

Press release from South Somerset District Council.

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Helping those who are homeless for life and not just for one night

Homelessness is something that sadly exists here in South Somerset as it does in most areas, but as a District Council, we are doing great work to try and prevent people from rough sleeping.

If you walk down the streets of some towns, you can sometimes find people rough sleeping and it is understandable to feel you want to help. There are many ways that you can support rough sleepers and make sure that your money is going to provide for them in the right way.

A Specialist in Housing at South Somerset District Council (SSDC), with extensive experience of helping vulnerable people, said: "We completely understand that people want to help – it's the right thing to do - but we don't want to see people aided to stay on the streets through providing them with money or supplies. There's an opportunity for rough sleepers to get into permanent housing and as a District Council, we work closely with various agencies and services to provide a package of support and care for anyone sleeping rough."

Here in South Somerset, SSDC funds a hostel with 30 beds and 10 emergency beds for anyone who is sleeping rough. The hostel is just one way that we want to help men and women who find themselves homeless, giving someone the opportunity to start building a better life for themselves with support.

The Housing Specialist said: "We are one of a few local authorities across the country that does not rely on bed & breakfasts as a way of housing rough sleepers or homeless, except in a real emergency. Because we have our hostel accommodation, people are given the opportunity to move on to permanent housing when they are ready to do so."

As well as the hostel, SSDC has plenty of emergency accommodation when there are cold and/or severe weather conditions, and even before temperatures dip below zero, the agencies that we work closely with to prevent homelessness kick in to action.

We fund a Rough Sleeper outreach worker, provide drug & alcohol support and also fund a community centre which helps and offers advice with issues such as health and wellbeing, tenancy skills, cooking skills, hairdressers, debt advice, help with welfare benefits plus much more.

Government guidelines say that as a Council, we must make one reasonable offer of housing to homeless but SSDC goes much further than that. SSDC offers a hostel

placement and a package of support for anyone who is homeless because we don't want to enable rough sleeping and we want to help someone for life, not just for the night by providing temporary accommodation.

A multi-agency approach to homelessness helps us act fast when there are reports of rough sleepers. We work with trained and qualified staff with experience of working with vulnerable people including the mental health services, Somerset probation, drug & alcohol services, Avon & Somerset Police, Yeovil District Hospital, Avon & Somerset Fire Rescue Service, adult social care and children's social care, to name a few.

As a result of this multi-agency approach, pressures on A&E have reduced and it helps other agencies because there is less demand on their services. The joint approach works well because the group of representatives work out what is the best approach for individuals and aims to deliver a tailored package of help and support.

Despite the comprehensive package of support that is offered, some people still choose to sleep rough but there are ways that you can offer help, rather than giving money to enable rough sleeping to continue. There are many people who are not rough sleeping, but making considerable sums through begging and this is why you should not offer money.

What should I do if I see someone sleeping rough?

Members of the public can report anyone who they see rough sleeping by using the StreetLink website – www.streetlink.org.uk.

StreetLink exists to help end rough sleeping by enabling members of the public to connect people sleeping rough with local services that can support them.

If you are concerned about someone over the age of 18 that you have seen rough sleeping, you can use the website to send an alert to StreetLink. The details you provide are sent to SSDC who then act upon the information received. If the person you are concerned about is under 18, please do not contact StreetLink but instead call the police.

I want to help someone that is homeless – how can I?

There are many, many ways that you can help someone who is homeless. The Council's Housing Specialist, who has helped support and change the lives of hundreds of people during their time with SSDC, offers this advice on some of the ways that you can help:

- “If you want to provide immediate help, buy them a hot drink or a sandwich rather than giving money, as money can often be spent on enabling them to sustain a negative lifestyle.

- “Any unwanted clothes that you have, please donate them to charity shops. Providing clothes direct to anyone who is rough sleeping can result in clothes not being used and ending up in landfill. Remember, those who find themselves in the unfortunate situation of sleeping rough will not have anywhere to store clothes so will get clothes from places such as charity shops as and when they are needed.
- “Every Christmas, there is always a shoebox appeal. Shoeboxes containing socks, gloves, hats and toiletries sweets, chocolate will be distributed by SSDC when needed to genuinely homeless people.
- “Pathways services provides 65 places in South Somerset and is aimed at reducing and preventing homelessness in South Somerset and Mendip. Joint owners Home Group and Developing Health and Independence are always looking for volunteers to help at their buildings. You can find out more information about Pathways and offer your help by [visiting their website](#).
- “We’d also encourage people to be environmentally friendly. Why not offer to wash a sleeping bag rather than provide a new one. Old ones remain out of landfill that way but you have still helped and offered your support. Earlier this year, officers from SSDC visited Glastonbury Festival and collected many leftover sleeping bags which staff voluntarily wash and prepare for those in need, so we are currently able to provide these type of provisions to the homeless and rough sleepers.
- “You can donate used but clean, good condition sleeping bags to Pathways hostel in Newton Road, they are given to people accessing the emergency beds.
- “You can also donate non-perishable food to the Lords larder which is run from the Gateway Church, Addlewell Lane in Yeovil.”

Council leader Val Keitch said: “There are lots of ways that SSDC is supporting rough sleepers and there are lots of ways that you can support them as well. Our incredible team works incredibly hard all year round to provide support and change lives.

“We don’t want to help someone who finds themselves homeless for a night. We want to support them off the streets and help them to build a life.”

Several weeks of planning by various agencies, led by the Yeovil One Team, saw a special Christmas dinner provided to dozens of vulnerable and lonely people who attended the event.

Donations from a number of people included food, crackers, drinks, gifts, a venue and volunteers to prepare, cook, serve and clear up gave the opportunities for people to enjoy a three course Christmas dinner in a friendly and welcoming environment with a Christmas present for all.

SSDC provided vegetables to cater for 75 and staff from the Westlands Entertainment Venue (Will and Brett) gave up their own time to come in and cook all the food. The meat for the meal came from a variety of donated sources, including Overland Turkey Farm and Pathways.