



THE HAVEN

6 MONTH REVIEW



CREATING A SAFE SPACE FOR VULNERABLE WOMEN

It Takes a City (Cambridge), c/o St Andrews Street Baptist Church, St Andrew's Street, Cambridge CB2 3 AR
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It Takes a City (ITAC) is a Cambridge-based charity, established in 2018, that works collaboratively with public, private, and voluntary sectors in Cambridge with the aim of ending homelessness for good.

ITAC has demonstrated its commitment to addressing immediate and long-term needs of those experiencing homelessness in the city. ITAC is currently in its fourth year of running 'Crossways', a 20-bed winter accommodation project for some of the most entrenched rough sleepers in Cambridge. This project received a 'Gold' award from the Housing Justice Quality Mark for Emergency Night Shelter provision.

A cornerstone of ITAC's work is convening the Women's Homelessness Action Group (WHAG) which was established to highlight and offer solutions to the distinct challenges faced by homeless women. Recognising that women's experiences of homelessness are different to their male counterparts, and that existing services frequently fail to meet their needs, the WHAG has developed targeted initiatives, culminating in the establishment of the Haven pilot project, run by ITAC.



Bunting created during a crafting session by women accessing The Haven

The need for The Haven

While statistics, gathered by regular national counts of people asleep on the street in the early hours of the morning, suggest that men make up the majority of the homeless population, research has shown that due to vulnerability and fear of violence, women are a large part of the 'hidden homeless' population.

Women often choose to sofa surf, to sleep in sheds, cars or bus stations, to walk the streets or remain in dangerous and volatile domestic situations to avoid sleeping on the streets. The causes of women's rough sleeping are also significantly different to that of men and there is an increased likelihood that women's continued homelessness is a direct result of trauma and abuse both before and during homelessness. Homeless women face severe health disparities, with a life expectancy of just 42 years, compared to 45 for homeless men and over 80 for the general population.

[National data shows](#) that 1 in 5 women (20%) who have experienced violence become homeless, compared to just 1% of women who have not experienced violence. Being a victim of violence is a traumatic experience and as a result many women develop a range of support needs in addition to their homelessness.

Since homeless women work hard to be less visible, they are often unaccounted for when local authorities take snapshot data and draw up plans for funding, skewing service provision towards the more 'visible' homeless population.

In Cambridge, the proportion of women sleeping rough is significantly higher than the national average. The City Council's 2022-23 rough sleeping numbers found that 17% were women, however 2024 statistics suggest that up to 35% of rough sleepers are women. An annual Women's Rough Sleeping Census, taken during the day is now taking place regularly to establish more reliable data.

A Safe Space for Women

'The Haven is a godsend, a long overdue female-led service that offers us females somewhere to shower, eat, sleep, relax or just to get some respite from the stress of being on the streets. A little bit of normality and home comforts, even just 2 nights a week, can make the week much more bearable. It's nice to have the reminder that I don't belong outside, certainly not 24/7. I would love for it to grow into an accessible service open as frequently as Wintercomfort. For now though it's nice that recognition of our needs as women differing from our male counterparts is finally being understood and starting to be met.' **Regular user of The Haven.**

In June 2024, ITAC opened the Haven project, a 12-month pilot to provide a space for up to 10 homeless and vulnerable women. The initial 12-month pilot is funded by Cambridge City Council's Rough Sleeping Initiative Fund and philanthropic donors. The Evelyn Trust supported ITAC with a donation to enable the project to be developed the year prior to opening.

The Haven operates twice weekly, from 8 PM to 8 AM, at a central Cambridge location. It offers immediate relief services while building long-term trust with women who may have been failed by, or are distrustful of, traditional services. The facility provides:

- Hot food and drinks
- Shower and laundry facilities
- Complete change of clothes, coats and shoes
- Hygiene and sexual health products
- Kindness, emotional support, and tailored advice

