

Psychologically Informed Environments

Good practice from the homelessness and housing support sector

October 2024



Introduction

Ever since the publication of the Adverse Childhood Experiences study by Public Health Wales in 2016, the homelessness and housing support sector has taken a huge interest how trauma and adversity affects people within the homelessness, care and justice system. Services have increasingly recognised the importance of embedding Psychologically Informed Environments in their organisational culture and service delivery, involving leaders, frontline workers and people with lived experience in the development of this approach.

Psychologically informed environments (commonly referred to as 'PIE') are services that are designed and delivered in a way that takes into account the emotional and psychological needs of the people using them and working within them. This can include developing a psychological framework that guides the organisation's approach; an emphasis on positive, trusting and compassionate relationships; providing high quality staff support and training; and creating safe, welcoming environments for people using services. A key element of this approach is understanding of how trauma can impact people's emotions and behaviours, and affect people's willingness or ability to develop trusting relationships. A trauma-informed, or trauma-responsive approach prioritises physical and emotional safety for people who have faced trauma or adversity, taking a compassionate, person-centred, strengths-based approach which avoids re-traumatising people.

Cymorth Cymru has long advocated for psychologically informed approaches, organising conferences on this topic, delivering PIE training to over 2,500 people working in the homelessness and housing support sector, and influencing Welsh Government policy and legislation to reflect a trauma informed approach. Our member organisations have also developed their understanding and response to trauma and psychologically informed approaches over the past few years, with excellent work being undertaken at an operational and strategic level. This report celebrates the work being done across Wales, showcasing the positive impact that working in a psychologically informed way can have on people using and delivering services. Moreover, we want this report to be useful to services who are at the early stages of incorporating PIE.

During the development of this report, we spoke to a number of people who shared their experiences and learning. We want to express our thanks to everyone who responded to our call for good practice and took the time to speak to us about this topic. Your contributions have really helped us to understand how psychologically informed environments are being developed across the sector, and the impact this is having on people using and delivering services.

We hope to publish a good practice report annually, to show the development of PIE as time goes on. We want to hear about the achievements and successes, as well as the learning and development that needs to continue. If you would like your organisation's work to feature in our next report, then please get in touch.

Catrin Elliott-Williams
Policy Officer, Cymorth Cymru

General themes

All of the organisations featured in this report demonstrated their commitment to psychologically informed and trauma informed approaches, working in a person-centred way, focusing on the needs of each person using their services. Many similarities and common themes arose in our discussions with these organisations, some of which we have outlined below.

Firstly, numerous organisations placed huge importance on wanting newly recruited staff to understand the core values and principles associated with psychologically informed approaches, and what this means practically within the workplace.

Managers at Taff Housing Association, for example, use the interview process to ensure that candidates have the right values for taking a psychologically informed approach within the role they are applying for. Similarly, several organisations said that PIE is an important part of induction training, so an understanding of this approach can develop from day one.

As well as introductory training, ongoing training about PIE is regularly delivered to all staff. As such, this topic is part of someone's continuous professional development, particularly as the understanding of PIE develops and approaches change.

ClwydAlyn is particularly keen to develop comprehensive training for staff, covering key aspects of being psychologically informed on a practical level, but also focusing on what 'challenging behaviour' is, and what happens to a person physiologically during a stressful response. The commitment from all services regarding training for new and existing staff demonstrates an understanding of how important it is to continually build people's understanding of PIE.

Risk assessments have undergone a significant change across many services. The services spoken to recognise the importance of language when it comes to being psychologically informed. Staff at the Wallich, for example, spoke of the connotations of 'risk' as a concept, which aren't particularly psychologically informed. Therefore, the Wallich changed 'risk assessments' to 'safety plans'; this is a more inclusive approach, as plans are completed with the person using the service, rather than solely by staff. All services recognised that risk assessments paint an individual as a 'risky' person which masks the importance of safety, not just to staff and wider communities, but to the individual themselves. Members of the team at Llamau spoke of the importance of taking on a 'strengths-based approach', which is a more collaborative approach, focusing on the client's goals and achievements.

