social sciences

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The Role of Companionship in Volunteer Homelessness Support Services: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: Drawing on developments in the application of occupational science to issues of homelessness and tenancy sustainability, this paper will argue for the recognition of authentic, everyday relationships as a core part of tenancy support. Data from a small-scale evaluation of a volunteer-led homelessness support service will be explored through a framework of social support to show the importance of companionship in enabling individuals to exit homelessness. The data show that individuals valued the provision of social support from volunteers in everyday locations, as it replicated authentic relationships which individuals had sometimes lost through their experiences of homelessness. This paper argues that the facilitation of authentic, everyday relationships should be considered an important part of homelessness support.

Keywords: homelessness; social support; volunteers; companionship

Citation: Taylor, Helen, and Henry Dawson. 2024. The Role of Companionship in Volunteer Homelessness Support Services: A Qualitative Study. *Social Sciences* 13: 568. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13110568

Academic Editor: Alan J. Dettlaff

Received: 19 June 2024
Revised: 2 October 2024
Accepted: 5 October 2024
Published: 23 October 2024

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1. Introduction

Homelessness can be defined in a variety of ways, including rooflessness or rough sleeping, staying in temporary accommodation, living in insecure housing, or staying with friends and family (FEANTSA 2006). Recent data on homelessness in England have shown an increase of 26% in individuals sleeping rough between 2021 and 2022 (Fitzpatrick et al. 2023, p. xvii). These figures refer to the most extreme (and often visual) form of homelessness; there has also been an increase in the past year in households that have been threatened with homelessness, as well as the number of households in temporary accommodation (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities 2023). A similar trend can be seen in Wales with 5700 households in temporary accommodation on 30 September 2023, the highest figure since the introduction of the Housing (Wales) Act in 2015 (Welsh Government 2024).

The response to the issue of homelessness is varied. The provision of support in the UK for individuals experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness is broad, with interventions coming from the statutory sector (through legal duties and formal welfare services), the voluntary sector (through informal care services such as soup kitchens or night shelters), and the not-for-profit sector (for example, The Big Issue magazine). Discussions on the interplay between these different sources of support are prevalent in the literature that considers the geographies of homelessness (Cloke et al. 2010) and the use of informal care solutions as responses to homelessness (Bowlby and McKie 2019).

The type, as well as the source, of support for individuals at risk of experiencing homelessness is varied, and it is often defined by the level of need that individuals are facing. Johnsen et al. (2018) outline a typology of social control delineating the different types of support available for individuals based on the threshold level of engagement with these services. For instance, low-threshold services such as night shelters or soup kitchens will often make no deliberate attempt at behaviour change. High-threshold services would require individuals to engage with behaviour change to receive their services

(e.g., abstinence from alcohol or illegal substances). Individuals engaging in support therefore experience different levels of conditionality in accessing support ranging from high levels of conditionality within state-funded services to support with no conditions on users, such as open access services from volunteer-led (informal care) projects (Johnsen et al. 2018; Prosser 2022).

Drawing on findings from a small-scale research project, this paper presents data which emphasises the importance of the provision of social support by volunteers within homelessness support services. This support can be seen to enable companionship or everyday relationships, resulting in a range of benefits which may not be achievable through the use of salaried staff. A brief overview of an occupational perspective on homelessness support will be provided, emphasising the role of establishing everyday activities in exiting homelessness. An exploration of the concept of social support will be added here before the findings are presented, looking at the role of volunteers in providing social support which constitutes authentic relationships. This paper will conclude with a consideration of the challenge of how authentic, everyday relationships can be built into responses to homelessness. Data was gathered as part of a commissioned piece of research into a small support service for individuals experiencing homelessness and those at risk of homelessness in Wales.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Occupational Perspectives on Tenancy Sustainment

Boland et al. (2023) outline an occupational perspective on tenancy sustainment. This type of perspective recognises the importance of everyday activities in individuals' ability to make and sustain a home. The importance of these activities will differ between individuals and will also be impacted by broader contextual factors. Based on qualitative data, they have created an occupational model of tenancy sustainment based on three core strategies (2023, p. 1243):

1. Putting your stamp on it: an active process of adapting the physical environment to make it feel like home.
2. Seeing a new self: the construction of an identity fitting that of a tenant and the expectations attached to it.
3. Living the life: having a consistent routine that enables the successful sustainment of a tenancy.

