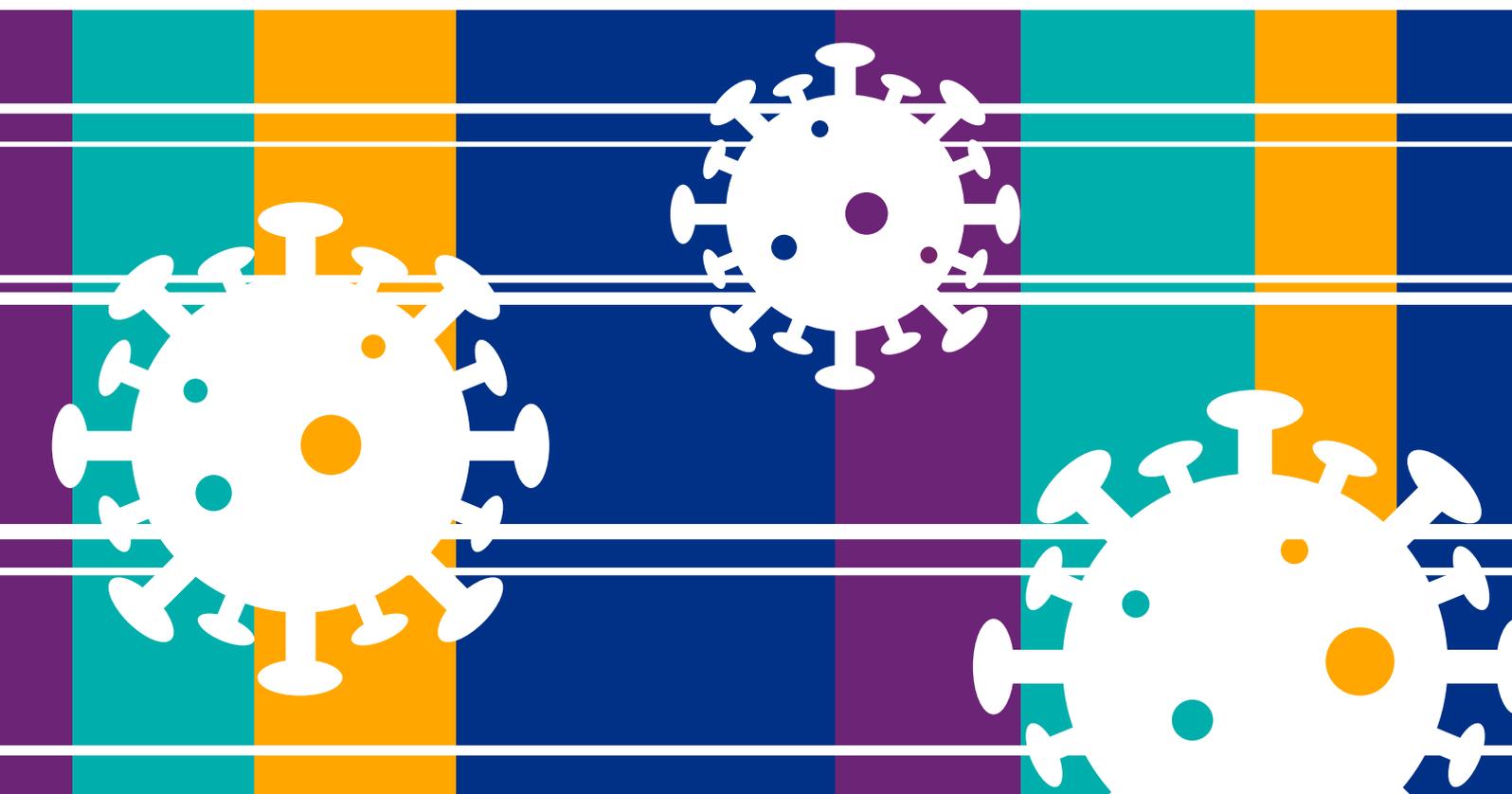


HOUSING FIRST IN A COVID AND POST-COVID WALES

MAINTAINING, OR RETURNING TO, FULL PRINCIPLES AFTER THE PANDEMIC

OCTOBER 2020



INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all areas of life in Wales and across the UK, not to mention internationally. Clearly, homelessness, support, and Housing First are no exception.

