



Supporting women who are homeless

Briefing for homelessness services

Let's end homelessness together

Homeless Link, 2-5 Minories, London, EC3N 1BJ | 020 7840 4430

www.homeless.org.uk | Twitter: @Homelesslink | Facebook: www.facebook.com/homelesslink

© Homeless Link 2014. All rights reserved. Homeless Link is a charity no. 1089173 and a company no. 04313826.

Supporting women who are homeless

Briefing for homelessness services

Contents

Introduction.....	3
Best practice in supporting women sleeping rough	4
Organisations that support women who are homeless.....	5
Toolkits, resources and publications to help improve your service	7

Produced by

The Innovation and Good Practice Team

With thanks to

DCLG

Published

March 2017

Introduction

Women who find themselves sleeping rough, who are homeless or in insecure accommodation are acutely vulnerable. This briefing gives an introduction to the key issues for services looking to improve their practice around support for women.

Homelessness is rising in England, as is the number of women recorded as rough sleeping and accessing services. In 2016, 12% of those recorded as rough sleeping on one given night were women.¹ Homeless Link's research has shown that 28% of service users in accommodation projects are women, while in day centres it is slightly lower at 24%.² This figure is significantly higher when looking at the number of young women (under 25 years old) accessing services, which is around 46%, a 6% increase on the year before.³ Despite these rises, many homelessness services are not sufficiently gendered in their approach, and their design and delivery has traditionally been dominated by the experience of male rough sleepers.

Our research has shown that women are more likely to avoid sleeping rough in the open and, therefore, the rough sleeping statistics do not provide the full picture. Many women end up living in a range of hidden and marginalised situations, putting them at risk of further violence and abuse. Even for those that are able to access accommodation based services, only 11 per cent of accommodation projects are able to offer women-only provision within their service.⁴

Homelessness among women can be catastrophic, not only for the individuals involved, but also for their wider family and relationships with children. Relationships with families, and in particular children, are often central to the lives of women who are homeless. The impact of children being taken into care or otherwise separated can be extremely traumatic for their parent, leading to increased need among homeless women for advocacy and advice, often relating to legal proceedings. The St Mungo's Rebuilding Shattered Lives report found that over half their female clients are mothers, and 79% of these women have had their children taken into care. The report therefore has drawn particular attention to the need for services to better cater for women who are mothers.⁵

Violence, trauma, substance misuse and domestic abuse are just some of the complex and interrelating problems that contribute to women's homelessness and presents barriers to recovery. Some homelessness services are not well equipped to address these issues which can often be traced back to a history of traumatic violence and abuse. Some women may turn to alcohol, illegal substances or prostitution as a way to "survive" while sleeping rough.⁶ Women experiencing complex trauma will often have trouble maintaining stable relationships, engaging in support and navigating non-clinical services. While homelessness and housing services cannot replace clinical services, working in a more trauma and psychologically informed way can improve the outcomes for women with multiple and complex needs.⁷

¹ DCLG, *Rough sleeping in England: autumn 2016*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/rough-sleeping-in-england-autumn-2016>

² Homeless Link, *Single Homelessness Support in England: Annual Review 2016* <http://www.homeless.org.uk/facts/our-research/annual-review-of-single-homelessness-support-in-england>

³ Homeless Link, *Young and Homeless 2015*, <http://www.homeless.org.uk/facts/our-research/young-and-homeless-research>

⁴ Homeless Link, *Single Homelessness Support in England: Annual Review 2016*

⁵ St Mungo's, *Rebuilding Shattered Lives*, <http://rebuildingshatteredlives.org/read-the-report/>

⁶ St Mungo's, *Rebuilding Shattered Lives*

⁷ Keats, Helen, Maguire, Nick, Johnson, Robin and Cockersell, Peter (2012) *Psychologically informed services for homeless people*. Southampton, GB, Communities and Local Government (Good Practice Guide)

Critically for homelessness services, funding for services that provide support are being cut. Research by St Mungo's shows that the proportion of services which are specifically targeted at women fell from 12% to only 8% in 2013.⁸ The government's proposed plans to cap housing benefit in the social sector at the same levels paid to private landlords threatens two thirds of women's refuges in England⁹ and the provision of supported accommodation services in the homelessness sector.¹⁰

Good practice in supporting women who are homeless

There is a lot of guidance, research and resources (many listed below) that can support your service to improve the way it delivers support to women facing homelessness. Good practice examples include:

Enabling women only spaces for support Organisations should develop or expand the way they cater for women accessing their service. For example, providing women-only spaces, women-only session times and female staff members within mixed sex services. Many women accessing homelessness services have been victims of sexual and violent abuse from men in the past and, when surveyed, women accessing homelessness services have expressed a preference for female staff.¹¹ This also extends to the provision of spaces within services that are clean, private, increase feelings of safety and foster greater feelings of security.

