Developing new Housing Support Grant Outcomes: Views from the Frontline Network Wales

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1. Introduction

Cymorth Cymru has written this paper to assist the Housing Support Grant Outcomes Task and Finish Group, which has been established by the Housing Support National Advisory Board to advise the Welsh Government on how to develop a new Housing Support Grant Outcomes Framework.

We have long advocated for frontline homelessness and housing support workers to have opportunities to share their experiences and ideas, and actively contribute towards the development of policy. The development of a new outcomes framework will directly impact on their day-to-day work, and we have highlighted the importance of frontline workers having the opportunity to feed into the decision making process. Members of the Task and Finish Group shared this view and agreed that Cymorth Cymru should utilise the Frontline Network Wales to engage with frontline workers and gather their opinions on workforce issues.

The Frontline Network Wales is delivered by Cymorth Cymru in partnership with the Frontline Network, which works across the UK to support workers from the public, statutory and voluntary sectors working on the frontline with those experiencing homelessness. Established in late 2020, the Frontline Network Wales holds regular regional meetings for frontline staff to share their experiences of working in the sector and their views on how to improve policy and practice.

During February 2022 we held a series of online regional meetings with 75 frontline homelessness and housing support workers from third sector support providers, housing associations and local authorities. We shared the initial proposals discussed by the Task and Finish Group and asked them a series of questions about their experiences of the current system and views on the new framework.

2. Reflections on the current system

2.1 Administrative burden and multiple systems for data collection
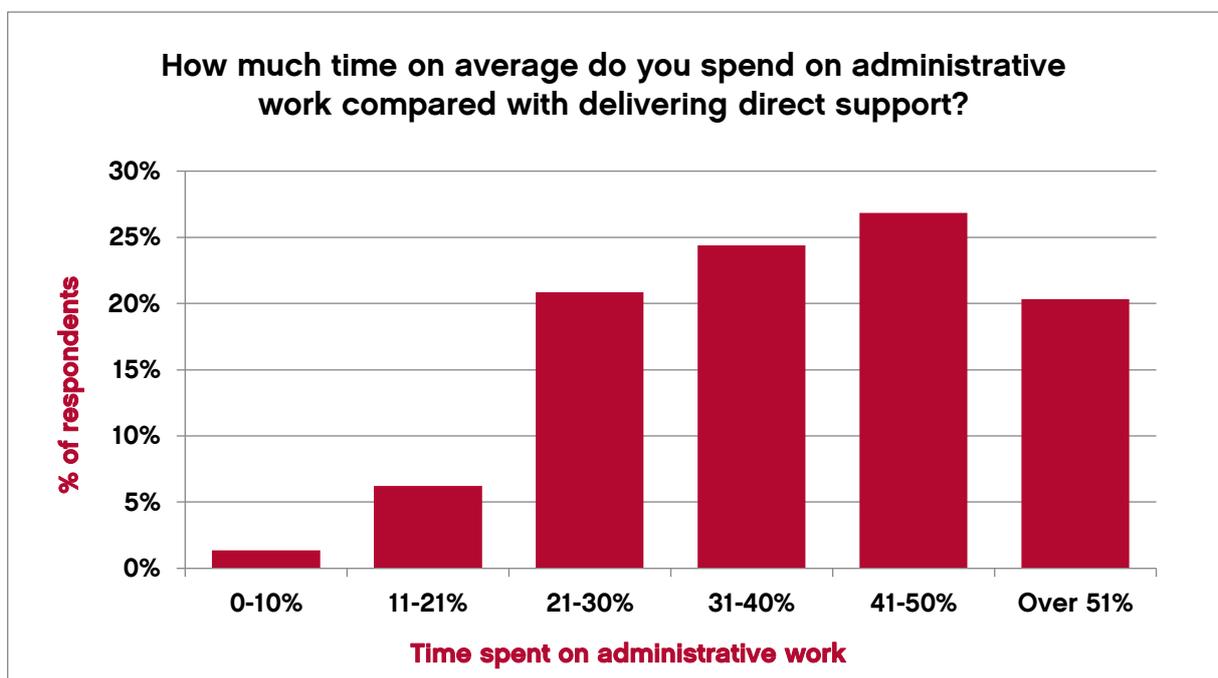
- A common theme during the meetings was the administrative burden of the outcome collection process. Lots of attendees completely understood why outcomes are collected (i.e. to demonstrate impact and justify public spending decisions) but felt that the administrative burden was too great and restricted the amount of time they could spend delivering support to people.
- Lots of workers said they have to record the outcomes in several different systems – one for their own internal data collection, one for the local authority's system and some mentioned having to input outcomes into a partner organisation's data collection system when delivering services in a partnership or consortium. Frontline workers viewed this as unnecessary duplication and advocated strongly for a single data collection system that would only require them to enter the information once.

