



A pilot research project into the housing aspirations, support needs and the barriers to homeless adults wanting to move/accept accommodation out of Oxford city and to the local districts. September 2022

## **Executive summary**

1. Introduction
2. Definitions
3. Background
4. Research methods
5. Findings and discussion
6. Conclusion
7. Bibliography

## **Executive Summary**

- Finances and costs of services played a strong role in answers across all groups. This also included the cost of public transport and/ or not having a bus pass.
- Social barriers were also a consistent concern for participants as well, particularly for those who did *not* want to live outside of Oxford. However, the emphasis placed on these were affected by whether the participant lived in supported housing and how long they had spent in Oxford.
- NRPF participants mirrored these concerns, but also emphasised literacy and English classes additionally.
- Sofa-surfing and temporary accommodation participants also emphasised the same things, albeit with added emphasis on more “functional” forms of support (ie. those relating to employment).

However, these results only suggest broader trends, but do not prove them. This is a pilot study, and further, more in-depth research is required to precisely identify and correctly assess the needs of each group.

## **LEAF Study report date March 2023**

### **1. Introduction**

In January 2022, the Oxfordshire Homeless Movement (OHM) Steering Group approached the Lived Experience Advisory Forum LEAF with a request involving a piece of peer research on the barriers to people wanting to move/accept accommodation out of Oxford city and to the districts. This research study aims to identify, describe and produce an analysis on why homeless people in the City of Oxford turn down housing in greater Oxfordshire when it is offered. The cohort of participants was small which is signified in the study title of 'pilot'.

OHM's Steering Group committed to supporting the research and to use the findings and recommendations to improve service provision. No such evidence based research had been conducted in Oxfordshire historically, to the best of our knowledge.

LEAF is an independent group run by and for people with lived experience of being vulnerably housed, homelessness and connecting issues. This is to ensure that the valuable input of Experts through Experience is included across Oxfordshire within commissioning, service planning, policy change, decision-making and service evaluation within services.

OHM is a partnership that brings together everyone addressing homelessness in the county working together to ensure nobody should have to sleep rough on the streets of Oxfordshire.

There are many people experiencing homelessness in Oxfordshire, and dozens of organisations focusing on the problem. This diversity can be confusing for would-be volunteers and supporters. We provide clarity. The issues are complex, but volunteering is simple, and our joint efforts can be life-changing.

We focus our work on filling the critical gaps in provision that others can't, always working in partnership meaning that we have the best team for the job and always listening to the voices of those with lived experience of homelessness.

## **LEAF Study report date March 2023**

Our partnership was established because life is simpler when we work together. We are resourced with a small **team** of volunteers, one staff member and a steering committee and together, we make a big **impact**.

The main body of this report will be divided into five sections: The introduction discusses the study's aims and terms that will be used throughout. The background will follow, discussing the context of this topic. The next sections will concern the research methods used and then the outcome findings. Finally, the last section of this report will discuss any conclusions we can draw from the findings, alongside suggestions for future research on the topic.

This is an important issue on many fronts: Firstly (on an obvious note), housing as many people as possible is key in combating homelessness. Secondly, the resources available to do this are limited, meaning that any potential barriers need to be identified and investigated to make the system as effective as possible.

## **2. Definitions**

Several definitions need to be established in order to avoid confusion later on.

Homelessness: Not having a home. For the purposes of this study, this includes people rough sleeping, in supported and temporary housing, and on other ad hoc pathways (ie occasional homelessness). Although defined by many organisations as being homeless, this study will *not* focus on people currently living in unsuitable housing<sup>1</sup>.

NPRF: No Recourse to Public Funds. Individuals have no entitlement to the majority of welfare benefits, including income support, housing benefit and a range of allowances and tax credits (Section 115 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999)

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<sup>1</sup> What is Homelessness?

[https://england.shelter.org.uk/housing\\_advice/homelessness/what\\_is\\_homelessness](https://england.shelter.org.uk/housing_advice/homelessness/what_is_homelessness)

## **LEAF Study report date March 2023**

At-risk: people who are not experiencing homelessness but whose current housing/ economic situation is precarious.

