

Experts by Experience: Report to the Expert Review Panel Health & Social Care and Criminal Justice

April 2023

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 has provided 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 panel's consideration of possible legal duties on public services such as health, social care and criminal justice. It should be noted that people's contributions often touched on issues that may not be addressed by legislation, but we felt it was important to provide an authentic representation of people's views and experiences.

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. Engagement with experts by experience

We engaged with 70 people in advance of writing this paper. We conducted interviews with people who are being supported by some of our members in north Wales. We visited two different projects in south Wales that provide support to people who have recently left prison. We also made two visits to a Welsh prison, meeting with a group of men from the general prison population and with a group of men from a dedicated wing for people who are neurodivergent, have learning difficulties or are vulnerable for other reasons. In addition, we conducted an online survey, which had 35 responses. Opportunities to engage with this work were promoted through direct contact with Cymorth Cymru's member organisations, our mailing list and social media accounts.

Many of the people we spoke to had experienced significant trauma in their childhood and throughout their time as an adult. There were clear failures in the system, a lack of compassion from many professionals they had interacted with, and a real sense of desperation for change. This group, more than any other, felt that they were not treated with dignity or respect and had never been listened to. They were incredibly keen for their contributions to effect change to benefit other people in the future.

3. Health services

The experts by experience we spoke to during this work tended to focus on two key themes when they were talking about health services. The first related to the compassion and understanding shown by

health professionals towards people experiencing homelessness. Lots of people talked about feeling stigmatised and how health workers didn't seem to have a good understanding of the impact that trauma and homelessness has on people's lives and their ability to interact with health services. Some people talked about their own lack of confidence or knowledge in how to navigate systems, calling for greater patience and understanding within health services about how difficult this can be.

"Be more understanding of people."

"To be more aware of [our] circumstances."

"Listen and support the vulnerable person."

"I am only 17 and didn't know the process so they could be patient with me and help me to understand."

"I felt stupid and didn't know what I needed to do."

"Be more understanding that I may not be able to get to the doctors as easy because I have to stay at friends' houses in different areas."

A number of people emphasised the role that health services could play in preventing homelessness, by spotting the signs during health interactions and providing people with information, advice and support to help them to avoid homelessness.

"I was engaged with the GP and substance misuse services before I became homeless. They were fully aware of my circumstances but didn't do anything to prevent it. They waited for it to happen. I could have been referred on for help [to prevent homelessness]."

"[For health services] to be more in contact with homeless services."

"Give people more help to stop them becoming homeless."

"Provide housing support or advice."

"Help them find somewhere to go instead of on the streets."

3.1. Primary health care

One of the most common complaints raised by experts by experience was the challenge of getting registered with GPs and dentists, particularly if they were homeless and had no permanent address.

"Many GP's try to deter homeless people from registering as patients, telling them they need a fixed or permanent address to do so."

"No address, no service."

"Getting registered at a GP is nigh on impossible."

"Not make me find my NHS number before letting me register as I had no idea how to find it and they wouldn't let me register without it."

"A GP in [town] has the contract for homeless people. But they won't register people outside of the centre of town. So, if you're placed in temporary accommodation within the wider county, but outside of the town centre, you won't be registered."

"Help with more treatment letters of support GP to give and not charge for."

"Getting repeat prescriptions delivered to or at a hostel address can be a nightmare."

"I've now moved into supported accommodation and don't have an NHS dentist near me."

“Registering with an NHS dentist almost impossible.”

“Access to dentist for the whole UK population not just the homeless or those with NRPF or No Fixed Abode is truly abysmal. It would be great to see the right to an NHS dentist enshrined in UK law for everybody.

“Eye tests extremely difficult at best if transitory.”

“Migrants and refugees or undocumented people are also treated appallingly. I would like to see the charter with 'Free at the Point of use' mandatory displayed above the reception in every NHS surgery or dentist in the UK.”

The people we spoke to often had experiences of complex trauma from their childhood and throughout adulthood, but felt that this wasn't being understood by GPs. Some felt that this wasn't reflected in the referrals that GPs would make to mental health services, reducing the likelihood of them getting the appropriate response. Others called for GPs to read their notes and understand their background before appointments, as they found repeating their history both re-traumatising and a waste of the very limited time they have with their GP.

“Dr didn't read up on my background before the appointment, so I have to go through everything. The appointment is only ten minutes so that time is gone when I explain everything.”

“It took 3 referrals to get accepted by mental health. The GP surgery referral only included one sentence about why I need to be seen by mental health. It didn't mention my eviction, how I was sofa surfing, the head injury I'd had – only when I had help from support workers did the referral happen.”

As with much of our work on this legislative review, a common theme from experts by experience was the sense that they are experiencing stigma, judgement and being stereotyped by primary health care services. They didn't feel that they were being respected or listened to, and desperately wanted to be treated with dignity, respect and compassion. Several told us that without their support worker, they wouldn't have been listened to, or been given the health care they needed.

“I was always stereotyped as drug addict.”

“When I went to see my GP, they told me I was intimidating and to have a look at myself. It made me feel really bad.”

“If you ain't got a support worker in place, it's hard to see a GP or be heard.”

“Many, though not all GP receptionists, treat homeless people with a special contempt they would not dream of treating other members of the public with. Many need basic communication and basic manners training and appear to lack any meaningful compassion, interpersonal, empathy awareness or indeed even basic communication skills.”

“Educate and train reception staff and GPs.”

One person felt that GPs should step in if they suspect that someone is at risk of homelessness, to try and ensure they have access to the health services they need. They also felt that GPs could provide some kind of notice to landlords if they were at risk of mental health or physical health issues.

