

Manifesto 2021

Homelessness needs a health check



Who we are

We are The Wallich, the largest homelessness charity in Wales, and a major provider of housing support services. We are working towards an end to homelessness in Wales, and are committed to working with partners across the public and third sectors to realise this ambition.



Our values

At The Wallich we are:

- **Courageous.** We speak truth to power, we challenge ourselves and each other. We fearlessly pioneer new initiatives. We and our service users have the courage to drive change.
- **Determined.** We will not stop. We will continue to strive to make big changes, not only for our charity, but for the people we support. We will not lose passion or focus, even when it's hard.
- **Authentic.** We are genuine in our intentions, working on the front line with the people who need us. We walk the path alongside people, and use peer experience to inform everything we do.
- **Compassionate.** At all times – always. No matter how many times someone comes to us for help, we will listen, be empathetic and greet them with kindness.
- **Community.** Everybody deserves to belong somewhere. As a team we are family and we embrace partnership. We strive for inclusion and acceptance of those affected by homelessness.

Our calls for the next Welsh Government

The 2021 Welsh elections fall at a crossroads for our country. After a difficult 2020, where our communities have been challenged like never before by the global coronavirus pandemic and pre-existing inequalities have significantly widened, the next Welsh Government will be tasked with building back stronger than before.

Two things strike us as particularly salient. Firstly, as so many people have spent more time indoors than ever before, it has never been more important to have somewhere safe and comfortable to call home. And secondly, the pandemic has emphatically demonstrated that good quality housing is a public health issue. The response from Welsh Government and local authorities was highly successful, providing emergency accommodation in April 2020 to 407 individuals who had been sleeping rough, on public health grounds. But just as it is dangerous to be sleeping rough during a pandemic, it is dangerous at all other times too, and is not something that should be tolerated in a modern society.

Read our calls to all candidates and parties seeking to form the next Welsh Government. Together they represent a unique opportunity to give homelessness a health check.

- ① Everyone has a human right to a home
- ② Everyone facing homelessness is our priority
- ③ Rapid Rehousing is essential for ending homelessness
- ④ Our people are our most important assets
- ⑤ Accountable, evidence-led commissioning
- ⑥ Substance misuse policy must embrace harm-reduction
- ⑦ The state must end all release into homelessness



“ We believe that a human rights-based approach is the best possible way to ensure everyone in Wales is afforded the basic dignity of a safe and secure place to call home ”

① Everyone has a human right to a home

We support the calls from Tai Pawb, CIH Cymru, Shelter Cymru and others, for the next Welsh Government to fully incorporate the right to adequate housing into Welsh law.

Whilst the current duties upon local authorities to relieve homelessness are welcome, we believe that a human rights-based approach is the best possible way to ensure everyone in Wales is afforded the basic dignity of a safe and secure place to call home.

Good quality housing is an essential part of living a happy and healthy life. We know that not having suitable, stable accommodation leads not only to poorer physical and mental health, but also to poorer educational outcomes amongst children, barriers to employment, and access to local services.

Additionally, research has shown us that homelessness is disproportionately more likely to happen to people who have had adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), or experienced some kind of trauma in their past. A human rights approach is essential to recognise the complex needs of these individuals, who might have support needs from mental health, substance misuse, or criminal justice services, as well as housing support. Only through effective multi-agency working can these needs be fully addressed.



② Everyone facing homelessness is our priority

We believe that every member of our society is equally deserving of our support.

In order to deliver on this belief, the next Welsh Government must remove the unreasonable hurdles to accessing homelessness support such as the 'priority need' criteria, the need for a documented local connection, a judgement of 'intentionality', and the in particular the immigration condition that grants leave to remain but with 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF).

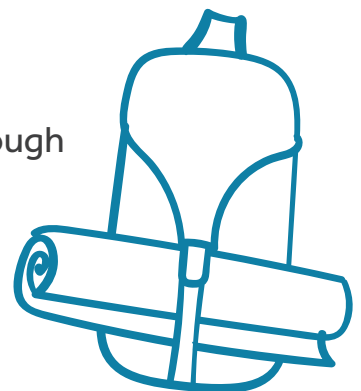
We note the recent Government review of priority need, and reiterate our belief that the evidence from Scotland and elsewhere is clear. By abolishing the priority need tests, fewer individuals will find themselves falling through the gaps of current service provision.

