

The Upstream Cymru Story: A Tale of International Exchange, Collaboration and Persistence

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2017 was a memorable year. The *End Youth Homelessness Cymru* (EYHC) coalition was launched with a goal of ending youth homelessness in Wales within 10 years. The Coalition's goals were supported by the First Minister of Wales at the time, Carwyn Jones, who stated: 'We believe we have a wonderful opportunity here in Wales to deliver real change. If we can put a man on the moon, we can surely end youth homelessness in Wales'. There was a collective will to rethink responses to youth homelessness in Wales by prioritising prevention and a real appetite for new approaches. In 2018, news about the success of The Geelong Project (TGP) in Australia reached Wales and by 2020 *Upstream Cymru* had been launched. This brief article tells the story of the development and implementation of the initiative.

2018: Discovery and Inception

The journey began in February 2018 when Tamsin Stirling, a leading voice in the Welsh homelessness sector, tweeted an article about the incredible impacts of TGP and tagged key staff members at Llamau (Wales's leading youth homelessness charity), including the EYHC Co-ordinator, Hugh Russell.

The Geelong Project will already be well-known to most people reading this article, however the key components of the intervention are; a universal screening tool (that is, a survey) undertaken in schools to identify risk of homelessness, and a collaboration of schools and services that seek to put in place appropriate supports to a cohort of young people during secondary school.

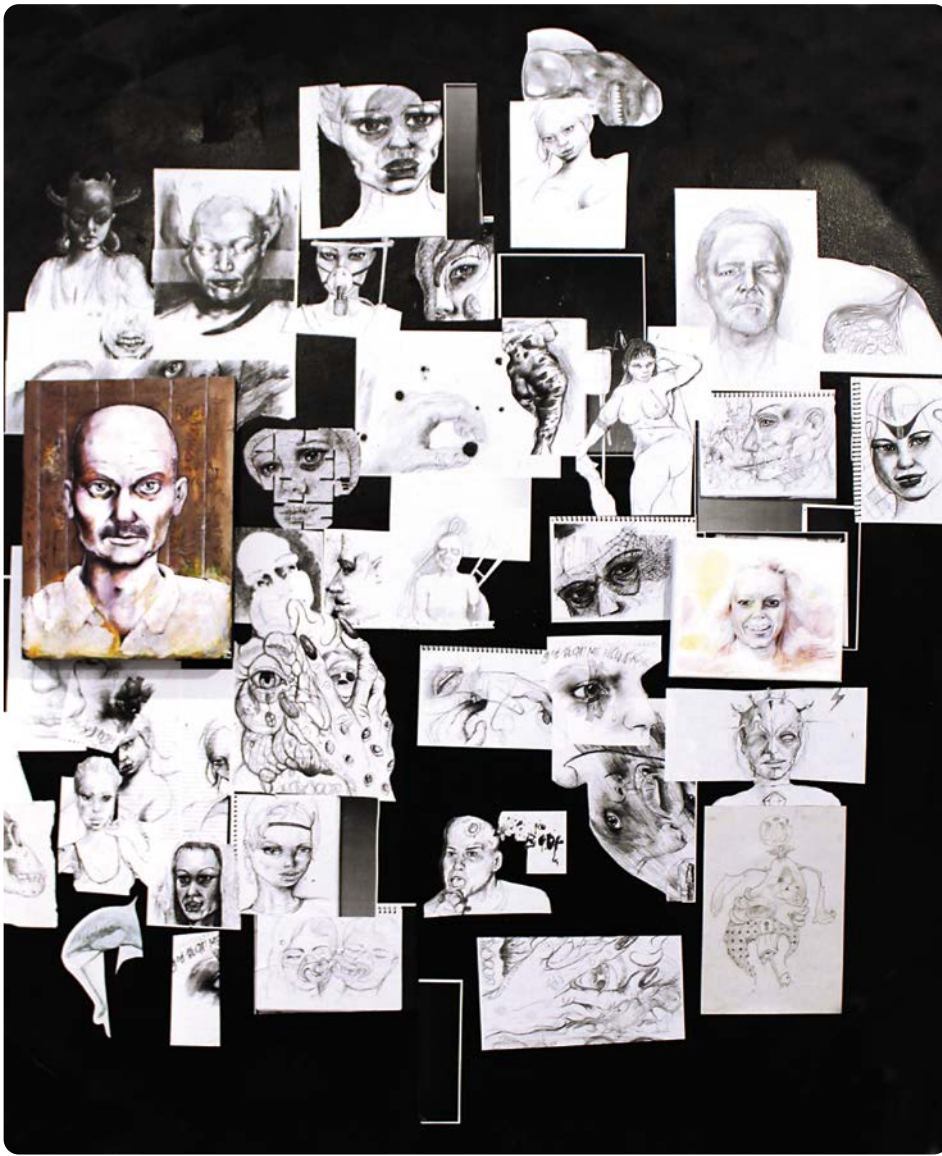
Within months of the initial tweet, international links between EYHC and the architect of TGP, Professor David MacKenzie, had been established, including in person at the *A Way Home Europe* launch.