“When someone is on the verge of homeless local GP should issue them with some kind of Homeless Persons Medical card which would be effectively an NHS 'parachute' enabling them to access a GP, dentist, local vaccinations service (especially relevant during a pandemic) and issue a

'hold notice ' to landlords social or private on evictions especially no fault evictions if they feel that their patients mental wellbeing or physical health would be at risk by them being made homeless."

"GP didn't know I was at risk of homelessness but their inability to treat me correctly directly affected me becoming homeless."

"GP's should have the right to intervene with a support package prior to evictions using a Multi-Agency Approach such as is used with safeguarding. This would effectively raise a safeguarding issue for an individual at risk of homelessness and in an ideal world would trigger a response from a future ' Homeless Prevention & Mental Health Taskforce who could then step in on behalf of the patient."

3.2. Mental health and substance use

The majority of the health-related comments we received through our survey and in-person engagement were focused on mental health and substance use services. Most of the people we spoke to had experience of mental health and / or substance use issues and had struggled to get the help they needed, particularly if those two issues were co-occurring. Others called for mental health and substance use services to work more effectively with housing and with other services such as the job centre.

"Make sure people get all the right help mental health and addiction is the worst."

"We need more dual diagnosis places. People are self-medicating due to mental health problems."

"More doctors saying we can't treat you if you take drugs. But you need mental health services even more if you take drugs to self-medicate!"

"Need to have more mental health and substance use services in supported accommodation. More multi-agency working all in one place. People with complex needs and trauma need things to be simple and easy to access."

"Mental health, drug and alcohol, and job centre staff to work together."

3.3. Mental health

Some people told us that mental health services needed to intervene earlier to prevent people's mental health from deteriorating, prevent people turning to substances to self-medicate, and to prevent homelessness. Some talked about this needing to start in schools and others talked about mental health services intervening much more quickly when adults developed mental health problems.

"Offer mental health services at an earlier age and have more support in schools."

"Make it easier to access mental health services and to have mental health speeches in schools and colleges."

"I think when I had bad mental health that's what led to addiction and that's when things are hard because you only think of stopping your pain. Don't think of rent, food - just that. So, help [with mental health] before the addiction becomes bad."

There were some positive comments about people's experiences of mental health services. However, this often came after a lengthy wait, and access was often due to support workers advocating on behalf of the person.

“Psychiatrist is brilliant. It has been a wait to get the support I need, I’ve been in and out of psychiatric units. But when I was assigned my mental health worker she was really understanding. She could spot the signs when I was going downhill and enable quick access to the psychiatrist.”

Unsurprisingly, timely access to mental health services was a concern for most people we spoke to. Some were able to access help within homelessness services, but then struggled once they were in mainstream housing. Lengthy waiting lists were a common theme. Others talked about the referral process failing to capture the complexities of the challenges they faced, again pointing to GPs not communicating the appropriate information to mental health services.

“Make easier to access mental health services.”

“Mental health services to be linked up and quicker access to the services.”

“Was only able to contact mental health services when was in hostel.”

“Accessing Mental Health Professionals can be difficult. GPs put in lots of referrals only to be turned down each time and more and more evidence needs to be put in for WHY a person needs to have an assessment.”

“The waiting lasts are unbelievably appalling, these need reducing asap. It is 42 weeks to see a local CBT provider with the first appointment it is 58 weeks before a patient can see a CBT Complex counsellor.”

“I watched my mum die of sepsis and I was told to ‘get on with it’. I was added to a counselling waiting list.”

“I really struggle with my mental health. My GP thinks I have ADHD, bipolar and paranoid schizophrenia, but it has taken two years to see a psychiatrist. I’ve been on lots of meds, some have made it worse. Mum kicked me out because my mental health was so bad and I wasn’t able to get the help I need. I stayed with my sister but if she wasn’t there I would be on the streets. Two years is nuts.”

“Accessing mental health support or follow up aftercare almost impossible. Standard experience is an 6-8 hour wait only to be handed two diazepam and a cup of tea then told Mental Health Team would be in touch this invariably never happens and then asked if you’re at risk of suicidal ideation or self-harm then told to return to a hostel environment that is often knee deep in drugs, painkillers or pharmaceutical substances. This is not only verging on medical neglect but illogical to the point of absurdity.”

One person talked about people who have hoarding issues and this being a symptom of someone being very unwell with their mental health. They called for this to be recognised as an opportunity to provide mental health support and for evictions to be banned for people in this situation.

“Evictions for Hoarding should cease immediately since every single person I have met without exception with severe hoarding issues is usually clinically and diagnosable mentally unwell and requires treatment to help maintain their tenancy not eviction, punishment by being made homeless and criminalisation under the law. This is neither morally justifiable or humane.”

Some of the people we spoke to were in prison or had recently been in prison. They shared a variety of views and experiences of accessing mental health support in prison. Some people talked about being

able to access support inside the prison but found themselves on a two-year waiting list once they were released, at a particularly vulnerable transition in their lives.

“No mental health support in prison.”

“I had a bit of mental health support in prison. But I didn’t get the right type of support. They didn’t listen to what I wanted and needed.”

“In prison you rely on peer support. That’s important for mental health care.”

“Medication is the only thing that keeps you sane in here (prison).”

“I had mental health support inside (prison) but had to go onto a two-year waiting list when I was released.”

“Why can’t I join the mental health waiting list whilst I’m still inside?”