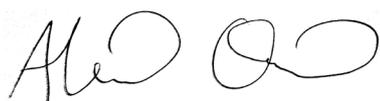
Housing First is a distinct approach to supporting a specific target client group. In effect, it is rapid rehousing with the highest level of housing-led support. Housing First in Wales is based on a [specific set of principles](#), devised by the Housing First Network Wales.

As a result of the swift action by local authorities and their partners over 2,000 people have been moved off the streets or from unsuitable housing into emergency accommodation. Given the current situation, and the fact that Welsh Government has recently announced £50 million to transform homelessness services and help people into more permanent housing, it seems likely that existing Housing First projects will increase their capacity and new projects may be established.

Due to the pace and scale of the response to the pandemic, it is possible that Housing First projects have had to work with less adherence to the principles of the approach, or soften the use of some of the principles during the first few months.

It is important that the sector acknowledges this reality, while understanding that Housing First will need to continue to maintain its identity and adhere to the principles going forward. As such, we recommend an honest, open approach: projects that, for understandable reasons, are not delivering Housing First to the letter of the principles, should not call themselves Housing First for the time being. They should also ensure there is a clear aim and plan to return to the delivery of those principles in due course.

This document discusses various ways in which projects which are just starting out, or have struggled to adhere to some principles during this pandemic, might return to delivering full Housing First - based on the insight of people delivering Housing First on a day-to-day basis. Additionally, it discusses some of the options available to the sector in a COVID and post-COVID world, and how we might take the current opportunity to provide support to people who have never engaged with it, while maintaining Housing First as a specific, clearly defined solution.



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THE PRINCIPLES

The Housing First principles document outlines a ‘scoring’ system for each principle, used by organisations to give themselves an idea of how true to the Housing First model their support is, before, for example, entering into Cymorth Cymru’s Housing First Accreditation pathway. Some of the principles can be scored in a graded way - from zero (a ‘fail’), through one and two, to a maximum score of three. Others are more binary, and can only score zero or three - effectively, a pass/fail system for that principle.

All the Housing First principles are equally important. That said, the principles that score in this binary way seem to be a sensible place to start this discussion. New projects established during the COVID pandemic might want to consider focusing on these principles first. Similarly, projects that have (justifiably) had to relax their adherence to Housing First principles due to the current situation should ensure that these principles are returned to as soon as possible. Incidentally, this advice could also apply to housing-led projects that need to increase the intensity of their support, on the way to an approach that is more like Housing First.

It should be noted that in some cases, projects might find it harder to deliver the second set of principles, precisely because they are less binary - it might be harder for a support provider to gauge how well they are delivering a principle, particularly a principle from the second set. Organisations need to understand that some flexibility is to be expected during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that this flexibility might apply more to the second set of principles - but that all principles are core to Housing First.

PRINCIPLES WITH A SCORE OF ZERO OR THREE:

Principle one

People have a right to a home that is affordable, secure, habitable, adequate both physically and culturally, and with availability of services (as per UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights). It should also be dispersed in the community and not as part of an institution.

- 0 - Individuals have to commit to treatment, or to changing lifestyle, in order to access accommodation. Housing is not affordable, secure, habitable and adequate.
- 3 - Individuals can access accommodation regardless of circumstance, support or historical engagement; housing is affordable, suitable, secure, habitable and adequate.

Potential issues

- Housing supply remains a problem, one exacerbated by current events. Many RSLs were unable to turn voids around due to contractors furloughing staff and supply problems with materials.
- Some landlords may have become more risk-averse as they have been asked to move people into properties more quickly than usual. This may have resulted in people being given licences or less secure tenancies, which do not give people security of tenure.
- The potential influx of clients, and the desire to support people during the pandemic, might lead to projects opening in a rushed manner, without having time to build relationships with clients and potential clients. As the rest of this document makes clear, building these trusting relationships is vital.

