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Shaping the future of healthy housing for children and families in Wales: A summary of stakeholder engagement

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Mae'r adroddiad hwn ar gael yn Gymraeg / This report is available in Welsh

1 Purpose of the report

Our homes can significantly shape our physical and mental health and well-being.

This paper sets out the work that Public Health Wales has conducted alongside other housing stakeholders to envision a future of healthier homes, especially for those living in poverty. It summarises insights drawn from stakeholder conversations and a futures-focused workshop, held in November 2024.

This work builds on two previous reports from Public Health Wales – an overarching report, [homes for health and well-being](#), and a second on [affordability](#). Here we go further and shine a light on housing quality, affordability, and security, and the impact this has particularly on the well-being of children and families.

By setting out our emerging understanding of these urgent challenges and opportunities, we hope this paper will provide a critical foundation for deeper exploration, and support future-focused policy and action for all those working to make healthier homes for people in Wales.

2 A vision for healthy homes in Wales

We know a home is more than just bricks and mortar and a roof over your head. It is a space that can keep us healthy and improve our well-being.

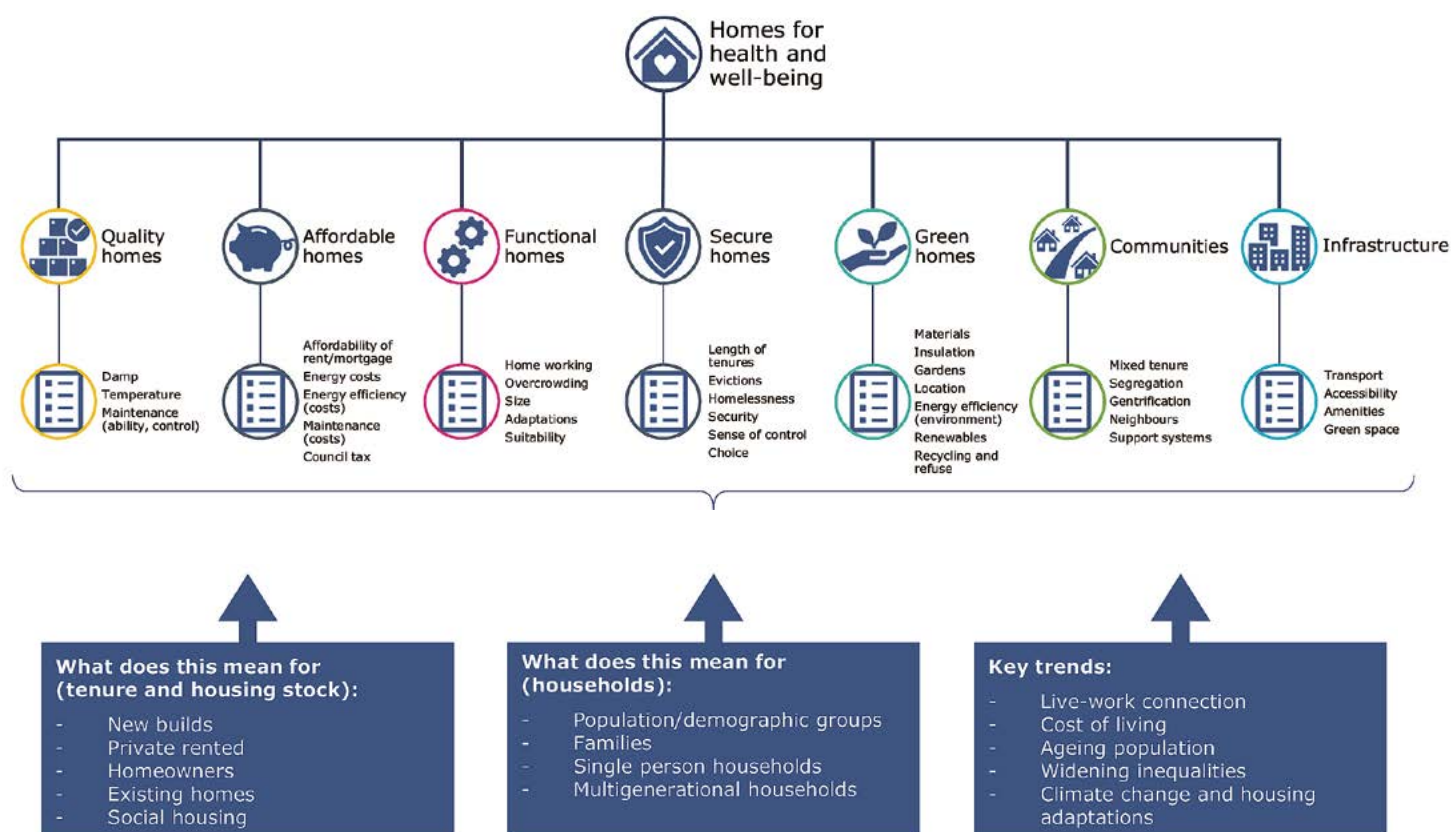
When we talk about ‘healthy homes’ we mean a home that is secure, affordable¹, of good quality, and environmentally sustainable. It should be in an area where people can access employment opportunities, a range of shops and services, and space for exercise and play, particularly for children. Homes that meet these standards are more likely to feel comfortable, safe, and stable, allowing families to establish roots in their community, participate socially, and develop a sense of belonging; all of which are essential for good health and well-being² (see Figure 1).