Individual factors: The personal circumstances of a homeless or at-risk person. These might be traumatic events, personal crisis (for example, losing a job or long-standing relationship), poverty, mental health and addiction, alongside physical health problems or disabilities. The relationship between homelessness and personal/relational issues is well established at this point.

Relational factors: Circumstances of the family or friends of a homeless or at-risk person that in turn influence the homeless person. This might include violence or abusive behaviour to be endured alongside all or any of the factors listed above.

The particular causes and vulnerabilities of rough sleepers (and by extension causes of death) of a London cohort of rough sleepers were examined in parliament in 2022.<sup>2</sup>

## **4. Background**

In many regards, the story of homelessness in Oxfordshire is the same as the rest of the United Kingdom. Individual or relational factors which place people under stress and can result in homelessness are common to all areas. Policies of austerity and constraints on the UK's welfare spending mean that there is patchy support for vulnerable people when they need it most. For example, much of the brunt of austerity has been taken by local councils, amounting to a 37% decrease in real-terms funding from 2011-2021 reducing their ability in many areas, including combatting homelessness.

Oxford City Council's website states:

*“Overarching national issues like welfare reform, precarious private renting and austerity-driven cuts to mental health and social care support services drive the shocking rise in*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN02007/SN02007.pdf>, 2022.

## **LEAF Study report date March 2023**

*street homelessness. In Oxfordshire these cuts include more than £2 million a year in countywide housing support for single people experiencing homelessness.”*<sup>3</sup>

Although there have been some concentrated efforts in recent years to eliminate homelessness countrywide such as the Homelessness Reduction Bill (GOV.UK, 2019), this will likely not become a reality. This is clear from the renewed focus on austerity, the current cost of living crisis and serious ongoing issues in larger cities such as London<sup>4</sup> which may present a more dire problem in the local setting. Local authorities do their best to develop strategies for housing the homeless which are optimised to the local environment. This study aims to throw some light on the situation in Oxford.

## **5. Research methods**

The LEAF members had the support of a volunteer researcher to develop a questionnaire with a mixture of qualitative (open-ended) and quantitative (closed) questions. This was chosen to make the results easily comparable while also allowing participants to add further comments or criteria to the questionnaire. This latter aspect was because, in the experience of the Forum, no such research had been undertaken recently, if at all, and it was felt that only by completing the questionnaire would any shortcomings be discovered. The questionnaire was therefore in itself a pilot.

The candidate selection methods also reflected the mixed approach taken. This entailed using a quota sample, with the goal of randomly sampling 10 participants in four different locations. Each location represented distinct categories of homelessness (a hostel, supported housing, an exclusively NRPF hostel and rough sleeping areas). This was to ensure that every group equally participated and to reduce the chance of sampling errors.

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<sup>3</sup>

[https://www.oxford.gov.uk/info/20019/homelessness/1242/what\\_we\\_do\\_to\\_tackle\\_homelessness](https://www.oxford.gov.uk/info/20019/homelessness/1242/what_we_do_to_tackle_homelessness)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/01/17/i-want-us-live-humans-again/families-temporary-accommodation-london-uk>

## LEAF Study report date March 2023

There were several research limitations. Firstly, LEAF members have access only to Oxford Homelessness Movement partner shelters and rough sleepers, comprehensive though they are. Furthermore, time and budget constraints meant that only a single daylight hours day could be spent gathering data.

This resulted in the number of participants being as follows:

Supported housing	15
Temporary accommodation	15
Rough sleeping	7
Sofa -surfing	3

The uneven number of participants across different categories means that it is difficult to compare and contrast the individual needs of each group. However, it does provide insights into potential areas for further investigation.

For these purposes, it made sense to divide areas of concern into three subsets. These were

- transport (covering access to transport)
- social (covering access to social, recreational and educational needs) and
- utilities (covering access to support, utilities and useful stores).

This aided in categorising the issues that participants have with engaging with housing for easier analysis in the latter sections.

