

Experts by Experience: Report to the Expert Review Panel

Access to housing and temporary accommodation

November 2022

1. Background

The Welsh Government has committed to reforming homelessness legislation in Wales and has established the Expert Review Panel to provide advice and proposals to the Minister for Climate Change. Through a series of online and in-person events and surveys, Cymorth Cymru's Experts by Experience project will provide opportunities for people with experience of homelessness to share their experiences and views on what needs to change.

This paper has been prepared in advance of the third panel meeting, which will be focused on access to housing and temporary accommodation. It should be noted that people's contributions often touched on issues outside of these topics, but we have done our best to be inclusive all the views shared, some of which will be relevant to other Expert Review Panel meetings.

Thank you to everyone who participated in the survey or spoke to us about their views and experiences, making valuable contributions to this paper and the Expert Review Panel's work.

2. Format of engagement

Engagement took place between the third and fourth meetings of the Expert Review Panel and included an online survey and informal meetings with tenants at three temporary accommodation schemes.

The online survey focused on people's experiences of applying for housing, temporary accommodation and allocations. The survey was open between 1st November and 15th November.

The informal meetings were held on the 7th, 10th and 11th November 2022 at three different temporary supported accommodation projects for single homeless people, families and young women.

3. Participants

Opportunities to engage with this work were promoted through Cymorth Cymru's member organisations, mailing list and social media accounts.

We engaged with 51 people through our survey and informal meetings. This included men and women; people aged 16-17, 18-24, 25-44 and 45-64 years old; people who identified as heterosexual and LGBTQ+; people who identified as white, black and mixed race; people with mental health and physical health issues; disabled people; and people with alcohol and/or substance use issues.

4. Applying for housing

4.1. What is working well with the process of applying for housing?

There were relatively few positive responses to this question in our survey, but these included:

“Straightforward application.”

“Sharing housing application information with other housing associations.”

“Clear forms in terms of what areas you are willing to go to.”

“Central bidding system.”

“Looking online at homes when possible, good way to find the exact price on properties.”

“Staff knowledge and information provided.”

“I get support from [support provider].”

However, several respondents answered *“Nothing”* and others highlighted specific problems with the current system:

“The whole process is not working.”

“Very little.”

“It isn't. Long delays in filling out paperwork and providing evidence to local housing options.”

“Nothing. You can't even get on the list and the local council won't help unless you are about to be put on the street.”

“It is very time consuming it's very difficult to see someone at [Housing Options]. Waiting outside [homelessness centre] for hours then being sent to [hostel] is not good when you don't have transport or money.”

“Nothing because there is a housing crisis.”

One of the people we spoke to in temporary accommodation simply commented: *“It never comes to anything.”* Another said that it was really difficult, that they *“had no idea what's going on”* and told us that they found it hard to express themselves due to their stutter and ADHD.

4.2. What should be improved with the process of applying for housing?

There were a greater number of responses to this survey question, with most centred around the following themes:

- A reduction in the amount of time it takes to apply for and access housing
- An increase in the empathy and understanding demonstrated by staff
- As simpler process, more information about how the process works and expected timescales
- Guidance about what information people can provide to assist with their application
- Regular communication / updates for applicants
- Support to navigate the system and/or using computers or the internet
- Increasing the amount of affordable properties
- Increasing Local Housing Allowance rates

We have included a variety of the comments below, in people's own words:

"Long processes and can be confusing."

"Long wait lists and times to get a property."

"Timescale."

"The period of verification and registration takes too long so not able to bid on properties for almost 4 months - this needs to be improved."

"The council needs to care more. The process should be simpler. I shouldn't have to beg for help."

"Housing in the council are judgmental."

"Not spoken to like a person, sent to unsuitable hostels (with a child), given incorrect advice, no understanding of urgency, no understanding of mental health, things spoken about aren't recorded by staff (avoiding paperwork), treated like you are at fault for being homeless, no follow up, poor contact."

"Being told that you're 'not going to be homeless forever'... but I don't want to be homeless now."

