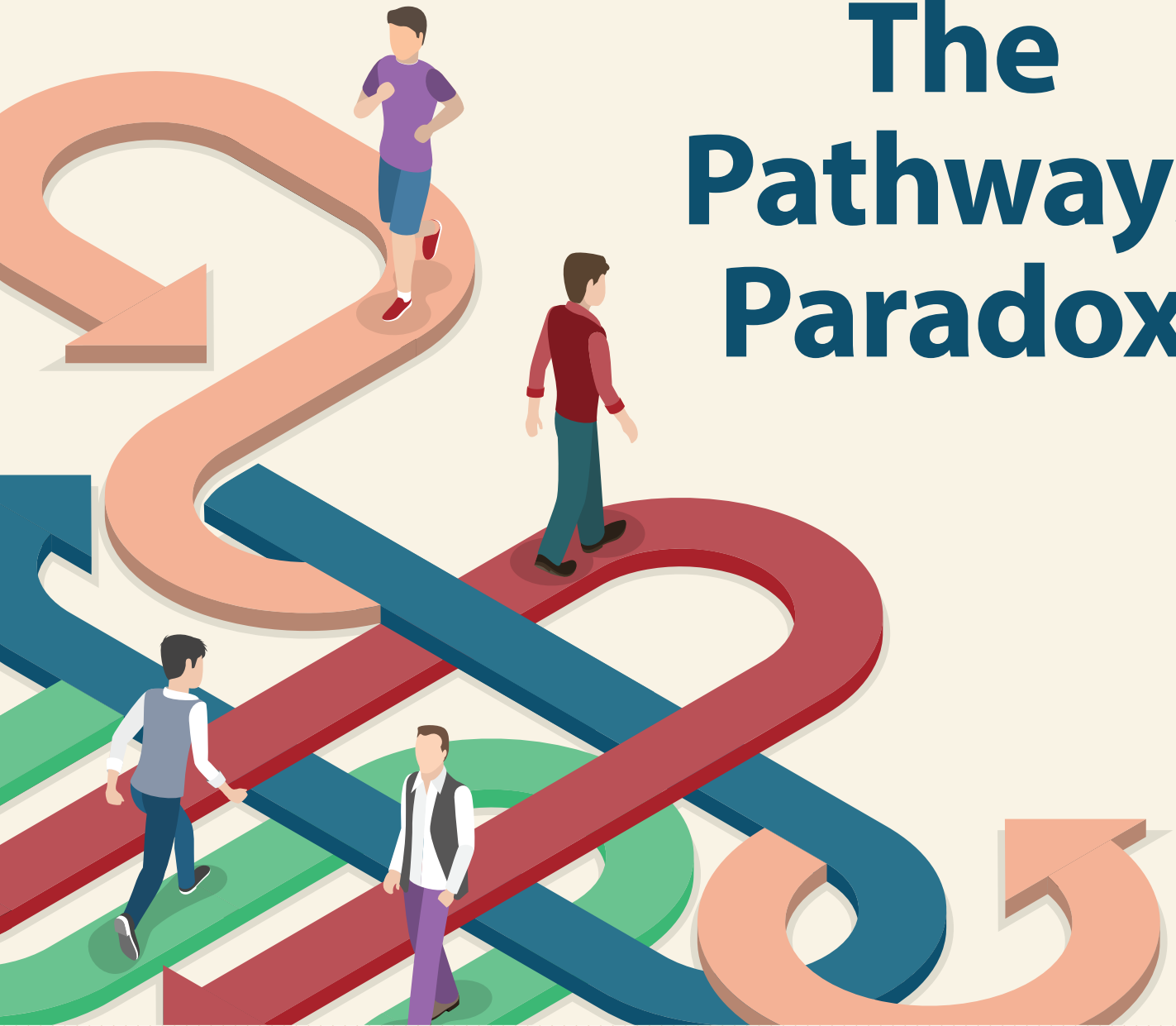SOCIAL BITE

socialudo

The Pathways Paradox

Can't get a job without a home?
Can't get a home without a job?

