

Statement on Homelessness for Exeter City Council Task and Finish Group – October 2022

1. Introduction

St Petrock's is Exeter's local homelessness charity, legally constituted in 2001 but operating under the umbrella of Exeter Community Initiatives for several years prior to that date. Historically, our focus as a charity has been on the provision of *emergency survival services* for rough sleepers from our Centre on Cathedral Green, coupled with *personalised support* to help address associated issues such as mental and physical health, access to accommodation, drug and alcohol problems, etc. We continue to support those former rough sleepers who move into accommodation, particularly temporary housing with minimal facilities (e.g. for cooking) in order to reduce the risk of them becoming repeat homeless.

In recent years we have started offering *supported accommodation* for former rough sleepers, and supporting formerly homeless people in the *private rented sector* to prevent a recurrence of homelessness. In the current climate we anticipate *homelessness prevention* becoming a significant part of our work in the coming months and years.

We welcome the work of the Task and Finish Scrutiny Working Group in reviewing issues around homelessness in the city.

2. Partnership Working

Contrary to the narrative promoted by some influential individuals, there is very close and effective co-operation between the various voluntary and statutory agencies associated with homelessness in the City, and St Petrock's actively supports and participates in this co-operative approach. There is a healthy diversity of approaches, coupled with genuine mutual respect, which allows for strong working relationships as well as mutual challenge when deemed appropriate. There is little in the way of unhealthy competition, with each organisation respecting the specialist skills of the others.

St Petrock's particularly works closely with our colleagues in the City Council, Julian House, BCHA and Colab, as well as Foodbank, One4Exeter (the umbrella for faith-based homelessness initiatives), Police (especially the City Centre team), ECC's ASB officer, etc. Our staff chair the inter-agency A2A (access to accommodation) panel of ECC and the various supported housing providers to co-ordinate placement of rough sleepers into housing, and are leading the establishment of a renewed Exeter Homelessness Partnership following the ending of the Big Lottery funding. We also produce the Free Food Guide to

signpost rough sleepers to the various voluntary groups providing free meals in the evenings and weekends.

We also work very closely with Public Health, mental health services, substance misuse services, and the Clocktower Surgery which delivered vaccination clinics at St Petrock's during the Covid-19 pandemic and now runs a weekly health clinic for rough sleepers in our Centre.

3. Customer Experience (Exeter City Council)

Before discussing the views of our homeless clients of their customer experience, we wish to highlight the positive relationship our team enjoys with ECC officers, who are to be commended for their genuine commitment to addressing the needs of people experiencing homelessness. We are grateful to work with Council officers who we feel are "on the same side" as us and are genuinely trying to do an effective job with inadequate resources in a very challenging context as far as housing availability is concerned.

That said, our homeless clients offer quite varied perspectives on ECC's customer service. On the positive side, we wish to highlight to superb work of Council Officers Julie Lenton and Sarah Preston who provide a very accessible and helpful service at Colab for those experiencing homelessness. This face to face contact in familiar "safe" surroundings is greatly appreciated by our clients.

Unfortunately there are significant areas that require improvement, particularly since the pandemic. Homeless clients indicate to us that they feel the Council does not want to speak with them, and is deliberately making it difficult to get assistance. In particular, the previously excellent face to face customer advice service provided at the Civic Centre has been greatly diminished, with those needing help directed to a telephone in a public area outside the entrance to the Civic Centre, where they are expected to explain their situation in the full hearing of passers-by. We suggest that a telephone service is wholly inappropriate for people in such distressing circumstances as the lack of physical proximity suggests a lack of care and will to assist. Further, it is impossible for even the most well-meaning officer to pick up visual cues by phone that might indicate issues other than those verbally expressed, for example learning difficulties or psychosis.

The Civic Centre opening hours are also limited to daytime on weekdays, and not at all on Tuesdays, making it impossible for those at risk of homelessness who are in employment to access customer service at the Civic Centre.

The advice given is almost always impossible to follow for those on low income (including those on welfare benefits) as the almost-universal "solution" offered is the private rental sector, where rents have outstripped Local Housing Allowance for some time now, making the PRS a non-solution for most experiencing homelessness. It is difficult to conclude that the Council has fulfilled its statutory obligations under the Homelessness Reduction Act in anything other than the most minimal way in such circumstances. To be clear, we understand that the disparity between PRS rents and LHA is not in the power of the Council to rectify. However, to offer the PRS as the "solution" to an individual's homelessness is very unhelpful and distressing.

Written information provided by the Council is often extremely unhelpful to our clients, particularly those (the majority) who struggle with literacy. Homelessness decision letters, along with Housing Benefit and Council Tax letters, are very lengthy and full of impenetrable and intimidating formal language. As a result they are often not read at all, and rarely understood. Whilst we understand that there are certain legal requirements in such letters, surely the primary purpose must be to communicate with the individual. That being the case, we would strongly recommend that all such letters begin with a very simple one-page summary in plain and simple language using short sentences informed by an understanding of the needs of those with poor literacy who are also experiencing distress and trauma. The legal jargon and caveats can then follow once the core message has been delivered in an appropriate manner.

In communication, the message that is received, rather than the message the giver intends to deliver, is fundamental. In this regard, Council communications to those experiencing homelessness is severely wanting.

