

Platform response to the Local Government and Housing Committee inquiry into Housing for Vulnerable People

Key messages:

- **Understanding the role of a support worker:** We need Welsh Government, members of the Senedd, professionals across Wales and the public, to have a greater understanding of the role that support workers play in prevention of homelessness and other harms – and also the work they do to connect to people in serious distress.
- **Increasing need:** our public service ‘safety net’ is failing people, that as a result people are arriving in the housing system with a lifetime of unmet need and that creates huge distress and pain for people we support within services. This is not a sign that people “have” complex needs, but a clear indication that our public services cannot provide people the support they need, at the time when they need it, and instead services are picking people up at crisis point when all else has failed.
- **Coordinating between services:** housing support has a key role to play in the coordination of services and is relied on to link professionals together, to hold people in periods of distress, to connect people to the right services at the right time, and to act as an often-unofficial advocate for people who are struggling. Often, housing support acts in this role whilst at the same time not always receiving professional recognition for this from other services.
- **Growing trend towards larger specialist homelessness accommodation:** we are concerned about the growth of larger supported housing units, in blocks, designed for exclusive use in housing people experiencing homelessness. We do not believe this is an effective or safe development, despite the best work of respected providers and landlords in this space. This should not be an option that we adopt more widely across Wales and runs counter to the principles of rapid rehousing.
- **Key elements of the Housing Support Grant legacy and structure can sometimes hold us back:** particularly, the inconsistent application of ‘eligibility’ criteria is one that in some areas holds us back from making creative, progressive choices for service delivery, that we know would benefit the person accessing support.
- **Funding challenges, exacerbated by the National Insurance changes, continue to be a barrier for service providers.**
- **Support work can be a difficult role and often involves serious incidents and we believe this needs a clear commitment for clinical supervision to be incorporated into every service commissioning specification.**
- **We need commissioners to agree to a minimum salary level when commissioning, set at the Real Living Wage level.** As a reminder, there are commissioners that are accredited Real Living Wage employers for their own staff, who still commission at a level that does not allow commissioned services to pay salaries at that level and remain sustainable.

About Platform

Platform was born in 2019 from Gofal, a mental health charity established in Wales in the late 1980s. Through decades of working across housing and mental health, we gained real insight into the reality of mental health in society, the impact of trauma, and

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the causes of distress. That work led us to change our focus and become Platform, the charity for mental health and social change.

Today we work with over 13,000 people a year. We support people of all ages, across urban and rural communities, in people's homes and alongside other services. Our work spans inpatient settings, crisis services, community wellbeing, supported housing and homelessness, businesses, employment, counselling, schools and youth centres.

Understanding the role of a support worker

Our core message, before we approach the questions set by the Committee, is the need for politicians, officials and other stakeholders – and the public – to better understand the role of a support worker. The people in these roles are fundamental to working alongside people in distress, and yet in a society where we rightly acknowledge the vital roles of NHS staff, and care workers, the role that support workers play goes all too often overlooked.

Broadly, tenancy support is offered in two areas: floating support and 'fixed' support, typically within supported accommodation.

Floating support is offered to people who are holding a tenancy, either within temporary accommodation, supported accommodation, or with their own tenancies either through a social or private landlord. Depending on the nature of the accommodation, and particularly the needs of the person, this can be difficult for many reasons.

Floating support means that more people can be seen, and often they are people with lower levels of need¹. However, it can mean that support workers find it harder to build close relationships with the people they support, as quickly as they would like. It also means support workers can spend a lot of time worrying about how someone is coping. A lot of their work is focused on coaching, supporting people to live more *interdependently*², so that eventually the support can end. At Platform, we try to keep our doors open to people returning if they hit a crisis point, but again that is very dependent on the relationships we have with commissioners.

'Fixed support', usually within supported accommodation, tends to be focused on people experiencing higher levels of distress, who have longer-term disadvantage and have been made more vulnerable by society and our systems. This can look like mental health distress, reliance on substances to regulate, or other factors.

Supported accommodation is an incredibly rewarding role – but it is also a hugely difficult one. Increasingly, we are seeing people who have been let down by the system hugely, and as a result can need much more time and support to feel safe and secure in their accommodation.

¹ We return to the concept of "lower levels of need" further along in the submission.