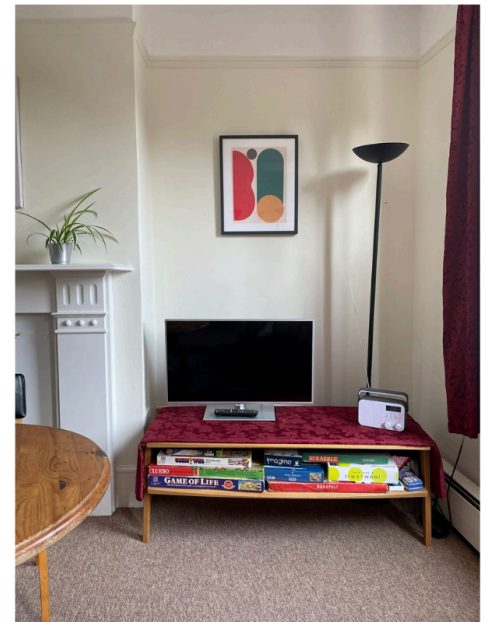
Case Study: B's Story



'B' has been rough sleeping in the city for much of the last four years, only intermittently accepting accommodation offers and then often abandoning accommodation within a short period of time. She is generally mistrustful of services and dislikes disclosing personal information. However, since she's been visiting the Haven, she has been engaging more than is her typical routine. When severe weather emergency accommodation was offered to her during a particularly cold spell, she accepted the accommodation. The Haven and local support services have jointly worked to better understand her needs which has been responded to positively by the council in the placements they can offer her. It is therefore significant that B has found the Haven to be an environment where she feels comfortable and not under pressure to engage, allowing her to accept support on her own terms.'

Staffed by an experienced support worker, SIA-accredited security guard, and experienced volunteers, the Haven ensures a safe, welcoming environment. This approach allows the team to address complex needs, including severe mental health issues, substance abuse, and trauma, while maintaining a sense of dignity for the women it serves.

In its first four months, the Haven regularly reached 80% capacity, serving women who otherwise lack safe overnight options. Feedback from service users underscores its transformative impact, with one attendee describing it as "the highlight of my week."



The Haven in Numbers

While the lack of local data on rough sleeping women only provides a glimpse of the true picture of homelessness, what we have indicates the project is achieving its aims. For example, the City Council's national rough sleeper count in November 2024 only identified 3 women, a two thirds reduction on the previous year. The Haven project is successfully engaging rough sleeping women, particularly some of the most vulnerable and service-avoidant people in the city.

Over the first 6 months, the Haven has supported 24 individuals. This is made up of a combination of women who are regular visitors and those who have visited for just a small number of sessions.

The majority of the women supported by the Haven are rough sleepers, with 17 of the women rough sleeping when they first accessed the service. The other 7 of the women are either vulnerably housed or living in temporary accommodation.

Some of the women who are in accommodation may still be living street-based lifestyles, either due to drug and alcohol dependency or being in relationships with others who are rough sleeping.

It has become clear that the service is an essential support for women who may be going between rough sleeping and temporary accommodation, providing security despite volatile or precarious tenancies.

5 of the rough sleeping women accessing the Haven have been provided with accommodation over the winter at ITAC's 'Crossways' shelter. The importance of the Haven as a stepping-stone into accommodation was particularly clear for one woman, 'C'.

Case Study: C's Story



'C' has been on and off rough sleeping in a tucked away site in the city for nearly two years and has struggled with poor mental health. As a result, she has been very withdrawn from services, found it difficult to build trusting relationships and found shared accommodation challenging. C was one of the first people to come to the Haven and has become a frequent user of the service, enabling her to build good relationships with staff members at the project. As a result, she was invited to visit Crossways before the opening date and given the opportunity to choose a room that she would feel comfortable in. She accepted the offer and staff have worked hard to ensure that her specific dietary requirements were met and she has continued to engage with the Haven and other women's services. While it's not been an easy journey and she has limited accommodation options, she has retained her accommodation at Crossways for 3 months over the winter. She has now accepted an invitation to move to a room in a quiet, female-only Christian environment which meets her very specific needs. The Haven has been instrumental in building a good relationship between C and support staff who are able to work with her to find long-term solutions.

Of the 17 women who were originally rough sleeping when first accessing the Haven, only 7 are still known to be rough sleeping in Cambridge. The Haven has enabled the Council to verify rough sleepers by providing a location for the women to be linked up with the Street Outreach Team. Women have then been supported into accommodation with help from local support services and the City Council. A small number of women have also left the city due to not having a local connection.

For the women who are in accommodation, the Haven has provided a support in many ways:

- Women who are still prone to periods of rough sleeping, despite having accommodation, are able to access the Haven as a safe space off the streets.
- Some of the women are in abusive or coercive relationships and therefore the Haven has offered a safe space away from their partners who they may be living or rough sleeping with.
- Some women suffer from social isolation and appreciate the community at the Haven, where women get together for food, films and relaxing activities.
- One woman who uses the service regularly is housed in an area where there's frequent ASB and therefore appreciates the relief from that environment that the Haven can offer.

