

Mile in My Shoes: Joanna's story

Estimated reading time: 7.5 minutes

I'm donating some rugby boots, which I wear currently to play touch rugby. My boots are blue. The reason why obviously I've chosen them is because they were what I was wearing at the beginning of my touch career. So being able to move from contact, which again is about tapping people, to moving to playing touch, which isn't. So, with these boots the one thing that I remember is one of my first training sessions where I may have gone in a bit too hard from a touch perspective and knocked somebody onto the floor... So yes...

But the person is still playing touch today. We play touch alongside each other, so it's always something that she brings up to anyone new. So yeah, so she warns people about me when she meets new people. So, it's never forgotten.

I'm Joanna Seymour and I'm Director of Partnerships and Development at an organisation called Warm Wales. We're a community interest company, and our aim is to bring about affordable warmth and to alleviate fuel poverty across Wales.

Warm Wales is trying to make sure that everyone is living in a warm, safe, secure home. That they are able to afford their energy bills. That they've got heating that is working. If they can't afford their energy bills, how to actually deal with it, how to get in contact with their energy provider. So, it's about trying to make them more resilient, which I think is what we're trying to do. We want to be able to help and facilitate residents that are struggling. Once they've got that help and advice, they're then able to continue helping themselves going forwards.

If you look at somebody who's on a lower income, and they could previously have been in rent arrears which then means that the only accommodation they're looking for may be in the private rented sector. And we know that, unfortunately, the private rented sector isn't necessarily up to scratch. And the impact can be that you're living in a cold home, which can be damp, which can then affect your health. So, it can affect the health of you as an adult but also you as a child.

So, from an adult perspective, could that be that you're not able to go to work, which could then mean you're going to be on a lower income. From a child perspective does that then mean that you're potentially going to be missing days at school. Which then means, from a school perspective and attainment, to do with education, to do with work, the cycle goes on and on. If you then look at again, living in that cold, damp home, you know, you could then end up having to go to a GP to get more medication because you're not feeling well. Your mental health, your wellbeing is going to be quite low. Which then means that your actual health and how long you'd be living for could actually be quite poor as well.

So, there is a massive knock-on impact to do with the income, the accommodation that you live in, and you can see that direct correlation between the property you're living in, it being cold and damp, and the impact that that has on everything.

One day, myself and my colleague went to go and visit a gentleman who was living in a small cottage. We went in, the cottage was really cold, it was really dark. Then he led us through into the living room. The living room was lit just by a small lamp. It was cold, the sofa that he was sitting on was worn. He was also using it as a bed, because of his mobility issues he wasn't able to go up the stairs.

I then did have a look upstairs and getting upstairs - very, very small, narrow staircase - again it was dark, I needed to use the torch on my phone to be able to see where I was going. From the top of the stairs, I then went straight into the bedroom. And then just off there was the small shower room which was filthy. It just wasn't the best at all. I'm not sure if it was used, or if it was used it wasn't kept clean. The gentleman was in rent arrears. He didn't know how to get out of the situation. He was talking about feeling suicidal, there was no point, you know, being here anymore. So obviously we wanted to be able to show that organisations were listening, there were people here that wanted to help.

There were a number of issues with the property which was being dealt with by other organisations. But due to the poor mental health of the gentleman, there were constant issues with him not engaging. So, the cases kept being closed.

We were able to provide him with a new bed, a new sofa, a new heater. Which is just like a sticking plaster, but it demonstrated to him that people were listening, that we were kind. And that then helped and made him then engage more with the organisations that he needed to. Because we couldn't help finding him a new property, we couldn't help getting moved. But what we were able to demonstrate is that actually somebody does care, an organisation is listening. Which then meant that he was able to then start trusting other organisations and engaging with. So eventually the gentleman was rehoused.

Sometimes I get frustrated and angry that things, or more things, aren't being done. But I know that I am doing as much as we can to make a difference and help people.

'Hello?'

'Hi, it's Joanna Seymour from Warm Wales returning your call to see whether or not we can find some support for you.'

There was another gentleman who I took a telephone call. It was probably quite late in the afternoon, and he was struggling to get connected back to his electricity. So, his electricity had gone off and he was really, really struggling, just did not know what to do. He didn't and he couldn't work out how to get it topped up. So, I was able to do that, able to get his electric topped up. Because that's something we provide as an organisation is being able to get vouchers for emergency gas and electric top-up.

'Having to wait on hold for a long amount of time, we can then facilitate that call with the energy provider, and hopefully get things resolved for you.'

It didn't really take too long to do it, but he was so, so thankful because it meant that he was able to make sure that the food that he had in his freezer wasn't going to defrost. He was able to cook food. He had his electric back on. So, when I got off the phone to him, I felt happy and pleased and I was going to say, warm inside. And I think that's the whole thing, yeah, you do feel like you are doing a good job.

So, from a government perspective, I think the issue that we've got at the moment is we are potentially trying to look at more environmentally friendly ways of being able to provide energy. The issue that we've got is lots of people cannot afford to pay their energy that they're currently using. There is so much debt around at the moment and unless that we deal with that debt – yes OK, we can look at greener energy but loads of people can't afford it. The impact that will then have on people's mental health and wellbeing will be massive.

There needs to be some form of something that – yes, OK, you pay so much of it. It might then get, the rest of it might get wiped off. So, it's not saying wipe it all off, because we still got to pay for it. We should: we've used it, we need to pay for what we've used. But we need to come up with a plan, which I think then reduces maybe the amount of anxiety that somebody has on knowing how much debt they've got to pay off.

So, my role, obviously I am all about partnership development. So, I get to go out and about and talk to people. And I get to talk about things that I'm passionate about. I have a massive passion about looking at the links between housing and health and trying to do something about it. And I am in that lucky position that I am able to do something about it. I can go out, I can talk to Welsh government, I can talk to public health, I can talk to the health board, I can talk to GPs, I can speak to pharmacists, I can speak to schools about making them more aware of those links and actually that there could be a solution about how we all work together. And I am really, really lucky that I love my job. You know, not a lot of people say that, but I do. I really, really love my job and the difference I can make to people. It's been hard at times where we've had no funding, and I thought I was going to lose my team. So now being able to deliver a project across the whole of Wales.

We've all of us, you do give a lot. I think it is the type of person. You don't go into this type of work unless you're not willing to give, because you need to give. But that's also then, yes where it's important that you look after yourself, and you find things you can do for yourself. So, I play touch rugby.

Recently I have represented Wales at the Touch Rugby World Cup, for the Women's 35, which was really, really good, we came fourth in the world. I also play for an all-inclusive touch rugby team as well and we are on our way to play at tournament in Amsterdam over the weekend.



I think it's a release. But also, when I do that, I haven't necessarily got to think. I haven't got to be in charge, I haven't got to make decisions. I can then just be myself and be a touch rugby player rather than being, you know, a director or having to come up for ideas for a project or answer these questions or look at funding. It's an opportunity to be able to be the other side of me.