

Somerset's Flooring Lottery



Barriers to accessing adequate floor covering for
social housing tenants



Somerset

November 2024

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Executive Summary

The negative impact of living without carpets on emotional, physical and financial wellbeing is immense. Yet, our research has identified that there is inconsistency in practice across social housing providers in Somerset when it comes to their provision for new tenants. Whether tenants move into a home with adequate flooring is often a matter of luck.

For most of the social housing providers we contacted, their policy on what happens to the carpets is not particularly transparent and relies on arbitrary case-by-case judgements. With the exception of some that have actively reviewed their policy, it would appear from our research that they neither have a clear protocol for keeping the carpets, nor do they give their future tenants' needs much weight in the decision.

The environmental impact of removing the carpets at the change of a tenancy is significant: wastage of viable flooring, transportation both to waste sites for the old flooring and along the supply chain for new, adding to landfill, the material costs of production, plus increased energy consumption for those new tenants unable to replace the carpets as they struggle to keep warm.

Many of the tenants we interviewed for this report were still living on bare floor six to 12 months after our initial contact, with no prospect of being able to raise the money for carpeting. Given the challenging life circumstances that households coming out of homelessness have faced, it is essential that every effort is made to help them establish decent, comfortable and energy-efficient homes.

Our Recommendations:

- Social housing providers review their policies and practices to ensure that they **save floor coverings whenever they can**.
- The criteria of **when to save and when to dump** should be clear.
- Social housing providers sign up to a six-month **“Keep and Clean”** pilot, whereby outgoing tenants can leave their carpets to be assessed, cleaned, and gifted to the incoming tenants so long as there is no health and safety risk.
- Social housing providers monitor their success by **collecting statistics** on how much floor covering they are able to retain.
- In instances where carpet has to be removed, **improve communication** to incoming tenants to support funding applications.

Introduction

Citizens Advice Somerset is a charity to which people turn in a crisis. When they cannot afford essentials such as food, energy or basic goods, we do our utmost to find a solution. Our work administering various crisis funds¹ has given us a good overview of the requests for support.

We receive frequent requests to help fund flooring in social housing. The narratives are often similar: that carpets have been removed at the tenancy changeover and incoming households cannot not afford to replace them. They are therefore living in very poor conditions, frequently following a traumatic period of homelessness and often with children. The assistance we can offer (if any) is patchy and based on a postcode lottery, or dependent on the landlord. Certain funds only cover the cost of one room; some charitable organisations only cover certain towns, not all housing associations have assistance funds and, even when they do, they can be hard to access for the tenants.

Following Citizens Advice's twin principles of advising the client and looking to improve policy and practices that affect people's lives, we decided to investigate the practices around the provision of flooring and carpeting by local social housing providers to see if there is any scope to improve their tenants' experiences.

Our clients' stories show that the impact of having no suitable flooring can be serious: not only the discomfort of living with exposed concrete floors but the additional cost of trying to keep the house warm and energy efficient. Lack of flooring is also highly visible and the shame that people feel about their home can lead to social isolation.

¹The first Household Support Fund (HSF), the Local Assistance Scheme (LAS) and, more recently, our own Client Support Fund (CSF)

Case Study

Amy² moved into a one-bedroom flat in May 2024 after the breakdown of her relationship and a period of homelessness in a Travelodge hotel. There was clean lino in the kitchen but no floor covering in the living area, bedroom or hallway. She is on UC and unable to work as she has rheumatoid arthritis and must do regular floor exercises to help manage her condition. The floor is bare, dirty and paint splattered but “I have found a solution,” she says. “I lie down on an old curtain.” The lack of carpet is also affecting the way she lives: “My condition means I drop things because I cannot grip, and I worry about the neighbours below me and the noise. To be honest, I feel shame when people visit me.” Amy has no savings and is borrowing from friends. When she asked her housing provider if it could help towards flooring, “basically, I was told: ‘it is your problem’.” Citizens Advice Somerset helped secure a £300 grant from Avalon Community but the cheapest quote she could find was £900 and she does not have the funds to make up the difference. She still has not found a solution. “It is very difficult to live like this” she says.

