

# Learning from the Ending Women's Homelessness Fund

Case studies March - July 2020

**Let's end homelessness together**

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## Introduction

Homeless Link's Ending Women's Homelessness grants programme aims to help end women's homelessness by building capacity for gender- and trauma-informed services and developing partnerships between homelessness and specialist women's sector charities. Twenty-nine diverse charities from across England that work with women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness were awarded grants, thanks to funding from the DCMS Tampon Tax Fund.

Seven of the 29 grantees were interviewed for this report, representing a cross section of the programme:

- **A Way Out:** An outreach service supporting women engaged in on street sex work
- **Encompass SW, MIND in Somerset and North Devon Against Domestic Abuse (NDADA):** A collaboration between a homelessness sector, a women's sector and a mental health provider to provide a coherent package of support to women experiencing multiple support needs.
- **Micro Rainbow:** A specialist provider of accommodation and support to LGBTI refugees
- **Simon on the Streets:** A women's street outreach service
- **Standing Together Against Domestic Violence and St Mungo's:** A collaboration between a women's sector and homelessness support organisation to develop much needed training and tools to support women's safety
- **Sunflower Women's Centre (Trevi House):** A trauma-informed women's centre for women and their children
- **Wearside Women in Need:** A residential recovery unit for women with complex needs

The lasting impression of conversations with services for the purposes of this study has been the scale of the will and effort to continue delivering services during Covid-19, and ensuring that vulnerable women are safe and can meet their basic needs. The services interviewed for this case study all reported delivering more than they would usually deliver, often providing additional services or additional hours.

## Methodology

Homeless Link associate, Anita Birchall, spoke with the seven grantees during June-July 2020. The structure of the case studies explored the local response, the impact on women during lockdown, and the implications for longer-term consequences for women. The purpose of this is to ensure that where women's needs are different to men's, they are included in forward planning. As one provider stated, *"We don't want women to have more than men, we just want them to have what they need."*

## Learning from the case studies

Many of the experiences and stories shared during this study were not new, at least in terms of what is known about women's homelessness. However, what was new was the response to a novel risk – coronavirus – which led to a very different course of action for people who are homeless than has been seen previously. The 'Everyone In' Government directive saw rapid, large-scale emergency housing responses for people in shelters and sleeping rough. In many areas, people who presented to local authorities at risk of homelessness were also housed under this scheme.

Many women have benefitted from the additional funding and the emergency provision of accommodation. However, a number of providers identified that accommodation solutions were not always suitable or safe for women. There was very little additional women-only accommodation and, as many refuges were in lockdown, this reduced options still further. Some women were left out because they were not already known to services or did not meet the definition of rough sleeping, for example those sofa surfing. In many of the case studies, the provision of women-only services was seen as out of scope, rather than a division of available resources that could have served women better.

It is apparent from these case studies that gender specific services and policies work for women, and that the strong partnership approaches, formally or informally, when tailored to women's needs, are successful in the most difficult circumstances.

These case studies have shown that some level of provision was maintained in all areas, usually working from home and making use of telephone contact. In some cases provision increased, in order to meet the additional needs, and bridge the gaps left by the closure of services. Some sectors and some organisations appear to have closed for part, or all of the lockdown, and all the providers were aware of gaps in local provision, which staff had gone to some lengths to try to fill.

Experience in some case study areas shows that Covid-19 responses targeting people sleeping rough often excluded women who lack safe, stable accommodation, but do not meet the definition of rough sleeping. These hidden homelessness situations should be included in interventions to prevent and reduce homelessness, so that women are not disadvantaged by assumptions based on a predominantly male experience of sleeping rough.

Having gender specific or gender informed services improves understanding and meeting women's needs.

The demands on staff working in homelessness (and women's) services have become more exposed during the lockdown period. Case study interviewees reported that some staff were working in volatile or dangerous situations as many had continued face to face work. Sometimes they struggled to obtain protective equipment due to the PPE shortages. Some staff were lone working. In addition, they are responsible for managing the complex needs and risks people present with.

Staff working in the sector describe navigating complex technical and legal issues such as housing, welfare systems, immigration as well as protections such as injunctions; mental health interventions, including specialised fields such as trauma therapy, child protection and child development, the different forms of violence against women and girls, drug and alcohol management and treatment. Often without

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specialist training or qualifications, they rely on statutory and specialist agencies to provide essential support, which enables people to get the help they need. During lockdown access to these specialist support agencies was vastly reduced and some closed altogether, this increased pressure on staff still providing support (often remotely, from their own homes) to vulnerable women.