This model describes a process of transition from homelessness to tenancy sustainment through the lens of an occupational perspective. The focus here is the routine and everyday activities that enable individuals to feel a sense of belonging, to create routines and habits, and to make a home, as well as the role of this in sustaining a tenancy. This perspective is akin to Peter King's (2004) focus on the role of the mundane in developing a sense of dwelling: that the everyday activities and experiences we might have in a home enable us to feel a sense of safety or ontological security (alongside potential negative impacts). This focus on 'the everyday' or 'the normal' is important here; that there is something special and impactful about ordinary, banal activities in terms of creating a home (and sustaining a tenancy).

2.2. Social Support and Social Networks

Frameworks of social support can be used to consider the impact of engagement with others on our everyday experiences. The concept of social support can be defined as "a person's perception of the availability of others to provide emotional, psychological, and material resources" (McLeish et al. 2021, p. 13). The positive impact of having adequate social support is clear in the literature: it has a range of psychological and physiological impacts such as leading to fewer suicides (Kleiman and Liu 2013), as well as reducing mortality more broadly (Berkman and Syme 1979; Blazer 1982).

Social support is multi-dimensional, with authors demarcating different elements within the broader concept. For instance, it can be considered in both a structural and

functional sense (McLeish et al. 2021). The structural element of social support refers to social networks and the number of relationships that individuals are part of or can draw on. Functional social support refers to the dimensions of social support, broadly considered to be:

1. Emotional
2. Appraisal (related to esteem)
3. Informational
4. Practical/instrumental

Cummings et al. (2022) also distinguish between social support (the functional understanding of social support) and social networks (a structural understanding of social support). Here, they emphasise that social networks can be understood as the relationships and interconnections between individuals who may or may not be providing social support. This focus on the source of social support provides a further analytic dimension to the understanding of social support, where sources of support can include family members, romantic partners, service providers, and the neighbourhood or community (Cummings et al. 2022).

A consideration of social support includes both the perception and actuality that one is cared for (emotional support), and this provides a further conceptual dimension (House 1981). Studies have suggested that there is a difference between social support provided and social support perceived to be received (Muñoz-Laboy et al. 2013).

This paper considers both structural social support (the source of support) and functional social support (the type of support). House's (1981) typology for functional social support is used here. This contains four elements:

(a) perceived emotional support relating to an individual's sense of acceptance and self-worth,
(b) perceived companionship (affiliation and help from others),
(c) perceived instrumental support (material resources, financial resources), and
(d) perceived informational support (advice to help understand and cope with circumstances) (House 1981).

This typology can be used to understand the type of social support that individuals are experiencing or lacking and the impact of that on their lives, experiences, and ability to meet their own needs. Furthermore, it can be used to more fully understand the types of interventions or services provided to assist with other needs. Services designed to respond to unmet needs around issues such as physical health, mental health, housing, and experiences of the criminal justice system can be evaluated in terms of the type and the source of social support they might (or might not) provide. House's (1981) framework is being used here as it most systematically aligns with the themes that emerged from inductive analysis of the interview data.

2.3. Social Support and Homelessness

Using social support as an analytic tool in understanding the relationship between social support and people's journeys through and experiences of homelessness has emerged in the literature from 2008 (Cummings et al. 2022). 'Homelessness' is a complex term, with a variety of different definitions. However this is experienced, homelessness is often the intersection of the most complex health and social care challenges, and "people who are homeless tend to experience multiple social challenges such as isolation and feelings of worthlessness leading to depression and loneliness" (Miler et al. 2020, p. 3).