Furthermore, all services continue to be committed to staff wellbeing, recognising that good mental health is vital for services to run successfully in a psychologically informed way. Pobl recognises that staff need to have the appropriate support from management as well as colleagues to be able to work in a psychologically informed way with clients. Cadwyn Housing Association sees mental health as just as vital as physical health, and services would suffer if staff were struggling emotionally. Therefore, they have decided to bring in a designated 'wellbeing day', where staff are able to take time for themselves for reflection and self-care, whatever form that might take. Similarly, Taff Housing facilitates 1:1 clinical supervision for all staff with an external facilitator, to ensure that staff feel comfortable to be open and honest about their emotional wellbeing and concerns they might have about work.

Cadwyn Housing Association

Cadwyn is a community housing association based in Cardiff, which provides temporary and supported accommodation for families with young children. Dedicated staff members work specifically with families to support their needs and look at ways that Cadwyn can offer support to make them feel at home, comfortable and safe. It is key that where they are staying becomes a place of safety, especially as families might have become homeless due to leaving violent or abusive environments.

Mediation and restorative approaches are seen as an integral part of how Cadwyn works with families, particularly if conflict does arise. Cadwyn has developed 'problem solving circles', for residents to resolve any issues that might have occurred. Dedicated staff will mediate these discussions and allow a space where problems can be discussed, without things having to escalate. It is not about having a warning system, but being able to solve the root causes of any issues that occur within the project. So far, the problem-solving circle has been a success and has provided residents the opportunity to have their voice heard.

Cadwyn has also recognised that being psychologically informed and trauma informed is a process; the organisation wants to be able to continue improving and developing its PIE approaches. One of the ways in which Cadwyn is doing this is working with a PIE consultant who can support development in certain areas. A lot of the work that Cadwyn does with families and children is backed by research to understand how adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can have an impact on life experiences, health and opportunity. Having an understanding of a person's background and potential ACEs can help staff at Cadwyn to support families and young people in having better life opportunities.

Cadwyn staff spoke about how vital their services are to the people they support, particularly as it can help lessen the burden on other public services. Most importantly, the support given can help create positive change in people's lives. Cadwyn spoke about changes and successes both big and small. For example, there have been instances of a child being removed from the child protection register because of improvements within family dynamics as well as the improvement of an individual's mental health, along with a reduction in substance use. Cadwyn employees also spoke about the day-to-day changes that might take place, such as a child doing their homework on time. Although these might be smaller successes, they are crucial in terms of contributing to the long-term development of that child, and helping mitigate against the impact of ACEs.

As mentioned earlier within this report, Cadwyn continues to see the value in staff wellbeing. Cadwyn recognises that vicarious trauma can have a huge impact on those working on a frontline, and therefore taking the time to reflect is viewed as essential.

ClwydAlyn

ClwydAlyn is a housing association operating across North Wales, delivering a range of care and support services, alongside the provision of social housing. ClwydAlyn adopts values of hope, trust and kindness as core to its work, and view these as integral to working in a psychologically informed way. ClwydAlyn is part of the ACE Hub Wales community of practice, which has supported the development of psychologically informed environments across their services.

ClwydAlyn strongly believes in investing in training that supports staff to work in a psychologically informed way. The training they provide to staff on this topic is delivered over two half-day sessions and focuses on being trauma informed with clients, as well as with colleagues, and the role that management should play.

ClwydAlyn recognises that although the training is important for people's professional development, many of the themes explored during the training may be triggering for staff. As a result, a mental health first aider is present at the training sessions, enabling staff to have someone to talk to if any topics within the training become too overwhelming and triggering.

ClwydAlyn wants to be able to create positive interactions, as opposed to causing further harm, and aims to make supporting people with experience of trauma more dignified for all involved. Furthermore, ClwydAlyn looks at how people build psychological resilience, and the ways in which staff can appropriately respond to the needs of clients, at whatever time of day most suits the client. Staff want the service to 'build support around the client' as opposed to clients having to change their routine to access support. For example, some people's routines are centred around night-time and therefore support needs to be available to them at that time.

ClwydAlyn has looked at what could support clients and staff during difficult and distressing periods. One of the things that staff have helped clients with is creating 'grounding boxes'. Grounding boxes contain items personal to the client that reduce feelings of anxiety or distress, and could help make the client feel more relaxed. If clients were struggling with stress and anxiety, then they could use these boxes to remain calm in times of crisis. Similarly, to Taff Housing, staff at ClwydAlyn have also had specialist de-escalation training in order deal with challenging behaviour appropriately.