² All names have been changed to protect anonymity

The Lived Experience

The evidence we gathered from our clients highlighted without exception the incredibly challenging circumstances that lead them to being re-housed into homes without carpets.

We gathered detailed evidence from 16 separate households³:

- Seven were homeless because they had fled domestic abuse
- Eight were single person households, mostly older people with health conditions and two were pensioners
- Eight of the households had children. In total 13 children were living in homes without carpets
- At least six households had spent long periods living in temporary accommodation, mostly Travelodge hotels and B&Bs

The gratitude and relief of being re-housed after long waits amid challenging circumstances came through clearly in our research. However, instead of being able to settle into a new home, they were immediately faced with a new set of extremely stressful circumstances.

Firstly, it was the speed at which households had to move in which presented problems. As Joe put it:

“One day you are living in a Travelodge and the next day you are out. They expect you to wave a magic wand and have everything ready. With the best will in the world, particularly when you haven't got family in the area to help with the move, they are putting people in an impossible situation. What are you going to do; put a hammock up or something?”

³ In the spring of 2024, advisers at Citizens Advice Somerset were asked to fill in evidence forms if they advised clients presenting with this issue. 16 were submitted. They detailed the background story and the impact on clients. Further in-depth transcribed interviews were then carried out with 5 households to gain deeper understanding of the issue.

The comparison with the experience in the private rented sector is stark, as Pete pointed out:

"It made a huge difference coming into a bare flat with no carpet. I'm homeless and I'm elderly and I'm moving into a shell of a building with no carpets and no white goods. I've always lived in private rented and this has never been an issue."

Households who are re-housed from homelessness into social housing not only have often suffered traumatic life events but also have very low incomes. They lack the means to purchase essentials, yet are expected to provide everything from scratch, often from a position of owning nothing at all.

Financial barriers were experienced by all our clients, and none had any savings, access to credit or means to fund such large outlays. It is estimated that the cost to lay carpet can range from £535 for a one-bedroom flat to £1,300 for a three-bedroom house.⁴

Here is Joe again: "At the time, I was signed off with a heart issue and my HGV licence had been taken away, so I had no livelihood. I didn't have any cash. I had to sell my car. It was a pretty crap time for me. I moved in winter - in January - so it was bloody cold with the concrete floors. All I had was one rug 6ft x 6ft and an air bed on the concrete floor. I lived like that for four months. I had to turn the heating off and use a small fan heater because I had no money. I didn't even have a cooker or a fridge - I had to keep food out the back door to keep cold."

The effect on households who cannot find funding to carpet their homes is immense. For our advisers, speaking to clients in this situation is a difficult and frustrating experience, because often there is no solution.

⁴ Longleigh report, page 33 [Learning-Report-2-Tenant-Perspectives.pdf](#)

National background

There are currently no legal or regulatory requirements for social housing landlords to provide floor coverings throughout their homes. The only guidance is under the Housing and Health Safety Ratings System (HHSRS), which states that flooring in kitchens and bathrooms should be easy to clean and slip resistant.

The situation, however, is different in Wales. The 2023 Welsh Quality Standards states that, in addition to the HHSRS flooring requirements for kitchens and bathrooms, homes must be comfortable and promote wellbeing. The standards require that, at change of tenancy, all habitable rooms (bedrooms and living room, staircases and landings) located within the home should have suitable floor coverings.

End Furniture Poverty, in partnership with the Longleigh Foundation, has produced an excellent report on the Provision of Floor Coverings in Social Housing⁵. It found that nearly a quarter of the tenants surveyed got into debt in order to pay for floor coverings and that the lack of flooring significantly impacted their lives. The report also demonstrates that providing flooring has benefits for the landlords, as it can lead to decreases in arrears and tenancy turnovers.