In the housing context, research suggests that social support can contribute to successful pathways into stable housing, with the focus on relationships with family and with caseworkers being an important element in achieving a sustainable housing outcome or transition (Nebbitt et al. 2007). However, the interrelationship between housing and social support is complex. A lack of social support to the extent of resulting in social isolation has been seen to be both "precipitating and perpetuating factors for individuals' homelessness

and housing histories" (Cummings et al. 2022, p. 355). Greater social support is related to less homelessness (Zugazaga 2008), but social isolation can persist after individuals attain housing (Cummings et al. 2022). Once housing has been attained, this can be used both as a foundation on which to improve social relationships and/or an opportunity to isolate from others within a negative social network (Henwood et al. 2013). All of these experiences sit within the context of social stigma, where individuals may feel further marginalised by their homelessness status (Bower et al. 2018).

Although the context of homelessness can, in some ways, be seen to be distinct, the use of the typology of functional social support and sources of support in the evaluation of services can be seen as appropriate. As with other unmet needs, individuals often experience a variety of intersecting issues, which social support can help address (in either a primary or tertiary way).

2.4. Role of Volunteers in Providing Social Support

The source of this social support is relevant to how it is perceived and experienced by recipients. For example, services delivered by peer support volunteers can be perceived differently to those provided by paid workers. In McLeish and Redshaw's (2015) study, participants identified that "peer support from a volunteer had an intrinsic emotional meaning; someone cared enough about you to give you her own time" (McLeish and Redshaw 2015, p. 11).

Peer support volunteers are defined as those who have had a direct experience of the issue that they are supporting individuals with (e.g., substance misuse) or similar experiences around a broader set of issues (e.g., homelessness, poor mental health). Studies on the provision of peer support show that the use of peers in providing support can have a far-reaching positive impact (Miler et al. 2020). A similar impact can be seen in the use of volunteers in providing services. Volunteers (rather than peer volunteers) do not have to have had similar experiences to those they are supporting, but both peer volunteers and volunteers are positioned as 'other' to professionals. This can be loosely defined here as peers and volunteers not expecting a wage in return for providing support. As Cameron et al. (2021, p. 267) identify "…there is something different a volunteer brings to the table".

McLeish and Redshaw (2015, p. 11) identify the differences between volunteers and professionals in terms of delivering support:

Peer (Volunteer) Support	Professional Support
Grounded in relatively long-term relationships	Time-pressed
Volunteer knows them personally	Pre-existing agenda
Offers flexible, personal support	Fixed hours and responsibilities
	No sustained relationship

Other studies have also identified the importance of mutuality within the relationships between volunteers and those using services (Swinkels et al. 2023). Here, the ability to bond around shared interests and activities was an important feature of the provision of services. This was important for two reasons: the activities that were undertaken in this context were not only considered 'normal', such as going for coffee, but also a mutual activity between the volunteer and the individual receiving the service.

In outlining how social support can be used to evaluate services, both the function of the support (emotional, affiliation, informational, instrumental) and the source of the support (peer, volunteer, professional) should be considered.

3. Methods

3.1. Setting

This study focused on a support service ('the Project') operating in Wales, UK. The aim of the service is to help people maintain their accommodation and avoid a return to

homelessness. At the time of this study, the Project had already become established over three urban areas in the north and south of Wales. Support provided by the organisation has changed from rehousing support aimed at getting residents into accommodation to a more preventative approach, moving resources ‘upstream’ to ensure people can sustain their tenancies.