A report exploring barriers and solutions to the
complex systems surrounding homelessness pathways

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Introduction

This report presents key findings from the Social Bite Impact Conference, held in Edinburgh on 6 February 2025. The event brought together over 160 passionate individuals united by a common goal: ending homelessness.

Participants from diverse sectors—employers, the housing sector, community and service providers, government agencies, and more—gathered to explore the transformative potential of partnership working.

The conference focused on a critical question: **how can we create smoother, more effective pathways for those currently experiencing or who have experienced homelessness? Through dynamic discussions and collaborative activities, the day aimed to uncover fresh insights, solutions and strategies.**

At the heart of this report is an exploration of the complex challenges involved in ending homelessness, captured through an innovative 'serious game.' This interactive approach highlighted the paradoxes often faced in homelessness pathways—such as the contradiction of needing a home to secure employment, while also needing employment to secure a home. By engaging with these dilemmas in a game setting, participants were able to think creatively, generating solutions for finding employment while living in temporary accommodation and navigating housing options while experiencing homelessness.

Key challenges facing those experiencing homelessness

People experiencing homelessness often face numerous additional barriers to finding housing and employment. These challenges are frequently linked to systemic issues, including:

- Lack of affordable housing and long waiting lists for social housing.

- Limited availability of stable, well-paying jobs.

- Stigma and discrimination from employers, landlords, and society.

- Difficulties accessing health, mental health, and recovery support services.

- The requirement for a permanent address to apply for certain jobs.

- Complex universal credit thresholds, reporting demands, and eligibility criteria.

- High travel costs to reach training centres, job interviews, or workplaces.

- Limited access to technology, digital skills, and financial advice, including debt management.

- Contradictory guidance from different support services.

- Unequal treatment and biases from some landlords.

- A lack of accessible, clear information—people often don't know what support exists.

- Challenges with obtaining identification documents required for housing or employment.

- Previous criminal records impacting job prospects.

- Inconsistent support networks and case management.

- Mental health struggles exacerbated by unstable living conditions.

Evidence shows that preventing homelessness 'requires effective policies and community interventions' that put people's needs at the heart of support. However, in a strained and complex system, it has been shown that even 'small efficiencies' at key leverage points in the system can reduce homelessness. Therefore, identifying and addressing systemic barriers, contradictions, and paradoxes is crucial to prevention efforts.

A central programme to help people navigate the system to find employment is the Jobs First programme, created and supported by Social Bite. This initiative facilitates connections between individuals with lived experience of homelessness, support services, employers, and charity partners. For many, it has opened doors to inspiring job opportunities and sustainable employment.

In the recently published evaluation of the Jobs First Programme, the authors Johnson et al. (2025) highlights its strong endorsement from participants and its cost-effectiveness. However, the evaluation also underscores that both individuals and support workers continue to grapple with an unfair and complex system. It is this system, with its contradictions and barriers, that we explored at the Impact Conference through a serious game called 'The Pathways Paradox'.

The Pathways Paradox

At the Impact Conference, we employed an innovative methodology designed and developed by Socialudo, called 'The Pathways Paradox,' a serious game designed to simulate the real-world challenges faced by individuals experiencing homelessness. The aim was to create an interactive, thought-provoking environment that encouraged participants to step into the shoes of those navigating the complex systems related to housing and employment.

Serious games explore serious topics via playful interaction. This allows a creative and strategic space to think through the barriers and challenges in the system. Serious games are a well evidenced method to explore and develop solutions and recommendations for difficult challenges. For example, serious games have been used to future-proof society for the ageing demographic, and have been shown to support the 'paradigm shift' needed for effective partnership working in siloed sectors.

The Pathways Paradox was created and tailored to Social Bite's ambitions of ending homelessness by highlighting systemic contradictions. Inspired by the experiences of many individuals in the flagship Jobs First programme, the game illustrates the Catch-22 situations people often face—needing a home to find employment, while simultaneously needing employment to secure a home.

