



Hidden Somerset

Homelessness



Rural Realities

397 Somerset households were accepted as statutorily homeless during 2017/18

Rough sleepers are ten times more likely to die than those of a similar age in the general population

Grants related to homelessness represent just 1% of all grants reported to 360Giving

Four rough sleepers died in Somerset in 2018

Full-time workers in Somerset pay 8.7 times their annual earnings to purchase a home

Government spending on homelessness dropped 27% between 2008 and 2018

People with more than four adverse childhood experiences are much more vulnerable to homelessness

Around 1 in 15 people who require local authority homelessness support in Somerset are the victims of domestic abuse



Introduction

Hidden Somerset is a series of short reports looking at aspects of life in Somerset that are often hidden from view. They are designed to stimulate debate and understanding and, in particular, help inspire new and better philanthropy.

In this report we reveal the hidden scale of homelessness in Somerset, the contributing factors and some of the wonderful work carried out by local organisations. Their work gives some of the most disadvantaged people in our communities the support to build a more stable, safe and fulfilling life.

Having a safe place to live is an essential human need, and yet those who are most vulnerable in our society and most in need of the security a stable and safe place to live offers are, paradoxically, those most at risk of becoming homeless. In October 2019 an Office for National Statistics (ONS) report identified that four rough sleepers died in Somerset in 2018.

How we respond reflects our values as a society. Statutory authorities play a key role in providing safety nets, but local charities, faith-based groups and social enterprises also have a part to play. At their best, these organisations start by treating people as people – with hopes and aspirations – not as a set of symptoms and problems. They can unlock resources in our community – from volunteers to buildings to farmland – to help turn lives around; they have a ‘never give up’ spirit. If the state provides the safety net, civil society brings the springboard.

My wish is that this report gives you hope. I hope it also inspires greater awareness and support from those amazing organisations and the people they help. By pulling together as communities, we can all contribute to make a tangible and lasting difference to peoples’ lives in the most fundamental way – by helping them find a place they can call home.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Justin'.

Justin Sargent Chief Executive, Somerset Community Foundation

The Hidden Homeless

A number can hide the true scale of a problem.

Last autumn, the Government's annual street count recorded 36 rough sleepers across Somerset.¹ These 36 people are ten times more likely to die than those of a similar age in the general population.² Their needs are complex and the importance of providing appropriate support should not be underestimated.

Yet this number actually tells us little about homelessness in our county. To the rough sleepers officially recorded, we need to add, among others:

- those sleeping rough in secluded rural areas
- young people 'sofa surfing' at friends' houses
- families housed in temporary accommodation
- ex-offenders leaving prison
- those suffering domestic abuse

Many of these people will not show up in any official figures. Indeed, one survey indicated that 62% were hidden homeless.³

Ultimately, it is very difficult to work out exactly how many people are homeless in Somerset today.



"Homelessness is a very limited definition and the threshold can mask the true picture. Too many families are living in poor quality, insecure, short-term housing and this is a huge problem for their health, well-being and prosperity."

Survey respondent

There is also no easy answer to the question of why someone becomes homeless. Just as rough sleeping is the most visible sign of homelessness, the lack of affordable housing is the most obvious cause. Somerset's current homelessness strategy explores this issue, concluding that both home ownership and private renting is unaffordable for many people. Average private rents in some parts of the county increased by more than 14% in the last five years, while Local Housing Allowance has been frozen or capped at a maximum of 1% per annum.⁴ Welfare policies like this one, alongside low or unreliable income, health problems, addiction, bereavement, and other factors all interplay and can lead to homelessness.

Government spending on homelessness dropped 27% between 2008 and 2018. While many local authorities have been able to maintain statutory support for families during this time, support for individuals has been halved.⁵ During a similar period only 1% of grants from charitable trusts and foundations appear to have been awarded to projects directly related to homelessness.⁶



¹ ONS, 2018, Rough sleeping in England: Autumn 2018

² R.W. Aldridge et al., 2017, 'Morbidity and mortality in homeless individuals, prisoners, sex workers, and individuals with substance use disorders in high-income countries' The Lancet 391: 241–250

³ Crisis, 2011, The Hidden Truth About Homelessness: Experiences of Single Homelessness in England

⁴ Somerset Homelessness Review & Strategy, 2017

⁵ WPI Economics, 2019, Local Authority Spending on Homelessness

⁶ What can 360Giving data tell us about homelessness funding?