The Project provides volunteers to help clients to identify their individual needs. Clients then work with the volunteers to address those needs in order to prevent a return to homelessness. Volunteers recruited by the project either provided general help services (e.g., performing home maintenance tasks) or acted as a ‘Friend’. Friends were matched with clients and met with them on a weekly basis over a 3–6 month period to provide ongoing friendship and support to help them adjust to their new life and meet their individual needs. Volunteer activities might include meeting for coffee and a chat or going to appointments together. A flexible approach is taken to the nature and extent of the support provided.

The housing organisation overseeing the Project approached a researcher from a Welsh university to investigate the relationships between the volunteers and the clients they supported. The aim of the research project was to determine how the support had influenced clients in achieving a sustainable housing transition. The researcher carrying out the project had over ten years of experience of qualitative research in the housing sector. The researcher’s previous involvement with the housing organisation was limited to the initial request to carry out the investigation, as well as a general briefing about the Project.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

This was a small-scale exploratory research project to capture information on the experiences of the clients and volunteers involved in the Project. Evidence gathering consisted of five telephone interviews conducted with clients and ten qualitative questionnaires completed by volunteers.

3.2.1. Interviews

These interviews were arranged through the gatekeeper organisation, with the support workers from the Project centres asking clients if they would be willing to participate in an interview about their experience with the project. Five clients agreed to participate in the recorded telephone interviews and provided their contact details, which were passed on to the interviewer.

An unstructured interviewing format was taken, with the initial question and prompts focussing on the support that individuals had received from the project (not about their housing situation or experiences that had led them to homelessness). No information was collected about how long they had engaged with the service, how they were referred, or why they were receiving support. This was specifically designed to avoid potentially re-traumatising individuals through discussions of their housing journey. Losing one’s home is a traumatic experience in itself, and homelessness is often precipitated by trauma. It can be difficult for clients to discuss their homelessness and rehousing experiences without referring to the trauma surrounding those experiences (Pope et al. 2020). This research project sought to capture evidence about clients’ experiences of the project with the minimum risk of interviews re-traumatising clients. The method also allowed participants to explore what they felt and valued about the support they received, giving them more power to influence the direction and content of the conversation, permitting a more evidence-led approach to capturing data ahead of analysis. The researcher took a trauma-informed interviewing approach (Stanford Centre for Health Education 2024; Office for Health Improvement and Disparities 2024). When interviewing, the researcher sought informed consent from participants, used inclusive language, observed participants for signs of re-traumatisation, permitted breaks during interviews, and ensured that participants were able to access relevant support resources after the interview if the need arose (Karmakar and Duggal 2024).

Following initial introductions, interviewees were informed about the evaluation of the project and provided with the opening question: 'can you tell me about your experience and engagement with the Project?' Discussions stemmed from that point, with the interviewer asking probative questions and taking a spontaneous approach to the generation of interview content. Evidence gathering was granted ethical approval by the University's Research Ethics Committee. No incentives were provided for participation.

Interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participant, and a verbatim transcript was produced. Transcription was performed over the same time period interviews were carried out, allowing further consideration of interviewee responses in shaping the discussion in future interviews.

3.2.2. Questionnaires

Qualitative questionnaires were also distributed to all volunteers at a volunteer event. These had a set of eight questions asking for open text answers, with questions exploring the type of support volunteers provided to individuals, the volunteers' view of the impact of their status as volunteers in this, and whether the service could be replicated by a service with paid members of staff. The aim of this method was to capture data on the volunteers' views of the impact of the service on the individuals they supported, with the ability to triangulate the data with the client data. Ten questionnaires were returned to the researcher. The volunteers completed these questionnaires in pen independently at the volunteer event. The responses ranged from single word answers to text filling the text box and drawing references between their answers to different questions.

3.2.3. Limitations

There are a number of limitations with the methodological approach taken. The sample size was small, particularly in reference to the client data. Gatekeepers were used to access research participants in both methods used, potentially leading to bias in the participants that engaged with the research. The questionnaires had been designed so that a particular researcher could support participants when completing them; however, that researcher could not attend the event due to illness. A number of these limitations were driven by the nature of the project commissioned; it was a small-scale, low-budget piece of research to be completed over a short time period. Despite these limitations, however, the data collected are valuable. Due to the focus on open questions within the methodological design, the data collected are participant-led, with the client data particularly reflecting what clients value in the project (rather than what the project staff, volunteers, or commissioners value).