"More information regarding the housing waiting list."

"No update about how long the wait will be. Little or no communication with/from the housing register."

"Help from support worker. Access to help with computer."

"Face to face meeting don't rely on online - not everyone has access to computer and broadband also lack IT skills."

"More face to face contact with professionals. To much is done over the telephones since Covid."

"LHA rates, more support from LAs to look for property, lack of affordable property, sustainable support for complex needs from qualified practitioners."

"If someone has been given an eviction date say that their house is being repossessed, they are given three weeks to leave. Housing do not understand the severity of this and put you in temporary accommodation."

"There just isn't enough accommodation and PRS is unaffordable."

"Rent arrears impacting access due to PRS."

"More availability of affordable housing across the tenures."

"How can you bid for a property, when you trying to work, and properties are taken within minutes. There are no waiting lists, to even know where you are for housing association properties. Decrease rents and not set criteria of having to earn of £25,000 for 1 bedroom flats, few people earn that in some areas."

Similar issues were expressed by some of the people we spoke to in temporary accommodation. Several talked about the lack of urgency they felt from the local authority, once they had been placed in temporary accommodation. They also said that communication was poor, that they had no sense of when they might be offered housing and were not given regular updates. They were also told to stop contacting housing options, but had no confidence that the council would call them.

“They think that having a roof over your head, it’s ok. You move down in priority. But you still need a home. You’re priority but you’re not priority.”

“As long as you have a roof over your head, you’re lucky, is what they think.”

“I got a ticket at the council housing options, I waited 3 hours but I wasn’t called. They told me to not ring: ‘we’ll ring you’, but they never do.”

“I’m told ‘stop ringing us’ – imagine being told that!”

“They tell us to be patient, but don’t keep us updated.”

“They fob you off to get you off the phone. I don’t believe them or trust them.”

“It doesn’t matter if you’re here 6 months, a year, ten years.”

Others commented on the difficulty in applying for housing when the only availability seemed to be in areas that they did not want to live, often for very good reasons. They felt that the system coerced them into selecting areas in which they didn’t want to live, because otherwise they would be deprioritised or removed from the housing waiting list:

“It’s making us tick areas that you don’t want.”

“If you refuse [an offer of housing] then you don’t get other offers.”

“It’s setting us up to fail.”

“Once you’re in, there’s no way of getting out of that house.”

“They’re forcing you to accept it.”

A number of people we spoke to expressed huge frustration in the number of empty homes in their local area, and the length of time it took for housing to become available once tenants had moved out. Another person talked about how they were offered a home, but it was of very poor quality and would be unsafe for them and their children to live in.

“There were holes in the floor, not safe, not appropriate and not in the right location. They said it wasn’t fit for purpose, so why were they letting it out? You lose trust in the system.”

One person detailed their experience of being a young black woman and experiencing discrimination. She said that coming from an ethnic minority *“makes services intimidating”* and that *“race affects how I am viewed by services”*. When she applied for housing she said she was faced with a stereotype that people of colour are able to ‘handle things better’. Another young person witnessed how family members were discriminated against on the basis of race in various settings (including health), which discouraged them from feeling confident when interacting with housing services.

Some of the people we spoke to also highlighted the challenges posed by the limited time between being told they had been offered a home and having to move out of temporary accommodation. One person told us they had to move the very next day. This created huge stress for the person and posed significant practical challenges, including having to move all of their belongings from temporary accommodation to their new home with very little notice. They also faced financial challenges such as needing time to sort out their benefits and access emergency funding to help them move.

“Being in temporary accommodation feels like you’re ignored for a long time. Then all of a sudden you’re told you have a house and must quickly find the funds to move at very short notice.”

5. Allocations

5.1. What is working well about how social housing is being allocated?

There was limited positive feedback in response to our survey question about what is working well about how social housing is being allocated:

“My [support] worker fighting my case and helping with appeals.”

“Band A status.”

“You get to bid on properties within the area you want to live.”

