



Connection Support

Housing Support Service Review of Service April 2018 to April 2021

Fiona O'Driscoll with Carol Steel

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Contents

	Page
1. Executive Summary	3
2. Context	7
3. Review parameters	8
4. Service overview	8
Findings	
5. Preventing homelessness	11
6. Income generation	12
7. Quality service	12
8. Adapting to COVID 19	15
9. Lived experience and co-production	16
10. Creative resourcing	17
11. Added value	17
12. Partnership working	18
13. Key Performance Indicators	20
14. Pattern of referrals	25
15. Conclusions	29
16. Appendices	29

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Connection Support has been running the Housing Support Service in Oxfordshire since its foundation in 1995, and never has the need for a homelessness prevention service been greater. In recent decades, social and political factors have driven up demand for housing support services and the combined impacts of a shortage of affordable housing, cuts to statutory services and the global pandemic have resulted in a system which is 'traumatised'¹.

The service is delivered by floating support workers, using a person-centred approach, to enable clients who are at risk of homelessness to maintain their tenancies and access services to avoid entering the homeless pathway. Before COVID, approximately 25% of clients were supported through the digital service and, during the first lockdown, the team transferred all the clients online and continued to provide the service throughout the various phases of the pandemic.

This paper reports on the review of the service for the three years from April 2018, which was conducted using a combination of an online survey, quantitative analysis of reports and qualitative interviews with 25 stakeholders. It identifies the strengths of the service during this period and learnings which will inform ongoing improvement as commissioning moves to an Alliance model.

"I've just had a quarterly catch up with the team and from my perspective they are just going from strength to strength. It's a really strong team and a really good service." **Commissioner**

I.1 Homelessness prevention

99% of the 1793 cases referred to this service during the three years successfully avoided eviction. As well as avoiding the human cost of homelessness for these households, this also constitutes an estimated² saving of £21 million to the public purse, net of the cost of the service.

The team have achieved this in part by using their expertise to support clients through court proceedings, usually to fight eviction or access benefits. Feedback from the interviews shows that courts look favourably on clients who are accompanied by support workers and that the team collaborates effectively with clients' lawyers to enable them to engage with the process and achieve better outcomes.

'[The Support Worker] developed a relationship with the client which enabled him to give instructions, arranged psychiatric assessments, meetings with Social Services and the landlord to advocate for him... the care and dedication that she showed towards her client was just incredible.' Turpin and Miller manager.

As well as avoiding eviction in the short-term, the team supported clients to get onto the housing register, to develop their financial planning skills and to access more income to stabilise their situation in the longer term. They have done the latter by helping them to understand their benefit entitlements and submit claims or by supporting them to access other sources of funding such as charitable grants and Connection Support's own welfare funds. In this way, the service has enabled clients to access between £111 and £128k of income per annum.

"We have had some awful cases, but have worked with Connection and families have been saved from the precipice. Connection are good at this difficult, complex work." **Lead Manager, Oxfordshire County Council**

¹ Housing-led Feasibility Study for Oxfordshire: Full Report Written by Imogen Blood, Mark Goldup, Anita Birchall, Shelly Dulson and Chloë Hands Commissioned by Crisis, with funding from Crisis and the Oxfordshire councils, November 2020 – para 4.1

² See section 5.3 for assumptions and calculation.

1.2 Valued Partner

For clients with underlying issues such as mental health, domestic abuse, learning disability or addiction issues, the team initially works with a client to stabilise their situation, build trust and make them ready and willing to engage with appropriate specialist services. One partner described an anxiety that a large proportion of her clients would not have been physically or psychologically able to access her service without support from this team. Interviewees reported that the team collaborates very effectively with partners across Oxfordshire to achieve better outcomes for clients either by accepting and making referrals or by working alongside partner agencies in a symbiotic relationship.

The use of embedded Connection Support workers in partner organisations was raised as a particularly useful form of collaboration to identify at risk clients at an early stage.

“I’ve always been able to trust the Connection Support Workers I’ve worked with over the years to complement my work safely and effectively.” **Domestic Abuse Outreach Worker**

1.3 Quality and expertise

Interviewees reported that the service is necessary, greatly valued and delivered to a high standard. Partners and colleagues appreciated support workers’ expertise in terms of understanding of homelessness prevention routes, including how to access the housing register and benefits, maximise income and engage constructively with local services and employers within each of the districts. Much of the interview time was taken by partners and service users taking the opportunity to praise the personal qualities of team members, particularly their compassion and commitment and the collaborative and respectful way in which they worked with clients to achieve better outcomes.

The service’s management were also highly praised and training and team development was perceived as strong. Connection Support’s leadership team is actively considering feedback from the review relating to salary and the team identified the need for a new database to streamline administrative processes.

1.4 Adaptability

The service remained open throughout the COVID crisis and the team were quickly provided with the necessary technical resources to move 100% online. They developed creative solutions to the challenges of working remotely, such as the ability to merge three-way calls between themselves, a client and a third-party organisation. They are now developing new interventions to adapt to a new cohort of clients who are vulnerable to homelessness for the first time. The service uses students effectively and plans to build in further opportunities for co-production and volunteer engagement going forward.

Although the online service has been more successful than anticipated, internal and external interviewees emphasised that the face-to-face component is key to the quality of the service and that an element of this should be retained going forward.

1.5 Key Performance Indicators

Due to the internal inconsistency³ of the KPIs for the service, it is not possible to achieve all of them, therefore all but one has been achieved over the three years, as illustrated in the table below.

³ See section 13
pg. 4

KPI	Target	Three year average
Number of service users ⁴	>700	790
Number of evictions avoided	>95%	99%
Referrals assessed in 3 days	>99%	99%
Full assessment in 14 days	>95%	100%
Closed within 6 months	>65%	52% ⁵
Clients in employment (PBR)	>70%	91%

Despite the interruption of COVID, the team exceeded the target for number of service users in average over the three years and consistently met or beat the targets for speed of assessment. The latter was reflected by a partner organisation who commented that ‘Connection are one of the ones that will pick up a case quickly.’

There was concern from the team about the relevance of the payment by results element KPI, as it relates to clients in employment rather than homelessness prevention and only 30% of clients qualify for it. Nevertheless, this target has also been consistently exceeded, as has the homelessness prevention metric as mentioned above.

The target for the proportion of clients moved on within six months has not been met but, before COVID⁶, 80% of clients were moved on within nine months. The team explained that the challenge with meeting the six-month targets is practical rather than emotional; Support Workers understood the need to avoid dependence, but often found that processes such as PIP applications and referrals to other organisations simply require more than six months to complete, particularly as some processes are currently running a hybrid online/paper system which adds to the administrative burden.

“The performance of the service has been extremely positive to date with results being consistently exceeded.”

Commissioner

1.6 Added Value and referrals

In addition to delivering the core service effectively, the interviewees and data suggest that the service adds value to individual clients and to the broader provision of homelessness services in Oxfordshire. Interviewees reported that there is a minority of the most complex clients for whom the homelessness referral criterion is just the ‘way in’ to enable the team to work with them on a range of life challenges, occasionally over a period of many months and usually in partnership with specialist organisations. For these most difficult cases and also for a cohort of people whose needs are not severe enough to qualify for other services, this is seen as a ‘service of last resort’ by referring organisations.

“Your team’s signposting is excellent. They tell me exactly where to send people, this has saved me a lot of time.”

Social worker, Oxfordshire County Council

50-60% of referrals were rejected over the review period, despite the team making proactive efforts to market the service effectively across the county. The referral criteria have narrowed in recent years and over 200 organisations refer to the service, so it is not surprising that a proportion of these do not fully understand the detail. However, team members reported that a significant proportion make the referral in the clear expectation that it will be rejected, but have nowhere else to go due to cuts in other services.

⁴ In January 2019, it was agreed that the definition of service users be extended to include all family members who directly benefit from the service.

⁵ This is the figure for successful departures, which have been reported over the last three years. If we include the unsuccessful/unplanned ones, it increases to 62%

⁶ When the pandemic struck, it was agreed that this metric would be suspended, as it was inappropriate to discharge clients who were especially vulnerable at this time.

They have learned that the team’s commitment and expertise is such that they will take responsibility for ensuring that people do not slip through the cracks, but are signposted elsewhere.

“I hope they carry on funding this service properly. I don’t know what I would have done without it.” **Service user**

2. CONTEXT

2.1 Homelessness in Oxfordshire

Oxford is the least affordable city in the UK for housing, and house prices across the county continue to increase faster than earnings⁷. The support system for those at risk of homelessness is ‘traumatised’⁸, largely due to expenditure cuts from 2018 onwards in homeless prevention budgets and related services. Provision is concentrated in the city which encourages those at risk to migrate to Oxford, putting additional pressure on capacity. Demand for services continues to grow - since 2012, the number of rough sleepers in Oxford has increased by 400%⁹, and in 2018-19, 4200 single households came into contact with the homelessness system in Oxfordshire¹⁰.

Although there is not yet a national plan for social care, the government’s pre-pandemic commitment to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and end it by 2027 gives some cause for optimism, as does Oxfordshire County Council’s latest thinking on how to address homelessness in the county.

2.2 The housing-led approach

Oxfordshire County Council are implementing a ‘housing-led’ approach to services which will be commissioned from April 2022. The [Housing-led feasibility Study for Oxfordshire](#) produced by Imogen Blood & Associates identifies that ‘an effective, multi-agency, strategic approach to prevention across the county must be the cornerstone of a housing-led approach’¹¹.

This approach aims to provide people with their own homes as a priority, then provide them with the support they need to sustain independent living, with the intention to minimise the number of transitions each individual makes before moving into a permanent home.

This report therefore frames Connection Support’s Housing Support Service in the context of the prevention goals of the housing-led model.