² We use the phrase *interdependently* in place of *independently*, because no person whether receiving services or not is truly independent. Everyone needs connections, support and help in their life. The pursuit of "independence" is not helpful, but working with people to connect them to communities and to other people is one of the best ways of preventing, or reducing the impact of, or recovering from, distress.

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This year to date, we have had 14 serious incidents (risk to the individual or public/staff, high level safeguarding concerns, or violent offences), compared to 9 in total for the last financial year. Whilst these numbers are not high as a proportion of our total tenancies or people we support, each one reflects significant risk or challenge both for the individual tenant, as well as for staff. Total anti-social behaviour (these are not serious incidents but are considered still high risk) for the year to date is 36. This cannot be compared to last year due to data system changes, but our assumption is that it has increased, leading us employ an additional housing officer to support. Notices served last year were 3 in total, and in the year to date, 6. Abandonments have doubled from 2 last year, to 5 this year to date. This concerns us from a support perspective, because it means someone's mental health may have deteriorated to the point where they cannot cope and may be returning to homelessness. We are confident these figures are comparative with those of other providers across Wales, we are sure this is a challenge that all providers and social landlords are facing. We believe it reflects a need for more bed spaces, or community mental health support. The lack of move-on accommodation has entrenched people into supported accommodation, and problems can worsen – or people can feel vulnerable when they need to leave (based on the two-year funding limit for supported accommodation stays).

Within support, our colleagues can witness very difficult and traumatic events. They have lost people to suicide, they have seen threatening behaviour from visitors, or sometimes from the distressed tenants themselves. They must navigate the right line with substance use, between reporting every instance and risking someone's tenancy, and safeguarding the person and the other guests. They must balance potential evictions in the most serious circumstances, with their own desire not to make someone homeless. They are witness to people often in their lowest ebb, and will sit without judgement, and listen. They have, rarely, but occasionally, been assaulted. They build strong connections with tenants, and try to build good communities within the accommodation, and they also work hard to maintain positive relationships with the wider community around them.

Increasing need

People who become homeless have fallen through every other safety net we have in place. They are people that have been excluded from every other service, labelled as 'too complex', and then experience public hostility when sleeping rough. They are people who have been failed – by lack of housing, by generational poverty, by intergenerational trauma, failure of systems, lack of resources for communities, schools that couldn't understand them, health systems that couldn't meet their needs in the right way. What looks to the outside as an increased complexity of need, is fundamentally about the failure of our public services in a harmful and painful way.

We cannot sugar coat the situation for people. We are seeing, after 14 years of austerity and historic underfunding of the public sector, systemic collapse. There is not enough housing for people who need it. That continues to lead to the widespread use of temporary accommodation to plug that gap (sometimes with support, sometimes not). We know that temporary accommodation is harmful in the long-term. We shared evidence to this fact with the Finance Committee, whilst copying the submission to this Committee too, in November 2024.

Temporary accommodation currently costs local authorities £99m per year, and the figure is expected to rise. Recent data from England has found the appalling and

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shocking cases that “at least” 74 children have died, with their deaths linked to temporary accommodation³.

The backdrop of people needing help after years of system neglect is leading to increased need for housing, which in turn leads to the placing of those same people in temporary accommodation. That leads to worsening outcomes for those people, and the distress they had initially only grows. That then means they are often not able to be placed quickly within ‘general needs’ housing and are instead allocated to specialist supported accommodation. Because of the crisis with housing supply, often people are placed within supported accommodation without the provider having the ability to create the right ‘mix’ of people. This is a critical point: whilst no provider should turn someone away, it is also important for safety to have the right mix of people in supported accommodation. With staffing levels often reduced because of funding, safety is paramount, and so getting the mix of tenants right is the first step to do that, preventing greater harm down the line.

We also see, increasingly, support services from the third sector being relied on to plug a gap in statutory services, or to deliver much-needed preventative work. This is invariably delivered by a workforce who are paid less than their NHS or local authority counterparts, with increased pressure on conditions, all at the same time that their expertise and experience is needed more than ever before. This is not for want of trying by providers – at Platform we are committed to the Real Living Wage, to offering the best terms and conditions we can. But there is a limit, within the cost envelope allotted to us by commissioners (and to *them*, by public finances), to what we can do. Our message here is simple: if you value the work that support workers do – recognise that.

