

Open Door

Issue 04 | Spring 2026

Laoise's Story

Our Impact

Take the challenge



Hello, I'm Stuart and I want to begin by thanking Simon Community for inviting me to be the very first guest editor of *Open Door* newsletter. Truth be told if I was to thank Simon Community for everything they have done for me, I would be writing a pretty big book.

Like thousands of others, I turned to Simon Community when I was at my lowest and had no place to call home. Thanks to Accommodation Manager, Joanne, my Key Worker Paddy, and the rest of the amazing team at Simon Community's North Belfast service, I didn't just get a room - I got real support. They helped me get counselling, sort out my medication, and get my benefits back on track. And through Simon Community's Creating Homes programme, I've now moved into my forever home.

Even though a lot has changed for me and I now have a place to call home, I've stayed involved in the

homelessness sector. I'm part of a brilliant lived experience group called Echoes of Home, and I've kept in touch with Simon Community too. They've continued to support me, and every now and then I even get the chance to give something back and help them in their mission to end homelessness.

Guest editing this edition of *Open Door* has given me the chance to meet more people like myself, people with a voice, a story to tell, and the lived experience that can genuinely make a difference when we share it.

To everyone who donates and makes all of this possible, and to the incredible people who work at Simon Community, who get up every day determined to make people's lives better - thank you. Honestly, I'm so grateful.

Stuart Copeland
Lived Experience Expert

Simon Community's Impact - At a glance

Stuart's reflections:

"I'm always struck by just how wide-ranging the work of Simon Community is, spanning prevention, accommodation, well-being and move-on support. Here are a few of the statistics that really stayed with me."

1,224

people helped through accommodation and community-based prevention services this year compared to 1,086 last year

26,000

requests for help compared to 17,915 last year

179

deposits were provided to secure safe housing in the private market up from 173 last year

210

families received emergency financial support to help them keep their homes

601

people were able to stay in their homes thanks to early, preventative services

271

people moved on to safer, more stable homes

333

people were supported by Drug & Alcohol Services



92 people, including **39 adults** and **53 children**, were supported through the family service in Conway Court, Belfast



Across all accommodation services, **307 people under the age of 25** were supported

With your support, Simon Community has been able to make a real difference.

From Fear to
Fierce Advocacy:

Laoise's Story

Laoise's journey began with the terrifying prospect of being the only female in an all-male hostel, to becoming the powerful voice for change that she is today. Here is Laoise's story.

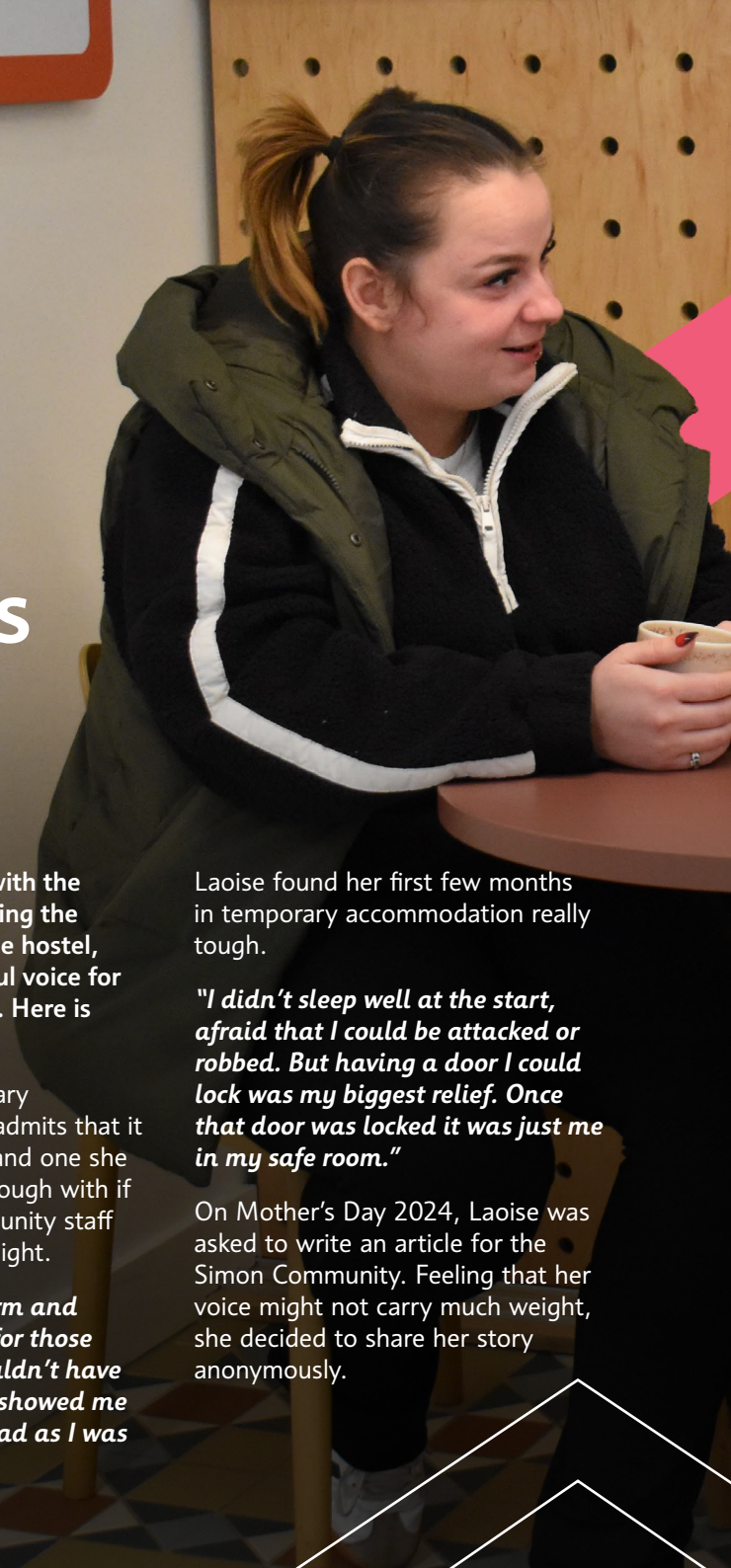
On first entering temporary accommodation, Laoise admits that it was a scary experience, and one she would not have gone through with if not for the Simon Community staff who were working that night.