2.3 Alliance model

The Housing Support Service or ‘Generic Floating Support’ is currently delivered by Connection Support as part of the County’s response to homelessness in Oxfordshire and the contract is being retendered at the time of writing. Commissioning for this service and the housing-led approach more broadly will be structured through an ‘Alliance’ model, which tenders the provision of services for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to a collective group of agencies. The Alliance

⁷ Lloyds Bank. 2018. Affordability of city homes. URL: https://www.lloydsbankinggroup.com/globalassets/documents/media/press-releases/lloydsbank/2018/020218_affordable_cities_lb.pdf Centre for Cities. 2018. Cities Outlook. URL: <https://www.centreforcities.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/18-01-12-Final-FullCities-Outlook-2018.pdf>

⁸ Housing-led Feasibility Study for Oxfordshire: Full Report Written by Imogen Blood, Mark Goldup, Anita Birchall, Shelly Dulson and Chloë Hands Commissioned by Crisis, with funding from Crisis and the Oxfordshire councils, November 2020 – para 4.1

⁹ Homelessnessoxfordshire.uk

¹⁰ Housing-led Feasibility Study for Oxfordshire: Full Report Written by Imogen Blood, Mark Goldup, Anita Birchall, Shelly Dulson and Chloë Hands Commissioned by Crisis, with funding from Crisis and the Oxfordshire councils, November 2020 – para 4.2

¹¹ Housing-led Feasibility Study for Oxfordshire: Full Report Written by Imogen Blood, Mark Goldup, Anita Birchall, Shelly Dulson and Chloë Hands Commissioned by Crisis, with funding from Crisis and the Oxfordshire councils, November 2020 – para 7.1

partnership will organise services and manage the budget envelope, a process which places cross-agency collaboration at the heart of effective service delivery.

2.4 COVID 19

This review covers the last three years of delivery, during which time the global pandemic struck. Clients of this service have been particularly impacted by the psychological and economic effects of the pandemic, as they were already in a fragile situation. The economic fall-out has been cushioned for some, not all, by the furlough scheme, but for those struggling to get by on low wages, a 20% cut in income can precipitate a crisis. A significant proportion will find that there is no job to return to after the scheme ends and that alternative employment options have significantly narrowed.

The pandemic also resulted in the sudden withdrawal of many services for people at risk of homelessness; many organisations either closed completely, as they felt it was not possible to deliver their services remotely, greatly reduced their provision, or had a temporary interruption while they assessed what was feasible. The temporary stay on evictions protected many clients and the Everyone In policy has also temporarily relieved pressure on services, but both of these are now coming to an end.

Never has the need for a homelessness prevention service been greater.

3. REVIEW PARAMETERS

The recommissioning of the service, and the introduction of the new Housing-Led commissioning structure, provides an opportunity for Connection Support to conduct an in-depth review of its service provision. This report aims to inform that tendering process for the Housing Support Service by:

- demonstrating where the service has succeeded in its goals and
- identifying opportunities for innovation and improvement.

3.1 Methodology

This report examines Connection Support's delivery of the Housing Support service for the three years from 12 April 2018, in line with the current service contract issued by Oxfordshire County Council. The data collection, engagement and analysis activities to produce this report included:

- An online survey circulated amongst 27 stakeholders;
- Statistical analysis of data maintained for the purposes of supporting service delivery on Connection Support's database; and
- Interviews with 25 stakeholders, including service users, Support Workers, Team Managers, Senior Managers, Commissioners, Council Social Workers and staff from a range of partner organisations and those who refer into the service.

4. SERVICE OVERVIEW

4.1 Background

Connection Support has been delivering a Housing Support service (formally known as 'Floating Support') across Oxfordshire as a core service since its foundation in 1995. The provision has naturally evolved in response to changing needs, national and local priorities and funding contexts. The most recent contract began in January 2018 and is a non-statutory preventative service targeted at single people, families, households at risk of homelessness or experiencing domestic abuse.

Oxfordshire County Council commission Connection Support to deliver the service at a cost of £600,000 per year, which includes a Payment by Results element of £50,000.

4.2 Purpose

As defined by the 2017 Oxfordshire County Council service specification, the primary priorities of the service are:

- The prevention of homelessness (2018 Act)
- The prevention of repeat homelessness
- Maintenance of tenancy/accommodation

The service is commissioned to provide a focus on prevention and early intervention for anyone at risk of losing their accommodation, or sofa surfing, before they become homeless. In addition to resolving immediate housing crises, the service is intended to equip individuals with the skills to avoid homelessness on a sustainable basis, including strengthened resilience and increased capability for living independently.¹² Looking upstream of the formal eviction process, it is widely recognised that prevention activity is most effective before the 56 day threshold required by the Homelessness Reduction Act¹³. The service is not primarily intended to provide long-term support for people with complex needs or to be a ‘form-filling’ service – The Citizen’s Advice Bureau has a Universal Credit application support function which supports routine clients with these activities.

“Homelessness prevention is massive. There are so many things that Connection have been able to do which have stopped tenancies ending.” – Locality Support Worker, Oxfordshire County Council

4.3 The Service in Practice

4.3.1 Client profile

The majority of clients are aged between 24 and 65 and approximately three quarters are white British. There is a slightly higher proportion of women than men using the service. The full demographic profile of clients who have been referred to the service is shown in Appendix I.

Clients present with a wide range of background issues with differing levels of need. Some are experiencing a short-term economic crisis, for example due to job loss or relationship breakdown. Many have rent or mortgage arrears which have built up due to fear of addressing the seriousness of their situation and/or a lack of understanding of their benefits entitlements. Some have long-term underlying issues, including addiction, domestic abuse or mental health issues. Many have issues with anti-social behaviour and other long-term health problems, and a proportion of clients are referred from prison and probation services. Some have autism or learning difficulties which aren’t severe enough to qualify them for help elsewhere, but render them incapable of navigating the complexities of modern life alone. During the review period, an increasing proportion of families have been supported by the service, which has added an additional layer of complexity to the work.

4.3.2 Way of working

The Connection Support team works alongside clients to overcome the challenges they face in life, with the ultimate goal of solving homelessness and achieving independence. The approach is therefore psychologically informed and person-centred, as support workers seek to find creative, individual solutions.

4.3.3 Personalised support plan

Support Workers engage with clients at an initial assessment and, if the referral is accepted, a

¹² Oxfordshire County Council Community Floating Support Service Specification, Schedule I, paras 3.1 and 5.4

¹³ Housing-led Feasibility Study for Oxfordshire: Full Report Written by Imogen Blood, Mark Goldup, Anita Birchall, Shelly Dulson and Chloë Hands Commissioned by Crisis, with funding from Crisis and the Oxfordshire councils, November 2020 – para 7.1

full assessment is conducted within 14 days. At this stage, a tailored support plan is co-produced with the client using a strengths-based approach. The aim of this plan is to enable them to develop their resilience and equip them with the skills and tools they need to move on to independent living as quickly as is achievable for their individual circumstances.

4.3.4 Short-term where possible

A minority of clients will require intensive, longer-term support due to the complexity of their situations, but the team supports the majority into independent living within six months.

4.3.5 Expertise

Support workers each have a case load of up to 25 clients, or over 30 if they work exclusively on the digital service. Activities that support workers routinely undertake with clients include:

- supporting housing register applications
- support in court eviction proceedings
- negotiation of repayment plans for arrears
- benefits applications for more complex cases including Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payments
- resettlement work, including helping clients to set up utilities and supporting grants applications e.g. for household goods
- advice and skills development for budgeting and tenancy management
- support to seek or maintain education, training or employment opportunities
- signposting to other services, including to addiction or mental health services where appropriate.

4.3.6 Digital provision

Pre-COVID, the service was already working with up to 25% of its clients entirely digitally, depending on the number who met the digital criteria. Of the rest of the clients, the majority receive an initial intensive level of support before transitioning to telephone support where possible as a trusting relationship develops, but there is a proportion of the clients who continue to require face-to-face support throughout their time with the service.

“I had never moved into a place before and never organised bills. Without you, I wouldn’t have known where to start. It was amazing. They were like a friend’. **Service-user**

“If we don’t help with benefits this will lead to rent arrears anyway – we save time and effort by helping them sooner.” **Support Worker, Connection Support**

FINDINGS

5. PREVENTION

Overall, 98.95% of service users during the review period avoided eviction. This performance is illustrated by financial quarter below, with reference to the service's target of 95%.



In the course of our interviews, one commissioner enquired about how many re-referrals we have – understanding that for these people, homelessness may have been forestalled rather than prevented. 13% of all referrals to the service had had full Housing Support service in the preceding two years.

The minority of service users who did suffer eviction were mostly evicted from privately-let accommodation. In the majority of these cases, it was necessary for the eviction process to be completed in order to avoid the client becoming voluntarily homeless and facing the subsequent restrictions in housing opportunities. Once the process was complete, the team supported the clients to secure appropriate housing elsewhere.

5.1 Upstream prevention

It is a requirement of the service that all clients have a housing need, and the urgency of that need is assessed at referral. Of the total 1793 individual cases seen during the review period, 1,114 (61%) of clients were not yet facing an imminent crisis.

The human cost of reaching crisis point is significant. Not only is it an extremely stressful experience for clients, which can cause additional problems such as family break-down and worsening substance misuse, but the fact of reaching crisis point has an impact on a client's self-esteem. Lighter touch upstream course corrections impact less on a client's independence and enable the support worker to move them on more quickly.

If we assume¹⁴ that, without the service, 75% of these households who were not yet at imminent risk of eviction would ultimately have been evicted, 835 households were prevented from homelessness 'upstream' during the three years reviewed.

5.2 Prevention at crisis point

Over the three years, 679 households working with us in the service were assessed as at immediate

¹⁴ Team members estimated between 50 and 100% of these households would have been evicted without this service.
pg. 10

risk of eviction in the next few days. The total number of service users evicted from their accommodation while being supported by the service was 75 in the same period. It seems reasonable to conclude that 604 households at immediate risk avoided homelessness as a result of the support received.

5.3 Financial value of prevention

The total cost of an individual being homeless for 12 months is £20,128¹⁵, so if we assume that each household consists on average of 1.5 individuals and they would have been homeless for six months, that would give a saving of £15,096 per household. According to the assumptions above, 1,439 households were prevented from eviction, giving a total saving to the tax payer over the three years of £22.8m. The service costs £600k per year including the payment by results element, giving a net saving of around £21m¹⁶.

“You have stopped families from becoming homeless and supported young families onto the housing register”. **Locality Support Worker, Oxfordshire County Council**

“The strength of this service is its focus as a prevention service. We achieve exactly what we set out to do”. **Team Manager, Connection Support**

“I’ve got nothing but praise. It’s brilliant, amazing! I’ve seen so many people house”. **Job Centre Floor Manager**

6. INCOME GENERATION

Although it is not a key performance indicator, in 2019, the team began to record the amount of income generated for clients in the service. Income is achieved in a range of ways, including supporting them to claim the benefits they are entitled to, enabling them to access food banks or charitable grants to pay down rent arrears or to support resettlement, for example by purchasing white goods. Connection Support’s contributions to clients from its own welfare fund are also included in the calculation below.

In 2019, we achieved £111k of income for clients in this way and in 2020, £128k.