There is still a lack of recognition in some areas that women have different needs to men, and are subject to different types of risk. Due to the pressure of providing accommodation and services for so many people so quickly during lockdown, there was a view that having to think about women, as well as everything else gave the impression that being a woman was an extra consideration. This was as opposed to embracing that men and women have different needs and are exposed to different risks due to gender, and thus underpinning planning and decision-making on gender specific emergency provision. To some this felt like a backward step: *“It feels like we’ve lost ground. Being a woman is once again viewed as a support need.”*

While providers found that telephone contact and online provision worked better for some women, particularly where it reduced the costs of travel or enabled childcare, others reported that women found it much harder to engage with. They found it was harder to assess safety or to support emotional and mental health needs. All highlighted that there were challenges with access to remote support due to women not having equipment such as phones and other devices, or money for the additional calls, wi-fi and data and the in particular the levels of digital literacy required to benefit from remote support.

All the providers welcomed the additional funding and initiatives during lockdown, as these had provided extra resources and safeguards for the women. Examples include agreements to accommodate people with no recourse to public funds (NRPF), extra welfare benefit payments, accommodating people sleeping rough in hotels, restrictions on evictions and funding for assessments. However, all expressed concern about what could happen when these additional resources are withdrawn. All felt that funding needed to be in place for longer for these exceptionally vulnerable people to avoid massive increases in homelessness and hardship. As one provider said: *“Homelessness is also a pandemic. We should be doing this all the time.”*

## Promising practice

- A Way Out have continued to provide face-to-face support and outreach to the women they work during lockdown which became a vital link for other partner agencies who were not able to connect face to face with mutual clients. Partners also strengthened their collaborative approaches during this period taking the opportunity to look at new ways of working when traditional routes and pathways were not available and able to work.
- The Standing Together and St. Mungos partnership addressed an immediate need for guidance for staff working in services.
- Standing Together was invited to provide specialist advice to staff throughout lockdown on how to manage complex cases, which involved multiple forms of violence and sexual violence to women.
- The Encompass SW, Mind in Somerset and North Devon Against Domestic Abuse partnership has successfully advocated for a female perspective, highlighting the different standards by

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which we judge people, and challenging the language and assumptions professionals use. In doing so, they have been able to change decisions and outcomes for women requiring accommodation during lockdown.

- Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex (LBTI) refugee and asylum-seeking women face multiple challenges that impact their ability to access services, including digital poverty. With support now being delivered remotely, they lack access to laptops or phones. As a new practice, Micro Rainbow now provides digital support across its three programmes (housing, social inclusion and moving on) to ensure that LBTI women can access its services.
- Utilising the additional COVID funding to enable the women to remain in placements to complete their assessments for the Wearside Women in Need recovery unit was a welcome positive step supported by the local authority.
- Simon on the Streets worked as part of a wider network of women's organisations raising awareness of the presence of homeless women and working together to find solutions.
- Leeds City Council has embraced the need for gender specific services and was the only Authority in this study to provide a women-only hotel, set up with the support of Simon on the Streets and providers in the Women's Lives Leeds partnership. The hotel was in a convenient but quiet location and staffed to ensure their safety.
- In partnership with a local housing provider and Plymouth City Council, Trevi House have been instrumental in getting a five bedroom house opened in Plymouth. This demonstrates a shift in thinking about provision for women.

## Opportunities

- Collaborating provides an opportunity to develop skills and knowledge across the homelessness and the women's sectors, to tailor support to meet the needs of women with multiple disadvantage, and work more flexibly to reach more women.
- There is an opportunity for homelessness and women's organisations to work together in raising awareness of the issue of violence against women to make sure their messages are joined up.
- The pressure on Local Authorities to find longer-term move on accommodation for everyone leads to concerns that the specific needs of women may not be fully considered in move on plans. There are a number of partnerships in these case studies who can use the strength of their relationships locally to provide a vehicle for highlighting the different needs and safety considerations for women.
- There is an opportunity to develop a better understanding of women's needs and to gather more evidence that women-only services can meet their needs better than generic services.