## 6. Findings and discussion

The results of the research had several interesting implications, especially regarding which issues were prioritised by individual groups. While priorities between groups varied

## LEAF Study report date March 2023

considerably, many of the cost and finance related options took precedent across different categories.<sup>5</sup>

Barriers and forms of support*	Number of participants (out of 40)
Cost/ Not having a bus pass	31
Friends	29
Access to suitable jobs/ ease of finding jobs/ attending interviews (9 more if Job centre added)	14
Access to the Job Centre	19
Accessing broadband/ phone	10
Low-cost shops	18
Mental health services	18
Help setting up bills	17
Access to a GP	20
Housing cost transition to private/ rented sector	20
Time to travel	20
Family	18
Clothes banks	20
Frequency of public transport	19
Distance to bus stop	15
Food banks	23

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<sup>5</sup> Many of the barriers and forms of support participants chose to add into the questionnaire as free text were grouped at the analysis stage into the category of the most comparable answer.



## LEAF Study report date March 2023

Barriers and forms of support*	Number of participants (out of 40)
Access to drug and alcohol services	20
Add other transport	

A broader analysis of the categories and how participants responded to them demonstrated an overall emphasis on financial forms of support, with social barriers (specifically, the proximity to friends and family) coming a close second. This is reflected in a broader analysis of the transport category<sup>6</sup>

The cost or lack of a bus pass was viewed as the most concerning aspect by far, being identified by nearly every participant. This reinforces the conclusion that participants view financial support as the most useful kind of support, due to it being the only transport option directly related to finances. In the same vein, those who cited the need for financial support to live outside of Oxford all needed bus passes, barring one. However, this should be considered with the fact that this was near to the front of the questionnaire, which introduces an element of fatigue bias. Frequency of public transport, time to travel and distance seems secondary to cost or lack of a bus pass and provides some insight. This suggests that participants would ideally prefer to live somewhere with a few good transport connections and ease of access to Oxford, rather than somewhere with a range of options.

Transport was also the least neglected topic of concern (albeit by a slim margin). three participants were not concerned by transport difficulties at all in contrast to social and utility issues being of no concern to five and six participants respectively. This reinforces the conclusion of the above table; that access to transport is regarded as the most important issue for the participants.

Social barriers were virtually as prevalent amongst all participants, with proximity to both family and friends also being a near constant. Interestingly, the large majority of those who

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<sup>6</sup> There will be no discussion of transport's significance to individual groups as demonstrated by their questionnaire answers, as all groups shared the concern to nearly the same extent. This meant that no significant analysis of it could be made in this context.

## **LEAF Study report date March 2023**

cited family as a potential issue also cited friends, and have all lived in Oxford for over five years. This suggests that (unsurprisingly) those who have spent a sustained period in Oxford are more likely to place an emphasis on maintaining their social ties.

Comparatively, people who have spent less than five years in Oxford were less likely to emphasise social and community factors, instead placing greater emphasis on utilities (especially those relating to finances). This may suggest that those with no social ties are more likely to prioritise finances, as they may have less friends or family to support them in times of need. However, it should also be noted that financial utilities were the most prioritised kind of utility in general, so this correlation may simply be a coincidence. Aside from this, the only other social barrier that was strongly emphasised was drug and alcohol-free housing - which is perhaps unsurprising, given the long established relationship between homelessness and substance abuse (ACMD, 2019).

Similarly, the utilities that participants identified as potential barriers also reflected wider trends for the homeless population of the UK. The most prevalent barriers were access to food banks and low-cost shops, which is understandable given the ongoing cost of living crisis and the vast increase in food poverty in the UK that has occurred in the past decade (HRW, 2019) which participants likely have had first-hand experience of. Only slightly less prevalent were the barriers of access to drug, alcohol and mental health services alongside low-cost clothing stores. This once again reflects the established relationship between substance abuse and homelessness - except this time also reflecting the similar relationship between mental illness and homelessness (Crisis UK, 2023). However, of these answers, the low-cost clothing is arguably the most significant, revealing the overriding trend in this category towards financial security. Not only does a lack of financial security play a role in food poverty, but this theme is overtly reflected in the prevalence of low-cost shops and clothing as well.