Over the Christmas period, the Haven was open as usual with donations from local businesses and organisations to make the festive season a little more special. This included a full Christmas meal on Christmas day as well as gift bags under the Christmas tree for every woman who visited.

Lives Transformed

Empowering Employment Aspirations

A woman living in her car used the Haven to prepare for and participate in a job interview. The staff provided tailored support, including early access to the space for Wi-Fi and a quiet environment, enabling her to present her best self.

Rebuilding Trust and Accessing Benefits

One regular attendee, who previously avoided all services due to mistrust, has built rapport with Haven staff. She has now begun the process of applying for Personal Independence Payment (PIP) benefits - a critical step towards regaining stability.

Facilitating Vital Meetings

Another woman, struggling to keep appointments with her social worker due to chaotic circumstances, was able to meet with her caseworker at the Haven. The space provided a neutral, supportive setting, helping her access much-needed resources.

Case Study: F's Story



'F' was living a very volatile street-based lifestyle and her heavy drinking was having a severe impact on her health. As she began to engage with the service more, the support workers were able to monitor the significant deterioration in her health which led to her being offered and taking up a place in City Council Temporary Accommodation.

Women's Rough Sleeping Census

The Women's Rough Sleeping Census, conducted in Cambridge in autumn 2023 and again in 2024, revealed significant gaps in service provision for homeless women. Key findings include:

- The prevalence of hidden homelessness, with many women relying on informal arrangements to avoid rough sleeping.
- A higher concentration of homeless women in Cambridge compared to the national picture.
- Barriers to accessing mixed-gender services due to safety concerns and past trauma.

In 2024, 18 women who completed the Women's Homelessness Census reported to be rough sleeping in the past 3 months. 5 of the census surveys were completed at the Haven.

In addition to the previous census, the 2024 questionnaire asked the women what was helping and what was not working. Many of the responses here highlighted the importance of the Haven:

'What helps: the Haven'

'The food van, women's Haven, community kitchen and Wintercomfort all help a lot.'

'Not enough women's services, need a bit more, need to wash'

'More 'one-stop shop' services'

These findings underscore the necessity of women-specific services like the Haven, which not only address immediate needs but also facilitate engagement with broader support networks.

Future Plans & Sustainability

The initial 6 months of the Haven pilot, funded by Cambridge City Council's Rough Sleeping Initiative Fund and philanthropic donors, has already proved its value. The Haven has demonstrated the transformative impact of tailored, gender-specific support for homeless and vulnerably housed women in Cambridge.

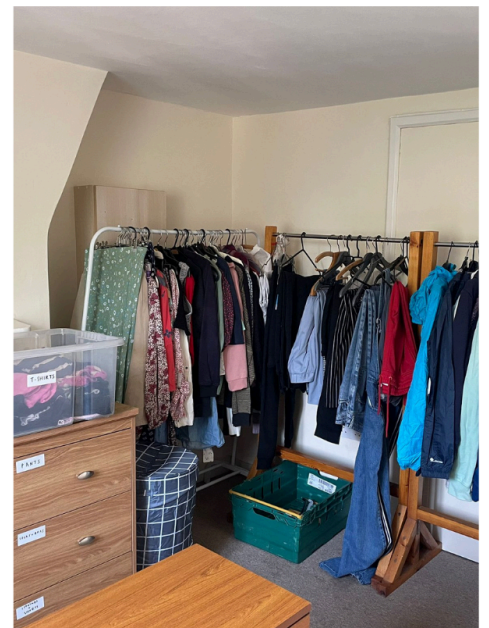
The Haven's success over its initial six months underlines its importance as a safe, accessible, and supportive space for women. From providing immediate relief to building trust and facilitating pathways to long-term stability, the Haven has proved to be an indispensable lifeline for those it serves. The stories and data presented highlight the project's ability to help women transition out of rough sleeping, rebuild their lives, and re-engage with wider support systems.

This report also highlights the necessity of recognising and addressing the distinct needs of homeless women, whose experiences are often underrepresented in traditional homelessness statistics.

Building on this success, ITAC aims to:

- Review and extend operating hours to include daytime access, allowing women to connect with key services such as healthcare, housing, and employment support.
- Collaborate with local healthcare providers to deliver on-site medical and mental health services in a single-gender environment.
- Secure long-term funding to ensure the sustainability and expansion of the Haven beyond its pilot phase.

By continuing to provide a safe, consistent space, the Haven is transforming lives and demonstrating the potential of trauma-informed, women-focused solutions. With ongoing support, this initiative can serve as a model for other cities grappling with the challenges of women's homelessness.



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