3.3. Data Analysis

The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, with a two-step process taken. Initially, an inductive approach was taken to the analysis of both the questionnaire and the interview data, with the researcher identifying themes that emerged organically from the data. The client data set included themes such as maintenance and decorating support, going for coffee with volunteers, and having similar interests with volunteers. By using a combination of unstructured questions (designed to be trauma-informed) and inductive analysis, the data produced here clearly reflected the clients' voice and explained the support from the project that clients found useful. A similar inductive approach was taken with the first set of analyses of the questionnaires. However, the questions here were structured; therefore, the data generated were less organic. Themes emerged here around the value of volunteers providing support and the role of the volunteers in helping to build confidence and self-worth in the clients.

As these themes emerged, their alignment with the typology set out by House (1981) became clear. The researcher then undertook a second stage of analysis of the interviews, setting aside the initial inductive coding structure and starting coding again, deductively applying House's (1981) typology of social support to structure the thematic analysis process. This second stage of analysis allowed for the organic responses of the clients to be

understood within a theoretical structure. House's (1981) model was also applied to the questionnaire data to see whether it could be used to triangulate themes across the two data sets.

4. Results

As outlined in Section 3, the interview transcripts were deductively analysed based on House's (1981) typology of social support. All four types of support were identified, with interconnections highlighted between them. This will be explored in more depth in Section 5. The data are not presented in the order of the typology instead, they are presented in the order that interviewees tended to use during the course of their interviews. It is interesting to note that clients outlined the instrumental and informational support initially, before discussing how this linked to emotional support and companionship further on in the discussion. Section 4.4 will incorporate findings from the volunteer questionnaire data in the discussion.

4.1. Perceived Instrumental Support (Material Resources, Financial Resources)

When asked about the support they were receiving from the Project, instrumental support was the first type of support that clients tended to outline. This support, both material and financial, was provided whilst individuals were still in temporary accommodation or moving into their new home. The Project helped clients access furniture and white goods for their new accommodation, decorate the new tenancies, and purchase soft furnishings.

One client outlined:

> Yeah, obviously I became homeless overnight. . .and because the B&B situation is that they don't provide you with no food. . .you've got no fridge and it wasn't the cleanest of places but the bedding, regardless of whether I became homeless or not, I'm still a very fussy person so I mentioned it to [volunteer] and he provided me with new quilts, new pillows, sheets, bedding. . .it was all brand new and it was much better for me to know that it was bedding that was brand new. You know it was far more comfier. [R2]

Sourcing furniture for moving into a new accommodation was also important to clients:

> They sorted out a new bed for me. . .The bed was very important to me because I'd just come out of hospital so it was nice to sleep in a bed rather than lie on a couch. [R5]

> I wasn't going to have a cooker for nearly a month so [volunteer] wanted to make sure that when I moved into my flat I wasn't going back to square one like at the bed and breakfast. [R1]

One client outlined how the volunteers were keen to source a sofa bed for their flat so that their children could come to stay in the future:

> So even though I might not see my kids now for 6 months or a year. . .he wanted to make sure that I had that there so when it actually came down to the crunch they can't say that since you've got nowhere for your children to sleep you can't have them. [R1]

Finally, a client outlined the impact of the offer of redecorating a flat after a traumatic incident had happened there:

> For a month I wasn't able to go into my living room or kitchen. . .and just the thought of it being redecorated and everything is going to make me so much more comfortable because it's not going to remind of the things I've been through previously you know? They understood, as soon as I said [what had happened] and was struggling, they knew exactly what to do. [R3]

The impact of this instrumental support seemed to reach beyond the immediate benefit of having access to goods and supported individuals' relationships with others, health,

and sense of self-worth. It facilitated the processes of engagement with the dwelling and establishing a sense of home.