3.4. Substance misuse

On the whole, the comments about substance use services were more positive than mental health services, predominantly because people had been able to access them more quickly. However, lots of people called for more support to be available to reflect the number of people who are struggling with substance use issues at the current time. One of the issues raised by several people was the need for a greater variety of accommodation for people with substance use issues, so that people who were still using could do so in a safe way, but people who were trying to abstain could be placed in dry accommodation and stay away from active users. There was a sense from some people that access to the right service was a postcode lottery and varied depending on where you lived in Wales.

“More support around addiction.”

“Faster scripted for substance use.”

“More local chemists to prescribe in more areas.”

“Need more wet services and dry services for people who are still using and those who want to stop using.”

“Drug/Alcohol services need huge amount of funding and staff training with minimum standard imposed (by legislation if necessary) to ensure support does not degenerate into a postcode lottery.”

There were several positive comments made about the use of Buvidal for people with opioid dependencies, which increased hugely during the pandemic as it requires a monthly injection rather than a daily dose of methadone.

“Buvidal really worked for me. I never touched drugs again. More people need to have access to it. It’s more sustainable (to take once a month) than to take methadone (every day).”

“Before I had Buvidal I never had anything Since I’ve been on it Buvidal it has been brilliant -not touched any drugs for years.”

Lots of people talked about the stigma they faced due to their substance use issues. They said that building trust was really important and that substance use services should try to build those relationships, even if people are not ready to engage yet. There was a recognition that experiences of trauma and people being let down by public services had resulted in a lack of trust, which would take time to overcome.

“I’ve been asked ‘why are you an addict?’. You put me in this situation – bad mental health, substance use and now crime.”

“There’s stigma with my history with alcohol. I was voiceless. Pushed about, forgotten about. I have been let down by most of the organisations.”

“Important to build trust even when people don’t want to engage, then when they are ready to engage they have built that trusting relationship. People won’t open up if they don’t feel trust and experience stigma.”

One person shared the positive impact of having a drug worker who advocated for them whilst receiving treatment in hospital. This worker’s understanding of the person they were supporting, their empathy and compassion, and their willingness to challenge other health professionals resulted in the person getting the treatment and support they needed.

“They treated me like shit in hospital and didn’t give me my medication. But then (doctor from substance use team) arrived and told them ‘you haven’t given him his anti-psychotics or methadone, and he needs to come down off diazepam slowly’. He showed me sympathy and compassion.”

Although some people referenced positive relationships between substance use services and the homeless services they were using, others called for better collaboration between substance use services and housing. They also called for substance use services to provide more help with housing.

“Substance misuse services need to work better with housing.”

“Substance misuse service left me with housing application but offered no support to complete application. All they’ve done is prescribe you. No support.”

One of the people we spoke to was now receiving the support he needed, from his housing support worker and from substance use services. He asked us to share a message of hope in this report, highlighting how a good experience with services can have a really positive impact on people’s lives.

“Any addict and homeless person who is listening, there is always hope, even if you’ve been in the darkest room, if there’s one light, there’s hope - never give up hope.”

4. Social services

Although there were fewer comments about social services, there were some common themes about social services not intervening as early or as effectively as they should have. Several people called for better collaboration between social services and housing to try and resolve the challenges people were facing.

“Some social service intervention is lacking. I was put at further risk after going to social services. They did not try to gain a clear understanding of abuse and neglect I had grown up with. [...] Child protection did not intervene fast enough. After I ran away at 16, my young siblings endured 2 years of neglect and abuse.”

“I got kicked out at 11 years old. I slipped through the net. If I’d had support then I might not be here in prison. I’m now 45 years old.”

"I've been in and out of care all my life, since I was 18 months old. I was in foster care until 10 years old and then in a children's home. That's when my world started going wrong. As soon as people leave care they should be given someone that can be there supporting them, who is on the end of the phone line when they need them. Most people who have committed crime have been in care."

"I wasn't assigned a social worker by housing even though my adoption social worker put in 2 Multi Agency referral Forms. I moved away to be safe. They couldn't assign me a social worker as they didn't have housing duty of care. After 2 months I was assigned a social worker from where I used to live, but that's 30 minutes away. Meeting him next week for the first time, he's coming to see me but no idea if he will continue if I am sofa surfing so far away."

"I was in an abusive relationship, which was very controlling and I got cut off from my family. I had to leave the home for my own safety. Social services were involved, but when I left I didn't have a birth certificate to prove where I was from so wasn't given help by housing."

"Social services didn't help. Once a child has been removed from the home it is really difficult to get help from social services."

"Social services did not help or support me when I was homeless and currently involved in domestic violence. They were happy to see me and my kids live in my car and sofa surf."

"I'm not allowed to have my child living with me due to my homelessness [living in a hostel]. But I won't be given priority banding for social housing until I have proof from social services of having a child. It's a catch 22."

Others, who had experience with social services as a child or young person, talked about being moved from place to place, not being able to settle or have any sense of stability.

"Social services are terrible! Was moved from place to place no one taking responsibility."

"I was move from place to place. Moved from Wales, moved from Scotland, moved from England."

One of the common themes repeated throughout this report is how people want to be listened to and supported. Some people found it difficult to engage with social services due to stigma, others encountered cultural and language barriers. When asked what social services could do better to prevent and respond to homelessness, people asked for understanding, support and to be listened to.

"Help. Understand, support, not assume."

"Listen and support. I have no faith in social services, as they did not help me but in fact made my health worse."

"Finding it difficult to engage with social services. Language and cultural barriers [from Afghanistan]. Finding it hard to engage with the system. Not having a lot of help."

Some people felt that social services were under staffed and needed greater capacity to provide high quality support to people who needed it.