4. Homelessness Prevention

St Petrock's is extremely concerned about the likely impact of cost of living and fuel crises on those who have been just about coping, and this has been magnified by the debacle of the mini-budget in recent days. Despite us never advertising any kind of homelessness prevention service, over the past 3-4 months, we have started receiving a regular flow of phone call from desperate people who fear they are about to become homeless as they can no longer afford to pay rent given the increases in heating and other costs. With the hike in fuel costs at the beginning of October, coinciding with the onset of winter, we expect the volume of such calls to escalate.

In addition, as mortgage interest rates have doubled despite the partial u-turn on the mini-budget, we anticipate significant numbers of homeowners to be facing repossession if they are on variable rate mortgages or when their fixed rate period comes to an end.

Furthermore, PRS rents, which are already way in excess of LHA, will increase further still in response to increased mortgage costs for landlords, triggering further affordability issues for people dependent on low incomes / welfare benefits. This will be further exacerbated if benefits do not rise in line with inflation.

We cannot overstate how worried we are about the impact of these policy failures on homelessness, and unless there is decisive action taken by central government, we anticipate a huge increase in homelessness in the city in the coming months.

St Petrock's 5-year Strategic Plan has as a core objective to establish an independent homelessness prevention service to try to meet some of these challenges in a way that is person-centred, compassionate and realistic, but we do not underestimate the challenge. We would be very keen to work in partnership with the City Council on this.

However, the disparity between LHA and PRS rents in the city, and indeed across Devon, remains a major obstacle to meeting this challenge. In part, this has been driven by excessive development of University student accommodation in response to the huge increase in student numbers (from 22,540 in 2017/8 to over 30,000 in 2021/2). Whilst the University student body undoubtedly brings cash into the city, the

impact on the housing market and homelessness is significant. However, anecdotal evidence is that much of this new student provision is under-occupied, and we would urge ECC to commission research into this matter to inform future planning policy as currently land prices have been artificially inflated by the student housing market to the detriment of housing development, particularly social and supported housing development which are both acutely needed.

There is also anecdotal evidence of residential accommodation being converted into AirBnB or similar short term/holiday accommodation, putting further upward pressure on PRS rents whilst simultaneously reducing the volume of housing in the city. Again, we would urge ECC to research this matter and use whatever planning tools it has at its disposal to mitigate the impact of AirBnB on the local housing market.

5. Specific Questions for St Petrock's

5.1. Numbers using St Petrock's Services

Typically St Petrock's are engaging with 25-35 people who are rough sleepers or vulnerably housing each day, of whom approximately 15 are rough sleepers. Whilst this number has varied slightly over the past 12 months, there are no clear trends at present.

The individuals we engage with may vary day by day depending on their location, etc., so we estimate our total client numbers at any given time to be 20 rough sleepers and up to 60 who are vulnerably housed.

5.2. Housing Delivery, Including PRS

We currently own or lease 7 properties, with a total of 19 supported bedspaces, most of which are occupied at any given time. In addition we support approximately 30 formerly homeless individuals in the PRS as and when required to prevent their tenancy breaking down.

Our Strategic Plan states we intend to increase our own housing stock by at least 12 units over the coming 5 years, or 20 additional bedspaces if we opt to become a Registered Provider of Social Housing which is our current preferred route.

We have received substantial capital finance from legacies over the past 2 years to enable this growth, and in previous roles our current Director has secured Homes England funding to deliver over 140 units of supported housing over the past 5 years, most of which has now been delivered. However our biggest challenge is organisational capacity to exploit this potential, combined with the extremely high cost of land in Exeter, fuelled in large part by the aggressive development of student housing.

5.3. Presenting Needs

From our perspective, there are a number of pressing needs that need to be addressed in Exeter that are directly impacting on our services and our clients, and homelessness services generally in the city:

- PRS rents have inflated way ahead of LHA, making it virtually impossible for people to move out of supported first-stage accommodation into the PRS. As a result, the limited supported housing in the city is largely “silted up”, meaning people cannot get off the streets. This is particularly acute for higher risk or more challenging clients (sex offenders, people with arson convictions, people with mental health challenges or learning disabilities, etc.) who have to compete with the general population for the limited properties available.
- **As reported above, we are already experiencing growing numbers of calls from desperate people facing homelessness due to the cost of living crisis. We expect this to accelerate over the autumn as fuel price increases and mortgage interest rises have impact.**
- Homelessness prevention must be given much greater attention both locally and nationally. The DLUCH strategy to end rough sleeping, welcome as it is, is doomed to failure unless matched by substantial investment in prevention well before someone becomes a rough sleeper, by which time the associated issues of mental ill-health and drug and alcohol problems are likely to have become much more challenging (if indeed they even existed prior to the person becoming in crisis). Such an almost exclusive focus on rough sleeping is like having an NHS that focused exclusively on Accident and Emergency provision but neglected primary healthcare.
- Again as reported above, people contacting us for homeless prevention advice will often state they have contacted ECC for help, but were not offered any meaningful assistance and so are turning to us in desperation. As one individual said after speaking to one of our staff, “Thank you. This is the first time someone has treated me like a human being”. Like ECC, we have no magic wand, but we can all treat desperate and scared people with respect and compassion.

Peter Stephenson

Director, St Petrock's (Exeter) Ltd

10 October 2022