS ACTION PLAN: POST-PANDEMIC TRANSFORMATION IN WALES

With the creation of the new Homelessness Action Group, Wales set out on an ambitious path towards ending homelessness. In November 2021, the Welsh Government published its Ending Homelessness Action Plan following engagement with the homelessness sector and a public consultation. This article offers an inside perspective from Cymorth Cymru, one of the NGOs involved in the process.



By **Katie Dalton** – Director, Cymorth Cymru, Wales

In December 2018, Wales' new First Minister Mark Drakeford appointed Julie James as the Minister for Housing and Local Government. The new Housing Minister made it very clear that she wanted to tackle homelessness and established the Homelessness Action Group<sup>1</sup> in June 2019. The group was asked to identify the policies needed to end homelessness in Wales and members included Cymorth Cymru and other representatives from homelessness, housing, local government, health and academia. The group engaged with a wide range of stakeholders, including people with lived experience, and submitted its major report<sup>2</sup> to the Minister in March 2020, just days before Wales entered the first COVID-19 lockdown.

As in many other European countries, the pandemic has been extremely challenging for the homelessness and housing sector in Wales. However, it also presented an opportunity to show leadership, act decisively, remove bureaucracy, improve cooperation, and sharpen our focus on ending homelessness.

At the start of the pandemic the Minister announced £10 million to enable people sleeping rough or in unsuitable housing to access COVID-safe housing and support. This signalled the end for night shelters and people sleeping on the floor of hostels, with self-contained accommodation required to keep people safe. She also told local councils that all people experiencing homelessness should be regarded as a priority for housing during the pandemic. Since then, over 18,000<sup>3</sup> people have been provided with temporary housing, exposing the scale of hidden homelessness in Wales.

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1 <https://gov.wales/homelessness-action-group>

2 <https://gov.wales/homelessness-action-group-report-march-2020>

3 <https://gov.wales/homelessness-accommodation-provision-and-rough-sleeping-january-2022>

However, it is important to recognise that people in temporary housing are still homeless and need a settled home to call their own. During the summer of 2020 Cymorth Cymru worked with the Welsh Government to develop an approach that aimed to increase the quality and provision of housing so that people could start to move on to more permanent homes. The Minister announced another £20 million, which grew to £50 million<sup>4</sup>, to improve the quality of temporary housing and deliver more permanent homes for people to move into. The transformation had begun.

As Wales started to look beyond the pandemic crisis, the Welsh Government's housing department dusted off the Homelessness Action Group reports and looked at how to turn the recommendations into action. Following engagement with the homelessness sector and a public consultation, the Welsh Government published its *Ending Homelessness Action Plan*<sup>5</sup> in November 2021.

In the first few pages of the action plan, the Minister reflects on the pandemic and recognises the challenges faced by services, but maintains a clear focus on transforming the system and ending homelessness.

*"It has been a difficult but necessary change, allowing us to truly begin the transformation needed to achieve our long term goal of ending homelessness in Wales. I have been very clear that we will not change course because the Welsh Government sees homelessness as being simply intolerable."*

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4 <https://gov.wales/written-statement-phase-2-homelessness-update>

5 <https://gov.wales/ending-homelessness-wales-high-level-action-plan-2021-2026>



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She also states that responsibility for ending homelessness extends beyond housing and requires action from all parts of government and all public services. This is reiterated in the plan’s policy principles, which also reference the importance of early intervention and prevention, services being person-centred and trauma-informed, and ensuring that people with lived experience inform policy and practice.

The action plan also provides a definition of ending homelessness; making homelessness rare, brief and unrepeated:

**Rare:** People are prevented from becoming homeless.

**Brief:** People who do become homeless can move into a settled home as quickly as possible, with minimal time in temporary accommodation.

**Unrepeated:** People do not experience multiple episodes of homelessness.

The plan contains a number of actions, derived from the recommendations of the Homelessness Action Group. The first section is dedicated to transforming the homelessness system in Wales, with a

particular focus on supporting the transition to rapid rehousing, which is also referenced in the Programme for Government<sup>6</sup>.

Rapid rehousing aims to make sure that when people become homeless, they spend as little time in temporary housing as possible and move quickly into a settled home. This will be a huge challenge, as there are still 7,500 people in temporary accommodation<sup>7</sup> due to the pandemic and we need a significant increase in truly affordable housing. We also need to provide the right support, including mental health and substance use services. The commitment to rapid rehousing also includes reference to expanding Housing First in Wales and maintaining fidelity to the Housing First principles.