In fact, several respondents highlighted the things that were not working well, based on their own experiences:

“I don't feel nothing is working well in regard to how social housing is allocated. I previously explained I did not want to live in a certain area, then I ended up back on the streets.”

“I don't know because no one ever contacts me. I don't know how people are chosen or who is a priority”

“Nothing. There is not enough social housing to meet needs and private landlords will not accept you if you are young and on benefits.”

“Takes far too long to be housed more social housing needed more support for vulnerable people.”

5.2. What needs to improve about how social housing is being allocated?

Communication was cited as a key area for improvement, including information about how the system works, the ability to ask questions, easier processes, and being treated with more respect:

“Nobody seems to know how the allocations work, the council staff can't tell me. It's a lucky dip.”

“Everything - and communication!”

“Everything. A big overhaul is needed from the way individuals are allocated areas in which they have connections.”

“The council need to stop treating homeless as stupid, we are not”

“Easier processes to follow and more chances for questions.”

Others cited the housing crisis and specifically the lack of housing stock:

“More social housing would be good.

“The local housing department also needs to address long waiting times and build more housing.”

“I get that there are only a limited number of houses, and I understand that not everyone can be given a house immediately. I know that some people have greater need than others which I think influences the decision on who is a priority. I just think if there were more affordable flats (private or social) there would be less issues all round. I lost my job because of stress and depression after getting kicked out. I never had mental health problems before this. I can't even think about getting another job because I'm worried about where I'm going to be in a months' time.”

Some survey respondents and people we spoke to in temporary accommodation highlighted groups of people who should be prioritised for social housing.

“Priority to those in temporary accommodation.”

“Single mothers need to be housed!”

“It should be allocated to locals first as a priority.”

“People who are really struggling with their mental health should be given extra help and support.”

One young person described the frustration at turning down a property they had been offered – due to it being in an unsuitable area, away from support networks – resulting in them being removed from the housing waiting list for 12 months. This had a direct consequence on the individual’s wellbeing; they had worked hard to get themselves ‘tenancy ready’ only to be told they had to spend another 12 months in temporary accommodation.

5.3. Have previous rent arrears or anti-social behaviour prevented you from being able to access social housing? If so, please tell us how this has affected you.

A number of participants shared that rent arrears had prevented them from accessing social housing, with one respondent referencing that this was due to domestic abuse:

“Yes, previous rent arrears prevent me from accessing social housing.”

“I had previous rent arrears from 5 years ago and had to go through CAB to set a Debt Relief Order up.”

“Having rent arrears due to fleeing my old property because of domestic violence from my ex-partner it has pushed me lower down the housing list.”

Another respondent told us that previous rent arrears had prevented them from being able to access social housing, had forced them into the private rented sector, which further increased their debt.

“Yes, [...] and being forced into PRS has increased my debt. PRS is not the best housing option for those on low income & DHP only pays for 6 months shortfall.”

One of the people we spoke to in temporary accommodation also told us how an issue with rent arrears was preventing them from being able to access social housing:

“I lived in a council flat for a year when I was 17 but moved out because of domestic abuse. I moved into [temporary accommodation] and six months later I got a letter saying I was £1,200 in debt from rent arrears. I had moved out and handed over my keys immediately, but hadn’t signed the form until two months later. The debt was from those two months. But it took the council six months to tell me and I was about to give birth. I was told I could pay 25% of the debt and then wait 13 weeks to go back on the [social housing] waiting list. If I didn’t pay any of it then I would be permanently off the list.”

6. Temporary accommodation

The survey asked participants what type of temporary accommodation they had stayed in. 24% had stayed in self-contained flats or homes, 24% in a hotel or B&B, 12% in a hostel with shared space, 6% in a refuge with shared space and of the 35% who answered 'other', answers included emergency accommodation and shared housing. A number of the people we spoke to had experienced a variety of types of temporary accommodation, including direct access hostels, as well as temporary supported accommodation for single people, families and young women.

