

# Ending Homelessness National Advisory Board: Annual Report to Welsh Ministers 2022-23

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Report to Welsh Ministers from the Ending Homelessness  
National Advisory Board

August 2023

## Foreword

As the Ending Homelessness National Advisory Board presents this annual report to the Welsh Government, I'm conscious that this has been a particularly challenging year.

Among other pressures, the soaring cost of living has pushed more and more people into impossible circumstances, leaving them with no other option but to present to the local authority as homeless.

There is no doubt that this has been a tough year for everyone who is working so hard to end homelessness under such difficult circumstances, including those in local authorities, the third sector and policy makers at the Welsh Government.

It was fantastic to see the adoption of the "no one left out" approach in Wales during the pandemic. Services across the country rallied together, seeking to support those who had nowhere to go when the world was being told to "stay home." It's commendable to see that, as a nation, Wales is committed to moving forward with this approach post-pandemic – a commitment sealed through the development of the Welsh Government's five-year Ending Homelessness Action Plan in 2021.

Since that time, we've faced a multitude of challenges – the cost of living crisis, the impact of the war in Ukraine, and a rise in rents and mortgages – have all led to an increase in the numbers of people seeking homelessness support. This year 9,228 households were threatened with homelessness in Wales – that's a 27% increase on last year.<sup>1</sup>

All this comes at a time when Wales faces significant barriers to increasing its supply of housing to match demand. Among other challenges, new and stricter targets on phosphate pollution in rivers have impacted progress on new builds across the country, as well as rising building costs, difficulties in accessing building materials following on from Brexit and obstacles in planning processes.

Without a settled and secure home to move to, many people are left staying in unsuitable temporary accommodation for long periods of time. Statistics show that on 30 May this year, 10,872 individuals were staying in temporary accommodation across Wales.<sup>2</sup> Behind these statistics there are many people who are struggling without access to basic facilities, people whose lives are left in limbo. The impact of long stays in temporary accommodation is devastating and traumatic, often affecting people's mental health as well as their ability to work and generally move forward with their lives.

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<sup>11</sup> See Welsh Government Statistics, "[Homelessness: April 2021 to March 2022 | GOV.WALES](#)" published July 2022.

<sup>2</sup> See Welsh Government Statistics, "Homelessness accommodation provision and rough sleeping: May2023," published July 2023.

Frontline workers are facing unprecedented pressure from increased workloads, stretched budgets and the emotional load that comes with rising numbers of homelessness presentations. This year we have heard powerful accounts of the strain faced by our vital and dedicated homelessness workforce. And we know that the Welsh Government is facing increased urgency to find new policy solutions during a time of financial strain.

It is precisely because we face these challenges that – now, more than ever – we must not lose sight of the goal we all share to create a breakthrough response to homelessness, based on the principles of prevention and rapid rehousing.

That is why I am proud to chair the Ending Homelessness National Advisory Board. This group of professionals have joined together from across sectors bringing their different expertise and views to the table – all with the common aim of being an independent and expert voice advising the Welsh Government to help ensure that everyone has a place to call home.

I am also immensely grateful to those who have given their time and energy to the task and finish groups established by the board. It is through these groups that the board is able to take detailed and deep dives into specialist areas and seek direction in recommending next steps both for the Welsh Government and for the board.

Indeed, the recommendations within this report - particularly on the need to ensure gaps identified within our housing profile in Wales are effectively being met at a strategic planning level - seek to lay crucial foundations for developing the genuinely affordable housing supply so desperately needed across the nation.

We remain committed to ensuring people can move into settled homes at the earliest opportunity under the rapid rehousing approach but given the current climate and pressures on the system, progress in this area is has not been on target. It will be crucial to secure a renewed drive and approach that spans across local government departments to ensure the ambition to shift to the rapid rehousing approach is realised.

The board's recommendations around supporting frontline services and staff will also be essential as we continue to navigate through these difficult times of unprecedented pressure on our housing support services.

As we reach the mid-point of the Welsh Government's five-year Ending Homelessness Action Plan, we hope this report from the Board will assist in reflecting upon the many areas where progress has been made, whilst also acknowledging and taking stock of arising risks and the actions needed to mitigate them as the Welsh Government plans its next steps towards delivering against its plan to end homelessness in Wales.

The year ahead will, no doubt, be another challenging one with much work to be done, but the commitment of the board to move forward and assist in this journey remains firm.

- **Matt Downie, Chair of the Ending Homelessness National Advisory Board and CEO of Crisis.**

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## 1. About the Ending Homelessness National Advisory Board

The Ending Homelessness National Advisory Board (previously known as the Housing Support National Advisory Board) was established to provide cross sector and independent advice to the Minister for Climate Change on progress made towards preventing homelessness in Wales and provide advice on effective housing support solutions. As such, the Board includes membership from across third sector, local authority, social housing and the private rented sector. In recognition that both the impact of homelessness and the key to its prevention spans wider than traditional housing services, the board also includes representation from social services, the police, HMPPS, Health Boards, and Public Health Wales.

The Board meets quarterly and discusses progress made against the Welsh Government's Ending Homelessness Action Plan, as well as enablers and blockers to its delivery. In addition, the board discusses arising topical matters, such as housing supply and developments with the Housing Support Grant.