To bring the contradictions in the system to life, The Pathways Paradox set up a simulation where some participants played the role of individuals who had recently become homeless. These fictionalised 'vignettes' were based on typical journeys seen in the Jobs First programme, reflecting real challenges faced by many people. Scenarios included becoming homeless due to domestic abuse, substance use, or coming out as LGBTQ+. Participants had to navigate diverse needs, from acquiring identification documents and developing tech skills to addressing health-related issues. Others in the room became the core services that provide housing, skills development, health support, employment assistance, and more.

The 'decision makers' had a set number of resources and specific criteria for allocating them, while also having some discretion to adjust decisions based on individual circumstances. The objective of The Pathways Paradox was to navigate the homelessness system effectively to secure stable housing and high-quality employment.

Around 160 had signed up for the conference looking to take part in the serious game. They were either allocated a role navigating the homelessness system or becoming decision-makers responsible for allocating resources. Data was collected through various qualitative methods, including observations from 12 observer-notetakers who documented interactions, negotiations, and emerging themes during the session. Additionally, insights were gathered via a final qualitative survey and a focus group discussion. This comprehensive approach provided valuable insights into key priorities and highlighted 'what works' in navigating the system. These insights will now be explored in the next section.

SPRINGWOOD

Declan O'Rourke

Declan, 41, grew up in a working-class family in Glasgow and once owned a small but successful construction business.

A serious back injury left him unable to work, and mounting health costs caused him to lose his home.

He has struggled with feelings of inadequacy since losing his independence but remains resourceful, often helping others in the homeless community with repairs or physical tasks they cannot manage.

Legal — Missing docs — Debt trouble

Support needs — Mental health — Poor health

Skills

Income

Housing

Experience of homelessness → Navigating the system / Meeting all the conditions, criteria → Secure Housing → Permanent, high-quality employment
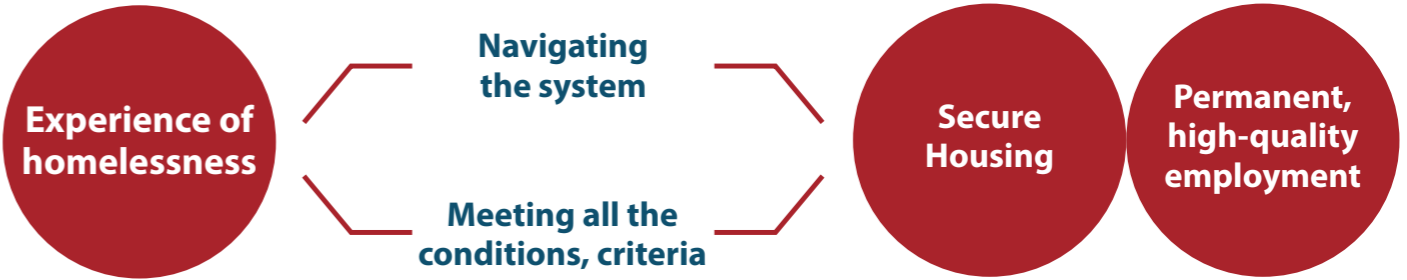
Findings

The endless loop: "If you were experiencing homelessness, where do you start?"

Professionals engaging with 'The Pathways Paradox' quickly discovered that the first step on a homelessness journey is often the hardest: figuring out where to begin. Identifying the right services to support diverse and nuanced homelessness journeys proved challenging. Additionally, many individuals do not know the right questions to ask to access the support they need.

Even once the right questions were identified, participants encountered another major barrier—accessing the necessary resources such as skills training, housing, employment, or vital documents. For example, there was notable frustration around the inability to access skills development, training, or universal credit without basic technology skills. Strict eligibility criteria within certain services further trapped individuals in a cycle, moving from one service to another without progress.

"It was really demoralising and draining for people going back and forth."

This frustration was intensified when language barriers existed, as the game vividly highlighted the often-unnecessary criteria and systemic challenges individuals face. Moreover, the overwhelming demand on decision-makers made it difficult for people to receive adequate help.

Participants experienced the demoralisation of actively queuing for support while observing limited resources being allocated to others ahead of them. These dynamics mirrored real-life struggles, where individuals are denied support due to resource shortages or a lack of available experts.