Two pay cheques away from being homeless?

The media often report on how close we could all be to homelessness. But some people are far more likely to become homeless than others.

Homelessness is the result of a complex interaction between a person's own circumstances and wider economic and social factors, many of which are outside of their control. Below, we consider four of the most important issues that our survey highlighted.

Poverty

Poverty, especially in childhood, is the most powerful predictor of homelessness in later life.¹ Groups that experience poverty more often, such as single parents, are more likely to become homeless. As one of our survey respondents told us: **"People with more than four adverse childhood experiences (such as bereavement, time in care or mental health issues) are much more vulnerable to a whole raft of issues – of which homelessness is one. Once homeless, other issues then become much more entrenched and more difficult to manage."**

Our survey tells us one of the first places someone facing homelessness visits is a foodbank. There are at least 19 providers of food parcels that we identified in Somerset. One Somerset foodbank that took part in our survey has helped to feed 4,286 people in the last year (August 2018 – August 2019).

"We are one of the first points of contact for many people in need. We give a food parcel and clothing, if available. Recently we helped a young mum. She had lost her part-time job through illness, and her accommodation, due to lack of income. Debt became an insurmountable problem for her. We signposted her to Grace Advocacy who supported her and helped her get another job. She made several trips during that time for food parcels and other practical items. She recently came to visit us with some tins of food to "help someone else" and now plans to be one of our volunteers in the future." Survey respondent

Many of our survey respondents referred to benefit reform, especially the introduction of Universal Credit, as exacerbating the factors that can lead to someone facing homelessness. This is supported by recent surveys covering the social housing sector, which found that almost three-quarters of Universal Credit tenants are in arrears compared to just over one-quarter of other tenants. The Trussell Trust has also seen a 52% increase in foodbank use in areas where Universal Credit had been rolled out for 12 months or more. In contrast, the increase was 13% where Universal Credit had not yet been rolled out, or had been available for three months or less.³



The probability of homelessness by age 30²

A white male who:

0.6%

- had a relatively affluent childhood in the rural South of England
- experienced an unproblematic school career
- went to university and graduated at 21
- was still living with his parents at age 26 with no partner and no children

A mixed ethnicity female who:

71%

- experienced poverty as a child
- was brought up by a lone parent
- left school at 16 and had spells of unemployment
- was living in rented accommodation with no partner but with her own children at age 26

¹ G. Bramley & S. Fitzpatrick, 2018, "Homelessness in the UK: who is most at risk?" Housing Studies 33(1): 96-116.

² New Philanthropy Capital, 2018, Tackling the Homelessness Crisis.

³ Commons Select Committee: Universal credit: delivery causing unacceptable hardship, October 2018

Two pay cheques away from being homeless?



Housing

A local authority has a duty to find somewhere for a person to live if they have a 'priority need'. This includes families with children and expectant mothers. In Somerset, 397 households were assessed as having a priority need in 2017/18. As a proportion of all households, Somerset's number of priority acceptances was 1.65 per thousand households in 2017/18, which is below the national average rate of 2.51.¹

If accepted, temporary accommodation – which includes B&Bs, hostels, social housing or privately rented accommodation – is often used while somewhere more suitable is identified. Between October and December 2018, a total of 120 people lived in

temporary accommodation in Somerset.² However, these arrangements are not available to everyone, particularly single, younger people.

For people who are homeless and not considered a priority need by local authorities, the options are very limited. Many people in Somerset end up in substandard accommodation, often with insecure tenures. This can be the case for private rented accommodation or even housing association tenancies. In Frome, for example, half of those living with family or others – because they had no other housing alternative – were very dissatisfied with their situation.³ A survey respondent told us:

"Anecdotal experience is that there is probably a lot of 'hidden homelessness' such as people sleeping on sofas, staying in unsafe relationships, or in overcrowded accommodation, because they have no other housing options. We have tried various initiatives to quantify these numbers. We're particularly concerned about families with children who are insecurely housed in the private rented sector and live in fear of eviction or rising rents. The Mendip Fixed Housing Allowance for a two-bed home is way below Frome market rents. We have also met families who are living outside the system because it can't offer them anything in this corner of Somerset, and to move away would disrupt jobs and schooling." Survey respondent

¹ Somerset Intelligence website, 'Homelessness'

² ONS, Live tables on homelessness, 2019.

