

Commonweal Housing & Reed Watts 'Flat Pack Pods'

Evaluation Report Summary

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Introduction

This document summarises the findings of our 2019 evaluation of the Commonweal & Reed Watts 'Flat Pack Pods' (the 'pods'), as used in three emergency winter shelter sites in London over Winter 2018-19.

The Commonweal & Reed Watts 'Flat Pack Pods' are a response to an identified need for reusable, short-term accommodation that can be deployed within existing empty and underused buildings. These prefabricated plywood structures can be assembled within such buildings to provide occupants with greater privacy and dedicated space to store their possessions. The hypothesis is that if people are happier in the space they are being accommodated in, then they may be more receptive to conversations about move-on.

Piloting the pods

During Winter 2018/19, the pods were piloted in three sites in London. The three sites provided an opportunity to explore pod use through three different organisations' mission and purpose, referral pathways and management styles.

Description of three shelters that piloted the pods

The 999 Club	Crashpad Shelter, Pilion Trust	Islington Glass House
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Trialled 2 pods to start with, eventually taking 10• Worked with Commonweal and Reed Watts to redesign the prototypes• The pods have provided greater sustainability and enabled them to operate continuously• Changed referral patterns which are now 95% from the LA• Guests are reported to have less experience of entrenched rough sleeping. Numbers of women, working people and people with a local connection and close relatives nearby have risen	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Crashpad Shelter, Pilion Trust aims to create an environment where its young guests mix with other people and take part in activities to improve their health and wellbeing• The four pods that were installed were removed after a month• Pods took up a lot of space, dominating the area and making it dark• Pods were felt to encourage feelings of isolation and institutionalisation• The young people were reported as being unhappy that the pods were removed	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Islington Glass House shelter, run by Housing Justice with Pilion Trust and Streets Kitchen, was a very short-life shelter open between February and the end of April• It had a focus on people who wouldn't normally go into shelters, particularly entrenched rough sleepers• It aimed to engage with the local wider community to provide a person-centred rather than system-led environment• The four pods used in the Glasshouse were relocated from the Crashpad Shelter

The evaluation

This has been a small-scale evaluation of the pods in use across three sites. The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the effectiveness and appropriateness of the pods to provide short-term accommodation and enable homeless people to engage in a conversation about move on. In order to make that assessment we looked at the pod across three domains:

Cost

What are the direct and indirect costs of making, installing and removing the pods?

Usability

What are the requirements for installing and managing the pods on site?

Occupation

What are the benefits and any downsides of staying in the pod?

The work was carried out during January through to April 2019 and involved the following desk and fieldwork:

- Review of 26 documents and c.20 photos related to cost, usability and management practice
- Eight visits to the sites during which we spoke with 19 guests, and 15 staff/volunteers
- Eight key informant interviews with Reed Watts, Rough Sleeping Strategy, Crisis, ACF Housing and Homelessness member network, Commonweal Housing, Housing Justice, and two shelters outside London that are considering the pod.

Part One: What makes the pods valuable and worthwhile?

The positive points outlined in this section are based on our conversations at all three shelters. We got back a great number of positive endorsements for the pods from staff, volunteers and guests. Guests 'love them' without exception and regardless of whether they get to sleep in them. Our findings also suggest that the value a shelter attaches to the pods is contingent on its mission and purpose as well as its approach to housing management and resettlement.

Implementation costs

Pilot Implementation Costs	Item	Net	VAT
50% of 999 Club Pilot Costs	50% of Reed Watts staff time	£1,480.00	£1,776.00
Birch Plywood BB/BB Exterior Glue Burnblock Treated to Euroclass B S1, D0	97 panels; 999 Club 65 + 2 spare; Pilon 29 + 1 spare	£6,984.00	£8,380.80
CWHL pods for 999 Club	Deposit for the fabrication	£883.70	£1,060.44
Plywood sleeping pods Pilon Trust	Remaining 50% Revision B	£883.70	£1,060.44
Total		£10,231.41	£12,277.67
Total cost per pod		£639.46	£767.36

The main question to be answered as to whether the benefits of the pods outweigh the costs relates to their impact in moving clients from rough sleeping to temporary accommodation and possibly on to settled housing. HACT and Simetrica have calculated that the average impact of moving from rough sleeping to temporary accommodation has a value of £16,448 per person. The impact of a move from temporary accommodation to settled housing is valued at £8,019 per person. The total value of a move from rough sleeping to settled housing is £24,467 per person. If one or more persons have made the move from rough sleeping because of the pods, it could justify the full monetary cost of the initiative.