A number of task and finish groups have been established, which focus on specific areas of work and report to wider board. These groups include:

- **The homeless workforce.** This group seeks to ensure that, across Wales, homelessness support services attract and retain a talented workforce with the specialist skills needed to carry out the work and the challenges it presents.
- **Outcomes Framework.** This group aims to develop new and robust outcome frameworks, which focus on accountability and partnership working in ending homelessness.
- **Rapid Rehousing.** This group seeks to assist the Welsh Government in its progress with adopting the rapid rehousing approach.
- **Health and Homelessness.** This group aims to consider the role that health services can play in supporting the Welsh Government's agenda to end homelessness.
- **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and Homelessness.** This group seeks to ensure that the needs of those with protected characteristics are considered within the Welsh Government's work to make homelessness in Wales rare, brief and unrepeatable.

Between the discussions at board level and the deeper dives into specialist areas through the task and finish groups, the Ending Homelessness National Advisory Board seeks to provide expert and independent advice to the Minister.

## 2. Introduction to the Board's Annual Report

The Ending Homelessness National Advisory Board and its associated Task and Finish Groups play a key role in advising on progress made against the Welsh Government's high level [Ending Homelessness Action Plan](#).<sup>3</sup>

This five-year plan commits the Welsh Government to 16 actions, each of which fall within the following three categories:

1. Transformation of the homelessness system
2. Prevention
3. Overarching Support.

As we reach the mid-way point in the lifespan of the Ending Homeless Action Plan, this report serves to highlight where progress has been made within the above areas, but also to acknowledge where further progress is needed. For this reason, our report is structured under the same three headings.

This report summarises the fundamental areas of discussion over the past year – both at board level and within our dedicated Task and Finish Groups. It identifies enabling factors that will assist progress on the Ending Homelessness Action Plan, while also highlighting risks that, if unaddressed, could threaten the progress that has been made. To this end the report makes a number of recommendations for the Minister's consideration. These recommendations have come directly from the task and finish groups, as well as from the board's discussions and are summarised at the end of the report. We ask the Welsh Government to take on board these recommendations as it continues on its journey to ensure homelessness in Wales becomes rare, brief and unrepeatable.

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<sup>3</sup> Welsh Government, *Ending homelessness in Wales: a high level action plan 2021 to 2026*, 2021.

### **3. Transformation of the homelessness system**

#### **3.1. Rapid Rehousing**

The call for a transformational shift towards a Rapid Rehousing approach is at the foundation of the Welsh Government's Ending Homelessness Action Plan. This is an internationally recognised approach in which people experiencing homelessness access secure and settled housing as quickly as possible. Under this approach, there is no requirement to demonstrate "housing readiness," rather any support needs are addressed in tandem with providing mainstream housing.

The Welsh Government's action plan recognised that this transformational shift in practice and culture would take a number of years to achieve but set out that all local authorities in Wales were to publish local Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans by the end of September 2022. These plans were to establish a direction for local authorities to move away from reliance on temporary accommodation and towards a rapid rehousing model, carefully considering local housing need.

The board is aware that a number of local authorities missed the deadline for submitting the Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan (RRTP). At the time of writing 4 out of 22 local authorities have yet to submit a first draft of the plan. A number of others have submitted a first drafts of the plan to the Welsh Government but are still working on the detail prior to publishing them.

The board recognises that local authority housing departments have been under significant and increased strain since the deadline for these plans was set. The increased cost of living, rising mortgage rates and the impact of the war in Ukraine have all impacted on the number of homelessness presentations and, in turn, upon the capacity of housing teams to be involved in drafting these plans. While in this sense, it is predictable that not all local authorities have been able to submit their RRTP, it is nevertheless, disappointing too - long-term strategic planning and the transition to rapid rehousing is key to moving out of crisis mode. We must see urgent action in moving forward with rapid rehousing plans, ensuring that the remaining local authorities are supported to submit their plans. Where plans have been submitted, it will be imperative that these are analysed and continuously improved in quality, with best practice and shared learning driving this agenda forward in Wales.

The board remains clear that, despite the challenges, moving towards a rapid rehousing approach must be a top priority – and a priority that must be shared across local authority departments. The long-term shift to a rapid rehousing approach is significant and requires clear commitment and co-ordination across a range of local authority departments, including housing teams, but also planning departments, finance and social services. The delay in publishing these plans is also indicative of the need to establish greater understanding and buy-in at a corporate and political level. The board believes that bold action is needed in this area to secure corporate ownership of rapid rehousing – without it, we cannot achieve the cultural drive required for this new approach.

The board's Rapid Rehousing Task and Finish group has also been examining the other barriers which need to be resolved in order to progress with the Rapid

Rehousing approach, including the significant and ongoing issues in supply of housing stock. The difficulties in supply of housing across the country is inextricably connected to the slowed pace at which the rapid rehousing agenda is moving forward. For this reason, the group's recommendations span across both rapid rehousing and wider approaches to supply (see section on supply on page 9). In relation to Rapid Rehousing, the group has reflected that the missed deadlines for transition plans demonstrate the need for greater investment and newly defined timeframes, including clearly identified points to review progress made.

Given the scale of the transformation required, the group also considers that a long-term support programme is required to assist local authorities in this transition. In particular, the group has discussed the need for the Welsh Government to support the development of tools and mechanisms to share best practice, including a review of the submitted Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans and the development of networks for Rapid Rehousing Strategic Co-ordinators and other key partners. The group also discussed whether the Welsh Government might assist local authorities by funding change officers to work on the shift towards a Rapid Rehousing approach.