The charities are calling for the Government to raise the standards of social housing by making floor coverings in all rooms at point of let a key priority for the new Decent Homes Standard in England and to review the Social Housing Quality Standard in Scotland.

They ask social landlords to “consider whether it is morally right that any of your tenants are living without floor coverings”.

⁵ The Provision of Floor Coverings in Social Housing, May 2024 [Longleigh Housing report](#)

The Somerset Picture

Our anecdotal evidence showed that when a tenant leaves a social housing property, carpets are often thrown out before the property is prepared for reletting. Mindful that we may not be seeing the whole picture, we decided to look at all the social housing provider's published policies to see whether this is common practice throughout Somerset and also to look for examples of good practice.

What we thought would be a simple task proved to be much more difficult than anticipated. Where we did find a statement of policy, it was usually in the context of notifying the departing tenant that they must remove their carpet, rather than setting out any criteria for saving the carpet.

In view of this lack of information, we decided to go directly to the social housing providers. We created a questionnaire that was sent to 23 with properties in the Somerset area. These included some large providers that had taken over the local council stock and some smaller ones. We received 12 responses.

The responses reflected a varied picture:

- Six have a statement in their letting standard or void policy
- Five reported no policy
- One larger provider is reviewing its policy

We asked the providers what flooring is provided in their **new-build properties**.

The responses were varied:

- Four only provide flooring in the bathroom and kitchen
- One provides it in the bathroom, kitchen and sitting room but not hall and stairs
- One provides it in bathroom, kitchen, hall and stairs but not sitting room
- Two supply flooring (vinyl) in all rooms

- Two say it depends on the development and floor construction
- One has recently reviewed and updated its specification to provide flooring to all areas.

When asked about their treatment of carpets and flooring when a tenant leaves, the main response was that carpets can be left if they are in a “good enough” condition. Where there is a written policy, it often just refers to a property inspection, at which it may be decided that a carpet can be left but the policy gives little, if any, explanation as to how that judgement is made.

The definition of “good enough” is difficult to pin down. One responder recognised that this could result in more waste:

“Generally, flooring is removed unless deemed to be in good enough condition to gift to the incoming tenant (this is where a degree of discretion occurs, and we probably waste more than if we considered carpet cleaning as the first step of the void standard).”

Another stated that, where it could, it would retain flooring but then gave a long list of reasons not to keep it. In all but two of the providers surveyed, a tenant is told to remove the flooring before leaving and doesn’t, the outgoing tenant is recharged. Only one respondent could provide any statistics relating to carpet retention.

Most providers have a referral pathway to hardship funds but there is no standard. Two specify that they offer help with a carpet for one room, or with vouchers for carpets. Unfortunately, a Carpetright scheme that helped tenants came to an end when the retailer went into liquidation.

Encouragingly there were some examples of positive change

One provider has recently conducted a pilot study and changed its policy as a result (see case study overleaf). Another is planning to conduct a small pilot survey, in part to look at where a lack of appropriate floor covering is contributing to fuel poverty and noise complaints from neighbours.

Keeping carpets saves money – LiveWest, a case study

LiveWest's response to our questionnaire stood out from most of the others as they had successfully piloted a new approach to the treatment of carpets at the end of tenancies and have updated their policy as a result.

Prior to the pilot, the LiveWest policy was that outgoing tenants removed their carpets on ending their tenancies. During the pilot, tenants could leave their carpets to be assessed, cleaned, and gifted to the incoming tenants so long as there was no health and safety risk. The pilot resulted in:

- 65% of homes relet having carpets retained and accepted by incoming tenants.*
- 22% of homes having carpets removed (health and safety risk/very poor condition)*
- 13% of homes had no carpets present when previous tenant moved out.*

LiveWest explained that their initial pilot and ultimate change of policy had been prompted following a recent "carpets, not concrete" campaign by a local tenant's union based in Cornwall. LiveWest met with them and along with their own customer scrutiny group, agreed to start a pilot in early 2024.

