



# Accessing services in the homeless community

Improving our understanding of the stigma  
experienced by homeless people when accessing  
services and the benefits of trauma-informed care

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*A reflection on 'Clarissa', a short film by Chris  
Godwin and Jimmy McGovern, in collaboration  
with Groundswell.*



## Background

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**In December 2024, the West Sussex Safeguarding Adults Board identified that there is a learning need in the partnership around homelessness.**

This was specifically in relation to reducing the stigma experienced by people experiencing homelessness; supporting access to services; and reinforcing the need for trauma-informed care.

This resource pack has been designed to be used by teams, and to provide a starting point for discussions, and policy and practice reflection. It can be used in team meetings, or as part of internal training opportunities.

## 'Clarissa': a short film

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**'Clarissa' is a short film by Chris Godwin and Jimmy McGovern, in collaboration with Groundswell. It is a powerful film, created to improve the health of people affected by homelessness, through better understanding of their experiences.**

Filmmaker Chris Godwin explained:

*I was approached about making the film in 2017. The aim – to shift people's perceptions of accessing healthcare when experiencing homelessness.*

*The film is rooted in the power of storytelling and isn't designed to tell or show people what to do, merely be a platform for discussion and debate. Ultimately the film offers an emotional perspective on the issues [...]*

*It has been a huge privilege working on Clarissa and meeting the all the amazing people working at Groundswell – a truly life changing charity with a huge heart. As I have begun to understand the issues of experiencing homelessness and accessing healthcare are incredibly complex, however as the film conveys there is a powerful simplicity in the power of compassion.<sup>1</sup>*

The film covers key topics of concern for the Board, namely: trauma-informed practice; access to health services; person-centred care; and policy and practice. Given these links with key safeguarding topics, it is our hope that all agencies will dedicate some time to watching 'Clarissa'.

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<sup>1</sup> Groundswell: Out of homelessness (2025) '[Clarissa' the film](#)



## Content warning

'Clarissa' explores themes relating to childhood abuse, drug taking, and drug dependency. Please ensure that you use your discretion when considering whether to view this film, to enable you to keep yourself safe.

Groundswell have provided links to [support in relation to these issues](#)<sup>2</sup>.



## Watch the film

'Clarissa' lasts 23 minutes. It can be viewed for free via the following platforms:

- ['Clarissa' on Vimeo](#)
- ['Clarissa' on YouTube](#)

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<sup>2</sup> Groundswell: Out of homelessness (2025) ['Clarissa' support resources](#)



## Suggested training plan

**If you would like to utilise this Resource Pack as part of internal training, you may wish to use the following training plan. It will take roughly 2 hours to explore the film's themes and can be adapted to suit your organisation.**

### **Learning objectives (2 minutes)**

The objectives of today's session are to:

- explore the stigma faced by people experiencing homelessness;
- identify the barriers they face in accessing healthcare and other services;
- consider ways that we can reduce barriers to accessing our service;
- commit to learning more about the value of a trauma-informed approach.

### **Content warning (2 minutes)**

This session includes a film which explores themes relating to childhood abuse, drug taking, and drug dependency. Please ensure that you use your discretion when considering whether to view this film, to enable you to keep yourself safe.

### **Viewing the film (30 minutes)**

The film is 23 minutes long. Ensure that you allow sufficient time after watching the film, to enable people to de-brief and share their initial reactions to the film.

### **Discuss: the stigma experienced by Clarissa (15 minutes)**

Discuss examples of stigma that Clarissa experienced in the film. *Where did this stigma come from? How did this impact Clarissa?* Consider the impact of unconscious bias.

### **Discuss: Clarissa's barriers to accessing services (15 minutes)**

Discuss the barriers that Clarissa experienced in accessing GP services for her back. Create a list of barriers that Clarissa faced. *What other services can you think of, for which Clarissa may experience similar barriers? What impact might this have on Clarissa's health and wellbeing, and ability to keep herself safe?*



### **Discuss: the impact of Clarissa's history of trauma (15 minutes)**

Discuss how Clarissa's history of trauma impacted her ability to engage with services. *How did Clarissa's history of trauma present itself in the present day? Were professionals working with Clarissa aware of her previous experiences?*

### **Group activity (20 minutes)**

In small groups, develop an action plan for Clarissa, with the intention of supporting her to access GP services, as well as any other support services that she may want and/or need. Consider your organisation's role in supporting Clarissa, as well as some ideas around a multi-agency approach. *Who might you need to engage with? How will you reach out to other organisations? What are the key considerations you will need to keep in mind when working with Clarissa?*

Ensure that you keep Clarissa's preferred outcomes at the centre of your planning, and try, where possible, to progress actions with Clarissa's informed consent.