Improving a poor situation

These were the first order positives identified by guests and staff/volunteers - making life feel better for guests and providing a degree of 'normality' or normal daily life within basic provision.

Privacy

- The practical benefits of being able to dress and undress in private, to not always be 'in open view' but enjoy a 'moment of privacy' were very important to everyone we spoke to.
- Somewhere to retreat to when the bustle of the shelter gets too much, or to remove themselves from forced communality.
- This privacy can be shared, e.g. by young women sharing a pod for dressing or undressing, and can also be afforded by the person using a pod to others outside it.

Storage

- Having somewhere to store possessions, or a shelf to arrange or display things, was also very important. In one shelter, women were said to have arranged photos and flowers on the shelf by way of decoration. In another, a man was able to retrieve a family photo album from safe storage with friends so he could look at it.
- Some mentioned their appreciation for a place where they could at least drape their clothes, although they would have liked a way to properly hang them up.
- Storage and display promoted a sense of ownership over their space, a place to show people around and feel some pride in.

Safety

- Some people who slept in the pods said that it made them feel safe.
- Shelter staff found them especially useful for women and other vulnerable people, as it meant they could accommodate them safely.
- Some saw the pods as having given the shelter a way to ease nervous or reluctant guests into the shelter and off the street.

Comfort

- Sleeping in a pod was more comfortable than sleeping on the floor, pod users said: they were warmer, and less draughty. One woman explained that it was better for her back pain because she no longer had to bend down to get into bed.
- Comfort was especially important for those who were working or facing long days outside.

Further benefits of the pods

Enabling shelters to restore a degree of agency and choice

Staff and volunteers said that the pods gave them another way to offer guests agency to make choices, albeit often within a narrow/tight framework. They gave the following examples:

- having a space and being able to hold onto things
- having a sense of ownership over a space
- the opportunity to act as part of a household/community, e.g. by being willing to give up a pod for someone more vulnerable
- An added element of choice over where to sleep.

Altering the look and feel of the shelter for everyone including staff

Installing the pods had a positive impact on the look and feel of the space in the Glass House and the 999 Club. In the former, people said that it helped to break up the large factory space and made it more flexible. In the 999 Club, people said that the pods made the hall where everyone slept feel tidier. Although people sleeping in pods can still hear others snoring or moving around at night, they said it disturbed them less because they were further from them or the sound was muffled; this in turn helped reduce tensions.

There was some concern that by installing pods, shelters would reduce available bedspaces but this has not been an issue in the pilot, possibly because none of the shelters had replaced all their bedspaces with pods.

Encouraging positive public engagement

The idea of the pods appears to have grabbed the public's attention, to have galvanised them to take action or given them confidence that there are things they can do to help. The four pods installed at the Glass House led to a considerable amount of positive press, social media attention and donations, as well as 350 volunteer shifts. At the launch of the pods at the 999 Club, Lewisham's mayor spoke in support and pupils from a local school did a presentation. The pods were also featured in local press.

New and different approaches also appear to give shelters some leverage with local public sector bodies, encouraging them to visit, even volunteer, and take the time to understand how the approach taken by shelters is working for homeless people in their locality.

Clockwise from top left: The pods are assembled at the 999 Club; the pods in use at the Glasshouse shelter; the pods in use at the Crashpad shelter; the team at the 999 Club after assembling the pods.



Part Two: What have been the challenges and issues?

While the pods are universally liked and welcomed, they are not without their challenges, as we heard in our visits and conversations with staff, volunteers and guests.

Materials

The digital fabrication design and assembly system that Reed Watts have used for the pods is very straight forward. The design can be downloaded and made with outsourced CNC ('computerised') technology anywhere in the world. And, once cut, the pieces can be assembled without specialist equipment or specialist tools. For all these reasons the material, cutting and assembling seem well suited to a winter shelter.