> "It's a lot of work, repetitive. We understand why we collect it, but in the current climate and how stretched we are, it is really difficult to implement, a real volume of work. At least 50% of our time is spent doing paperwork. It could be streamlined better to suit our needs now […] we need a system that supports how we are working now."

> "Sometimes the data systems we use are extremely time consuming, CRMs and transferring data over to excel spreadsheets."

> "We record case notes and outcomes in a gateways system – it is simple but we work in partnership with another organisation, so have to input info in to their system too – so duplication. If there was one system it would make it easier for all."

- Some attendees also mentioned that they were also required (by the local authority) to complete spreadsheets detailing individual clients' income, expenditure and debt – in addition to recording all of the SP/HSG outcomes. Again, this added to the administrative burden on frontline workers and reduce the time available for delivering direct support to people.
- In a recent survey of over 400 frontline homelessness and housing support workers in Wales, respondents said they spent the following proportion of their time on administrative support:

How much time on average do you spend on administrative work compared with delivering direct support?

% of respondents

Time spent on administrative work

- Attendees also commented that changing jobs and moving to new organisations and new local authority areas meant having to learn new systems, despite it being the same outcome data being collected for the same Welsh Government funded programme.
- Lots of attendees suggested that having one system to record the outcomes across all organisations and local authority areas in Wales would be helpful.

2.2 Missing important activity and progress

- Some people commented that the current outcomes system doesn't enable them to capture lots of activity and progress made with regards to independent living skills, such as helping people to understand how to set up bank accounts, liaise with utility companies, pay rent and council tax, and engage with other services.
- Attendees emphasised that these weren't just standalone activities but they formed a critical part of developing confidence and learning skills which enable people to sustain tenancies in the longer term. This was highlighted as being particularly important for people who had spent sustained time on the streets, people leaving institutions and others who had never had a home of their own before.
- There were also a few comments about how recording outcomes at a fixed point in time often missed some of the progress that had been made in-between these points.

> **"We use a spreadsheet – every 3 months, so difficult to see what has happened in between. The day you record might be a bad day for the person but they have made progress in between, so maybe an option to record how many goals they achieved in the timeframe rather than at the 3-month bracket."**

2.3 Tracking progress

- Support workers are often carrying large caseloads and are unable to remember the outcomes they entered for a particular client a few months earlier. Some people commented that the system used by their organisation or local authority doesn't allow them to look back at previous entries – so they find it difficult to reflect on the progress that has been made. Others said that the systems utilised by their organisations enabled them to do this. There was a consensus that being able to look at previous entries was incredibly useful, as both a reference point for support workers and for the person using services to understand what progress they have made.
- Some people suggested that using visual tools like the outcomes star enabled people using services to be able to see their progress in a very visual way and gain confidence from this – whereas entering numbers into a computerised system didn't allow people using services to do this.

> **"It does give our members a clear overview of where they've started from and how far they have come because they have involvement in it, and shows their progression."**

2.4 Subjectivity and different contexts

- Some people commented on the subjectivity of the system, and how outcomes for one person can look very different from another, depending on their circumstances.

> **"What is a success for one individual is not a success for another."**

- Others said that the subjectivity and lack of absolute clarity caused confusion among staff who were sometime unsure what number to record against an outcome. People suggested that clear guidance could help to reduce some of this confusion and uncertainty.
- Others felt that subjectivity was inevitable in this system, due to the nature and diversity of the services and client groups – and didn't view it as a problem.