Over the three months of the pilot, they calculated that the cost of cleaning the carpets for incoming tenants was also 25% less than the cost of removal and disposal of the carpets. In addition to this, there has been a reduction to landfill to support their ongoing drive to improve sustainability.

Charitable support

Our research found there is a postcode lottery when it comes to accessing charitable help to fund carpets. If tenants are lucky enough to live in the Frome area, a joint enterprise between Fair Frome and the Frome Rotary and Lions Club means tenants have a chance of securing funding to carpet their whole property. If they live in the rest of the Mendip area, they may secure a £300 grant from Avalon Community Energy towards the cost of carpeting. For those living in Taunton, the Taunton Heritage Trust may award up to £400, which is only enough to carpet one small room.

If tenants live in Bridgwater or Yeovil, however, there were no known charities offering funding for carpets.

The Household Support Fund's future is not secure and criteria changes periodically. In any case currently it is only accessible for carpet funding if applied for via a social worker or village agent. Whether people know about this or are told about this again is based on luck. As Zoe's case below illustrates, even a successful Household Support Fund application might only be enough to carpet part of a house.

The feeling of being passed from pillar to post in the search for assistance came through frequently in our research. If you are a single parent trying to navigate moving home with young children and you do not get clear signposting to the help that is available, this adds layers of stress to households that are already struggling to cope.

The lack of consistency in communication meant households are living without carpets for far longer than is necessary. Some of our interviewees were living in properties let by housing associations that have their own charitable funds to help, but our clients stated that they had never been informed of this.

Case Study

Zoe is a single mother with three children under 11 who left an abusive relationship and was offered a tenancy in a three-bedroom new-build house, where the kitchen and bathroom were laminated but the rest of the house had no floor coverings.

She was not told about her landlord's tenants' support fund, nor had the funds to finance carpeting herself, as she is on UC and finds it difficult even to pay the bills. For months the family lived with no carpets.

Through the intervention of a social worker, eventually funding was secured for carpets in the living room and stairs, but there was not enough for the bedrooms.

She still lives with bare chipboard in her bedroom. She managed to find an offcut for the 10-year-old's room and her brother helped her lay it as best they could. "The younger children have a basic rug but don't play in their room because it is not nice. It has been like that for a year."

Conclusion

The overall impression is one of **inconsistency** in practice and provision, with it often being down to **luck** for the tenants as to whether flooring is provided, or there is access to funding.

The responses from the social housing providers demonstrate a lack of standard practice, other than that they all provide flooring in kitchens and bathrooms, to meet the HHSRS regulations. Where flooring is provided in other rooms in new builds, which of those rooms is given priority varies not only between providers but also between different schemes developed by the same landlord.

Similarly, there is very little consistency between housing providers regarding the treatment of flooring when a property is vacated. The lack of a visible policy in most cases and the reliance on arbitrary judgement about when to keep a carpet does little to dispel our initial suspicion that carpets are too easily disposed of. We were encouraged, however, to see that some housing providers are reviewing their policies, and we urge others to learn from their experiences.

The outcome of the LiveWest pilot, which saw carpet retention in re-lets increase to 65%, clearly demonstrates that there is scope for significantly more carpet to be retained and gifted to incoming tenants, with benefits for all parties and helping to meet sustainability goals.

From our clients' perspective, it is down to luck as to whether they move into a property with decent flooring. For those who need assistance with obtaining suitable flooring, it appears to be hit or miss whether they can get support from their provider or find other charitable help.

We hope that in the near future, there will be amendments to the national Decent Homes Standard so that in the future social housing in England will be let with suitable flooring. Meanwhile, the flooring lottery will continue in Somerset unless landlords determinedly focus on providing or keeping flooring, which would significantly improve the lives of their tenants.

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