



Listen Up! Insight 5: the role of community for people experiencing homelessness

Welcome. This is the fifth and final Insight from [Listen Up!](#). Our lived experience-led project tackles homeless health inequalities by amplifying the voices of people experiencing homelessness to:

1. Increase key decision makers' awareness of the barriers to healthcare faced by people experiencing homelessness across the country
2. Create a movement of people experiencing homelessness, influencing decision makers and holding them to account for changes in practice and policy.

The Listen Up! team interviews people experiencing homelessness across England. This Insight looks at the role of community for people experiencing homelessness. We draw on interviews with **34** people experiencing homelessness and our recommended actions for change were coproduced at a webinar with people with professional and/or personal experience of the issues.

Summary

“Community appears to me to be a blanket term for something really quite nuanced. Just like life itself.” (From Tess' report, [Experiencing communities](#))

This research set out to learn more about the meaning of community for people with experience of homelessness, and how the nature of homelessness itself can shape this. What we found was the label of 'community' wasn't always the easiest to define and participants found it easier to talk about connections or relationships. To explain these findings, we have chosen to use the language of roots because this helped us to explore the different sides of what mattered most to people: feelings of being uprooted, rooted, or not able to put down new roots.

Our key findings were:

- Homelessness impacted social connections and a person's sense of community. We spoke to people whose experiences of homelessness uprooted from communities, made it challenging to put down new roots, or rooted them within places, often interchangeably and with little control.
- For some, being pushed into homelessness or moved to inappropriate housing uprooted them from stable and secure communities and disrupted social networks.



- For others, however, the experience was quite different. They felt trapped in communities that they found challenging to leave. This sense of being ‘rooted’ was experienced negatively and made people feel stuck in circumstances that were holding them back from where they wanted to be.
- In both cases, it was the lack of choice and control over one's housing situation that had a significant impact. Whether through the loss of a supportive community or the inability to leave a detrimental one, the consequences for wellbeing and other aspects of their lives were deeply felt.
- It wasn't that the people we spoke to lacked positive community connection or relationships – homelessness disrupted their ability to navigate existing or new ones. Services and decision-makers must acknowledge this impact, give people more control over where and how they live, and address the impact of stigma, so people with experience of homelessness can nurture the safe and supportive roots that support the rest of their lives.

What we heard

1. Uprooted from consistent and safe communities

A significant characteristic of a positive community was somewhere that felt **safe**. Often a safe community was one that was **consistent**, where people were able to rely on a routine, returning to the same people and places, and a sense of familiarity that helped to develop trusting relationships over time.

“Community doesn't have to be necessarily the place that you live. I've used [service] for over 20 years. I go to a woman's group every week there. There's some girls I've known for 15 years. When I'm in women's group there, I feel like I see girls that – they know, they care. It feels like being part of the community, or a community.”

Some participants identified experiences within and around homelessness services as examples of consistent and safe communities. **Mutual support** and respect were important foundations of these settings. The expectation to help each other out – giving and doing what you can, when you can – was sometimes felt to be an unspoken requirement, and participants valued the responsibility of being depended on.

“Community is, to me, a form of belonging [...] feeling wanted and needed and appreciated.”



“If someone is struggling, somebody else will step in and give them what we've got. None of us have got much, but people genuinely do really get on and really help each other. It is a nice atmosphere.”

“You tend to find that the people that don't stay here are the ones that don't show respect. We help each other. We genuinely help each other, whether that be sharing food, somebody hasn't got any washing powder or washing liquid to do their clothes.”

Consistent and lasting contact with others in a community also meant people felt their experiences could be **understood**. One participant explained how this deeper understanding, where people really knew their story, meant their communities were motivated to help them through difficult or turbulent times in their lives.

“People knew me and knew about my story. Some of those people, they would help me out with – one guy paid for me to stay for a couple of nights in a guest house. A couple of people gave me some money to get somewhere or to get some food, that stuff. There was that support from them as well.”

This was felt especially keenly in homelessness and drug and alcohol recovery services that we visited. We spoke to participants at a residential rehab centre and the structured consistency of groups there, or in groups like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), combined with **non-judgmental support** from people who already know you and understand your experiences, were key factors in creating a safe community. This echoed findings in our earlier [drug and alcohol dependency and recovery research](#), which highlighted mutually supportive relationships with peers and mutual aid as beneficial in recovery settings.