Good practice

- Ensure that relationships between clients and staff are somehow developed, despite added pressure. This is easier said than done, but by doing some of the other things listed in this guidance (flexible use of budgets, ensuring client move-in is still seen as a vital moment, etc.), relationships can be strengthened.
- Maintain contact with RSLs, even ones that suggest they have no accommodation, and be assertive in requesting to be notified when new properties become available. The recent release of capital funding by Welsh Government should help to increase supply of accommodation and Housing First providers should speak to their local authority contacts to ensure that Housing First clients are considered for new properties.
- Pre-checks and pre-approval for HF clients.
- Housing First teams should attend void meetings as many RSLs and local authorities have them.
- Work with RSLs to discuss the importance of secure tenancies for Housing First clients.
- Continuing communication between support providers and RSL partners, even if there isn't much to report, is vital to maintain those relationships. Reassurance can be provided, as well as context. This helps with continuity and ensures that relationships are maintained.

Principle two

Housing and support are separated.

0 - Housing and support have no to little separation.

3 - Support and accommodation should be separate. Access to accommodation is not conditional on engagement with any generic support that may be offered by the landlord/accommodation provider.

Potential issues

- Given the continuing role of support providers ensuring people comply with lockdown, the perception of support workers as being part of 'the system' could become more likely.
- RSLs have been taking social distancing very seriously, and some clients have found themselves in trouble in Housing First properties quite quickly.
- Different issues could arise in a similar way if RSLs don't seem to take social distancing seriously - Housing First staff could be put at risk, for example.
- The lifting of the eviction ban could result in increased evictions.

Good practice

- Support workers should be honest with clients about decisions that have been made that they might not agree with, and make it clear that they are on the side of the client, no matter what.
- As always, taking the time to build relationships will help with this.
- Support workers should be willing to challenge housing partners when required. This might involve other third parties.
- Support providers should work with RSLs to encourage a trauma informed approach when clients break lockdown or social distancing rules.
- The Network and sub groups should develop guidance that can be distributed to housing partners that makes roles in Housing First clear - who should be doing what, and what shouldn't different stakeholders be doing?

Principle three

The service is targeted at individuals who demonstrate a repeat pattern of disengagement with hostel accommodation and/ or, individuals accessing rough sleeping or accessing EOS (Emergency Overnight Stay) at the point when the referral is made.

- 0 - The service is able to exclude on the basis of complexity.
- 3 - The service identifies and works with the most complex cases

Potential issues

- At some point soon, the phase 2 response to COVID-19 might lead to Housing First projects dealing with an influx of clients, some of whom might have been referred in a way that precludes relationship-building and the usual assertive outreach.
- There is also the danger that Housing First is seen as a solution for nearly everyone who has been housed temporarily as a result of the pandemic.
- The clients who are part of this influx may or may not actually fit Housing First target client criteria.

Good practice

- We need to work with Welsh Government and local government to ensure that any referral routes allow providers and clients to build strong relationships and trust
- Local authorities should ensure that they have a robust need-assessment process to determine whether a person meets the Housing First client criteria, and only the people who meet this criteria should be referred to Housing First projects. Others should benefit from rapid re-housing with an appropriate level of support.
- Organisations, supported by the Housing First Network and its sub groups, need to be open about whether the support they are providing is Housing First, and whether there is a clear plan to return to full Housing First if they have had to relax some of the principles because of the pandemic. We must work together to ensure Housing First as a model is not diluted.

Principle four

Flexible support is provided for as long as it is needed.

- 0 - Support is time-limited and finite.
- 3 - Support is ongoing, not limited by time, can scale up and down, and can be re-accessed when needed.

Potential issues

- While support provided during the COVID-19 pandemic has, in a way, been forced to be flexible, social distancing has made things difficult. Members of staff are not present for important moments, like a client moving in. Similarly, not all clients respond well to support over telephones or other non-face-to-face means. Staff still need to make sure they are following social distancing guidance and remaining safe, which might make it difficult for them to visit certain properties.
- Additionally, small Housing First teams are more overstretched than normal, and so providing the 24/7 on-call support that is at the core of Housing First is very difficult.
- The funding for the phase two response is only available until the end of 2020/21. There are concerns that future budgets will not enable the continuation of Housing First projects.

