

CONNECTING THE DOTS

How can grassroots organisations work better together to support existing services for those who are experiencing homelessness in York?

August 2025





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FOREWORD

Homelessness is one of the most visible and urgent social issues of our time. In York – an historic and vibrant city renowned for its culture and community – homelessness remains a daily reality for many individuals. It is a reality that is complex, multifaceted, and profoundly human. And yet, as this report illustrates with clarity and compassion, homelessness is not inevitable. It is preventable. It is solvable. But only if we act together.

This report, *How can grassroots organisations work better together to support existing services for those who are experiencing homelessness in York?*, emerges from the York Homelessness Partnership Project – an ambitious collaboration between Tang Hall SMART CIC and the University of York, launched in early 2024. The project brings together a powerful mix of academic insight, lived experience, and community practice. It responds to a pressing challenge: how do we strengthen and unify the invaluable work of non-statutory services in a way that could meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness.

It comes at a time of unprecedented pressure. The COVID-19 pandemic, an escalating cost of living crisis, and sustained austerity have driven more people into housing insecurity, while simultaneously stretching existing support services beyond capacity. Between autumn 2022 and autumn 2023, rough sleeping in England rose by 27%. Households experiencing homelessness have reached record highs. Even York, with its collaborative civic culture, has not been immune.

Yet amid this challenge, this report finds hope. Hope in the form of grassroots organisations, charities, and community groups who provide not only immediate relief, but also pathways to stability, recovery, and skills. These organisations often operate with limited resources, but offer something invaluable: agility, trust, community insight, and deeply personal support. They are, quite literally, on the frontline.

This research is grounded in the voices of both service providers and individuals with direct experience of homelessness. Their testimonies have shaped a nuanced understanding of York's current ecosystem of support – its strengths, its duplication, its limitations, and its gaps. Their insights are honest, authentic and ultimately constructive. They illuminate a central truth: that meaningful, sustainable progress depends on better coordination, clearer communication, and a shared commitment to work collaboratively across sectors.

One of the most powerful contributions to this report comes from a person with lived experience of homelessness:

"Homelessness is quite possibly the most debilitating and isolating experiences that any human being can have... I found myself committing crimes just to get locked up, as prison is often a more comfortable environment than a street corner... You will serve your lifestyle and it will not serve you."

This is not just a personal reflection. It is a call to action. It reminds us that homelessness does not begin with a lack of shelter, but with a loss of connection – to community, to services. Homelessness is not merely a statistic or a policy issue – it is a deeply human experience. It is in rebuilding that connection that grassroots organisations play such a vital role.

This report affirms that homelessness is not inevitable. It is solvable. When we act together, when we coordinate rather than compete, when we listen as well as lead, change is not only possible – it is certain.

The findings presented are practical and actionable. The recommendations provide a framework for more integrated, inclusive and responsive services – services that meet people where they are, and help them move forward. From better signposting and access to services, to addressing funding constraints and service gaps, the report outlines a path for organisations to align more effectively and amplify each other’s efforts.

Crucially, this work complements – not replaces – the work of statutory agencies. It is not about duplication, but collaboration. The City of York Council, NHS services, and other statutory providers remain central to the city’s homelessness response. But the voluntary and community sectors offer something equally essential: proximity, innovation, responsiveness, and trust.



Julian Richer
Managing Director and Founder, Richer Sounds
Author and Philanthropist

This is a moment of opportunity. As one local service provider reflected:

“York is a good city to be able to try doing things differently... where there is a general sort of consensus it’s a good idea, you can usually find the funding.”

The time to act is now. This report does not have all the answers, but it offers an informed starting point – rooted in experience, backed by evidence, and shaped by those closest to the issue.

We invite you to engage fully with its findings, to reflect on the realities it presents, and to join us in forging a more cohesive, and effective response to homelessness in York. By bringing our shared purpose to the forefront of service delivery, we can build a city in which no one is left behind – and in which everyone, regardless of their circumstances, can find a place to call home. Because homelessness affects us all. And together, we can build a York that works for everyone.