Homes can be described as a “social determinant of health”³, where the housing conditions that children experience can influence their physical and mental health throughout life. Exposure to poor housing such as overcrowding, damp, cold, mould, and noise can lead to poor health, including cardiovascular and respiratory illnesses, a greater spread of infections, and stress, depression, and anxiety⁴.

This means that good housing policy is good health policy. And it begins with recognising that a healthy home is not a luxury — it is a necessity.

That is why our vision for healthy homes in Wales is that **everyone should be able to live in a home that protects and promotes their health and well-being**; and that all housing policy decisions are used to enable this vision in the short term and for future generations.

Figure 1: Homes for Health and Well-being⁵



3 Current challenges to healthy housing in Wales

To make progress towards achieving our shared vision for healthy housing in Wales, we need to understand what issues are currently standing in our way and what change is needed to create the future we want.

To do this, Public Health Wales has engaged extensively with stakeholders, both in one-to-one interviews and through a futures-focused workshop. In the interviews, we focused on identifying the key challenges that are preventing healthy homes in Wales today. What we heard is summarised in Figure 2.

In our conversations, stakeholders also noted current areas of action in health and housing policy and practice that provided opportunities for change, including:

- The [White Paper](#)⁶ on securing a path towards adequate housing, fair rents and affordability.
- Hywel Dda University Health Board (UHB) [Bevan Exemplar](#), which is bringing housing and health stakeholders together in a community of practice.
- A [Housing and health research network](#) hosted by the University of South Wales.
- The [Back the Bill campaign](#) led by Tai Pawb, Shelter Cymru, and the Chartered Institute of Housing Cymru.

These pressing issues and a clear desire for change highlight that now is a pivotal time to build on evidence that makes the case for investing in healthier homes for families in Wales, and for stakeholders to work together collaboratively.

Figure 2: Key challenges to healthy housing in Wales as identified by stakeholders

Fragmented policy landscape

Whilst there is work on building low carbon social homes, there is a need to go further with policy to address affordability, accessibility and diverse housing tenures. Housing policy would also benefit from increased integration with other relevant policy areas such as those to support low income families.

Addressing all sectors

At present, the private rented sector significantly lags behind the social rented sector in terms of quality. There is a need to improve quality in private sector housing by prioritising data collection and implementing standards to enhance key housing indicators, such as tenure and habitability, across all housing sectors.

Growing numbers in temporary accommodation

The increasing number of families in temporary accommodation reflects a shortage of affordable housing, rising homelessness, financial pressures, and challenges in housing policy and funding. These factors, combined with the impact of COVID-19, highlight the urgent need for more stable, long-term housing solutions in Wales.

Functional homes

The housing needs of older people and those living with disabilities are not being adequately met and require more tailored solutions for older individuals with features like step-free access, wider doorways, and age-friendly bathrooms. There is also a need for housing close to healthcare, social services, and transport, as well as flexible options like extra-care or sheltered accommodation to support independent living.

Public awareness and trust

There is a lack of awareness and trust from the public when it comes to accessing the right support and services for housing needs.

Framing and language

There is a need for better framing and language when developing housing policies and initiatives to ensure clarity, understanding, and engagement of those with lived experience.

