



**Promising  
practice from  
the frontline**

Exploring gendered approaches to supporting women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage

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Lisa Young, Tessa Horvath.

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Understanding and supporting women and their organisations

## Executive summary

This scoping research is a collaboration between Homeless Link and the Women's Resource Centre (WRC) to explore gendered support available in England to women who experience homelessness and multiple disadvantage.

### Summary of key findings

#### The factors that services are seeing most frequently

Survey data suggests that women experiencing multiple disadvantage are presenting to a broad range of community services including those that are designed to support women with multiple disadvantage and services that are not. Over two thirds of the survey respondents (69%) reported they had seen an increase in the numbers of women with multiple disadvantage presenting to their service over the last two years.

When asked to report the types of multiple disadvantage that women present to services with, the findings demonstrate that services are supporting women with a broad range of experiences:

- All the survey respondents said that they 'sometimes' or 'often' support women who experience homelessness
- 97% of respondents reported that they are either 'sometimes' or 'often' supporting women with experience of mental ill-health
- 94% of respondents reported that they 'sometimes' or 'often' support women with problematic substance use
- 93% of respondents reported that they 'sometimes' or 'often' support women who experience domestic violence.

65% of the survey respondents<sup>1</sup> said that they support women with all the following either 'sometimes' or 'often': homelessness, domestic violence, sexual violence, involvement in prostitution, problematic drugs and alcohol use, mental ill health and involvement in the criminal justice system.

The research also explored the way in which women experience homelessness and their journey to services:

- Domestic and sexual violence as well as changes in welfare leading to an inability to cover housing costs were reported to be the main triggers for women's homelessness
- To avoid violence and exploitation when sleeping rough women either stay with family and friends or resorting to using public transport or A&E waiting rooms
- Women who experience domestic violence and present to the local authority were reported to often receive an inadequate response and are not deemed priority need.

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<sup>1</sup> From 90 responses.

- When women do sleep rough, they may stay on the move all night to avoid the risks of more violence and exploitation
- Traditional support provided through the homelessness pathway tends to be mixed provision which risks exposing women to further violence and exploitation. Staff rarely have the skills and experience to understand the types of support women need as a result of the continuum of violence they have experienced.

### **Support available for homeless women who experience multiple disadvantage**

Of the 90 respondents to the survey, the majority (62%) were from homelessness and housing services, but a wide range of other community support projects were represented including violence and abuse support services, criminal justice support services, substance use, drop-in advice services and specialist women's services. Almost half of the services that responded to the survey (48%) reported that they were designed to work specifically with women facing multiple disadvantage, 46% reporting that they are not and 6% answered 'not sure'. 19 respondents explicitly stated that their service was a dedicated woman only organisation.

Responses varied significantly in the extent to which services implement policies, practices and training to inform their support for this group of women, suggesting that services need to be strengthened to incorporate gender informed policies, practices and training.

### **Effective support for homeless women facing multiple disadvantage**

Building on previous research<sup>2</sup> this project identified common factors that are reported to enhance the effectiveness of support for women experiencing multiple disadvantage:

- **Organisational commitment** to work from an understanding of women's lived experience of inequality
- **Service design which incorporates gendered approaches** – incorporating the understanding of the impacts of VAWG and how to respond appropriately
- **Organisational structures: policies, staff recruitment training and support** - implementing policies which embed a gendered approach, recruiting knowledgeable, empathic, compassionate and resilient staff that are trained on violence against women.

Examples of promising practice where services have incorporated the elements illustrated above have been documented in a series of good practice case studies in the full report.

### **Barriers and enablers to providing effective support**

The primary barriers facing services include:

- A lack of strategic, gender informed funding approaches from commissioners.

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<sup>2</sup> AVA and Agenda. (2017) *The core components of a gender sensitive service for women experiencing multiple disadvantage: A review of the literature* (London: AVA & Agenda 2017)

- Structural barriers relating to an overall lack of availability of safe, appropriate housing options.
- A lack of resources resulting from widespread social care sector spending cuts, particularly for women with no recourse to public funds.
- A lack of systematic evidence relating to women's homelessness which delays their access to support.

As such, those providing gender informed and gender specific approaches are facing an uphill struggle in making the case for and leveraging in resources to do their work. Suggestions were noted that would enhance support for women:

- Increasing joint commissioning approaches to encourage services to work together rather than in silos
- The Housing First model adapted to work specifically with women
- Specific expertise, time and resource available to advocate for migrant women to access their rights, entitlements and legal advice
- Changes to how women's homelessness is categorised including the need for changes to the verification process which can miss out women who do not sleep rough and those who hide themselves whilst rough sleeping
- Assertive outreach models to more effectively locate, identify and engage women.

## Recommendations

### Recommendations for policy makers

- Develop a central Government strategy that recognises women's specific experiences of multiple disadvantage and the support they require.
- Use the existing National Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy to address all forms of violence against women.
- Increase Government funding for the violence against women sector to provide early intervention and prevention and explore the development of a cross-departmental funding stream.
- Address the structural causes of homelessness by reducing poverty, increasing the supply of truly affordable housing and ensuring there is an effective welfare safety net.
- Accurately represent women's homelessness in official statistics, which may require changing counting and analysis processes.

### Recommendations for commissioners and funders

- Provide funding for gender specific specialist services, approaches for homeless women experiencing multiple disadvantage, and for women with NRPF
- Increase the development of joint funding initiatives which tailor service delivery to effectively engage this group of women across the local VAWG and homelessness services.
- Improve the monitoring and evaluation frameworks to more fully recognise the quality and impact of interventions.

### **Recommendations for services**

- Implement policies, practices and role-appropriate training for staff on women's experiences of homelessness, VAWG and multiple disadvantage. Incorporate assertive outreach services to offer support to women in a way that works for them.
- Work in partnership with local services to provide co-located support for women in familiar surroundings (e.g. drop-in centres).
- Generic services to consider incorporating or working alongside VAWG and multiple disadvantage lead workers with relevant skills and expertise.
- Support services should review their remit and activities, so that wherever possible, women experiencing multiple disadvantage are not excluded.
- Generic services should link in and develop referral pathways with local specialist VAWG women's services.
- The homelessness sector and violence against women's sector should explore opportunities for improved collaboration (e.g. through co-location of support workers, multi-agency meetings, formal partnership working and the development of specialist forums or specific knowledge sharing events).

### **Recommendations for further research**

- Systematically review existing data collection and outcomes measurement frameworks, to assess their effectiveness at demonstrating the impact of women centred approaches.
- Explore the potential for shared measures across the homelessness and women's sector services to enable systematic data collection.
- Additional qualitative research with women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage to explore the aspects support they find most beneficial.
- Improved understanding how homelessness and multiple disadvantage is experienced by BAME women, women who are trafficked and those with NRPF.
- Good quality independent evaluations of services and models working with women experiencing multiple disadvantage would increase our understanding about what works for who and in what circumstances.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

This research is a collaboration between Homeless Link and the Women's Resource Centre (WRC) to better understand the support available to homeless women who experience multiple disadvantage in England to identify policy and practice recommendations to improve support for this group of women.

The research was commissioned due to the acknowledgment that provision of specific support for homeless women experiencing multiple disadvantage is scarce and women frequently fall through the gaps in support that is currently available<sup>3</sup>.

### Context

Women facing multiple disadvantage experience a combination of homelessness; serious mental health problems; problematic drug and alcohol use, involvement with the criminal justice system and experience multiple forms of violence and exploitation. Research highlights the role of male violence in women's multiple disadvantage, with St Mungo's reporting that almost half of the women they support have experienced domestic violence and 19% experienced abuse as a child. This violence is a contributing factor for women's homelessness. It also has specific impacts leading to more complex mental health issues and impacting on women's sense of trust and self-worth. Research by Cardiff University found that homeless women are more likely to have faced the following:

- Mental ill health (64% of women compared with 46% of men)
- Violence and abuse from a partner (61% of women compared with 13% of men)
- Their children being looked after by someone else (38% of women compared with 9% of men)
- Self-harming (49% of women compared to 23% of men).

This group of women experience a particular set of circumstances, which requires personalised, gendered and trauma informed responses from specialist services that are equipped to address these aspects experienced by women. This includes the provision of longer-term support where needed to help women overcome their experiences and recover.

### Support available for women

A recent report by The University of York and Centre for Housing Policy states an upward trend in women sleeping rough in the UK.<sup>4</sup> Despite this, research also shows a significant shortfall in the support available for homeless women experiencing multiple disadvantage.<sup>5</sup> AVA and Agenda's report *Mapping the Maze* (2017) found that only 19 areas in England provide support across all the domains associated with multiple disadvantage: substance

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<sup>3</sup> J Holly. *Mapping the Maze: Services for women experiencing multiple disadvantage in England and Wales*. (London: Agenda & AVA (2017).

<sup>4</sup> J Bretherton & N Pleace, *Women Sleeping Rough: A Critical Review of Current Research and Methodology*, (University of York, Centre for Housing Policy & St Mungo's, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> J Holly, *Mapping the Maze*, (2017).

use, mental health, homelessness and offending. Only 57 local authority areas in England were found to provide accommodation for women that is not a refuge. The Homeless Link Annual Review (2017)<sup>6</sup> demonstrates that in 2017 29% of those accessing accommodation projects were women whereas only 7% of accommodation services in England provide women only accommodation.

Homeless Link and Mapping the Maze identified between 99 and 155 women only homelessness and accommodation services in England<sup>7</sup> and 61% of all local authorities in England and most of Wales were reported to have no homelessness services specifically for women.<sup>8</sup> Adequate support for this group of women is, therefore, a postcode lottery. Moreover, support is reducing due to large scale funding cuts across the entire social care sector as part of austerity measures disproportionately affecting women<sup>9</sup> and particularly on low income BAME women.<sup>10</sup> Also, for women with no recourse to public funds, support is especially limited as they cannot access mainstream services.

Research by Crisis found that homeless women tend to be hidden from support that is designed for men<sup>11</sup> and recent research shows that women avoid services when sleeping rough.<sup>12</sup> This is reportedly due to fear and a lack of women centred responses from services. Consequently, women are shown to stay on the move or try to hide themselves on a night to avoid abuse and stay safe.<sup>13</sup> The Government's Rough Sleeping Strategy (August 2018) acknowledges that this means we know less about women's experiences and needs when rough sleeping than we do about men's.<sup>14</sup>

There are a limited number of accommodation services that accept women experiencing multiple disadvantage and have the knowledge, skills and capacity to adequately support women.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, gender specific services, which recognise the role of gender inequality in the disadvantage women face and provide relevant support are thin on the ground and, those that exist, are facing operational reductions, cuts to funding and closures.<sup>16</sup> Women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage are at risk of falling through the cracks in existing support.

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<sup>6</sup> Homeless Link, Annual Review 2017: Support for single homeless people in England (Homeless Link, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> J Holly, *Mapping the Maze*, (2017).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Women's Budget Group, and Runnymede Trust [http://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/AFS\\_2016\\_press\\_25Nov2016.pdf](http://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/AFS_2016_press_25Nov2016.pdf) (2016); S Reis, The Impact of Austerity on Women in the UK (Women's Budget Group, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> K Reeve, R Casey and R Goudie, *Homeless women: still being failed yet striving to survive*, (London: Crisis 2006).

<sup>12</sup> J Bretherton & N Pleace, N., *Women Sleeping Rough*, (2018).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *Rough Sleeping Strategy* (London, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> E.g. S Harvey, S Mandair & J Holly, *Case by Case: Refuge Provision in London for survivors of domestic violence who use alcohol and other drugs or have mental health problems* (London: AVA & Solace Women's Aid, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> J Holly, *Mapping the Maze* (2017).