6.1. What was the best thing about your experience of temporary accommodation?

Many of the respondents struggled to say anything more positive than it was better than the situation they had come from. This was reinforced to a certain extent by some of the people we spoke to in temporary accommodation, who said that it was preferable to sleeping on the streets or being in an abusive home.

“Only positive was a room to stay in”

“Not [being] on the street.”

“Knowing that I lived with people who had been through a similar experience.”

“Being off the streets.”

“Having a roof over my head and warmth”

“It’s better than living on the street or a friend’s sofa.”

Some people spoke very highly of their temporary accommodation, particularly where there were well trained support workers on site. They commented that the support they received from staff was excellent, that they appreciated the 24-hour staffing, and enjoyed the activities or volunteering opportunities that were provided to them. Others said they felt a sense of community where they shared accommodation with people who had similar experiences and could provide each other with peer support.

“No-one will ever understand how beneficial this hostel was to me.”

“Support from my [support] worker”

“I’ve got my own toom, privacy.”

“This hostel is the best. There’s 24-hour care and they’re trying to give us things to do – activities, volunteering, art.”

However, some people made the point that even the highest quality temporary accommodation did not feel like a home, often due to the rules, the level of security, and the lack of agency that people had over the space.

What type of temporary accommodation have you stayed in?



- Self contained flat or house
- Hotel or B&B
- Hostel with shared space
- Refuge with shared space
- Other (please specify)

6.2. What was the worst thing about your experience of temporary accommodation?

When asked about the worst aspects of their experiences, the following responses were received from survey respondents with lived experience:

“Placed into accommodation with no support, no food, more stress added as don't know how long to stay there. Other clients staying caused more issues.”

“Out of borough - no cooking & washing clothes facilities no respect no privacy nowhere to store my belongings after losing my last tenancy no support no empathy didn't know where I was going until the day before no time for making arrangements to move.”

“Doesn't feel safe. I don't feel stable (like I can relax). Can be noisy or chaotic with other tenants.”

“I was on the top floor - an attic room with my 20 month old son. The room was tiny with a kitchenette. The toilet and bathroom were on the floor below me so I had to leave my son on his own if I needed to use the toilet during the night while he was sleeping. The room has 2 tiny windows the house was next to a train station. The room was boiling and couldn't open the windows as the trains would wake the baby. The shower has poo in it and was always dirty - I did not feel comfortable washing myself or my son in it. No communal living room - just a bedroom with 2 beds and a sink, a fridge, a microwave, kettle and toaster and a 2 ring hotplate. The room was approx 8ft x 10 ft. No room for wardrobes, chest of drawers or a chair to sit on. I had to put the TV on the kitchen counter as there was nowhere else for it to go. I was so depressed and wanted to kill myself.”

“The quality of the property was poor, not knowing where you will be put next.”

“Being around substance misusers.”

“It's horrible, my stuff gets stolen, there are people injecting.”

Our conversations with people in temporary accommodation highlighted a range of concerns with temporary accommodation, including:

- Not having a room of your own
- Parents being required to share a room with several children
- Not having your own living space
- Being accommodated with people who were actively using drugs
- Having cameras in your 'home'
- Inexperienced agency staff at evenings or weekends
- The length of time some people had spent in that temporary accommodation
- The uncertainty of never knowing when you might be able to move on
- The negative impact on their children and the feeling that they could not be the best parent in temporary accommodation
- The poor quality of some of the accommodation
- Being located far away from support networks, schools or workplaces
- Being placed in inappropriate or unsafe accommodation

Some of the people we spoke to complained about the poor quality of their temporary accommodation. One person said that their room was damp, that the heating wasn't effective and the bathroom was mouldy. Another said there was a broken window which made it cold for a number of residents. One young mother said that she had come out of hospital following childbirth and found that the shower was

broken, but was told there would be a lengthy wait before it was fixed. Another teenager said that she had been given an emergency room in temporary accommodation which had no pillow or duvet and no bathroom. She had a sleeping bag and had to use the staff shower during her stay.