³ Fair Housing for Frome, Frome Housing Survey, 2019.

Mental and physical health, trauma and abuse

Some experiences can make people more vulnerable to homelessness: these include poor physical and/or mental health, alcohol and drug abuse, bereavement, experience of care, and experience of the criminal justice system. As one of our survey respondents explained: **“If a person has grown up in care, has been in the armed forces or has been in and out of prison it makes it extremely difficult for them to be able to adjust to independent living. They often have underlying mental health issues that are not picked up during initial homelessness assessments.”**

It is important to remember that someone who is living somewhere unsafe is homeless. Around 1 in 15 people who require local authority homelessness support in Somerset are the victims of domestic abuse.¹ When domestic abuse leads to homelessness it can become a difficult cycle to escape. Repeat homelessness can be a common problem among women, who are also vulnerable to other forms

of violence. Women who experience complex trauma often find it difficult to maintain stable relationships or to engage with support services.²

“We have been working with one woman for approximately 18 months. When we first met her, she was involved with county lines drugs gangs and addicted to crack cocaine. She had been in the care system and in and out of prison since the age of 17 (she’s now 24). She has been working incredibly hard to address the issues that have held her back from being able to access mainstream housing, and is now drug free and in a stable placement. She is now about to complete the Tenant Accreditation Course so that she can move into her own independent accommodation.”

Survey respondent

Rurality

Delivering homelessness services in a rural area like Somerset is particularly difficult. These difficulties include:

- poor economies of scale
- large travel distances and poor transport connections
- constrained resourcing for specialist services
- isolated communities
- an ageing population
- limited alternative and emergency housing provision.³

While the causes of homelessness are often the same in rural and urban areas, in the countryside it can be more difficult to detect. This is partly due to the stigma of being visibly homeless, which appears to be stronger in rural areas and which leads to people self-isolating themselves by living in tents, parked cars, or barns. This in turn, increases the difficulties of accessing local services.⁴

“Peter⁵, an older gentleman, came to our drop-in reporting that he was single and homeless. He had been sofa-surfing and living in his car when nobody was available to take him in. The car was parked off-road in a rural area where he had local connections and felt secure.

When we first met Peter, he was very distressed because he had been told that his request for a house had been closed, as he had failed to reply to a request to provide an update of his housing needs. This request had been made in writing to an address he had given the year before, but where he no longer lived.

We went with Peter to visit the housing team. They were able to accept him as homeless and offered him a bed within a single person’s short stay hostel. Peter declined the offer, as he felt insecure and afraid of that option. He felt safer in his car.

Over the next few days we supported Peter with a food parcel and helped him re-register for housing using our office as his contact details. We also provided benefits advice, which included helping him negotiate with the Job Centre over acceptable ID for a Universal Credit claim.” Survey respondent



¹ ONS, Live tables on homelessness, 2019.

² SafeLives, 2018, Safe at Home: Homelessness and Domestic Abuse

³ IPPR, Right to Home? Rethinking Homelessness in Rural Communities, 2017.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ All names have been changed

Community Solutions

Open Door

Steps to recovery

"We provide emergency support to around 300 vulnerable adults each year, predominantly rough sleepers, people who are drug or alcohol dependent, and people living with mental ill health or relationship problems. Clients are sleeping in doorways, cars or tents, and we've also helped people affected by other issues such as county lines and modern slavery.

In the mornings we provide clients with hot meals, shower facilities, a laundry service, a clothes exchange and signposting to external services, but just as important is that we provide somewhere safe where users can have breathing space, connect with others and feel cared about. Our volunteers are instrumental in providing this service and are the backbone of our day centre.

The next step is to help our clients find accommodation. In the meantime, we provide administrative support with things such as benefits applications, assistance with phone calls and registering with a doctor. We also offer finance and budgeting advice, helping navigate court fines or other debts. Crucially we aim to increase clients' employability by assisting with CVs, working very closely with the Job Centre.

We have recently set up activity sessions at our day centre, encouraging our clients to take up hobbies and enable those who have moved into accommodation to feel less isolated. Our current activities include arts and crafts, knitting, make-overs, reading sessions and we even have our own musical band. We would love to be able to expand this area of our work but don't currently have the capacity to do so.

Open Door provides the space and a base from which to move on. Whether in freefall from mental ill health or substance misuse, we offer somewhere to land and be safe, with support and encouragement to make a positive next step."