ClwydAlyn has also made changes to HR policies and procedures. Senior staff recognised that some language within these documents was not in line with being psychologically informed, and efforts were made to consider the impact that language can have on both clients and staff. For example, probationary periods for staff have been removed to show trust in the individual and recognise their capabilities for the role they have been hired to take on. Documents also no longer refer to anti-social behaviour, as it creates stereotypes and assumptions of clients that might lead to trust issues and an inability to build strong relationships.



ClwydAlyn

Llamau

Llamau is a Welsh charity which supports young people and women who are facing homelessness and/or domestic abuse. Llamau started working in a psychologically informed way in 2015 and have been developing their approach since then. As part of their initial steps, a survey invited all staff to share their views on how Llamau could make improvements and become more psychologically informed.

One area of Llamau's work is the 'Step Into' programme. This prioritises a young person's emotional wellbeing with the aim of supporting young people to access education, training opportunities and employment. This programme will move at the pace of the young person, as they work towards their aims and aspirations. Although Llamau wants to support young people to become independent, there is emphasis on 'moving on' being a transitional process. An 'open door policy' is taken, so service users know that support is available to them should they want it, and that moving on does not have to mean goodbye. Llamau also provides mediation services so that they can support the resolution of any issues as opposed to using punitive measures. For women's services, staff are trained in leading work that looks at healthy relationships and supporting women to recognise healthy and non-healthy behaviours within a relationship.

Staff from Llamau spoke about the importance of building homely environments for people using their services, so they feel safe and secure. One of the most notable examples discussed was the creation of 'Granny Grey', a book written in collaboration with the women in the service for their children. It was about seeing the project and accommodation as a space where they would be safe, happy and free from harm. Although professionals were brought in to help create the book, the ideas came from the women living within the projects who wanted their children to know that they are living in a place that they can call their home.

As well as being psychologically informed for people using services, Llamau sees the importance of taking a psychologically informed and trauma informed approach with staff. Llamau provides a 24-hour helpline service for all staff to access if they need support with their mental health and wellbeing, as well as offering clinical support. Llamau also offers a compassionate leadership programme which consists of 8 programme modules that is open to all managers to access. The aim is to look at how management can create a supportive environment for their staff that focuses on their needs and emotional wellbeing. One of the ways managers look after their staff is by providing a 'good welcome' to new staff. Managers want staff to feel safe within their workspace and to feel comfortable in being vulnerable, open and honest with their colleagues. Induction packs for new staff are also made to feel welcoming, so that good relationships are built from the beginning.

Llamau

**Imagine a World Without
Homelessness**

Pobl

Pobl is a housing association working across Wales to provide homes, care and support that make a difference to people's lives. Pobl has been working in a psychologically informed way for the last six years, and is keen to continue to develop their approach.

Pobl have made a variety of changes and utilised a wide range of tools to make it easier and more accessible for staff to feel knowledgeable and confident about how to work in a psychologically informed way. One of the ways that Pobl measures its approach to PIE is through the PIE Abacus monitoring toolkit. One aspect of this is the online version of the Pizazz self-assessment system, which allows services to 'assess' how much they are working within a psychologically informed way, allowing the user to form an action plan to address and develop certain areas that may not be as psychologically informed as others. Pobl has been using this service for the last twelve months and staff believe that their investment in it is important as it makes developing action plans easier. Managers have also been able to collate a report to assess where staff might be struggling and are then able to look at ways they could improve.

Having conversations about PIE at all levels is particularly important, as staff learn from one another about things that are going well and/or things that might need more attention. Managers have set up community of practice meetings that consist of ten facilitated groups which meet monthly to discuss a topic in relation to PIE. Themes for upcoming community of practice meetings tend to be chosen as an outcome from the discussions that have been brought up in regular staff meetings. This community of practice allows staff to talk about things that they are struggling with and is a safe and welcoming space in which thoughts and feelings will be listened to and, where appropriate, acted upon. In fact, the meetings have helped with content for PIE training for all staff by identifying common themes.

Pobl is also committed to working with different departments within the service so that staff in all areas feel comfortable with a PIE approach, not just frontline staff who work with clients daily. They see it as crucial that all departments understand the meaning of being psychologically informed, so they have the tools to work with clients and colleagues in a trauma informed way, and that these approaches are consistent across the service. Within supported accommodation, 'house rules' are created in co-production with the residents. Residents decide what are fair house rules for all residents to follow. Pobl considers it integral to have residents make these decisions, as this accommodation is their home and tenants have the capacity to decide what should be expected as opposed to being told what to do and how to behave.