7. QUALITY SERVICE

7.1 Delivering valuable work

Interviewees were asked in the broadest terms what they thought of the service, and the most common response was that it is a quality and very *necessary* service, which helps people who have nowhere else to go. Several referring organisations singled out the fact that the service can still do an element of face-to-face ‘handholding’ work as its key differentiator and where it adds the most value for complex clients.

There have been no complaints during the review period.

“I hope they carry on funding this service properly. I don’t know what I would have done without it.” **Service user**

“We have had some awful cases, but have worked with Connection and families have been saved from the precipice. Connection are good at this difficult, complex work.” **Lead Manager, Oxfordshire County**

¹⁵ www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/cost-of-homelessness/

¹⁶ Total households: 835 + 604 = 1439. Cost of homelessness: £15,906 x 1439 = £22,888,000. Cost of service: £600,000 x 3 = £1,800,000. Total saving: £22,888,000 - £1,800,000 = £21,088,000

Council

“I think it’s a very good service and very well needed. I have worked very closely with a lot of support workers over the years from Connection Support and the job that they do is invaluable to the service I provide.” **District Council housing officer**

7.2 Care and dedication

Interviewees, in particular the service users, praised the personal kindness and commitment of the support team in the highest terms. A sample of the positive comments received by the review team is reproduced below.

“I have been so happy with the support. I couldn’t have coped without your help. Kate has been absolutely brilliant, so caring, professional and not judgemental, I couldn’t have asked for more.” **Service-user**

“The support has just been amazing. The Support Worker is like the sort of friend who you’ve never made friends with before.” **Service-user**

“Connection are brilliant – they do a lot of great work. They really care. That’s what you need, to be passionate and to care about the clients – the rest you can learn.” **Housing Association pre-tenancy support officer**

This impression is borne out by the support workers’ descriptions of the personal satisfaction they derive from a successful case and the pride they feel in their work.

“The other day, one of my clients was downsized to a one bed as she had lost her children to care. She was allowed contact via letter but her children’s letters were sent to the previous address... she was crying, trying to get hold of the letters from the previous address ... no one wanted to go, it was hard to get access to the property, so I had to rally everyone involved and eventually tracked down the letters. We’re caring people – that’s the sort of thing we go the extra mile to do.” **Support Worker**

“If the professional body they’re dealing with overwhelms them, I’m the middle person that softens it down for them and helps them understand.” **Support Worker**

“We help a lot of people; we get so much positive feedback from people about how much we’ve helped them.” **Support Worker, Connection Support**

7.3 Expertise and advocacy

The technical expertise and knowledge around housing issues was widely recognised as a core strength in Connection Support’s service. Support Workers are not lawyers, but their knowledge of housing law and the legal processes around that and the benefits system, enables them to support clients to defend court action.

A support worker’s presence in court alongside a client demonstrates to judges that the client is engaging positively with the process and the overwhelming majority¹⁷ have positive outcomes. In addition to supporting clients to achieve a positive outcome in court proceedings, clients are often able to avoid the trauma of bailiff action and establish agreed repayment plans which buy enough time for them to maximise their income to be able to meet their bills in future.

¹⁷ Internal reporting for court outcomes was inconsistent but suggests that of 97 cases in which we supported clients, only three had an unsuccessful outcome.

The teams operates at district level which enables a deep understanding of local conditions, for example around employment opportunities and connections with services in that part of the county.

“We help facilitate people accessing social housing. We can help them navigate the process, it’s so complicated.... We can make very confusing things much easier because we know the system.” **Support Worker**

“Support workers know the terminology to use and can articulate the clients’ situation better than the clients can alone.” **District Council housing officer**

“The team are skilled about benefits and housing law and aside from that, meeting people’s emotional needs, e.g. domestic abuse, people with mental health needs that may or may not be being met. They need to try to unpick all this and I think they do an amazing job.” **Commissioner**

“I think you guys are amazing. The level of knowledge and experience you have is just so valuable...I always rely upon and trust Connection. With all the changes in law and housing regulations around Covid, I would have been lost without you guys.” **Locality Support Worker, Oxfordshire County Council**

7.4 Effective Management

The team gave very positive feedback about the support they have from their immediate management team. There were some sincere concerns expressed regarding remuneration and its impact on retention, which are being explored by the Connection Support senior team.

A lead commissioner described the management team as ‘open and transparent and as ‘going from strength to strength’.

The team enjoy each others’ company and are missing the opportunity to work together in the office, but they have continued to share knowledge and experience, for example in a full team meeting over Teams before Christmas, where a support worker shared legal updates and changes in the benefits system. Throughout the three years of this review, a range of training has been provided ranging from core knowledge such as the Homelessness Reduction Action, to added value offerings such as training in modern slavery and hoarding.

“Whenever there have been issues, they have been in touch really quickly - I have never had a sense that things were being hidden from us.” **Commissioner**

“We have a lot of highly skilled team members who have been here a long time. Pay should be higher for what we do and the quality of the work we do.” **Support Worker**

“Our strengths are that we share so much information – each one of us has specific knowledge. This is amazing in the Banbury office – we have missed bouncing ideas off each other in lockdown.” **Support Worker**

“Kate’s the best manager I’ve ever had.” **Team Manager**

8. ADAPTING TO COVID

8.1 Transition to a digital service

During the first COVID lockdown, most other agencies closed, but the team, while simultaneously dealing with the personal implications of COVID in their own lives, adapted and built on the existing digital provision, so they could continue to be there for their clients.

The service remained open and the team proactively contacted partner agencies to ensure they were aware of this. They distributed information leaflets targeted directly at service-users, as the usual referral mechanisms had temporarily been disrupted. This may be one of the reasons self-referrals have grown as a proportion of total referrals. Where it was impossible to complete a task remotely, there was flexibility in the provision - for example we continued to accompany clients to hospital appointments where absolutely necessary.

8.2 New ways of working

Support Workers, replaced in-person assessments and meetings with telephone, FaceTime or Zoom calls. Within a few months, Connection Support had deployed Microsoft Teams across the organisation for internal meetings to enable face to face remote communication.

Support workers learned how to merge calls between service users and, for example, utility suppliers or benefits services. This enabled them to get through to the right person and explain their client's situation and their own role, then 'patch in' the client. This was not only time-efficient but resulted in service-users engaging more positively with organisations, as the initial contact was with someone who better understood their circumstances.

"Call merging was a revelation." **Senior Support worker**

Support workers tailored their response to their clients' situations and preferences. For example, one Support Worker carried folding chairs in her car to enable outdoor face-to-face meetings in parks where digital engagement was not an option. When the courts were closed in the first lockdown, another support worker liaised directly between the client and their landlord to agree a repayment plan and avoid eviction.

"We have found ways to work around most things." **Team Manager**

8.3 Additional equipment and support

Connection Support equipped all frontline workers with laptops, phones and printers and scanners where necessary, to enable efficient home working. Staff were given an additional allowance in their pay for office supplies and management reinforced with them that the Employee Assistance Programme was there to support them. Wellbeing initiatives were introduced, such a 'virtual lunchbreak' over teams and a wellbeing knowledge sharing area on the shared drive.

"We're able to do more on the system, less paper, less fuel. I've been taken aback by how we've adapted."
Support Worker

8.4 Evolving client group

The team is now adapting to a changing demographic of client coming to the service, who find themselves in financial trouble for the first time and have never had contact with statutory services before. This client group has fewer long-term, intractable issues so a short, digital intervention is proving successful.

The team is developing a new provision of group information sessions and 'How to' briefing documents on, for example, navigating the housing register, in order to deliver an efficient service to this new cohort. There is a higher proportion of homeowners, so the team are also refreshing their knowledge of dealing with mortgage foreclosures.

"Our team have adapted really well and are really flexible. It's not a case of 'it's not my job' – we just roll up our sleeves and get on with it." **Senior Support Worker**

"Digital working met a lot of resistance at first. Now we have realised this can work really, really well." **Team Manager, Connection Support**

8.5 Ongoing face-to-face component required

Team members and referrers were clear that, although digital support has been more successful than anyone expected, it does not work for every client. For example, when managing paperwork, support workers have found that with some clients it can be more efficient, and worth the travel time, to physically show a client where to sign or enter information.

"I've had one client for about six months..... [remotely due to COVID] He's entitled to a council tax reduction but no-one told him, so he's owed lots of money. I've been working with him for six months and still haven't managed to get a signature... I've sent five stamped addressed envelopes, called in advance to describe the colour of the envelope and stamp, put a yellow dot where he needs to make his mark."

Support Worker

"Connection Support pick up the trickier ones who need face to face. Connections are great to be able to do that work. When they've done that handholding, they will move them onto the digital support system."

District Council Housing Officer

"I am a strong believer that you cannot beat face to face.... virtual work is ok for some people but in support work, you need to build up the trust, build a relationship, get inside their world. Not everyone has the resources or skills to do zoom etc.... so I would say do please retain the face to face work." **Pre-tenancy Support Officer**

"Kate [Support Worker] called me on the telephone all through lockdown, but I missed having company." **Service-user**

"Remotely, you do miss out on a lot of things which you'd pick up on if could see clients in person and see their house. That initial meeting is vital, then a lot of the other stuff afterwards can be done remotely. This still depends on the client – some are not good on the phone or can't text. There is no way you could work completely remotely." **Support Worker**

9. LIVED EXPERIENCE AND CO-PRODUCTION

Co-production is working effectively at the one-to-one level in terms of service users developing their own support plans. It has been challenging in this particular service to ensure that clients' influence drives change at the different levels of the service provision, for example in the design of the service, staff recruitment and the allocation of resources. Unlike living in supported accommodation which, by its nature, is not easy to conceal from family and friends, many clients of this service prefer to keep their involvement confidential and, once they have moved on, to leave it in their past.

However, this is a priority for Connection Support and recruitment is underway for a Co-production Manager and a number of frontline staff are able to draw on their own experience to support their clients.

The team runs regular client satisfaction surveys, either electronically, which enjoy a higher response rate of around 10% or in paper form. The feedback is positive, e.g. in q1 2019 81% of clients said they would recommend the service.