The disconnection between accommodation and employment prompted the call for system change. The need for accommodation before employment, and then a certain type of employment for types of accommodation (mirroring real-life rules), was the main point of contention.

We were employers at this table, and we actually had quite a lot of resources in our area… but we found that it was useless without everything else

It was clear that criteria, such as needing a permanent address to access certain employment, was a real impediment or 'bottleneck' in the system. Interestingly, the lack of transparency regarding what services and support decision-makers could provide made the process even more difficult. However, once people understood their specific needs, and where to seek support, the system began to make more sense, and navigating it became somewhat easier.

A siloed situation: "drowning in a sea of bureaucracy"

The game highlighted how a lack of transparency between services and sectors made it difficult to allocate resources effectively. Participants recognised the need for better understanding of what each service can offer to improve support and direct individuals to the right help. Breaking down silos emerged as a key priority for professionals in the room.

"Housing, employment, government, community services—it's all siloed departments, whether that be national government-run or local government."

While silos between organisations and departments are often discussed, participants with lived experience also highlighted the physical realities of this fragmentation. Services are frequently located miles apart within cities, leaving individuals stuck in a cycle of travelling long distances to seek support.

"There's nothing more demoralising than on a cold, wet day when you're homeless, carrying all your possessions, having to travel two miles to one agency, then another two miles to the next."

There was a clear call to focus on the entire journey rather than fragmented parts of it, aiming to create more cohesive and effective homelessness pathways.

Participants noted that accessing services required not only awareness of one's needs but also a proactive, almost competitive approach—rushing to the front of queues and passionately advocating for oneself. This expectation to repeatedly tell traumatic personal stories to different services was exhausting.

"You wouldn't have that drive. You'd be absolutely exhausted. Having been through the system, you wouldn't have the motivation to do that. That needs to be taken into consideration."

This process highlighted the unfair expectations placed on individuals accessing services, who may need to advocate persistently while reliving traumatic experiences. Even when in the right place, necessary services might still be unavailable.

"Having to tell your story more than once felt like reliving a trauma. It wasn't even real in the game, but it felt real at the time. The barriers between services made it feel like a game of ping-pong."

Participants also provided feedback on the negative discretion sometimes exercised by service providers:

"You're dealing with people on an ego trip. It's almost like you're battling for support. And because there's no interaction between agencies, you're left drowning in a sea of bureaucracy."

These reflections underscored how silos, bureaucratic hurdles, and resource shortages contribute to a stigmatising, rigid system that fails to be flexible or person-centred. This experience is often demoralising, exhausting, and leaves individuals feeling like just another number.

"You wouldn't have that drive. You'd be absolutely exhausted. Having been through the system, you wouldn't have the motivation to do that. That needs to be taken into consideration."

Conversely, other decision-makers prioritised listening to individuals' stories and addressing their specific needs. Feedback highlighted that a person-centred approach was far more effective, even within a high-pressure environment:

"We found the best way to work with the clients in front of us was to just take a breath and find out really what it was they needed to make a confirmed decision. That took time, understanding, and listening—and it worked better."
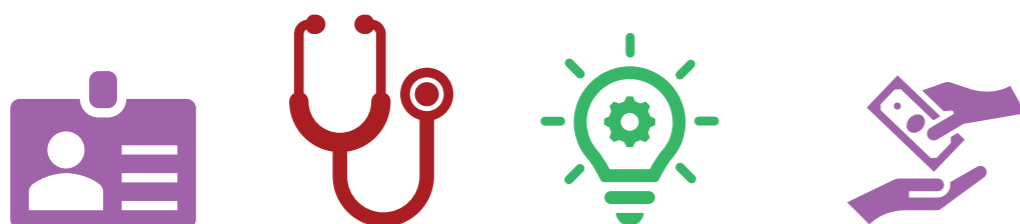
One scenario that illustrated this well involved a vignette named 'Eva,' a piano player on a homelessness journey. Decision-makers thought creatively, breaking down resource and criteria barriers to help Eva access a piano, enabling her to train others and generate income:

"It was a win-win situation for everybody, and that's because we both saw each other as people rather than as a system or as an applicant."