## **A fragmented approach to supporting homeless women experiencing multiple disadvantage**

Despite the evidence above detailing the experiences and vulnerabilities of this group of women, there is a lack of strategic policy direction from central Government regarding the need for specialised and coordinated support for women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage. As a result, a variety of models and different services exist that women access in the community. Some are designed specifically for this purpose by services that recognise the multiple disadvantage experienced by women and the need for support, whereas other services are generic, and women may contact these services for a variety of reasons. These services sit along a continuum, with most services available providing single issue support for both men and women at one end, a minority of specialist gender specific women only services at the other end, and a variety of combinations in between.

## **Effective support**

Research with women's specialist services has identified key elements of a gender informed approach to supporting homeless women experiencing multiple disadvantage.<sup>17</sup> These include: establishing quality relationships between workers and women based on trust, working from a strengths-based empowerment model to give women choices and control; women only space provided by women for women, offer comprehensive and tailored support across women's full range of circumstances, establishing physical, psychological, and emotional safety of women and working from a perspective which recognises the impact of trauma on women. Despite research identifying components of an effective approach to supporting women, challenges remain in consistently implementing this approach. This is due to a lack of specialist services for women and a lack of understanding of the need for specific and tailored support for women amongst mainstream services.

## **Aims of the research**

This study aims to explore the types of support available for homeless women facing multiple disadvantage and strengthen the evidence regarding the enablers and barriers to providing effective cross-sector support for this group of women. As such, the research explores the following themes:

- Women's experiences of homelessness and multiple disadvantage and their journeys through support services
- The types of models of services available to women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage
- How effective approaches to support women experiencing multiple disadvantage operate to address the circumstances in the way they are experienced by women
- Benefits and challenges of different models of support provided by the homelessness and the women's sector, identifying examples of promising practice

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<sup>17</sup> For example, AVA & Agenda *The core components of a gender sensitive service* (2017).

- Enablers and barriers to providing support for women experiencing multiple disadvantage and suggestions about how an approach can be shared across sectors to support women appropriately
- Recommendations for a way forward in supporting women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage.

### **Methodology**

This scoping research was conducted between April 2018 and November 2018 using a mixed methodological approach combining quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. The methods used in this research include a literature review, an online survey of support providers, telephone interviews with staff in services and site visits.

Full details of the methodology can be found in Appendix 1 to this report.

## Chapter 2: What services are noticing about women's circumstances

This section provides an overview of the findings from the survey respondents regarding the circumstances women are reported to be presenting to services with. Also included are perceptions from stakeholders regarding changes in the numbers of women with multiple disadvantage presenting to services and illustrations from stakeholders of the patterns they notice about women's experiences of homelessness. In addition, findings regarding the factors which are reported to drive and exacerbate the complexity of the needs and circumstances that women experience are included.

### **The factors services are facing**

Survey responses from stakeholders suggest that women with multiple disadvantage are presenting to a broad range of community services including those that are designed to support women with multiple disadvantage and services that are not. Over two thirds of the survey respondents (69%)<sup>18</sup> reported they had seen an increase in the number of women with multiple disadvantage presenting to their service over the last two years, suggesting that services are facing increased pressure to respond to higher levels of more complex cases.

The findings demonstrate that services are seeing women with a broad range of experiences of multiple disadvantage<sup>19</sup>:

- All the survey respondents said that they 'sometimes' or 'often' support women experience homelessness.
- 97% of respondents reported that they 'sometimes' or 'often' support women with experience of mental ill-health
- 94% of respondents reported that they either 'sometimes or 'often' support women with problematic substance use
- 93% of respondents reported that they 'sometimes' or 'often' support women who experience violence.

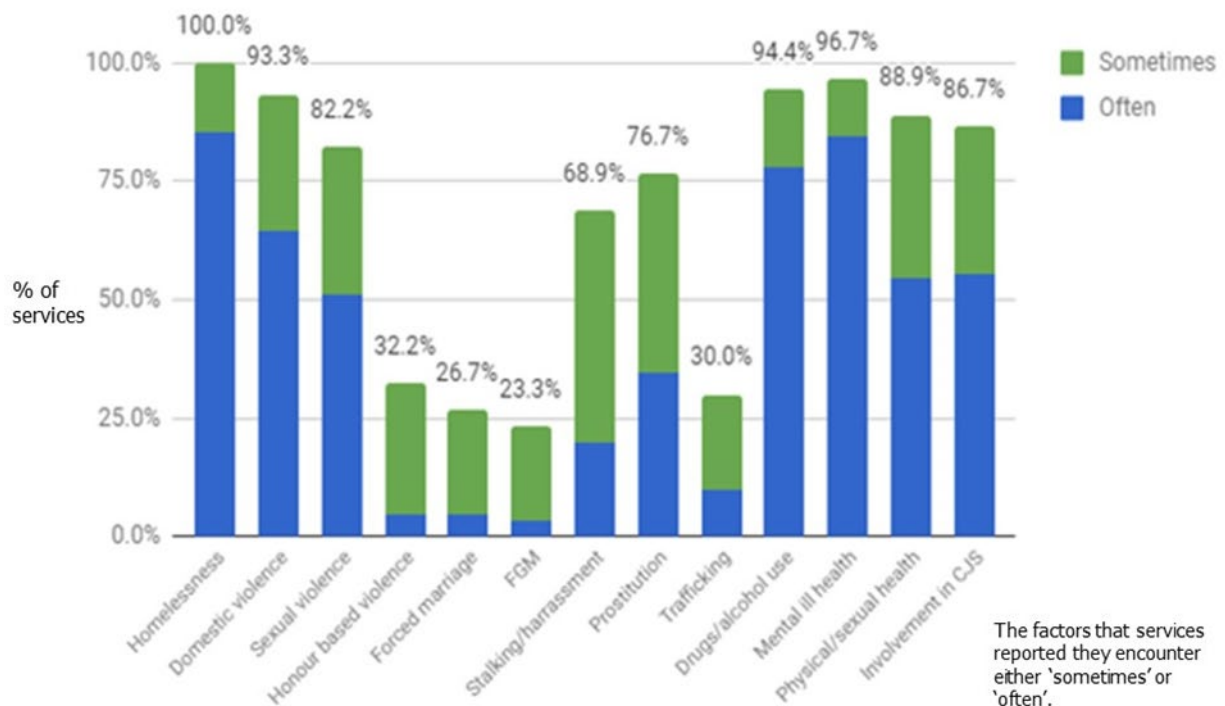
65% of the survey respondents said that they support all the following either 'sometimes' or 'often': homelessness, domestic violence, sexual violence, involvement in prostitution, problematic drugs and alcohol use, mental ill health and involvement in the criminal justice system.

The graph below demonstrates the aspects that services are noticing either 'sometimes' or 'often' about the women who access their services:

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<sup>18</sup> 90 responses received to this question.

<sup>19</sup> 90 responses received to this question.



The data from stakeholders is perception data which provides a snapshot of respondents understanding of women’s experiences. To strengthen this data, it is important that women’s experiences are recorded and gathered on a systematic basis using the same interpretation so that we can better understand the circumstances of women accessing support on a broader scale.

### Women’s journeys into and through homelessness

This scoping research identified themes and patterns relating to women’s journey into and through homelessness to illustrate what services are noticing about women’s homelessness trajectories.

### Triggers for homelessness

Reflecting previous research which found that experiences of violence and abuse were common in the lives of homeless women,<sup>20</sup> respondents to this research also illustrated that domestic and sexual violence was considered a key driver as well as a continued risk of homelessness for women: *“Each case is very different, but the overriding factors are domestic and sexual violence somehow.” Specialist VAWG service*

Welfare benefit changes were also highlighted as a reason for an increase in the number of women presenting to their service experiencing multiple disadvantage and were cited by 12 survey respondents.<sup>21</sup> An example is that a six-week delay to receiving Universal Credit was

<sup>20</sup> Hutchinson et al, Rebuilding Shattered Lives (2013)

<sup>21</sup> Out of 57 who responded to this question.

reported to cause rent arrears. A stakeholder reported that in some cases this has made people homeless where landlords are not happy to set up a repayment plan or wait for their money.

It was highlighted by several stakeholders that women with no recourse to public funds are at particular risk of homelessness when leaving abusive situations because there are so few support services funded to offer support to this group of women: *“A really common challenge is women who have no recourse, you know that makes it all the more challenging to support women to access safe accommodation when they are trying to get out dangerous situations.”* Specialist VAWG service

Even where there are services available, women were reported to have few move-on options in terms of access to mainstream support or housing until they can regularise their immigration status. This means that women either have no access to relevant support, become stuck in the support services that are funded to support them or risk having to return to perpetrators.

### **Inadequate response from Local Authority**

Stakeholders reported that women often only report to housing options once they have exhausted other routes. At that point they are not always provided with adequate support that takes account of what they have been through. For example, local authorities were reported to not deem women in priority need when fleeing domestic violence or in other cases to prove their experience of domestic violence or other circumstances: *“A lot of these women are priority need, so go to the housing options for help and they’re sent away... So the only pathways for them is to you know go down the homelessness pathways into hostels.”* Second-tier strategic service

### **Women’s experiences of sleeping rough**

A recent report by The University of York and Centre for Housing Policy<sup>22</sup> illustrates how women avoid sleeping rough if they can as this puts them at particular risk of further male violence and exploitation. Examples of this was also noted in this research illustrating that women stay with friends on sofa’s, in A&E on public transport or are exploited by men for sex in exchange for somewhere to stay: *“About 70% of the women that come here are exchanging accommodation for sex, so they are hidden, they are not publicly sleeping rough. We have a number of women who are sleeping in hospitals, emergency areas, train stations, on buses, on tubes, the usual scenario.”* Specialist VAWG service

As women are less visibly homeless on the streets, the numbers of homeless women are not accurately captured by current systems at present in rough sleeping counts.<sup>23</sup> Stakeholders in this research described how women being hidden homeless was also reported to contribute to women’s circumstances becoming more complex and entrenched as they are not currently being effectively identified by services: *“So women are either hiding in toilets,*

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<sup>22</sup>J Bretherton, and N Pleace, *Women Sleeping Rough* (2018).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

*waiting rooms and are not picked up and able to access the support thus making them more likely to experience more trauma and become more entrenched or they are staying in other places usually crack dens with a violent partner. Somewhere of perceived safety but then are experiencing more trauma again.” Mixed homelessness service*

This research also found that women are sometimes in exploitative situations such as exchanging sex with homeless men who may offer to ‘protect’ women who sleep rough. One stakeholder described how women are frequently having to think about who might exploit them, who might protect them and calculating their level of vulnerability: *“The choices that you have got when you are a woman rough sleeping, you are putting yourself in vulnerable situations all the time because actually you haven’t got any option. Who do you trust? Who can you trust? Who is going to protect you? Who is going to exploit you? You’re protected or exploited and is that better than sleeping on your own and putting yourself at risk of strangers?” Women-only night shelter*

### **Accessing mixed services**

Stakeholders and women accessing support reported that when women do access services, they often find that some projects are not able to recognise and respond appropriately to their experiences. For example, mixed environments are often male dominated and threatening for women who have experienced abuse. Some respondents to this research reported that in large-scale mixed hostel accommodation, women’s circumstances can become exacerbated. Staff may lack the awareness, skills and confidence to identify and adequately support women around the circumstances they present with: *“Staff lack the training and experience to be able to pick up on warning signs and the confidence to act on them when they’re disclosed.” Women’s project within a mixed service for people experiencing multiple disadvantage*

This research highlights how women’s experience of homelessness can contribute to a deterioration of women’s personal circumstances, their physical and mental health drug and/or alcohol use and ultimately increase the complexity of women’s experiences over time.