The pieces are covered in a recommended number of coats of fire retardant when they are cut. This sinks into the wood and should, therefore, be permanent. Care is needed to ensure that the design instructions for the pods are precise on this matter and that they include details on the manufacturer's recommended use / specification of the product as such products can vary.

To date it has been for the shelters to apply the varnish that will protect them from wear and tear. This has not happened and, in future, varnishing will need to take place before delivery and factored into the price.

Assembly and installation

Once cut, the pods can be assembled without specialist knowledge or equipment. The pods are heavy, however, and shelter staff and volunteers were surprised by their weight and the effort required just to unload them. Shelters will benefit and save time by finding someone local with practical and organisational skills with access to a few basic hand tools to assemble or supervise assembly of the pods.

- The pod components are large as well as heavy
- The layout of pods needs careful consideration in relation to maintaining fire escape routes, sight lines for supervision of guests, avoiding creating corridors between rows of pods
- The rectilinear / orthogonal nature of joining plywood sheets together to make the pod enclosures is made difficult on uneven or unlevelled floors
- Listed buildings may require planning and temporary structures consent; meanwhile, spaces will need checks and permissions before pods are installed and shelters will need to take advice on this.

As discussed in Part One above, any concerns about installing pods leading to a reduction in available bedspaces did not materialise.

Maintenance and storage

Although the pods in the pilot are showing some signs of wear, it seems likely that this is associated with the lack of a varnish coating which, as previously mentioned, should be factored into the panel preparation. Otherwise, they have stood up well to shelter use and although it is too early to make predictions as to how long they will last, an advantage of the design is that individual panels can be replaced if necessary.

Organisations will need to plan dry storage space for the numerous large sheet components when pods are not in use. Sheets need to be stored flat to avoid warping. It would also be advisable to package or bundle and label the smaller components.

Management

The pods were used for a minority of guests at each shelter. All the shelters followed the same approach of allocating pods to an individual throughout their stay. Although none of them explored rotating occupation in a systematic way, there were instances where a guest vacated a pod so that a more vulnerable newly arrived guest could stay there instead.

The evaluation findings underline that using the pods does require shifts in a shelter's approach to housing management. The pods impact on the space and transform an open area into one with closed parts and large structures. Each shelter will need to make its own decisions about how to manage the space when the pods are added into the mix.

We suggest there are five critical factors to take into consideration: mission, resources, space, place and people. We expand on these in Part Three and in the Practical Framework for Replication.

Guest experience

Some of the challenges we uncovered appeared contradictory to the positives outlined earlier:

- Pods could be a good space for someone with mental health issues, or unsafe for them
- Pods enabled people to slowly come out of their shell and overcome anxiety by giving them somewhere to retreat to, or exacerbated their anxiety by enabling them to become more isolated
- Pods were described negatively as reminiscent of prison, and also positively as being like little houses.

It's too early to tell, and there isn't enough evidence, how far the pods are able to contribute to resettlement. But we did pick up some useful reflection and learning about the role that the pods might or might not play in resettlement:

- Glass House subtly observed how guests organised their shelves and kept their pod tidy as part of their ethos to work with guests at their pace.
- Some felt that the structure makes you want or feel able to live independently, and that managing your belongings is good preparation for moving on and generally not something people gain experience of in shelter environments.
- Pods had enabled people who might otherwise have never entered or been rapidly excluded because of their behaviour, to stay in the shelter. However, some wondered if a pod has the opposite effect and 'holds you in a place', institutionalises, or otherwise makes it harder to move on because they are more homely and provide the structure and capacity to accumulate more belongings.

The challenges we have outlined in this part of the report do not appear to outweigh the benefits of installing and staying in the pods discussed in Part One. But they do raise questions for consideration in the way Commonweal and others take the pods forward. These considerations are discussed in Part Three and incorporated into the Practical Framework for Replication.

Part Three: Key lessons for Commonweal

For Commonweal, the pods were about creating reusable, short-term accommodation that can be deployed in existing empty or underused buildings. And, without being naïve about the complexity of an individual's resettlement pathway, there was a wish to see the pods play a part in that pathway however tentative or preliminary. Commonweal is now working in partnership with Housing Justice and ReedWatts architects to scope out new short-term replication opportunities for the pods.