“I think people are lucky to have the service – going back to my own issues, I ended up homeless and remember how it felt with the professional bodies coming at you – it’s absolutely phenomenal that we are able to help them get them back on their feet.” **Support Worker**

“I got thrown out at 16.... I get a lot of positive feedback from my clients because I’m real.” **Support Worker**

10. CREATIVE RESOURCING

In addition to the core support team, Connection Support offers regular placements to social work students. The team finds that the time invested in managing them is rewarded by the value they add through their fresh perspectives, up-to-date knowledge and connections to academia and others who support people facing homelessness. The service has also utilised volunteers in the west of the county, to perform straightforward tasks such as taking paperwork to clients for signature. The aim is to make greater use of volunteers going forward to tap into the post-covid community spirit.

“Your service is only as good as your support workers and you have a really strong, committed team.” **District Council Housing Officer**

11. ADDED VALUE

11.1 Service of last resort

During austerity, services were cut for those facing homelessness in Oxfordshire, and the referral criteria for many remaining services, including this one, were narrowed. The result has been that there is a cohort of clients who do not obviously meet the criteria for any services, but nevertheless need help to avoid homelessness. The team’s experiences on the ground confirm Isaac Ghinai’s finding that *‘people experiencing homelessness and service providers expressed a feeling that current services – particularly those for mild-moderate mental health issues – do not meet the very high level of need in this population’*.¹⁸

The absence of services for people with mild autism or learning disabilities was highlighted a number of times in the interviews.

Team members described using the housing need criterion as a ‘way in’ to help clients deal with the underlying issues which put them at risk of homelessness and who otherwise would fall between the cracks in provision.

11.2 Going the extra mile

There is a small proportion of clients whose situations are extraordinarily difficult, so an intense and occasionally extended intervention is required. Support workers derive particular satisfaction from these cases. Some examples which were described in the interviews are briefly illustrated below.

11.2.1 Case Study 1

“A guy was referred to me whose family are in another country. He was working and coping with his finances until he had a problem with his eyes. They decided to operate and something went wrong so he suddenly lost his sight and could no longer live alone. He initially moved in with friends, but that became a difficult relationship and, because he had a religious culture, he couldn’t move anywhere and live with anybody. I worked in partnership with the sight impairment team, who did some amazing

¹⁸ A health needs assessment of the adult street homeless population in Oxfordshire. Dr Isaac Ghinai, July 2019. pg. 16

work, providing him with adaptations such as a stick, but he suffered emotionally as he had to transition so quickly to becoming completely dependent. I'm always aware of professional boundaries, because you don't want people to come to rely on you, but I had no choice to do things for him because he simply couldn't do anything for himself. He couldn't see, so couldn't cook for himself so had to rely on people and eat junk food to survive. I helped him apply for benefits and registered him for housing and he was eventually offered a flat. I got him settled with his utilities, furniture etc and all the way through had the confidence of the sight impairment team doing their bit and Connection doing our bit - it all worked really well. He started to refer to me as his brother.... It was really rewarding.” **Support Worker**

11.2.2 Case Study 2

“We had a call from the Mental Health nurse about a man who was 87 years old and had severe mental health problems. He was living in a flat belonging to his ex-wife, who had just died – even though they were divorced, they had still been together and now he didn't have anyone. His kids had sold the flat and he had to move out within seven days. His son lived in Egypt and his daughter was going on holiday, so planned to put him in a B&B for three weeks. He was too depressed to talk to anyone and refused to go to the council to make a homeless application. I rang the council and one of the housing officers came out to see him; we did all the paperwork and within days he was placed in temporary accommodation. I helped him pack up all his stuff, got him food, bread and milk, made his bed up and unpacked his clothes. I supported him with carers and got him a radio and a big tv because he is partially sighted. Now his son is coming over and will look after him until he dies. He tells everyone I'm his adopted daughter!” **Senior Support Worker**

“We're unique because we're flexible and we'll do what we need to do to ensure that people are in a better place when we leave them.” **Support Worker**

“They say it's a housing service, but it's not just housing – we're so involved with the clients.” **Senior Support Worker**

“There will be clients we can do a short piece of work for and close within, or well before, six months.... Then there are the clients who have every issue under the sun, rent arrears, substance misuse, mental health, debt, social services involvement with children, physical health issues, and there is no way on earth we can help support a person like this and get a positive outcome within six months.” **Support Worker, Connection Support**

12. PARTNERSHIP WORKING

It is not possible to support our client group effectively without working very closely with partners. The Oxfordshire Safeguarding Adults Board's report into the deaths of homeless people between December 2018 and July 2019 identified the need for 'an integrated approach to meeting their care and support, mental health, physical health, substance abuse and accommodation needs'.

12.1 Symbiotic relationship with partners

Feedback from partner organisations and the Connection Support team suggests that the Service collaborates extremely effectively across Oxfordshire. Referring organisations trust the team to support clients effectively and with compassion. Specialists such as lawyers and domestic abuse workers appreciate the opportunity to rely on Connection Support to do their own work in parallel and create a positive, symbiotic working relationship. Several referrers mentioned particular 'favourite' support workers by name, with whom they have built a strong relationship over the years and whose personal performance they went out of their way to compliment.

“I can put faith in Connection Support – I’ve always been able to trust the Connection Support Workers I’ve worked with over the years to complement my work safely and effectively. The [Connection Support] Support Worker did a separate piece of work and it worked seamlessly.” **Domestic Abuse Outreach Worker**

“[The Connection Support Worker] developed a relationship with the client which enabled him to give instructions, arranged psychiatric assessments, meetings with Social Services and the landlord to advocate for him. What I valued most was the symbiotic relationship that we had with her - and the care and dedication that she showed towards her client was just incredible.” **Turpin and Miller Manager**

“Housing Associations hold us in very high regard and work alongside us to help maintain people in the properties, even though they might have significant arrears outstanding... they trust us enough to let us work alongside the clients to keep them in their homes.” **Senior Support Worker**

“It’s often really useful to work with someone who works with Connection Support because they can provide the intensive on the ground support for matters which are ancillary to the legal aid matter.” **Turpin & Miller Manager**

“We maintain really good relationships with other external agencies. We have respect from other agencies. They know our work is done in a professional and positive way.” **Team Manager, Connection Support**

12.2 Enable clients to access other services

In addition to referring people onto other organisations where appropriate, the team works with clients who need physical or emotional support to access those services. One support worker described a client who had been referred to a service on the other side of the county, but had no transport to get there; nor did she have any shoes to wear on the way. The support worker drove her to the appointment.

‘I would have an anxiety that a large proportion of clients would never reach our doors if it wasn’t for Connection Support – either because approaching a solicitor is a scary thing to do or they need physical/psychological support to access our service.’ – **Turpin and Miller Manager**

12.3 Need for improved ‘upstream’ identification and communication

Discussions during the course of our review identified the need for an earlier identification point for clients who are at risk of arrears, so they are not allowed to accumulate for as long as six months. One commissioner proposed mapping the evictions process to identify trigger points, creating a shared communication mechanism for a range of agencies and embedding Support Workers in councils and landlord organisations. Through the work of the Council and the Alliance model going forward, these proposals seem achievable in the medium term, and this report supports those recommendations.

12.4 Embedded workers a successful upstream strategy

Before COVID, Connection Support had an embedded staff member working part-time in the Cherwell Housing Team, and the feedback suggests that this model of collaboration has enabled improved communication and early identification of clients with whom prevention work can be effective. The team looks forward to re-establishing this arrangement when circumstances allow. Given this positive feedback about this role, Connection Support’s Embedded Housing Workers in health system, and the Trailblazer project in the past, it is recommended that opportunities for more embedded working arrangements are explored in the future.

“The Trailblazer pilot was absolutely brilliant, one of the best things I have seen for years. It strengthened the

efforts of social services because people would respond to independent agencies in a way that they won't respond to social workers and brought expert housing and legislative knowledge in-house. It saved huge amounts of time." **Lead Manager, Oxfordshire County Council**

13. KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

With one exception, the service has consistently exceeded the target KPIs throughout the three years reviewed.

KPI	Target	Three year average
Number of service users ¹⁹	>700	790
Number of evictions avoided	>95%	99%
Referrals assessed in 3 days	>99%	99%
Full assessment in 14 days	>95%	100%
Closed within 6 months	>65%	52% ²⁰
Clients in employment (PBR)	>70%	91%

"The performance of the service has been extremely positive to date with results being consistently exceeded." **Commissioner**

The team looks forward to these KPIs being reviewed for the recommissioning. The target to move people on within six months works against the aim to support 350 clients at any one time and both are impeded by the narrowness of the referral criteria, which excludes many people who could be helped by the service. The internal inconsistency of these three criteria makes it impossible to meet all three at the same time.

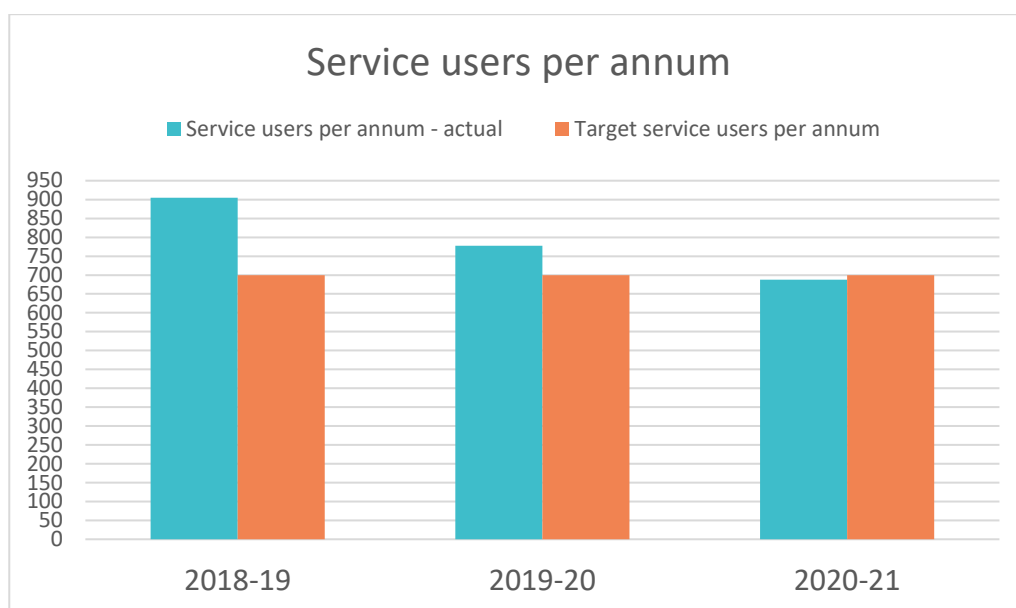
13.1 KPI - Number of service users

The service is targeted to support 350 people at any point in time, for up to 6 months on average and 700 over the course of a year. Although the service did not consistently support 350 at any one time, the total number supported during the course of the three years exceeded the target.