This overriding theme of finances is also partially reflected in the forms of support that participants most prioritised. This was support for the transition to a private rental system, which is reflected in existing literature on the topic. Indeed, the Department for Local Communities and Government identified the ending of a private sector tenancy as a driving factor for homelessness by 2016 (Dorling, 2018). This may mean that (similarly to the point raised about food poverty) the emphasis placed on this issue may be due to previous experience of the private rental system. A similar level of emphasis was placed

## **LEAF Study report date March 2023**

on access to a GP or dentist, which is once again consistent with prior findings on the topic relating to homelessness and physical health (GOV.UK, 2019). Access to benefits and support setting up gas, electricity and water bills were the other most emphasised forms of support, again illustrating the importance of finances. It should also be noted that since this research was performed in early September, the cost of bills have vastly increased so there may be even more concern around the topic. Overall, there is very little to discuss about this section that does not support the prior conclusion that financial support is ultimately crucial when it comes to supporting former homeless people living outside of Oxford City.

Finally, it would be amiss to not discuss the most important barriers and forms of support exclusively according to those who *would not* accept housing outside of Oxford City. In regard to this, it broadly matches the established trend of priorities that other candidates had. The most important aspect was proximity to friends (Although intriguingly, not to family) which every candidate cited as being a potential barrier, with access to food banks and the transition to private rental coming close behind. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of this is the concern around access to banking, which was also very highly prioritised within this subset of participants. However, it ultimately makes little substantive difference to the overall theme of this section; that the pool of candidates overall prioritised financial support and social needs.

### Individual groups

In terms of individual groups, across those in *supported housing (NRPF and non-NRPF)* almost all of the participants had lived in Oxford for five years or more. Of the 13 non-NRPF candidates, 11 said they would accept housing in Oxford City and the majority of this group would also consider housing outside of Oxford.

The hypothetical barriers to moving outside the City cited were largely friends and family, cost or availability of food and clothing, and support mechanisms such as casework and mental health teams, alongside drug and alcohol services but also transitioning to private rental, health support mechanisms such as dentists and GPs, completing forms and setting up utilities.

## **LEAF Study report date March 2023**

As for the small contingent of *supported housing NRPF* participants, none would accept housing outside Oxford City and identified the same issues as non-NRPF participants, however with greater emphasis on literacy/English as a second language issues (perhaps unsurprising, given the large number of migrants affected by the NRPF rules).<sup>7</sup>

This may overall demonstrate that those in supported housing generally require more social forms of support - although as the rest of this section details, social barriers are largely emphasised across nearly every other group in this study as well.

Much like those in supported housing, a large proportion of those in *temporary accommodation* had lived in Oxford for five years or more. Unlike supported housing residents however was the proportion of the temporarily housed saying that they would not accept housing anywhere, with a fifth of the temporary accommodation participants being unsure about accepting any form of housing. This group primarily cited barriers of cost or availability of public transport (alongside access to unspecified services), proximity to friends and family, access to drug- and alcohol-free safe areas/ housing, food and clothing banks, availability of casework teams, mental health services and alcohol and drug services.

Support required to live outside of Oxford, were it to be considered at all, was similar in some regards to supported housing participants, identifying transition to private rental, completing forms, access to suitable jobs/ease of finding jobs/access to interviews, setting up utilities, access to broadband or IT equipment. However, unexplored remains the question of whether the barriers cited indicate an innate distrust of 'the system' in the temporarily housed since the proportion should be noted.

The single NRPF participant within the temporarily housed group articulated many of the same concerns, saying that they would accept any accommodation as long as it was alcohol- and drug-free and allowed access to friends and family. This answer reflects the overall emphasis on substance abuse-related issues for temporary accommodation

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/about-us1/media/press-releases/citizens-advice-reveals-nearly-14m-have-no-access-to-welfare-safety-net/>

## **LEAF Study report date March 2023**

participants, by far the most significant difference between this group and the group of supported housing participants.