4 Moving towards healthier homes

One thing all stakeholders in housing agreed on is that collaboration is fundamental to addressing housing related health challenges. To facilitate this, Public Health Wales coordinated a workshop in November 2024 on the future of healthy homes (see Box 1 for the agenda).

Following feedback from stakeholders, and the growing recognition of the importance of early years in lifelong health and well-being, the workshop had a focus on children and families living in poverty. Preventative and proactive efforts in supporting children's health now can enable all children in Wales to reach their full potential and reduce the risk of costly, complex health challenges in the future.

We also elected to apply long-term thinking to the workshop, using the Three Horizons model (see Box 2 for more detail on the methodology). We did this for several reasons. First, because to advocate effectively for a future of healthy housing, stakeholders across sectors must have a shared vision of where we are heading and alignment of the different views of what 'good' could look like.

Taking a long-term approach also enables us to prevent potential harm and take advantage of opportunities to maximise health and well-being outcomes for current and future generations. For example, by considering how [future trends](#), such as climate change, an ageing population, global political shifts, and new technological developments, may affect the future of healthy housing.

Exploring how the future may unfold differently for different people is also necessary to ensure no one is left behind in policies that seek to achieve a healthier and more equal future. Building collaborative, hopeful futures gives us agency to actively work towards creating them, and avoid the risk of unhelpful outcomes in future.

To take a futures approach, we used the [Three Horizons model](#).

Nearly fifty stakeholders working in health and housing, including representatives from Welsh Government, local health boards, the third sector and academia, attended the workshop. The outcomes of the day are summarised below.

Box 1: Long-term thinking workshop agenda

- Prior to the workshop, participants were asked to share examples of good practice via a Seeds of Change exercise, which was emailed out to each participant.
- The workshop opened with a presentation on the Welsh Government's [White Paper](#) on securing a path towards adequate housing, including fair rents and affordability, which was out for consultation at that point.
- This was followed by a World Cafe event, which included opportunities to learn about the Hywel Dda UHB [Bevan Exemplar](#)⁷ on health and housing, ACE Hub Cymru's [Trauma Informed Wales framework](#)⁸, and a [lived experience video](#)⁹ kindly shared by Tai Pawb.
- The workshop also included a [Three Horizons](#) exercise.

Box 2: The Three Horizons methodology

The three horizons model is a structured way of thinking about future planning. It considers:

- Where we are now (horizon 1),
- Our preferred future (horizon 3),
- What steps are happening already, or will need to happen, to bring about the future we would like to see (horizon 2).

The model can be used at a high-level, to give us quick insights, and then developed iteratively to explore each horizon in more depth.

It can be a useful exercise at multiple stages of a project – to help diagnose current issues and agree why change is needed, to develop a shared vision for the future, or to start developing a transformational change plan.

4.1 Where are we now? (Horizon 1)

Attendees were first asked to review the current challenges to healthy housing in Wales. In addition to the issues identified by our stakeholder interviews, attendees identified three additional challenges, which are captured in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Summary of the additional challenges to healthy housing identified by workshop participants



Stakeholders also identified several more granular, immediate issues that the sector in Wales needs to grapple with that interact with the wider challenges:

- A large private rental sector with insufficient regulation.
- Fragmented collaboration between health and housing organisations.
- A shortage of housing supply, both in terms of volume and diversity.
- A growing gap between local housing allowances and rental costs.
- A focus on short-term solutions, such as emergency funds, rather than addressing the root causes of housing issues.

4.2 What should the future look like? (Horizon 3)

Before looking at tangible action to pursue in the present, attendees were asked to skip forward and identify the elements of a future of healthy homes. The eight priorities they identified are summarised in Figure 4.

Figure 4: The future vision for housing in Wales



Clarity on the future vision enabled the workshop to identify priority areas for action in the present. The following sections outline the key steps, opportunities, and partnerships required to begin moving toward this vision, ensuring that housing in Wales supports health, well-being, and equity for all.

