

Tai Pawb promotes equality and social justice in housing in Wales and has therefore been at the forefront of discussions with partners as to the equality and human rights impacts of COVID-19 on individuals and communities across the country. We outline these below:

BAME communities

It's now common knowledge that COVID-19 is having a disproportionate impact on BAME people across Wales, including higher death rates – in particular among social care and NHS staff. To that end we welcome Welsh Government's inquiry.

Tai Pawb recently hosted an online forum with members and third sector partners to look at the issues and discuss newly-adapted practices. We're aware that there have been issues around language barriers, the marking of Ramadan and difficulties in staff members changing roles to meet demand. Third sector support organisations have expressed their desire to work collaboratively and to share resources as widely as possible to help support BAME individuals and communities.

No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)

Pre-COVID, most asylum seekers with NRPF are usually sofa surfing with friends and/or receive help from churches and community groups or are in hosting schemes. In some cases at the moment, some people are being referred to floor space as a first step; there is a general reluctance to approach mainstream provision as the needs and vulnerabilities of asylum seekers are different to other clients, i.e. there are usually no substance misuse issues.

As lockdown restrictions are eased, there is a question as to an 'exit strategy' – specifically, what will happen to those with NRPF who are currently housed? There is a concern as to how local authority homelessness services will cope with demand.

There is a clear need for Wales-specific guidance. Local authorities in Scotland have worked with the Scottish Government and refugee organisations to work on what will happen as lockdown is eased, which includes the following pledges: (i) an end to evictions into homelessness from asylum support accommodation, (ii) prevention of new cases of rough sleeping including among people with NRPF, (iii) protection of people with NRPF and (iv) preventing destitution by ensuring decent and safe accommodation and access to emotional support. Moreover, the coalition has requested clarity as to what funds local authorities are able to use for those seeking or having been refused asylum together with lobbying the UK Government for a better deal for those seeking safety in the UK.

Refugees – move-on accommodation

The Home Office has initiated a stay on evictions for three months during the pandemic. This is due for review at some point in June, to which end we share concerns as to the need to develop a safe and fair exit strategy for those in accommodation – and the support required for individuals.

Homelessness

We recognise and warmly welcome the approach that has been adopted in these circumstances by both local authorities and Welsh Government in ensuring as many people sleeping rough have had access to accommodation during this crisis. We believe this goes to the heart of a rights-based housing system in Wales, proving both the need and benefit of a right to adequate housing. We also recognise the concerns – shared by other partners in the sector – as lockdown restrictions are gradually eased and consideration is given to the sustainability of long-term accommodation options for c. 500 (previously) homeless people in Wales.

Mental health

We hosted an online forum with members in the housing and support sector on mental health which revealed a lot of good practice, including the use of well-being telephone calls. This has been widely adopted across the sector, whereby social landlords are simply ‘checking in’ on tenants to provide help and to signpost to services.

We are aware that in the first few weeks of the pandemic, referrals to mental health services across Wales had fallen significantly – this is something we will highlight in our continued communication with members to make clear that NHS services continue to operate outside of the COVID pandemic. Anecdotally, we’re also aware that in some instances, the longer that strict lockdown measures continue, so the mental health of some individuals is deteriorating – in particular for those who are shielding and have a limited social or family circle around them.

We’ve also been keen to point out that the mental health of staff across housing and support services is paramount, too – in particular around the flexibility of working practices. It’s the case that, in working from home, many people are actually working longer hours than they might do from a regular office base; while others have to balance caring or childcare responsibilities for example.

Accessible homes – aids and adaptations

In discussion with our members – and having held a recent online forum to further explore the major issues in this area of work – we’re aware that there are different practices across Wales. Largely, there is a focus on hospital discharge; essentially, readying a home and making it fit for purpose in order that an individual can return home as quickly and as safely as possible. There are some concerns as to whether all hospital discharges have been safe in their wider considerations beyond aids and adaptations to their home. Some providers are also focusing on prevention of admission, ensuring that (generally low-level, low-risk) work is carried out to maintain that person’s independence at home for as long as possible.

Communication with tenants will be a key element of planning the next phase (or 'exit strategies' as they may be termed). There is clearly a worry – on the part of tenants/residents – around contractors and the wearing of PPE. In some cases, those shielding may not want work carried out at their properties if it means someone outside of their household requiring access. Where possible we would be encouraging – so long as there is an agreement with the resident/tenant – that any external works to the property, such as a ramp to allow entry/exit, be carried out to ensure that an individual is able to exercise or gain fresh air for example.

We're aware that enquiries over the past two months have eased across most parts of Wales but providers expect there to be a significant uplift in the coming weeks/months as suppressed demand returns, potentially leading to a backlog of works. Given that social distancing is likely to be with us for the foreseeable future, Tai Pawb is encouraging a collaborative approach on the way forward with Welsh Government i.e. in consideration of what priority/essential works are.

Social and economic impact

There is clearly a substantial socio-economic impact from the virus across all cohorts, but in particular among young people; whether it be having been furloughed; a job loss; being made homeless; tensions at home. There has tended to be a focus on the impacts on older people i.e. around loneliness, isolation, shielding etc. – whereas the impact on young people has had less of a spotlight. We'll be looking at this area of work as we host another online forum in June specifically on this.

Tai Pawb and COVID-19

As an organisation, we have:

- developed a dedicated online resource page for members which is updated regularly with refreshed guidance and signposting materials
- fed in to weekly calls with Welsh Government and other housing sector colleagues
- hosted three online forums for members and stakeholders around mental health, BAME communities and aids & adaptations. This was an opportunity to discuss the impact but importantly to look at newly-adapted practice across the sector and ways and means to mitigate. We're sharing learning and 'golden nuggets' with members