"Employ more social workers. Don't overload one worker with too many cases and allow them to focus on one."

"Get better trained publicly accountable and qualified Social Care staff."

While some people said that social services had helped them to get accommodation, the majority called for social services to provide more help with housing, work more effectively with housing services in the council and play a greater role in preventing or responding to homelessness.

"I got a flat due to support from social services."

"Need more options for help in housing"

"Helping with financial support."

"Look into families more and consider if homelessness may occur further down the line."

"Offer more support, help finding homes."

"Support me where I am sofa surfing and help me."

"Please someone just help me where I feel safe to live."

Some people talked to use about the need for social services to work more closely with housing services to ensure that people who were vulnerable due to learning difficulties or disabilities were not placed in inappropriate accommodation where they could be at risk of exploitation.

"They're putting people with learning difficulties or disabilities in inappropriate accommodation. They're vulnerable and could be exploited."

5. Criminal Justice System

A number of people told us about their experiences of homelessness and how this had led to then being caught up in the criminal justice system.

"I got kicked out of home at a young age and turned to drugs. I wouldn't sleep on the streets, I was paranoid something would happen to me, so I used drugs to stay awake. This led to crime and jail. I'm 17 years old. I struggled with mental health issues but there was nothing there to help."

"I lived with my partner. She got arrested and when I came home from work the council had changed the locks. I started sofa surfing and was told I had to start selling drugs to be allowed to stay on their sofa. I hadn't been in prison since I was 16. I'd had a home and a job. But then I was arrested for dealing drugs and I'm now in prison at age 39."

"If you haven't got a home then you can't get a job. So, you have to sell drugs."

A number of people advocated for people to be supported with the challenges they faced and for the response to people experiencing homelessness to be less punitive and more supportive.

"Try to treat homelessness as a social issue / social prescribing issue rather than participate in the further criminalisation and marginalisation of already vulnerable and in some cases addicted or mentally ill individuals with long PTSD term trauma issues some as far back as childhood or PTSD from former service veterans."

5.1. Police service

Many participants described having had negative experiences of the police, feeling judged because of their homelessness or previous criminal record, and how this contributed to a lack of trust in the police.

“There’s so much stigma and judgement. Once you’ve got a record, you’ll always be labelled as a criminal. It doesn’t matter what you do to rectify it, they still judge you.”

“Don’t impose Vagrancy Bill - its archaic and primitive.”

“All services need more compassion.”

“Whilst I was rough sleeping, someone tried to stab me. I called the police, and I was taken to be interviewed in the station. They took all my possessions – including a new tracksuit that had been donated to me and my trainers – and then kicked me out in paper clothes and foam slippers. I was homeless and was given no help. I felt traumatised and like I had been treated as the criminal. I was a victim of other crimes but didn’t want to report it. I was afraid I would be treated like that again.”

Following an unlawful eviction and the landlord destroying his belongings, one person told us about his struggles trying to get hold of the police officer who was dealing with his case and how difficult it was to get information and access justice for what had happened to him. He felt that stigma around his history was playing a part in the poor response he received.

“Trying to get hold of police officer, struggled to get hold of her, phone calls to station, couldn’t get through, I decided to speak to more senior organisation, then they closed the investigation. Lack of communication between police. They asked whether I had any receipts to prove what you’ve lost, which is impossible.”

One participant detailed their experiences with the police as a young man of south Asian heritage.

“I used to get pulled over in my car constantly. I was 17 years old and had a decent job. I wasn’t doing anything, but it would always be random stop-and-search checks. Race is a factor - I know other people from my community who have experienced this.”

A number of people talked about how they or their peers had been in positions of vulnerability but did not feel that the police provided an appropriate duty of care. They felt that there were missed opportunities for people to get the help and support they needed, which could have prevented homelessness, exploitation or abuse.

“I was once in town in the early hours and had been drinking. I was in a really bad state with my mental health. I had been being a nuisance, but I wasn’t being violent. Police came over to me and I was in tears and said to them, ‘I don’t want to be here anymore’. They said they didn’t care and told me to get in the police van. I was really vulnerable, I had no intention of making it home that night. This was my cry for help, and I think the police should have a duty of care.”

“My life had been threatened and I went to the police for help. I had to leave school before my GCSE’s as school couldn’t keep me safe. I didn’t feel safe where I lived. I left home and went somewhere else where I did feel safe. The housing there wouldn’t help me unless the police gave a letter to say that my life was at risk. The police said they could give a letter as I didn’t make the criteria. In the meantime, I’m too scared to go back to where I used to live but can’t live anywhere else. Proof that I wasn’t safe at school, proof of threats on social media to kill me, letters from my psychotherapist saying that I was at risk didn’t make any difference. They are the people that know me and no one could help me so I’m now sofa surfing and have no means of having a safe place to live unless I go back to the place where I am scared for my life.”

“There has to be an agreement between police and councils when a person is being cuckooed or intimidate din their home. They go to the council for help to be moved and they will don nothing unless it is reported to the police. They have a fear of reporting something like this to the police so they become homeless to get away from a situation.”

A number of people have talked to us about how they have received a poor response from police when they have been the victim of a crime. One person told us that the police were repeatedly contacting him and making him re-live the trauma of childhood abuse. It was having a significant impact on this mental health and putting him at greater risk of homelessness and prison.

“I’ve been giving evidence since 1997 in court about childhood abuse. I continue to give evidence to bring people to justice. But I’m getting older now, I need a rest. The nightmares that I have are horrific. The PTSD is through the roof. I almost need to go back into prison just to have a break from the police constantly calling me. They won’t stop getting in touch with me. I don’t want to keep reliving this trauma. I want to get on with my life. The way victims are treated needs to change and not retraumatise people.”

