

DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

An investigation into key contemporary challenges relating to overcoming homelessness in Wales, legislative duties bestowed on Local Authorities, and how homelessness links to antisocial behaviour and societal inequalities.

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Contents

Introduction	3
Literature Review	4
Housing (Wales) Act 2014	4
Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016	5
The Housing Shortage and Challenges	6
<i>Phosphate Levels</i>	7
<i>Unaffordable Rents and Local Housing Allowance Shortfalls</i>	7
<i>Causations and Service Provisions</i>	8
Methodology	10
Data Collection	11
Ethical Considerations	12
Reference List	13

Introduction

In 2020, the Welsh Government implemented the 'No One Left Out' approach as a proactive measure to address the predicament of street homelessness by ensuring the provision of temporary accommodation to homeless individuals amidst the backdrop of the pandemic (Welsh Government, 2022). Although society has largely resumed life as normal following the pandemic, the Welsh Government has continued with their goal to eradicate street homelessness where possible by introducing a new priority need category for anyone who is street homeless or would become street homeless without assistance from their Local Authority (National Homelessness Advice Service, 2022).

However, due to the ongoing Cost of Living Crisis, which is seeing mortgage rates exceed rates seen in the 2007/8 recession, many landlords are being forced to sell their rental properties and homeowners their homes due to concerns over affordability (Wilson and Barlton, 2023).

Additionally, recent changes in Welsh legislation introduced by the Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016 have also reformed the private rental sector, which has caused many landlords to sell their properties and leave the sector (ITV, 2022).

The combination of insufficient affordable properties within the private rental and social housing sectors, an ongoing cost of living crisis, and a shortage of service provisions to support people living with substance dependencies and mental health conditions has created vast inequalities and damaging societal challenges across Wales (Fitzpatrick et al., 2021). The proposed dissertation intends to investigate the shortage of affordable housing, why there is a large demand for such housing, what the challenges are in ensuring its supply, how legislation has changed the landscape for

better and for worse, and how homelessness as well as other root causations and societal inequalities are contributing to repeat offending rates and antisocial behaviour.

Literature Review

Housing (Wales) Act 2014

The enactment of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 (HWA 2014) reinforced homelessness services and encouraged a preventative rather than reactive approach taken by Local Authorities in response to households threatened with or already experiencing homelessness in Wales (Brown et al., 2021). Prior to the introduction of the statutory duties set out by the Act, a review by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (2021) described homelessness service provisions, especially at local government level, as operating on a foundation of inconsistency and inequality. In the first year alone, Welsh Councils were able to prevent 65% of households threatened with homelessness from becoming homeless (Brandon, 2018). Recent data shows that between the start of the pandemic February 2020 and the end of February 2023, over 33,600 households across Wales had been supported into emergency temporary accommodation in accordance with Section 68 of the HWA 2014 (Senedd Research, 2023). The Senedd Debate committee, however, notes that the standard of temporary accommodation varies, and although supported accommodation can be particularly valuable in contributing to positive outcomes, less suitable accommodation can be detrimental to those already vulnerable and chaotic individuals, with particular concern for those with illicit substance dependencies, offending behaviour, and undiagnosed mental health conditions (Senedd Research, 2023).

Dean (2002), Segal (2006), and Neubeck (2006) contest the notion of statutory duties based on concern that enforceable legal rights can lead to over-legalisation, and

therefore, housing and homelessness practitioners within Local Authorities develop defensive-oriented mindsets in a bid to preserve resources and prevent the homelessness process from being misused. Additionally, the Local Government Association (2020) has raised concerns that Local Authorities are now spending too much time reacting to homelessness presentations rather than directing resources and developing services to prevent homelessness from occurring at all. Additionally, due to the shortage of suitable accommodation and the initial knee-jerk reactions caused by the introduction of the Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016, Local Authorities are now experiencing a bottleneck when it comes to rehousing households who are in temporary accommodation (Bevan Foundation, 2022) and are also finding an increase in the number of people presenting as being served a 'no fault' eviction due to landlords selling their rental properties (Jessel, 2023).

Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016

On 1 December 2022, the Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016 (RHWA 2016) came into place and has dramatically changed the renting landscape in Wales, as the legislation is claimed to be the biggest change in housing law in Wales to date, both within social and private housing markets (James, 2022).

Huws (2019) provides that the housing reform has provided many positive changes, including ensuring that all contract holders have a clear understanding, or at least the ability to, of their rights and obligations; there is an increased onus placed on landlords to ensure all rental properties are fit for human habitation; and with no-fault eviction notice periods now being six months rather than two, there is more time for the prevention of homelessness to take place. The change in legislation also allows for 16–17-year-olds to become contract holders, a category group that is often extremely

vulnerable and susceptible to leading chaotic lives as adults due to the lack of stable accommodation and access to service provisions from an early age (Huws, 2019). Data shows that in 2018–2019, there were over 7,600 homeless presentations by young people, and 732 of those were by children aged 16 or 17 (End of Youth Homelessness Cymru, 2023). Demographic characteristic data shows that children aged 15–17 totalled 80% of the offending population in England and Wales (Youth Justice Board, 2023).