The total number of individual cases over three years was 1793, and a total of 2371 people are estimated to have benefitted from the service in total. The difference between the two numbers reflects the fact that, in January 2019, it was agreed that the definition of service users be extended to include family members who directly benefit from the service.

¹⁹ In January 2019, it was agreed that the definition of service users be extended to include all family members who directly benefit from the service.

²⁰ This is the figure for successful departures, which have been reported over the last three years. If we include the unsuccessful/unplanned ones, it increases to 62%



When these case numbers were agreed, the impact of factors such as the introduction of Universal Credit, the increasing pressures of the local housing crisis, the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act and further cuts to statutory services were not fully understood. These environmental factors have had an impact on the demand for the service offered, and have increased the complexity of the cases the service works with. Also, at the beginning of 2019, the Citizen’s Advice Bureau’s Help to Claim service was established which provided a better option for routine benefits application support.

Despite these factors, the team supported 905 people²¹ in 2018 and 778 in 2019. This dropped to 688 in 2020 in the context of the pandemic, when there was a formal ban on evictions and many referring organisations were closed or working at significantly reduced capacity.

At no point has the service had a waiting list.

“Without Connection, Social Services would have to pick up the work.” **Commissioner**

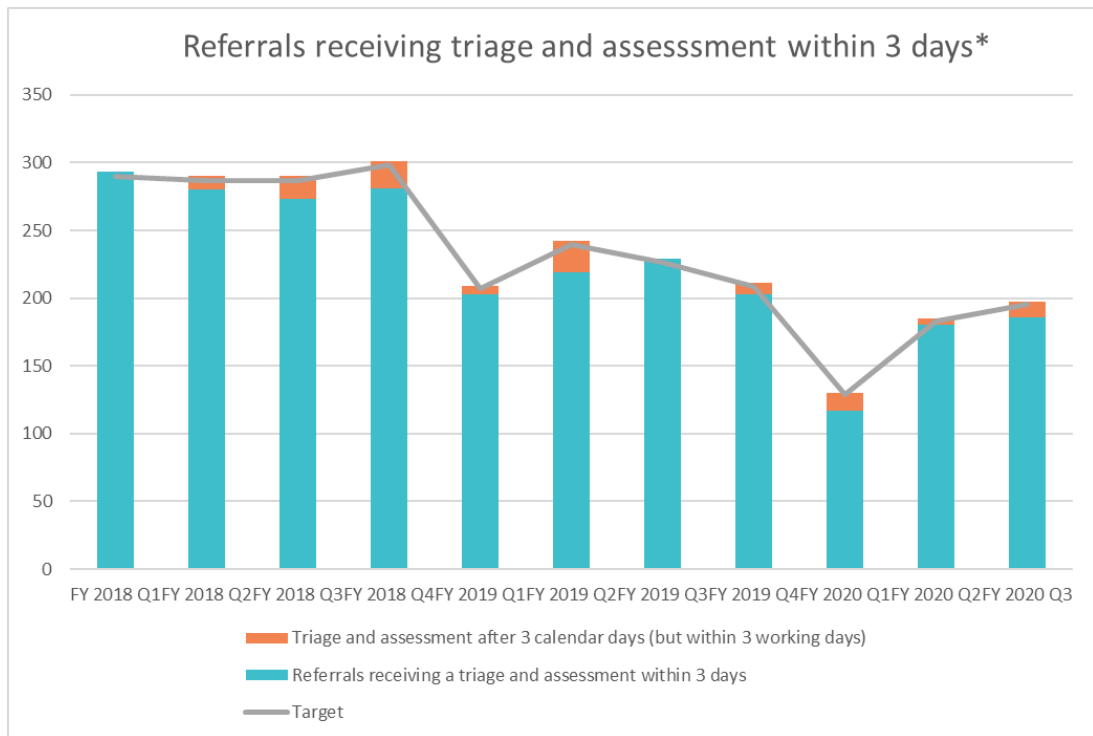
13.2 KPIs – Speed of assessment

The service has consistently exceeded the KPIs for speed of initial triage within three days and full assessment within 14 days. Interviews with external contacts showed that the referral process, in the main, was easily understood and ran smoothly. This was partly thanks to the introduction of an improved referral form in the first year of this review period.

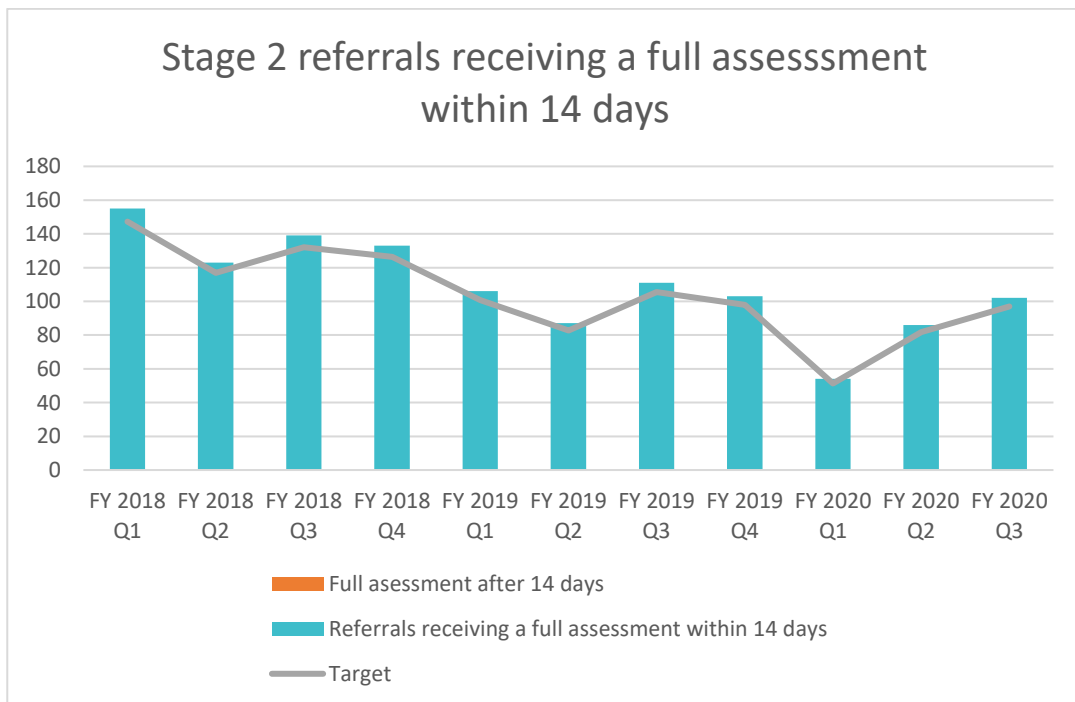
“The speed of how people are picked up is great. To get support in place quickly – a named person to guide the client asap to guide them through when they’re at risk of homelessness.” **Pre-tenancy Support Officer.**

“Connection are one of the ones that will pick up a case quickly.” **Locality Support Worker**

²¹ Appendix 2 provides an analysis of the client demographic over the course of the review period, split by gender, ethnicity and age.



*Delays are over-reported in some quarters, as no allowance was made for weekends in monitoring spreadsheets



Internally, on the other hand, team members reported that the processes were cumbersome and the administration overly paper-based and repetitive. The need for a new Connection Support database to streamline and digitalise these processes has been highlighted by this review and this will be delivered during 2021 to ensure improved efficiency going forward.

13.3 KPI - Close majority within six months

13.3.1 52% of clients closed within six months

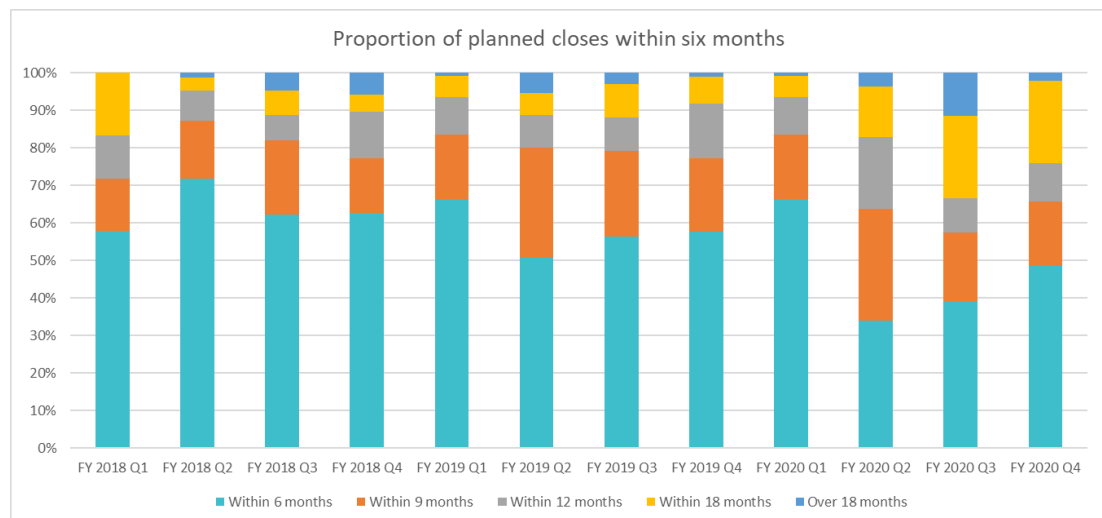
As mentioned above, the majority of clients can be assisted in the relatively short-term, but there is a cohort, increasing after COVID struck, who require a longer-term intervention and in Q2 2020, commissioners agreed that clients should not be closed under this criterion during the pandemic. The target of moving on 65% of clients within six months has therefore not been achieved consistently as it would have required the team to close clients who were not yet independent or had ongoing legal or benefits processes in progress, and would likely have returned to the service if discharged. The team made individual, person-centred decisions to work for a short additional time with certain individuals to minimise this revolving door scenario.

13.3.2 70-87% of clients closed within nine months

The figure below shows that the proportion of genuinely long-staying clients remained very small before COVID struck - between 70% and 87% of clients were closed within nine months in the first two years of the service.

13.3.3 Statistical Note

The service has historically reported closure data solely relating to planned closures; the proportion of closures within six months increases when unplanned departures are included.