## Chapter 3. Types of services providing support

One of the aims of this research was to explore the varied nature of support that women can and do access, gain insights about the extent to which the support is designed specifically for this group of women and to understand the design and implementation of that support.

### **A snapshot of the types of support available**

In line with other research, this study found that a range of different types of service work with women who experience homelessness and multiple disadvantage. The survey responses were received from services across 27 separate counties in England and one survey response came from Cardiff in Wales.

Most of the services that responded to the survey were housing and homelessness services working with men and/or women (62%), with other services such as community drop-ins, domestic violence services, education services, health, criminal justice, substance use and specialist women's sector services also represented. 26% of the respondents reported they provide services for women only, and 19 respondents indicated that they were a dedicated women-only service.

### **Specific support for homeless women experiencing multiple disadvantage**

In this research, 49% of the survey respondents reported that they were designed to work specifically with women facing multiple disadvantage, 46% reporting that they are not and 6% answered 'not sure'. Of those not specifically designed to support women who face multiple disadvantage, 59% reported that they do offer some women only provision in their service. This includes the allocation of some women only space, clinic or drop in times and appointments, or women only interventions or workshops. Most of the services that do offer some form of women only provision state that it is also staffed by women.

## Chapter 4. Support that promotes positive achievements for women

This section of the report explores some of the components of effective support provided to women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage and how this operates in practice.

In gender specific services the support available for women is intrinsically woven throughout the entire service design and delivery, aims and ethos. In the generic or sometimes mixed services, gender informed approaches that were identified were incorporated in recognition that women and men require different types of support. Definitions of the terms used to describe the support noted throughout the research are described below.

**Gender specific** approaches are from services designed and delivered by women for women. A strong thread through these services is the appreciation of the lived experience of gendered disadvantage and inequality experienced by women. Gender specific approaches usually have a strong feminist ethos to stand alongside women to support them using a strengths-based approach that empowers women to make positive changes in their lives. These services are often said to take a gender transformative approach, working to address the consequences of inequality and the impact of male violence and abuse women experience due to that inequality. Mapping the Maze has shown that there is a lack of gender specific services for women with multiple disadvantage<sup>24</sup> in England.

**Gender informed support** seeks to adapt and configure elements of support or parts of the service to better support women in the way that works for them, noting that their experiences are different to men. The services where examples of gender informed support were identified are not always women only services and may not have a feminist ethos underpinning services. Homelessness services supporting women are more likely to fall into this category where they are actively delivering services that recognise women's differing needs from men.

Whilst these aspects discussed are more prevalent and embedded in gender specific services, findings highlight the importance of understanding and embedding some elements of this approach across other services, particularly around awareness of VAWG and the impact on women. This would enhance the support for women overall and improve the ability of generic services to work collaboratively with gender specific services to provide appropriate support.

The themes identified as being integral to effective support for women are grouped as follows:

- **Organisational commitment** to understanding women's multiple disadvantage

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<sup>24</sup> J Holly, *Mapping the Maze* (2017).



- **Service design** which incorporates the following gendered approaches:
  - understanding of VAWG and ability to respond appropriately
  - gender aware trauma informed care
  - support which is women only by and for women
  - support related to children and childcare
  - multi-agency working to provide wrap around support.
- **Organisational structures:** policies, staff recruitment, training and support to embed and sustain an effective approach to supporting women experiencing multiple disadvantage

These aspects are explored in more detail below.

### **Organisational commitment to understanding women's multiple disadvantage**

Previous research advocates that services that support women experiencing multiple disadvantage must seek to employ an overarching organisational commitment to work from an understanding of women's lived experience of inequality. This includes the understanding of intersectional disadvantage, experience of VAWG and associated trauma and work with women around their full range of experiences.<sup>25</sup>

Several stakeholders described how their activities and approaches were driven by the overarching aims and ethos which stemmed from the understanding of women's intersectional experiences of inequality. This approach is most evident in the contributions from services which described themselves as specialist women's organisations. These organisations reported taking a feminist, rights based and strength based approach which is derived from their mission as an organisation to empower women and alleviate inequality: *"So it's part of the organisation, part of our mission statement, it is part of who we are... We advertise as who we are and if you are a black feminist then come and join us, when we sign our contract, it is part of our make up so I think it is very much in our DNA..." Specialist women's service*

Whilst respondents consistently recognised and highlighted the need for and the value of women's specialist organisations, several examples were noted of more generic services recognising the need to operate in a more gender informed way. This was reported to be to improve their own responses to women, encourage improved engagement and to improve their partnership working with specialist organisations. To achieve this, services reported developing knowledge and skills amongst staff through training and support.

### **Promising practice**

A mixed homelessness service in London was reported to have recently undergone a culture change to adopt a gender informed approach. Changes have been made to how the team are seeking to empower women by taking an approach which facilitates choice and control for women: *"It's working in a gender informed way so understanding that what the men and*

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid; AVA & Agenda *The core components of a gender sensitive service* (2017), and S Covington *Beyond Violence* (2013).

women in your building need is different...It's about recognising the nature of multiple disadvantage around women who are homeless and going back to giving people as much choice and control in the situation as possible" Mixed homelessness service

### **Service design which incorporates gendered approaches**

Of the 37 survey respondents who provided examples of the practices they use, the most common related to the way services are designed.<sup>26</sup> The service design elements considered essential for implementing a gender informed response noted in this research and others<sup>27</sup> are explored below.

### **Understanding of VAWG and ability to respond appropriately**

Historical and present-day experiences of gender-based violence are common in the lives of women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage. This has serious effects on women's physical and mental health, relationships, behaviour and safety. It is vital therefore, that any service supporting this group of women is informed as much as they can be about the causes and consequences of VAWG and implications for support. Important considerations to be taken into account when working with women who experience violence that were identified through this research and supported by other studies include:<sup>28</sup>

- **Understanding that women experience a continuum of VAWG<sup>29</sup>** which is commonly rooted in male aggression and gender inequality.
- **That women more than men are most at risk from violence from those they know**, such as family members or partners and that this form of violence is particularly damaging to women's sense of safety and stability and the ability to trust.<sup>30</sup>
- **Ensuring that staff are equipped to routinely inquire about VAWG and to recognise the signs of VAWG** and the way that this may impact on women's behaviour and engagement in support.
- **Ensuring that staff are knowledgeable about how to safeguard women experiencing VAWG**, the specialist VAWG organisations they can work in partnership with, are using evidence-based risk assessment processes<sup>31</sup> and are taking part in multi-agency approaches designed to safeguard women.
- **Ensuring that staff understand the barriers to women disclosing experiences of VAWG**; and that staff provide warm, empathic, informal support to women to build a trusting relationship which builds a positive basis for disclosing experiences of VAWG and asking for support.

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<sup>26</sup> Mentioned in 31 responses.

<sup>27</sup> S Covington, *Beyond Violence*, (2013) and AVA & Agenda, *The core components of a gender sensitive service*(2017).

<sup>28</sup> These elements are included in: G McVey, (2015) *Responding to Violence Against Women Supporting survivors and managing risks: A Good Practice Guide* (Women's Safety and Support Service Criminal Justice Social Work, 2015)

<sup>29</sup> L Kelly, ) *Surviving Sexual Violence* (1988).

<sup>30</sup> S Covington *Beyond Violence*, (2013).

<sup>31</sup> E.g. Women's Aid risk assessment tool and CAADA DASH tool.

- Ensuring that **when women disclose experiences of VAWG, these are effectively and sensitively recorded by services** to gather a comprehensive picture of women’s circumstances and improve the available data on a systematic basis. **Informal conversation and a gradual, skilful approach to this by trained staff is crucial**, rather than a formal needs assessment style set of questions which is more of a barrier for women to disclose.

Specialist women’s services are designed to incorporate these aspects, and as such are better placed to provide this specific support, however, increased knowledge and awareness of some of these aspects among generic services can improve their appreciation of women’s circumstances and how to respond or refer them appropriately.

### Promising practice

An emergency women-only night shelter described how they had implemented a VAWG checklist and were attempting to systematically capture data on the types of violence women would disclose either formally or informally during conversation during their stay. Recording this data helped the service be better informed, to understand what support is needed or whether referrals for specialist support might be helpful and to gather better quality data as valuable evidence to illustrate the experiences of women: *“So we have checklist of what instances of VAWG women disclosed to us and what instances have been disclosed by the referring agency” Women only night shelter.*

### Gender aware trauma informed care

Women are more likely than men to experience violence from people they know and love. This has a specific impact on women, which has been shown to lead to more complex mental health problems and issues such as substance-misuse.<sup>32</sup> Women’s experiences of abuse have specific impacts on women’s sense of trust and self-worth and require an approach designed to rebuild their emotional wellbeing and the ability to form trusting relationships.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, trauma informed care for women who experience homelessness and multiple disadvantage is hugely important.

As highlighted by AVA,<sup>34</sup> a trauma informed approach is, therefore, essential for supporting women experiencing multiple disadvantage. Support which prioritises trauma survivors’ safety, choice and control has been shown to be effective.<sup>35</sup> Judith Herman also developed and advocates a three-stage recovery model for women who have experienced violence and abuse which includes supporting women by establishing physical and emotional safety, supporting women through remembrance and mourning and supporting them to re-connect

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<sup>32</sup> S Covington, *Beyond Violence* (2013).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> J Holly, *Mapping the Maze* (2017).

<sup>35</sup> M Harris & R Fallot, *Using Trauma Theory to Design Service Systems*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2001)

to themselves, others and their surroundings.<sup>36</sup> Components of these trauma informed aspects were identified in this research.

Services that participated in this study described the following aspects as being important for embedding a gender aware trauma informed approach:

**Understanding impacts of experiences on women's lives:** Stakeholders consistently highlighted a need for services to understand the impact of trauma associated with violence, abuse, abandonment and insecure attachment. Also, how women's experiences may affect their internal beliefs and self-esteem as well as their external behaviour and relationships. This should encourage services to respond to women's experiences with compassion, understanding rather than seeing the issues women may present with as problematic: *"looking at what has happened to somebody as opposed to what is wrong with somebody..."*  
*Specialist VAWG service*

**Ensuring physical and emotional safety:** Ensuring services are warm and welcoming, that spaces are available for private conversations, that any potential for unsafe situations to occur are recognised and risk is managed.<sup>37</sup> 47 respondents to the survey reported that creating a positive, safe and welcoming environment was a key element of effective support for women experiencing multiple disadvantage. Recognising the need for culturally sensitive and specific services for women who face barriers to accessing mainstream services due to language, cultural, race and or religious needs. Some survey respondents also advocated implementation of a psychologically informed environment (PIE) that recognises women's experiences of trauma and making spaces as comfortable and safe as possible, so they are welcoming places to be.

Survey respondents and stakeholders interviewed also reported that accompanying women to appointments (such as cervical screening) was an aspect of building women's sense of safety as well as enabling women to access the support they need. Access to specialist therapeutic support was also highlighted as a part of the service offer by stakeholders and women accessing services for helping women to recover from their experiences.