Coordinating role between services

One of the key areas where support workers are invaluable, is acting as a coordinating role between services. Often, support workers regardless of whether they are floating or fixed, will build a longer-term connection with someone they support. They get to know them personally, they understand when they may be giving signs of a mental health crisis, they know the best ways to engage with people, they know which members of their family are trusted and which are not, they know what they care about, what they are interested in, and how to help people motivate themselves. As a result, when support workers need to step into a multi-agency meeting, or make a referral to community mental health services, or reporting someone missing to the police, or take any official action, they are coming from a position of deep expertise and experience with that individual’s needs, in a way that cannot be replicated by any other statutory service.

That is a critical point, and so worth re-emphasising: statutory services cannot, due to time pressures and funding challenges, build a deep knowledge of an individual’s needs except after years of work. A support worker can build that connection quickly. It does not happen with every person, of course – but it does happen regularly. If a support worker raises a concern for a tenant, or someone they are supporting, it can with the right system, carry significant weight and mobilise additional support or activity from statutory services.

In parts of Wales, this does work – we have positive relationships with community mental health teams, with local community police, and social workers, for example. However,

³ [Temporary housing linked to deaths of at least 74 children - BBC News](#)

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our support workers do often find that their professional judgement is not always respected or welcomed. The expertise they have developed and built can be easily dismissed by statutory services who are themselves understandably overwhelmed and beleaguered.

Responding to specific queries from the Committee:

We wanted to respond specifically to the queries raised by the Committee, in addition to our context-setting above.

How effectively the Welsh Government is planning for the future of HSG in light of rapid rehousing transition and the forthcoming Homelessness Bill

We are concerned about the lack of communication on the progress of the Bill, from Welsh Government. We welcome the rapid rehousing transition, but the key challenge here is the supply of housing. We cannot move to a rapid rehousing approach to homelessness in Wales, without significant volume of new social or private rented housing.

Without that supply, we are concerned that a rapid rehousing transition would more closely resemble larger temporary accommodation units with support attached. This approach would inadvertently lead Wales to begin institutionalising homelessness, potentially under the guise of a progress rapid rehousing transition. This may feel like a leap of logic, out of context, so it is worth exploring.

Without new supply of social homes in the numbers we need, but with a renewed focus on rapid rehousing, it is more likely that single-bed accommodation in new-build flats will become one of the solutions to short-to-medium-term supply challenges. Examples of this include recent developments in parts of Wales, which offer accommodation for over fifty people experiencing homelessness, in a complex of flats. Whilst we do not doubt landlord or providers' effectiveness and values, or doubt that the local authorities commissioning these models are taking the only choice they feel is available to them, this is not the future for homelessness provision that we believe the Welsh Government wants to see. However, it is the future that will be most likely without concerted effort to build homes on a dispersed basis. Without that supply, the only alternative will be numerous projects like those mentioned above, where people live in a complex devoted specifically and, in its entirety, to those with experience of homelessness. At Platform, we see already how dysregulating and isolating it can be for people to be defined by their experiences, to be placed with other people experiencing high levels of distress, and the negative outcomes that can come about as a result.

This may, sadly, be the only option available to Wales in the short-term, if social housing supply does not increase rapidly and at scale. However, at that stage, we would want the Welsh Government to be clear and forthright that projects in that mould do not class as rapid rehousing. To do otherwise would be to take an approach that obfuscates the reality of the housing crisis and would do a gross disservice to the people we are here to support. This is the point at which those options could be scrutinised properly, before they become the default setting for support, and set homelessness and support back decades.

We would want to see a coordinated, planned approach to rapid rehousing, with Regional Partnership Boards, to ensure that health and social care services are

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coordinating alongside housing, to effectively and efficiently implement a rapid rehousing plan. Currently, we are not confident that this wide-spread engagement is happening, although we appreciate that the Welsh Government will want to work on the Bill first. We are, to conclude, in a holding pattern, until we can see the progress of the Bill. Until then, what we see is the combination of increasing needs, lack of social housing stock, and continued concerns about integration across services – all of which will need to be addressed if rapid rehousing is to be a success.