“Shared experience, not being judged. If it's been a shit week, be able to say, look, girls, it's been a really shit week, so I'm not myself. Instead of people saying ‘What's wrong with you?’ or ‘Smile, it might never happen,’ they know, because you've told them.”

On the whole, experiences of homelessness are, however, usually defined by their insecurity or inconsistency, and a lack of safety. Participants explained how being moved to unfamiliar areas, with little choice or control, disrupted the consistency in their lives and threatened to uproot them from positive communities. Where people were unable to continue contact with existing support networks, this sometimes led to intense isolation, affecting their wellbeing and removing tools they needed to move themselves out of homelessness for good.

“Yeah, I've lost a lot of [connections due to homelessness]. Before I got kicked out, I was going to visit my friends, I was going to visit my family. I was in that more consistency of meeting up. Now I've lost it in a way that I don't know how to approach them and say – oh,



listen, sorry, this is what was happening. It's left it too long. I feel good physically, but mentally, I don't feel good."

Participant asked about maintaining tenancies: ***"My first property – when I moved out of care, when I was 21, I feel like it was a bit hard. Because I just wasn't in contact. It was very low contact, from living with them [my carer]. So that feeling of loneliness [...] I didn't take pride in the tenancy because I actually didn't want to be by myself. I actually didn't even want the house."***

For people whose ongoing recovery from drugs or alcohol relied on an existing community, the impact of being uprooted was considerable and they were forced to go to lengths to maintain the connection.

"Although I was very grateful to be in the hostel in [London borough] because I had a bed of sorts. [...] Some evenings, I'd walk like two hours to get to my AA meeting. That would have helped to maintain some connection."

One participant, an asylum seeker (already once uprooted and now seeking safety in the UK), had been suddenly relocated 75 miles away after their Home Office accommodation was shut down. This move was especially difficult as they had just begun to establish roots in the city. They explained the importance of familiarity and feeling safe to 'fit in' and build positive communities.

"And I had problems as well. I fitted in well in [city], and I was doing good. And while I was starting to get familiarised with the people that I'm around there – studying, making friends at the college and stuff like that, starting to feel happy – then all of a sudden, I got moved up."

2. Homelessness puts pressure on existing relationships

Homelessness didn't just uproot people from places and whole communities, it also jeopardised individual relationships, which created barriers to nurturing wider communities and support networks. Over time, this could lead people to feel isolated.

The pressure of having to prioritise day-to-day survival strained existing relationships. Without a secure home of their own, some participants were forced to sofa surf at friends' houses or share a space that wasn't suitable for them to live in. In some cases, participants felt they were forced to take advantage and 'use' friendships just to have basic security. These circumstances pushed otherwise strong and supportive relationships to breaking point.

"[Homelessness] messes up your relationships with people because you meet someone, you're getting on so well, and they try to help people. You don't really know people until you



actually live together, or do certain things together, and just end up realising, you're falling apart. It's not really each other's fault. It's just the stress and the strain you're putting on your relationship."

Participant asked if homelessness has impacted relationships: ***"I can feel that I've been a bit of a liberty-taker, using people and stuff like that. In order to get that over my – to get that security, is it the right word? Maybe not. But to get that roof over my head, I've definitely manipulated and used over the decades."***

Social interactions and **shared enjoyment** were central and common themes in people's sense of community and belonging. However, some participants explained how a lack of control or ownership over spaces for socialising played a significant role in limiting opportunities to do so. Many participants didn't have access to comfortable environments for these interactions to happen. Hostels often had restrictions on visitors and couldn't offer private space or digital connectivity, or other resources that people often take for granted.

Participant asked if hostels help with connections: ***"No. No. None of that. None of that. They had a phone box, and all the time I was there it was broke. That was in the lobby anyway, so everybody coming in and out was disturbing you."***

"I know my daughter. My favourite thing at the minute is making pies [...] I'm so good at making pies [...] She would have love to be able to come and just have something to eat together."

"But it's sad sometimes when you want to see your friend and you're like, I can't even invite him over. He comes down to Bristol. Where is he going to come stay?"

The stigmatisation of people experiencing homelessness played a part in how existing relationships were managed. For some participants, this stigma was internalised and meant they distanced themselves from friends and families, which caused isolation. We heard how people didn't want to be reach out for help due to their feelings of failure about their homelessness situation, or wanted to rely on only themselves ("fix it myself") due to this shame.

