



**emmaus**  
working together to end homelessness



# Realising the Emmaus Vision to End Homelessness

## Summary Report

*"I think things need to change. Emmaus highlights the issues of homelessness and brings it home, brings it into people's living rooms if you like. It's about working together to make a difference."*

**– Emmaus companion**

## Introduction

“As a companion, I feel honoured to have had the opportunity to be part of the group that developed Emmaus's plan for its future campaigns.

Homelessness is a debilitating experience which challenges the resilience of the human spirit. Through this research, we wanted to discover the issues that really matter to companions in a way that involved companions throughout the process.

This has been a most impressive exercise. My personal experience of homelessness, of stigma, exclusion and physical danger, is truly reflected by my fellow companions, in their conversations, embarrassment, pains and stresses.

The Emmaus strategic plan calls for Emmaus to have a louder voice in campaigning, to raise public awareness and change policy. I hope that this research will help to develop a better understanding of the realities and challenges of being homeless and will start a process of change to improve the lives of homeless and socially excluded people.”

### **Mahesh Pherwani**

Companion at Emmaus Lambeth



## About the study

Emmaus is committed to working to overcome homelessness and social exclusion. We wanted to find out more about companions' experiences to understand what would make the difference in helping people to avoid and overcome homelessness.

We felt the best way to do this would be to involve companions themselves in the research process, so we used peer research, training eight of our companions in research skills so they could

speak to other companions about the issues affecting them.

Along with the Groundswell team, the companion researchers carried out 76 one-to-one interviews and spoke to another 81 companions in focus groups. In total, a quarter of all companions from 23 communities told us about what they think needs to happen to achieve Emmaus's mission to end homelessness.

## Leon's story – being a Peer Researcher

“When I first put my name forward for the Peer Researcher role with Groundswell I was in a place in my Emmaus journey where I was looking for something extra outside of my ordinary routine.

After two days of training with Groundswell, I took part in research visits to Lambeth, Colchester and Greenwich. I found the first interview the most difficult, as I was trying to find my feet and come across confident and in control. But by the time I was into the second interview I was starting to feel like I'd done this many times over, and my confidence was sky high.

When the research visits were completed, we met up back at Groundswell's offices to look through and analyse the information we had gathered through all the interviews and focus group meetings.

I found this part fascinating as some conclusions confirmed what we had expected but there were also a few surprises. I feel extremely lucky to have been part of this whole process. I hope that in the future I get the opportunity to work on more research projects as I found the whole experience interesting, educational and thoroughly rewarding.”



**Leon Webster**  
Emmaus St Albans companion  
& peer researcher



## What help could have prevented companions from becoming homeless?



*"When I first became homeless I did withdraw into myself. I was very bitter with society and with what had happened to me. But if I had sat down with somebody and been mentored I could probably have seen it from a different point of view."*



## Preventing homelessness

We started out by talking to companions about how they became homeless and the difficulties that they experienced during this time.

We wanted to understand what could have helped to prevent them becoming homeless and what support they needed when it first happened.

## Why did companions become homeless?

The reasons for companions becoming homeless are incredibly diverse, with companions often giving several inter-related factors which led them to leave their last home.

The most common reasons were relationship breakdown (**22%**), followed by loss of employment (**20%**) and debts, arrears or other money problems (**16%**).

## What help was available to companions before they became homeless?

One experience many companions share is that they didn't get support when they needed it most. **49%** of the companions we spoke to had not received any help to prevent them from becoming homeless.

**15%** had received counselling and **12%** had accessed drugs services. **9%** had received help to find work or support from mental health services or probation services.

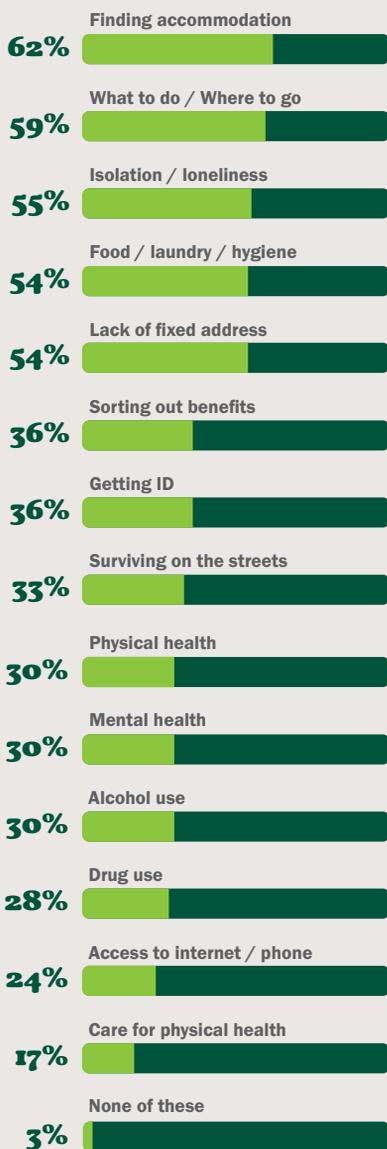
## What would make a difference?