Professor Kiran Trehan
PVC for Enterprise, Partnerships and Engagement
University of York

“This important research, based on listening to both people with experience of homelessness and service providers, highlights a number of gaps in service provision, and also makes recommendations for how to improve collaboration and communication between organisations working in this space. It provides a powerful testimony which I hope will be acted on to make a real difference to people’s lives.”



Karen Rowlingson
Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences,
University of York

“This much needed research has placed people with real experiences of homelessness at the very heart of its focus, giving them a voice when they so-often feel unheard. The result is compelling reading that will inspire, inform and galvanise our future actions and projects with the aim of supporting those experiencing homelessness better and in a more informed way.”



Sue Williamson
CEO and Founder of Tang Hall SMART C.I.C.



INTRODUCTION

The York Homelessness Partnership Project was initiated at the start of 2024 by Tang Hall Smart and the University of York with the intention of finding ways to improve non-statutory services for people with experience of homelessness in York. This summary of the full report aims to be a catalyst to inspire future projects to support those who find themselves homeless in York.

The project is dedicated to Glenn Sweetman. Glenn had been a resident at various homeless hostels, then moved through resettlement and into his own flat, but struggled with mental health and addiction issues. The impetus for this project and report came from his tragic death and the aspiration of Sue Williamson of Tang Hall Smart to provide greater support for others in need through improving the connection between existing resources and creating new ones, if any gaps were identified from the research conducted during the project.

The COVID-19 pandemic, the cost of living crisis and energy austerity have all played a part in exacerbating the challenges faced by people experiencing homelessness in recent years,

resulting in an increase in rough sleeping and stretching services that were already under pressure before 2020. This has made the need for coordinated and well-supported services more urgent. The research has identified some key gaps in service provision, and has also underscored the importance of effective collaboration and communication between organisations to overcome barriers and enhance service delivery.

Through the project, the views of service providers and people with experience of homelessness were sought to build a picture of how the services aim to support their clients and how the services are perceived by their clients by covering the following themes:

Service highlights	Smaller service providers and targeted initiatives through statutory service providers (often jointly funded in partnership with other organisations) are valued for their flexibility, agility, and ability to build trust with clients, offering a wide range of support and activities.
Service duplication	Most services are not duplicated, with the exception of services providing a range of advice/guidance or activity-based support. However, duplication of services can be viewed in a positive light, giving more choice and options to clients.
Service limitations	Financial constraints limit service providers, affecting staffing, space, and the ability to support clients effectively.
Gaps in services	A number of gaps in services were identified which were used to develop recommendations for future projects.
Accessing services	Navigating access to services can be complex and overwhelming for people experiencing homelessness, with barriers such as technology access, lack of ID documentation and fear or mistrust. A need for better signposting to services was also identified.
Coordination and communication	Effective collaboration and communication between organisations is critical, although challenges to achieving this include funding competition and data sharing issues.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Engagement	Stakeholders	Topics covered
Two initial launch events (January and February 2024)	50 people involved in homelessness service provision. 4 people with lived experience of homelessness. (3 from within York and 1 from outside York).	- Experience of services for people experiencing homelessness. - What has worked well within the services. - What could work better within the services. - Challenges/Barriers to accessing services.
Interviews with service providers (both statutory and non-statutory) (April and May 2024)	7 in-depth interviews conducted over Zoom. 1 service provider supplied additional information that was used to create a case study.	- Highlights about their service. - Limitations of their service. - Recommendations for improving access to their service. - Recommendations for improving their service. - Gaps in service provision. - Duplication of service provision. - Recommendations about how organisations might work together more effectively for the benefit of those accessing the services they provide. - Knowledge or experience of wrap-around support.
Email questionnaire for service providers (April and May 2024)	18 email questionnaires completed.	Covered similar topics to those covered by the interviews.
Event held for people with experience of homelessness (August 2024)	7 people with experience of homelessness in total. 6 people participated in a group discussion. 5 in-depth interviews were conducted. 1 of these people later provided information that was used to create the case study.	- Experiences of services they have accessed. - Ideas for improvement of or simplification of access to services. - Ideas for improvement to services. - Gaps in service provision. - Recommendations for what could be done to assist people experiencing homelessness.
Email questionnaire for people with experience of homelessness (August – September 2024)	2 questionnaires completed. 1 person sent information via email. - A total of 12 people with lived experience of homelessness were consulted during the project.	Covered similar topics to those covered during the event.