In addition, the task and finish group has identified that there is a general lack of awareness and understanding around the rapid rehousing agenda. As such, over the past year, the task and finish group has been working on a Rapid Rehousing Communications plan. The plan, which focuses on raising awareness among housing professionals and local council elected members, is accompanied by a number of ready-to-use resources, including FAQs, standard presentations and explainers, all of which have been endorsed by Welsh Government and key partners.

Despite the development of these tools, the task and finish group consider that there remains a lack of awareness of rapid rehousing at a local authority leadership level. As such, it has discussed the need for complementing these existing resources with a further awareness raising programme.

Furthermore, as is highlighted later in the supply section of this report, the group reflected that there should be a focus on ensuring that various plans and strategies (including the Local Housing Market Assessments) are all effectively aligning and working towards to common goal of rapid rehousing.

**Recommendation 1: That the Welsh Government works with local authorities to establish clear and defined timetables for delivering local RRTPs, as well as a national transition target date for the Rapid Rehousing approach. This date should be balanced against the unprecedented pressure services are under and include points to review progress. It will also be crucial that the Welsh Government seeks to increase support to local authorities to assist in delivery of the transition to rapid rehousing. This could include a programme of learning as well as funding for new local authority change officers to assist with developing the plans.**



**Recommendation 2: That the Welsh Government should work alongside the board’s Task and Finish group on Rapid Rehousing to secure senior local and national leadership behind the ambition to end homelessness in Wales.**

### **3.2. Legislative reform**

The National Plan to End Homelessness states that the Welsh Government will “*evaluate existing homelessness prevention legal provision and review areas to improve the law, to maintain the ‘no-one left out’ approach taken through the pandemic and to ensure that all public services are working in partnership to prevent homelessness.*”

Over the past year, the Welsh Government has introduced interim legislation to ensure that those who are street homeless are considered to be in priority need. This was a very welcome move that will ensure that, while longer term legislative change is underway, those at the most acute end of homelessness are prioritised for support.

In the meantime, an Expert Review Panel has been formed to review legislation and make recommendations on providing a longer-term framework for ending homelessness.<sup>4</sup> Chaired by Suzanne Fitzpatrick and convened by the homeless charity Crisis, the Expert Review Panel includes representatives from the third sector, local government, housing providers, academia and legal expertise.

The board has heard how the panel has been ensuring that the voices of those with lived experience have been shaping the panel’s discussions at every stage. Cymorth Cymru has consulted with more than 300 experts by experience as part of the project. In addition, the work of the panel has been informed by wider stakeholder engagement including a series of online stakeholder sessions run by Crisis, direct meetings with relevant stakeholders, a working group on homelessness convened by Community Housing Cymru, a local authority reference group organised by the Welsh Government and Cymorth Cymru’s Frontline Network Wales.

The board has received regular updates on the work of the panel and understands that it is due to make its recommendations to the Welsh Government in early Autumn. The board anticipates that the Expert Review Panel will be making wide-ranging and bold proposals for change - both within traditional homelessness legislation and more broadly. For example, the panel is looking closely at how the long-established legal tests of priority need, intentionality and local connection operate and is considering whether these tests could be abolished or adapted in the future. This type of change would represent significant step changes in ways of working, as do the calls for wider collaborative working across the public sector to

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<sup>4</sup> Written Statement: Establishing an Expert Review Panel for homelessness legislation in Wales, March 2022, available at [Written Statement: Establishing an Expert Review Panel for homelessness legislation in Wales \(30 March 2022\) | GOV.WALES](#)

facilitate early identification and prevention of homelessness – particularly in relation to health and social care.

Ensuring that the Welsh Government acts swiftly upon the recommendations of the Expert Review Panel and utilises this expertise to move forward with a white paper that encapsulates this ambitious vision for change will be crucial.

The board acknowledges the significant role that legislative change has to play in setting the direction needed to shift cultural ways of working to help end homelessness in Wales. However, it also recognises the position of the Expert Review Panel that investment and resourcing to support legislative reform will be key to securing successful and effective implementation.

**Recommendation 3: That the Welsh Government considers the recommendations made by the Expert Review Panel in the autumn and acts swiftly to introduce a white paper which reflects on the Panel’s report. The Board will continue to take interest in this work and to advise on the progress of legislative developments, including reflecting on the Panel’s call for changes to be adequately resourced.**

### **3.3. Strengthen Housing Support Services**

The Ending Homelessness Action Plan outlines a commitment for the Welsh Government and local authorities to *“ensure that funding and commissioning frameworks ensure comprehensive tenancy sustainment services are in place, designed to respond proactively to issues, as they arise, that could lead to people becoming homeless.”*

The Housing Support Grant (HSG) is central to funding homelessness support and prevention services across the country, supporting around 60,000 people a year through refuges, supported accommodation and tenancy support services.<sup>5</sup> Members of the board have raised concern that, under the recent budget settlement, allocations to the HSG remain the same as last year at £167 million. The board is concerned that while the HSG allocation remains static, costs associated with running services (for example energy costs) are soaring. This presents the very real risk that, in order to keep running, service contracts will be reviewed, rationalised and reduced.

This risk to services comes at a time when homelessness presentations are rising (27% higher than last year)<sup>6</sup> and demand for these services are increased.

In addition to the risk presented to services, members of the board have also shared concerns over the impact of the static HSG on the salaries of frontline workers. Research conducted last year by Cymorth Cymru demonstrates that frontline staff seeking to help homeless households were themselves facing the prospect of

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<sup>5</sup> Senedd Local Government and Housing Committee, *Homelessness*, March 2023, page 39. Available [here](#).