Academics have played a key role in all contexts where Upstream is being implemented and this was also the case in Wales. Dr Peter Mackie was introduced to Upstream by the EYHC co-ordinator and in parallel he was invited by Canadian colleagues (Professor Steven Gaetz and Melanie Redman) to be part of the Upstream International Living Lab (UILL) — a coalition led by David MacKenzie and supporting the development of Upstream in Australia, Canada, the United States, and now Wales. These international links proved pivotal to the speed at which Upstream could be developed in Wales.

By September 2018, Llamau and the EYHC co-ordinator had begun to engage with senior staff in two local authorities (Cardiff and Rhondda Cynon Taf), including elected leaders and officials with responsibility for youth services, housing, and education. The Welsh coalition was building.

In October 2018, Canadian colleagues authored a report for the Wales Centre for Public Policy¹ where they cited evidence on the effectiveness of The Geelong Project. The Welsh Government responded to this report and in December 2018 committed £3.7m to strengthen existing services '*drawing on the principles of the Geelong model*'.² The initial year of discovery and inception ended very positively with hope that this funding might enable meaningful, Wales-wide development of *Upstream Cymru*.





2019: Building a Coalition and Adapting Tools

In early 2019, following multiple discussions between Llamau, Dr Mackie and Welsh Government, it became clear that commitments to 'Geelong principles' would not equate to implementation of *Upstream Cymru* — most crucially there was no desire at that time to see the development or implementation of a new screening tool. A proposal to a large foundation was also unsuccessful. Funding challenges impacted on the nature of ongoing discussions with local authority partners who would now be required to fund the intervention independently. Additionally, Llamau committed to use their own resources to fund the licence required for the online survey system (discussed later).

The second quarter of 2019 was spent in multiple, detailed, time-consuming, movement-building conversations with potential collaborators in the two local

authorities and Llamau and the team were also successful in securing interest from a third authority (Caerphilly). These meetings included important discussions about data protection and privacy, with incredible support provided by the Data Protection lead in one local authority.

In parallel to coalition building efforts, a substantial piece of work was undertaken to adapt the Australian Index of Adolescent Development survey (the screening tool used by TGP) for the Welsh context. Partners in the UILL provided essential support to Dr Mackie who was responsible for leading on the screening tool development in Wales. Colleagues from Australia provided advice on their screening tool, including approaches to scoring and identification of young people at risk, and North American colleagues were able to share their adaptations of the Australian survey. Crucially, in Wales the decision was made to collaborate

with Professor Amanda Kirby and DoIT Profiler, enabling *Upstream Cymru* to implement the screening tool online, in a manner suitable to neurodiverse young people.

Despite the funding challenges that characterised the start of the year, the second year of coalition building and survey development ended positively, with an enthusiastic reception and a desire to be part of *Upstream Cymru* from the first school in Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) — Mountain Ash Comprehensive. Multiple meetings took place with the school between November and early into the New Year.

2020: Launching a Schools-based Initiative in a Global Pandemic

In the first quarter of 2020, naïve to the emerging global pandemic on the horizon, the *Upstream Cymru* coalition was in the final stages of preparing for the launch of the initiative in four schools, across two local authorities (RCT and Caerphilly). One of the most important steps was the recruitment of the *Upstream Cymru* Co-ordinator, Talog Harries. An experienced family mediator, Talog was recently described in the following way: *'If we'd genetically engineered the perfect project manager, they'd probably do a worse job than Tal'*. Talog has since been the keystone of *Upstream Cymru*. His appointment was accompanied by the recruitment of skilled family mediation staff, all of whom were ready to begin in February 2020.

Additionally, final amendments were made to the online survey (following input from teachers and young people with experience of homelessness), all data protection and privacy requirements were signed off, the *Upstream Cymru* team were trained in the use of the online tool, and start of intervention meetings were held with schools. Meetings were also held with two schools ahead of a potential later launch of *Upstream Cymru* in Cardiff.

In late March 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic caused all schools to close, with some vulnerable children and those whose parents were both key workers, able to access school hubs. The *Upstream Cymru* team, and Llamau more generally,

developed a COVID-19 response strategy; remote mediation support was made available to children in hubs and through Social Services referrals. In the absence of the screening tool, this direct-referral approach continued throughout the first period of lockdown in Wales, which lasted until early in the summer term in June 2020.