3. Proposal for primary and secondary outcomes

- There was widespread support for the proposal to have primary and secondary outcomes.
- While some people questioned the need for change, most understood that the Housing Support Grant encompasses a broader range of services than the Supporting People Programme, and also recognised the Welsh Government's sharpened focus on ending homelessness and evidencing progress towards this aim.
- People understood that preventing / alleviating homelessness and supporting people to maintain their tenancy was the primary aim of the programme and that the Welsh Government needs to collect evidence of this.
- However, people felt very strongly that the secondary outcomes were critical enablers for achieving the accommodation related outcomes and that these reflected significant achievements for many of the people they support. They were all adamant that these should be collected alongside the primary, accommodation-based outcomes

> **"Yes, the primary is important but the secondary is really beneficial."**

> **"Have worked on other project that have had hard and soft outcomes - and the secondary (soft) capture it - we go the extra mile, nice to record that the service is doing that."**

> **"All sounds good to me, we put so much work into it […], so to be able to show the primary and secondary outcomes to government would be great – e.g. substance misuse etc, without it they won't maintain their homes."**

- People were very supportive of the concept of a 'menu' of secondary outcomes, recognising that different outcomes would be relevant to different services and client groups. They felt that describing these as a 'menu' was helpful in terms of reducing (real or perceived) pressure to record outcomes against areas that were not relevant to the person they were supporting.

> **"Yes, really like the primary and secondary model working in domestic abuse […] [we] ask about things like education but they aren't always relevant to our users, so the ability to pick and choose what fits our clients' needs is a much better way of recording the support we provide."**

> **"We struggle with [some of the outcomes] – as most seem inapplicable - then we doubt if we are doing it well."**

4. Primary outcomes

- There was widespread support for being able to clearly record the positive outcomes that clients achieve regarding housing / accommodation, recognising the primary aim of the grant.
- Attendees were generally happy with the suggested outcomes and everyone felt that their service could record at least one primary outcome for the people they support.

- There was support for being able to capture an outcome for short term interventions (the first draft primary outcome), as this is valuable preventative work, but isn't captured under the current system.

> "We do a lot of signposting - since the pandemic, lots more people experiencing homelessness for the first time, so they want some initial advice and info, not necessarily continuing support

- Some people suggested that the second outcome was not clear and needed re-wording.

> "I don't understand the second one."

> "Primary outcomes proposed don't account for preventing homelessness or finding accommodation for people at risk."

- Another piece of feedback was whether these adequately captured an outcome when someone completes their stay in supported accommodation and successfully moves to independent living in their own tenancy.

> "What it doesn't cover is when people move out – they exit our support, not really a box on the form that I've got."

- There were also questions from people working in temporary accommodation. While the Welsh Government plans to reduce dependency on temporary accommodation as part of the transition to rapid rehousing, the reality for some people is that they could be in temporary accommodation for sustained periods and workers questioned how this would be reflected.

> "Agree, in our team people move around a lot- from temp accommodation, B&B so hard to sustain that placement but not their fault."

> "People moving around from unsuitable temp accommodation might move a number of times over a few months."

5. Secondary outcomes

- Attendees were generally supportive of the proposed secondary outcomes, feeling that they reflected the variety of support they delivered and included most of the key enablers that helped people to exit homelessness and maintain tenancies.
- There was support for having these broader secondary outcomes, with more specific / detailed measures sitting under them to enable services to record meaningful actions and progress.
- Feedback specific to each draft outcome included:

5.1 People have meaningful and healthy relationships with people in their life

- There was general support for this secondary outcome and clear links with lots of work that is undertaken around domestic abuse, family breakdown, re-building relationships, and ending unhealthy relationships that have previously led to substance use or offending.
- One question was posed as to whether this would include both personal relationships with family and friends, and relationships with key external services such as GPs and health visitors. However, most people felt that it would relate to personal relationships with family and friends.

5.2 People like where they live and feel part of the community

- Some attendees were unsure what this outcome aimed to capture. Frontline workers were able to respond much more confidently to the other proposed secondary outcomes, as they could see how these related to the support they deliver – but they struggled to understand what areas of their work would relate to this outcome.
- Another concern was that people exiting homelessness do not often have much choice about where they live, and support delivered via the HSG can do very little to influence this and therefore deliver progress against this outcome.

> **"Part of the community - this is hard when people aren't living where they want to, when they haven't had a choice about where they live, so they are away from friends and family."**

5.3 People feel safe

- Attendees were very supportive of this outcome and emphasised that the measures underneath it need to include a range of issues regarding safety, including people fleeing domestic abuse being safe from the perpetrator, people feeling safe from exploitation (county lines, drug dealers), and people feeling secure in their own home for the first time.

> **"Need to expand on what it means to feel safe (for some it might be a roof and bed, but what does safety feel like to a wider range of people)."**

5.4 People can manage their money/finances

- Several people made the point that there's often a key step before people are able to manage their finances, which is helping people to access the financial support that they're entitled to – particularly where people are underclaiming their welfare benefits (benefits maximisation).
- Some pointed out that being able to manage your finances while on Universal Credit was unachievable – and therefore any measures against this outcome need to be realistic and understand the very challenging context in which people on no or low incomes are trying to manage their financial situation.