Current and anticipated pressures in the delivery of HSG-funded support services, including pressures on the workforce

We have addressed much of this question in the context-setting above. We are hugely proud of the work of our colleagues, at Plattform and across the sector. They work in extraordinarily difficult situations, and they have built strong teams, with positive and effective ways of working, that are a testament to their qualities as professionals. Without their work, Plattform could not speak with the experience we have, about the challenges facing our communities. We know that for every response we give, it is built on the expertise and experience of our teams on the ground.

The people we support need stability, consistency and a highly skilled, trained and supported workforce. Without high quality training, good supervision and reflective practice, without pay that recognises people's skills and allows providers to retain that experience, it is becoming harder and harder to deliver the quality services we know that so many people rely on.

The latest announcements about National Insurance changes have significantly challenged us as an organisation. We are committed to remaining a Real Living Wage employer and working hard to find the means to do this despite an increased National Insurance bill. It is a deeply frustrating situation to be in, and it is at its core, fundamentally illogical. Whilst we understand, again with compassion, the challenges facing any government in these financial circumstances, we cannot understand why an exemption has been given to local government – but not the third sector that the same local government sector commissions from. Whatever the cost of the National Insurance rise, it will have to be borne by local government commissioners – invalidating much of the same exemption they have already been given.

The challenges this will place on the Housing Support Grant, given we have not seen evidence of a UK Government clarification, are significant. Rather than using the uplift from the draft budget, to invest in new services, or to provide clinical / reflective support for the sector, instead much of it will need to be used to meet the National Insurance costs. It is a hugely backwards decision, and we have raised it again here, as we are still hopeful that the UK Government may yet clarify its position.

We mentioned above the need for clinical and / or reflective support, which is what we had hoped some of the additional HSG funding could have been used for. We have shared above how challenging and emotive the work of a support worker can be. The trauma they can experience first-hand, let alone vicariously through support sessions, is significant. We have seen excellent support workers leaving the profession because they are exhausted and burned out. Mental health psychologists and psychiatrists, for example, are expected to receive supervision to ensure they are working effectively, and safely, and are emotionally regulated. That cost is part of recruiting and employing a professional in that role.

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We hope to see progress on this for support workers. Whilst they are not a regulated profession, they do experience significant distress on a sometimes-daily basis, and if we want the amazing people in these roles to continue to work within the sector, we need to demonstrate that we value, respect and support them whilst they do so. Part of that is good pay and conditions which the third sector has had to squeeze – and part of that is supporting them with excellent reflective or clinical supervision as part of the role. This cost should be part of every commissioned support service through the Housing Support Grant.

How much is known about service performance, including data on outcomes

We do not believe that the new system of outcomes data has had long enough to 'bed in', yet, and would not advocate for any changes at this stage. However, we would make the point that with continued local authority cuts, we are not often scrutinised on the official HSG outcomes data – instead we are monitored locally by our commissioning officer, who will look at our reporting, our incidents, the numbers of people we have supported, and will often make a judgement about our effectiveness based on that.

If that experience is widespread across the providers within the Housing Support Grant, we would argue that the outcomes data should be aggregated to a national level and used as an overall measure of the effectiveness of the fund, rather than used locally to determine effectiveness of individual services. This should of course consider the overall impact that the Grant has on the NHS, police, social services and other sectors.

If it is to shift towards a national level, then we would want to ensure that it includes more qualitative information alongside the outcomes data, to reflect the complexity of peoples' experiences within the service.

Additionally, and separate to the outcomes data, we would encourage the Welsh Government to fund a full evaluation of the Housing Support Grant, that identifies the benefits of the support in the different settings and sectors across Wales. Whilst the evaluation report by Cardiff Metropolitan University (Montes, Fury and Taylor, 2020) is clear as to the value for money of the Grant, we believe that a wider evaluation, with Government support and data, would make it clear as to the vital role this grant plays in Wales, and not just for housing need.