The game served as a powerful reminder that while the system itself can be challenging, the people within it are human, too:

"Just because people are doing roles, it doesn't mean they don't care. It's about understanding the demanding lack of resources they face."

These insights underscore the importance of balancing efficiency with empathy in service delivery to ensure individuals are treated as people, not just numbers.

When people become numbers: "it became a critical transaction"

The serious game brought into focus the challenges of delivering services under pressure, particularly the struggle to distribute resources fairly within time and budget constraints.

"I realised that even though we're very person-centred, very nice and empathetic, I was just listening to what they needed. I wasn't connecting with the story because I didn't have time—I had other people waiting."

Different decision makers adopted varied approaches, revealing a contrast between compassionate, person-centred practices and practical, resource-driven strategies. Some leaned into transactional behaviours, focusing solely on meeting basic needs. Under challenging conditions and resource limitations, participants distributing resources began to exhibit gatekeeping behaviours:

"When you have such limited resources, it's like, 'Well, you've already got that, so we don't really want to help more.' That's one of the biggest issues—when resources are scarce, you have to be really prepared."

Key services to breaking cycle of homelessness:
"Game changing services needed"

There are many paradoxes within the system. A key issue identified is the dual challenge of uncovering support needs and securing the necessary resources, both of which are constrained by the availability of resources and the expertise of decision-makers.

Participants highlighted the following game-changing services needed to break the cycle of homelessness:

1. It is crucial to improve the visibility of available services via signposting, ensuring that individuals know where to turn for the support they need.

2. The role of support workers as advocates is essential to guide individuals through complex systems, helping them access the right services at the right time.

3. Adopting person-centred approaches enables services to focus on the unique needs of everyone, making interventions more effective and responsive.

4. Providing a wide variety of more formal peer support networks can foster a sense of community and shared experience, which is invaluable for people navigating homelessness.

5. Expanding language support services is necessary to break down communication barriers for individuals who do not speak English as their first language.

6. Offering improved skills training helps individuals build competencies that enhance their employability and independence.

7. Establishing one-stop shops for accessing essential documents streamlines processes and reduces the administrative burden on individuals.

8. Strengthening partnerships between health and housing sectors ensures a more integrated approach to addressing the interconnected needs of individuals.

9. Enhancing debt, justice and addiction support services provides critical resources for individuals and will contribute to stability and recovery.

10. Creating more opportunities for upskilling helps individuals adapt to changing job markets and increases their chances of sustained employment.

11. Developing a deeper understanding of the root causes of homelessness informs more effective policies and interventions.

12. Training GPs to have strong listening skills ensures that individuals feel heard and understood within healthcare settings.

13. Expanding on-the-job learning and skills development programmes provides practical experience that is highly valued in the workforce.

14. Incorporating the serious game into training for new council employees can improve their awareness and understanding of the key issues faced by people experiencing homelessness.

15. Focusing on increasing income opportunities enables individuals to access affordable private housing, offering a pathway out of homelessness.

These recommendations reflect the need for a more integrated, person-centred approach to support services that recognises the diverse and complex needs of people experiencing homelessness.

> "it's difficult with so many resources to take a person-centred approach, but when we did take that time, it was more efficient as people were getting their needs as well."

What can key partners do to breaking cycle of homelessness a reality

Key partners play a vital role in transforming the homelessness support system into one that is more accessible, effective, and compassionate. Providing accurate, up-to-date information and advice is critical to prevent misinformation that often leads individuals to the wrong services, exacerbating the siloed nature of support systems. As one participant noted:

"And there was a lot of misinformation, people sending each other to the wrong places as well, which is really interesting, which I think mirrors that siloed situation we have, and how do we overcome that?"

Reducing bureaucratic barriers such as the requirement for documentation to access GP services can significantly improve healthcare access. Simplifying the navigation of services is equally important, ensuring that individuals do not get lost within complex systems. Engaging directly with people who have lived experience of homelessness provides invaluable insights, helping to shape services that truly meet their needs.