Staff training to enable gendered responses Organisations working with women should ensure that their training, policies and guidance enables staff to respond to the challenges faced by women experiencing homelessness. The organisations listed below run a range of training and support around domestic and sexual violence, mental health support, sex working, substance misuse and more. Services should develop the skills and awareness of their staff to avoid stigmatisation and ensure that women are provided with non-judgemental support. Gender training for management and front-line staff in homelessness services should be standard practice to avoid indirect discrimination towards women by operating in ways that are insensitive to their needs.

Psychologically informed services which respond to trauma Services for women should be psychologically informed and designed and delivered in a way that takes into account the emotional and psychological needs of women experiencing homelessness. This can enable services users and staff within an organisation to improve awareness of trauma and its impact on vulnerable women. Working in a trauma informed way can also avoid re-traumatisation in services and support women to build control and safety, vital steps towards recovery from trauma.

Partnership working to address multiple support needs Women with multiple and complex needs often find it hard to access support from local services that may not be tailored to their needs. Building partnerships between services around, for example, mental health, offending, substance misuse and homelessness can overcome this. In particular, co-location can support chaotic individuals to receive a range of support services in one place. Closer working with women's sector organisations such as women's centres and refuges

⁸ St Mungo's, *Rebuilding Shattered Lives*

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/sep/05/womens-refuges-housing-benefit-cap-domestic-violence>

¹⁰ www.homeless.org.uk/connect/news/2017/mar/01/homeless-link-launches-five-core-principles-for-new-supported-housing

¹¹ St Mungo's, *Rebuilding Shattered Lives*

Homeless Link

supporting women with complex needs can ensure women are receiving gender-specific support whilst being accommodated within homelessness services.

Client involvement Involving the voice of women in the design, delivery and evaluation of services plays a key role in enabling services to respond effectively to feedback from beneficiaries of the service. Avoid tokenism and ensure that those with lived experience of rough sleeping/homelessness are consulted on changes to policies, procedures, service development and any organisational changes. Are there areas where women are seen as 'not engaging' or falling foul of their agreements? Are women frequently raising a particular issue about the service? Working with women accessing services and co-producing policies, procedures and service design will result in better outcomes for both staff and women.

Supporting women with children For many women, the impact of being separated or losing custody of their children cannot be understated. Women experiencing homelessness find that many services are ill equipped or lack flexibility to allow contact with children. Services should, where appropriate, develop childcare/access facilities and support for women to receive necessary advice and advocacy around legal proceedings. Services need to provide adequate psychological and emotional support that recognises the traumatic impact that separation from children can have on the lives and, ultimately, recovery of women experiencing homelessness.

Organisations that support women who are homeless

A Mile in her Shoes Running group for women affected by issues of homelessness in London:
www.amileinhershoes.org.uk

Brighton Women's Centre has developed a partnership in West Sussex with Worthing Churches Homeless Project (WCHP) and is delivering services through women only Drop-ins in Worthing and in Littlehampton
www.womenscentre.org.uk

CAST Women A holistic service of education, training and employment advice: www.castwomen.org.uk

Changing Lives offer a range of services to women across the North East including: Offending support programmes, Services for women involved in sex work and specialist women-only accommodation projects for women at risk of homelessness and domestic violence. www.changing-lives.org.uk/how-we-change-lives/for-women

Clean Break Theatre company who work with women affected by the criminal justice system:
www.cleanbreak.org.uk

Durham Action on Single Housing (DASH) Provide vulnerable women who have multiple and complex needs with accommodation. <http://www.dashorg.co.uk/index.html>

Hidden Hurt Domestic abuse information: www.hiddenhurt.co.uk

Homeless Link

MATCH (Mothers Apart from their Children) A charity that offers non-judgemental support and information to mothers apart from their children: www.matchmothers.org