Conditions for successful use of the pods

Positive experiences of using the pods are context dependent. We explore this in more detail in the practical framework provided in Appendix A as an indication of learning that could be made freely available along with the pod design. Here we summarise the five conditions that need to be thought through for safe and positive use of the pods.

- **Mission.** Pods need to be considered in the light of an organisation's mission, ethos and values and how they contribute, or not, to wider resettlement needs. They can be places that simply provide privacy and are managed in terms of safety and compliance with rules. Or they can be an integral part of resettlement pathways, with a conscious sense of how agency and space can prepare for moving on.
- **Resources.** This provides both challenges and opportunities. It's no small task to install the pods and the pilots were able to draw in other local expertise and pro bono support to set them up, bringing wider engagement with their work. They also require a shift in housing management practice which might require a fresh look at the skills and expertise of volunteers and staff. Thought also needs to be given to where they can be stored when not in use.
- **Space.** Pods change the look and feel of a space. Configuration, decoration and the impact on the kind of atmosphere that shelters want to create, need to be worked through before they're installed as they're hard to move.
- **Place.** This is about taking into consideration the physical property in terms of its structure, restrictions on use, whether it needs to be handed back (and in what condition), capacity to accommodate the weight, impact on floors and sounds.
- **People.** We found that shelters understood their guests well including differences based on their referral routes. They used this knowledge when considering whether the pods would be a help or hindrance to their guests' circumstances and resettlement paths. Underpinning this is their approach to engaging with guests in making decisions and how they're communicated to guests, volunteers and staff.

Commonweal will reflect with its partners on the different ways that the pods can help address homelessness and support resettlement. We've heard about their potential as an encouragement to people who are reluctant to come into shelters or who find the atmosphere too frenetic; and as a more conscious 'graduation' prior to moving to more settled accommodation. Future partnering organisations using the pods with Commonweal might consider what would be meaningful and feasible to record, so that they can begin to track some of the micro steps towards resettlement (and future funding potential) that the pods do appear to contribute to.

Mission

What is your shelter about, what does it stand for and what does it exist to achieve? Does everyone involved with the shelter whether as a guest, volunteer, staff member or referral agency understand your mission? Depending on what your mission is, you will need to think about:

- Transparency and clarity about allocation
- How you enter people's private spaces and assure safety.
- How you deal with protecting privacy and maintaining shelter rules
- That the pods are not supposed to become permanent

Place

- What is the physical property like? How long will you be allowed to occupy it and what does that mean for the level of investment you can afford to make in adapting it to be able to take the pods?
- Do you have access to professional advice about the technical and legal requirements you have to fulfil in order to occupy the property e.g. safety, weight that the structure can bear – the pods are heavy, any permissions if it is a heritage building. Links for more information for England, Wales and Scotland respectively are at: [Historic England](#), [Cadw](#) and [Historic Environment Scotland](#).

Space

- What kind of space are you trying to create in the shelter? How do you want it to look and feel to guests? Will the pods help or hinder your efforts to create this kind of space? How could you consult with guests about this?
- Have you spent time thinking through the configuration of the pods; they are hard to move once in place. Learning from the pilot suggests that they should be placed facing into the shelter space; should not be placed in rows that will create dark corridors.
- Will the number of pods you install affect your capacity when fully occupied?

Resources

- What is your volunteer capacity? Do you have people that can lift and carry the pods?
- What is your staff and volunteer experience in shelter management? Using the pods will require some adaptations to the way you normally assure safety in the shelter, for example.
- Have you calculated the cost of cutting and coating the pods in fire retardant, varnishing and furnishing them?
- Have you looked ahead at your options, including costs, for storing the pods flat and dry when not in use? Have you thought about what maintenance they will require?

People

- Who do you expect will occupy the pods? Where are referrals likely to come from?
- What benefits are they likely to derive from using the pods; and are they likely to experience any challenges?
- How will you allocate the pods and how will this be communicated to guests?
- How will you involve guests in issues such as layout, allocation and protocols for use?



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