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- Organisations were able to adapt their offer very quickly in order to continue providing support to so many vulnerable women, however, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the gap that exists in people who can and cannot access technology. As many organisations may continue to offer phone or online support for some time, there is an opportunity to address the gaps and ensure more people are able to access technology.
- The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the ways in which many services do not meet the needs of all groups. Micro Rainbow plan to advocate more widely for services, which focus on the needs of people who are not usually considered.
- Creating women-only services provides somewhere for women to go, and further highlights the 'hidden' nature of women's homelessness. The success of these projects to date is an opportunity to influence the provision of more women-only services.
- There is an opportunity to recognise the risk of vicarious trauma and burnout for project workers, and to implement appropriate supervision to support them.
- A women's centre in every city could be achieved virtually by continuing with an online offer to supplement the face to face work, which would allow people who cannot get to the centre, or who live in an area without a women's centre to access support.

## Ending women's homelessness

The case studies have echoed many of the findings of Homeless Link's 2019 [Promising Practice from the Frontline](#) scoping study in partnership with the Women's Resource Centre, and these recommendations still apply.

The services and organisations participating in the Ending Women's Homelessness grant programme are providing gender specific or gender informed services. They are supporting women, raising awareness and challenging systems. Each organisation gave examples, which demonstrate that changes recommended in previous reports have not happened quickly enough, which meant that the emergency response to Covid-19 has not met the needs of women.

The experience of Covid-19 for services and the women they support has reiterated the need for responses that meet the specific needs of women. It has also highlighted the disadvantages that women face when services fail to make the distinction between the needs of men and women. In particular, the impact of domestic abuse during lockdown has increased the urgency for rapid access to housing and gender-informed support for women who are homeless or at risk.

We urge providers, commissioners, funders and Government to work with the homelessness and women's sectors to adopt and extend the good practice identified in this report.

## Case studies

### A Way Out

#### Project Overview

A Way Out deliver a number of services across the Tees Valley and Durham areas. The service, funded by the Ending Women's Homelessness grant programme, is part of A Way Out's Liberty Project supporting women engaged in sex work, mainly on the street, based in Stockton and Middlesbrough.

*"Our Liberty project provides an outreach, engagement and recovery service to sexually exploited women and those involved in selling sex on the street to survive. Those women who are surviving by selling sex on the street are part of a nocturnal economy, which makes them hidden and hard to reach. Most suffer with poor physical, mental and sexual health, some struggle with unresolved issues related to historic child sex abuse, exploitation, domestic abuse or family breakdown/being in care. They are one of the most marginalised, discriminated and isolated groups in the area and are often disconnected from mainstream services and struggle to have their voices heard and be seen."*

*"Our service aims to reach, engage and empower in a uniquely holistic way, within a centre which provides a female-only space, as part of a focused recovery journey that addresses their immediate needs for safety and inclusion and over time supports and empowers them to transition and break free from exploitative or harmful situations and be treated as equal citizens."*

#### Impact of lockdown on services

*"Provision didn't stop - it just looked different and adapted at pace." Many services in the area expanded and developed more on line support. A Way Out also continued to provide vital face-to-face contact with some of their most vulnerable clients, undertaking outreach three times per week to meet immediate needs, conduct welfare checks and safety planning. Agencies continued to work together throughout, sharing information through virtual meetings, collaborating and providing more of a joined up approach and response. "Because our outreach services continued three times a week and we were one of the few agencies still out there in the community delivering, at times, life saving face to face support, we became a vital link for other partner agencies who were not able to connect face to face with mutual clients. One of the positives during this time was the increased engagement and dovetailing of partner agencies working outside of traditional structures to help meet need and make things happen. A lot more thinking outside of the box, flexibility and agile approaches to partnership working which contributed to better outcomes for the women."*

Examples of the above were demonstrated by the local drug treatment service who changed the frequency of scripts to support people with addictions during lockdown, which the women supported reported upon positively.

#### Impact of lockdown on women

The project recognises that, despite continuing their outreach service three times a week during lockdown, they are only just beginning to hear from some women about the experiences that they have had. They believe that as face-to-face contact increases they will learn more.



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On-street sex workers are already marginalised and isolated from their own communities but the Covid-19 crisis has further polarised and compounded this. The women are reporting a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing, increased levels of anxiety, and feelings of isolation. Some women have had difficulty accessing healthcare if they did not have a phone, or have been reluctant to attend doctor's appointments fearing there might be even worse risks to their health from Coronavirus.