Good practice

- Housing First schemes should have conversations with local authorities about the importance of sustainable funding beyond this financial year.
- While digital engagement cannot replace face-to-face support entirely, helping clients to purchase equipment such as smart phones, internet hubs or data can help them to stay on regular contact. In addition, some people may need help to improve their digital literacy.
- Flexible use of budgets has shown good results - buying Netflix subscriptions for clients, for example, as well as videogames and consoles. Leaving small welcome gifts, or items belonging to clients taken from storage or previous accommodation, in a house for when a tenant moves in, also connects the team with the client even if they can't be present.
- Similarly, teams have purchased arts and crafts sets and activities for clients who like that kind of thing. In another example, the team purchased phone quiz apps for a client who enjoyed quizzes.
- Maintaining staff morale and ensuring that all possible ways of providing support to clients are explored are vital.
- Relationship-based support in hotels, hostels and other temporary accommodation.
- Equip staff teams with vans, equipment for making tea, and wet weather shelter (gazebos, for example). This will allow Housing First workers to meet clients anywhere it is possible to adhere to social distancing guidelines - on beaches, for example, or in parks. Equipping these vans with key safes will ensure that the van can wait outside properties while clients move in.
- Acquiring allotments can also provide areas for staff and clients to safely meet in the open air - as well as providing an actual activity for clients who want it.

Principle six

Additionally, based on reflection among the Network and related meetings, the principle governing Choice and Control is perhaps more binary than it seemed when the Principles were drafted. As such, we include it here:

Individuals have choice and control

- 0 - Individuals are allocated one property without any choice; the tenure offered is on licence.
- 1 - Individuals are able to choose properties, but within specific areas, or between properties of lower quality; the tenure offered is a full tenancy.
- 2 - Individuals are able to choose properties based on a free choice from the housing available; the tenure offered is a full tenancy.
- 3 - Individuals are able to choose properties across all tenures, and can request specific PRS properties to be considered / approached by the HF provider; the tenure offered is a full tenancy.

Potential issues

- In some cases, due to the large numbers of people needing to be housed as a result of COVID-19, clients might need to be housed in accommodation they wouldn't necessarily have chosen. Support staff should bear in mind that for some clients, changing that choice, or deciding they'd prefer to live somewhere else, might be difficult once they're in a home for the first time in years. For others, it might be easier to be open or even vocal about preferring different accommodation elsewhere. There needs to be a commitment to return to the principle of choice as soon as possible.

Good practice

- Ensure a plan is in place to work with the client further down the line, to ensure they are genuinely happy to stay in given accommodation, or whether they would make a different choice. The stronger the relationship that has been built up, the easier this will be.
- It is possible that clients who have expressed an interest in a specific area will expand their choice if accommodation doesn't become available in that area. Again, conversations with clients need to be honest and open, so support workers can be sure that they are acting upon a client's genuine choice.
- Guidance mentioned elsewhere in this document about building relationships, so that support workers are confident they understand their clients' choices, would also apply here.
- Housing First providers should work with RSLs and local authorities to ensure that allocation policies do not prevent people from being able to move properties.

REMAINING PRINCIPLES

The remaining principles are scored differently, with scores of zero, one, two or three possible. Given the fact that these seem less binary, they could be focused on after the principles discussed above - or, for example, lower scores could be aimed for before a project could move to higher ones.

These principles are:

Principle five

An active engagement approach is used

- 0 - Individuals have a waiting list for support, or have to meet certain criteria, before they can engage with the Housing First project, and if they refuse to engage, the offer is withdrawn.
- 2 - Individuals are able to engage when they want, but there is limited outreach to encourage them and ensure the paths to engagement are open.
- 3 - Individuals are approached regularly and engaged with, whether or not Housing First is taken up; the engagement takes place without proviso that someone needs to get involved; the service is ready to move quickly if the individual changes their mind and wants to engage, to ensure "window of opportunity" remains open.

Potential issues

- As noted above, an increase in the number of people who might be suited to Housing First services, as well as the pandemic context, might lead to more individuals being supported without having had an active relationship with a support provider. Sometimes it takes many months of work to build a trusting and positive relationship between support workers and potential clients. We need to think through how those relationships can be developed through referral systems in a COVID and post-COVID context.
- Similarly, the impact that social distancing has had on face-to-face contact will make outreach, as well as maintaining relationships with existing clients, much harder.

Good practice

- Teams need to ensure they have sufficient PPE for frontline activities - this will apply across all principles.