Integrating compassion, empathy, and solidarity across all levels of service provision fosters a more person-centred approach, ensuring that individuals feel respected and supported throughout their journey out of homelessness.
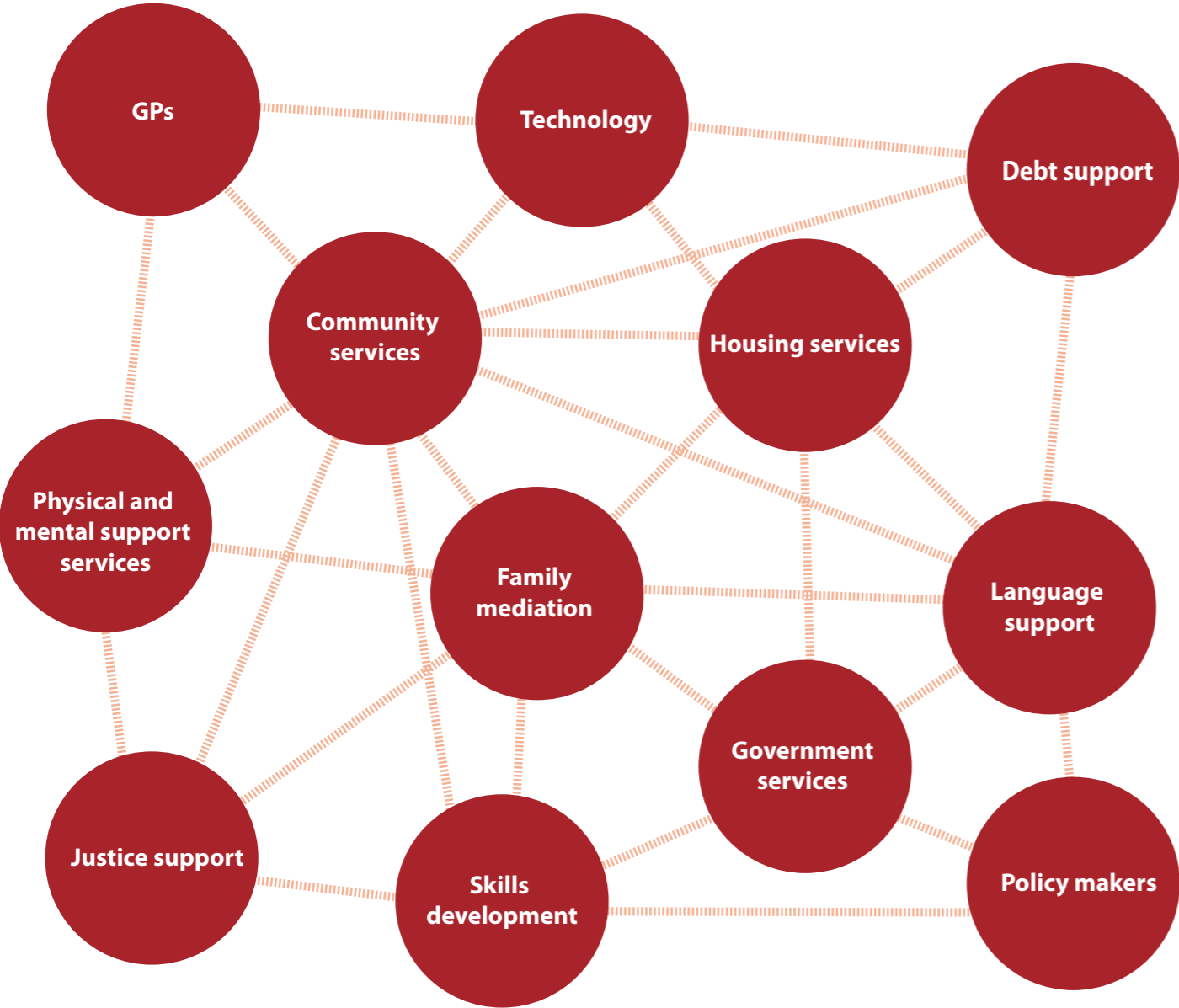
Recommendations

Based on the findings from the conference, the following key recommendations aim to support efforts to break the cycle of homelessness:

- ○ Integrate Compassion and Empathy: Embed compassion, empathy, and solidarity at all levels of service provision to ensure that support is genuinely person-centred.