Alongside the gathering of questionnaire, discussion group and interview data, a web-based research and mapping exercise was conducted to gather information about relevant organisations (both within the City of York and its local region and nationally) which provide services to people experiencing homelessness. The information was divided into national and regional/local organisations and the 81 organisations/ services were categorised as follows:

 Homelessness support (cross-cutting support)	 Finance services (banking, credit, debt) Accessing the benefits system Legal services/probation service/police
 Health services Addiction services Mental health services	 Food bank/food provision services
 Employment services	 Equality, diversity and inclusion-related services Disability/LGBTQ+/ethnicity
 Housing/ accommodation services	 Activity-based support

Information collected during the project was also used to create a case study concerned with the potential development of a model of intensive key-worker support and the feasibility of expanding this to support more people in the future.



KEY FINDINGS

Service highlights and impacts

- Smaller service providers have the advantage of flexibility and agility enabling them to respond to client needs better and more quickly and in innovative ways.
- Flexibility in the provision of services for those experiencing homelessness is vital.
- Relationship building is key to assisting those experiencing homelessness.
- Service staff who have personal experience of homelessness can use their insights to assist clients due to their lived experience of some of the issues they face.
- The way in which service provider staff communicate with their clients (showing compassion, respect and kindness) has a big impact on outcomes for their clients.
- Grassroots services can play an indispensable role of providing people with experience of homelessness with structure and focus. Reported benefits of activity-based support included: a sense of purpose, confidence building, acquiring skills and knowledge, enjoyment and combatting loneliness through being part of a community, making it more likely for them to continue attending.
- Participating service providers reported a wide range of positive impacts on their clients as a result of engaging with their services ranging from practical outcomes relating to financial support and accommodation to mental and physical personal impacts.
- The participating people with experience of homelessness reported a wide range of both positive and negative impacts from engaging with homelessness services.

"It's that level of trust, [...] sometimes people have been failed by the system, within this system. And we have to be there and build that trust up again [...], build that rapport again."

Gerry, service provider 7

"I think we provide a safe space where people feel comfortable. I think we provide the opportunity to vent and rant within a safe space with no consequences."

Bernie, service provider 2

"You just feel like you're treated like you're just dirt and you usually already feel like that usually anyway. [...] [The services] need to have people actually who are bothered, who are there to help people, not just there to get their wages."

Nicky, person with experience of homelessness 6

"I'm not on drugs anymore, I'm not drinking anymore, I'm not chaotic anymore. So, yeah, I think it's a number of things but they all kind of needed bringing together, which [service name] kind of did or [named person within the service] did more specifically."

Ollie, person with experience of homelessness 7

Duplication, limitations of and gaps in services

- Duplication of services did not appear to be a significant issue and was also cited by some participating service providers as something positive which gives more choice to clients with both things to do and different places to go.
- The benefits of collaboration and communication between services (as opposed to competing with each other) were highlighted.
- Some people with experience of homelessness that were interviewed also cited choice of venues/locations to visit or congregate gave them more options if they didn't feel comfortable in some places.
- Financial constraint was highlighted as the main limitation of service providers with this impacting on staff levels, staff salaries, staff retention and premises.
- Training of staff was highlighted as important, in particular with respect to how service provider staff relate to and manage their relationships with their clients. Lack of training (and experience) can result in raising unintentional barriers between staff and those they are trying to assist.
- A number of gaps in services were identified by both service providers and people with experience of homelessness which have been used to create some of the recommendations.

"Giving people that choice actually helps in a way because I'm pretty sure as well amongst the homelessness population that, just as in any culture, group in society, some people won't get on with each other and if they don't have to be in the same space but do the similar sort of activity, they've got that option."

Chris, service provider 3

"Homeless services are being expected to provide more for less and less and whilst, you know, wages within the homeless system have lagged massively behind inflation because there's not money in the contracts to pay people, so you end up with knowledgeable people leaving and moving on."

Drew, service provider 4

"There needs to be better training with people dealing with people in difficulties that they don't get refused any help or told to leave because they've been talking about things in difficult circumstances in such a way that they've perceived as being aggressive, when it isn't."