- Housing First workers, as long as they can adhere to social distancing guidelines and remain safe, can still do their utmost to deliver face-to-face support and to be contactable by clients. By doing outreach work with rough sleepers during the COVID pandemic, as well as supporting rough sleepers being accommodated temporarily (depending on local plans, of course), can enable teams to begin building rapport and relationships in advance of a sudden influx of clients, as has been discussed elsewhere.
- The importance of slowly building relationships, and being prepared for setbacks, cannot be overstated. One example concerns a very complex client who had built up a distrust of services over many years. The support provider engages with the client regularly, following his lead - sometimes telephone contact works well, while other times, the client will shout abuse at staff. Staff have taken an understanding and delicate approach and after several weeks feel some trust has been built up - it might be, the team think, that the client was essentially 'testing' the staff to see what boundaries he could push; staff would make it clear that abuse was unacceptable, reinforcing those boundaries while never abandoning the client. Now the client has been sending grateful texts which is seen as a huge breakthrough; additionally, some paperwork was completed face-to-face with the client, so the approach of taking the client's lead and always being there for when the client wants to engage has been successful so far.
- Where face to face support is not possible, Housing First providers should consider providing phones, data and/or internet access to ensure that clients can engage with their support workers.

Principle seven

A harm reduction approach to substance misuse is used

- 0 - Providers are prevented from taking risks in terms of harm reduction, and activities that reduce harm are actively forbidden in contracts either by commissioners or RSLs.
- 1 - Providers are able to take a minimal harm reduction approach, but are not able to ensure the correct support is in place.
- 2 - Providers are able to ensure that a fully harm-reduction approach is adopted, and can act to ensure the most correct support is in place without fear of negative responses from landlords.
- 3 - Providers can adopt a true harm reduction approach with the open support and endorsement from all stakeholders including RSL / PRS landlord, provider, police, NHS, etc.

Potential issues

- It is possible that the lockdown has affected the supply of substances, or the ability of individuals to purchase alcohol. Similarly, encounters with police while trying to buy substances might be more likely, given the smaller number of people outside their homes at present.
- Conversely, lockdown and the associated loneliness or frustration may have exacerbated people's dependence on alcohol or substances.

Good practice

- Support providers will need to develop policies to help staff operate during lockdown. Some organisations have developed policies governing the provision of alcohol and cigarettes to clients, to prevent clients sharing cigarettes or alcohol, picking up used cigarettes from the floor, and to help make sure they stay isolated rather than going to the shops. Supplying tobacco to clients can also help encourage smoking other substances over injecting.

- One example involves a client who had been furloughed from his job, and began using large amounts of alcohol. Staff were able to work directly with the local substance misuse team and a rehabilitation centre via direct phone calls, and the client was moved there more quickly than he might have been while he was working (when stopping drinking was less of a priority for him, due to his job). The PRS landlord was involved in supporting him to get help too. Budgets were used to use a taxi to take him the 100 miles to the rehab centre (ordinarily staff would have taken the client, but could not due to lockdown guidelines).
- There are positive examples of Substance Misuses teams working closely with clients during lockdown, where substantial progress has been made with addiction issues. This highlights the importance of principle ten, and how involving other agencies properly can have hugely beneficial outcomes. It is critical that this positive engagement continues as we enter phase two.

Principle eight

The service is delivered in a psychologically-informed, trauma-informed, gender-informed way that is sensitive and aware of protected characteristics.

- 0 - The service does not take into account the personal history or circumstances of individuals, and the commissioning team limits, or sets strict criteria, for how providers should work.
- 1 - The service is aware of the personal history or circumstances of individuals, but as a result takes judgements to “minimise risk”, rather than working to adapt to those needs.
- 2 - The service is working towards training its staff and developing partner stakeholders and ensuring that everyone involved in an individual’s journey to Housing First is fully aware (where needed) of the potential trauma and adverse experiences by the individual.
- 3 - The staff of the service and partner stakeholders are trained and are aware of the personal history, trauma and experiences of their clients, and work to ensure their interactions are sensitive and responsive to those experiences.

Potential issues

- Training related to PIE, trauma and ACEs that might have been booked before the lockdown began might now have been cancelled. Overstretched teams might find it harder to work in a psychologically or trauma informed way. This may have had a particular impact on being able to respond to specific traumas or issues - for example, assigning female support workers to clients that request them could be harder.
- In a time when face-to-face contact is much harder, methods that are less trauma-informed are more likely to be used - telephone, for example.
- The challenges and anxieties of working during a pandemic have had a negative impact on staff. Those delivering face-to-face support have had to cope with the fear of catching the virus, and those working from home have been more isolated than usual. Access to reflective practice and peer support is also likely to have been reduced.