<sup>6</sup> Welsh Government, Homelessness Statistics, available [here](#).

homelessness. Cymorth Cymru's survey of more than 650 frontline workers, showed that 44% were struggling to pay their bills.<sup>7</sup>

While the board has welcomed the Welsh Government's recent campaign to encourage workers into housing support services, with frontline wages often unable to compete with other local employment opportunities, such as supermarkets, the sector faces significant risks in retaining our frontline workforce.

The board acknowledges that the Welsh Government has been working with a particularly tough budget this financial year, but to be facing these risks amidst an ongoing cost of living crisis when presentations of homelessness are rising is of particular concern. It will be essential that, as has been stressed by the Local Government and Housing Committee within its inquiry into homelessness, the Welsh Government seeks to uplift the HSG at the earliest possible opportunity.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, it will be imperative that the Welsh Government keeps under review the impact on service contracts, committing to take action should service delivery drop. Failure to do so will severely compromise the Ending Homelessness Action Plan. This will, of course, be an area which the board will continue to monitor.

**Recommendation 4: That the Welsh Government keeps under review the impact of the HSG funding levels on service contracts and the ability to deliver key support and homelessness prevention services, increasing the HSG at the earliest opportunity.**

### 3.4. Housing Supply

As is identified within the Welsh Government's Ending Homelessness Action Plan, the need to ensure housing supply matches demand is intricately linked to ensuring homelessness in Wales is rare, brief and unrepeatable. As such, the plan committed the Welsh Government to "*increase housing supply, availability and accessibility in the social and private sector.*"

Consideration of progress made against this objective has been central to the discussions both at board level and within the board's Task and Finish Group on Rapid Rehousing. The board considers that addressing the gaps in housing supply lies at the heart of addressing problems with homelessness in Wales. Securing the affordable housing needed to match the needs and levels of individuals presenting a homeless is also key in unlocking the potential to fully realise the ambition to move to a rapid rehousing approach.

At board level, members have heard of the multitude of barriers the Welsh Government has faced in meeting its target to build 20,000 new social homes. Such barriers have included the introduction of phosphate targets by Natural Resources

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<sup>7</sup> Cymorth Cymru, *Struggles from the Frontline*, September 2022. Available at <https://www.cymorthcymru.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Struggles-from-the-Frontline-Eng.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Senedd Local Government and Housing Committee, *Homelessness*, March 2023, Recommendation 10, page 41. Available [here](#).

Wales which has brought an estimated 1,600 new build homes to a standstill and the impact of Brexit on the availability and cost of building materials, which is estimated to have affected 3,400 new homes.<sup>9</sup>

These challenges are reflected within the latest statistics on housing supply in Wales, which show a decrease in the annual delivery of new affordable houses. In 2021-22, 2,676 additional affordable housing units were delivered across Wales, which was a 26% (927 units) decrease on the previous year and 9% less than in 2019-20.<sup>10</sup>

The board is aware that the Welsh Government is also focusing beyond new builds and looking at additional homes through various schemes such as the Empty Homes Grant, Wales Stalled Sites Fund and the Leasing Scheme Wales.

In addition, the Welsh Government invested £79 million into Transitional Accommodation Capital Programme in 2023/24, which seeks to assist local authorities in transforming unused properties, remodelling or converting existing buildings and creating medium-term housing – bringing forward 936 more homes.

While the board recognises the challenges that the Welsh Government is facing, it is nonetheless crucial to keep driving forward a step-change in increasing the supply of housing that people can afford. A central part of this discussion - both at a board level and within the board's task and finish group on Rapid Rehousing, has been the need to develop a range of types of accommodation in order to match population needs.

Ensuring applicants are placed in homes that are suitable to their needs is a fundamental part of ensuring that an individual's experience with homelessness is unrepeated. Despite this, it is widely acknowledged that the housing stock in Wales lacks diversity. For this reason, the board is keen to increase its focus on assessing the data and information that is currently available on housing supply and to work with the Welsh Government consider how this can be utilised and expanded to ensure there is a clear and detailed profile of the existing housing stock in Wales. It will also be important to carefully consider the extent to which planning strategies are effectively interconnecting with Rapid Rehousing Plans to fill the existing gaps in housing supply according to need.

Meanwhile the Rapid Rehousing Task and Finish Group has held similar discussions as adequate and varied housing stock is central to the delivery of the rapid rehousing approach. Similar to the board, the group has considered whether local authority plans and strategies are effectively aligning to address the evidenced needs of homelessness locally. In particular, the group is keen that consideration be given as to how connections between Local Housing Market Assessments (LHMAs) and meeting the housing needs of homeless households are working and might be

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<sup>9</sup> Presentation by Stuart Fitzgerald, Deputy Director of Homes and Places at the Welsh Government, to Ending Homelessness National Advisory Board, May 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Welsh Government, Affordable housing provision: April 2021 to March 2022, published February 2023. Available at [Affordable housing provision: April 2021 to March 2022 | GOV.WALES](https://gov.wales/affordable-housing-provision-april-2021-to-march-2022)

strengthened, driving the supply forward accordingly. The group is also particularly keen to take a deeper dive into what mechanisms might be available to drive forward the supply of single occupancy homes, the lack of supply of which, is known to be a common problem across Wales.