Mark Woodcock, Manager, Open Door



West Somerset Advice

Preventing homelessness with specialist advice

"We run a housing advocacy project, which was set up in response to increasing demand for housing advice. In the last year, the number of people to whom we have provided specialist housing advice has trebled, and in total we've assisted 704 households at immediate or medium-term risk of losing their home. Shockingly, one in five people who have approached us because they were at risk of homelessness last year were pensioners.

Terry¹ is an example of a typical client. When he approached us he was distressed; he needed medical help, but the hospital consultant wanted to wait as his mental health was so poor. A carer, Terry was unable to work due to poor health. His home was provided by his employer and he felt harassed because he was not at work. Terry approached us to find out about his housing rights. He could not afford his rent from his statutory sick pay and was falling into arrears, causing him further worry.

We established the property was in significant disrepair, and we also addressed issues with employment and disability by completing a benefit check. Our adviser, Sam, secured a discretionary payment to help Terry pay his rent. During the progress of the case, which was over some months, Terry was served notice on his accommodation. Sam helped Terry access legal aid, working in partnership with a solicitors' firm. Terry was able to counterclaim for disrepair and harassment with compensation, meaning he was able to leave the property with no arrears. This, in turn, was key to being able to secure a more suitable home. Possession action was delayed, enabling him to move. He was successful in a bid for accommodation in the social housing sector, providing him with level-access accommodation and allowing him to rehabilitate in a safe environment, following his medical treatment. The main gain was to Terry's health: the intervention had restored his confidence so that he was well enough to have the medical treatment he so desperately needed.

Our service has increased the income for our client group by £1,157,674 since it was launched in July 2018. This improves the ability of many households to afford to pay rent and other utility bills. Part of this sum is compensation paid to tenants, counter claiming for disrepair through the courts, or debts written off due to the intervention of our advisers."

Susan Clowes, Manager, West Somerset Advice

¹ The name and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the individual



Dairy House: Root Connections CIC Community Garden

Helping the homeless to grow and move on

"The Community Garden was developed at the Dairy House, which is a residential community hostel for the homeless. It's based on the principles of therapeutic horticulture and aimed at improving health and well-being. Elim Connect Centre set up Dairy House as a place to inspire change and be a place of change. It's Mendip's only direct access hostel for those rebuilding their lives after experiencing homelessness.

Our residents live and work on our thousand-acre farm, growing chemical-free fruit and vegetables. A few years ago, we realised it would be good if we could work towards making Dairy House more sustainable, so that – over time – we could become less reliant on funding. So, we set up Root Connections: a not-for-profit vegetable-growing initiative. All profits from the sale of our produce, which includes fresh veg boxes, preserves and chutney, is reinvested into the project, supporting our residents and helping to bring an end to rural homelessness. It gives our service users a meaningful activity here on the farm, creating more of a community feel.

The majority of people sleeping rough in Mendip are self-isolating, living outside of built-up areas, so the remote location of the Dairy House offers a softer transition from rural homelessness.

While staying with us, we also work with residents on addiction issues, housing and debt support, and improving family relationships. We tailor our support to everyone as individuals, working on a personal support plan together. Our residents have a busy time while they are with us, sorting things out and getting ready for living more independently – but it's a calm place, away from busy towns; it's somewhere they are able to focus and think about their next steps.

Around 30 people pass through here every year, staying for up to three months. We also provide what is called step-down or move-on accommodation at Evergreen House in Wells, for up to four people, where they can stay for up to a year.

People arrive here through Elim Connect Centre, which is the virtual front door to the service, based in Wells. We have an outreach team who go out and look for people rough sleeping in the area. We also take referrals from the council, police, YMCA and members of the public through an anonymous online scheme.

We have an open-door policy and people can always come back to us if it doesn't work out. We are a community of people helping each other, and we're always here when people need to talk."

Suzanne Addicott, Director, Root Connections CIC

YMCA Mendip & South Somerset

Never giving up

"Our work provides a range of services for young people and vulnerable adults, with an emphasis on housing and homelessness, helping them to grow in confidence, develop as individuals and realise their full potential. We look after young people aged 16–25 and vulnerable adults across Mendip and South Somerset, and we have just over 100 beds of supported accommodation.

Our clients come through the care system, from family or relationship breakdowns, or as a result of domestic violence. Some will be coming out of mental health institutions or hospital, and some from prisons. We might work with someone who is living in a tent or sofa-surfing. We are also able to provide emergency accommodation so we can place people at very short notice.