*34% of companions said that they didn't know what might have helped to prevent them from becoming homeless, or that nothing could have helped. However, 66% of companions felt that further help might have prevented them from becoming homeless.*



**Problems companions experienced when homeless**



## Difficulties getting help

80% of companions who took part in the research had been street homeless and 50% had spent more than a year on the street. Many companions talked about the difficulties of accessing help when they were sleeping rough and 36% said they had received no help while on the streets.

***“When I was first made homeless, I went into Housing Options... And they told me because I haven’t got any serious health issues or disabilities or anything, I’ve got no choice but to live on the streets.”***

### Where to go and what to do

Many companions said that they didn’t know what help was available to them when they first became homeless or how to access it. Many struggled to know where to go to get advice.

***“Well when you become homeless... a lot of services aren’t advertised. Most of the places I found were by speaking to fellow homeless people that had already been through what I was about to go through. If it’s not from word of mouth, there’s not a lot of help.”***

### “Not vulnerable enough”

Many companions reported that they could not access services that were available for homeless people as they did not meet the criteria. Companions commonly spoke about local councils and other support services turning them away as they were not considered vulnerable enough to be a ‘priority need’ or could not demonstrate a connection to the local area.

## A vicious cycle

Companions often talked about how sleeping rough put their mental and physical health under increased strain, making it even more difficult to change their situation.

*“With all the acts and laws and governments and policies, I am homeless. I went to the homeless system itself to get help... to be told I don't fit in any category. If you don't fit certain criteria you don't get that help... So then your personal issues, then the problems you have... only get worse.”*



*“When I was homeless I experienced panic and things. Anxiety, depression, money issues, family issues. Everything, really.”*

*“One of the main problems was weariness. Physical tiredness, because you don't get a lot of sleep. You might get a few hours here and there, but something always disturbs you. And you are constantly moving around, so you are never settled. And even when you are you are worried about stuff you've put somewhere else to keep safe, in case it doesn't keep safe.”*

## What would make a difference?



*“I would just have liked somewhere warm to sleep and someone to advise me on the help that I needed with getting off drugs. And also I wish that there had been somebody there to guide me not to go from drugs to alcohol. But just having someone to go to I suppose would be the main thing.”*

*“There is more support needed when you are on the street about sorting your benefits and knowing where to go.”*

## Attitudes towards homelessness

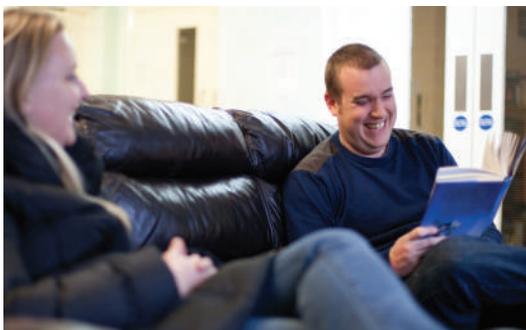
One of the themes that emerged from the research was the stigma and discrimination that many companions had experienced. Being homeless can be hard enough, without having to face negative attitudes from the people around you. 84% of companions had experienced negative attitudes while they were homeless.

### “They’re all druggies and drunks”

Often, negative attitudes were due to homeless people being labelled ‘druggies’ or ‘drunks’. Drugs and alcohol can be a cause, or it can be a consequence of homelessness, but not everyone who is homeless has faced these issues.

For example, only 5% of companions reported drug or alcohol issues as the reason they left their last accommodation.