4.2. Perceived Informational Support (Advice to Help Understand and Cope with Circumstances)

Clients also identified the provision of informational support in terms of engaging with and navigating the homelessness system, as well as accessing goods and services at an affordable price.

Clients stated:

> They pointed me in the right direction, I'd never been homeless before, I'd never been in this situation, didn't know where to start and they pointed me in the right direction for housing lists and so forth. [R2]

> When I was homeless they worked tirelessly every single day to look for private properties, other properties, anything that would meet my criteria. [R1]

> Being the project that they are they get notified of properties that are becoming available or are available for people who are in my position so I kind of get the offer first. [R2]

> One client who had been staying in a B&B stated:

> They [other B&B guests] are like 'well how come you can get offers or flats or bedsits or whatever' and I say it's all through [the Project], if you wait for Housing Options you might as well wait forever. [R2]

This access to information also related to the provision of material support and sourcing furniture. One client outlined: "She's helped me a lot with finding furniture and that. . .it's like 'I've seen this which you might be interested in', just looking out for things" [R4], whilst another stated that they had received a discount off a sofa because the person knew they were working with the Project following a previous visit to the shop.

4.3. Perceived Emotional Support Relating to an Individual's Sense of Acceptance and Self-Worth

Data from clients highlighted that the support provided through the Project made them feel cared for and recognised. One respondent highlighted that:

> When you become homeless, you just become, like a number. You are forgotten about. I mean, I've come across people who've been in a bed and breakfast for maybe a year now and they don't have the added support of you know, [the Project]. [R2]

> They acknowledged that working with the Project has helped them emotionally and "without them at the beginning I could have easily plummeted into a deep depression [but] you know they're always on the other end of the phone". [R2]

> Another participant highlighted that, "when I had taken ill, the . . . team kept in touch to see how I was and I could tell by the by the way that they were messaging me that they genuinely wanted to be kept in the loop about what's going on" as they "actually care for me". As the primary carer for their mother, this individual highlighted that the volunteers "are so supportive of Mam as well, they're always saying 'is Mam coming? How's Mam doing?'. . .yeah I know they care about me but they know that how I feel is a direct result of how things are with my mother". [R3]

Clients also referred to broader impacts of this support on their lives in terms of self-acceptance and self-worth:

> It makes me confident. [R2]

> She [the volunteer] has opened up a new part of my life that has been closed for months. [R3]

> They just helped me get back to normal you know? I'm finally happy and they've been a big part of this. [R4]

> The way that they are coming to decorate my place so that it looks amazing, I just know that they care about how I feel. I know that they wanna give me something to be proud of, to look at and say 'I've been through all this stuff in my life but I still deserve to have this space and this is mine'. [R3]

4.4. Perceived Companionship

Companionship was a key positive element for the client respondents. Importantly, the relationships built up between volunteers and clients were seen as authentic relationships where the interactions both went beyond practical support and mirrored regular companion activities such as going for coffee:

> I meet up with [volunteer] just in Costa and that's lovely, we can talk about anything. Anything and everything. If I want to bring up my feelings I can, if I just wanted to sit there and laugh I can. There's no pressure, no atmosphere, nothing. [R3]

> I meet [volunteer] every Tuesday morning and we go for coffee. . .And so I've built up quite a rapport with them and it's really really nice. [R2]

> And I look forward to it! Whenever we meet up I can't wait, I'm on my way and I get so excited, I'm sat here with a smile all across my face because I know full well that everyone's going to be in such a good mood. It's just getting out and seeing people. [R3]

> We have a coffee and we do have a chat then. Anything I need help with [they say] 'you know where I am, I'm on the other side of the phone'. [R5]