Good practice

- Consider holding more informal reflective catch-ups among teams who might be overstretched and have had training cancelled.
- The importance of properly developed relationships is, again, vital here. Support workers who have built up trusting, honest, empathic relationships with clients will have a better understanding of how to work with various traumas.

- Careful consideration needs to be paid to the available staffing and resource, and staff need to understand that they might have to respond quickly to clients (as they would have to in a normal context, in response to mental health crisis, for example).
- Some teams have been able to safely carry out face-to-face meetings with clients, as discussed elsewhere in this document.
- Flexible and creative use of budgets to ensure clients feel safe and ‘at home’ in their property, as discussed elsewhere in this document, will also have an impact on the reaction of clients to previous trauma - in effect, creative budget use (for example, purchasing a video game console) can be trauma-informed in itself.
- Consider how staff can access psychological support and reflective practice during lockdown, potentially using digital platforms.

Principle nine

The service is based on people’s strengths, goals and aspirations, and as such has an explicit commitment to a small caseload.

- 0 - There is a set approach for support for all individuals regardless of specific needs.
- 1 - There is an attempt to create individualised support, but services are commissioned on an hours-based basis, which limits the time that can be spent with people.
- 2 - There is an individualised, personalised service, but it acts in a way by which support is given to an individual, rather than with.
- 3 - There is a commitment to co-production and service user involvement, where the individual has a very real say in their support, and is able to suggest ways they can be supported; local commissioning is flexible with Housing First services monitoring and reporting to allow this.

Potential issues

- As has been discussed elsewhere, a potential influx of clients could put stress on a Housing First service, potentially transforming its support into something more housing-led than Housing First.
- Client goals might have been forced to change by the pandemic and lockdown restrictions. It is harder to be aspirational during potentially depressing times.

Good practice

- Some organisations have been able to recruit new staff to mitigate the above issue somewhat. Housing First providers should be clear with commissioners when caseloads are reaching their limit and ensure that they are clear when extra staff capacity is needed to take on additional clients.
- Other organisations have ensured that caseloads have remained small, so they can focus on clients’ strengths. Again, this might be more difficult in coming months. This will also help ensure work is trauma-informed and aligns with principle eight.
- Once again, strong relationships between support workers and clients will ensure that conversations are honest, and support workers can advocate for clients whatever the context. Support workers can work with clients to make sure they understand that goals can change and can still be important.

Principle ten

The widest range of services are involved from the outset (health, substance misuse, mental health, police), so individuals can access them if needed or wanted.