4.3 What can we do differently? (Horizon 2)

For the final part of the exercise, stakeholders were asked to think of transformational and innovative ideas that can help us achieve the desired future vision (termed horizon 2 'plus' interventions). They were also asked to identify and be wary of activity that may serve as a temporary sticking plaster, rather than an activity that helps pave the way towards the desired future (termed horizon 2 'minus' interventions). Their thinking is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of 'plus' and 'minus' horizon 2 interventions identified by workshop participants

Horizon 2 'minus' interventions	Horizon 2 'plus' interventions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Emergency streams of funding that help individuals temporarily but do not deal with root causes. ✗ Increased use of temporary accommodation, e.g. hostels, B&Bs, to house people who are homeless or in urgent need of housing. ✗ The temporary relaxation of planning rules, which speed up the development of housing but can lead to poor-quality developments and do not always meet the needs of families. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Co-production of a housing strategy informed by those in the public and third sector and those with lived experience. ✓ Benefit reform (reserved to UK Government) such as changes to the local housing allowance, and improved welfare support for families on low incomes. ✓ Rent controls and stabilisation that would curb the rising costs in the private rental market, ensuring rents stay affordable for those on lower incomes. ✓ Simplifying planning permissions for affordable housing projects to reduce delays and costs associated with construction. ✓ Supporting standardised Health Impact Assessments (HIA) in all local authorities in Wales to ensure developments have a positive impact on health of the local population. ✓ Investing in homelessness prevention programmes that focus on addressing the root causes of homelessness, such as poverty, mental health issues, and relationship breakdowns. This could include rent subsidies, legal aid, and access to support services. ✓ Expanding a 'housing first approach', which provides stable housing for homeless individuals first, followed by support for issues like addiction or mental health. This model has been shown to reduce homelessness and improve long-term outcomes.

4.4 Seeds of change

Attendees were also asked to share ahead of the workshop examples of 'seeds of change'¹ – those existing ideas that, if nurtured, have the potential to shape the future.

They are likely not widespread nor well-known and can include social initiatives, economic tools, or technologies; social-ecological projects, movements, or organisations; or new ways of acting that can contribute to the creation of a future that is just, prosperous, and sustainable.

During the workshop, attendees were asked to consider the 'seeds of change' examples submitted and assess their impact and scalability. Two examples that were identified as particularly exciting in terms of potential impact are detailed in Box 3 and Box 4.

Box 3: Warm Wales - Healthy Homes Healthy People (HHHP) case study

Healthy Homes Healthy People (HHHP) addresses fuel poverty and health inequalities by offering practical energy efficiency and health support to vulnerable households across Wales.

Key Aims:

- To identify vulnerable households and provide immediate, person-centred support.
- To offer services in home safety, energy efficiency, fuel affordability, household income maximisation, and heating improvements.

Delivery:

- Warm Wales recruits, manages and trains community workers specifically to recognise the symptoms of an unhealthy home environment with the aim of providing relevant support and services to ensure residents have a warm and safe home.
- Case workers work closely with local partners (e.g. GPs, local charities) to ensure holistic care.
- Support includes home safety, household income maximisation, energy saving advice, benefit checks, and heating system improvements.
- Promotes health and wellbeing by ensuring residents have safe, warm homes.

What is the impact?

- Supported areas with high vulnerability, using vulnerability mapping.
- Supported over 3,700 households, helping them achieve warmer, safer, and healthier living conditions and facilitated financial savings exceeding £2.75 million.
- Funding from the Vulnerability and Carbon Monoxide Allowance (VCMA) Fund through Wales & West Utilities has enabled the work to be scaled up so that support is provided across all of Wales and the South West of England.

¹ For more information on the seeds of change exercise please see [WCVA \(2021\) Building Better Futures Toolkit](#)

How can this influence policy?

- This supports key policies on vulnerable households and energy efficiency. Vulnerability mapping allows resources to be effectively targeted, an approach that policymakers can replicate for more efficient allocation of support.
- The partnership between housing, health, and welfare services creates a comprehensive support system that could inform integrated service delivery at a policy level.
- The initiative's success in scaling across regions provides a model for broader application.
- Financial savings of £2.75 million highlight the economic impact, demonstrating both immediate and long-term benefits.
- Collaboration with Wales & West Utilities VCMA funding also offers a valuable model for integrating existing infrastructure to expand services.

Box 4: Caredig - Trauma-Informed Approach case study

In 2019, Caredig (a housing association) initiated a shift towards becoming more trauma-informed in its service delivery and support for tenants, service users, and staff.