However, Geraghty (2018) and Hunter (2023) have raised concerns relating to the change in law, as many landlords have left or intend on leaving the private rental sector as a result. In a news report published by ITV (2022), it is recognised that a primary catalyst for landlords exiting the rental business and selling their properties is the perception that the legislation reform is ‘anti-landlord’ and ‘pro-tenant, which creates hostility within the sector. Consequently, coupled with the increase in rental rates and the number of landlords selling up and their properties no longer being an option for renters, the shortage of available, suitable, and affordable housing is worsening (Robinson, 2022).

The Housing Shortage and Challenges

Baxter (2021) reinforces that Wales has an insufficient number of properties to contend with demand and adds that research has provided that over 14,000 properties need to be built every year in Wales for the next 15 years to contend with the demand. However, data shows that homebuilding in Wales is on a downward trajectory (Caffel and Price, 2013).

Delahunty (2022), Reeve et al. (2016) and Caffel and Price (2013) present several challenges that are contributing to the housing shortage in Wales.

Phosphate Levels

Towards the end of 2022, it was reported that over 1,000 planned affordable social housing homes were stuck in development stages due to phosphate levels preventing the schemes from being approved and progressing (Delahunty, 2022). Statistics show that over 60% of Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) rivers are impacted by concerning heightened phosphate levels, creating poor water quality (Welsh Government, 2023). Consequently, due to firmly regulated planning rules in SACs, many developments are on hold and the Welsh Government's commitment to build 20,000 new social homes has been distributed (Welsh Government, 2023). Many Local Authorities (LAs) and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) have been impacted by the phosphate issue, especially those within the catchment area of the River Wye and Usk, covering most of the south-east of Powys, where there is a particular shortage for affordable housing for single households and couples (Powys County Council, 2023).

Unaffordable Rents and Local Housing Allowance Shortfalls

For many households in Wales, private rentals are not affordable due to monthly rental figures increasing by 10.1% in the last year and the average rental amount sitting at over £915 per calendar month, as provided by HomeLet (2023). Due to the sharp increase in rental amounts, the Local Housing Allowance rates (the scheme used to calculate the total Housing Benefit that households renting within the PRS can receive) are failing to compete, and therefore, many households are unable to access the PRS due to issues of affordability, thus placing additional demands on social housing stocks (Reeve et al., 2016). In 2021, it was reported that only 4.8% of properties advertised

would be completely covered by LHA rates, with an average shortfall of £133.53 per month (Bevan Foundation, 2021). For example, the LHA rate for a single person under 35 in Bridgend for the 2023–2024 financial year is £58.68 per week (£234.72 in total across a four-week month) (Valuation Office Agency, 2023). The last data showing median rental amounts was published by the Welsh Government in 2020 and in the report the average rental amount in Bridgend was placed at £450, meaning that single households under the age of 35 would be subject to a £215 rent shortfall (Statistics for Wales, 2020).

Causations and Service Provisions

As published by Caffel and Price (2013) on behalf of Public Health Wales, the occurrence and prolonging of homelessness isn't only a result of unaffordable rents and a lack of affordable properties but also a repercussion of underlying causations and unmet support needs relating to substance misuse, mental health, offending behaviour, and those from impoverished socio-economic backgrounds and/or having experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).

Data gathered and published by Song et al. (2021) during the COVID-19 pandemic relating to individuals with lived experience of homelessness shows that on average:

- 17% have a dependency on alcohol, compared to 1% of the general population.
- 15% have depression, compared to 2% of the general population.
- 11% have a dependency on drugs, compared to 0.4% of the general population.

Research shows that the people who are living with mental health challenges are significantly more likely to have previously experienced homelessness, or are currently homeless, than those who do not (Commander et al., 2002). Furthermore, research

