



## A SAFE PLACE TO CALL HOME

Addressing Homelessness in South Somerset 2021 - 2023



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# INTRODUCTION



**In 2021, The Community Council for Somerset (CCS) and South Somerset District Council identified a gap in the support structure surrounding people at risk from, or identified as homeless.**

Clients are only able to move on from temporary accommodation if they have the right support package in place to enable them to manage their life. This does not always happen and therefore, housing providers are, understandably, less willing to take clients who have a history of complex needs because they believe that they will be un-supported, should the client's needs begin to rise.

The aim of this pilot project therefore was to help maintain stability of tenure.

At CCS, we believe there are strategies that can be employed to collectively address this, so that systems are in place to support individuals to maintain their tenancies and avoid the 'revolving door'.

Key to this is working with each individual holistically, understanding their personal journeys. Community Agents, funded by Somerset Council, have been a vital enabler in supporting Adult Social Care in this way and finding community based solutions to people's needs.

We know that delivering person centred, strength-based practice which is routed in communities, has reduced dependency on paid-for support and resulted in improved outcomes for people, enabling them to become or remain independent.

This project applied this approach to working with this incredibly vulnerable client group.

# WHAT DID WE DO?



**This report data is based on 70 individuals who were supported by the Homelessness Village Agent between January 2021 - August 2023, 42 of which are male and 28 of which are female.**

- We focused on high risk individuals who had been highlighted as lacking the life skills to be able to hold onto a residential property.
- We identified individuals who had been struggling to cope through an eviction.
- We provided guidance and emotional support throughout, and were able to encourage those individuals to make applications for assistance and support whilst in temporary accommodation.
- We built up a good working relationship with multi-disciplinary agencies and services across the whole of Somerset. Whilst the geographical focus of the pilot was South Somerset, the journey of someone facing homelessness does not stop at boundary lines.
- In South Somerset, our Agent attended a weekly Teams meeting with the South Somerset Homeless Reduction Team. This meeting allows all of the agencies to discuss the homeless clients in the area and agree on the best course of action for each individual.

# WHAT DID WE DO?

- Each client had a tailored support plan to enable them to take back control of their lives.
- Recognising that no one's journey is without barriers, we operated a 'step up-step down' service, meaning that our Agent continued to support each individual even after finding a home. This meant that clients had a rolling support mechanism should they start to lose momentum on their independence.
- We were able to source household items for the client to be able to live comfortably and with the essentials for their home. The Agent was able to support each client with an average case duration of under three months.

## FEEDBACK

**“We have been so fortunate to work with Alex in our multi-agency team in Yeovil. She has been quick to provide support and essential items to several of our patients experiencing homelessness and was a key member of our team when caring for a gentleman at the end of his life in 2022.**

**Her help allowed us to support him in temporary accommodation and improve his quality of life in a safer and more dignified environment in his last weeks.”**

**Laura Devlin**

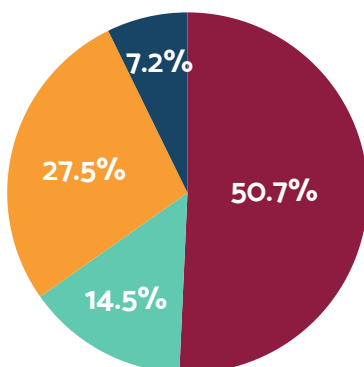
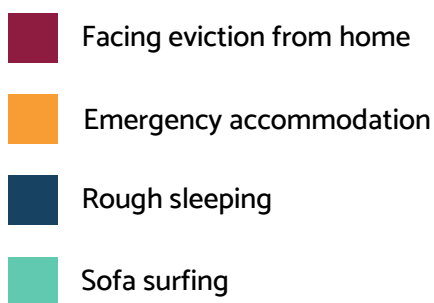
**Rough Sleeper and Homeless Nursing Team, GP and LARC Specialist.**

# WHAT DID WE LEARN?

## The Hidden Homeless

Being 'homeless' is a catch-all term that does not fully identify the nuances of an individual's situation. It can be misleading when not working with professionals who fully understand the complexities of working with this client base. Nor is it easy to understand the full scale of the problem. The breakdown of clients' starting accommodation shows this. People who deal with their situation informally mean that they are hidden from statistics and services – they are the hidden homeless. Those individuals and families in Somerset who are known to statutory services, and the multi-agency teams in districts, may only be the tip of the iceberg.