13.3.4 Reasons for clients remaining over six months

When interviewed, Support Workers understood and supported the aim of moving people through the service quickly to avoid dependency and maximise the number of people supported. They shared touching stories about the personal connections they had built with clients and were particularly proud of the cases where they had gone the extra mile to achieve a positive outcome for a client. However, when explaining the barriers to closing clients the team cited other factors such as:

- Multi-agency working adds a lot of value, but creates delays while waiting for other organisations' processes to kick in.
- The complexity of cases increased over the three years of the contract – e.g. families are multi-faceted and more time consuming to work with than individuals.

- the PIP application process takes longer than six months.
- Universal Credit is a challenging system for some clients to navigate – in particular if they have learning difficulties or are older and struggle with technology. Significant time is required to transfer knowledge and build the skills necessary to achieve independence within this system, even where the technical tools are made available.

13.3.5 Partial digitalisation of systems increases burden on service users

Certain systems such as the housing register and Universal Credit process have moved online, but the system still requires applicants to produce documents which now have to be sourced directly from e.g. banks and scanned in to support the application. Often this requires the person to physically visit the bank, which is challenging for many clients and was impossible during parts of 2020 due to lockdown.

For a person with complex needs, this has created a triple burden of the need 1) to find the documents 2) to access technical equipment needed to scan and submit the paperwork and 3) to master the technology required. Until this system is truly digitalised, this dual process requires additional support time.

13.3.6 Ongoing prevention work

After clients have been formally closed, ongoing support is available through the duty service; support workers give clients their mobile numbers to enable them to reconnect if needed and re-enter the service if necessary.

“It’s difficult when we have to close. I wouldn’t go out of the way to speak to my other friends about bills and fill out forms, but this is like someone who is that friend.” **Service user**

13.4 KPI – Clients in employment (payment by results element of contract)

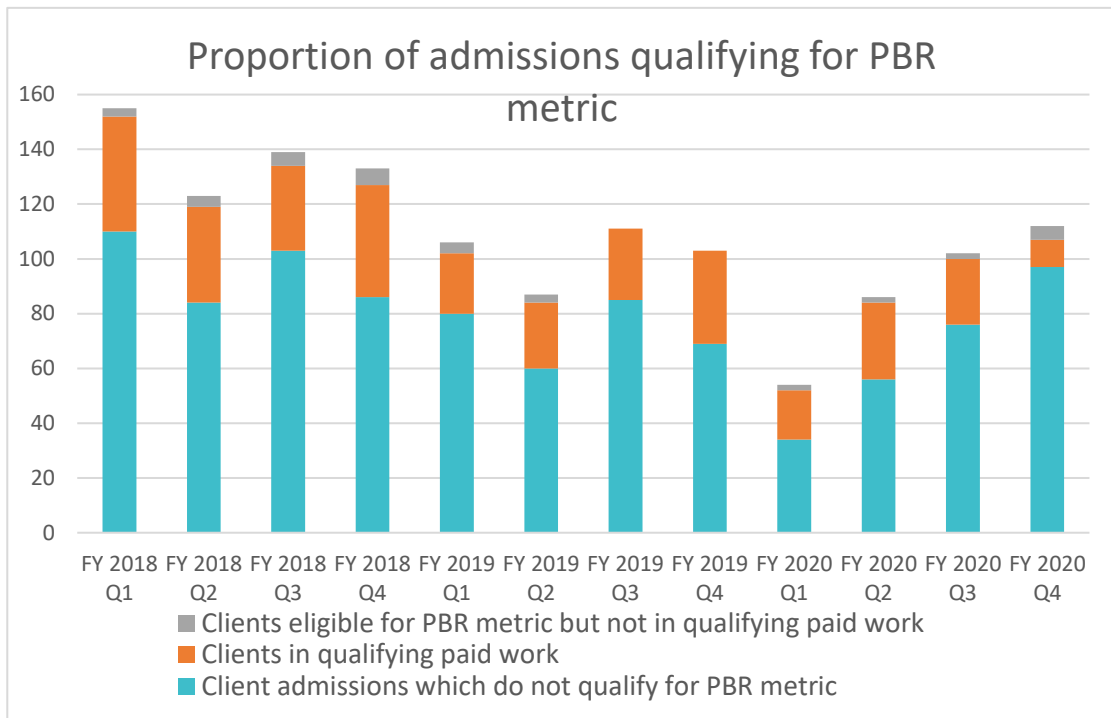
13.4.1 Employment KPI exceeded in every quarter

The service’s target for clients in employment is 70%, which has been easily exceeded at all stages of the contract, including through lockdowns.

FY 2018	FY 2018	FY 2018	FY 2018
Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
97%	89%	86%	89%
FY 2019	FY 2019	FY 2019	FY 2019
Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
85%	89%	100%	100%
FY 2020	FY 2020	FY 2020	FY 2020
Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
90%	93%	93%	79%

13.4.2 Inappropriate KPI for housing service

The PBR metric for the project is based on the number of clients remaining in employment, an indicator which arguably bears little relation to the success of the service, since just 29.6% of clients over the course of the review period were eligible for evaluation against this goal.



In many cases, entering employment at the rates of pay for jobs which are accessible in Oxfordshire would be detrimental to a clients’ situation and may actually cause them to become homeless. A significant proportion of our clients are unable to work due to health issues, or are not yet ready to attempt that step, and pressure to do so could break trust and distract us from the primary objective of preventing them from becoming homeless.

For these reasons, it is suggested that this KPI is not appropriate for the service.

13.4.3 Alternative payment by results metric?

The team would welcome the opportunity to engage with commissioners and partners in Oxfordshire to define an appropriate measure of impact for this service which relates to more relevant factors such as a measure of a client’s resilience and capacity to maintain accommodation and an assessment of the risk factors for eviction.

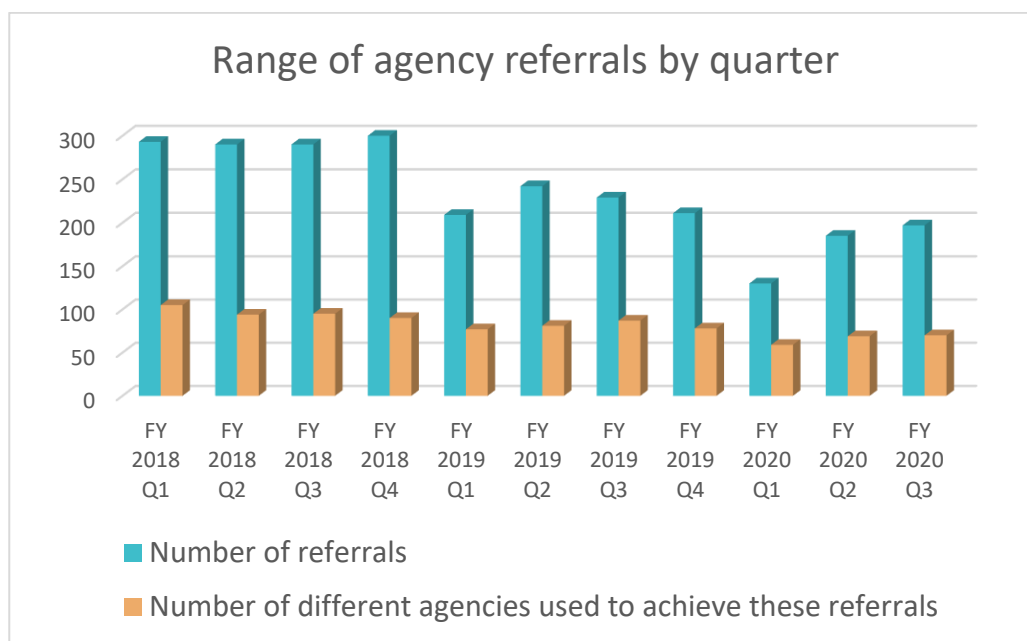
“The challenge is finding a way to measure the impact of what we do for difficult cases. The figures don’t show the value we add for clients who wouldn’t get help any other way.” **Support Worker, Connection Support**

“At [Housing Association] we measure the social value of the work that we do.... Some around finance, some around confidence. We give these a score at the beginning and the end of the work, for example for how in control of life they feel. It’s a look at their quality of life and mental health.... I feel this gets missed a lot at Connection because they’re so housing focused. Even just linking someone in with a social life somehow, can cause a massive improvement in their lives but it doesn’t get captured.” **Housing Association Pre-Tenancy Support Officer**

14. PATTERN OF REFERRALS...AND REJECTIONS

Although there is no key performance indicator for referrals, the team records this data and the review team’s analysis has shown that referrals come from a very broad range of agencies. The service also refers onto a range of other agencies during normal times, though options have been reduced in the last year due to services closing.

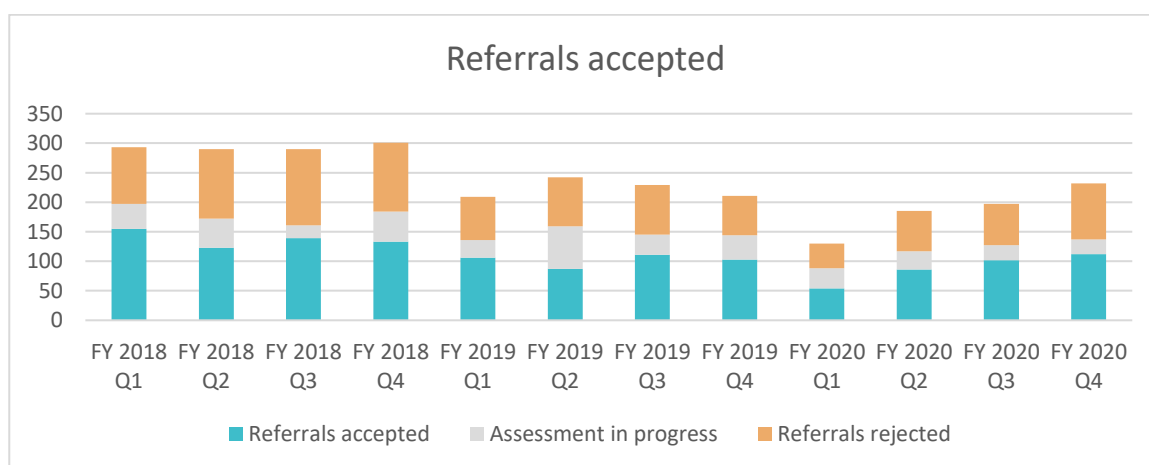
The most notable trend around referrals is the consistently wide range of organisations referring clients to the Housing Support service. Over the course of the review period, referrals came in each quarter from an average of 82 different referral sources and over 200 organisations in total. See Appendix 2.