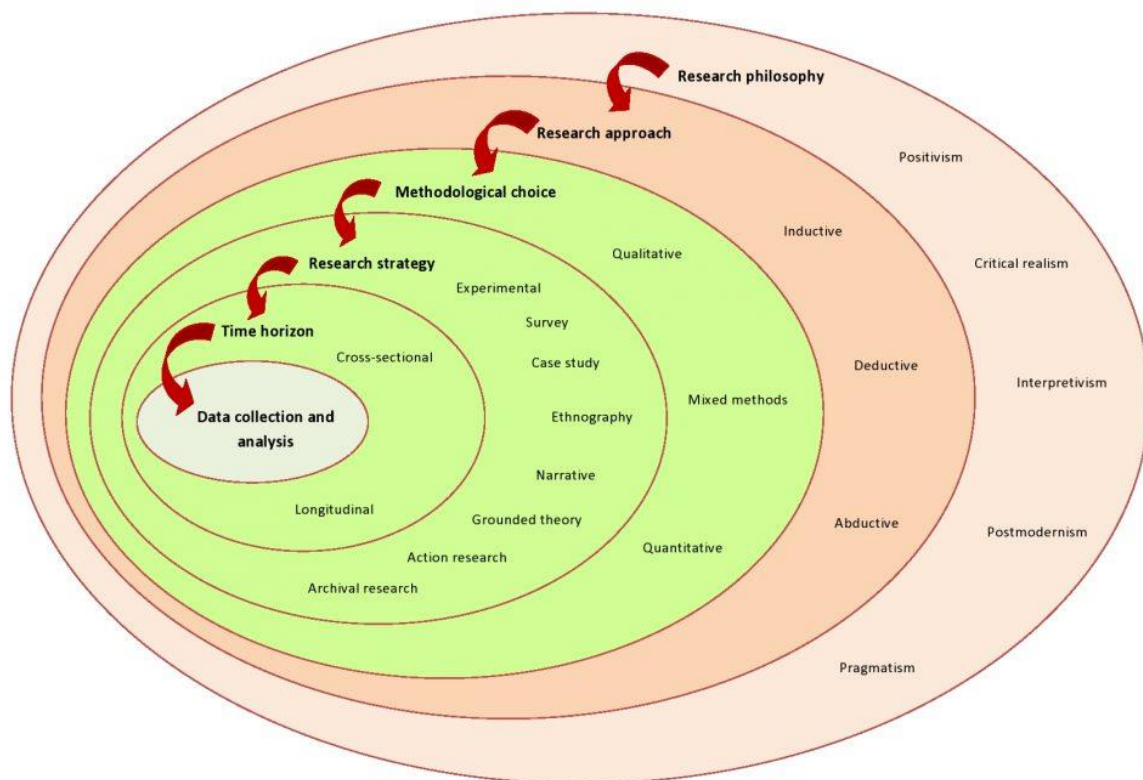
also shows that people experiencing homelessness were more likely to be repeatedly involved with the police and criminal justice processes; increased usage of illicit substances and worse mental health than those who were housed in settled accommodation (Commander et al., 2002).

Homelessness is a risk factor that can occur as a result of the established comorbidity between substance abuse and mental health. Mental health inequality refers to the various ways that the population's risk of poor mental health is affected, and the groups that are most disproportionately at risk are those that cope with other societal disparities (Ballard, 2003). Although this problem is not exclusive to those who are homeless, waiting lists for mental health treatments are frequently criticised as being excessively long. Someone who may already be living in insecure housing, is attempting to end their homelessness, or is seeking to keep their tenancy may be significantly impacted by this. If someone becomes homeless or experiences extended and/or repeated homelessness because they were not able to obtain prompt mental health treatment, the health consequences—for the person and the public purse—are worsened (Ballard, 2003).

Methodology

Saunders (2007) provides the research approaches taken are vital in answering chosen research questions.

Figure One: The Research Onion



(Saunders, et al., 2012, p. 160)

By utilising the research onion (as shown by figure one), the proposed project will consist of mixed-method research methods and will be cross-sectional as the research (consisting of surveys and case studies) will take place over a short period of around two weeks, giving sufficient time for the data to be analysed, criticised, and reviewed.

Using the research onion for reference (figure 1), the research for this project will be cross-sectional because it will be carried out at one point in time due to time

constraints. The data will consist of both quantitative and qualitative elements, as the surveys will incorporate both quantitative questions (yes/no answers), rating scales, and free-entry text boxes allowing participants to write their own words as well as interviews. An inductive research approach will be taken (Saunders et al., 2012), as data will be gathered in order to explore the phenomena of homelessness, housing shortages, and offending behaviour.

Data Collection

The method of data collection for the study will be:

1. One online survey designed to be sent to current homeless service users who are currently working with homelessness services under the duties set out by the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. The target response rate will be 50 homeless households that are experiencing homelessness for various reasons and are at varying stages of the homelessness duty process.
2. One online survey designed to be sent to homelessness and statutory service professions who are currently working in and alongside Local Authorities homeless team to deliver service provisions to homeless households. The target response rate will be at least five professionals from key services such as the homeless team, probation, police, local substance misuse agencies, and floating support services.
3. Interviews will also be carried out with a mixture of participants (homeless households and professionals from services) until theoretical fullness is reached.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the course of this project, there will be ethical considerations and limitations taken into consideration. For this project specifically, consent will be obtained from Powys County Council and any other services invited to participate (and their service users) before the surveys are sent out. The researcher will also be subject to guidance from the university's code of ethics policy and will ensure that all potential risks are highlighted in the ethics form submitted as part of the dissertation project.

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