"Their faces were so warm and welcoming, if it wasn't for those two staff members I wouldn't have went inside at all, they showed me that this might not be bad as I was expecting it to be."

Laoise found her first few months in temporary accommodation really tough.

"I didn't sleep well at the start, afraid that I could be attacked or robbed. But having a door I could lock was my biggest relief. Once that door was locked it was just me in my safe room."

On Mother's Day 2024, Laoise was asked to write an article for the Simon Community. Feeling that her voice might not carry much weight, she decided to share her story anonymously.





"I requested it be anonymous but later felt that was a mistake because the feedback I got from the few who knew I had written it was phenomenal; I cried both tears of joy and sadness. I fell in love with the purpose of helping others in my situation, and also in taking away the stigma around homelessness."

Laoise has taken huge steps in becoming an advocate for those now walking the same path she found herself on - especially young women. This has seen her help Simon Community present a report at Stormont and seen her become a powerful voice in her lived experience group.

"Here I am rebuilding my foundations, I see young women facing the same situations as myself who feel they have no voice. Now I feel that not only can I be that voice, but more importantly help them find their own, to let them know that there is someone out there with a voice powerful enough to help make changes that will benefit them on their own journey to finding a safe home."

Laoise is a brilliant reminder that real strength often comes from having the courage to speak up and share your story.

Ending the Stigma

By Stuart Copeland

One of the most frustrating challenges when dealing with anything related to homelessness is the stigma that still surrounds it. When people hear the word "homelessness," many still picture rough sleepers or those struggling with drug or alcohol issues. But the reality is very different. 62,888 people in Northern Ireland are officially homeless, and they come from all kinds of backgrounds and life situations. It's important that we start recognising that homelessness isn't one story - it's many.

Around 1 in 31 people in Northern Ireland are officially homeless. If you're reading this, you may have experienced homelessness yourself or know someone who has. Thousands of people here are living in temporary accommodation or "sofa surfing," without a permanent place to call home. Every one of them deserves somewhere safe and secure to live.

The Echoes of Home lived experience group I'm part of is made up of people who have all been through homelessness in one way or another. Our journeys are all different, but

what brings us together is a shared determination to support others facing these challenges today. When I hear the words "homeless people," it's these incredible individuals who come to mind first.

Young people leaving care, people bravely fleeing abusive relationships, those struggling with rising private rents, and people facing mental health challenges have all been supported by Simon Community. Simon Community has always been - and will always be - a non-judgemental organisation because they understand that every person's journey is different. When you reach out to Simon Community, you'll always be met with the dignity and respect you deserve.

And I'll keep doing my bit to break the stigma and make things better for anyone going through homelessness.