14.1 Persistent rejected referrals

Effective partnership and signposting are core to the service’s way of working and the team is pleased to be able to connect people to the right services. A proportion of failed referrals naturally occurs in this service due to clients being unable to face the seriousness of their situations, but the relatively high level of rejected referrals between 50-60% has concerned the team over the years. This has declined slightly during the three years, due to a concerted marketing campaign and proactive efforts to engage directly with referring agencies, but a significant improvement has not been achieved.

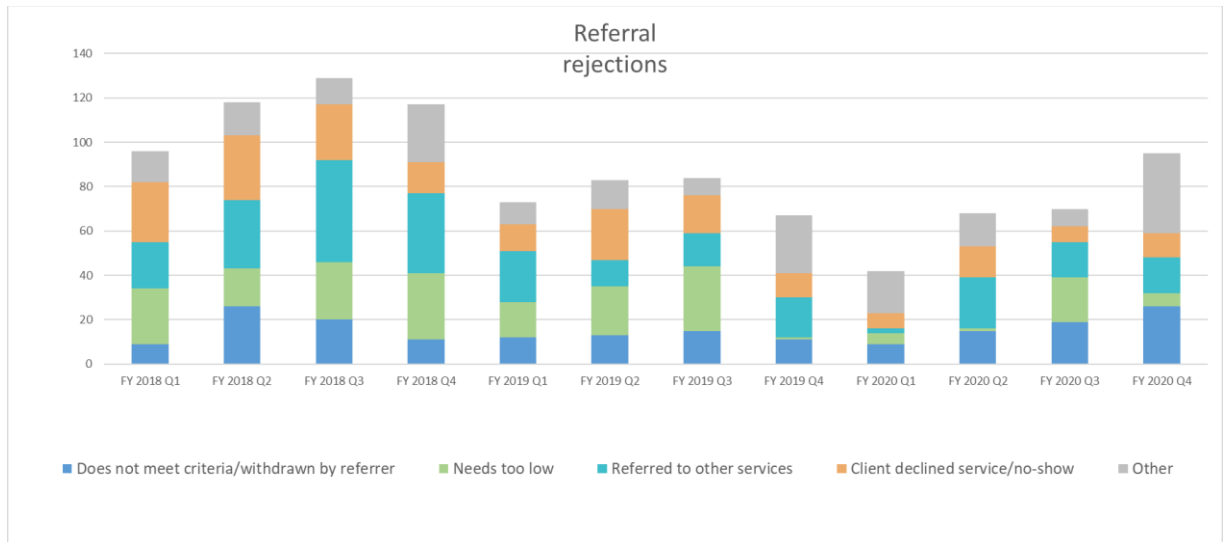
“The team have worked really hard and promoted themselves in all the right places.” **Commissioner**



14.2 Possible explanations for rejections

When referrals come from statutory bodies, especially the probation service, it is unsurprising that a proportion of clients decline or do not engage with the service as shown in orange below. However,

the majority of rejected referrals to this service were withdrawn, referred on elsewhere or identified as having insufficient need for this service. This is a high volume of inappropriate referrals and, with the exception of Q1 2020 when many organisations were not operating at full capacity, this issue has persisted throughout the three years, despite the team’s efforts to communicate the referral criteria as described above. The review team considered possible explanations for this.



14.2.1 Legacy issues

Historically, the referral criteria for this service were much broader and it is likely that some referrers, who have not yet been reached by the team’s communication campaign, are not aware of the criterion that clients have a housing need.

“The service has a legacy for providing a much broader generic support. Social workers still refer to the service based on their historic understanding of this.” **Team Manager, Connection Support**

14.2.2 Staff turnover

Turnover of staff within referring organisations can also create knowledge gaps around referral criteria, and it is recommended that the team continues with its ongoing communication campaign in order to reach new joiners.

“Sometimes the newer social workers don’t know that the referral isn’t appropriate – possibly, they don’t understand what we do as a service.” **Support Worker, Connection Support**

14.2.3 Connection Support website

Some internal and external interviewees identified potential issues with Connection Support’s online information, which may be contributing to inappropriate referrals, while others thought the online information was clear. Connection Support is addressing this potential challenge as part of the overhaul of its organisational communications processes. A communications strategy will ensure the targeted dissemination of key messages to service-users, agencies and peer organisations and supporters, which reflect the new organisational strategy and values. Outputs will include an updated website and a communications plan tailored to reach key stakeholders of each of Connection Support’s services.

“People look at the website and confuse other services with this one. They also rely on word of mouth and get the wrong message.” **Team Manager, Connection Support**

“Connection’s website never catches up with the services.” **Senior Manager, peer organisation**

14.2.4 Speculative/hopeful referrals

Many Connection Support staff reported that referring agencies, particularly social workers, refer clients in the full knowledge that they do not meet the criteria. Due to cuts in other upstream services, they see it as the only option they have, for example for shopping, befriending and other lower level support. These interventions don’t fit the criteria for this service or have a clear prevention role, but do represent a genuine need, especially during the pandemic.

It makes sense for referrers to do this once or twice, but it is unclear why these referrals persist when it is clear that these referrals are being consistently rejected. To put it another way, it seems that referrers must be deriving some benefit from making the referrals or they would dry up.

“My working relationship with Connection informs our referrals. You learn quite quickly what the service offers.” **Locality Support Worker, Oxfordshire County Council**

14.2.5 Is Connection Support acting as signposting service?

One possible explanation for these repeat referrals is that referrers derive value in the form of Connection Support’s willingness to signpost clients elsewhere. It could be argued that the volume of partners continuing to refer to this service as a service of last resort, is a positive sign of how trusted and effective the team is at redirecting people when the service cannot help them.

It could also be interpreted as additional evidence of the need, identified by the Housing-led Feasibility Study, for a central referrals hub in Oxfordshire to coordinate homelessness services. It is anticipated that the level of inappropriate speculative referrals to this service will significantly decrease once this is established.

“Your team’s signposting is excellent. They tell me exactly where to send people, this has saved me a lot of time.” **Social Worker, Oxfordshire County Council**

“We do give a lot of advice to people without taking them on. We will always forward them on to someone who can help.” **Support Worker**

“We are a dumping ground for referrals – if an agency we are dealing with don’t know where to signpost them, they send them to us and there’s a lot of sifting through.... We go through the process of assessing them and have to signpost them elsewhere... it’s quite time consuming.” **Support Worker**

15. CONCLUSIONS

This review finds that the Housing Support Service has delivered extremely effective homelessness prevention work to vulnerable people across Oxfordshire between 2018 and 2021. It has prevented homelessness in 99% of cases and achieved an estimated £21 million of savings to the public purse. The team has been shown to collaborate well with partner agencies and add value through appropriate onward referrals. All but one KPI has been consistently achieved. Due to the internal inconsistency of the metrics, this is the best possible outcome and it is recommended that these KPIs are reviewed in the recommissioning, in particular the PBR element.

In addition to this very strong core delivery, the caring commitment of the team and person-centred approach has added value across the board and particularly in the more complex cases, which required a longer-term intervention to enable clients to turn their lives round.

The team has innovated effectively in response to COVID and it is recommended that they continue to maximise use of the digital service going forward as they incorporate the learnings from the pandemic, and retain a face to face element for those clients who need it.

In addition to maintaining the very high standards of delivery which have been achieved so far, the review team recommends that the service seeks further opportunities to use embedded workers and volunteers and to explore more opportunities for co-production. Internal recommendations regarding the deployment of a new database, salaries and potential improvements to the website and communications have been made internally and are being followed up by the Connection Support senior team.