- ○ Promote Lived Experience Engagement: Involve people with lived experience of homelessness in the design, delivery, and evaluation of services to ensure that interventions are grounded in real-world insights.

- ○ Expand Government Services: Address the severe limitations in current government services by increasing funding, resources, and support structures dedicated to tackling homelessness.

- ○ Simplify and Streamline the System: Reduce complexity within the homelessness support system to make it more navigable and user-friendly for those seeking assistance.

- ○ Foster Cross-Sector Collaboration: Create opportunities for all relevant sectors to come together regularly, ensuring a coordinated approach that enhances system-wide effectiveness.

- ○ Enhance Clarity and Transparency: Increase clarity and transparency within and across support services so that individuals understand how to access the help they need.

- ○ Strengthen Advocacy and Support Roles: Empower support workers to act as strong advocates, guiding individuals through complex systems and helping them secure the resources they require.

These recommendations underscore the need for a cohesive, compassionate, and well-resourced system that prioritises the dignity, needs, and voices of individuals experiencing homelessness.

Conclusion

The Social Bite Impact Conference provided a dynamic platform to explore the complex and interwoven challenges faced by individuals experiencing homelessness. Through the innovative use of 'The Pathways Paradox' serious game, participants from diverse sectors engaged in a powerful exercise that highlighted systemic barriers, paradoxes, and gaps within existing support structures.

The game was structured around realistic scenarios, reflecting the lived experiences of people facing homelessness. Participants, grouped into diverse teams representing different sectors, were tasked with making decisions based on limited resources, conflicting information, and systemic barriers—mirroring the paradoxes encountered in real life.

The findings underscored key issues such as the overwhelming challenge of navigating fragmented systems, the emotional toll of repeatedly sharing personal stories, and the demoralising effects of bureaucratic barriers. Participants identified the need for more cohesive, person-centred support systems, better integration across sectors, and the removal of unnecessary barriers to essential services.

It highlighted the key role of programmes such as Jobs First that give support in facilitating and navigating through the complex system. The main point of contention was often unnecessary criteria (e.g. a long term permanent address for certain employment, or certain employment to access a hoe) that clearly highlighted the need for system changes, especially in terms of the connection between accommodation and employment to address the 'bottlenecks' in homelessness pathways.

Key recommendations from the conference emphasise the urgency of expanding government services, simplifying and streamlining access to support, improving document accessibility, and fostering cross-sector collaboration. Additionally, enhancing clarity, transparency, and compassion within services, alongside amplifying the voices of those with lived experience, emerged as vital steps towards creating meaningful change.

Ultimately, this report reflects the collective insights and experiences of those dedicated to ending homelessness. By adopting these recommendations and fostering continued collaboration, we can move closer to a system that is truly equitable, effective, and capable of breaking the cycle of homelessness for good.

About Social Bite

Social Bite is a movement to end Homelessness. They are a charity and social business providing homes, jobs, food, and support to empower people to transform their own lives.

The Social Bite vision is a society where no one should have to be homeless. They challenge the status quo by pioneering solutions that create lasting change.

Social Bite began life as a small coffee shop in Edinburgh, Scotland, in August 2012. They became involved in the homelessness issue when a young homeless man named Peter came into the coffee shop one day to ask for a job.

When Social Bite offered this young man employment, this was the origin of an unexpected 10 years of charitable work and campaigning on the homelessness issue. Social Bite believe in the power of supportive employment to transform people's lives.

About Socialudo

We founded Socialudo to use games to help diverse groups plan and think about how we future-proof society. We design, develop and deliver bespoke games to help organisations tackle hard problems.

Founders Professor Vikki McCall and Professor Alasdair Rutherford lead Socialudo, a social enterprise set up to use serious play to help organisations with strategic and creative thinking, and embedding evidence into their practice.

Find out how serious games can take your strategic thinking to the next level. Find out what people say about our games. And if you would like to discuss how serious play can help you and your organisation, please get in touch.

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