Taff Housing Association

Since 2018, Taff Housing Association has made a concerted effort to embed psychologically informed approaches in its services. One of the ways in which staff are supported to work in a trauma informed way is through 'trauma principles' workshops. All staff, including management, learn about what being 'trauma informed' means, and how staff can support clients who have experienced trauma.

Being psychologically informed is seen as important at all levels and in all departments. The organisation is keen to push PIE training, not just for support staff but also for the general needs and maintenance departments. For example, if someone has to visit a property to carry out repairs, but a tenant does not answer the door, the member of staff will not abandon their attempts. Frontline staff have also had training in non-violent resistance. Such training allows staff to feel confident when having to deal with uncomfortable or difficult situations, and in knowing how to handle such situations appropriately in a trauma informed way.

Taff has also removed its warning system and aims to deal with challenges using a more restorative approach, instead of threatening individuals with eviction. It is important to the organisation that conflict can be managed and resolved, as opposed to punitive measures that do not necessarily address the causes of such conflict. Some staff have gained an accreditation in restorative approaches so that they are able to train and support colleagues. As well as making those changes practically, the organisation has amended policies and procedures (for example, complaints procedures) to remove 'defensive language'. Complaints are dealt with by one person as a matter of urgency so that the clients know their complaints are taken seriously and that they are being listened to.

Taff delivers a variety of different projects and support people with a diverse range of backgrounds and needs. One area of their work is supporting refugees, providing practical support, as well as medical and emotional support. They also hold cultural sessions, whereby people can learn about one another's cultures and backgrounds. This way, refugees can experience and learn about the area in which they live, so they are able to feel part of the community. Staff also organised a trip to Barry Island, so people were able to explore and get to know an area that is an iconic cultural part of South Wales. This approach recognises the importance of being part of a community, to help people to feel safe and welcome, particularly after fleeing horrific traumas.

Taff also provides opportunities to people using their services through their reverse mentoring scheme. For example, someone using Taff's services has worked alongside the Chief Executive with the aim of providing her with an insight into the challenges and adversity that people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities often face daily.

The logo for Taff Housing Association, featuring the word "TAFF" in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. The letters are slightly irregular, with the 'A' having a white dot in the center and the 'F's having a white dot in the middle of their vertical strokes. The logo is positioned in the bottom right corner of the page.

The Wallich

The Wallich is a large homelessness charity which provides a wide range of services across Wales. Over a number of years, the organisation has embedded Psychologically Informed Environments within its services and continues to prioritise and develop its approach to becoming more psychologically informed.

The Wallich has a Head of PIE Operations role, which ensures there is a designated staff member in charge of developing psychologically informed approaches across its projects. The importance of being psychologically informed is emphasised during the staff induction process, with understanding and knowledge of this issue being integral to the work that the Wallich do. The organisation has also developed a PIE impact assessment toolkit, which allows projects to review their policies and procedures and consider whether they are psychologically informed.

In 2019, The Wallich introduced their 'Reflections Network'. The counsellors working for this service are private practitioners who work at a significantly reduced fee and offer as many sessions as an individual would like. The counsellors have had training on working with people with complex support needs and therefore know how to approach working with people who have co-occurring experience of trauma, mental health and substance use issues. Most importantly, there are no rules attached to working with the counsellor. For example, a person will not be removed from counselling if they don't attend a certain number of sessions.

The Wallich recognises the importance of funding for this service, without which the service would likely not exist. Over the last year, 4799 appointments had been offered to clients, with a 62% success rate of clients actively engaging with the service. Out of 279 appointments being offered for the first time, 76% of clients attended their first appointment, with 75% reporting improvement in their mental wellbeing (of those who have completed the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale with counsellors). Staff at the Wallich are pleased with the success rate of attended appointments, as people have previously struggled and faced challenges engaging, particularly when it comes to interacting with new people. The Reflections Network is a particularly important resource for people, as they are not expected to change their behaviours in order to be able to access support.

The Wallich is also leading a relatively new multi-agency partnership called 'Swansea NPT 360', which aims to support people with the most challenging circumstances to remain safe and happy in housing. The project is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, and delivered in partnership with Swansea Bay University Health Board, Barod, Crisis and the Welsh Refugee Council. The project seeks to embed a trauma informed approach and includes a multi-disciplinary Homeless Health Occupational Therapy team, which links services together and provide a single point of continuity for people.

