



A Briefing Note for GPs and Primary Care Practitioners

Produced in conjunction with Gofal

Mental health and housing

Just as with physical ill health, there is an obvious and well established link between poor housing / homelessness and mental ill health.

This briefing note attempts to equip those working in primary care with a basic understanding of some of the issues, including suggested interventions you may be able to undertake to help safeguard or improve your patient's mental health through maintaining a stable home, or by improving their housing situation.

Background and Evidence

Poor mental health is both a cause and a consequence of poor housing and homelessness.

In Wales, the number of households accepted as homeless and in priority need in 2007—8 was 6,367¹. Nearly 3,000 households were living in temporary accommodation².

Priority need

Local authorities have a duty to ensure suitable accommodation is available to those who are 'unintentionally homeless' and in 'priority need'. In Wales, this means households with dependent children, a pregnant woman, **people vulnerable through mental illness** or physical disability, those aged 16 or 17 (or between 18 and 21 who were previously in care), those experiencing (or in threat of) domestic violence or those vulnerable as a result of leaving the armed forces or prison.

Implications for Mental Health

People who are homeless or who live in poor quality housing are more likely to experience mental ill health. Compared to the general population, mental health problems are eight times higher amongst people living in hostel / B+B accommodation and eleven times higher amongst people sleeping rough³.

People's housing has an impact on their mental health. People who experience mental ill health are four times more likely than the general population to say their health has been made worse by their housing circumstances⁴. It can also be very difficult for people who are homeless or in temporary accommodation to access healthcare.

Implications for Families

People's mental health can have an impact on their housing situation. One in four tenants experiencing mental ill health has serious rent arrears and faces losing their homes⁵. People experiencing mental ill health may also struggle to keep their home in a good state of repair, to find suitable housing or to negotiate the complex housing benefit and social housing application procedures.

Living in poor housing or being homeless or at risk of homelessness will have an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of every member of the family.

¹ Welsh Housing Statistics 2008, Local Government Data Unit (2009)

² Welsh Housing Statistics 2008, Local Government Data Unit (2009)

³ Bines, W., The health of single homeless people, Discussion Paper 9, Centre for Housing Policy, University of York (1994)

⁴ Social Exclusion Unit, Social Exclusion and Mental Health (2004)

⁵ Social Exclusion Unit, Social Exclusion and Mental Health (2004)

WaMH in PC is working to improve primary care mental health by nurturing:
trust • good communication • person centredness



WaMH in PC
Wales Mental Health in Primary Care

Regus House, Falcon Drive, Cardiff Bay, Cardiff CF10 4RU

T: 029 2050 4516 F: 029 2050 4300 E: wamhinpc@rcgp.org.uk www.wamhipc.org.uk



What GPs and Primary Care teams can do

GPs and other health professionals should consider the impact a person's housing may be having on their mental health, and visa versa.

- Ask patients who are experiencing mental ill health about their housing situation; it'll help give a fuller picture. A 'Housing Health Check' can be a useful tool for this, as this incorporates a number of housing and homelessness specific questions that can help identify a person's need or facilitate an appropriate referral
- You could encourage those living in unsuitable accommodation, or who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, to approach their local Council and / or Housing Association for advice or assistance
- Because housing and mental health have traditionally been dealt with by separate agencies, who may be expert in one issue but have little knowledge of the other, an individual's needs may not be being fully met (or even understood). **Working in partnership with other agencies will help ensure better mental health and housing outcomes for your patient**
- You may also wish to consider contacting (or making a referral to) voluntary sector agencies working in the homelessness and mental health housing advice field, as these agencies have a comprehensive knowledge of homelessness and mental health issues and services. They will also be experienced in supporting an individual through the Local Authority homelessness procedure
- If a local authority approaches you for information about a patient as part of a homelessness application, you should consider the risk to that person's physical and mental health if they were to remain homeless and ensure that is reflected in your response. Homelessness departments only have 33 days to complete their investigations, so it is important that this information is provided to them as swiftly as possible
- If patients are struggling to live independently, there are a number of housing support options which may be appropriate, which a person's care co-ordinator (if applicable) or the Local Authority social services / housing department should be aware of and able to advise on.

Housing Health Check

- Where were you living before you were homeless? /Where are you living now? (Are you an owner occupier, tenant or 'living with family / friends'. Who is your landlord? etc), and do you feel this accommodation is suitable for your needs? (If not, why not?)
- Do you have any rent, mortgage or council tax arrears?
- Do you receive help or support from any agency with your tenancy / housing issues?
- Do you feel that your current housing situation is affecting your mental health? (If so, in what way?)
- Do you feel that your mental health issues may have contributed to your current housing situation? (If so, in what way?)

Sources of support and advice

Your local authority's website will have a contact number for their housing and homelessness department.

In addition, Shelter Cymru provide a range of housing advice and support services. You or your patients can ring them **0845 075 5005**, and they can arrange for local caseworkers to meet with anyone with a housing issue to explain their options and offer advice.

Both of these should also be able to put you in touch with other relevant services operating in your area.

Acknowledgements



'Thinking differently about Mental Health and Wellbeing'

Contact Details:

w: www.gofal.org.uk

e: enquiries@gofal.org.uk

t: 01656 647722

WaMH in PC is working to improve primary care mental health by nurturing:
trust • good communication • person centredness