

The National Assembly for Wales

# Housing Research Summary

## Rough Sleeping in Wales

From October 1998 to October 1999 Paul Bevan was employed by the Welsh Office and later by the National Assembly for Wales to investigate the incidence and causes of rough sleeping throughout Wales and to advise on effective strategies for assisting rough sleepers. Mr Bevan was employed on secondment from a voluntary organisation working in this field, Newport Action for the Single Homeless.

The work was based on visits to the housing sections of all local authorities and to around fifty other organisations working to help single homeless people in Wales. The report outlines the position in each local authority area and makes a series of recommendations for the National Assembly to consider. Mr Bevan found that:

- It is impossible to establish accurate figures of the numbers of people sleeping rough on any one night, or over the course of a year, due to inherent difficulties in collecting accurate figures, to the different methods used in the surveys undertaken, differences in their timing and their incomplete geographical coverage.
- The combination of factors leading to people sleeping rough are very varied and go far wider than simply a shortage of affordable accommodation. The most important ones are relationship breakdown, poverty, unemployment, mental health problems, drug or alcohol misuse, sexual or physical abuse, and an inability to manage in independent housing.
- Well-informed multi-agency, multi-disciplinary strategies to address single homelessness play a crucial role in ensuring the most effective use of resources and provision of appropriate services, but few Welsh local authorities have such strategies in place.
- The main unmet needs identified by local authorities and homelessness organisations are for more emergency accommodation and good quality affordable housing for single people, resettlement and support services to help people maintain their tenancies, housing advice services and specialist supported accommodation for people with drug or alcohol problems.
- Many single homeless people experience difficulties in registering with General Practitioners and in accessing health care.



## The incidence and causes of rough sleeping

The report finds that surveys of rough sleeping have been undertaken in some parts of Wales, but different survey methods, the timing of surveys, their incomplete coverage and inherent difficulties in collecting accurate figures makes it difficult to establish how many people sleep rough on any one night, or over the course of a year. The evidence indicates most rough sleepers are to be found in the larger towns and cities, but there is clear evidence of rough sleeping in the smaller towns and in some rural areas.

There are numerous reasons why people sleep rough. The precise combination of factors precipitating each person to sleep rough is as unique as the individual themselves, but some common factors can be discerned; relationship breakdown, poverty, unemployment, mental health problems, drug or alcohol misuse, sexual or physical abuse and an inability to manage in independent housing.

## Existing services and single homelessness strategies

The accommodation and support services with most intensive contact with people sleeping rough are in Cardiff, Swansea, Newport, Wrexham and Bangor, with Cardiff and Swansea having the widest range of provision. There is some provision in other towns, such as a direct access scheme in Carmarthen, and soup runs in Caernarfon, Colwyn Bay, Llandudno and Rhyl. As well as year-round night shelters in Cardiff, Swansea, Wrexham and Bangor, there were temporary shelters in Cardiff, Abergavenny, Rhyl

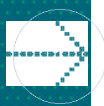
and Bangor over the winter of 1998/99. In Pembrokeshire the local authority will accommodate rough sleepers in its hostels for 'statutorily homeless' people over the winter.

Four of the twenty two local authorities have a written single homelessness strategy, but many others have forums which would be suitable arenas in which to develop such strategies. Well-informed multi-agency, multi-disciplinary strategies to address single homelessness can play a very important role in ensuring the most effective use of resources and provision of appropriate services.

## Gaps in provision and other issues

The main gaps in services identified as being needed by the local authorities and organisations visited were emergency accommodation (often small schemes in a few towns in an authority area), more good quality affordable housing for single people, resettlement and support services to help people to maintain their accommodation, housing advice services, and services (such as supported accommodation) for people with an alcohol or drug misuse problem. Other gaps, in a smaller number of areas, included day centres or drop-in centres for homeless people, bond schemes to help people access private rented accommodation, outreach services to contact rough sleepers, and supported accommodation for homeless people who display behavioural problems or a chaotic lifestyle. The need for more research into rough sleeping was also identified by respondents in eight local authority areas.

As well as deficiencies in the level of services available to single homeless people the report



highlights difficulties that many face in accessing those services that do exist. The main problems uncovered were in registering with General Practitioners and in accessing health care, obtaining help for people experiencing problems in relation to two or more areas of mental health, drug or alcohol misuse, and obtaining help for people with a personality disorder or behavioural problem. Concerns were also expressed as to the low priority given by social services departments to single homeless people. Various difficulties relating to housing and social security benefits were expressed in almost half of the local authority areas. In a smaller number of areas the difficulty of access to social housing for people without a fixed address was highlighted, access to drug rehabilitation was identified as being very slow, and a need for better preparation and support for people being released from prison or leaving local authority care. Respondents in six local authorities without a specific single homelessness strategy felt it important that they should develop one.

### Conclusions and recommendations

One of the main conclusions of the report is that rough sleeping and single homelessness often involves factors much wider than housing issues alone, and that the provision of forms of support which are tailored to individual need is crucial.

The report makes thirty seven wide-ranging recommendations. Many cover the need for additional accommodation and support services for single homeless people and people sleeping rough, and as such have significant financial implications. However, others involve less of a financial commitment, such as the development

of a national homelessness strategy complemented by single homeless strategies in all local authorities. Each local authority should have a 'champion' to ensure the development, implementation and monitoring of the strategy. It is recommended that further research be undertaken into the issue of the difficulty facing some single homeless people in accessing General Practitioners, and that local authorities and Registered Social Landlords should ensure that they are not imposing unjustified restrictions on access to their housing registers for people with no address.

Some recommendations involve changes to primary legislation (for example raising the entitlement to housing benefit payments to 16-25 year olds to the level available for over-25 year olds) and also to legislation within the powers of the National Assembly for Wales (to widen the categories of homeless people who are regarded as being in priority need of accommodation to include people sleeping rough).

Other recommendations are the establishment of a consistent format and method of keeping records of rough sleeping and single homelessness, a grant (equivalent to Supported Housing Revenue Grant) being made available to support those tenants of local authorities and private landlords needing help to sustain their tenancies, and local authorities ensuring that an assessment of the support needs of all people who they find to be homeless is undertaken, and appropriate arrangements for support services are made.





The report **Rough Sleeping in Wales** and further copies of this summary can be obtained from:

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