> **"Understand why it's on there - but when someone is on less than £400 a month UC and they have a flat to run, it is impossible to manage, I don't know how they are going to do it, especially with energy prices rising- all the budget plans in the world can't help."**

5.5 People are engaged in something meaningful to them

- Attendees were very supportive of the proposed 'meaningful activity' outcome, saying that it enabled a person-centred approach to capturing what was meaningful to that person, depending on their circumstances and recovery – whether that be social activities, recreational activities, volunteering, education or employment.
- Attendees welcomed the move away from having a separate 'employment' outcome, as this wasn't feasible for lots of people – examples were given of people who were unable to contemplate employment after sustained homelessness and trauma, as well as employment being a barrier to people being able to stay in supported accommodation, particularly for young people and women in refuge.

> **"Working with people with a long history of homelessness, talking about employment with them is difficult not the main priority, plus a lot of places are still shut, so hard to find somewhere for people to go - but it is so important to understand the things that are meaningful to them, helps with self-worth and confidence."**

5.6 People's health and wellbeing is good

- Lots of attendees expressed the view that this outcome should be broken down into at least two different outcomes – partly because it makes up a large proportion of their support work (particularly supporting people's mental health) and partly because it's such a complex area including physical health, mental health, substance use, wellbeing and resilience.

  > "Last one is too big, should be split between physical and MH, well-being and resilience, or things will get lost under too big an umbrella."

  > "Health one probably needs to be broken down more because it is a large part of what we do."

- A common suggestion was to split physical health into one outcome and mental health into another. Part of the rationale was that someone's physical health could be very good while their mental health is very poor (and vice versa) – so different outcomes would need to be recorded against each.
- Others advocated for a separate outcome relating to substance use, as this was a significant part of their support work and was linked, but different to, someone's mental or physical health.

  > "I think substance misuse gets overlooked, hard to capture the impact it can have on someone's life, on physical and mental health and a person's capacity to manage the other parts of their life, but hard to suggest what the label should be."

  > "Substance misuse one could be its own one, so many stages to addressing substance and alcohol use – and often tied to MH but is a separate issue."

- Others suggested that the health outcome(s) should record when people have accessed NHS services to improve their health – as this can be a very positive step for someone who may have previously struggled to engage with health services and neglected their health and wellbeing.

  > "Health outcomes should also include when client has accessed other services (e.g. health, mental health via bodies such as NHS) to improve wellbeing."

- Others suggested the need to capture outcomes related to wellbeing and resilience separately, or in addition to, health.

  > "Agree about health and wellbeing being spilt because they are very different for some people."

5.7 Independent Living Skills

- An issue raised by attendees at all of our regional meetings was how to capture some of the issues raised earlier in this report regarding 'life admin' or independent living skills. Several attendees talked about how vital this was to helping someone to maintain a tenancy and avoid homelessness in the future.

  > "Life admin is really important – example of a tenancy failing because someone didn't know they had to top up their electricity card- so life skills are really important."

  > "We look at things like can they access local GPs health visitor, Flying Start playgroup, what day the bis are due, that kind of thing, not just hobbies and interests."

- In particular, attendees expressed a wish to capture things like:

  - Setting up bank accounts, setting up payments, sorting our benefits, registering for council tax, topping up payment cards, engaging with health and social services, learning to use phones and computers, dealing with correspondence, dealing with solicitors / courts
  - Improving people's motivation, ability to engage with support, ability to take responsibility

> **"Motivation – take responsibility for completing tasks- we don't measure that in the outputs."**

- Attendees were very clear in their belief that 'life admin' or independent living skills should be captured within the secondary outcomes.
- One suggestion that had a lot of support was to expand the managing finances outcome to include independent living skills, as lots of these activities, processes and issues are inter-linked.

6. Effective data collection systems

6.1 Current data collection systems

- When we asked people to reflect on existing data collection systems, we received a variety of responses. Some people enter the information into spreadsheets, others enter it into digital platforms created by their organisations or by the local authority. People expressed frustration with spreadsheets.
- As mentioned above, many people described having to input the data into multiple systems for their organisations and the local authorities they worked in. This was a frustration for many people.
- Some people raised concerns about the current technology and systems and called for improvements in the new system:

> **"Technologically, database is hard to access, can be hard to know whether you've submitted something or not."**

> **"Software requires a lot of updates, hard to maintain."**

6.2 Tracking progress

- Some people commented that the systems they currently use did not enable them to look at previous outcomes scores. This meant it was difficult to remember previous outcome scores and understand what progress had been made in comparison to previous entries. Others used systems that enabled them to look at previous entries and everyone agreed that any new system should enable them to do this.
- There was a consensus that the ability to look back at previous 'scores' was beneficial to both the support worker and the person using the service.