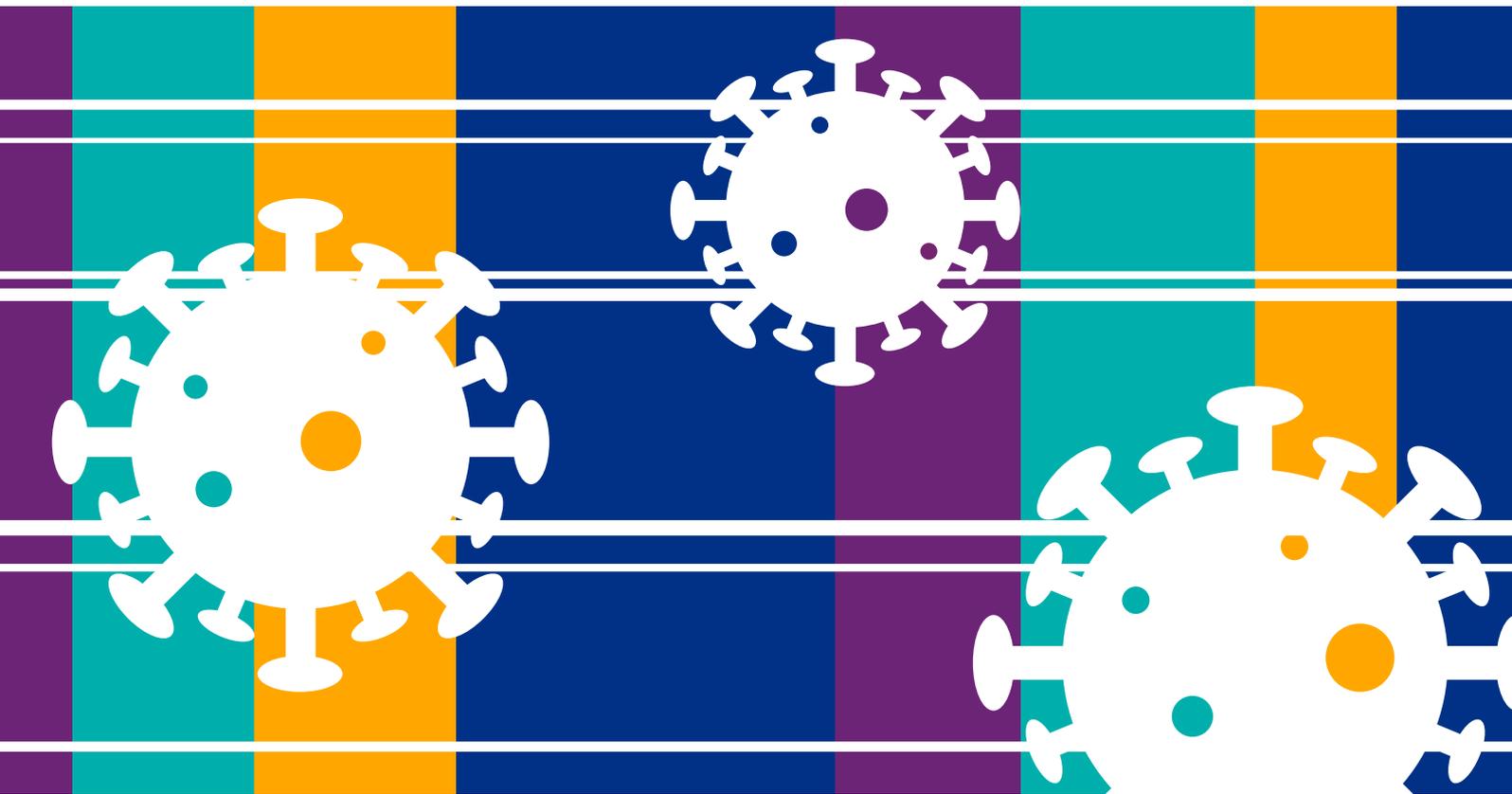
- 0 - The service is commissioned by the housing department with no involvement or buy-in from other services; the service is run with minimal to no involvement from other agencies.
- 1 - The service is commissioned with limited and / or late involvement from other services, and the service has no plan to run with involvement from other agencies.
- 2 - The service is commissioned with planned involvement from other services, and there is a plan to involve those services, but no shared MoU or limited commitments.
- 3 - The service is commissioned with full partnership approaches, there is regular commitment by all stakeholders to review the systems and continue to support individuals, there are “fast-track” referral procedures put in place to improve access to health and mental health services.

Potential issues

- It is likely that a significant number of people who have been moved off the streets during the pandemic will need support from mental health and substance misuse services. Welsh Government will need to ensure that there are fast track systems for substance misuse and mental health referrals so that we don't miss this opportunity to make a lasting impact.
- Areas where buy-in has been difficult to develop partnerships with external agencies and organisations are likely to find it even harder in the current context.
- Other organisations will have their own issues to deal with because of the pandemic: health and mental health services, for example, will be incredibly busy.

Good practice

- In many parts of Wales substance misuse services have been heavily involved in efforts to move people into emergency accommodation and many people have started treatment. It is essential that this continues as we enter phase two.
- Letting relevant partners know as early as possible that a particular client is being worked with by a Housing First team is crucial, as it sustained and honest communication between services.
- Support providers should make support workers aware that they should be willing to challenge other organisations, and argue the case for multidisciplinary teams to be involved, with other agencies being added as necessary, to ensure the best support possible is provided to the clients.
- There are examples of full partnership approaches working well during COVID as it almost seems some people are more likely to answer emails and phone calls during lockdown. Some organisations have been able to set up fast-track referrals because of this (like the rehabilitation centre example discussed previously).
- Some of the phase two plans include the development or expansion of multi-disciplinary teams. It is important that this continues beyond the end of this financial year.



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