This is echoed by some of the experiences outlined in a previous Experts by Experience paper, which share the stories of survivors of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence.

“The perpetrator started a campaign of sending the police to my house – sometimes in middle of the night, and on Mother’s Day. I was in total despair. I was worried about social pressure of people seeing police turn up. The landlord said the neighbours were getting worried about police turning up and complaining, which could have put my tenancy at risk. This must stop, if there is no valid reason, they should not be coming. The perpetrator is using police as tool to threaten me. I’m scared of the police – it was a violence to me to have the police knocking on the door, how it affects me, my surroundings, neighbours’ judgement. The police are a threat to homelessness.”

“The police were ok most of the time but sometimes I felt I was making a nuisance. I’d been told to log everything, write everything down. But I felt like a nuisance.”

“The police would come around and I would say he had threatened to kill me, and the police said ‘Really, would he?’. I don’t want to have to retell the whole thing - you should know what has happened. I shouldn’t have to go through it all again for you to take me seriously.”

5.2. Entering prison

A number of people told us about the problems they faced when being sent to prison, including building up rent arrears, losing their tenancy and losing their belongings. They said that this made it even more difficult to have a fresh start when they came out of prison and therefore put them at greater risk of homelessness and re-offending.

“I lost my flat when I came to prison.”

“Lost my property when I went to prison. My property wasn’t stored properly, I lost photos of my children and the only photo I had of my child who died.”

“I was only in jail a year and would have liked to put my property in storage. I lost my cooker, fridge, everything. When I came out of ail I had nothing.”

“They gave my mum two hours to get everything out of the house. I had sofas, new carpets and lost everything. When I’m released I have to start all over again.”

"I don't have any family support, so I lost all of my belongings, they were disposed of. We should be able to put things in storage."

"When I was sentenced I lost my property and I lost my belongings. I couldn't get hold of my landlord and he disposed of my belongings."

"I had half an hour to pack. I took a suitcase and my mum's ashes. I lost everything else. There's no compassion. Your belongings are your life. Without them you feel like just another number."

Others talked about pressure from their social landlord to give up their tenancy, confusion over whether they had retained the tenancy, and the impact of having to pay rent during their sentence in order to keep hold of the property so they weren't homeless on release.

"I've got the financial burden of having to pay previous housing costs. It took a long time to close the flat after being recalled to prison. The paper work was delayed. I was billed for the rent during that period, so I had more debt. My white goods are still in the flat even though I no longer occupy it. Prison rang the housing association to try and sort out the housing issues and belongings, but they said I wasn't a tenant. However, on release they said I was a tenant and they needed to collect the rent arrears and other costs."

"I've got a property with [housing association]. I'm in prison for two and a half months. I've been sent a letter [from the housing association] telling me I had to sign to hand over my tenancy, but I'm refusing to because I might be out soon. Hoping to get DHP to cover interim rent."

"Housing association told me if I didn't give up my tenancy they had a shit hot lawyer and would take me to court."

5.3. Time in prison

Most prisoners described feelings of hopelessness of being in system that they felt didn't support them to reintegrate back into society.

"I'm lost in the system."

"This is one hell of hard system to get out of."

"I'm just a number in the system."

"Mistakes follow you everywhere."

Several people talked about the difficulties they had with their health and accessing health care while they were in prison. Many felt that this was a missed opportunity for them to get the treatment and support they needed, so that they would have a greater chance of avoiding homelessness and re-offending when they were released.

"When I was in a Cat B prison, I noticed my health declining. I thought I had MS, but I kept getting locked away as they suspected I had covid (even though I hadn't been tested.) When I arrived at the open prison (Cat D), I was rushed to hospital because I was fitting. I was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes."

"In prison I sometimes got help for mental health, but there were lots of bad times. [talked about suicide he witnessed]. You can buy drugs off the screws, there are more drugs in jail than outside, but they are more expensive inside."

"Went to mental health in jail cos I needed it. But they didn't listen to what I wanted."

"In prison they didn't want to know if I was ill. I lost 7 stone. I was locked up for 24 hours a day for 9 days in a row with suspected COVID but I didn't get a test for 9 days!"

"You have to be escorted by a member of prison staff if you want to see a GP but this isn't always possible due to capacity."

"It took four months for a referral for mental health support in prison."

5.4. Release from prison: Access to housing

The lack of housing on release from prison was the most common issues raised by people who were currently in prison or had recently been incarcerated. The vast majority said that this was the issue that would make the most difference to whether they re-offended. Most had experienced being released from prison into homelessness, and described how difficult this had been when trying to cope with the transition back into society. A lack of housing on release was their greatest fear.

"I was out in 2018 but probation told me I wasn't priority need and there was nothing they could do. They gave me a sleeping bag and I was left on the streets."

"I'm being told I'm vulnerable but I'm also not priority need."

"I know when I get out that I won't be a priority. I'd prefer to just stay here."

"Biggest worry is that I'm going to get out of prison and told I'm not priority need."

"I got out of jail but the council told me I was intentionally homeless. They said 'it's your fault' because I was kicked out of a hostel. But this was because someone hit me."

"I was told I was intentionally homeless – but I was escaping violence."

"I went through 13 years of hell because of intentionality. I was beat up, stamped on [on the streets]."

"I'm booked into BASS accommodation but then I'll need to present to the council. I can't make a housing application yet because it hasn't reached 56 days before that accommodation ends."

"Housing application was done 3 months before release. Housing received it and referred me to the prisoner support services but didn't set up housing."