***“The Jobcentre really struggled with my situation. At one point they left me with nothing for nine months because I was in such a poor state of mind that I couldn’t remember or even get to appointments. And when I explained it to them it was all too late and they just didn’t do anything about it. They treated me really badly.”***



### 84% of companions had experienced negative attitudes when homeless

Percentage of companions experiencing negative attitudes from different sources



General public



Police / Probation



Jobcentre / Benefits Office



Local Authority



Family / Friends



GP / Hospital



Social Services



Other

## The impact of stigma

When companions were asked how they felt about the negative attitudes they had experienced:

- **26% reported feeling undermined, depressed and worthless.**
- **21% of companions reported experiencing harassment and even being physically assaulted.**



*“Well for the general public it’s just general abuse. They just look down at you. They don’t acknowledge you, they just turn their nose up at you, to cross the road, really.”*



*“Once you lose that address, you become a nameless person sort of thing... I wasn’t a productive member of society and things like that. That was my biggest problem”*

## What would make a difference?



*“People like the police, local authority, probation, hospitals, GPs - they should have specific training on how to deal with the needs of the homeless... We can’t guarantee that we will be somewhere at 10am, because we don’t know where we are going to have slept the night before. And so they need to accommodate for the chaoticness of it.”*

*“It’s about showing that we are human beings. We are educated sensible people. And I think once people realise that then they will probably be more inclined to help us. I know in this room sitting here right now are people with huge skills. But we are held back because of being stigmatised.”*

*“I think the best thing to do is work with the young people of this country who don’t understand homelessness”.*

## A long-term approach

Many companions said that Emmaus had played a key role in helping them to overcome homelessness. 93% said that they would recommend Emmaus to a friend in a similar situation. We were interested to find out what factors were most important in helping them to rebuild their lives.

***“It offers so much. It offers you work, offers you shelter, offers you food, offers you friendship, companionship. And all in a kind of friendly environment. So you feel safe... you can be social with people.”***

To escape homelessness and social exclusion you need more than just a roof over your head. Companions said that the most important factors in making a lasting difference are:

### Community

Feeling part of a community that you can contribute to and be supported by is important to companions. 72% of companions said they liked the ‘family atmosphere’ of Emmaus. 72% also liked how their Emmaus community was involved with the wider local community.



*“I don’t function well in self-contained accommodation. I don’t budget well. I get isolated. I suffer with mental health problems that get progressively worse when I am in that situation. So for me being in Emmaus... it’s not life or death but it’s certainly survival. It makes me a more active member of society.”*



### A routine and a sense of purpose

86% of companions said that they found the work aspect of Emmaus very helpful and talked about the value of having a routine and structure.

***“Emmaus offers a structure. A set time to be in work, set things to do, set times to leave. You leave ... feeling tired, but you’re motivated for more. You feel like you have accomplished something. And you go home to yourself and say ‘I have done that today’.”***

### Developing new skills

85% of companions had the opportunity to improve their skills while at Emmaus.



### Regaining confidence and self-worth

Companions said that regaining their self-esteem was a crucial step in moving forwards with their lives. 68% had developed self-confidence while at Emmaus.



*"I have seen people come in here saying, 'I can't do nothing'. We say, 'what are you good at? What do you like doing?' Then you find out they are really talented, they just haven't realised it... You get put down so much on the street, you don't have any self-worth, do you?"*



### Acceptance and solidarity

93% of companions said that the opportunity to help others in need is important to them. 80% of companions particularly value the non-judgmental environment of Emmaus.

*"Instead of somebody going round and saying, 'OK mate we will put a roof over your head', Emmaus turned around and said, 'yes we will give you your roof, we will give you your bed and lockable door. But in return we want something from you.' And just giving me something to do gave me something I didn't even realise I had lost. And that was self-respect. I personally think it's one of the first things to go when people find themselves on the street. And in my opinion, it's one of the most important. Because if somebody has got no respect for themselves, and no sense of self-worth, they are going to think 'I am not worth people making the effort for'."*

# Campaigning for change

Having experienced homelessness themselves, companions are keen to do what they can to prevent other people from becoming homeless and to help those who need it.

**91% of companions want to be involved in campaigning**



**Companions said they would like Emmaus to campaign to:**

## **Prevent homelessness**

Encouraging more effective and targeted support at an early stage to prevent people from becoming homeless

## **Help people to know how to find support**

People need to know where to go and what to do when they are at risk of homelessness. Information about the support available to people on the streets also needs to be made easier to find.

## **Improve the support that is available to single homeless people**

Companions told us that support services are not meeting the needs of homeless people, especially if they have low support needs. Legislation that stops people accessing the support they need must change. There needs to be a more proactive response when people first become homeless rather than waiting for people to become more vulnerable before they are entitled to support.

## **Dispel the myths about homelessness.**

Tackling stigma and educating the public, service providers and policy makers about the realities of homelessness is an important priority.

## **Highlight the importance of long-term, holistic support.**

Companions stressed the importance of feeling part of a community and having the opportunity to contribute. For many companions, rebuilding their self-confidence was a crucial step in overcoming homelessness

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