"Especially if you're just living a lie. I know I'm not a liar, but I don't like to make people worry. [...] They think that you're going to turn left. He's going to become an alcoholic and that. He's going to become really, really, really bad homeless type of person. I don't want them to have that in their mind."

"Yeah, I felt alone. I felt like no one was there for me. I couldn't even reach out to my own family. I think I've lost all respect, all self-respect. How did I get to this state? There was no one. No one."

"No, I'm in trouble. No, I need to fix it myself."



3. Putting down new roots

Participants often talked about journeys and transitions in relation to communities. As explored in the first section of this insight, establishing safety and belonging in a community often required time and certainty. Much of the housing offered to the people we spoke to was transient, Home Office accommodation, hostels, or temporary accommodation, and being repeatedly 'uprooted' made it challenging to put down new roots and build new communities.

Where people had been abruptly moved to a new location, they described the discomfort and challenge of navigating unfamiliar environments, services and systems. A sense of 'not knowing what was out there', in some cases compounded by poverty and lack of mobility, led to people isolating at home.

"I wouldn't want to end up somewhere that I didn't know at all. Then I wouldn't know where to go. I'd have to get on a bus to go somewhere that I do know or start rediscovering the place and get my bearings. There have been some guys that don't know [city] at all. You can see the discomfort."

"[Location] was a bit more isolated because it was somewhere I didn't really know as well. I didn't have any money for the first week that I was there, so I was stuck there. I didn't know what was available around there. Didn't feel like venturing out either. Just stayed in my room, mostly."

Our findings reflected Groundswell's [research into the experiences of people living in temporary accommodation](#), and the challenge of 'adjusting' to new areas and finding communities.

"The only roots I can think of are my plants really. Because I don't really have any friends in the area. I haven't been able to adjust into the community. I haven't been able to go to the leisure centre. Go to the library for events or activities. So, there is a lot of things that I could be doing, but I am just not able to get out there and reach it." Groundswell (2023) *Improving the health of people living in Temporary Accommodation in London*

One participant highlighted how asylum seekers were often unable to navigate new surroundings to find community. They were moved into hotels and became isolated because of extra challenges such as language barriers or being unable to work, all while facing the pressure to assimilate or integrate into communities to gain acceptance.

"I would take the stand for asylum seekers and say that they are isolated, basically, from English community or any other community, basically. Because they are put in a hotel. They don't know what's going around. They don't know how to fit in, how to learn the language. They don't have anything."

Moving around hostels frequently also made it difficult to develop long-term friendships.



“I've had a drink together [with people], and, you know, I've always got on with them. Like, obviously I've never been in the places for long, so by the time I formed a decent friendship, kind of thing, and then I go.”

Trust was a significant theme in the positive relationships and communities participants talked about, and wherever trust was found lacking it was a barrier to putting down new roots. We heard about past experiences or traumas related to homelessness that made it very difficult to trust new people and feel safe in new communities.

“Homelessness has affected what I think of communities because I can't trust anyone. When I had my flat people were just coming round all the time.”

“You just had to adapt to it, which is, I think, the most hardest thing, especially for me, it's very hard to walk into a new place and feel safe. [Why is that?] Just through my past experiences. I was just being out there alone.”

Despite these challenges, people identified what helped ease transitions into new environments and communities. As in existing communities, knowing you have **shared experiences** and **wouldn't be judged** by peers was reassuring, and made it much easier for people to feel accepted in new communities. Again, this was felt particularly keenly in recovery settings.

“We don't know nothing about each other, but yet we know a lot about each other. That's the thing. You can tell when someone's feeling down and if I'm in a different space to what was last week, someone will tell me and hold you.”

Mutual aid and practical support was also something that could happen in new places to quickly build communities.

“I think the first time I went to [foodbank], I made a couple of friends with some of the other people in the queue. The first time I went, they pulled me into the queue with them rather than me having to go all the way to the back. Every time I'd see them, that was another community, I guess.”

4. Feeling rooted or stuck in communities

We also heard what it felt like to be rooted in a community and how, for some participants, this was a frustrating experience as they lacked choice or control over where they lived and didn't have the resources or tools to escape. Being rooted to a locality was a particular challenge for people who were in recovery from drugs and alcohol alongside experiencing homeless or housing insecurity, where being unable to move to a new area and escape old communities associated with substance misuse was particularly harmful.