The current requirement for local authorities to ascertain whether or not an individual seeking homelessness relief has a local connection, and whether they 'intentionally' became homeless, should also be scrapped. There are often very good reasons why someone might purposefully leave a home and move to a new area; for example, the individual may be escaping chaotic family or friendships, or leaving unsafe living conditions.

Whilst we recognise that the responsibility for immigration laws are not currently devolved to the Welsh Government, we believe that the actions taken during the coronavirus pandemic, to house every individual on public health grounds regardless of NRPF status, prove that Wales can take positive steps to support those who have No Recourse to Public Funds when they find themselves facing hardships such as homelessness.

Indeed, we believe that homelessness is itself a public health challenge, which is why we believe that the successful cross-departmental public health approach to homelessness and rough sleeping in particular, must continue after the pandemic.

By reconsidering these policies, the Welsh Government will be signalling that everybody who needs help is their priority.

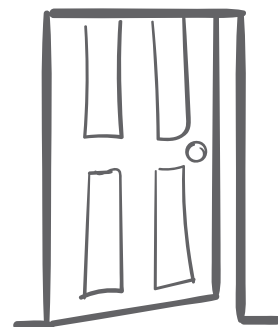




“ We believe that Rapid Rehousing should become the dominant model for addressing homelessness in Wales ”

③ Rapid Rehousing is essential for ending homelessness

We believe that Rapid Rehousing should become the dominant model for addressing homelessness in Wales, as recommended by the Homelessness Action Group.



In some ways similar to the Housing First model, the Rapid Rehousing approach would mean that providing safe, appropriate, and sustainable accommodation should be the first priority for all new homelessness presentations. It is only once housing is secured that support workers and other agencies can most effectively deal with the more complex underlying issues behind an individual case, whether they be mental health, alcohol or substance misuse, or some other trauma.

For Rapid Rehousing to be effective, all local authorities need to work to increase the availability and diversity of affordable housing options, whether directly owned council housing, housing associations, or well regulated, affordable private rental properties. Local authorities must also consider the evidence that a range of dispersed accommodation options with dedicated support will be more effective than concentrating clients in single locations (such as 'super-hostels'). The development of affordable housing must take priority over the further development of high-end, exclusive properties and premium student accommodation, which do not meet the current housing needs of Welsh communities.

The enhanced offer of dedicated Housing First projects must be available for those individuals with more complex needs, and should continue to uphold the principles identified by the Housing First Network. In particular the individuals must have choice and control over their housing, and be given unconditional, non-time-limited support.

Rapid rehousing should be considered an essential public health intervention, as it is the best way of preventing the long-term threats to health presented by prolonged periods of homelessness and in particular rough sleeping.



“ We believe that staff working with those experiencing homelessness are deserving of greater financial and professional recognition. ”

④ Our people are our most important assets

We believe that staff working with those experiencing homelessness are deserving of greater financial and professional recognition.

The current commissioning process encourages a race to the bottom on price. It means that providers like The Wallich, which endeavour to deliver high-quality, professional support services, can struggle to attract and retain project staff whilst running at a low enough cost to win tenders.


Delivering quality support for our clients is undoubtedly a demanding job, as staff are required to have advanced knowledge and skills not only in housing, but also in trauma-informed care and even how to respond to health crises. Whilst alternately feeling like a social worker, a therapist or even a paramedic, staff pay rarely reflects such responsibilities, leaving support staff feeling demoralised and undervalued.

Whilst the current Welsh Government guidance for commissioning services through the Housing Support Grant (HSG) is strong in its evidence-based specifications of the sorts of services that make a real difference in tackling homelessness, we would like to see it go further. We are calling for the professional status of support staff to be recognised, perhaps through accredited training and qualifications from the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH).

A level playing field could also be maintained through clarifying reasonable staff-to-client ratios for distinct types of support work, ensuring funding increases in line with higher numbers of referrals, retaining fair terms of employment, and enabling all service providers to pay the real living wage to all staff.