How You Can Help

Stuart, the editor of the magazine, has shared these tips to help you get involved and support our work in ways that suit you.

Your Understanding

A lot of people who end up homeless here in Northern Ireland have been carrying heavy stuff since childhood - things most people never see. Those experiences don't just disappear as you grow up, and they can leave you vulnerable in ways you don't always notice until life goes wrong. When someone loses their home, it's rarely out of the blue. What they need most in that moment is a bit of understanding - to be treated like a person who's having a tough time, not a problem to be avoided.

Your Respect

When you're sleeping rough, you'd be shocked at how invisible you start to feel. You go whole days without anyone looking you in the eye, never mind saying hello. And honestly? That can hurt more than the cold.

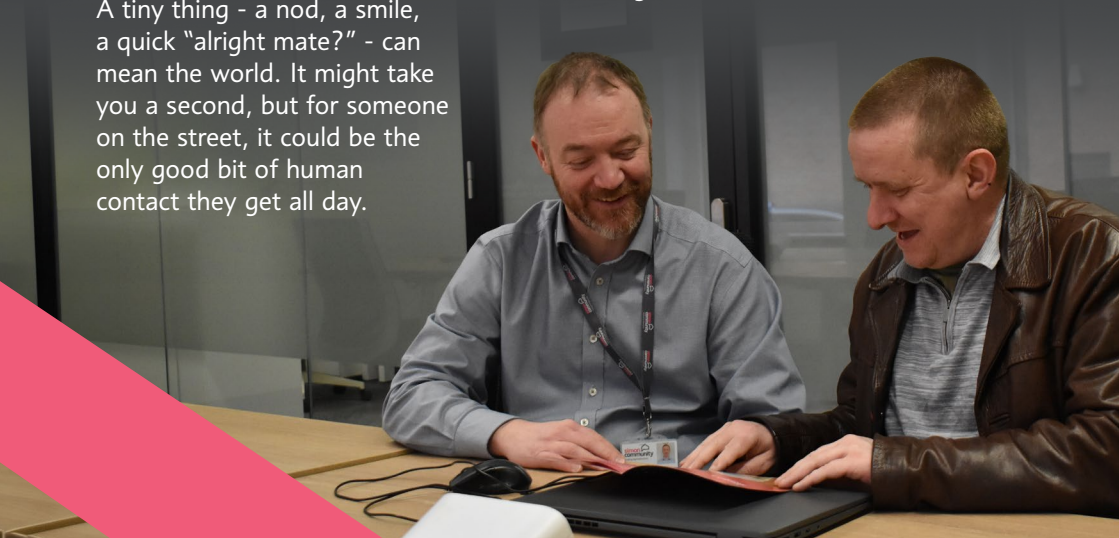
A tiny thing - a nod, a smile, a quick "alright mate?" - can mean the world. It might take you a second, but for someone on the street, it could be the only good bit of human contact they get all day.

Your Donations

When you donate to places like Simon Community, you're doing more than giving money - you're giving someone a chance to get their feet back under them. Donations help keep temporary accommodation running and support the staff who show up every day determined to make life a bit easier for people going through hell. Those little acts of support add up to real change.

Your Kindness

If you ever meet someone experiencing homelessness, try to remember this: they're someone's son, someone's daughter, someone who used to laugh and plan and dream just like you. A bit of kindness costs nothing, but it can make a huge difference. Simon Community is working hard to end homelessness - but the truth is, kindness from the public is one of the strongest tools we have.



Maebh's Story

Maebh has faced homelessness since she was just 16 - still only a child. From couch-surfing to the terrifying reality of sleeping on the streets of Belfast city centre, and finally to walking through the doors of Simon Community, this is Maebh's story.

"I suffered domestic violence from a young age and that started with my mum. At times I would stay on friends couches to get away, then I moved in with my dad and the same thing happened again."

To escape Maebh found herself on the streets of the city centre, sleeping on concrete, relying on help to charge her phone and get a bite to eat - it was desperately unsafe.

"I woke up one morning to find someone going through my bags and knew I had to make a change, so every morning at nine sharp I was at the doors of the Housing Executive trying to get help."

During these visits, Maebh was told about Simon Community and at last, things started to take a turn for the better.

"I got a call that there was a room for me at Simon Community temporary accommodation service and I went that very morning. It wasn't just the things in the room I was grateful for, like a bed or a fridge but it was the fact I could lock the door. I never felt safe at home and never felt safe on the streets, but here I feel safe."