"I'm in recovery [...] I just see all the dealers who, even though I haven't touched anything for over two years, still shout my fucking name."

Participants had varied experiences in hostels. Among some positive connections, people disliked the lack of control over who they were surrounded with, and explained how hostels could be challenging environments to stay clean. We also heard how it felt to know you could potentially be forced to live alongside someone you have had a bad relationship with in the past.

"If you're not on drugs, you end up on the drugs when you're in it [hostels]."

"I'm also aware that anybody can move in at any time, and that might be somebody who I've had a problem with in the past."

Encountering individuals from old communities that you are trying to avoid was also an issue at local services, such as day centres or drug and alcohol support services. For many participants this reinforced a sense of being trapped in an area that represented something they were trying to move on from, and in some cases meant people stopped accessing services entirely.

"That's why I don't go to [service] because I see people that don't want to see and that. I end up fighting and I end up in jail. I don't want that. I'm trying to stay away from things like that."

The stigma that comes with homelessness also contributed to a feeling of being rooted or stuck. Some participants spoke about what it felt like to have people define you by your past experiences, and the appeal of escaping a community to somewhere people did not know your 'story'.

"Everyone knows me and the stuff I've done up here, so I think I'll end up living in Manchester 'cos people don't know me there. When people know you've been homeless, they will never see you as anything else."

However, some participants also shared fears of experiencing stigma from those that didn't know them. They explained how "society" or the "wider community" judge people with experience of homelessness or multiple disadvantages. Shared experiences and understanding among people experiencing homelessness created positive bonds and a safety net in the face of this judgement, but these communities could be hard to 'break' or move on from.

"I just suppose for people like me, I should imagine they all feel the same when it comes to the community. The actual wider community, the society, don't really like people like us."

"You tend to stick with the people that you know, that understand why you do the things you've done. It's just hard to break that cycle."

It wasn't that we heard all communities were either 'good', and needed protecting, or 'bad', and needed escaping from. Rather, people consistently emphasised the need for control over where they



lived, how they lived, and who they lived with – in order to be able to positively benefit from community, moving forward out of homelessness and on with their lives.

What action is needed

- **Government** should give people more choice and control over where and how they live by providing more and better financial support and improving and increasing housing provision. See Groundswell and Amnesty UK's [Ending Homelessness Together: Our Voice Our Rights manifesto](#) for more details on how to do this.
- **Government** should ensure people seeking asylum are given adequate and culturally sensitive information about communities and opportunities in new areas they live in, alongside extra financial support to travel where needed.
- **Local authorities** should consider a person's expressed needs and involve them in decisions that determine local connection, using special circumstances such as, but not limited to, social connections, specialist care, or risk of violence or harm.
- **Service providers and commissioners** should promote a strengths-based and person-led approach in homelessness services that recognises people's interests, skills and community connections, and takes necessary steps to ensure people are able to nurture and build on these strengths.
- **Service providers and commissioners** should use Groundswell's [\(un\)entitled toolkit and videos](#) in staff training to understand and reflect on the impact of stigma for people with experience of homelessness.
- **Service providers and commissioners** should ensure when people are new to an area, accommodation or service, they have the appropriate trauma-informed support and time to make the transition.
- **Service providers and commissioners** should ensure all homelessness services and accommodation providers have a multi-use communal space that residents can adapt for various activities, building social connections, and host friends or family that wish to visit.
- **Service providers and commissioners** should specifically consider how people's relationships and communities are affected when commissioning new services, and involve people with experience of homelessness to make better, informed decisions on how to do this.



How you can get involved

For more information about the Listen Up! project please visit: groundswell.org.uk/listenup/

The reporter story cited in this Insight is [Experiencing communities](#) by Tess (August 2024). All the Listen Up! reporter stories are available on our hub: groundswell-listenup-hub.org/

To keep up to date with future research and projects at Groundswell please [sign up to our newsletters](#).

Further reading

- Groundswell (2023) [Improving the health of people living in Temporary Accommodation in London](#)
- Groundswell (2023) [Listen Up! Insight 2: drug and alcohol recovery](#)
- Groundswell (2024) [\(un\)entitled toolkit and videos](#)
- Courtney Buckler, National Survivor User Network, and Mind (2024) [Exploring “community” and the mental health lived experience landscape](#)

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