"Housing is really hard. I've been out since 3rd February and I still don't know where I'm going to live. [Temporary accommodation] is fine, but I can't call it home. This could have all been solved while I was in jail."

"The system sucks as it's left me with no safe place to live and I've just turned 17."

"I was released into a BASS hostel out of area. The first day I came out I was asking so many questions about support, medication and doctors because I was nervous and unwell - and the BASS worker tried to get me recalled to prison."

"Probation wasn't helpful and my Universal Credit was messed up. I was still in my prison tracksuit three weeks after being released from prison. I thought this was part of my punishment. Without [support worker] I would probably have committed suicide."

"The prison dropped me off in [local authority] but then it turned out I wasn't allowed to be here. I had to spend £35 of my discharge grant on a taxi to [local authority] as I wasn't allowed to go on the train within the area that was included in my restrictions. Probation officers in the two local authorities didn't talk to each other."

“On the day of release you don’t know where I’m going to be.”

“Prison told me everything was in order, that I’d have somewhere to go. I had an end date for my BASS hostel stay. But the day before no one knows what is happening. Couldn’t get hold of the council or probation. No one knew what was happening. Do I pack, do I not? Then the BASS accommodation got extended.”

“When I got out of prison the local authority gave me a tent and I lived in it for three weeks. It’s stressful getting out of prison as it is. I felt vulnerable, it’s embarrassing. I should have a roof over my head. I’m worried the same thing is going to happen when I get released this time. They are setting you up to fail. Should be able to register in advance with the council [for housing].”

“All paperwork was done well in advance. Yet come to that day and nothing.”

“Probation offered me a tent. I refused and got put into a B&B. I was angry at how I’d been treated and I smashed up my room. I then got recalled.”

“When I was last out and spoke to probation, they just gave me a tent and a sleeping bag.”

Lots of people talked about the need for their housing to be dealt with much earlier in their sentence and saw this period of time as an opportunity to try and resolve their housing issues so they wouldn’t need to be released into homelessness.

“Prison could do a tenancy ready course with inmates.”

“Resettlement should be caught at the beginning of the prison sentence, not at the end.”

“There’s a two-year waiting list [for social housing] and I have a 23-month sentence. Why can’t I go on the housing waiting list at the start of my sentence so it’s ready when I’m released? If I have no housing then I’ll be back in prison.”

“I’ve done 9 months. But I don’t have housing, so I’ll have to stay here for an extra 6 months.”

“Six months before release the council, housing, probation and prison need to work together to understand people’s needs and the right place for the person to go.”

“In jail you should have help to fill in all of the [housing] forms. 6 months before release you should be able to go on the council waiting list and be able to go into your own flat when you leave prison.”

“Help find a safe place to stay for the night at least.”

“Make it compulsory to have somewhere to go to reduce the chance of re-offending. Prisons try but short sentences got no chance.”

“There should be no prison release on a Friday.”

Some people talked about not wanting to be released into approved premises of particular homelessness accommodation where they thought they would be vulnerable to using substances or where it was really difficult for them to get to their probation appointments or health appointments. This tied into the previous Experts by Experience evidence on the suitability and location of temporary accommodation.

“I’m vulnerable to using drugs in release. I want to go to my mother’s until I find a flat, but social services won’t let me. They want to put me on approved premises with people using drugs.”

“They put you in hotels where most people are on licence, ex-criminals, drug dealers. How are you supposed to succeed in that environment? It blows me away how they set you up to fail.”

"I'm from Neath but was put in accommodation in Crosshands. I had to take two bus journeys to get to probation. I was moved to four different temporary accommodation places in three months. I had nowhere to cook, nowhere to wash my clothes."

"I was placed in a B&B far away, so I had to walk 90 minutes every day to get my methadone."

"I'd rather stay here [in prison] than be in temporary accommodation or a hotel. There's no end time for temporary accommodation, there's so much uncertainty."

5.5. Release from prison: Access to services and support

A number of people told us that they felt ill-prepared to deal with the transition from prison into the community, particularly those who had been in prison for a long time and weren't confident with technological developments and being able to use mobile phones or computers. Lots of people said they weren't sure what help was on offer outside of prison, whereas others gave positive examples of how they had been supported to develop independent living skills.

"I've been in prison a long time, I don't know how to use a mobile."

"In the months leading up to release you should be able to develop independent living skills. I don't know how to use a mobile phone, a laptop or how to make appointments."

"I didn't know what was on offer outside of prison. There was no help with anything. I didn't know what was available to me."

"I was put in a D-Cat prison for the last few months. It was setting me up for release, I was able to earn a wage and had money going into my bank account."

Lots of people talked about the importance of having a support service to help them to navigate the first few days, weeks and even months after release from prison.

"People leaving prison should be given support workers."

"You need to be able to build trust with one person. It would be good to have a support worker before you leave prison. At least 2 months to build a relationship and good rapport. Someone to ask what your needs will be once you get out."

"People who have lost their home, lost their belongings, are traumatised, often don't have family connections or relationships. Need one point of contact to help them navigate the system after being released from prison."

"There should be someone involved 2-3 months before release, and that same person should continue supporting them after release. They will have built trust and hope, and will motivate people to push forward. If there's inaction then people lose momentum."

"Previously, newly released inmates were taken to new accommodation on release by accompanying social worker staff with a support package and paperwork in place. [...] often people present at the wrong hostels on the wrong days and in the wrong town with often no more than a scrap of paper with an address, no medication and no paperwork. This presented huge safeguarding risks to other residents, staff and the wider community as well as leaving newly released inmates at risk of reoffending or drug and alcohol relapse as a result of being bounced round from pillar to post."