Among the younger women, there has been evidence of low mood, increased self-harm, and increased suicide attempts. The loss of social networks, particularly when the women are living in abusive, controlling or violent households has been particularly challenging especially given that some have had reduced ability to connect with others and their social support networks outside the home.

Many of the women have experienced sexual abuse, harm and trauma as children. Their marginalisation and isolation from positive networks, the community and mainstream services, enable perpetrators to target them more easily and so the harm and trauma continues. Many use drugs and alcohol to self-medicate or are introduced to it by perpetrators. Most of the women selling sex on the street do so to survive, for a sofa or a floor for the night, food, drugs or alcohol. The reduced ability to be on the street and sell sex during lockdown further impoverished the women, and in some cases destabilised them and made them homeless or forced them back into abusive relationships for a roof over their heads.

Others were housed within hostels or temporary accommodation that was mixed with both men and women occupying. This did further traumatise some women as they felt unsafe, open to abuse, exploitation and harm from male residents. This period highlighted the lack of female-only accommodation for women who experience multiple disadvantages, have addiction issues and/ have been sexually exploited. A gendered approach to homelessness is needed to address this issue.

Some women have had positive experiences - they have had time to think and reflect about what they want from their lives and have engaged really well during the lockdown period. Some have moved away from unhealthy networks and relationships and are now in safer places where they have chosen to be. The women the project works with are diverse as a group and most have shown strength, tenacity and resilience during this period to keep on surviving despite the external systems at times not being set up to support them.

For some women that the project works with it has been extremely difficult; some have stopped engaging and have disconnected; and it may be sometime before more is known about what they experienced during this period in terms of the violence/harm and exploitation *"Some women have been locked in with their abusers. Some have left their accommodation and been enticed back to former partners who abuse, control and violate them. "It has been very difficult, stood on the doorstep delivering emergency food and wellbeing packs, to really understand what is happening behind closed doors, but we have tried to reach out and create opportunities for the women to talk to us about what they want and need in that moment in time, and show them that they do matter, are of value and that we care"."*

### **Local Covid-19 emergency response**

The local authority, PCC and other statutory agencies took part in a weekly domestic abuse (DA) forum considering occupancy rates in refuges and a broader understanding of issues with move on accommodation. Although a proactive forum, there was an absence of something similar to discuss the needs of the women with multiple disadvantages, with addiction issues, mental ill health and those who had experienced sexual exploitation outside of DA

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*“Many of the women we work with have experienced historic domestic abuse or are currently doing so but do not present with one siloed issue but usually have a range of needs which may be around addiction, mental health and/ sexual exploitation. There are no specialist commissioned services that work with adult survivors of sexual exploitation and in turn provide safe stable accommodation that specifically meets their needs and those of the women facing multiple disadvantages. Instead they are placed into mixed accommodation where they are often further targeted, destabilising their recovery leading to failed or abandoned tenancies. Coercive control and the grooming cycle need to be better understood for women who have been sexually exploited with services set up for female adult survivors and those facing multiple disadvantages alongside specialist accommodation, in the same way that we address those who have experienced domestic abuse.”*

The team have been able to apply for one off hardship grants for sex workers from SWARM to meet immediate needs such as paying for data on phones. SWARM (Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement) is a small movement of current and former sex worker volunteers who run a hardship fund. Overall, there has been no strategic emergency response for women locally, and support has been primarily based on the individual. Rough sleeping initiatives and staff have worked with A Way Out during this period when some of our clients have fallen out of accommodation and have been homeless on the street. For others however their homelessness has been more hidden where they have temporarily stayed at a property sofa surfing which has in some cases increased their risk of harm.

### **Promising practice and opportunities**

Throughout lockdown A Way Out have continued to provide face-to-face support and outreach to the women they work with. Many services moved to virtual support, leaving a large gap in provision for women who sell sex on the street to survive who are among the most marginalised and isolated and the most disconnected, many not having the technology to engage virtually. A Way Out was able to maintain contact and support to the women, shared information with other agencies to help holistically meet the needs of the women. Partners have strengthened their collaborative approaches during this period taking the opportunity to look at new ways of working when traditional routes and pathways were not available and able to work.