The board is clear that the focus on improving housing supply and ensuring full alignment of planning strategies with the needs of homeless households is a key priority. Subsequently, recommendations 5 and 6 to the Welsh Government are of utmost importance and will also be a core area of focus for the board in the new year.

The task and finish group has also focussed discussion on the need to increase understanding of allocation to social homes, acknowledging the recently commissioned research by Welsh Government, WLGA and CHC into social housing allocations and suggesting that this research be expanded in order to help take forward key learnings on allocations to homeless households. The group considers there is a need to collate ongoing and detailed data in order to build a deeper national understanding of broader population need for housing and accessibility, including supply, evictions and allocations.

In addition, both the board and the Rapid Rehousing Task and Finish group have considered the role of the private rented sector in increasing the availability of affordable homes.

Board members shared concerns that the gap between LHA and the cost of renting on the private market is making renting inaccessible to many. A recent report by the Chartered Institute of Housing Cymru indicated that 69% of private renters who received housing benefit in Wales had a rent shortfall.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, according to the Bevan Foundation, only 32 properties advertised for rent (1.2% of those on the market) in Wales between February 3 and February 17 were available at LHA rates.<sup>12</sup> The board notes and is supportive of the recent recommendation by the Local Government and Housing Committee that the Welsh Government continues to seek an increase in LHA rates from Westminster.<sup>13</sup> The board will seek to make similar representations too.

Meanwhile, the task and finish group considered whether the Leasing Scheme Wales, which seeks to encourage private landlords to sign up to leasing their properties as social housing through the local authority, is operating as effectively as it could. At present, 15 of 22 local authorities in Wales are signed up to the scheme and 105 properties were brought into the scheme over the past year.

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<sup>11</sup> Chartered Institute of Housing Cymru, *Cost of Living Crisis: A spotlight on Benefits and Disability*, October 2022, page 3. Available at [0508-cost-of-living-crisis-volfour-v1.pdf \(cih.org\)](#).

<sup>12</sup> Bevan Foundation, *Wales' Housing Crisis: Local Housing Allowance and the private rental market in Wales*, 2023. Available at [Wales' Housing Crisis: Local Housing Allowance and the private rental market in Wales, Winter 2023 - Bevan Foundation](#).

<sup>13</sup> Senedd Local Government and Housing Committee, *Homelessness*, March 2023, Recommendation 16 on page 57. Available at [Homelessness \(senedd.wales\)](#).

The Task and Finish Group also discussed concerns that landlords may be leaving the private rented sector. The NRLA's Landlord Confidence Index revealed that landlords in Wales had the lowest confidence rating since the index began in 2019, citing the newly introduced changes within the Renting Homes Wales Act as the reason for the low confidence score.<sup>14</sup> The group discussed a number of possible actions to assist in encouraging private landlords to remain in the market. This included consideration of whether the Welsh Government should review the consequences of the Renting Homes Wales Act for landlords.

**Recommendation 5: That the Welsh Government should ensure housing supply across Wales is profiled in sufficient detail, identifying where there are gaps in the types of housing provision needed to address the varying needs of the current and predicted homeless population in Wales. The Welsh Government should work with the board to ensure that Local Housing Market Assessments (LHMAs), Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans, alongside other strategies and mechanisms, are collaborating effectively to address the housing supply issues identified.**

**Recommendation 6: That the Welsh Government should work with the board to identify, scope and then invest in better quality data and research on homelessness, supply, evictions and allocations to inform evidence-based decision making. This could include a programme of learning and activity to take forward findings from the recent research on allocations.**

**Recommendation 7: That the Welsh Government, alongside the board, continue to call upon the UK Government to unfreeze LHA rates.**

**Recommendation 8: The Welsh Government should increase access to affordable rental properties by working with landlords to remove barriers and encouraging private landlords to remain in the market.**

### **3.5. Workforce**

The Welsh Government's Ending Homelessness Action Plan commits to "develop a resilient and valued workforce recognised for their expertise" and identifies the Board's task and finish group on workforce as central to this work.

Over the past year, the board's workforce task and finish group has considered how, across Wales, we can ensure that homelessness support services attract and retain a talented workforce with the specialist skills needed to carry out the work and the challenges it presents. In order to achieve this, the group has reflected that there are five areas for consideration:

- a) Support systems for staff
- b) Remuneration
- c) Staff skills, qualifications and accreditation
- d) Best Practice and Recruitment

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<sup>14</sup> NRLA, The Landlord Confidence Index Q1 2023. Available at [Landlord Confidence Index \(LCI\) No.17: 2023 Q1 | NRLA](#).

e) Commissioning.

**a. Support systems for staff**

It is well recognised that working on the frontline of homelessness can be emotionally challenging. In November, the workforce task and finish group presented a powerful report to the board, emphasising that the psychological impact of supporting people in the most traumatic of situations can be heightened where frontline workers feel unable to assist an applicant. Given the current rise in homelessness presentations and the lack of housing supply to match, staff are under particularly high levels of emotional strain at present. Indeed, a recent survey of local authority housing staff conducted by the Chartered Institute of Housing Cymru, found that 75% of respondents felt that their mental well-being had decreased since January 2020, citing workload pressures as a key factor.<sup>15</sup>

The group's report also drew on evidence that the homelessness support sector often attracts staff who have experienced trauma in their own lives. It highlighted that working in such a high-trauma environment can bring unique psychological challenges for such staff members.

The report identified that being placed repeatedly under high emotional strain and working consistently with people who are experiencing trauma can also lead to poor health among the workforce, high turn-over and burnout. With burnout comes the additional risk that those working in support systems can become less empathetic and welcoming to applicants.