## STARTING ACCOMMODATION ON REFERRAL



In the 18 months we are considering in this report, only 7.2% of the clients referred to us were what is perceived traditionally as 'homeless', or rough sleeping. These individuals were sleeping outside or in places that are not designed for people to live in.

By far the biggest proportion of our client base, half, were individuals or families who were facing eviction. These people may have fallen into rent arrears, or the landlord had taken the decision to sell the property, meaning that the client had to vacate it in the imminent future.

27.5% of clients were in emergency accommodation, usually a hotel or B&B, because they were fleeing domestic abuse, have a medical issue, or their home was flooded, meaning that they have no option of anywhere else to stay and 14.5% of clients were sofa surfing, staying at a friend's or relation's house, and therefore without their own fixed address.

These clients of course, were all referred from within the South Somerset area, but if we scale this up to Somerset as a whole, the number of individuals and families who could benefit from access to an Agent to support them through these traumatic situations is significant.

# WHAT DID WE LEARN?

## Every client or case is different

We know that people with four or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) are particularly vulnerable to a whole range of issues, of which homelessness is one.

Once homeless, other issues become more entrenched and far more difficult to deal with, meaning that individuals end up in a chaotic spiral of challenges that is overwhelming.

Working holistically, not only with housing, but with the breadth of organisations that can offer support on all of these issues, means that individuals are offered a scaffold of support to help them get back onto their own feet, and live independently once more.

The underlying issues that clients are referred with (in some cases multiple issues) illustrate the complexity of challenges. 39% of clients had mental health issues, and 17% had drugs and alcohol addiction. 17% had a history of crime.

Vulnerable migrants are now a significant minority in the cases that our Agent supports, alongside our two Refugee Support Agents who now look after the majority of these cases.

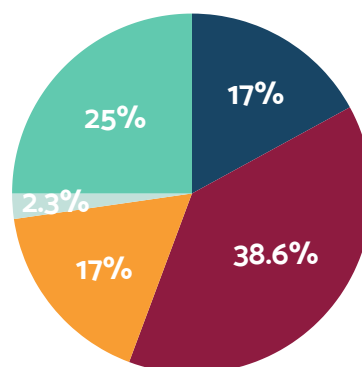
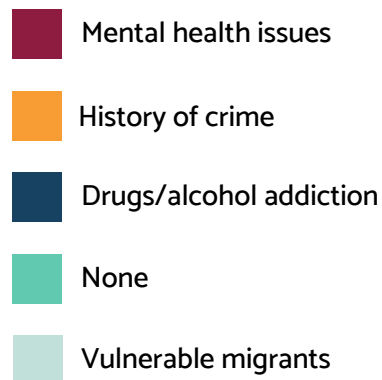
Language barriers and limited documentation are two of the practical things that must be overcome; harder to develop is trust with those who are supporting them.

For many who have fled from war torn or authoritarian states, statutory services are often to be feared.

In these instances, voluntary sector organisations have an important role to play to help people and families feel secure in their rights, and what they are entitled to.

Only a quarter of cases had no underlying issues, and have fallen on hard financial times - given the cost of living crisis, it is a group we can expect to increase, particularly over the winter of 2023 - 24.

## CLIENTS REFERRED WITH UNDERLYING ISSUES



# WHAT DID WE LEARN?

These underlying issues mean obtaining and retaining tenancies is difficult. Individuals may not have the life skills, confidence and awareness to retain, process and act upon information that is provided to them by support services.

This leads to frustration on both sides and becomes a 'blocker' in moving people into secure housing.

Clients with a past or existing history with drug and alcohol abuse are more likely to find themselves homeless, as their life skills and priorities have changed with their addiction.

Those with a history of criminal offences can often find the application process for housing difficult, and may find it difficult to find a home if the provider becomes aware of any criminal convictions.

In these cases, the ongoing encouragement, support, and trust in our Agent has helped both the provider and the individual to build mutual trust between them.