One thing Maebh has always had to get her through the tough times is her incredible creativity, from making her own music to designing her own clothes she always keeps herself busy.

"Music all day every day is my life, I have played guitar from I was 14 and just got myself a bass guitar too. I love writing my own music. It is class and I hope to make a record one day."

Maebh will be one of the first residents to move into a new Simon Community site in West Belfast and is looking forward to moving to a new community.

"I am looking forward to a fresh start. I hope people understand that we are all just a few bad steps away from needing services like Simon Community. If not you personally then your son or daughter, brother or sister may one day need the help and safety that Simon Community offers."





"As someone who has received Paddy's support firsthand, I am proud to share his reflections, I can truly say his impact is felt long after you leave the service."

The Role of Support Worker

Paddy has worked as a Support Worker at Simon Community for over 16 years now in temporary accommodation services, helping to guide those who come through the doors toward a safer and more secure future. Here is his story.

How Paddy first came to Simon Community.

"I used to be a roofer in London then a friend of mine got me work in a mental health unit. When I came back home to Belfast I did some agency shifts with Simon Community and met Joanne, who is my manager here now, who wanted me to stay permanently."

Helping rebuild confidence at Cliftonville Avenue temporary accommodation service.

"We have people here trying to get past drug or alcohol dependency issues and I believe that you have to replace that with something positive, we have a small gym here and I also take them to an outside gym as well. I also go for walks with clients around Cavehill or take them to the Crumlin Road Gaol. It's about getting people active and giving them motivation."

The wide range of people who need temporary accommodation.

"You never know who will come through the door. We have had a pharmacist, an architect and teachers come here who for one reason or another have found themselves without a home, and the reasons can be anything from rising rents, family breakdowns or dependency issues."

Staying connected after people move on.

"I have stayed in contact with quite a few people after they move out of our accommodation service. Sometimes just phone calls or they are looking for advice. Thanks to the Creating Homes scheme Stuart moved into his home on my street and he always knows I am close by if he needs anything."

Europa Abseil is back!

Gear up for a heart-pounding adventure with our Europa Abseil for ending homelessness!

Join us at Europa Belfast on Sunday 7th June for a thrilling descent that transcends heights and homelessness.

When: Sunday 7th June 2026

Registration fee: £35

Minimum fundraising target:
£120



And if you missed out on a place in the Belfast City Marathon, don't worry - there are plenty of running events happening right across the country, giving you lots of chances to fundraise for Simon Community and help end homelessness.

If you're planning to run for Simon Community, find out how to join #TeamSimon by emailing fundraise@simoncommunity.org

We'd love to cheer you on.

Conexia: Working Together

Conexia Limited joined us as a partner in October 2025, and their commitment to making a meaningful impact has been outstanding. In a short time, they have raised funds through bake sales and raffles, donated gifts for our Christmas Hampers, and even helped pack and distribute them to our Temporary Accommodation sites. What has impressed us most is not just the activities themselves, but the enthusiasm and dedication shown by Conexia staff throughout.

Looking ahead, 2026 offers even more opportunities for Conexia to deepen their impact. There is potential for Simon Community clients to join their workforce through the JobStart Scheme, and they will be working closely with our Operations team to develop resources and deliver workshops on CV writing and interview preparation.

Conexia will also be joining Team Simon in this year's Belfast Marathon and taking part in the Europa Abseil. We know there is much more to come from this wonderful group, and we are proud to call them a partner.

"Our 2024 staff survey highlighted a strong passion across our teams to support homelessness in Northern Ireland, shaping our Corporate Social Responsibility focus and leading us to partner with Simon Community. The fundraising and volunteering enthusiasm shown so far has been inspiring, and we're committed to building on this momentum with Dan (Corporate Partnerships and Volunteering Officer) and his colleagues in 2026."

Nathan Cunningham,
Head of Service



Childhood Trauma is Driving Record Homelessness in NI

Towards the end of 2025, Simon Community launched a major new report revealing that childhood trauma plays a powerful role in Northern Ireland's record levels of homelessness, giving insight into the experiences that set people on a pathway to homelessness from a young age.

We were delighted to be joined by people with lived experience, including our guest editor Stuart and Laoise, whose story is featured - helping to ensure these voices were front and centre at the launch.

You can read the landmark report: Childhood Adversity and Homelessness in Northern Ireland: Breaking the Cycle by scanning the QR Code.



Simon Community
17 Bedford Street
Belfast, BT2 7EG
Charity No: NIC102724

028 9023 2882
info@simoncommunity.org
www.simoncommunity.org