We would like to see national recognition of homelessness and housing support as a true vocation, as deserving of equal respect and remuneration as other frontline health and care workers who have also given so much to keep people safe during the coronavirus pandemic.



“ We believe that everyone is responsible for ending homelessness, and all public bodies need to be accountable for this objective to be realised. ”

⑤ Accountable, evidence-led commissioning

We believe that everyone is responsible for ending homelessness, and all public bodies need to be accountable for this objective to be realised.



The Homelessness Action Group recommended establishing a national framework of outcomes, against which Welsh Government and local authority commissioners can be evaluated, to understand where progress is being made. We believe this is essential to be able to measure the impact of policy interventions.

We have been concerned previously that a number of positive suggestions – utilising trauma-informed models of care, co-producing services directly with clients, or hiring support workers with lived experiences for example – are mentioned in official guidance and commissioner specifications, however there is no way to ensure they are being implemented in practice. There is also currently no formal requirement for local authorities to consult with providers or service users themselves before making big decisions about services. A national homelessness outcomes framework would improve confidence in the commissioning process.

This national homelessness outcomes framework should also be considered alongside the more established framework for monitoring national health outcomes, as the two are inextricably linked. We would expect to see a meaningful reduction in homelessness and rough sleeping ultimately lead to better outcomes across several key areas of public policy.

Commissioners must be encouraged to develop robust impact assessments for their proposals, and this must include a genuine conversation with experts in the sector as well as current clients and those with lived experience. Consideration should also be given to the responsibility for monitoring the national framework and holding public bodies to account. This function could be exercised by members of the Senedd, or by an independent body such as the Public Services Ombudsman or Audit Wales.



Warning
Beware of step

Please wait for a
staff member
before entering the
bus.

“ We believe that
we must support people
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wish they would be. ”

⑥ Substance misuse policy must embrace harm-reduction

We believe that we must support people as they are, not as we wish they would be.

The Wallich has a long-standing commitment to the principle of harm reduction, particularly when it comes to substance misuse or other harmful behaviours. We would like to see the next Welsh Government and other public bodies take a harm reduction approach to support, as a key pillar in rebuilding services following the coronavirus pandemic.

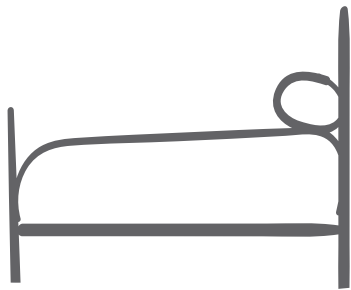
What this means in practice is working with police, probation, and community safety teams to sensitively manage substance misuse and its related harms to society. We should not rush to criminalise people who are in need of support to get sober. As with the wider issue of homelessness, we are strongly supportive of an approach to substance misuse as a public health issue, rather than simply a problem to be solved by the criminal justice system.

We would like to see the pilot of Enhanced Harm Reduction Centres in Wales, to provide a safe, clean space for people to use substances under supervision, exchange used needles and other paraphernalia, and get advice and support. International evidence suggests this could dramatically decrease the risks of overdoses and blood-borne viruses and reduce the number of avoidable drug-related deaths. We call on the next Welsh Government to work closely with the newly elected Police and Crime Commissioners, as well as the UK Government, to explore how this could be piloted in Wales.



⑦ The state must end all release into homelessness

We believe that no one should be discharged from state institutions into homelessness.



We currently see far too many people being released from prisons without a home to return to. Just as a local authority has a duty to assist all those who present as at risk of homelessness, we believe that the HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) should have a duty to ensure those leaving its care are not released into homelessness.

As well as being at greater risk of physical and mental health problems, individuals who are released from prison with no home to return to are also more likely to reoffend, putting ever more pressure on already overstretched prisons and probation services. Whilst we at The Wallich already have positive working relationships with HMPPS, we would like to see cross-agency working on issues such as housing and health to become more strategic, led by the Welsh and UK Governments.

Although we recognise that justice is not currently a devolved responsibility of the Welsh Government, housing and homelessness is devolved, as is public health protection. We call on the next Welsh Government to work proactively with HMPPS and the UK Ministry of Justice to address this major cause of homelessness in Wales.



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