### **Closing thoughts (10 minutes)**

Summarise the discussions had as part of the group activity. *Was anything in the film a surprise? Has the film changed your understanding of the stigma and challenges faced by the homeless community?*

Reinforce the need for a trauma-informed approach to care. Signpost to our resources of a trauma-informed approach:

- [Trauma-informed approach | West Sussex Safeguarding Adults Board](#)

Revisit the learning objectives. *Have these been achieved?*



## Exploring themes: understanding the challenges of accessing services

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**In the film, we see Clarissa attempting to register with a GP surgery and make an appointment to discuss her back pain. This throws up a number of challenges for Clarissa, including both practical issues around providing a fixed address, and emotional challenges around her experiences with drug and/or alcohol dependence.**

In the NHS England leaflet *People who are homeless: How to register with a doctor (GP)* (PDF, 352KB) it states that, “a homeless patient cannot be refused registration on the basis of where they reside because they are not in settled accommodation. [...] There is no regulatory requirement to prove identity, address, immigration status or an NHS number in order to register as a patient and no contractual requirement for GPs to request this.”

In light of this, it's important that services are consistent in their response to homeless patients, and that people experiencing homelessness are supported to know their rights, and access services.

Some issues to consider when supporting adults experiencing homelessness to access services include:

- How can we support adults to know their rights, if they have a negative experience with registering for services?
- How can we support adults to make appointments when services are typically reliant on telephone contact or an online appointment system?
- How can we support adults to keep in contact with services regarding follow-up appointments or referrals if they have limited contact options?
- How can services identify, and offer support to, people experiencing difficulties in understanding and/or completing forms required to access services?
- How can GP surgeries, and other services, develop trusting and respectful relationships with adults, in order to effectively support their healthcare needs?

### Key takeaway

In many of these situations, it will be necessary to adapt our usual processes, and employ some creative thinking, to ensure that services are fit-for-purpose for the individual, rather than trying to make the person fit the service expectations.

## Exploring themes: providing person-centred care

**When we see Clarissa reading the GP registration form, we note that she feels discomfort at some of the questions asked. These are specifically in relation to housing status, drug and/or alcohol use, and marital status. It's apparent that Clarissa may be fearing a perceived stigma attached to some of these factors.**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'stigma' as, "*Figurative.* A mark of disgrace or infamy; a sign of severe censure or condemnation, regarded as impressed on a thing; a 'brand'."<sup>3</sup> It is possible that, as a result of perception of certain protected characteristics or health and social care inequalities (such as homelessness), people may fear experiencing discrimination when accessing services.

To support adults to feel comfortable accessing services when they fear the stigma of their circumstances, we must employ a person-centred approach to care. Being person-centred means working with the adult to find out about their wishes, their needs, their values, and their beliefs. We must do this whilst avoiding imposing our own prejudices or unconscious bias, which may lead, even inadvertently, to discriminatory practice.

Consider the following tips for anti-discriminatory practice:

- Respect diversity, and treat all adults as unique, with their own unique set of circumstances and needs;
- Ensure that you are always professional and non-judgemental, and that you do not stereotype or allow your own beliefs or values to affect the care you provide;
- Refuse to initiate, participate, collude with, or condone discrimination and harassment;
- Proactively challenge and address discriminatory behaviours and practice;
- Use supervision to reflect on protected characteristics for the adults you work with, and to identify any issues and unintended practice bias or discrimination.

### Key takeaway

The [Equality Act \(2010\)](#) places an equality duty on health and social care workers to eliminate unlawful discrimination. We all have a duty to consider the diverse needs of adults we are working with, minimising disadvantage, and ensuring the inclusion of under-represented groups.

<sup>3</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "stigma (n.), sense 7," September 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1193939933>.

## Exploring themes: the importance of trauma-informed care

**It's clear in the film that Clarissa's history of trauma, and specifically childhood experiences of abuse, affect her ability to feel safe, and engage effectively, with services. When we see her at the GP appointment, Clarissa is clearly at risk of re-traumatisation as a result of the physical examination of her back.**

In the [Sussex Safeguarding Adults Policy and Procedures \(2024\)](#) trauma is described as "a wide range of traumatic, abusive or neglectful events or series of events (including Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and trauma in adulthood) that are experienced as being emotionally or physically harmful or life threatening." When we are working with adults who have experienced trauma, we need to be aware of how that trauma can impact on someone's neurological, biological, psychological, and social development.