*Rough sleepers* represented a unique category compared to the prior two. A much higher percentage of the participants had NRPF status (but note the limited sample size), and as an overall group their barriers and required support largely reflected an emphasis on finances, with every participant citing barriers of cost or availability of food, clothing and low-cost shops. It should also be noted that NRPF rough sleepers did not emphasise maintaining friendships, a factor that was otherwise consistent across all other groups (including their non-NRPF rough sleeping counterparts).

As such, these questionnaire responses may represent a lack of social integration for NRPF rough sleepers, which is perhaps unsurprising as they had all been in Oxford for less than a year. The only other distinction is the emphasis on financial barriers and support. This may be due to the rough-sleeping lifestyle and the unreliability of their day-to-day finances.

In the case of the three *sofa-surfing* participants, there is not much that can be gleaned from analysis due to the small number. The barriers predominantly cited were proximity to friends, access to benefits and job centres, support and transition to and the cost of private rental housing. These answers generally reflect a varied set of needs, most of which are shared amongst other groups (such as friendships and financial support). However, much like temporary housing participants, the emphasis by the three sofa-surfers on benefits and job centres perhaps reflects an overall emphasis on more “functional” forms of support, which might suggest an advanced degree of flexibility and work-readiness by these groups. The study did not explore this.

To summarise the behaviour of all groups, although social barriers and financial support were largely shared, different groups emphasised some concerns more than others. Supported housing participants generally placed a much greater emphasis on social barriers and in-person forms of support (such as casework teams and drug and alcohol services). Contrastingly, participants in temporary accommodation and sofa surfers prioritised more functional forms of support (such as those based on employment).

## **7. Conclusion**

The questionnaire produced several responses, some of which align with existing literature on the topic and some of which serve as interesting outliers.

Finances and costs played a strong role in answers across all groups (especially in the context of utilities) although rough sleepers tended to emphasise it more. This also meant that it overrode health-based concerns, which were more frequently a lower priority. In terms of individual answers, participants overwhelmingly prioritised the cost of public transport and neglected the transport category the least as a whole, although this should be seen in the context of its positioning at the beginning of the questionnaire.

Social barriers were also a consistent concern for participants, although this appeared to be bolstered by two factors. Firstly, spending longer in Oxford overall increased a participant's likelihood of emphasising social relations, and secondly, participants in supported housing also tended to place more importance on this set of barriers.

NRPF participants as a whole tended to prioritise many of the same concerns as their counterparts, albeit with a few caveats such as emphasising literacy and English classes (existing or the desire for them).

Interestingly, sofa-surfing participants and those in temporary accommodation had similar priorities, following the pattern of emphasising financial and social aspects. The only way in which they diverged from the general pattern was a greater emphasis on more "functional" forms of support relating to employment such as access to suitable jobs and the job centre.

However, these findings must be contrasted with the limitations of the questionnaire. It is clear that the questionnaire and the way it was utilised, while being comprehensive, would need further development to draw any definitive conclusions from this research. These include (but are not limited to):

- The sample size of the questionnaire (and the number of participants in each "category" of homelessness) would need to be expanded or suitably altered to

## **LEAF Study report date March 2023**

reflect the homeless population of Oxford. This could be achieved through cooperation with other homelessness organisations or possibly partnering with individual members of the OHM movement to source the particular needs of their cohort.

- Some of the free text responses indicated areas of investigation which might merit being expanded into a question in their own right, such as disabled access being necessary.
- Any wider study would also benefit from safeguards against misinterpretation or the suggestion of answers into the questionnaire due to the answers being scribed on behalf of the participants

This study highlights several key factors for homeless people who may be seeking housing outside Oxford (or not) including the cost of public transport and access to a bus pass, proximity to family and friends and the transition to a private rental system. Although this may suggest a broader emphasis on finances, it should not be taken at face value without further investigation. This study opens up the possibility for several promising avenues for more in-depth research (such as the relationship between financial and social factors and the extent to which previous bad experiences of the private rental market have sapped the confidence of participants to the extent that they say that housing without support is unthinkable).

Above all the study demonstrates the distinctive voice of Oxford City's homeless population. LEAF sensed that the housing aspirations and support needs of the homeless needed investigating and the insights which have emerged from this study bear this out.

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## **LEAF Study report date March 2023**

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