In July 2020, *Upstream Cymru* mediators also began operating in Cardiff. While some schools were open, and *Upstream Cymru* staff were able to begin working within schools in Caerphilly and RCT, it continued to be impossible to progress the screening tool survey due to the immense pressures on schools.

The return of pupils to schools in September 2020, after the summer break, continued to be problematic as there were many pupil and staff absences and local lockdowns. Yet, it was possible for *Upstream Cymru* staff to work within schools and the first 300 surveys were completed in the two RCT schools. It was December before the next surveys were undertaken, this time in a Cardiff school, however after just one class was surveyed, another lockdown was announced that would continue until spring 2021. This third year of *Upstream Cymru* was exceptionally challenging, yet the team were able to support some very vulnerable young people and their families through the global pandemic, while also piloting the survey tool, and extending the intervention to include the Welsh capital.

2021: Emerging from the Pandemic Crisis Response

In March 2021, before the second major lockdown in Wales ended, while *Upstream Cymru* was still operating in COVID-19 crisis response mode, RCT discontinued their involvement — ending support for young people in two schools. Whether this will be permanent or a temporary suspension remains to be seen. There will be a separate, more detailed process evaluation that will shed light on the drivers behind this decision but buy-in at an operational level within youth services and the inability of the *Upstream Cymru* team to fully implement the screening tool survey are likely to be key factors.

In spring 2021, the lockdown was lifted and the *Upstream Cymru* team were able to quickly move forwards with screening tool surveys in Cardiff (April–May 2021) and Caerphilly (May–July 2021). By July 2021 approximately 1,200 surveys had been completed.

As schools closed for the summer it provided an opportunity for the *Upstream Cymru* team to reflect on what has been learned so far. Presentations were delivered at key Welsh homelessness and youth work events, raising awareness of *Upstream Cymru*, its successes and challenges, and the early findings from the surveys. Additionally, a successful international event³ was held, including presentations from David MacKenzie and Tammy Hand from *Upstream Australia*. These events have sparked further interest in other Welsh local authorities, in Scotland and in Belgium.

Summer 2021 also provided an opportunity to reflect critically on the risk scoring applied predominantly from the Australian screening tool. Operationally the scoring had proved ineffective and so revisions were made and implemented through the DoIT profiler system. These amendments were due to go live at the time of writing and are likely to significantly improve the speed at which young people at risk of homelessness can be identified through the screening tool. We cautiously look on 2021 as a period of emergence from the pandemic and a shift towards true implementation of *Upstream Cymru*.

Some Reflections

This article provides a narrative of the *Upstream Cymru* journey so far, documenting some of the important milestones. The intention is not to provide a thorough critical analysis of the implementation process, but it is possible to identify three key enablers/challenges:

1. International collaboration has been crucial to the development of *Upstream Cymru*. Key support, particularly from David MacKenzie in Australia, included: robust evidence on the effectiveness of TGP, access to survey tools,

and an unofficial ‘phone-a-friend’ advice hotline. *Upstream Canada* even provided the logo.

2. Key individuals in local authorities, schools, Llamau (the Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, *Upstream Cymru* co-ordinator), as well as Hugh Russell the EYHC co-ordinator and Dr Peter Mackie, were the core of the collaboration that has built the *Upstream Cymru* coalition and launching the initiative in Wales. Without their commitment and drive, often against some opposition at local or national level, *Upstream Cymru* would not have reached its current stage.
3. Sustainable long-term funding remains important to the long-term success of the intervention and its scaleup. Funding has been somewhat problematic in Wales, with no Welsh Government support and generally only short-term commitments from local authorities.

Clearly, in the longer-term, a more sustainable infrastructural resourcing is necessary. We do not see the *Upstream Cymru* initiative as an ‘add-on’ programme but in its fully mature form, a significant change in what happens for vulnerable young people and their families that starts to reform and reshape a more effective local services ecosystem.

Endnotes

1. https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/WCPP_per_cent20Preventing_per_cent20Youth_per_cent20Homelessness_per_cent20international_per_cent20evidence_per_cent20review.pdf
2. https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjss4y16dTzAhWBi1wKHTzIDFwQFnoECAUQAAQ&url=https_per_cent2FA_per_cent2F_per_cent2Fsheltercymru.org.uk_per_cent2Fwp-content_per_cent2Fuploads_per_cent2F2018_per_cent2F11_per_cent2Fstatement-by-the-Minister-for-Housing-and-Regeneration-20-11-2018.docx&usg=AOvVaw20Roqlu3qOUyD5ivCIU33o
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AC8AgHIHZPE>