The task and finish group welcomed areas of good practice where staff members were supported by wellbeing packages such as the fostering of regular reflective practice, staff wellbeing training days and to free confidential service offering various levels of mental health support (e.g. Canopi, a service for NHS workers). The group emphasised the value in workplaces whereby staff who were exposed to a traumatic event were able to access reflective practice and support and called for such packages to be more routinely available to housing support staff across the country.

**Recommendation 9: That the Welsh Government acknowledge that a valued homelessness workforce, working in very challenging traumatic situations must have specialist support services available for staff to access as needed. As part of this acknowledgement, the Welsh Government should commission a review of the availability of specialist trauma support services across Wales to identify any gaps in supply; seeking to act on reported shortfalls within an agreed timescale.**

**Recommendation 10: That the Welsh Government ensures there is equity of access to mental health support for staff working in the homelessness sector, regardless of the size or financial position of their organisation. For example, this might be achieved by considering the expansion of reflective practice and**

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<sup>15</sup> Chartered Institute of Housing Cymru, Joining the Dots Part 3, published 2022. Available at [0447-ttc-joining-the-dots-3-eng-v3.pdf](https://www.cih.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/0447-ttc-joining-the-dots-3-eng-v3.pdf).

**of the Canopi services available to NHS workers to also support staff in housing services.**

### **b. Remuneration**

The board has heard numerous concerns that low pay within the housing support sector is driving skilled workers out of the sector and into lower skilled, better paying work elsewhere. Indeed, Cymorth Cymru's report *Struggles from the Frontline*, published in September 2022, stated that of the frontline workers surveyed, 70% had stopped engaging in social activities, 44% were struggling to pay bills, 11% were struggling to pay rent and 7% had started using food banks.<sup>16</sup>

The Workforce Task and Finish group has helped to advise the Welsh Government on the commissioning of independent factual research on pay levels within the sector, including a benchmarking exercise within the homelessness sector and comparative roles outside of the sector. This work is ongoing, and recommendations will be considered by the Ending Homelessness National Advisory Board in the winter.

**Recommendation 11: That the Welsh Government utilises the recently commissioned independent research on pay levels in the sector to inform future budget setting, acting swiftly to ensure that Housing Support Grant contract holders have the resources to pay staff at comparative rates to those undertaking similar roles outside the sector, reflecting the skill and complexity of job roles.**

### **c. Staff skills, qualifications and accreditation**

In addition to boosting staff skillset, ensuring that the Housing Support Grant workforce has access to professional development and qualifications can be a key factor in securing job-satisfaction and higher rates of staff retention. As such, the Workforce Task and Finish group has started work to test appetite for specialist qualifications and accreditation within homelessness support. This initial survey demonstrated clear support for this approach, with 66% of respondents in favour.

Following on from this initial survey, the group has begun consulting with managers to scope a qualification specification and intends to continue this work in the new year. These qualifications are primarily being developed for the Housing Support Grant workforce, but the intention is that others working within homelessness may also benefit.

**Recommendation 12: That the Welsh Government acknowledges the need for a bespoke qualification and accreditation framework for the Homelessness Sector and commissions the development of such a framework. The Welsh Government should work with the Board's Workforce Task and Finish Group**

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<sup>16</sup> Cymorth Cymru, *Struggles from the Frontline*, September 2022. Available at <https://www.cymorthcymru.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Struggles-from-the-Frontline-Eng.pdf>



**to set clear timeframes for the commissioning and subsequent implementation of this framework. The framework should recognise the professional standards staff work to as well as the specialist skillset required in these roles.**

#### **d. Best Practice and Recruitment**

It is to be noted that, over the past year, the Welsh Government has developed and run a public communications campaign, seeking to attract new people into the homelessness workforce. The board is supportive of this communication campaign, but as highlighted earlier, is mindful of the risk that this work could be undermined by the need to invest in HSG given the pressure that services are under at present and the low wages of frontline staff.

#### **e. Commissioning**

In recognition of the role that commissioning plays in securing consistent and high standards for the workforce, the task and finish group intends to commence work this summer on developing best practice commissioning guidance for local authorities.

Such guidance could be particularly valuable within the current context, as under higher service delivery costs and retained levels of HSG funding, the group is aware that commissioning contracts is an area under significant pressure at present.

**Recommendation 13: That the Welsh Government agree in principle to develop updated best practice commissioning guidance for HSG services procured by Local Authorities. Such guidance should facilitate appropriate staff wages as well as paid time for training, reflective practice and access to specialist interventions as a result of managing traumatic incidents at work.**

## 4. Prevention

The Ending Homelessness Action Plan sets out a series of specific actions seeking to work on prevention. This includes working to support specific groups at particular risk of homelessness, including those with adverse childhood experiences, those with substance misuse issues, neurodivergent people and those experiencing mental health difficulties.

As highlighted earlier in this report, the board has been receiving updates from the Expert Review Panel on its work reviewing homelessness legislation in Wales. The board has heard that the panel's discussions are rooted within the principle of early prevention. It is anticipated that the panel's final report, due in early autumn, will include a range of proposals for legislative change to aid a cultural shift towards early intervention and multi-agency working seeking to prevent homelessness wherever possible. It will be essential that the Welsh Government seeks to consider the recommendations of the panel and move swiftly towards a white paper to drive forward this ambitious prevention agenda.