Key aims:

- To use a trauma-informed approach that recognises the widespread impact of trauma on individuals' lives and a shift in focus to creating safe, reliable, and trusting environments. In the context of housing, this means creating physical spaces that are safe, welcoming, and stable. The environment (whether it is the housing unit itself or the interaction between tenants and staff) should reduce stress, provide predictability, and give tenants a sense of security - critical for individuals with a history of trauma.
- The approach prioritises safety, trust, reliability, choice, and agency in all interactions. For tenants, having a say in their living conditions - such as being involved in decisions about their housing, having secure tenure, and knowing they are in a place where their needs are understood can greatly reduce the impact of trauma. The aim is to empower tenants to have control over their living situation, promoting their mental and emotional well-being.
- To implement a trauma-informed approach as a way of being, not just a list of methods or strategies to implement.

Delivery:

- In the summer of 2021, a total of 31 tenants and 40 staff members were interviewed as part of a comprehensive evaluation to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences with the trauma-informed approach to housing implemented at Caredig.
- The interviews aimed to gather insights into how this approach was perceived by both residents and employees, focusing on its impact on their well-being, the effectiveness of support services, and the overall quality of housing.

- By capturing tenant and staff perspectives, the research sought to identify areas of success as well as opportunities for improvement in creating a supportive environment within the housing community.
- There is now retained focus and ongoing efforts to embed this approach across the organisation.

What is the impact?

- Staff found trauma-informed practices helpful in improving interactions with tenants, especially in offering targeted support based on understanding trauma. These led to more effective interventions, increasing tenants' confidence. Key elements included safe and supportive communication, flexible and empathetic case management, and staff training in recognising trauma triggers.
- Tenants expressed a strong sense of satisfaction with their relationships with Caredig staff, noting they felt heard, valued, and respected. While tenants did not specifically mention the trauma-informed changes, their positive feelings reflected the impact of the approach in their overall experience of support. Many tenants felt more emotionally supported and listened to, indicating the trauma-informed approach contributed to building trust and safety in the service environment.
- However, the process of implementing this approach has highlighted challenges for staff, particularly around feeling unsupported during transitions.

How can this influence policy?

- The positive impact of trauma-informed practices at Caredig highlights the need for public policies that require housing and social service providers to integrate trauma-sensitive care into their operations, promoting safer, more supportive environments for both staff and service users. This could be scaled up across the country with ongoing training, adequate resources, and mental health support for employees, ensuring they are equipped to implement trauma-informed practices effectively across public service sectors.

5 Emerging areas for action

There is strong evidence linking homes and health, and the high risk of negative impacts on children of insecure and sub-standard homes¹⁰. We now need to focus on action and implementation.

What has emerged from the collaborative work with stakeholders, as summarised in this report, are four emerging areas for action. These include:

1. **Support for a housing strategy:** This strategy would address the systemic challenges identified in this summary report, such as unhealthy living conditions, affordability pressures, and homelessness, including the number of families living in temporary accommodation. This will require coordinated action across sectors including health, housing, education, and social justice to provide healthier homes for children and families in the short and longer-term.
2. **Explore opportunities to better integrate data on housing conditions:** Robust collection and integration of public health data is critical for identifying the health consequences of unhealthy housing such as cold, damp, and overcrowded living environments. Data should be disaggregated to highlight the differential impacts on children, low-income households, and other high-risk populations. Evidence-led policymaking will ensure that interventions are targeted, proportionate, and focused on reducing health inequalities rooted in housing conditions.
3. **Inclusive engagement with those who have lived experience of unhealthy homes in policy development:** Meaningful engagement means that policies truly reflect the needs of people facing housing challenges. By fostering partnerships particularly with families with young children living in poverty, policy development can be informed by real-world experiences, leading to more equitable access to healthy, safe, and affordable housing.
4. **Utilisation of Health Impact Assessments (HIAs):** Promote awareness, understanding, and application of HIAs to encourage greater use by planners and local authorities (LAs). HIAs are valuable tools for identifying the specific potential impacts of housing planning and policy decisions on children, their families, and low-income communities—helping to maximise benefits and mitigate negative effects.

5.1 Next steps

We will focus on translating these ideas to support policy making and implementation and ensuring that key stakeholders, including families with lived experience of poverty and unhealthy housing, remain involved in shaping the next steps.

We hope attendees of our workshop, and those reading this summary, take away a stronger sense of their role in shaping the future of healthy homes in Wales, as well as a deeper understanding of the collaborative effort required across sectors to bring about meaningful change.

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