Refuge Domestic violence organisation for all women and children: www.refuge.org.uk

Rights of Women Legal advice and information: www.rightsofwomen.org.uk

Rape and Sexual Abuse Counselling Centre www.rsacc-thecentre.org.uk

Solace Women's Aid helps women in London experiencing sexual and domestic abuse, including refuge accommodation, advice and advocacy, counselling and family services. www.solacewomensaid.org

Southall Black Sisters Advice and nation-wide referrals for BME women experiencing abuse, and leads a campaign to increase support for women with No Recourse to Public Funds: www.southallblacksisters.org.uk/services

Spires Streetlink Outreach service working with sex- workers: www.spires.org.uk/spires-streetlink

Swish Part of the Terrence Higgins Trust, Swish is an organisation offering confidential advice and support for women involved in the sex industry. www.swishproject.org.uk

The Nelson Trust Women's Centres: In Gloucester and Swindon provide a women-only space where a wide range of support needs can be addressed in a safe and supportive environment, using gender and trauma informed approaches. www.nelsontrust.com/community-based-services/womens-community-services/

Women's Aid Federation of England National charity working to end domestic violence against women and children: www.womensaid.org.uk

Women at the Well Trauma Informed women-only drop in centre providing support with complex needs: www.watw.org.uk/case-studies

Women Centred Working Guide to women centred working initiatives: www.womencentredworking.com

Women in Prison Services and interventions for women facing prison or leaving prison: www.womeninprison.org.uk

Toolkits, resources and publications to help improve your service

AVA (2013) *Complicated Matters* – A toolkit addressing domestic and sexual violence, substance misuse and mental health. www.avaproject.org.uk/resources/?types=toolkits#content-anchor

AVA (2016) *Voices of Experience: Best Practice in Service User Involvement for Women Facing Multiple Disadvantage* avaproject.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Experts-by-Experience-Seminar-Event-Summary.pdf

AVA & Drugscope (2014) *The Challenge of Change: Improving services for women involved in prostitution and substance use*: www.drugscope.org.uk/Resources/Drugscope/Documents/PDF/Policy/Challenge%20of%20change_policy%20briefing.pdf

Changing Lives (2016) [Peer led research into sex work in Durham and Darlington](http://www.changinglives.org.uk/research/peer-led-research-into-sex-work-in-durham-and-darlington)

Homeless England Search for homelessness services by gender, category or postcode www.homeless.org.uk/facts/homeless-england

Homeless Link (2015) *Young and Homeless* www.homeless.org.uk/facts/our-research/young-and-homeless-research

Homeless Link Training [Supporting Women Experiencing Homelessness](http://www.homeless.org.uk/training/supporting-women-experiencing-homelessness)

Homeless Link & Shelter [London PLUS Project](http://www.homeless.org.uk/london-plus-project), runs good practice events on a range of issues including trauma informed approaches for women and women with No Recourse to Public Funds.

Keats, Helen, Maguire, Nick, Johnson, Robin and Cockersell, Peter (2012) *Psychologically informed services for homeless people*. Southampton, GB, Communities and Local Government (Good Practice Guide) www.riaconsultancy.org.uk/6454%20clg%20pie%20operational%20document%20aw-1.pdf

Lankelly Chase (2014) *Women and girls at risk: Evidence across the life course- report outlining the circumstances which can lead to the development of complex needs in women*: www.lankellychase.org.uk/news-story/women-and-girls-at-risk

No One Left Out: Solutions Ltd for Westminster City Council (2015) *Creating a Psychologically Informed Environment; Assessment and Implementation*. www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Creating%20a%20Psychologically%20Informed%20Environment%20-%202015.pdf

St Mungo's *Rebuilding Shattered Lives* report www.rebuildingshatteredlives.org/read-the-report

Women Rough Sleepers Project EU <http://womenroughsleepers2.eu>



What we do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for organisations working directly with people who become homeless in England. We work to make services better and campaign for policy change that will help end homelessness.

Let's end homelessness together

Homeless Link
2-5 Minorities
London EC3N 1BJ

020 7840 4430

www.homeless.org.uk

Twitter: @Homelesslink

Facebook: www.facebook.com/homelesslink

© Homeless Link 2014. All rights reserved.
Homeless Link is a charity no. 1089173 and
a company no. 04313826.