> **"It would be helpful to see the start and end, you see the evidence of that you've done."**

> **"You can track over months – and the manager could spot trends, another sheet to do with client- it would take 20 mins at end of month and you could really see improvements / what was needed. Plus things that you weren't aware of – there is a place for that, for example you might find out weeks in that someone can't read, but with SP it has to be recorded at the start, so that's would be missed."**

- Some people also suggested that there should be space to add some commentary to the record, alongside the numerical scores, as this could provide some context and useful narrative about why particular numbers were recorded.

6.3 What would help staff to administer a new system

- There was a consensus across all of the Frontline Network Wales regional meetings that establishing one, easy to navigate outcomes collection system throughout Wales would be a very positive step, and enable people to enter and access data in one system and avoid duplicating data entry processes. Attendees felt that a single system could be utilised by individual support providers to enter and track outcomes for their clients, and by local authorities to assess progress against outcomes for a whole service. In addition, the Welsh Government could receive the data for the whole of Wales, or individual local authorities.

> **"A national standard of collection that we all link it would be great, so people wouldn't have to keep learning new systems."**

> **"Would be really helpful to have one system - especially for orgs that work across more than one LA."**

- Attendees said that good quality training on the new HSG outcomes framework and any new data collection system(s) would be important and that online training should be available at all time to ensure that new staff could understand and implement the system in a timely manner.

- Attendees also asked for clear guidance to help staff to understand how to record outcomes, particularly about what they should include under which outcome, and what they should consider when determining the 'score' for each outcome.

> **"With the outcome codes 1-5, I think people may record these differently. One support worker's 4 may be another support worker's 5 - so a different system and/or clearer guidance and training is essential."**

- However, there was also a recognition that the outcomes framework would be subjective – particularly the secondary outcomes – regardless of how much training and guidance was provided.

6.4 Input from people using services

- There were suggestions that the outcomes should be focused on what the person wants to achieve, rather than what the system wants them to achieve.

- Some attendees talked about the importance of involving people using services and getting their views on the outcomes that were recorded.

> **"Prefer for the client to score themselves - and that helps with their progress."**

> **"Outcomes star does include the client and they are the best people to lead on that."**

- Others commented that some clients are not able to fully articulate how they feel or may be at a stage in their recovery where they don't want to discuss outcomes – and we don't want the outcomes system to add to their stress and impact on their recovery.

- There was general agreement that is was valuable to involve people using services where they were able and willing, but that this should always be person centred and not be mandatory.

- Several attendees talked about different tools that they used to discuss outcomes with people using services – particularly more visual approaches such as the outcomes star, using emojis / illustrations.

> **"We've experimented with using cartoonish images and not using black on white text- so visually engaging for the client."**

> **"We've used outcomes stars to get clients to score themselves, because some clients are not able to fully articulate how they feel."**

- However, people also commented that some tools would be useful to some groups but inappropriate for others.

> **"Regarding tools - I don't think that would work for all projects, they want fast responses and good data - so not a one size fits all."**

- Others commented on the importance of making sure the system is accessible for people whose first language is not English.

7. Recommendations

On behalf of the Frontline Network Wales, we are asking members of the Task and Finish Group to consider the views of frontline workers and reflect these in the decision-making process. The following recommendations are based on the feedback we have detailed above:

The Task and Finish group should consider:
- How a new system could reduce the administrative burden on frontline staff.
- Whether a single, national system for data collection could be developed, which could be used by all support providers and local authorities.
- How to ensure that the primary outcomes are clear and relevant to all services.
- Feedback on all of the secondary outcomes, with particular consideration of:
  - What the 'feel part of the community' outcome is trying to capture
  - Whether the health outcome needs to be split into more than one outcome
  - Whether to incorporate independent living skills into the managing finances outcome
- The importance of providing good quality training and guidance before implementation and is accessible to new staff members in a timely manner when they join the sector.
- How to enable people using services to engage with outcome collection and whether a series of tools should be developed to support this.