## FEEDBACK

**“On behalf of the Housing team at Somerset Council, I cannot speak highly enough of the service that Alex continues to offer our more vulnerable clients.**

**As Officers, we are unable to visit clients in their homes ‘to see the true picture’.**

**The help and support that Alex gives has helped to create trust with clients and to also allow our team to gather the required evidence that clients have to submit.”**

**Ben Azariah**

**Case Officer Service Delivery,  
Somerset Council.**

# WHAT DID WE LEARN?

## There is not always closure

Whereas our average case duration in the Village Agent service is eight days, the average time spent supporting clients and families by our Homelessness Agent is three months. The complexity of the cases, the many contributing factors and the overriding need to build trust and relationships with the individual, between agencies and between agencies and the client, mean that there are far more variables than in less complicated cases.

Nevertheless, as of August 2023, 44% of clients had sourced a permanent residence and been offered financial support when their case was closed on our system, although ongoing check-ins from the Agent were carried out. This is testament to the skills and hard work of many that enable these solutions to take place.

It is also important to acknowledge that due to a variety of reasons, just over a quarter (26.5%) of clients had no change in circumstance. This is often down to the availability of housing and challenges with funding – particularly if a deposit is expected.

Unfortunately, due to the nature of the complexities of the challenges faced by many of our clients and their chaotic lives, there is a significant proportion of the client base (30%) who have disengaged or, whose outcome to their issues is unknown.

This is often due to mental health issues or lack of communication skills, but individuals have become unresponsive to contact or support. Importantly though, the Agent continues to reach out to the client and lets them know that they can make contact when they are ready to do so. At this point their case is then reopened.

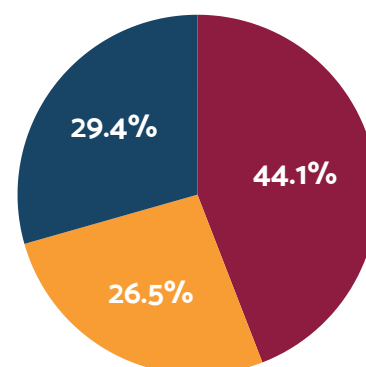
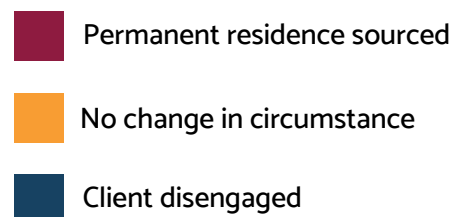
## FEEDBACK

“Through liaising with Alex, I have been able to facilitate positive change with not only the service user, but also with trying to help local agencies including police and housing associations, to look at people with complex needs in a more trauma informed way”

**Polly Robshaw**

Recovery Coach, Second Step.

## ACCOMMODATION ON CLOSURE OF REFERRAL



# PRACTICAL SUPPORT IS VITAL



**We know from our work within the Village Agent service that being able to help in a practical sense is an important part of support.**

Whether this is sourcing a washing machine on social media or buying a kettle. We are fortunate to be able to utilise our community networks, the funds we collect from generous donors or are awarded by funders, to support clients.

This support is key to enabling independence and self-sufficiency.

## **FURNITURE, CLOTHING AND HOUSEHOLD ITEMS**

Were donated from Help for Homeless, Tesco Community Champion and Social network sites for 13 clients.

## **SURVIVING WINTER GRANTS**

Were awarded to five clients to enable them to have heating and stay warm during the winter months.



# PRACTICAL SUPPORT IS VITAL

## HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT GRANTS

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Were awarded to seven clients who were struggling with short term financial problems.

## FOODS PARCELS

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Were applied for and given to 17 clients from local food banks in South Somerset.

## CCS SOUTH SOMERSET GRANT POT

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Awarded a total of £148.62 in funds to support clients.

## GLASSPOOL ESSENTIAL LIVING FUND

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£400 was applied for and awarded by GLASSPOOL ESSENTIAL LIVING FUND for our clients.

## HOMELESS GRANT POT

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Over £450 from the HOMELESS GRANT POT was used to support clients with kettles, toasters, kitchenware and other home essentials.

# CLIENT CASE STUDY: JOE'S STORY

Names have been changed to protect the identity of the client



Joe made the decision to return from living abroad to care for his unwell father. He did not have a home of his own in England and dedicated his time to looking after him in the family home. Sadly, Joe's father did not get better and passed away in hospital.