Kai, person with experience of homelessness 3

Accessing services

- Many services for people experiencing homelessness are accessed via referral.
- There are also a number of services that offer drop-in or self-referral as an access route.
- Fear and anxiety are factors to consider that could prevent clients accessing some services.
- Navigating complex systems that are there to assist people experiencing homelessness can be very overwhelming for them.
- Barriers such as transport and lack of access to technology could prevent people experiencing homelessness from accessing services.
- Some service providers have already made changes to enable easier access to their services such as support for clients with form filling and meeting clients in locations they are comfortable in rather than making them attend offices.
- Providing face to face contact with clients helps to build service provider/client relationships.
- Some service providers highlighted signposting other services to their services as something that could be improved.
- Improved navigation to and awareness of activity-based services would be really helpful for people with experience of homelessness to enable them to engage with these services more.

"People think there is no help for them. They don't understand how it works or as recently a person who I have been supporting will admit he was totally naive about what it entails to get rehoused, having never needed this help before. Others who are disabled with mental and/or physical health issues are overwhelmed with it all. As I frequently have to explain to people that 'they aren't stupid, for not understanding it all'."

From questionnaire, service provider 20

"I just kept getting sent back and forth between [organisation name] and [organisation name] and like [organisation name] and I don't really know who's who and yeah, it was just.... being passed around by messiness."

Morgan, person with experience of homelessness 5

"...after messing around on an app, which is confusing, and it often sends you in loops because of technical bugs and where's the problem and you have to press buttons on a diagram and tap in this box."

Kai, person with experience of homelessness 3

"...we've tried to shift that to make it face to face and having a more organic conversation. So whilst you are following through it's up to them, the [staff member] to fill in the form as opposed to making the person fit into these boxes."

Gerry, service provider 7

Coordination, communication and connection

- All the service providers who were interviewed felt they had good working relationships with a core network of organisations that they worked with regularly.
- Most of the service provider questionnaire respondents also felt they worked well with other organisations.
- Difficulties of working with organisations came from issues such as competing for the same funding streams, data sharing and personality clashes between specific individuals.
- Relationship building was seen as important to the success of organisations working collaboratively.
- Listening to clients and putting them at the centre of the service was highlighted as key to successful outcomes for the clients.
- People with experience of homelessness focussed their attention on the importance of service providers listening to clients, understanding their needs fully and making them feel heard and respected.
- Whilst service providers had their own networks, there was interest in developing wider links with and knowledge of other organisations to enable service providers to provide better solutions for their clients.
- Wrap-around support can be a successful method to assist some clients but it is not suitable for everyone.
- Members of the community of those experiencing homelessness highlighted that they also/often receive support from within their community.

"I can think of occasions where a significant difference has been made because services have worked together."

Drew, service provider 4

"...because I know the people, I can make one phone call and all that mess is sorted out."

Ellis, service provider 5

"I think being able to have a knowledge of what's going on, you know, you can support a person better if you go, 'oh, I know who does that'."

Gerry, service provider 7

"I think we need to listen an awful lot more to the customer base and hitting targets doesn't necessarily work."

Chris, service provider 3

"You need to know a lot more about someone before you start offering them any sort of support. Any support. You can't support someone unless you know what they need."

Joe, person with experience of homelessness 2

STATUTORY SERVICES

The aim of this project is to complement the work of the City of York Council and services provided by the NHS (as well as other statutory services) through coordinating the voluntary/community and charitable groups across the city in ways to help prevent and reduce homelessness through both supporting and filling any gaps in formal city-run and commissioned homelessness services.

The research conducted was therefore intentionally not focussed on an in-depth analysis of Housing Services provided by the City of York Council, services provided by the NHS or other statutory services. However, as Housing and Health Services are a substantial part of the support system for people experiencing homelessness our full report contains a summary of key points that were highlighted during our project.

There are many other statutory services that all play a role in the support of people facing homelessness including: adult social care, children’s social services, welfare benefits, jobcentre plus, the police, criminal justice and probation services. Due to the small scale of this project and its focus, it was not possible to cover all of these services in detail. However, they were included as part of the mapping exercise conducted during the project. Representatives from some of these services attended the initial launch event and completed questionnaires so were able to have an input into the project. It is envisaged that representatives from these services will be invited to any future events that may be held during the next phases of this project.