The board has also been in the process of setting up two significant task and finish groups – one on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and homelessness and the other on health and homelessness. These groups are in the early stages of development and will constitute a crucial role in the board's focus for 2023/24.

Given the Welsh Government's commitment within its [Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan](#) to "*reflect ethnic minority people's voice and representation in the transformation of homelessness services*<sup>17</sup>," the newly established Equality, Diversity and Inclusion group will focus initially on race and homelessness. It seeks to consider race and homelessness challenges, outlining solutions that are drawn from expertise and lived experience. The group also intends to ensure that policy developments overseen by the board embed anti-racism.

The board has also recently established another task and finish group, called the National Strategic Health Inclusion Group. This group includes representation from all Health Boards, local authority, Welsh Government, housing, Public Health Wales, Royal College of Physicians, mental health and substance misuse. The group seeks to support strategic coordination of public health and health care service provision in order to reduce inequalities and improve health outcomes for people experiencing homelessness, and other population groups who have difficulties accessing mainstream healthcare.

The National Strategic Health Inclusion group will consider improved access to healthcare for homeless households, including building upon an existing programme of work on Primary Care Pan Clusters. This programme seeks to ensure access to inclusive primary care and explores how health support can assist in maintaining tenancies. The programme is aligned to the guidance for integrated health and social

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<sup>17</sup> Welsh Government, Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan, 2022. Available at [https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-06/anti-racist-wales-action-plan\\_0.pdf](https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-06/anti-racist-wales-action-plan_0.pdf), page 84

care published in March 2022 by the [National Institute for Health and Care Excellence](#) (NICE).

The Board looks forward to hearing more from these newly established groups in the new year.

## **5. Overarching support**

### **5.1. Outcomes Framework**

The Ending Homelessness Action plan commits to “develop new Homelessness Outcomes Framework” in order to ensure policies are operating cohesively towards ending homelessness. It also commits “to review and revise data collection to support new outcomes framework.”

The Board established two task and finish groups to co-produce two frameworks – the Housing Support Grant Outcomes Framework and the overarching Ending Homelessness Outcomes Framework. The Board is pleased to report that significant progress has been made in this area over the past year. These frameworks seek to define, measure and report on progress towards preventing and ending homelessness and were co-produced by the Welsh Government in collaboration with the sector.

A new Housing Support Grant Outcomes Framework was introduced in January this year and implemented from April. Members of the Task and Finish group also supported Welsh Government in promoting training ahead of its formal implementation for 1,700 professionals across Wales.

The Strategic Outcomes Task and Finish group has also worked with the Welsh Government to co-produce a new Ending Homelessness Outcomes Framework, consulting on its development and working to refine the outcomes listed. Welsh Government launched a formal consultation<sup>18</sup> on the framework in June, responses to which will be analysed in the autumn.

Given the important role that the Ending Homelessness Outcomes Framework can play in data collection and monitoring to inform continuous service improvement (in conjunction with the now implemented HSG Outcomes Framework), it will be important that the Welsh Government seeks to move swiftly to address consultation feedback later this year.

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<sup>18</sup> See [Ending Homelessness Outcomes Framework | GOV.WALES](#).

## 6. Conclusion

This has been a difficult year. For many, the cost of living crisis and other pressures have left them without a safe space to call home. No one should be put in this position, and yet we are seeing ever-increasing numbers of people facing this traumatic situation.

During times like these where daily pressure on the system is so intense, keeping an eye to longer-term change is both ever-more important and increasingly difficult. Despite these challenges, there has been progress across a number of areas to help shape future delivery. The board is particularly pleased to have seen the delivery of a new Housing Support Grant Outcomes Framework as well as the imminent introduction of the Ending Homelessness Outcomes Framework. These frameworks will play a crucial role in the delivery of our homelessness support systems and their continual improvement.

The board is also pleased to see that the Expert Review Panel has been seeking views from people with lived experience as well as professionals from all corners of the housing sector and beyond to consider practical solutions for improving homelessness legislation. The Welsh Government has taken positive steps in introducing interim legislation to ensure that those who are street homeless are considered a priority need, but it will be important to maintain this momentum and act swiftly on the recommendations of the panel, bringing forward a white paper at the earliest opportunity.

Despite these positive steps forward which will undoubtedly make a difference in the longer term, it should be acknowledged that there have been a multitude of complex challenges arising that have slowed progress and presented ongoing and significant risks to the delivery of the Welsh Government's five-year plan to make homelessness in Wales rare, brief and unrepeatable.

The rising cost of living and the knock-on effects of the war in Ukraine, among other factors have meant that, despite positive action in some key areas since the publication of the Ending Homelessness Action Plan, we have sadly seen an upward trend in the numbers of homeless households facing long stays in temporary accommodation. For many, temporary accommodation provides little more than basic shelter and does not provide people with the stable base needed from which to rebuild their lives.

While homelessness services are needed now more than ever, these services are facing risks themselves as they attempt to navigate increased running costs against static funding levels in the Housing Support Grant. Action is needed to ensure that we retain our skilled frontline workers in these difficult times and to ensure that our services are able to continue to move forward and keep with the pace of homelessness presentations remaining resilient in meeting these challenging circumstances.

The extreme pressure on our homelessness services alongside other contributing factors has also slowed progress towards the Welsh Government's ambition of

transitioning to a model of Rapid Rehousing. The board considers Rapid Rehousing to be essential to ending homelessness in Wales and, in the coming year, we must find ways to push forward and drive the step change needed to progress this approach in the face of the increasingly challenging circumstances. This can only be achieved with greater understanding of the approach across local government departments as well as strengthened strategic collaboration to ensure efforts to increase housing supply are effectively matched to plans for a Rapid Rehousing approach.