**Provide relational support and building trust:** A relational approach means taking time to ensure that a positive relationship is built first upon which other support work and positive changes can take place. Stakeholders consistently highlighted that a trusting and supportive relationship between the support worker and the woman is essential for helping women to feel safe and able to trust the service. Listening to women, being there for them unconditionally, and treating women with dignity and respect was reported by stakeholders to be a vital aspect of support as it directly contravenes the abuse and poor treatment associated with their experiences of multiple disadvantage: *"It's about that making sure they know we are listening and we hear them and that we value them as they have never had that before..."*  
*Women only homelessness service*

A woman interviewed for the research highlighted that this approach was important for her: *"Basically, first of all I will say building a relationship you know. Don't come in looking at you*

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<sup>36</sup> J.L.Herman, *Trauma and recovery: the aftermath of violence - from domestic abuse to political terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

<sup>37</sup> G McVey *Responding to Violence Against Women* (2015)

*and judge you like you are this that and the other. Speak to me like you are a friend you know, hiya, how are you? How are you doing? Do you know what I mean? What you been up to? What things do you like doing?"* Woman accessing support

Another woman described what she valued about the support workers at the service she was accessing: *"They look at you as a human being, one that has got emotions..."* Woman accessing support

**Give women choice and control:** Women's experiences of multiple disadvantage are underpinned by having had their choice and control taken away from them often through abuse, violence, as well as negative experiences of services. Therefore, it is important that support rebuilds women's choice and control by listening to women, building a collaborative relationship, giving women dignity and respect, presenting options to enable them to make choices and take ownership of the support process and their lives: *"It's basically doing it from the women's point of view. It's talking with the woman about what she really wants rather than grabbing her hand or telling her what she should do, how she should do things, what's best for her."* Women's centre

**Providing long-term, intensive, consistent and flexible support:** Offering long-term, consistent support to women was deemed important as it provides a basis for effective engagement in support. Often due to difficulties with relationships in the formative years, from abuse or neglect, the consistency of support and support worker with whom women can trust is key. Adaptability and flexibility in the response was also considered vital: *"We recognise that most of the women who come to us have had some kind of experience of trauma, so then we work with them through that trauma lens which means that we're very adaptive, very flexible, in how we respond to women."* Women's Centre

One woman reported that she had previously felt rushed by other services and this had contributed to her poor mental health: *"Because the support is on your side, like they don't say you've got six months to do all this, they give you your time, they let you go when you are ready, they help you to decide what you want to do in your own time, so that's what's good about long term."* Woman accessing support

Other examples of providing flexible support in the research include providing flexible engagement practices such as meeting women in the community in a place they feel comfortable to have an initial conversation over a cup of tea or coffee.

### **Promising practice**

A women's accommodation project in Oldham incorporates the elements described above. Recognising the need for safety first, the model provides access to safe, independent housing. Women are offered intensive, long term support from a case worker who takes a relational approach to supporting women and enables women to have ownership of the support and engage in the way they want to. This helps to help to build their self-determination and recover from experiences of abuse: *"So everything within the service apart from being accepted into the service is chosen by the woman. We say we've got this option if you would like to take that."* Stakeholder

## **Women-only support by and for women**

Women-only services run by women for women is reported as crucial to facilitate safety for women on both an emotional and physical level.<sup>38</sup> Of the 47 respondents that advocated the importance of creating a positive, safe and welcoming environment, many said that providing women only space was an important aspect of this. Previous research has documented risks of housing women alongside perpetrators of domestic and sexual violence in mixed homelessness settings.<sup>39</sup> Stakeholders interviewed highlighted the level of fear and intimidation that vulnerable women experience in mixed settings, putting them at further exploitation and abuse in these circumstances. One stakeholder described an instance of this: *“she wouldn’t leave the room in the hostel, because her partner would just keep her in there and then go and get alcohol for her and bring it back and then she would just drink in the room... and I raised it a lot with safeguarding because I felt that it was...quite controlling...So actually, that living situation, she wasn’t able to get away...”* *Mixed housing support service*

In recognition of the risks to safety in mixed settings, nineteen survey respondents operated women only services. 59% of survey respondents that were not designed specifically for this group reported that they provide some women only provision in their service.

Women receiving support who took part in interviews reflected that women only space provided safety, but also enabled them to speak more freely about their experiences: *“If you’ve been raped or you’ve been homeless or anything like that, and you don’t feel you can talk to a man about those sort of things. You feel you can talk to women better about it.”* *Woman accessing support*

An important aspect highlighted by women’s specific services was listening to women through research and service user involvement to develop services in line with what women want: *“We have undertaken research and based on that have designed, amended and delivered practice to support women to exit prostitution.”* *Specialist VAWG service*

Women only group work and therapeutic support was also highlighted in the survey and interviews as practices which help build women’s peer support networks by providing safe spaces for women to come together.

For mixed services that are able to incorporate elements of a gender informed approach, the importance of women only activities, spaces and female staff that understand women’s specific experiences of trauma and homelessness was advocated as a crucial aspect.

### **Promising practice**

A specialist women’s service has been offering support to women within a mixed homelessness service through a drop-in. The women only drop-in offers a safe and supportive space where women can support one another, socialise and be linked to other services. The two services have worked together to ensure that all staff in the building understand the importance of the women only space and that they make alternative arrangements to engage with men accessing the service so that they do not come into contact with women during the drop in: *“So actually having a women’s service specialist, it’s basically done properly, as it should be. During the women’s group, there’s a no show of any*

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<sup>38</sup> AVA & Agenda *The core components of a gender sensitive service* (2017).

<sup>39</sup> G Bramley & S Fitzpatrick, *Mapping severe and multiple disadvantage* (Lankelly Chase Foundation, 2015).

*males downstairs. I have seen other women only spaces and they're completely not respected by other male staff or whatever, which here it is." Stakeholder*

### **Support related to children**

Another gendered aspect highlighted in the research is that women experiencing multiple disadvantage are more likely to have commitments as carers of children and needs related to their children. They are also more likely to be facing challenges relating to having children taken into care. Support approaches, therefore, need to acknowledge and respond to these aspects of women's lives appropriately. Some services help women contact estranged children or those who are looked after. They also support women practically and emotionally through child protection court cases.

### **Promising practice**

A women's accommodation service reported that supporting women to have contact with their children wherever possible is an essential aspect for women's recovery. As a result, they explicitly work to reduce the number of children removed and to support women to rebuild relationships with children: *"We've obviously tried to reduce the numbers of children removed. We've tried to look at things to really unite families." Women's housing project*

This service also works in a flexible way to provide support for women who have caring commitments: *"The services that we offer are responsive to that person's needs. So, we could offer to meet that person when...so they choose when to, so if it's like around the school run we'd be able to respond to that particular gender specific issue because it does tend to be that the woman does the school runs" Women's housing project*

### **Multi-agency approach**

93% of respondents to the survey reported that they work in partnership with other services and advocate this approach to adequately support women experiencing multiple disadvantage. Examples of the ways in which services incorporate partnership working to effectively engage with women by offering support in a way that works for them includes:

- co-locating a worker within other services to allow for cross-pollination of skills and experience and to make the service more responsive
- providing a range of comprehensive support options in one place so women can get a range of support from one service
- case conferencing models that place women at the centre of support and where women choose the lead worker.

### **Promising practice**

A women's centre described the importance of bringing a range of services into a space where women feel comfortable so that they can access them easily, rather than expecting women to go somewhere unfamiliar: *"They're not going to make the journey to go and access Rape Crisis, so Rape Crisis comes there. So just the fact that they are there in the space it develops that trust. They feel they are then able to go and talk to them. It's making it easy for them" Women's centre*

### Organisational structures: policies, staff recruitment training and support

The table below demonstrates the number of services that report having policies, practices and training in place to inform their approach to supporting homeless women experiencing multiple disadvantage.

	Number of survey respondents that have implemented aspects to inform their approach.	Number of responses from services specifically designed for women experiencing multiple disadvantage	Number of responses from services not specifically designed for women experiencing multiple disadvantage
<b>Policies</b>	35 <sup>40</sup>	26	9
<b>Practices</b>	49 <sup>41</sup>	30	19
<b>Staff training</b>	56 <sup>42</sup>	34	22

The table shows that policies, practices and training are implemented by many services to inform how they work with women. This is mainly in the form of staff training or practices with fewer services reporting that they have specific policies to inform their work with women. A higher proportion of services designed to support women experiencing multiple disadvantage reported that they had policies, practices and staff training in place than services that were not designed specifically to work with this group.

To embed a gender informed approach within a service, respondents indicated how they try to reflect this in their policies and staff recruitment, training and support processes. Stakeholders advocate recruiting empathic, compassionate and resilient staff; incorporating regular and relevant training; and implementing ongoing learning and reflective practice.

#### Policies

The role of having specific policies in place to help embed gender awareness within organisations was highlighted as an important practical component for implementing effective support. The policies mentioned most frequently in the survey included policies that helped to embed gender awareness within organisations and policies or approaches around domestic violence; *“Although not strictly a policy, we’ve developed a service level agreement for a domestic violence Housing First pilot outlining the roles and responsibilities of all partners and how standard housing processes need to be more flexible for this cohort of women.” Second tier domestic violence service*

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<sup>40</sup> From 88 responses.

<sup>41</sup> From 89 responses.

<sup>42</sup> From 89 responses.



## Staff recruitment

In line with the findings of AVA and Agenda's Mapping the Maze research (2017), stakeholders in this research describe how effective support for women with multiple disadvantage is mainly related to the skills and attributes of staff. Recruiting people who are passionate about supporting women experiencing multiple disadvantage who demonstrate compassion, empathy and resilience was reported to make all the difference, as was illustrated by these two stakeholders: *"We don't do training courses around a gendered approach because we would look at that at interview stage in terms of how that person is and their understanding of our values and ethos"* Women's Centre

*"So when we first started working with people with complex needs using the [service] model we recruited on qualifications and skills and progressively over time we used resilience to recruit because we realised that skills you can learn, qualifications you can learn but without that level of personal resilience, you're not gonna be able to work in a [service] working with people with complex needs..."* Housing project for women

## Training

62% of the survey respondents reported that they incorporate staff training to inform their approach with women either to learn new skills or refresh existing knowledge. In the survey, examples of the types of training provided include: training around violence against women and its impacts, trauma informed care and psychologically informed environments, developing effective relationships with women, motivational interviewing and broader awareness of specific topics such as mental health, prostitution and substance use.

Whilst in the survey, training was reported to be most usually offered on ad hoc basis to individual staff rather than providing standardised training packages for all staff, interviews highlighted the importance of improving the quality of support across the staff team. Some services have invested in training for all staff such as trauma informed care provided by Homeless Link. One service reported how important it is for the whole team to be confident in their knowledge and skill to provide support to women experiencing multiple disadvantage, otherwise you can lose the expertise if one member of staff gets trained and then leaves: *"It sounds small but the whole team doing the training together. Not just sending one person. It means that you all come into work the next day with the same knowledge, ready to use it."* Mixed housing service

In addition, implementing shadowing opportunities for new starters with more experienced staff members helps to ensure that the team takes a consistent approach.

## Reflective practice

12 survey respondents said that reflective practice is an important component of effective support for women. It is considered to enhance the quality of support available to women through the sharing of ideas, learning, and experiences. This approach also contributes to supporting the staff team overall by taking time to reflect and constructively challenge the teams practice and implement new ways of working: *"The training would be of very little use to us if we did not have regular reflective practice opportunities, in a nutshell. You can't just deliver training and expect people to get it and change their practice. There has to be a way of reviewing clients' needs based on what you've learned."* Mixed housing service

The data gathered highlights factors reported to be important in providing effective responses to women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage. It is evident that for an approach to be successfully implemented, it needs to be strategically driven by the organisation and a culture created that supports a gendered approach.

