



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru  
Welsh Assembly Government

# Housing Research Summary

## The Housing Histories of People who have Experienced Homelessness



### Introduction

Glamorgan University, Shelter Cymru and Caer Las Cymru were commissioned in 2003 to undertake a review of the housing histories of people who had successfully moved out of a homeless situation. The purpose of this study was to identify factors which led to the successful resolution of homelessness problems.

The findings of this study come principally from the analysis of 30 in-depth interviews with people in different parts of Wales, both males and females, all between the ages of 18 and 65. These participants had previously used homelessness services but, at the time of the interview, had been living independently without support for 12 months or more.

The multi-agency team undertook the interviews and the analysis, with the aim of recording the experiences of homelessness service users and to explore the factors that help to achieve a settled housing situation.

### Findings

#### *Information and Partnership working*

- The provision of good quality advice and information was one intervention, which played a crucial role in preventing and resolving homeless situations. Lack of knowledge about housing and rights, as well as ignorance of services, could lead to or prolong homelessness.
- Participants' accounts illustrated the ways in which information was passed. Interestingly, a number of participants gained vital information 'by chance'. They were more likely to act on information when this was provided by friends or trusted sources. Front-line service workers, such as the Police, GPs and solicitors were often approached and could provide both information and referral to other known services. Discharge from institutions, such as hospitals or release from prison, were occasions when information should be provided.

### *What is a home?*

- Gaining appropriate accommodation and creating a 'home' was identified by the participants as being a significant factor in resolving their homelessness. In nearly all cases, accommodation was accessed through a support agency which also provided tenancy support. Participants highlighted how having a 'home' provided stability and safety, which enabled people to deal with other issues such as health or employment.

### *Housing policies and practice*

- The majority of participants were, at the time of the research, tenants of Local Authorities or Registered Social Landlords. A third reported positive experiences of housing practice, including being allocated a property in an area of choice. However, some accounts highlighted the impact of poor quality or unsuitable housing, such as allocation to an area where the participant or his/her family felt unsafe. The provision of poor information was also raised as an issue. Such practices and failures caused stresses that exacerbated a homelessness situation. In contrast, good housing practice can prevent crises developing, and can contribute to the resolution of homelessness situations.
- Geographical movement is a factor, particularly for women fleeing domestic violence, but also for others who move in order to access services. Over half of the participants had moved from other parts of the UK or between local authorities within Wales. This has implications for joint working and funding across administrative boundaries.

### *Temporary Accommodation – hostels and refuges*

- Half the participants had used hostels or women's refuges in their routes through homelessness, and some spoke of their

experiences. A number of accounts identified the dangers of larger hostels. The importance of move-on accommodation and support when people are ready to move from temporary accommodation was stressed.

- Female participants made several suggestions for improving refuge accommodation. These included establishing more specialist services, increasing levels of support and providing more information about the local area. These all have funding implications.
- For a number of participants, specialist residential units - for detoxification and the provision of mental health services – had been crucial in resolving health issues and also in referring the person on to housing and support schemes.

### *The significance of support*

- Support work was identified by the participants as being the most significant intervention in resolving homelessness by assisting them to resettle into independent accommodation and develop links within the community. The researchers distinguished the following types of support:
  1. The giving of information.
  2. Assistance with accessing accommodation.
  3. Practical support with matters such as new tenancies and welfare benefits.
  4. Assistance with integration into the community, links to organizations and services.
  5. The provision of social and emotional support which can be general and/or specialist.
- Overall, half the participants experienced general social support. Numerous examples demonstrated the

importance of support workers in developing self-esteem and confidence, and enabling people to take control of their situation. In this study, the need for support with health and financial problems was less apparent than the need for support on this general level. Approximately a third of participants referred to the importance of assistance provided by friends or family.

- The accounts showed that support must be person-centred, flexible and not time-limited. Delivery of effective support, based on the needs of the individual, can best be achieved following a comprehensive assessment of need. Participants in the study benefited particularly from general social support, which increased self-esteem and which was delivered by workers who were often described as ‘friends’. This describes a method of working which, whilst respecting proper professional boundaries, is accessible, friendly and non-judgemental. The study highlighted that the person needs to be in control and to feel that support is tailored specifically to their requirements.

#### *Returning to work*

- Six participants were working, most of whom were working part-time. Three women were doing voluntary work and two attended college courses. Of the nineteen who were not employed, nine were not available for employment because of age, disability or care of pre-school children. Those in employment and education emphasized its importance in providing links into mainstream life and in helping them cope with and overcome their problems.

#### **About the study**

The interest of this study lies in its collection of qualitative data and in the way in which it uses this to allow informants’ voices to structure the results. The study was undertaken through a three

level action research model. At the first level, the accounts and narratives of the thirty participants were collected. These accounts formed the basis for the analysis and report. An unstructured interview format allowed the participant to lead the narrative. At the second level, in eight inquiry group meetings, the four researchers shared their experiences, interpretations of the accounts and narratives. Common themes were identified and weight was given to the number of participants who discussed them. At the third level, this research will be shared with the Welsh Assembly and other agencies in order that it can contribute to improved policy and practical changes.

The issues experienced by the participants reflect the organizations through which they were contacted. These were:

- women’s refuges;
- a drug and alcohol support agency;
- a Registered Social Landlord (RSL) project for young people;
- a housing advice and advocacy service;
- housing and support agencies; and
- a temporary accommodation hostel.

Relationship breakdown – between parents and children or between partners – was the dominant cause of initial homelessness. One third of the participants spoke of having problems before they became homeless; but two thirds did not.

Significantly, common themes ran across differences in age, gender and situation. Often the causes of homelessness, the barriers to leaving homelessness and the interventions which were identified as successful were very similar for different individuals.

### The promotion of good practice

- Gaining accurate information about homelessness services was identified as crucial in resolving homelessness situations. Deficient information could lead to a delay in resolving the situation. The importance of front-line workers having up-to-date information and knowledge to make referrals is highlighted. Joint working increases information about services. Leaving institutions is a key point at which to give information.
- Being allocated an appropriate house by an efficient housing provider is a key element in resolving homelessness. Poor practice can create extreme stress and even homelessness. Effective policies on allocations, repairs, and anti-social behaviour can prevent homelessness.
- Participants emphasized the value of support in enabling them to leave homelessness. Support agencies often provide both information and access to housing. The most successful support was flexible, person-centred, delivered professionally but from someone seen 'as a friend'. This implied a relationship of equality, trust and accessibility. In this study most of this support was provided by the voluntary sector. Specialist residential support such as that given in 'detox' or mental health centres, was important for some participants.
- These findings reflect values which are embedded in Local Homelessness Reviews and the priorities of the National Homelessness Strategy. There is already considerable knowledge about interventions which are successful but there still remains a need to translate this knowledge into action.

The report [The Housing Histories of People who have Experienced Homelessness](#) and further copies of this summary can be obtained from:

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