A number of people advocated for peer support services to support people on the day of release and help them to sort out their accommodation, benefits and access to health and support services.

“A peer mentor picked me up from prison and took me to the council. The support was really beneficial. He stayed with me for a few hours to make sure I was ok, that I had what I needed.”

“There should be more support from peer mentors, who understand what you’ve been through. They should meet you at the gate on release and show you how to sort everything out.”

“Peer mentors should pick you up at the gate and take you where you need to go.”

Several people talked about issues with their benefits claims when they were released from prison, despite efforts being made to address this before release. This had a range of impacts on people, from putting their accommodation at risk to leaving them with no food or having to live in their prison clothes because they couldn’t afford to buy new clothes.

“I filled in the forms in prison to do my DWP claim. I was released on a Friday and went to my appointment at the job centre but I was told I had to do a new claim. I had to come back on the Monday to redo the claim, which delayed it. I didn’t get any backdated payment for the Friday and over the weekend. They wonder why people want to be recalled to prison.”

“There was confusion about whether Universal Credit or ESA were going to take the lead with my benefits. UC gave me an advance payment but it ran out. I had an ESA letter but they said they hadn’t received it. So, I had no money and no food. My support worker rang them three times. Without support I wouldn’t have got it. I would have given up when I was told no.”

“Phone calls take a long time, you don’t have credit, your phone doesn’t have charge.”

Others talked about difficulties accessing mental health services on release from prison, or not meeting the threshold for social services.

“They didn’t make any plans for mental health or substance use services on release.”

“There are massive waiting lists for mental health services.”

“Medication is key when you have mental health problems. People stop taking their medication because of the challenges of being released. They should fund a delivery service or provide hotspots for people to access their medication. They should provide more support for people to help them to stay on their medication when they leave prison.”

“Mental health support in prison is useful but waiting lists in the community are really long. By the time you get to see them your mental health has deteriorated too much.”

“On release I didn’t meet the social services threshold.”

One project we visited told us that they are commissioned by the council to work with people who are approaching their release date. They are involved in the last two months before release and go into the prison, explain the housing duties owed to people when they leave prison, work on the plan for their release, link in with health care and the resettlement team, link in with the council’s housing team and try to secure priority need status.

Another example that appeared to work well was a substance use project working with people in prison and ensuring that they have medication sorted out for their first ten days after release, and then work

with the person in the community. This helped to smooth the transition and ensure people had the medication they needed and were able to focus on other resettlement issues such as housing.

A number of people talked about the importance of having structure to their day, of engaging in activities or having a job. They reflected on leaving a highly structured environment in prison to one where they had lots of freedom, which could result in them re-offending.

“Without the structure of prison, it’s hard. You just end up wanting to go back.”

“Make prison leavers fill they days up by doing activity or working to fill they days better to limit their free time to stop them doing crime.”

“There’s no structure coming out, you’re going to lose the plot. You’ll get into trouble and go back in, you need structure when coming out!”

“If I had a job and a house I wouldn’t have used drugs. I’m constantly mixing with friends who are doing drugs because I have no home.”

5.6. Probation service

There were varied views of the probation services from the people we spoke to. Some had positive experiences of probation officers, whereas others felt that the probation service was almost looking for them to fail. Some people said that they would have liked to have seen their probation officer for a longer period of time, and that probation services should work with people until they are absolutely sure that they are settled and the risk of homelessness and re-offending is low. Others talked about the impact of staff turnover in probation services, where they built rapport and trust with their probation worker, but then had to start again with a new member of staff.

“Probation officer was quite good, but only saw him 3-4 times.”

“Probation should make sure that people are set up with local housing and not disengage completely until a person is settled in.”

It’s difficult when probation officers change. You build rapport but then the next guy doesn’t understand.”

“Probation are always looking at how you’re breaching your conditions, not how you’re doing yourself. So, it’s a revolving door.

“Probation threatened to get me recalled cos I had no address.”

A few people told us that they had been recalled due to missing probation appointments or for alleged crimes they did not commit. This was similar to some of the comments about missing health appointments, and didn’t always consider the trauma and challenges facing people who were making the transition from prison into the community. They shared examples where this had caused significant disruption to their lives, again putting their housing at risk.

“I was recalled by probation. It took 3 months to investigate and then it was decided there was no further action. I had a job, a car, but all of this was being put on hold.”

“If you miss three probation appointments then they can give you a 28 day lie down [recall to prison]. But they can then decide to keep you in for longer and end up doing 18 months as that’s how long is left on your licence.”

Some people who had been released from prison talked about the restrictions they faced in terms of where they were allowed to live. This was partly due to local connection rules with temporary accommodation and social housing allocations, but was also affected by the probation service's restrictions on where they could live. We spoke to some people who were clearly distressed by the restrictions that had been placed on them, some because they feared for their safety, and others because they were unable to be close to their family. There was a definite sense that there needed to be much better communication and join up between local authority housing departments and probation services to try and establish where someone could be housed on release.

"Some of us don't want to come back to our home county. Because I was born in [county] I have to come back here. I don't go into town much, there's days when I'm really nervous. I asked if I could go to Bangor or Wrexham but I was told no, you have to go to your own area. I'm nervous about my safety. I want to go somewhere where no-one knows me and get on with my life."

"I was living in shared accommodation in Wrexham. I didn't have anywhere to go but my dad was in Powys. But probation didn't let me go there because I would be 40 miles from the victim. So, then I was let out onto the streets because I didn't have local connection in Wrexham."