Through our Pathways to Independence work with young people, we have an holistic approach to the support we offer; it's more than a room, we work towards helping the young person achieve sustainable independence. We offer employment training and education, a floating support service and a bespoke individual support package. We are beginning to adapt our offer for younger people including those coming out of residential care. This will enable us to work with them from a younger age for greater impact.

We quite often see young people who have never washed up or used a washing machine. We would like to make sure that young adults acquire life skills at an earlier age. We work through basic finance and budgeting, cooking, and general self-care skills. We make sure they are registered with a GP and their health-care needs are being met. For some, just getting their medication right is a massive issue.

A lot of the young people we work with have experienced people giving up on them. We don't give up on them. That's the difference in the voluntary sector. The young people we support learn that we're not going anywhere; they can sense the compassion and love.

County lines drugs gangs are becoming a big problem in Somerset and vulnerable young people are being targeted. The needs around mental health are increasing and we see a lot of self-harming and suicide attempts. There is also a lot of pressure on young people around sexuality and gender. There would be a large number of young people and adults out there struggling if we did not exist, and we are extremely grateful to one philanthropist in particular, and other charitable trusts, who provide us with annual funding for the young people. It's not huge, but it makes a massive difference.

A lot of people think homelessness doesn't happen here, they think it's an urban issue. But it exists here more than people realise. There are a lot of vulnerable young people and adults in Somerset, but they are still part of our community. We all need to be doing our bit to look after them."

**Emma Good, Director, Housing and Support,
YMCA Mendip & South Somerset**

Looking Ahead

There are no easy solutions to homelessness. It is a complex issue caused by structural problems like poverty and local housing alongside personal factors like mental health. However, through this research we've identified three key areas where funders can have a significant impact in Somerset.

Supporting community-wide prevention

We were told repeatedly that prevention is key; we need to support people before they become homeless.

But what works to prevent someone becoming homeless? It's a question that the Centre for Homelessness Impact was recently established to answer. As the Centre explains:

"A surprising number of people continue to experience homelessness each year despite the millions of pounds invested each year to address the issue. There is a financial as well as moral imperative to act. In other fields, a whole movement has emerged to help find more ways to link research to policy and practice."

While that evidence is beginning to emerge nationally, for those on the ground in Somerset the message was quite clear. It's about treating people as people – with hopes and aspirations – not as a set of symptoms and problems. That means building real relationships between individuals, between support services, and with the wider community. In turn, that requires often intensive one-to-one support from experienced staff who have realistic expectations and who can break down barriers. As one of our survey respondents told us:

"We sometimes pigeonhole people into services where their lives become surrounded by the issues they are trying to escape. By integrating homeless services and outreach workers into the wider community we might avoid this."



Working together to encourage innovation in housing

Philanthropy has a long history of establishing affordable housing in this county, but this has dwindled in recent decades. Philanthropists cannot hope to solve today's crisis in affordable housing, but by working together – with the public, private and charity sectors – there may be opportunities to create impact. We have seen this first-hand with the Dairy House, which was able to provide accommodation thanks to a partnership with their district council and a local landowner.

Such opportunities might extend to the offer of subsidised land, affordable loans, equity stakes or grants. It might include innovations in small homes, container homes, or emergency accommodation. It may also include support for the Housing First model, which prioritises access to stable accommodation over the requirement for an individual to first address any other support needs they have. Having begun in New York, Housing First has grown in popularity in a number of countries, with evaluations showing that 70–90% of residents have remained housed.

Philanthropy continues to act as a catalyst for the innovations needed to solve our housing crisis.

Growing enterprises that can act as stepping stones

For many, moving back into a stable home also means moving back into a stable job. But this can prove too great a step for some. By providing an occupation for those transitioning out of homelessness, this change may be better supported, breaking the cycle of homelessness. Enterprises already active within homelessness services include furniture recycling, gardening services, shops and cafes. These enterprises must carefully balance social and commercial considerations in order to achieve their aims, something which many established charities struggle to maintain.

That is what we think...but we are interested in hearing from you. Contact justin.sargent@somersetcf.org.uk with your thoughts and ideas.



Our grateful thanks go to
The Fairfield Charitable Trust
for funding the Hidden Somerset
research and publication

somerset
COMMUNITY | FOUNDATION



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