One young person commented on temporary accommodation only providing the most basic needs – a bed, a toilet, a sink – which led them to think: *“if I can survive this, I can survive prison. I may as well commit a crime”*. Others talked about the presence of security cameras in communal areas such as the living room, saying they felt really uncomfortable with being watched by staff in their home, although some recognised that the cameras were there for safety reasons.

Some of the people likened their experience to losing a section of their life, or being in prison, when they reflected on the length of time they had been in temporary accommodation, combined with the lack of communication or uncertainty about how long they might be waiting for a settled home.

“I’m 20 years old and I’ve spent a year with two kids in a hostel. That’s a 20th of my life.”

“Temporary accommodation is like a prison but you don’t know when you’re going to be released.”

“It’s like a prison sentence without knowing the length of the sentence. If you knew the timescales you could be more prepared and see the light at the end of the tunnel.”

One young woman told us that she had been placed in a hostel that had lots of people actively using substances, being very unwell as a result, and engaging in violence. She told us that she walked the streets for days to avoid this environment.

Participants from a young women’s hostel recognised that whilst living with people who had also experienced trauma provided potential to forge connections through shared experiences, this could also result in re-traumatisation as other young residents engaged in self-harm, substance use or displayed anti-social behaviour.

“Two people passed away in my time in temporary accommodation.”

“There have been times when ambulances and police vans have been here, at my home.”

“Doesn’t feel safe. I don’t feel stable (like I can relax). Can be noisy or chaotic with other tenants.”

One person talked about the impact of being placed in temporary accommodation far away from her children’s school and their extended family. It takes several buses to get to the school but the child has a disability so they have to get a taxi, which has a significant impact on her finances. She also said that she would be unable to take her children to visit family at Christmas, because the temporary accommodation was too far away from her family and there would be no buses running.

6.3. What could have improved your experience of temporary accommodation?

Our survey also asked people with lived experience about what should be improved about temporary accommodation:

“More suitable accommodation where support is available being kept updated not leaving until the last day to be told I was moving to B&B - no storage options a lot of stress.”

“My own kitchen or bathroom. (I eat takeout, as I don’t want to cook in the shared kitchen). Knowing how long I am expected to be there.”

“A more appropriate room for me and my son - I do not consider the room I was put in to be suitable for a family.”

“Separate hostels.”

“Housing being less judgemental.”

“Support workers to provide proper support without judging.”

“The staff could have helped me more in regards of helping me with benefits and what would be available to me.”

“Being closer to more familiar places.”

“People actually caring or wanting to help you have quality of life and a safe child.”

“Proper heating facilities.”

A number of people talked to us about the need for a range of different types of temporary accommodation for people with different characteristics or support needs. Young women and women with young families talked about the need for spaces where they could feel safe from violence and substance use. People who were or had been struggling with addiction talked about the need for wet accommodation to support people who were still active users in harm reduction, and for dry accommodation for people who were in recovery and were trying to stay clean. We also spoke to someone who thought there should be more appropriate temporary accommodation for people over 50 and for people with physical health issues or disabilities.

Some people we spoke to highlighted the costs of temporary accommodation, making particular reference to service charges and the shortfall in housing benefit. They illustrated how £20 per week could have a significant impact on their finances and called for a reduction in costs.

In summary, the people who engaged with us said that temporary accommodation could be improved in the following ways:

- Better communication from the council regarding progress towards securing a settled home and likely timescales for this.
- A time limit on how long people are in temporary accommodation before they get a settled home (e.g. 6 months).
- A variety of temporary accommodation that can enable people to feel safe and meet people’s different characteristics and support needs
- Better quality temporary accommodation
- Larger rooms or more than one room when an adult has more than one child.
- Self-contained temporary accommodation with own kitchen, bathroom and laundry facilities
- Being placed in temporary accommodation in an appropriate location, ensuring access to support networks, schools, and employment.
- More mental health support for people in temporary accommodation.
- Having more activities for children in temporary accommodation, including older children.
- Well trained, high quality support workers to help people to understand and navigate processes and systems, and to advocate for them.
- Reduction in service charges