Whilst gender specific services embed these aspects of this approach, the research highlights ways that more generic services can provide more effective provision for women. This mainly involves increasing knowledge and understanding of women's experiences and responding to women in a way that works for them. Whilst this section illustrates factors that are important for any service to take, the research also identified strengths and challenges inherent in different models of accommodation support, which are explored in the following section.

## Chapter 5: Benefits and challenges of different models of support

The table provides a summary of the benefits and challenges of several accommodation models and community-based support to women experiencing multiple disadvantage that were explored in the qualitative aspect of the research.

Model	Benefits	Challenges
<p><b>Hostel model:</b> providing emergency or short-term accommodation as part of the homelessness pathway. Hostels or supported housing vary in the number of occupants that can be housed at any one time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Can provide emergency accommodation for women until more suitable options are available.</li> <li>- Some hostels where staff receive specific training provide elements of more gender informed approach. (See St Mungo's Endell Street Case study_.</li> <li>- Staff can work in partnership with other local services to link women into relevant support that they may benefit from.</li> <li>- Staff with a keen interest and passion for women's rights and an understanding of women's multiple disadvantage promotes better quality support.</li> <li>- Hostels and night shelters that are designed specifically for this group of women are better equipped to respond appropriately to women's circumstances. (See Green Room case study_.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Usually a mixed environment with very few women only options.</li> <li>- Mixed hostels can place women at risk from further abuse or exploitation from men: <i>"She was living in a mixed hostel, she was sexually assaulted by a man in that hostel and it all went very wrong."</i> Stakeholder</li> <li>- Staff are not always equipped with knowledge or skills to identify VAWG and how to respond appropriately: <i>"I have seen so many women going into sort of mixed hostels and they don't feel safe...I think sometimes the staff don't really recognise...what is happening."</i> Stakeholder.</li> <li>- Women make up a smaller proportion of residents in mixed accommodation and there is little resource to tailor support.</li> <li>- Funding is reduced, and thresholds are increasing.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Housing First model:</b> Independent accommodation is provided alongside intensive support.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women have instant access to independent, secure, long term accommodation.</li> <li>- Support is controlled by the woman and is separate to the accommodation.</li> <li>- Small caseloads allow time to build positive relationships.</li> <li>- Women can quickly leave a violent partner and find safety for the long-term to recover.</li> <li>- Support workers manage risks and keep in contact with landlords to smooth tenancy issues: <i>"They (landlords) knew that any risks for them would be managed by us"</i> Stakeholder.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cost can look expensive to funders</li> <li>- It can take time to build trust with landlords to engage them</li> <li>- Throughput is low as the project is designed to work intensively with small caseloads of women who choose when support ends (funding permitting).</li> <li>- Not always women only, but can be tailored to women</li> <li>- Success depends on a high fidelity to the model: <i>"lots of other organisations are doing their own version of Housing First which are not specific to the model...and the cost to commission services that are not actually Housing First is</i></li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Evaluation of Housing First for Women demonstrates reduction of repeat homelessness and value for money.<sup>43</sup></li> </ul>	<p><i>cheaper...So you wouldn't be commissioning like for like."</i> Stakeholder</p>
<p><b>Specific accommodation services for women experiencing violence:</b> refuges and specialist accommodation usually operated through the voluntary sector by feminist organisations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide women only services as an escape from violence.</li> <li>- Deliver a feminist, rights-based approach to supporting women around their lived experience of violence and multiple disadvantage: <i>"Because I am a lawyer and because I see things in a certain way, I feel most of it is linked back to how patriarchy works and how women are treated in society."</i> Stakeholder.</li> <li>- Provide gender informed therapeutic intervention to address women's experiences of violence and trauma.</li> <li>- Have well established links in the community with other services to work in partnership with other organisations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Very few available means a postcode lottery for women to access specialist support.</li> <li>- Funding is scarce across the women's sector and services are precarious. Closures of services risk the loss of expertise.</li> <li>- Domestic violence services without a broad VAWG remit may not have the expertise to support homeless women who experience multiple forms of violence and other challenges such as substance use or mental health problems: <i>"You don't come in like you would normally do as an IDVA with your CAADA, with your safe lives risk assessment tool and sit down...with a very complex woman, doing a tick box exercise...It doesn't work."</i> Stakeholder.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Community support services (without accommodation):</b> Services that support women in a variety of ways and work in partnership to improve practice and enhance support for women.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Community services provide a range of valuable support to women including substance misuse, outreach, criminal justice support, women's centres, healthcare or housing advice.</li> <li>- These services provide a vital link into available accommodation services and often work in partnership with others to enhance support for women. (See Lancashire Women's Centre case study_.</li> <li>- There has been an increase in joint commissioning of multi-agency approaches such as MEAM<sup>44</sup>, Fulfilling Lives<sup>45</sup> and the Whole Systems Approach<sup>46</sup> to harnesses the strengths of services in a locality and test new ways of working.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The availability of resources, community services and accommodation differ greatly across localities and support for women fluctuates.</li> <li>- Overcoming different organisational ethos and objectives can be challenging: <i>"It has been a bit of a journey because obviously you have got two sectors with slightly different agendas and ways of working."</i> Stakeholder.</li> <li>- Multi-agency approaches require time, resource and buy-in from the local authority and senior management.</li> </ul>

<sup>43</sup>J Bretherton & N Pleace, Women Sleeping Rough (2018).

<sup>44</sup> <http://meam.org.uk/>.

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/funding/strategic-investments/multiple-needs>.



## Chapter 6: Barriers and enablers to providing effective support

This section illustrates the main barriers identified by services in being able to support women effectively as well as strategies and recommendations made by services to overcome the barriers. These are grouped as follows; commissioning and funding approaches, housing options for women, local partnership approaches, no recourse to public funds and identifying and engaging women.

### Commissioning and funding models

Eighteen survey respondents specifically mentioned funding cuts and commissioning approaches as barriers to delivering effective support for women experiencing multiple disadvantage. These themes were also highlighted in interviews with stakeholders who described an urgent need for more resources to be available: *“I mean there are amazing people working in the area...but if the resources aren't there, you can't do it from nothing. We just need more resources, it's that simple”*. Women's Centre

Several survey respondents and interview participants described a lack of awareness among commissioners about the need for specialist women-centred approaches for women who have experienced male violence: *“When we're talking about being a women's centre and the need for a gendered approach there's still the questions out there – why is it needed? Why is there something special for women?”* Women's Centre

Related to a lack of understanding among funders, stakeholder interviews reported that contracts for services for women experiencing multiple disadvantage are often short term and include rigid expectations and often unachievable targets. This can be at odds with the long-term, relational, trust building approach needed to support women experiencing multiple disadvantage, as described by this stakeholder: *“What seems to be the trend and culture with that is that it's very short-term funding...It's very limiting when you're talking about a relationship-based approach”* Mixed homelessness service

### Strategies and recommendations to improve funding and commissioning

Strategies and recommendations suggested by research participants include:

**Enhancing commissioner knowledge:** Stakeholders suggested raising awareness among commissioners regarding the approach required to support women effectively, especially by illustrating the value of specialist services: *“I think going back to what we were saying about relationships, having that relationship and having these discussions with commissioners, this is what we do and this is what we can meet, and negotiating I guess on those contracts”* Women's Centre

**Improving evidence:** Improving the evidence available regarding women's circumstances on entry to services, the aspects of multiple disadvantage experienced and the elements of support that are most effective for women was considered important in making the case to

commissioners about which services to fund: *“If we could get some evidence around that, and say that this in the long term will have better results for women and will cost less because we won’t be sending someone round and round the same system”* Mixed housing support service

**Joint commissioning and funding:** Stakeholders advocated the value of funding services through a whole system approach, designed to enable services to work effectively together to support women, rather than funding services in silos. Promising practice examples include:<sup>47</sup>

- The MEAM approach: a non-prescriptive framework to help local areas design and deliver better coordinated services for people with multiple disadvantage.
- The Big Lottery Fund’s Fulfilling Lives: Supporting people experiencing multiple disadvantage in 12 local areas to support local partnerships to develop better services and improve systems for people experiencing multiple disadvantage.
- A joint commissioning initiative between The Green Room, Advance and Standing Together has been set up to engage and support homeless women experiencing multiple disadvantage and to provide training and awareness across the services about the specific support required for this group of women (see case study above).

**National strategic guidance and funding:** Participants noted that to implement strategic coordinated approaches across the country, guidance and funding is required at Government level: *“[Commissioners] are pressed by their funding options...and they’re answerable to the powers that be, so I guess everybody’s tied somewhat by that red tape. This is something that needs to go a lot further up that funding chain really – it’s national.”* Women’s Centre

## Housing options

A lack of available housing overall was reported as another major barrier that was mentioned by twenty one survey respondents and frequently reported in the stakeholder interviews. In particular, respondents referred to a lack of appropriate safe and supported housing available for this group of women. In line with previous research,<sup>48</sup> stakeholders highlighted that exclusion criteria and rigid parameters adopted by a range of accommodation providers, as well as some VAWG services, prohibit access to housing for women experiencing multiple disadvantage. This either happens due to strict funding criteria, or because teams lack the skills, knowledge and the capacity to provide intensive support required to effectively support women who experience multiple disadvantage. This service provider reflected on the deficit of accommodation options in their area: *“In an ideal world, I would love for there to be great supported living facilities for women who perhaps are living with a lot of trauma, who face a lot of issues, that have experienced educated staff on premises, that the accommodation would be safe, would be nice, it would feel like home, but there isn’t*

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<sup>47</sup> Sharpen, J. (2018) Jumping through hoops: How are coordinated responses to multiple disadvantage meeting the needs of women? London: AVA, MEAM, Agenda and St Mungo’s.

<sup>48</sup> Holly, J. (2017) and Bretherton, J & Pleace, N. (2018)

*such a thing, at least not in this area...All the women we work with who are in seriously high risk domestic violence relationships will not be accepted by refuges because of their complex needs, because of their mental health issues, because of their substance issues.”*  
Womens Centre

### **Strategies and recommendations to improve housing options**

Strategies and recommendations suggested by research participants include:

**Housing First model:** The Housing First model for women which recognises the specific nature of women’s multiple disadvantage has been highlighted as an example of promising practice (see case study above). This gives women access to stable and long-term accommodation alongside the gender informed intensive support they need to recover. This model provides a way of working with the private rented sector to access good quality independent living accommodation and provide the stability women need to make positive changes.

**Removing exclusion criteria and adapting to meet women’s needs:** Stakeholders commented that it is important not to operate exclusion criteria or implement strict parameters on who could access the service. Some services described how they adapt support to be able to meet women’s needs more effectively by using ‘charters’ rather than ‘rules’ and address inappropriate behaviour with conversations around the expectations of the service rather than excluding women as this can re-traumatise them. In addition, other services had broadened out their remit to offer accommodation support to women experiencing any type of VAWG rather than a single strand of VAWG so as not to unnecessarily exclude women: *“There is that wider spectrum of VAWG out there and we need to be sending these women the same message around consent around coercion and control”* Women only night shelter

### **Local partnership approaches**

Barriers with local partnership working between services was the most frequently mentioned barrier in the survey.<sup>49</sup> Examples include a lack of resource in local statutory services particularly in mental health, substance use and adult social care where thresholds for accessing support are increasing. This results in a lack of access to specialist support, a lack of understanding within local services of the nature of women’s multiple disadvantage, and a lack of practical joined up working among local services.