Another action commits to legislative reform, which could include reducing the legal barriers to accessing housing. Factors such as whether someone is in a priority group, has a local connection to that

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<sup>6</sup> <https://gov.wales/programme-government>

<sup>7</sup> <https://gov.wales/homelessness-accommodation-provision-and-rough-sleeping-january-2022>

area, or is regarded as having made themselves homeless intentionally are likely to be considered as part of this work. Legislation could also address housing allocations, evictions, and extending homelessness prevention duties to a wider range of public bodies.

Unsurprisingly, there is an action dedicated to increasing housing supply, availability, and accessibility in both the social housing and private rented sectors. The re-elected Welsh Labour Government has made a commitment to building 20,000 low carbon social homes during this Senedd term, and there are plans to expand the Private Sector Leasing Scheme<sup>8</sup> to increase the availability of private rented properties for people leaving homelessness.

Another action focuses on developing a resilient and valued workforce. This pandemic has highlighted the amazing contribution of homelessness and housing support workers, who have protected and cared for people in very challenging circumstances. However, we know that their pay and recognition does not reflect this, with wages being squeezed over the past decade. Support workers also face huge challenges and trauma in their daily work and do not always have access to the psychological support they need. We have been very clear that this needs to change and are pleased to see an action dedicated to this.

The action plan commits to assertive outreach approaches<sup>9</sup> across Wales, recognising the importance of a persistent, person-centred approach to engaging with people who have experienced long-term homelessness and may have low levels of trust in services.

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8 <https://gov.wales/leasing-scheme-wales-guidance>

9 [https://www.cymorthcymru.org.uk/files/8615/7130/0502/Assertive\\_Outreach\\_Principles\\_ENG\\_Final.pdf](https://www.cymorthcymru.org.uk/files/8615/7130/0502/Assertive_Outreach_Principles_ENG_Final.pdf)

The plan also promises to strengthen housing support services, recognising that putting a roof over someone's head is just one piece of the jigsaw. This includes traditional tenancy support, provided by Cymorth's members, and multi-agency support from a range of public services such as mental health and substance use services. This is being supported by £166 million annual funding for housing support services and health funding for services working with people experiencing co-occurring homelessness, mental health and substance use issues.

The next set of actions focus on prevention and include references to reducing poverty and adverse childhood experiences<sup>10</sup>, which research has shown to increase the likelihood of experiencing homelessness. There is also a focus on early intervention, identifying young people at risk of homelessness much earlier, and reviewing family mediation services to ensure that young people across Wales can access support in order to resolve conflict and continue living at home, if that is the right option for them.

This section also commits to working with other public services to prevent homelessness for groups of people who are at greater risk. This includes preventing people from becoming homeless when they leave the care system, hospital, prison or the armed forces. There are also actions focused on improving services for people with mental health, neuro-developmental and/or substance use issues. These actions have been developed with the health department of the Welsh Government and are reflected in the mental health and substance use delivery plans for Wales.

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10 <https://phw.nhs.wales/files/aces/voices-of-those-with-lived-experiences-of-homelessness-and-adversity-in-wales-informing-prevention-and-response-2019/>

The final set of actions include some overarching themes, such as developing a homelessness outcomes framework, which will enable us to monitor progress towards our goal of ending homelessness in Wales. This is accompanied by a commitment to reviewing data collection, which is critical to understanding the extent of homelessness in Wales, how to respond to it, and how to measure progress.

The penultimate action promises to establish a communication programme to reduce stigma and increase understanding of the causes and solutions to homelessness. We know that ending homelessness requires investment in public services and a significant increase in house building in people's communities. Support from the public will be important, and Crisis research<sup>11</sup> has highlighted that we need to increase understanding of these issues. We also want a Wales where people experiencing homelessness are treated with dignity and respect.

The plan ends with one of the most important actions, which we strongly argued for: to empower people with lived experience to influence policy and practice. We provided opportunities for people with lived experience<sup>12</sup> to contribute to the Homelessness Action Group reports and believe passionately that they should continue to be at the heart of policy development. We are delighted to be launching a new *Experts by Experience* project very soon, and will use this to ensure that people with lived experience have their say on how we should end homelessness in Wales.

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11 <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/services-and-interventions/reframing-homelessness-in-the-united-kingdom-a-frameworks-messagememo-2018/>

12 <https://www.cymorthcymru.org.uk/en/news-blog/news/experts-experience-how-we-should-end-homelessness/>

The Welsh Government has already established a series of task and finish groups to start delivering on these actions, and we are looking forward to supporting the transformation over the coming months and years. We cannot underestimate the scale of the challenge ahead of us, but we have to seize this opportunity. Wales has come a long way over the last decade, however we still have so much more to do if we want to end homelessness.

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