This means being able to recognise when someone has been affected by trauma and adjusting the way that we work with them so that we can respond in a way that supports recovery, does no harm and recognises and supports people's resilience. This is with the intention that we support adults to feel safe and develop trusting relationships with staff, therefore supporting their access to services.

You may wish to consider the following when reflecting on whether services are 'trauma-informed':

- Are staff trained in what it means to be 'trauma-informed' and how this affects their practice?
- How can we begin to embed this at a system level, in a similar way to the concept of Making Safeguarding Personal?
- How can we support adults to share their experiences of trauma, in a way that does not re-traumatise them, to allow services to identify the best way to support them?
- Is there anything that we can change in our physical environment, for example, waiting rooms or treatment rooms, to support trauma-informed practice?

### Key takeaway

There are five key principles to trauma-informed care in practice. These are: safety; trust; choice; collaboration; and empowerment. If we can build trusting and collaborative relationships with adults, we can support them to make choices about their care, in a way that feels comfortable for them, and avoids re-traumatisation.



## Exploring themes: homelessness in safeguarding policy and practice

**Whilst safeguarding is not explicitly discussed in the film, it is clear that professionals are trying to work with Clarissa to ensure her safety and wellbeing. We know that people who experience homelessness are at an increased risk of experiencing exploitation and abuse.**

In the *Sussex Safeguarding Adults Thresholds: Guidance for Professionals* you will find information about indicators in relation to homelessness, which may require adult social care intervention. You will also find information about alternative actions to consider, including referral to local authority housing services, community and voluntary sector organisations, mental health services, and GP or district nursing services.

If the following indicators are present when you are working with adults experiencing homelessness, you may need to raise a safeguarding concern with the local authority:

- The adult has deteriorating physical or mental health, placing them at risk of harm;
- The adult has been offered housing which is not suitable for their needs;
- Support agencies are not working together effectively to support the adult, which is putting the adult at risk;
- The adult appears to be being targeted by individuals for abuse or exploitation.

If you identify that there is an element of self-neglect occurring, it is important that you refer to the *Sussex multi-agency procedures to support adults who self-neglect* and the *Sussex Self-Neglect Practice Guidance for Staff*.

### Key takeaway

Whilst the Care Act (2014) does not place a duty on the local authority to provide housing for adults, it is important to consider whether adults experiencing homelessness meet the criteria for a Care Act Assessment, and to ensure that services are working together to meet identified care and support needs.



## Accessing more information

**For more information about homeless services in West Sussex, you can approach the following services.**

### Your local district or borough council

Search for your local district or borough council housing services on the [West Sussex County Council website](#).

### Bognor Regis | Bognor Housing Trust

Bognor Housing Trust was founded in 1984 and has since developed to own and manage three supported housing projects for single homeless people in Bognor Regis. Bognor Housing Trust works alongside both national and local voluntary organisations and statutory agencies. Phone 01243 837995 or visit the [Bognor Housing Trust website](#).

### Chichester | Stonepillow

Stonepillow operates two 'Hubs' and two 'Hostels', one each in Chichester and Bognor Regis, and one 'Resource Hub' in Bognor Regis. Working as drop-in day centres, the Hubs are a first port of call for anyone who finds themselves homeless or in crisis. They meet basic needs as well as helping people find the support they need, either with Stonepillow or one of their partners. Call 01243 537934 or visit the [Stonepillow website](#).

### Crawley | Crawley Open House

Crawley Open House has a mission to support those who find themselves experiencing homelessness in Crawley and West Sussex. Crawley Open House is a year-round, high support hostel for those who are experiencing homelessness and hardship, also providing life-skills training and resettlement support for residents and service-users. Phone 01293 447702 or visit the [Crawley Open House website](#).

## Worthing | Turning Tides

Turning Tides is our Board representative from the homelessness sector. They provide a warm, safe space to listen to anyone who needs help. They provide pathways out of homelessness and are committed to supporting people at every stage of their journey. Their clients shape services through coproduction, and they work in close partnership, across all sectors, drawing from the strengths and generosity of the local community. Call 01903 680740 or visit the [Turning Tides website](#).

**We would like to take this opportunity to thank all of those who created the 'Clarissa' film**, including Chris Godwin, Jimmy McGovern, Sarah Hoare, Doreene Blackstock, Grace Doherty, Jonny Colgan, Jon Bignold, Jon Dickinson, Guy Ducker, Martin Burrows, Becky Evans, Jane Cook, Mat Amp, Groundswell, Inner Eye, Ideas Alliance, and Wellcome.