The stakeholders interviewed echoed these findings, highlighting that without a consistent, multi-agency approach based on mutual understanding of women’s experiences of multiple disadvantage, services tend to take an approach that is fragmented and ineffective: *“What happens when we get really silo working is that those clients who are so multiply disadvantaged where their issues are so intersectional, they just fall between the cracks, they just get lost”* Mixed homelessness service.

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<sup>49</sup> Mentioned by 67 respondents.



## **Strategies and recommendations to improve partnership approaches**

66 respondents to the survey provided suggestions as to how cross-sector working between the homelessness and the women's sectors can be improved to achieve positive outcomes for women who are multiply disadvantaged. These were categorised as follows:

**Improving partnership approaches:**<sup>50</sup> Improving joint working at the service design/commissioning level to encourage collaboration in service delivery rather than competition. Implementing improved communication strategies when working with the same women or referring women, appreciating the value of enlisting specialist support for women which is built on decades of expertise and a sound evidence base.

**Improving understanding and knowledge across sectors:**<sup>51</sup> In particular about the causes and consequences of women's experience of trauma and the ways that this can impact on the development of problematic substance use as unhelpful coping mechanisms and the exacerbation of mental health conditions. In addition, developing better understanding on a systematic basis of women's experiences of multiple disadvantage by improving data across sectors to build the evidence base.

**Improvements in the availability and quality of local partner services:**<sup>52</sup> There is a need for more specific specialist provision designed to support women facing multiple disadvantage; improved access to statutory services such as mental health and appropriate housing; more funding available made available for women; and embedding gendered approaches as far as is possible within the mainstream organisations that women access so that the quality of provision is improved overall for women.

Stakeholders provided several examples of innovative strategies to provide joined up services:

- **Co-location** between the Brighton Women's Centre and homelessness services to share expertise and provide specialised support to women experiencing multiple disadvantage (see case study above)
- The Green Room's model of **joint assertive outreach** between a gender informed homelessness night shelter and a domestic violence service (see case study above)
- Developing '**co-located**' support by bringing services together to offer support within one safe space (see case study above)
- **Case conferencing** multi-agency working where women are the centre of the approach, choosing whether they want to be present or not and who they want the lead worker to be.

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<sup>50</sup> Mentioned in 44 responses.

<sup>51</sup> Mentioned in 40 responses.

<sup>52</sup> Mentioned in 24 responses

## No recourse to public funds

The particular barriers experienced by migrant women with no recourse to public funds and who are not entitled to access statutory services, welfare or housing was highlighted by several stakeholders in this research: *“No recourse, I’ll just give you a little example of that, so these are women who’ve been brought over on a spousal visa. Ordinarily have nowhere to turn to, have finally found the courage to leave the perpetrator and ended up in the housing advice services but obviously due to the homeless legislation they’re not eligible in the UK, they don’t get any assistance.” Women’s housing project*

There are few services currently funded to provide specialist support for women with no recourse to public funds and so support is particularly scarce for this group. This also means that services that do support women with no recourse face challenges in findings move on support options.

### Strategies and recommendations to improve support for women with no recourse

The strategies suggested by stakeholders to improve support women with no recourse to public funds include:

**Advocating for women’s rights and entitlements:** Investing in the specialist expertise and the time needed to advocate for migrant women to access the rights and entitlements that they are eligible for. This means that women who experience domestic violence whilst on a spousal visa are provided with have the opportunity to regularise their immigration and access public funds: *“we’ve put them in refuges temporarily and then what our no recourse worker works on is getting their leave to remain so she’ll support them in getting the biometric finger prints, getting them a solicitor involved, getting a restraining order against the partners.” Women’s housing project*

**Volunteer host housing:** Training and supporting volunteer hosts to house women who are at risk of destitution while they await a decision about leave to remain: *“We are in the process of starting to make a partnership with an organisation where we are looking to train hosts. Usually the person is awaiting discretionary leave, but the decision hasn’t been made and they might have to leave the safe house, so it is training up hosts to fill the gap, so they have somewhere to go that’s safe. A volunteer host house.” Trafficking project*

**Challenging legislative interpretation:** Testing the equality and human rights as well as immigration laws by advocating for women and challenging how statutory services are interpreting these laws, which prevent migrant women who have experienced abuse from accessing basic rights and entitlements.

**Campaigning for legislative change:** Stakeholders noted that legislative changes are required to provide access to public funds, the right to rent and to provide more comprehensive support for victims of trafficking: *“The crazy thing is we deem people to be victims of trafficking and then we’re putting them at risk of destitution and further harm because there isn’t the support systems in place. We are trying to back a bill through parliament at the moment which would change that.” Trafficking project*

## Identification and engagement

In line with the recent report by The University of York and the Centre for Housing Policy,<sup>53</sup> this research also identified that homeless women are not being effectively identified by homeless services or in the data demonstrating the number of homeless people. There is a risk that they are not included in official statistics as well as missing out on important support, if they are not visible to or engaged by services: *“It’s an ongoing problem really in this sector, that because of the pattern of women’s rough sleeping, in order to keep themselves safe women will often find alternatives to being bedded down on the streets...So they are homeless but not seen, and getting them verified can be really difficult.” Women only night shelter*

## Strategies and recommendations to improve identification and verification

Strategies and recommendations suggested by research participants include:

**Broaden the routes into homelessness services:** Respondents mentioned a need to bring about changes in the street outreach ‘verification’ process to acknowledge that women are less likely than men to be visibly rough sleeping. It is important to create routes into support services that reflect the way women experience homelessness by going to the places they use and accepting forms of homelessness wider than the Government’s definition of ‘rough sleeping’: *“What quite often gets suggested is that we need to widen the parameters for verification so if someone is met at a bus stop, a train station, if someone presents and they are just sofa surfing...people sitting around in A&E in the waiting room or at airports... so that the person can be verified on the spot and they can start using the services rather than telling them you have to put yourself in this risky situation of waiting about in the street to be found.” Women only night shelter*

**Assertive outreach:** Services are also piloting assertive outreach models to more effectively engage women. Assertive outreach means going out to find and directly engage with homeless women in the places they go when they are homeless. It means thinking and acting creatively in how they offer support and understanding how women experience homelessness. Knowing where to find women e.g. A&E, stations, 24-hour public spaces avoids putting them at further risk by expecting women to bed down in the open and makes it easier for them to access help. Respondents in this research said this is important as it can prevent women who face multiple disadvantage from falling further through gaps in support: *“[They] have been running an assertive outreach service for trying to reach the women that don’t usually get their services. So homeless women, in hostels, on the street, sofa surfing, who have got multiple needs, and trying to engage and support them around the violence they are experiencing.” Second tier service*

The data gathered shows that the primary barriers facing services are structural, relating to an overall lack of safe, appropriate housing options available to women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage. Alongside this, barriers include a lack of

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<sup>53</sup> J Bretherton & N Pleace, *Women Sleeping Rough* (2018).

resources, resulting from widespread social care sector spending cuts, and a lack of strategic, gender informed funding approaches. As such, those providing gender specific and gender informed approaches (defined above) are facing an uphill struggle in making the case for and leveraging in resources to do their work. Strategic guidance and investment is therefore required at a national level. Despite this, this research has examples highlighted several examples of services working creatively to respond to these challenges that can be adopted by others.

## Chapter 7: Promising Practice: Case studies

The case studies in this section present a range of different models that are using elements of gender informed approaches to supporting women experiencing multiple disadvantage, highlighting the service design, ethos and approach taken and outcomes for women who access them. These are examples of promising practice identified through the research.

### Brighton Women's Centre

#### About the service

Brighton Women's Centre (BWC) is a women-only organisation that works in collaboration with homelessness services in Sussex to provide integrated, tailored and women centred support with women facing multiple disadvantage who are homeless or insecurely housed. In the Worthing area, BWC works in partnership with Turning Tides (formerly Worthing Churches Homeless Project, WCHP) through co-location of services. The BWC women's worker, funded by a local commissioner, runs a women-only Drop-In from the Turning Tides day centre, enabling women to access a safe and supportive environment from which they can build trust with the worker and access one-to-one case work. The Drop-In also provides peer support and friendship amongst the women.

#### Organisational ethos

The ethos of the organisation is women centred support, aiming to empower women and reduce inequality by promoting independence in a safe, women-only space. The organisation recognises the impacts of structural disadvantage and violence upon women's lives and the resultant trauma women experience. This ethos runs throughout the organisation and informs a way of working that is collaborative, trauma informed, and designed to place women's needs and empowerment at the centre of support: *"We would describe our work as being women centred and within that there are a number of principles that sit alongside or under that"* Staff member.

#### Approach

BWC takes an approach which is relational, long term, flexible, adaptive and strengths-based to help women address the complex challenges they are facing; *"We work with them through that trauma lens which means that we're very adaptive, very flexible, in how we respond to women."* Staff member

BWC accommodation support workers are based with homelessness projects. This enables them to share their knowledge and expertise about supporting women on a daily basis with staff, to champion the rights and needs of women in a generic setting, and to learn more about homelessness provision. It also facilitates the provision of a women only space within a homelessness project that is delivered by specialist workers, and an entry point into the services for women that is informal, safe and women only. The success of the partnership approach has been driven by the similar organisational values of the two organisations, a genuine desire to improve provision for women and an open and transparent approach: *"I have meetings with them and we check in regularly and make sure everything's working. They're really open and transparent. Turning Tides who we've been working with for over 3*

*years and it's been a really incredibly positive experience. It's meant that we've learnt absolutely loads from them about the homelessness world and from what they say it seems like we've brought a lot of learning and knowledge into that organisation, so I guess that's the benefit."* Staff member

### **Achievements of the approach**

The approach enables women to build trusting relationships with the staff, engage effectively in the available support and to build a support network with other women, as reflected by this service user: *"I think it's a good place. It really does help women to feel like they can speak and be heard. Some women have been through similar situations. It isn't good, but it helps them to understand you"* Woman accessing support.

Staff members describe how this enables women to stay engaged in support and to believe change is possible: *"One of the things she told me was just coming in here for the sessions really kind of kept her going – thinking 'yes it will happen'"* Staff member.

In time, women were reported to make significant changes in their lives such as leaving an abusive partner and securing safe and appropriate accommodation: *"We have supported her to get her accommodation. And she has finally actually engaged with domestic violence services. It was a lot of tenacity and perseverance and being there and just saying 'I'm here'."* Staff member

As well as providing specialist women centred support, the co-location of the BWC accommodation Support Worker within Turning Tides' premises has provided a new entry route for women into both services and enables both organisations to share expertise and improve provision: *"There's been a couple of incidents that have been really challenging... It's been really positive how as two organisations we have shared learning to deal with the situations."* Staff member

### **Key elements**

- Delivers a co-located service between specialist women's organisation and homelessness organisation to provide gender sensitive provision and to combine expertise
- Takes a strengths-based, peer support approach through a woman only Drop-In
- Provides open-ended, holistic, trauma informed support rooted in awareness of gender inequality and violence against women.

## **St Mungo's Endell Street**

### **About the service**

St Mungo's Endell Street Hostel is a 53-bed hostel for people who are verified as homeless facing multiple disadvantage. The hostel provides single rooms for all service users and access to kitchen facilities, a cooked breakfast, a telephone and an IT suite. All service users are allocated a key worker who provides ongoing one-to-one support. After receiving funding from the London Borough of Camden to provide more bed spaces specifically for women, the team adapted its culture and way of working to be gender informed. This included: the

whole team taking part in gender and trauma awareness training, embedding learning through regular reflective practice, appointing a women's lead worker to champion the approach and provision of women only activities at the hostel.