Again, this focus on companionship was apparent in clients' discussions of just general catching up with volunteers, knowing that they had someone to call on if they needed it, as well as being able to discuss shared mutual interests:

> I see somebody once a week as well which is really good. I've got somebody to talk to. And it's the same person, I thought it would change but I like to get to know somebody you know, and when you do get to know someone you get to talk to them better. [R5]

> We talk a lot by text or we have phone calls just to catch up and see how we're both doing really. [R4]

> I never feel like I'm a burden on them. As soon as I feel like I need to talk to them I move to my phone and send them a text or ring them, they're brilliant. [R3]

> She's [the volunteer] got so many interests, like she crochets and I do as well, so we've been teaching each other things. [R3]

> And sometimes just that little check in means a lot, just that they're concerned to make sure you're OK. [R1]

One respondent outlined that, due to their situation, they had lost a lot of close relationships but noted that:

> It's been really beneficial since I've been in contact with [volunteer] because I don't have many people in my family and I care for my mother full time so I've lost a lot of friendships. . .but with [volunteer] it doesn't matter what time of day it is or how I'm feeling. . .she's always there. [R3]

As well as the relationship between volunteers and individuals receiving support, one client particularly highlighted the positive impact a group meeting of individuals receiving support from the Project had had on them:

> We did have our first group meeting. . .which was really really good to see the other people who help out on the project and the other people who are in the same position as me who have moved further on with the help of [the Project] so it was nice to know that there is light at the end. Some people have got themselves sorted now and [the Project] have helped in getting them to where they are so they're not just a project that are there but do nothing for you. [R2]

Supporting this theme of companionship were a number of comments from clients about volunteers going 'above and beyond' in providing support. For instance, the project arranged for clients to get their COVID vaccinations, set someone up with an email address, and offered to pay for someone's phone credit if needed. One client highlighted this in relation to the living room redecoration that the Project arranged:

> They knew exactly what to do, they needed to talk to me about decorating, what colour schemes did I want, arranging for people to come down, you know they were messaging everyone. They've been so amazing with it; I mean that's going above and beyond for me you know? [R3]

Another highlighted that the project had been involved in supporting a friend too, once the project had heard that the client's friend was having difficulty with housing.

4.5. Volunteers as a Source of Support

Considering the dimension of the source of support (rather than the form of support), the data show a strong and positive response to the volunteer-led nature of the Project. In responses, clients outlined that the fact that support was delivered by volunteers was important for a variety of reasons:

> I've had a support worker previously who was employed. . .and to be honest they were very objective, weren't very understanding you know, they had no time for you unless it was the slot I was given and basically not a full willingness to want to help whereas I've noticed with volunteer workers they've got every time under the sun for you. [R1]

The fact that volunteers are not paid for the support they are providing was a significant positive element for clients:

> Basically, the fact that they are volunteers speaks a lot to their character. You know, they don't get paid for what they do, they get up at the start of the day, they choose to do their job, they want to help people. They don't do it because they're getting paid, they're doing it because it's what they want to do. [R1]

> [Volunteer] makes me feel like they care, not that they are paid to care. It's such a genuine thing. It reminds me that there are people that. . . aren't only around you when they need something or when it's beneficial to them. [R3]

> Because she's doing it as a volunteer it just shows how much commitment she's got really because if people are getting paid to do a job they might not want to really do it but if someone is doing the job because they have free time to do it and they want to do it then it shows. [R4]

The concept of support being delivered by volunteers as distinct and positive was repeated in the data collected through the volunteer questionnaires. Volunteers echoed the clients' comments around the support being perceived as more valuable, as the time was being given freely:

> [Being a volunteer is] definitely seen as a big plus since I am giving my time to help someone and because I choose to volunteer. My support is not determined by my line manager or the fact I'm being paid. [Q1]

> It makes them feel that you care and that it's important to us as volunteers that they have the help and support that they need. [Q6]