How effective is joint working between housing support services and public services such as health and social care

Our experience in Platform, is that this is mixed, and dependent entirely on local relationships. Where it works well, with multi-agency safeguarding teams, or multi-agency tenancy panels, it goes a huge way towards making a person's experience of supported housing, or support more generally, as effective as it can. However, in spaces where it does not work so easily, it can be very difficult. In those occasions, professionals can at times fall back on seniority of role, qualification, or experience, and it can leave support workers being left on the outside of key decisions – not to mention the person themselves. We have, however, seen significant progress in recent years, and increasingly the ideas and perspectives from our support workers are listened to by professionals across the areas where we work. That is a significant shift, in the last five years. Whilst imperfect, it is positive.

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The overarching theme however, for public service partnership, is funding. The lack of capacity within statutory services is possibly one of the biggest barriers we face as a provider organisation. Not being sure whether we can access support or help for people we support, unless they are in a critical situation, creates a sense of frustration, helplessness and despair within our workforce. Support workers regularly feed back to us that they will make referrals, but they know they may not be picked up until there is a crisis. What this means, ultimately, is that our support workers are increasingly acting as the first line of prevention – but also stepping in to cobble together support in spaces and for situations that they were not commissioned to deliver. That could be offering crisis support to someone who has not met a threshold for community mental health services, but who would likely have met that threshold five or ten years ago. The picture for us as a provider is of a workforce that is working well in partnership with landlords, health colleagues, and social care – but is increasingly being asked to do more in the ‘grey area’ between HSG funded services and statutory. That situation is not sustainable and cannot continue.

What services should be commissioned in future to effectively support people with complex needs to find and keep a home.

In our submission to the Finance Committee in November, we expressed a need for a preventative budget that can explore mental health alternatives, along the same lines as the Housing Support Grant. This would allow vital preventative work to be undertaken across mental health as well as it does within housing. There is still a distinct lack of joined up services with oversight and accountability, that can work across the complexity of needs within the housing sector. Regional Partnership Boards could be used, and we would want to see a renewed focus on making those work effectively.

Crucially for us, when crisis and preventative services are funded from the same budget, we see a natural prioritisation of crisis spend and services. This is what the HSG has managed to avoid, both now and in its former incarnation as the Supporting People Grant. However, other services do not have the same preventative fund available, and so the work of HSG-funded services is often hampered because the support more widely for growing complexity is not available when it would have the best impact.

We need services that can flex around an individual, can unlock preventative services when they are needed, and we need a shift in the professional recognition given to support workers in housing. These are the fundamental building blocks for a service response that is needed for addressing and tackling the needs of people with housing needs and vulnerabilities.

Although it differs across regions and local authorities, we would argue that the concept of ‘eligible activities’ needs to be removed from HSG grants – this can result in support workers being overly monitored on the type of support they give. It can also lead to progressive ideas being defunded by local authorities that are nervous they are not aligning to ‘eligible activities’.

We need services funded to a minimum of the Real Living Wage, and including budgets and allocations for clinical supervision. All of these will enable us to offer freedom for providers to be specialists in relationships with the people they support, reduce bureaucracy and cost for local authorities, and crucially, centre the individual who should be at the heart of all we do.

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We also wanted to reiterate our concerns from above, about the gradual and seemingly inevitable shift towards large-scale developments for greater numbers of people, concentrated in specific areas. We must word this strongly: herding people with similar life experiences and challenges into one place is misguided, and increasing evidence demonstrates that it is ineffective and doesn't work. We need the Welsh Government to be much firmer with partners across Wales that this approach should not be adopted.

Conclusion

The Housing Support Grant's existence should be a point of pride for the Welsh Government – and indeed, the wider Welsh political system. It has been a source of cross-party agreement throughout the history of devolution, and we have seen support for it on all sides of the political spectrum. We are clear that this is because of the clear evidence for its impact, its presence within our communities, and the ability of HSG services to work with people that the system often cannot hold. It is also the envy of other UK nations, with the experiences of England after the loss of SP ringfencing in 2010 serving as a sober example of what happens when support for preventative homelessness funding weakens.

There remain huge challenges within HSG services, however. Staff morale, staff pay and conditions, the ability to process significantly difficult and emotional experiences, and often a lack of public understanding of the roles, have taken their toll on staff across the housing sector for years. The sense of public service fragmentation, a palpable realisation that there is no easy way to repair that social safety net, and the lack of support from statutory services except in the most urgent of situations, creates a sense of despair in many services. The hope our colleagues hold on to is the difference they can still make – but we know that hope is harder and harder to find.

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