RECOMMENDATIONS – LIMITATIONS AND GAPS IN SERVICES

Recommendation Theme 1 – Support to Succeed

Obtain ID service and PO box

Establish a service to assist people experiencing homelessness (both practically and financially) with obtaining forms of ID to enable them to access other services and provide a PO Box for receiving mail.

Develop model for intensive key-working to scale up wraparound support

Establish an initiative based around the case study included in the full report to enable more people with experience of homelessness to be supported with accessing services, managing finances, managing tenancies, building confidence and self-esteem.

Mentoring service for disadvantaged school leavers

Train people with experience of homelessness to provide mentoring support to young people to help them navigate their way to employment or to other activities such as music or sport, thereby building their confidence and self-esteem. Connect with Changing Lives to learn from their experience of establishing a mentoring scheme based around construction.

Support network for grassroots organisations to support their own staff better

Create a support network for staff in smaller organisations to provide training, mentorship and support to help them with their role.

Support network for grassroots organisations to access funding

Create a network for grassroots organisations to provide assistance (via bid writing experts or staff within other relevant organisations) with seeking out new funding streams/sponsorship and writing proposals for additional funding for more staff, resources etc. to allow them to enhance their provision.

Reciprocal mentoring scheme for statutory and grassroots organisations

Create a reciprocal mentoring scheme for staff from statutory and grassroots services to support each other and their clients.

Recommendation Theme 2 – Educate to Enlighten

Assessment of training programmes available for homelessness sector staff

Undertake an analysis of training programmes available for staff working in the homelessness sector. Take into account experiences of those with lived experience who have accessed homelessness services to identify training gaps/improvements. Use the findings to better meet the training needs of organisations working in the homelessness sector.

Training programme for volunteers – part 1

Create and establish a training programme for volunteers that could be accessed and used by smaller organisations to reduce the burden on their own staff and cover a wider remit.

Training programme for volunteers – part 2

Create a volunteer programme in collaboration with a large local organisation which would provide volunteering training to the organisation’s staff who would then, as part of the programme, commit to volunteering on a regular basis to improve relationship and trust building with clients.

Training programme for people with experience of homelessness - part 1

Investigate options and feasibility for training people with experience of homelessness for roles within homelessness services through creating a specific programme or through offering apprenticeships. Link with the Council and other service providers to establish options and feasibility to provide routes to employment.

Training programme for people with experience of homelessness – part 2

Investigate options for linking initiatives such as the Changing Lives mentoring scheme based around construction and the Construction York initiative to train people with experience of homelessness in trades. Link with the Council to establish options and feasibility to provide routes to employment within the Council Maintenance Department.

Training programme for people with experience of homelessness – part 3

Explore options for training in other skills. Link with other organisations and educational institutions to establish training and education opportunities. Connect with Tang Hall SMART, Tang Hall Employment and Chocolate and Co to learn from their experience of creating training and employment initiatives.



Recommendation Theme 3 – Revive to Revitalise

Re-establish mothballed projects

With the permission of the service providers who identified projects that had been paused, discuss these in more detail, and if feasible, create a plan to resurrect them.

Recommendation Theme 4 – (Re)direct Resources

Evening meal provision

Gaps were established in evening meal provision. Link with existing providers and food banks to fill the gaps.

Dentistry outreach service

The demand for the service provided by Dentaaid far exceeds supply. Additional funding could be used to increase the regularity and capacity of the service.

RECOMMENDATIONS – CONNECTION, COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION

Recommendation Theme 5 – Connect to Collaborate

Pop-up events for the homelessness service providers in York

Hold pop up events twice a year for service providers and people with experience of homelessness to enable face to face conversations, interaction, knowledge exchange and action to take place. Ensure action points are agreed at each event so that the events lead to actual change (rather than just conversations). Introduce a feedback mechanism to be able to track positive (and negative) changes and impact.

Create a directory of homelessness service providers (linked to above initiative)

With their permission, use the list of participants in this project to create an initial invitee list for the pop-up events. Use the mapping exercise in the full report to develop the list which would have the dual purpose of serving as a directory of relevant organisations. Link with York VCSE Homelessness Support Network.