> I think it is helpful that it is a volunteer role so my individual knows I'm not doing this for money. [Q4]

The volunteers also emphasised that the same type or quality of service would not be able to be delivered if the service was provided by paid workers:

> Being paid would [make] the workload be excessive to the point where they wouldn't be able to see clients as regular or have the time to support to the same degree. [Q1]

> Difficult to deal with the peaks and troughs of when people need/want your input. [Q2]

> Yes, there are services but you would lose the 1-2-1 focus. [Q3]

The comments from clients and volunteers outlined above reflected the nature of the resourcing of services and the flexibility and person-centred nature of the provision through the Project.

5. Discussion

When analysing the data according to House's (1981) forms of social support typology, responses fell into all four categories, and this was evenly spread across most participants. However, responses from clients regularly referred to elements of (b) perceived companionship. Importantly, this sense of companionship was enabled by the source of the support being provided through volunteers.

A core finding of the research, therefore, was the creation of authentic relationships between clients and volunteers. Interviewees emphasised the relationships that they developed with the volunteers through engagement with the Project and consistently noted that these replicated 'normal' relationships where they discussed shared interests and engaged in 'normal' activities, such as going for coffee. This reflects the discussion in the literature (McLeish and Redshaw 2015; McLeish et al. 2021) about volunteers being considered as friends. It can be seen that these approaches to support (offering to help friends, enabling clients to make changes, providing support that is not strictly related to housing) replicate more authentic companion-based relationships rather than transactional support relationships based on a particular issue.

Referring to the structural dimension of social support (the source), the volunteer being the source of support was seen as preferable to it being from individuals who were paid to deliver support. The characteristic of this element of the service impacted on individuals beyond the instrumental value of this, with clients feeling that there was something particular about support being delivered by individuals who choose to give up their time to help and build relationships with them. Again, this echoes the literature that outlines that there is "something different" (Cameron et al. 2021) about the provision of services by volunteers that has an "intrinsic emotional meaning" (McLeish and Redshaw 2015). This is particularly pertinent in a context where individuals have lost other sources of social support such as with family, friends, or co-workers through their experience of homelessness (Cummings et al. 2022).

One way of understanding this element of companionship and authentic relationships is through its normal or everyday nature. Here we can see how this relates to the occupational perspective as outlined by Boland et al. (2023). In addition to those everyday activities, habits, and routines playing a positive role in tenancy sustainment, everyday relationships can also be seen to have a function here. This is particularly important in the context of the positive impact of authentic relationships on individuals' sense of self-worth and the potential of these support relationships to replicate sources of support that individuals have lost from broader networks.

6. Conclusions

Boland et al. (2023) call for a further engagement in occupational perspectives around housing and homelessness. This paper aims to make a contribution to that call by emphasis-

ing the importance of authentic relationships in individuals' ability to exit homelessness—not by using a strictly systematic, occupational approach but, rather, by emphasizing the everyday nature of these relationships and how this contribution can be cultivated through volunteers being the source of support. Although based on data from a small, self-selecting set of participants, the findings can prompt further considerations around the provision of social support within homelessness services: Who should deliver support? How and where should it be delivered? How can we build the development of authentic relationships into commissioning processes, and should we be pursuing this agenda? With a significant turn toward person-centred approaches to support across legislative responses to homelessness, as well as formal welfare services and informal care responses, the challenge of including authentic relationships within this context should be considered.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, H.T.; methodology, H.T.; validation, H.T. and H.D.; formal analysis, H.T.; investigation, H.T.; resources, H.T. and H.D.; data curation, H.T. and H.D.; writing—original draft preparation, H.T. and H.D.; writing—review and editing, H.T. and H.D.; funding acquisition, H.T. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: Funding was providing by the Project which commissioned the research.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by Ethics Committee of Cardiff School of Education and Social Policy, Cardiff Metropolitan University (date of approval: April 2021).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data is not available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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