Whilst grieving, Joe was informed that because his father's home was owned by a local housing association, he would be evicted from the house due to succession laws. This left him homeless.

At this time, Joe wanted to carry out his father's dying wish and take his father's ashes back to Ireland, his birthplace.

Whilst in Ireland, Joe was involved in a terrible car crash which left him with life changing injuries. Over time, he recovered enough to be discharged from hospital in Ireland and was able to return to Somerset.

Now homeless, Somerset Council sought and funded a hotel for Joe to stay in as a temporary measure. It was at this point that Joe was put in touch with the CCS Homelessness Agent, Alex Fenion.



# JOE'S STORY

Alex soon realised that Joe did not have his own bank account, was receiving only the basic benefits, and had to meet deadlines with council led documents to apply for housing online, but lacked internet access. Moreover, Joe needed regular medical attention for his ongoing medical issues resulting from the car crash. He was also struggling with his new mobility issues.

Joe welcomed the support from Alex and was soon provided with food parcels. She was able to support him with a bank account application which was successful and in uploading council application documents. Information was given to him on local homeless drop ins, sourcing mobility aids and most importantly, ongoing medical support from the Homeless Nursing Team.

Alex was able to get Joe an interview with the job centre, who then awarded him the correct benefits for his medical and housing issues.

Alex also became Joe's advocate when dealing with Somerset Council and was able to use CCS resources – grants and networks, to get Joe back on his feet.

Throughout this ordeal, all that Joe wanted was a home to settle in and fully recover physically and mentally. Alex supported Joe with a Homefinder application and he was eventually offered a gold banding award and soon placed in more suitable accommodation with his own kitchen and living areas. Joe was always very appreciative of Alex's support and is still in contact, providing her with updates on his situation.

# CLIENT CASE STUDY: THE SMITH'S STORY

Names have been changed to protect the identity of the client



**Katie and Kevin Smith lived in a privately rented house with their four children.**

In May this year Katie was at home with three of them. It was raining heavily.

The family watched as the toilets started bubbling and then they noticed that water was flowing down the road and onto their front garden.

The bungalow they lived in was set lower than the road and without much warning the water suddenly rose above the step of the door and started coming into their home.

Katie described it as a sudden gush of water coming towards them. It was at this point they decided they had to evacuate the property and with a younger child on each of their backs and the family dog. Katie and the older child waded, almost having to swim out of the property to higher ground and to the safety of a family friend. It all happened so fast they were not able to grab anything.

The Homelessness Agent, Alex Fenion, met Katie and the children at the local village hall the following lunch time.

# THE SMITH'S STORY

Some good neighbours were looking after them; someone with a contact at a local private school with industrial washing machines was able to start putting all their clothing through the wash.

Kevin was at the property with the eldest child trying to salvage any items they could. Alex watched when Kevin video called Katie, to show her the extent of the damage, and how high the water had filled the house. The water line was 3.5-4ft high. The back steps had been washed away and debris from other gardens had been deposited in their own. All the family furniture was ruined.

This is when their battle started. Alex called Somerset Council to report that the Smith family were flood victims and needed emergency accommodation. The next day the family were placed in a hotel.

Alex then sat with the family and made a list of any essential items that they needed urgently. Clothing was at the top of the list.

Neighbours rallied round to give what they could to the family and Alex was able to donate some clothes that she had in storage. The family also all needed underwear and Alex was able to secure a small grant for this so that they could purchase enough to make do until all their clothing was returned.

Unfortunately, the landlord did not have any insurance and was considering demolishing the bungalow and awaiting a surveyor to provide an assessment.

The family already had a Homefinder application in as the property was unfit for purpose, lacking space and with ongoing sewer problems.

Alex arranged to meet a Housing officer who processed their application. To add to their frustration, the family was awarded a silver banding and would have to wait 56 days for a review.

Alex continued to support the family whilst they were living at the hotel. It became evident that the longer the family stayed in the hotel, without any cooking or washing facilities, that their mental health began to suffer.

On numerous occasions Alex met with Katie to talk through their situation and make plans. Alex liaised with Somerset Council's Housing Officers regarding their situation.