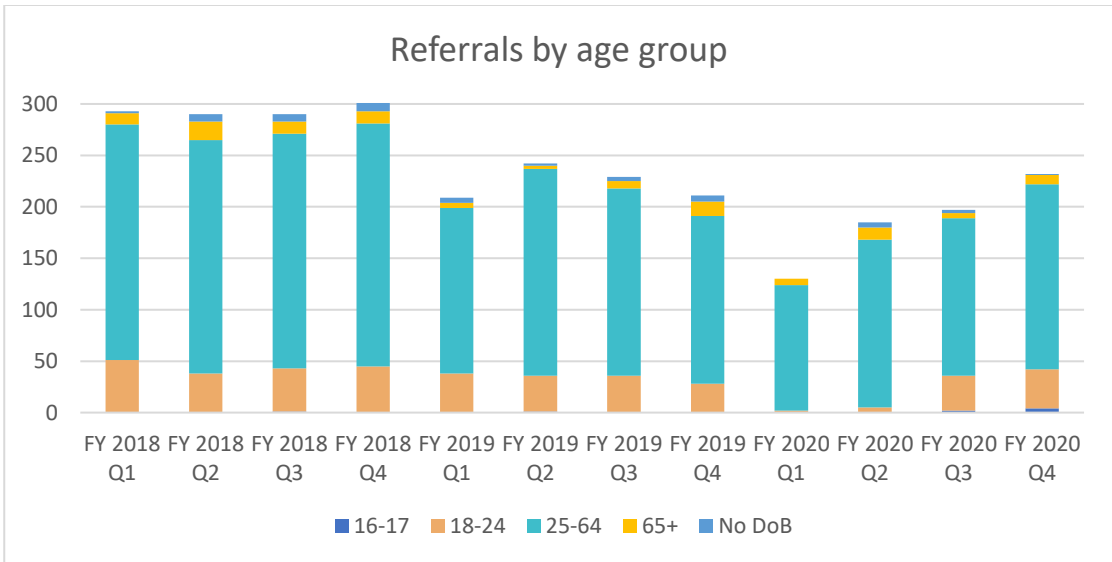
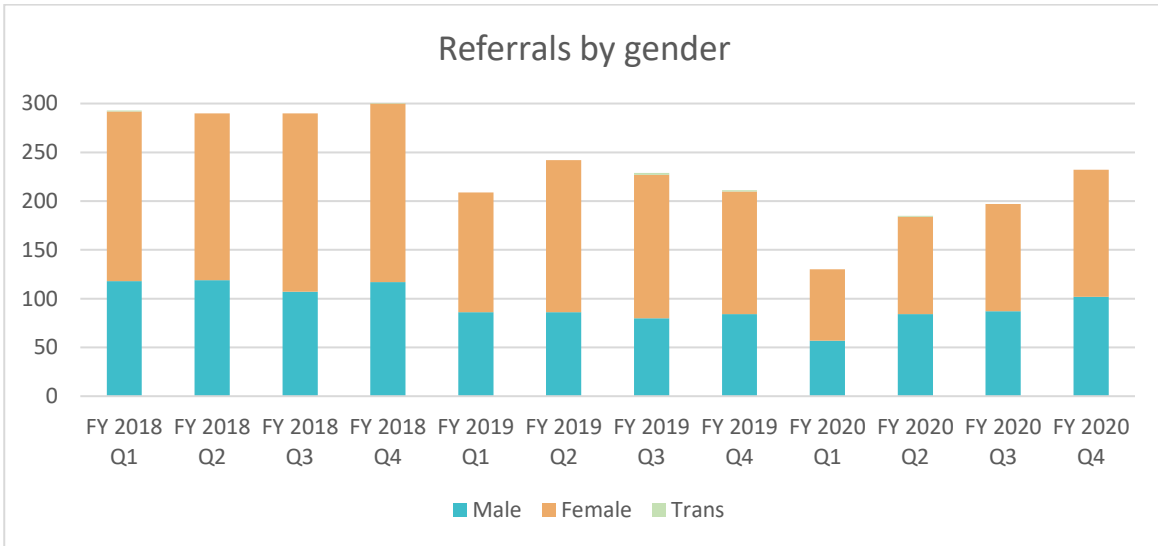
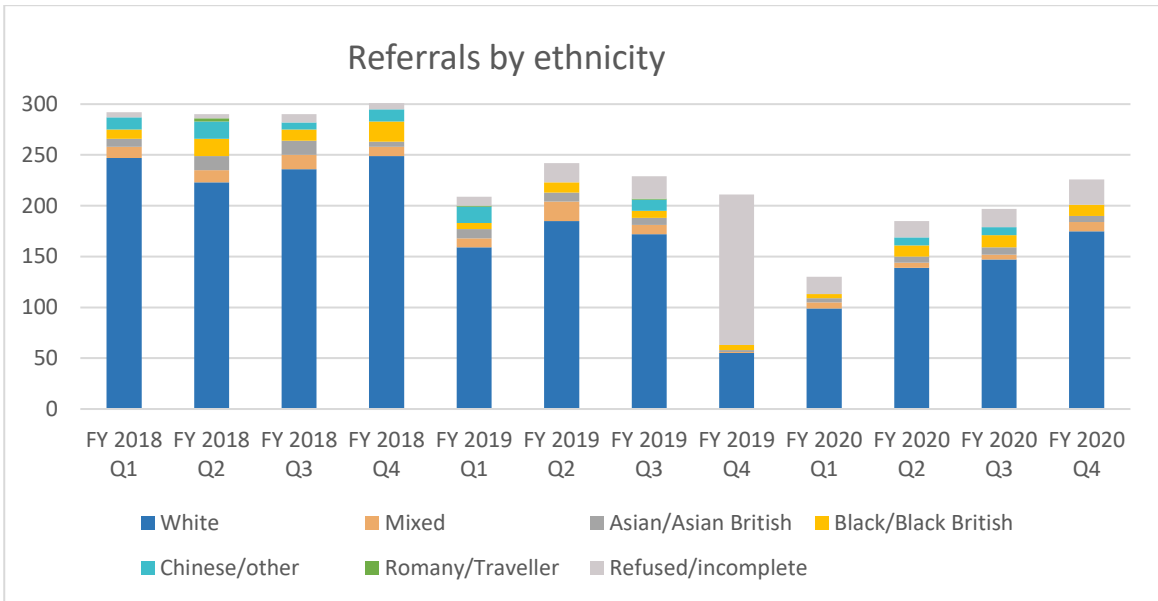
16. APPENDICES

Appendix I – Demographic pattern of referrals

The predominant service-user profile was people of white ethnicity between the age of 25 and 64. Over the course of the review period, a total 17.6% of services users were from a black and minority ethnic group. In the 2011 Census 22% of the Oxfordshire population were non-white.

Female service-users comprised 54%-60% of the total each quarter. Young adults between the age of 18 and 24 made up 14% of service users over the review period, with only four service-users under the age of 18 receiving support from the service over course of the whole three years. There were no notable shifts in these demographic trends over the review period.

Families receiving support comprised between 25% - 54% of service users during each quarter.



Appendix 2 – Referring organisations

Referral Agencies	
a2Dominion	Connection Homeless Pathway
Abbey House	Connection Mental Health Service
Abingdon Mental Health Centre – AMHC	Connection Milton Keynes
Activate Learning	Connection North
Adult Mental Health Team	Connection Outreach Service (COS)
Adult Safeguarding Service	Connection Oxford
Age UK Oxfordshire	Connection South
Agnes Smith Advice Centre	Connection Trailblazer
All Saints Primary School	Connection Witney
AMHT - Ridgeway Centre	Cornwallis House
Aspiration	Cottsway HA
Aspire	Criminal Justice Liason and Diversion Service
Asylum Welcome	Crisis Skylight
Aylesbury Homeless Action Group	Dashwood Banbury Academy
Aylesbury Probation Office	Department For Work & Pensions (Banbury)
Aylesbury Womens Aid	Didcot Family Solutions Team
Banbury Health Centre	Didcot Health Centre
Banbury Job Centre	Dunmore Primary School
Beacon Centre	Early Intervention Service / Help Family Solutions
Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust	East Oxford Health Centre
Bicester Family Solutions	Education
Blackbird Leys Community Centre	Eldercare
Botley School	Elmore Community Services
BPHA	Emmaus
Bromford Housing Association	Families First Project
Bure Park Primary School	Family Member
Bury Knowle Health Centre	Family Nurse Partnership
BYHP	Family Solutions Blackbird Leys
CAFAT	Family Solutions Service (Banbury)
CAHMS	Family Solutions Blackbird Leys
Catalyst Communities	Family Solutions Service (Headington)
Cherwell District Council	Family Solutions Service (Oxford)
Children and Families Assessment Banbury	Family Solutions Service (Witney)
Children Young People & Families	Family Support Team
Childrens Centre	Five Acres Primary School
Children's Disability Team	Friends & Family
Chipping Norton Health Centre	GP
Churchill Hospital - Social Work Dept	Green Square Housing
Citizens Advice Bureau	Hardwick Primary School
Clean Slate	Harriers Banbury Academy
Clifton Hampden Surgery	Headway
CMHT	Health Visitor
Community Rehabilitation Company	Hedena Health Centre
Connection Drop In	Henley YMCA
Hightown Surgery	Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Service

Hillview School	Oxfordshire Mind Wellbeing Service
HMP Woodhill	Oxford Sexual Abuse and Rape Crisis Centre
Home School Community Link	Paradigm Housing Group
Homeless Oxfordshire	Pegasus School
Homes4All	Prison
Home-Start Banbury & Chipping Norton	Probation
Horton Hospital	Public Protection Unit
Housing and Care 21	Queen Emmas Primary School
IDVA (Reducing the Risk)	Queensway School
Integrated Locality Team (City)	Red Kite Children's Centre
Isis Midwives	Reduce the Risk
Job Centre	Reigate/Banstead Womens Aid
John Radcliffe	REOC
Julian Housing	Response
Landlord	Restore
LCCS South Children & Family Assessment Centre	Rose Hill Family Solutions Service
LCSS MASH	Royal Mencap Society
LD Community Connections Team	Safeguarding Social & Community Services
Liason and Diversion	Salvation Army
Locality Community Support Service	Samuelson House
Lydalls Nursery School	Sanctuary Housing Association
Malthouse Surgery	Self
MASH (Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub)	Social Services
MayDay Trust	Social Services Children & Families
Midwife	South Oxford District Council
Migrant Help UK	SOHA
MIND	South & Vale District Council
National Probation Service	Sovereign Vale
NOMAD	St Aloysius' Catholic Primary School
Nuffield Health Centre	St Birinus School
Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre	St Francis Church
OCC Children & Family Assessment Team	St Mary's Church
OCC Children Social Care	St Mary's Primary School
OCC Social & Healthcare	St Mungos
OCC Social Services	Stonewater HA
Occupational Therapy	Sunshine Centre
ODAS	Tandem Befriending
Orchard Health Centre	Temple Cowley HC
Orchard Meadow Primary School	Thames Valley Community Rehabilitation Company
Outreach Barnet	Thames Valley Housing
Oxford City Council	Thames Valley Police
Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust	Thames Valley Probation Service
Oxford Probation Office	The Big Issue Foundation
Oxfordshire County Council	The Bucks Project
Oxfordshire County Council Young Carers Service	The Elms
The Gatehouse	

The Net Youth Centre	
The Porch	
The Sunshine Centre	
The Vibe	
The Wychwood Surgery	
Turning Point Banbury	
Turning Point Oxford City	
Turning Point Didcot	
Turning Point Witney	
VOWHDC Housing Dept	
Wallingford Hospital - AMHT South Oxon	
Wallingford Medical Practice	
Wantage Independent Advice Centre	
Warneford Hospital	
West Oxfordshire District Council	
Womens Centre	
Wood Farm Health Centre	
Woodlands Surgery	
YMCA	
Young Carers Service	

Appendix 3 – Inter-agency engagement activities

Below, in no particular order, is a sample of the type of regular interactions which have taken place with partner agencies during the last three years:

- Panel meetings: ‘Tenants at Risk’, ‘Families at Risk of Homelessness’ and ‘Young Persons Housing Panel meetings’ in Oxford City.
- Oxford City and South and Vale Team Manager chairs the South & Vale Floating Support Meeting – a forum that brings together the local authority housing department and housing associations such as SOHA and Sovereign
- Joint training regarding the Homelessness Reduction Act with Shelter and OCC
- Banbury team working with Thames Valley Police to support young people to avoid county lines exploitation
- Information sharing with the National Careers Service and Job Centre Plus regarding the roll-out of Universal Credit
- ‘Homes for Cathy’ event with SOHA and the Landlord Procurement officer at Oxford City Council
- Cherwell Homelessness Network Meetings
- Joint training with Aspire regarding the employment/PBR element of the contract
- Citizen’s Advice Bureau networking event in Q3 2018
- ODAS safeguarding training
- ‘Dig and Grow’ Market gardening initiative for service users
- City Council Tenants At Risk Meetings
- Job Centre Plus inter-agency meeting
- Worked with Response to offer resettlement support for clients moving into social housing
- Direct engagement events with Crisis, Oxford City HMO Enforcement Team, ODAS, Aspire and a planned meeting with Turpin and Miller solicitors.
- Knowledge-sharing meeting with Julian Housing who run similar service in Bath

Appendix 4 – Housing-led solution hub