Investigate collaboration with Live Well York and consider the use of links to service webpages (rather than publishing information which needs to be kept up to date).

Review other directories currently available and connect with those who update the information to explore how we can bring the information together, keep information regularly updated to ensure it is accurate and avoid duplication.

Create a live calendar of food/activity provision

Share the timetable of current provision with relevant organisations to enable them to keep it updated. Disseminate it to the wider group of homelessness service providers. Investigate feasibility for an electronic board in a central location or the production of a regular printed zine/newsletter for distribution amongst the community of those experiencing homelessness. Link with York VCSE Homelessness Support Network.

Data sharing

Create a service for groups of grassroots organisations that work closely together on a regular basis to assist them with creating and implementing data sharing agreements (perhaps through linking with a local law firm) with the aim of reducing the number of questions to answer/forms to fill by people trying to access services.

Recommendation Theme 6 – Signpost and Signal

Navigator role for activity-based support

Create a navigator role to work closely with other organisations and assist with directing clients to activity-based support that is available for them to engage with. Part of the role could be to work with organisations to establish new activities for people with experience with homelessness to participate in and also involvement in the recommendation of updating and communication of live calendar of activity/food provision.

Library initiative

Create a joint initiative between grassroots organisations and the library to promote library services such as PC access and information to those experiencing homelessness. Connect this to the directory of homelessness safe spaces idea and the navigator role in the recommendations above.

Case studies

Create case studies/short films of the excellent work being done by the grassroots organisations (perhaps using footage already filmed) and its impact which can then be used to raise the profile of this work for the purpose of engaging with local businesses to offer donations/sponsorship/work experience placements/job placements for people with experience of homelessness. Involve people with experience of homelessness in the process. Investigate linking this with the organisations involved in CEO Sleepout.

Recommendation Theme 7 – Involve to Inform

Engage people with experience of homelessness in the design of any future initiatives/projects

Ensure people with experience of homelessness are involved in the design of any future initiatives so that new services or improvements to existing services are designed by those who use them which will also help to keep up with current trends in needs and issues. People with experience of homelessness may need to be encouraged to be involved by those they trust and have relationships with to give them the confidence to be involved.

Although this project has not focussed on housing services, the people with lived experience of homelessness who took part were very interested in finding alternative ways of housing provision to the statutory routes. Many of the people with experience of homelessness spoke of the provision of portacabins or converted shipping containers as an alternative housing solution. Examples of projects include The Embassy Village, a charity in Manchester, and “the People’s Pods”, Blackburn with Darwen Council. One additional recommendation is therefore to connect with this charity and with Blackburn with Darwen Council to learn more about their projects and their development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was driven by an aspiration to better coordinate and improve the grassroots services that support people with experience of homelessness. It could not have been completed without the willingness and enthusiasm of all the people who participated in the launch events, interviews, discussion groups and questionnaires.

We gratefully acknowledge the support of Sue Williamson, CEO and Founder of Tang Hall Smart, who also had the initial vision for the project.

Tang Hall Smart is a music, arts and sport community organisation offering creative and personalised learning programmes for young people with an Educational Health Care Plan (EHCP), as well as creative clubs, classes and programmes for people who have struggled with mental health, homelessness and/or addiction.

In addition, we want to thank the people with experience of homelessness who shared their very moving personal stories and experiences during the project – many of which were harrowing and difficult to listen to. Their willingness to take part in the hope that things

could change in the future for them and many other people in similar situations was both inspirational and motivational for the project team.

The research and project was undertaken by Liz Frost and Jayne Blizzard with guidance from Professor Kiran Trehan.

For a copy of the full report, please email:
pvcpe-po@york.ac.uk

To preserve the anonymity of the participants in this research project, no real names have been used in this report or the full report. Every effort has also been taken to maintain the anonymity of the representatives of the service providers who took part in the interviews, although they were informed that their anonymity could not be guaranteed as it is possible that somebody may identify them through the specificities of their role.

At the time of writing this report and the full report, the information included about the services was correct but may be subject to change due to changes in service providers and the services provided.