The biggest problems were that they needed a larger house and the Council did not have any larger homes to offer the family. There was also a lack of larger capacity temporary housing, which meant they had to continue to stay at the hotel.



# THE SMITH'S STORY

Due to the families' continuing struggles with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the younger children's need for daily support at school, Alex, Katie and Kevin decided that the family would try to get onto a gold or emergency banding. Alex wrote a support letter to Somerset Council, explaining the situation and their ongoing battles and asked for them to be considered for emergency banding.

Katie supplied evidence from the children's school of the developing mental health concerns and sent it to Somerset Council. Unfortunately, the family's request for a new banding was declined.

Alex spoke to her manager at CCS who drafted several emails to people and organisations that we thought could help the Smith family. Through this, the Agent managed to secure funding for the family for when they do find a home, so that they can furnish it and purchase essential items.

After 134 days of living in a hotel room with no proper facilities, the family was given a temporary property. They were able to cook, wash clothes and set up a much more stable environment.

The Smith family continue to wait for a permanent home in the area they need to be in and will continue to receive our support.

# HOMELESSNESS IN SOMERSET

## Homelessness in other Somerset localities



**Whilst it is hard to gauge a comprehensive understanding of homelessness across Somerset, our Agent Service is often called in to help, without having the specialist support that Alex has been able to provide in South Somerset.**

In August 2023, **West Somerset** had four active cases of homelessness. Our Locality Manager in that area reported that they often experience challenging situations with clients being relocated out of area and sometimes into Devon for temporary accommodation. This causes issues with transport for school if children are involved.

In the 18 months the project has been running in South Somerset, Agents have had to take on 19 homeless cases in **Taunton Deane**, including men, women and families..

They have also had to help some clients who were temporarily housed in Tiverton. As CCS only works within Somerset, we had to work with a Devon partner charity to assist them.

Agents in the Village Agent service covering the Taunton area have found that support for homeless clients has put pressure upon their locality crisis grant fund and increased the strain on the service, which is not funded to support homeless clients in this locality.

# HOMELESSNESS IN SOMERSET

## Homelessness in other Somerset localities



The team in **Sedgemoor** have recently been supporting eight homeless clients, two of these are going from temporary accommodation into their permanent tenancies.

Agents have been unable to provide the 'step up- step down' support that Alex has done in South Somerset, which helps to ensure that the tenancy is successful.

Two homeless people have also visited the Talking Cafes, and have had to be signposted on to an outreach team and the council housing team, rather than supported directly because of the lack of specialist capacity.

The Hospital Team report a recent increase, since August 2023 in clients who are referred to them because they are homeless, and have no where else to go upon leaving hospital. This is a new trend in our data and we are monitoring it closely.



## NEXT STEPS

**The pilot project in South Somerset has proven that the model of face-to-face specialist, and ongoing support for individuals facing homelessness has helped to change lives.**

Even within our service, we can see the difference there is between South Somerset and other localities, who are referred cases from housing officers, but without the resource or capacity to give them the attention that they need.

Homelessness is not a lifestyle choice and working holistically, in a multi-agency approach to un-pick and address the challenges that individuals face, is important.

This addresses the root causes that lead to homelessness in the first place and is vital to avoid the 'revolving door'.

As is the 'step up - step down' nature of support that our Agent can offer, to ensure that tenancies are a success and clients retain access to a support mechanism, should they need it.

We believe that this approach should be scaled up and rolled out across Somerset.

We would like to increase capacity in the Village Agent Service in the first instance through a Phase 2 of the pilot for two specialist Tenancy & Homelessness Support Agents, based in the East and West of the county.

# NEXT STEPS



This will enable CCS and our partners to better understand the need on a county scale and identify what other gaps there are in this area, and how the new unitary council will continue to offer support.

To enable this we are funding one Agent in East Somerset for six months from January 2024 - June 2024, to focus on two areas, one rural and one urban.

We aim to:

- Fully monitor and test the 'step up - step down' model
- Undertake a more comprehensive needs analysis into homelessness in Somerset to better understand gaps and challenges on a county wide level
- Compare rural and urban homelessness
- Develop 10 fully costed case studies.



# THE COMMUNITY COUNCIL FOR SOMERSET

## GET IN TOUCH

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