"Probation keep releasing me to England. Welsh councils refuse to take me because I'm not from Wales and have no local connection. But I have kids in Wales. I need to be near my kids so I live here. there and everywhere, breaching probation restrictions because I need to be near my kids. But probation won't work with the council in Wales to get me a hostel."

"I get released to north Wales but I don't want to be there. I have no family, I was abused as a child up there. I know it's going to happen again."

"They gave me a tent last time I got out. I'd rather stay with my mum. But 10-15 years ago, I had an argument at home with my mum and got arrested. Even though my relationship with my mum is fine, it's still on my records, and probation won't let me go back there [on release]."

A few people we spoke to expressed frustration at the amount of time it took probation to approve private rented sector properties for people leaving prison. They told us that they had been able to secure the housing, but probation took three weeks to approve it, and by that point it was no longer available. Another person said that they got a property approved by probation and paid a £700 bond to secure the property – but then a risk assessment was conducted by the public protection unit and the property was deemed unsuitable.

"People will make plans and then a risk assessment will change everything."

"I was on licence for three years but there were no home checks. Then probation couldn't find me on their system. No one was checking where I was staying, there weren't bothered where I was. I couldn't get information or prove my situation. So, I couldn't get a house. It's one of the reasons I'm in prison. I had to house-hop."

5.7. Neurodiversity and learning disabilities

On our second visit to Parc Prison, we visited prisoners on a wing that housed people who were neurodivergent, had learning difficulties or disabilities, or who were vulnerable for other reasons. We also spoke to a number of people who were under probation services who had a range of learning difficulties, ADHD or autism.

“Housing options need to be more trauma informed. You’re penalised for ‘bad behaviour’, but this is just how my brain works.”

“Support networks are key.”

“I’m institutionalised. I don’t know how to use technology. My head is in bits.”

“I feel intimidated approaching house services in prison.”

“I slip through the net wherever I go.”

One prison leaver we spoke to told us of his experiences of being recalled. Due to the nature of his offences, he tended to avoid the town centre in his community and felt nervous to travel to probation meetings. His support worker told us that he had a learning difficulty and struggled to understand the conditions of his release, resulting in him accidentally revealing information about himself or embarking on a path that could lead to him committing further crimes and being recalled.

It was clear that lots of people who were neurodivergent or had learning difficulties had been let down by various systems and services, and their homelessness and offending could have been prevented if they had received the help they needed earlier in their lives.

5.8. Access to legal advice and justice

Some people told us that they had struggled to get access to legal advice and justice.

“I was unlawfully evicted in 2019 and the landlord threw out all of my possessions. I have been sofa surfing ever since. I’m trying to take the landlord to court but I am struggling to get a solicitor, most say that they wouldn’t support me due to lack of legal aid funding. The landlord has a solicitor so I am worried about not having one. I’m getting help from citizens advice, but this is limited.”

Another person told us how a false accusation against him caused huge amounts of stress and worry. He was accused in May 2022 but had to wait until January 2023, at which point it was dismissed out of court. This was reflected in some of the conversations we had with people in prison and under the probations service, who told us that lengthy waiting times for accusations to be investigated or for cases to reach court were putting them at greater risk of homelessness.

6. Education and youth services

There were some positive comments about the role that schools, colleges and youth services have played in helping young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

“They do a good job of trying to help.”

“My old college helped me get into a homeless shelter when I was forced to sleep on the streets by my mum.”

“I went by my local youth service, and they put me in touch with the right people, after that I was moved into temporary accommodation pretty fast.”

“I accessed Info services in my local area, and they directed me to the council.”

“I think my youth service did a great job at helping me.”

Others had a poor experience when they needed help. Some highlighted the lack of appropriate response when they were experiencing abuse at home, or if they were neurodivergent or had learning difficulties. They felt that this had a significant impact on their lives, often resulting in people falling out of the education system, and contributing to them becoming homeless. The importance of listening non-judgementally and trying to understand how young people are feeling came up with a number of people:

"[They should] speak with the person to listen and understand how they feel."

"School and social services had chances to see the abuse I was telling them about at home but did nothing. This led to be being kicked out of home."

"I did not learn about housing in school or at college."

"I did not go to the College as I didn't think they would do anything to help."

"I have a learning difficulty, but it was undiagnosed when I was at school. I was always labelled the 'naughty' kid and got kicked out of lessons. I ended up playing up to it."

"I went to 10 different schools, I was getting kicked out constantly, probably due to my ADHD."

"My learning difficulties were not picked up, I was always branded the naughty kid."

Lots of respondents focused on how schools and colleges could play an important role in educating young people about homelessness, how to manage a tenancy and where to get help if they become at risk of homelessness.

"Teach money management."

"Have more visits to schools and colleges."

"Education on right to accommodation and right to repairs and how tenancy agreements work, along with info from Shelter, Crisis."

"We need to learn life skills. About tenancies, how to pay bills, basic cooking."

"Young people need life skills. If they grow up in homelessness and abuse, who's going to teach them?"

"College and high school do more on budgeting and real-life independent skills."

"School should be teaching you life skills and about tenancies."

There were also practical suggestions about how staff in schools and colleges could support young people who were experiencing homelessness, mental health problems or financial difficulties.

"Focus more on the signs of homelessness."

"Have mental health professionals to work alongside schools and colleges."

"Check on welfare of students."

"Help make sure they have a safe place to go for the night."

"Understanding their situation and not giving them too much work. Allow them to have regular breaks during school. Offer counselling."

"Homeless Prevention & Support worker in every school, college or university in the UK."

"Help out financially, bus, food."