### **Service ethos**

The ethos of the service is to provide safe, flexible support that enables women to have as much choice and control as possible. It is rooted in understanding of the nature of multiple disadvantage facing women and the need for a gender informed approach in a mixed setting. This has led to a new culture and way of working across the team: *"We just say we're going to accept them and we book them in and everything from the minute they walk through the door is about offering that woman as much choice and control as possible and building a relationship with the team...That's produced a different way of working for the whole team". Staff member*

The service has a strong focus on a whole team approach to support, ensuring that everyone, including male staff, are trained and knowledgeable to be able to support women effectively, and developing a supportive working culture: *"Doing this work as a team to really think about women's needs, you're benefitting everybody in the building."* Staff member

### **The approach**

Key workers focus on building a trusting relationship with women, being flexible and adaptive, supporting women to engage with other services and giving women choice and control over their support. A service user reflected that she values the approach taken by her key worker: *"She's there if you need her but she's not pushy. She's very good. She's always aware. I trust her."* Woman accessing support

Recognising the experiences of women of having been excluded from services, the team aim to keep bed spaces available for women as long as necessary to help maintain consistency and access to key working support: *"People might go to prison, or disappear for a couple of weeks [...] if you close down that person's accommodation you'll need to start all over again every single time and you see the damage that does on top of all the other traumas people experience."* Staff member

The team works closely with partner agencies, through a new case conferencing model, to share information and identify risk and to offer women an opportunity to be at the centre of multi-agency, coordinated approach to support: *"It very much puts the woman's voice at the centre – it gives her a bit more autonomy, she can be present or not. She can choose the worker who leads it."* Staff member

Whilst there are challenges of operating in a mixed environment, the team advocate the value of providing gender and trauma training for all staff in a mixed setting to raise awareness and understanding of women's experiences of homelessness and multiple disadvantage, how this impacts on women and the importance of a specific approach to supporting women.

## Achievements of the approach

By developing positive relationships with women, the team support women to maintain stable accommodation at the hostel, to access and accept support and to develop the skills and confidence to work towards independent living. A service user described how the support has helped her to access other services and to build her confidence: *“I’ve got an agoraphobia problem. They actually been helping me if I’ve got an appointment, my key worker or somebody else comes with me. If I’m alone I can’t go... My key worker is always smiling and pulls me up. She shows that trust for me so that’s helped me. It’s confidence.”*  
*Woman accessing support*

## Key elements

- Gender informed approach implemented through whole team gender and trauma training, reflective practice and driven by a gender champion
- Key workers build trusting relationships with women through flexible, adaptive, trauma informed approach
- Work closely with partners to manage and share risk and to facilitate access to a range of support

## The Green Room

### About the service

The Green Room is an emergency night shelter providing support for homeless women who experience violence and multiple disadvantage. It is funded as part of a tri-borough initiative to improve the availability of support for women who were recognised as falling through the gaps of existing provision in the area. A specific role of one of the team members is to act as a link worker between the homelessness sector and the domestic violence sector to improve the knowledge, awareness and quality of the support provided to homeless women in the local area.

The shelter has a communal room with space for 12 women each night and can provide approximately seven nights of accommodation for women. However, some women do stay longer if they face more complex circumstances requiring longer or more intensive support such as when women have no recourse to public funds.

### Organisational Ethos

There is a commitment to quality of provision within the service. As such, the accommodation is set within a high-quality building which is very secure and well kept. There is a shower and facilities for women to make themselves snacks or warm drinks on an evening. It has outdoor space and breakout rooms with soft furnishings, sofas, and books. These aspects of the service have reportedly been noted and appreciated by the women who stay at The Green Room: *“they say it is nice to have a bed, it is nice to have a break away rooms, it is nice that they can make tea and coffee and go for a cigarette...”* *Staff member*

The service is designed to offer choice and empowerment to women who access the night shelter at a time when women have little choice or power over their circumstances. This is achieved by including women in discussions about what they would like to achieve and what they are seeking in terms of a realistic move on option.



In addition, the staff are extremely passionate about the rights of women and about upskilling local partner services as well as women to understand the continuum of violence experienced by homeless women: *“there is that wider spectrum of VAWG out there and we need to be sending these women the same message around consent around coercion and control... around actually if he takes your bank card and takes your money that is still domestic violence...because we are so used to as a society to turn around and go oh you know ‘six of one and half a dozen of the other’...and I’m like no, no its not ... and it’s about shining a light on that.”* Staff member

### **The approach**

The staff are trained in trauma informed care and are highly knowledgeable about the extent of male violence that homeless women experience and the impacts: *“these women are much more vulnerable and much more exposed, every single one of them has felt scared of men at some point you know?”* Staff member

It was noted that one of the keys to their successful approach in engaging women is to develop a positive relationship with women who come into the service by treating each woman with kindness and respect: *“actually it is just treating people like individuals...respecting them and listening to them and being able to respond to their needs...”* Staff member

In addition, being reliable and realistic about what you can offer helps to build trust with women and helps to manage their expectations: *“being accountable to them if you are say you are going to do something then you do it...there is nothing worse than letting these women down who have been let down so many times.”* Staff member

### **Achievements of the approach**

Working in partnership has enabled the service to engage with women who may be ‘hidden homeless’: *“the first thing I did when I started working here was to set up a link with the TFL team as they come across women on buses and tubes...”* Staff member

Also, partnership working with a local domestic violence project has led to joint outreach sessions to proactively engage street homeless women who are experiencing abuse and provide them with tailored and gender specific support: *“together they managed to locate her, and they actually managed to take her to the local housing options unit and she is now in temporary accommodation.”* Stakeholder from partner agency

Working in partnership with Advance and other local partner services has encouraged projects to broaden out their remit to offer support to women who experience different strands of violence rather than only supporting women who experience domestic violence. This is in recognition that a narrow interpretation of women’s experience of violence can exclude homeless women from accessing gender specific support if they do not fit the criteria.

### **Key elements**

- Designed to bridge the gaps in support for homeless women facing multiple disadvantage
- Provides high quality provision and incorporates trauma informed care.
- Works proactively with other local services to engage women to offer joint support.
- Support both women and practitioners to develop awareness of the indicators of abuse and healthy relationships and supports partner agencies to develop strategies for working with women who are street homeless and manage risk appropriately.

## Lancashire Women's Centre

### About the service

Lancashire Women have been in operation for over 30 years. The charity operates a network of women's centres, providing support across 5 local areas (in some of the most deprived communities in Lancashire) alongside delivery in additional areas through community hubs and co-location. They support women experiencing multiple disadvantages, including those who experience involvement with the criminal justice system, homelessness, problematic drug and alcohol use, physical and mental health problems and violence. The service operates within the Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM)<sup>54</sup> framework and is also part of the Whole System Approach<sup>55</sup> to supporting women involved in with the Criminal Justice System.

Their services are designed to help women stabilise their situation and regain control over their circumstances. The service helps women comply with mandatory community orders imposed by the criminal justice system, improve their wellbeing and self-esteem and improve their skills around debt advice, benefits and employability. The service offered at Lancashire women's gender specific centres have a lounge area, as well as a kitchen and garden available for women to use. There are treatment rooms available where local support services can attend to provide support, treatment or advice sessions. These include specialist support provided by other agencies, meetings with probation, mental health support, training, courses or other groups and activities.

### Organisational ethos

The service is provided in line with the recognition of the inequality that women and girls face in society, in particular those facing additional disadvantage, and seeks to redress that balance for women and girls in Lancashire by empowering them and giving them a voice to redress that inequality. The long-standing nature of the service, their understanding of the local area and what women need has enabled the service to build an excellent reputation and positive relationships with the other services – enabling them to advocate effectively for women. Staff are highly qualified, committed and passionate about the support they provide to the women they work with: *“our case workers believe in what they're doing, they have got that passion and they want to make a difference.”* Staff member

The women centred approach and the focus on developing a supportive environment for the women as well as the staff team helps to create an effective programme that encourages and facilitates women to achieve positive changes: *“It's important for us to focus on not just what we believe the needs of that individual are but also what they feel their needs are as well so it's very person centred in terms of the support package that we offer.”* Staff member.

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<sup>54</sup> <http://meam.org.uk/>

<sup>55</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/719771/guide-to-whole-system-approach.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/719771/guide-to-whole-system-approach.pdf)

## **The approach**

The approach taken to supporting women is both trauma and gender informed. The support available for women is comprehensive to meet their varied circumstances and the Centre operates as a one-stop shop where women can access a variety of services under one roof, and without the need to 'refer on', and at which point women can often fall through the cracks. Around 40% of women access multiple services at the centres. The team have built effective relationships with other services such as local mental health and substance use services to coordinate access to specialist support for women. There is a focus on providing consistent and intensive support: *"it's very hand holding at the start and aspirational that they will one day be able to do those things for themselves"* Staff member. The team members also have a strong relationship that enables them to collaborate and support each other in their work.

## **Achievements of the approach**

Being part of multi-agency, national framework such as MEAM which helps local areas design and deliver more coordinated services for people experiencing multiple disadvantage can help to ensure women receive good quality support from services that have shared aims: *"If you go to housing needs and say you're working with this person under MEAM they will be more aware and will do more to support the client as it's a small cohort and they know that client will be on everybody's radar..."* Staff member.

The service is one of the few women's sector organisations involved in the MEAM approach nationally which has resulted in a stronger focus on the needs of women across the framework overall.

## **Key elements of the model**

- The centre provides a place-based and contextual approach to supporting women
- The team operate within the recently implemented MEAM and the Whole Systems Approach frameworks that are aimed at improving practice on a regional and national scale by gathering important outcomes data to demonstrate what works.
- The women centred, empowering approach is evident in the support work with women as well as within the staff team.

## Chapter 8. Conclusion

This scoping research was commissioned to explore the availability of support for women who experience homelessness multiple disadvantage, and to identify promising practice. The data gathered from stakeholders and women in this research has provided valuable insights into women's experience of homelessness and multiple disadvantage, their journeys through homelessness as well as routes into and through available support services.

This research has also explored types of support available for this group of women, identified the ways in which support is offered and documented how these differ from one another. In addition, this study illustrates some of the challenges that the homelessness and women's sector services are facing in trying to support women, and some of the factors that are reported to contribute to supporting women effectively.

This research has also demonstrated some important findings about how the homelessness and women's sector services can collaborate in the future to better support homeless women experiencing multiple disadvantage.

The findings from this scoping research about women's experiences echo what other research has found.<sup>56</sup> Women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage face structural gender inequality, trauma and abuse, homelessness and a lack of appropriate support services. This combination of factors often leads to a deterioration of personal circumstances, their physical and mental health and wellbeing which then often requires specialist and tailored support to help women recover. Most of the services that responded to this research (69%) have witnessed an increase in women experiencing multiple disadvantage presenting to their services over the last two years.

Respondents to this research described how women's homelessness is frequently connected to their experience of domestic and sexual violence and abuse, and 93% of survey respondents reporting that they either 'often' or 'sometimes' support women who experience domestic violence.

Recent welfare reform changes including benefit cuts have impacted disproportionately on women<sup>57</sup> and were also reported to be contributing to women's homelessness by making it more difficult for women to cover basic housing costs resulting in women losing their homes. These are two important and preventable structural challenges contributing towards women's homelessness. Effectively addressing violence against women and cuts to the welfare system could prevent further deterioration of women's personal circumstances and the necessity for time and resource intensive support later.

In line with other research, the findings in this scoping study suggest that homeless women are particularly vulnerable to physical and sexual violence when sleeping rough. As such, women tend to use public transport or A&E or other options available to them to avoid rough sleeping. This results in women's homelessness being hidden and women not receiving adequate support.