As the Welsh Government reaches the halfway point in its plan to end homelessness, it is important to acknowledge the progress made in the journey towards ending homelessness. But it is also time to take stock and establish new routes to help us overcome the challenges that have arisen since the action plan was published. We hope that the recommendations set out within this report will assist the Welsh Government in identifying these next steps.

### **6.1. Next Steps for the Ending Homelessness National Advisory Board**

The work of the board this year will undoubtedly lay the foundations for our drive forward in the coming year. We have seen significant housing challenges over the past year and we know that these challenges will not dissipate without a continued concerted and collaborative effort across the sector.

As we move into 2023/24, it will be imperative that the board continues to provide independent advice to support the Welsh Government in making progress around the recommendations within this report.

We must work together to closely evaluate and address the gaps in housing supply which threaten to undermine the transition towards the rapid rehousing approach. Supporting local authorities in their strategic planning and adoption of rapid rehousing is also crucial, given that this is so fundamental in making homelessness rare, brief and unrepeatable.

We know that services are under immense pressure in these difficult financial times. As such, the board will maintain a careful eye on risks to homelessness services and will also remain committed to our work in ensuring that frontline workers are valued and supported.

The anticipated introduction of the new Ending Homelessness Outcomes Framework will be a welcome step forward that will provide the board with valuable insights and assist in continual service improvement.

The board is also keen to move forward in advising on other areas of the Ending Homelessness Action Plan, taking a closer look at how we can work to prevent homelessness among groups that are known to be at increased risk. The board's newly established task and finish groups on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and on health and homelessness will play a crucial part in this work, but it will also be important to look at other areas where the board can work differently or increase its focus.

The upcoming year will, no doubt be a challenging one, but the board looks forward to continuing its role in advising the Welsh Government and in helping to overcome these challenges so that everyone has a place to call home.

## **Annex: List of Recommendations**

1. That the Welsh Government works with local authorities to establish clear and defined timetables for delivering local RRTPs, as well as a national transition target date for the Rapid Rehousing approach. This date should be balanced against the unprecedented pressure services are under and include points to review progress. It will also be crucial that the Welsh Government seeks to increase support to local authorities to assist in delivery of the transition to rapid rehousing. This could include a programme of learning as well as funding for new local authority change officers to assist with developing the plans.
2. That the Welsh Government should work alongside the board's Task and Finish group on Rapid Rehousing to secure senior local and national leadership behind the ambition to end homelessness in Wales.
3. That the Welsh Government considers the recommendations made by the Expert Review Panel in the autumn and acts swiftly to introduce a white paper which reflects on the Panel's report. The Board will continue to take interest in this work and to advise on the progress of legislative developments, including reflecting on the Panel's call for changes to be adequately resourced.
4. That the Welsh Government keeps under review the impact of the HSG funding levels on service contracts and the ability to deliver key support and homelessness prevention services, increasing the HSG at the earliest opportunity.
5. That the Welsh Government should ensure housing supply across Wales is profiled in sufficient detail, identifying where there are gaps in the types of housing provision needed to address the varying needs of the current and predicted homeless population in Wales. The Welsh Government should work with the board to ensure that Local Housing Market Assessments (LHMAs), Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans, alongside other strategies and mechanisms, are collaborating effectively to address the housing supply issues identified.
6. That the Welsh Government should work with the board to identify, scope and then invest in better quality data and research on homelessness, supply, evictions and allocations to inform evidence-based decision making. This could include a programme of learning and activity to take forward findings from the recent research on allocations.
7. That the Welsh Government, alongside the board, continue to call upon the UK Government to unfreeze LHA rates.
8. The Welsh Government should increase access to affordable rental properties by working with landlords to remove barriers and encouraging private landlords to remain in the market.



9. That the Welsh Government acknowledge that a valued homelessness workforce, working in very challenging traumatic situations must have specialist support services available for staff to access as needed. As part of this acknowledgement, the Welsh Government should commission a review of the availability of specialist trauma support services across Wales to identify any gaps in supply; seeking to act on reported shortfalls within an agreed timescale.
10. That the Welsh Government ensures there is equity of access to mental health support for staff working in the homelessness sector, regardless of the size or financial position of their organisation. For example, this might be achieved by considering the expansion of reflective practice and of the Canopi services available to NHS workers to also support staff in housing services.
11. That the Welsh Government utilises the recently commissioned independent research on pay levels in the sector to inform future budget setting, acting swiftly to ensure that Housing Support Grant contract holders have the resources to pay staff at comparative rates to those undertaking similar roles outside the sector, reflecting the skill and complexity of job roles.
12. That the Welsh Government acknowledges the need for a bespoke qualification and accreditation framework for the Homelessness Sector and commissions the development of such a framework. The Welsh Government should work with the Board's Workforce Task and Finish Group to set clear timeframes for the commissioning and subsequent implementation of this framework. The framework should recognise the professional standards staff work to as well as the specialist skillset required in these roles.
13. That the Welsh Government agree in principle to develop updated best practice commissioning guidance for HSG services procured by Local Authorities. Such guidance should facilitate appropriate staff wages as well as paid time for training, reflective practice and access to specialist interventions as a result of managing traumatic incidents at work.