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<sup>56</sup> J Holly, *Mapping the Maze* (2017); J Bretherton & N Pleace, *Women Sleeping Rough*. (2018); S Hutchinson, A Page, A. & E Sample, *Rebuilding Shattered Lives* (2013).

<sup>57</sup> S Reis, *The Impact of Austerity on Women* (2018)

In addition, due to the hidden nature of their homelessness, women are often missed from data on homelessness. The extent of women's homelessness, therefore, remains unknown because systematic good quality data on the numbers and their experiences that lead to homelessness and of multiple disadvantage remains patchy.

Stakeholders and women that contributed to this scoping research are well informed about women's experiences and the findings echo what other studies have found. However, this was a small scoping study with a small sample of respondents. Further research and improved mechanisms to collect data systematically about homeless women's experience of multiple disadvantage is required to be able to comprehensively understand the situation on a broader scale to drive positive changes.

### **Support available for homeless women experiencing multiple disadvantage**

This research has identified a variety of services that currently provide support for this group of women, including services that are designed to support women experiencing multiple disadvantage (49%) and those that are not (46%)<sup>58</sup>. A lack of strategic political direction over the support for women facing multiple disadvantage means that support is currently designed and delivered through a variety of different models which vary in the extent to which they appreciate and can adequately address women's experiences. Assessing the effectiveness of these types of support in detail was beyond the scope of this research. The strengths and challenges of the models explored as well as examples of promising practice have been documented throughout this report. Good quality support for women incorporates:

- An organisational/service commitment to understanding and addressing women's inequality and multiple disadvantage and the impact of violence and abuse.
- Providing women only, trauma informed, relationship based, long-term, intensive, flexible support that incorporates reflective practice alongside access to safe and appropriate accommodation.
- Implementing a skilled and qualified staff team trained in VAWG, trauma, multiple disadvantage, who share attributes such as empathy and resilience and commitment to a supportive working culture.

The models that incorporate these aspects are better equipped to respond to women's experiences as documented in the case studies. In a context where access to specialist services is not widespread, good quality support is therefore a postcode lottery for women. It is important to enhance the ability of generic and specialist services to work effectively in partnership with specialist services to support women appropriately.

### **Barriers to providing effective support for women experiencing multiple disadvantage**

Services across the women's and homelessness sectors are facing some significant challenges in their work to support this group of women. One of the main challenges is the lack of availability of housing, especially safe and appropriate supported housing for women who have experienced trauma and abuse. Other barriers include a lack of access to

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<sup>58</sup> With 5.6% answering 'not sure'.

statutory services, such as, mental health and dual diagnosis services as well as challenges in effective partnership working with those who do not understanding the impact of women's experiences. In the current funding climate specialist women's services face challenges in relation to commissioning and funding. Limited understanding by commissioners of the value of women only specific support and understanding what good looks like when commissioning services for homeless women with multiple disadvantage was also raised. Access to support and appropriate move on options for women with no recourse to public funds is another significant challenge to supporting women effectively.

### **Factors that contribute towards positive outcomes for women**

In addition to more resources for specialist gender specific support services, several other factors enhance the effectiveness of support available for this group of women. These included increasing practical opportunities for services to share knowledge and learning about what works for women through regular events and forums. Co-locating support in shared spaces was reported to increase the responsiveness towards women and makes it easier for women to access support in one place. Joint assertive outreach between services to locate and offer wrap around support that is meaningful to what homeless women are experiencing can boost the likelihood of engaging women.

Creative initiatives to adapt models of support such as Housing First and make it specific to women can help to broaden the provision and test new ways of working. Supporting domestic violence services and homelessness services to work in partnership to engage homeless women who experience violence and multiple disadvantage would prevent women from being excluded from support. Developing specific services that are designed for homeless women that are based upon an in-depth understanding of the broad range of VAWG women experience would also be beneficial. Diversify specialist provision to encompass all forms of VAWG recognising the full range of violence women experience in the lead to and during homelessness.

Collaborative funding opportunities incorporating the benefits from high quality homelessness sector services with the specialist expertise and experience in providing therapeutic interventions from women's sector services can offer the chance to test new approaches. Using the equality legislation and testing the power of the law and the way that it is interpreted for women including those with no recourse to public funds may also increase the availability of support for women and document successful approaches that can be incorporated on a more widespread basis.

We welcome the wide adoption and implementation of support which recognises women's experience of multiple disadvantage such as trauma informed care and psychologically informed environments. However, there is still much more to be done to prevent women becoming homeless in the first place and to ensure all service responses for women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage are gender and trauma informed and that support is fit for purpose in helping women recover and achieve positive outcomes.

## Chapter 9. Recommendations

Drawing on the research findings, this section provides recommendations for policy makers, commissioners, funders, services, and future research.

### Recommendations for policy makers

- Develop a central Government strategy that recognises women's specific experiences of multiple disadvantage and the support they require.
- Use the existing National Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy to address all forms of violence against women.
- Increase Government funding for the violence against women sector to provide early intervention and prevention and explore the development of a cross-departmental funding stream.
- Address the structural causes of homelessness by reducing poverty, increasing the supply of truly affordable housing and ensuring there is an effective welfare safety net.
- Accurately represent women's homelessness in official statistics, which may require changing counting and analysis processes.

### Recommendations for commissioners and funders

- Provide funding for gender specific specialist services, approaches for homeless women experiencing multiple disadvantage, and for women with NRPF
- Increase the development of joint funding initiatives which tailor service delivery to effectively engage this group of women across the local VAWG and homelessness services.
- Improve the monitoring and evaluation frameworks to more fully recognise the quality and impact of interventions.

### Recommendations for services

- Implement policies, practices and role-appropriate training for staff on women's experiences of homelessness, VAWG and multiple disadvantage. Incorporate assertive outreach services to offer support to women in a way that works for them.
- Work in partnership with local services to provide co-located support for women in familiar surroundings (e.g. drop-in centres) (see Lancashire Case Study).
- Generic services to consider incorporating or working alongside VAWG and multiple disadvantage lead workers with relevant skills and expertise.
- Support services should review their remit and activities, so that wherever possible, women experiencing multiple disadvantage are not excluded.
- Generic services should link in and develop referral pathways with local specialist VAWG women's services.
- The homelessness sector and violence against women's sector should explore opportunities for improved collaboration (e.g. through co-location of support workers, multi-agency meetings, formal partnership working and the development of specialist forums or specific knowledge sharing events).

### **Recommendations for further research**

- Systematically review existing data collection and outcomes measurement frameworks, to assess their effectiveness at demonstrating the impact of women centred approaches.
- Explore the potential for shared measures across the homelessness and women's sector services to enable systematic data collection.
- Additional qualitative research with women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage to explore the aspects support they find most beneficial.
- Improved understanding how homelessness and multiple disadvantage is experienced by BAME women, women who are trafficked and those with NRPF.
- Good quality independent evaluations of services and models working with women experiencing multiple disadvantage would increase our understanding about what works for who and in what circumstances.



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# Appendix 1

## Methodology

The methodology was designed firstly to capture a snapshot of the types of support services that currently exist for women who experience homelessness with multiple disadvantage using a survey. Secondly, the research focused in more depth on specific models and examples of support via a combination of semi-structured qualitative telephone interviews with stakeholders and site visits to services to engage with staff teams and women accessing support. The activities were developed by the researchers in collaboration with the commissioners of the research at Homeless Link and The Women's Resource Centre. The research process was undertaken in line with the British Sociological Association statement of ethical protocols.<sup>59</sup>

### 1.3.1 A review of relevant literature

To situate this scoping study in context of what is already known about the support available for homeless women who face multiple disadvantage, the researchers undertook a brief review of the relevant literature focussing predominantly on evidence from the third sector documented over the last six years. This ensured that this research did not duplicate other work in this area, but instead was able to build on previous research and contribute meaningful insights to this area of work.

### 1.3.2 Design and dissemination of a survey

The researchers designed an online survey using a range of qualitative and quantitative questions to explore the provision of support for homeless women experiencing multiple disadvantage. The survey explored; the types of support available, the aims and objectives of the services, perceptions about what they have noticed about women's experiences, the strengths and challenges to supporting women, factors that drive success, as well as suggestions as to how the homelessness sector and the violence against women and girls' sectors might work in closer collaboration in the future. The survey was disseminated widely through online platforms, email circulations and newsletters throughout the social care sector to reach services that provide support for women who experience homelessness and multiple disadvantage. Ninety<sup>60</sup> survey respondents self-selected to take part by responding to the survey within the three-week period that the survey was open.

The results were analysed using descriptive statistics to document the frequency of responses and the researchers also examined the differences in responses among different groups of services.

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<sup>59</sup> British Sociological Association (2017) Statement of Ethical Practice.

<sup>60</sup> In the data cleaning process one entry was removed as one was from an individual who did not represent or work in a service that provided support for women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage. In addition, one service completed two separate entries, however they were from distinct projects within the organisation and the responses were sufficiently different to incorporate both responses.

### **1.3.3 Qualitative data collection**

The researchers carried out a range of activities to gather qualitative data from stakeholders and women accessing services to provide a layer of meaning and interpretation to the available quantitative data gathered through the survey. The services that took part in the qualitative aspects of the research were purposively sampled to ensure that a range of perspectives from services operating using different models and delivering a range of support and interventions for women were incorporated. The qualitative data collection activities included:

- Semi-structured telephone interviews with 14 staff members from 12 services.
- Site visits to five services in London, Manchester, Lancashire and Brighton where the researchers carried out interviews and focus groups with 21 stakeholders, and eight women accessing support.

The services helped to facilitate the engagement with women by offering the opportunity to have their opinions incorporated into the research using an information sheet that was designed by the researchers. Before conducting the interviews and focus groups with stakeholders and women participating, the researchers gained informed consent from women by carefully explaining consent and confidentiality processes, as well as the option to withdraw from the research, and obtained signatures as consent to participate. Women accessing support who took part in focus groups or interviews were given a £10 shopping voucher as a token gesture to thank them for their time.

All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed or detailed notes were taken to ensure the accuracy of data gathered.

### **1.3.4 Data analysis**

The researchers developed an analytical framework which was refined as the research progressed. All data were sifted and organised according to the framework to ensure all data were treated equally. The researchers conducted thematic analysis of all the qualitative data gathered from participants to draw out relevant themes, including the delivery model and approach, the barriers and enablers to supporting women to achieve positive outcomes, perceptions regarding women's experiences and journeys to services as well as recommendations as to how services can improve the support available for women in the future.

### **1.3.5 Limitations**

As with any research there are some important limitations to consider which impact the robustness and reliability of data from this scoping study:

- Within the available time and resource of this scoping research, data were gathered from a limited number of stakeholders and women accessing support which means the findings are not generalisable to the wider population and should not be taken out of context.
- The individuals who self-selected to take part in the survey, interviews and focus groups were motivated to provide their feedback and consequently these data are not representative of all the services, stakeholders and women who have accessed support, so again the findings should not be taken out of context.

- As with most social research, there exists a challenge around attribution regarding which aspects of support are perceived to contribute towards positive outcomes. It is not possible to solely attribute the activity of the services to changes for participants. Therefore, the perceptions reported by participants provide a useful reference point for future enquiry about what makes a difference in terms of the quality and the outcomes of the support for women. Any statements about the effectiveness of support made in this research are indicative of effective practice that can form the basis of aspects to be tested in the future through further research or evaluation.





## What we do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness agencies and the wider housing with health, care and support sector. We work to improve services through evidence and learning, and to promote policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.



Understanding and supporting women and their organisations

## Let's end homelessness together

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