An understanding that poverty is a key driver for sex work, and recognising that the industries that typically employ women have been most affected in the area is needed. A Way Out are concerned that more women will be forced to sex work to support their families (75% of women who sex work are mothers) as unemployment increases and the furlough scheme ends. *“We have come across some new women who are out on the streets selling sex and are working closely with them to better understand the drivers behind this so we can help tailor our service; enable their voices to be heard to help bring about change and meet their needs”* Moving forward there is a hope that there will be a greater understanding around on street sex work and sexual exploitation, and that the increased collaborative working that has developed over lockdown continues to enable the women to be seen and heard as equal citizens in the region.

Conversations have started with safeguarding and housing leads around the need for women-only accommodation and changes to practice for women faced with multiple disadvantages and/ those who have been sexually exploited across the Stockton, Middlesbrough and the Hartlepool area. The “Team Around The Individual” is a multi-agency high risk panel that ensures representation at a senior management level have become more involved in overseeing risk management, case coordination and implementing resources thereby increasing accountability for achieving improved outcomes. A Way out

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have noted that Initial findings and attendance show that this model is making positive in roads to the women that they work with.

## Encompass SW, Mind in Somerset and North Devon Against Domestic Abuse

### Project Overview

The Women First project is a partnership between Encompass SW, Mind in Somerset and NDADA (North Devon Against Domestic Abuse). Operating across North Devon and Torridge it is the first gender specific service in the area, but also the first partnership specifically tailored for women. Developed out of a recognition that women do not just experience single issues, but most commonly experience homelessness or unstable housing, gender based violence and mental health issues, the partnership came together to provide a model of support which is designed to incorporate all three aspects. They provide a gender informed service locally, liaise with local services to fill gaps and improve the quality of gender informed support for women experiencing any form of homelessness.

The result of this is a seamless support package for women that is not only gender specific, but no longer requires them to be referred between services, or subjected to repeating their story and experiences to each agency. The partnership works together to triage and assess referrals, agree (with the woman) the priority support need, and share a case management system so that support can flex between the partners in response to her changing needs. Women can have more than one specialist worker, but depending on what the women determine is their priority need (housing, mental health, domestic abuse) the specialist worker for that area will be the lead worker.

### Impact of lockdown on services

During Covid-19 lockdown many of the local services stopped or were limited to telephone or online contact.

### Impact of lockdown on women

A higher number of women have been made homeless or have been identified as homeless as they now have no way of escaping abusive situations: *“Because of Covid, women are stuck in accommodation with males who make them unsafe. They have fewer options to move from place to place. They’re more scared so they’re reaching out. It’s the level of fear that has brought them out to ask for help.”*

There was also an increase in the numbers of women who had been sofa surfing coming forward. However, because the local authority required verification of rough sleeping in order to give priority need status, the women sofa surfing were not deemed eligible for help through this pathway. The only option they had was holiday lets that were accepting people with low - not high - support needs.

*“In our [RSI] reports to the Government we only report on rough sleepers. In this area they are all male so no information goes to central government about women. Funding only covers verified rough sleepers.”*

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Staff feel that lockdown has further highlighted the need for women-only accommodation and more gender specific or gender informed supported accommodation, as women with complex needs do not fit into criteria for either women's or homelessness services as illustrated above, so they slip between the gaps.

The partnership have had some success in accessing Assured Shorthold Tenancies (ASTs) for women during this time, but women then experienced challenges around being able to acquire the essentials in order to be able to live there. Utilities companies were not providing the usual levels of service, or delays in processing benefit claims meant people didn't have access to funds, and people could not obtain furniture due to the closure of all non-essential shops.

More recently, the service has become aware of an increasing number of eviction notices in the area, but due to the restrictions on evicting tenants throughout lockdown many have been able to remain in place. This has increased uncertainty for some of the women. As they know they are at risk of homelessness and there are few options for alternative suitable accommodation, this is an issue the partnership are advocating on.

*"We anticipate that there will be a rise in evictions from October onwards. As soon as they can [evict], they will".*

Emotional wellbeing has also been heavily impacted as many women have reduced access to mental health support due to the closure of services, and they are unable to connect socially with people in person, which is often the way they reduce their anxiety.

### **Local Covid-19 emergency response**

Pressure on councils to act urgently to accommodate people meant that women's needs were not considered specifically. For some women this resulted in creating an increased risk to their safety, and even contributed to them becoming homeless, as only mixed-sex emergency accommodation was made available with one example of a known perpetrator being accommodated alongside vulnerable women. .

Due to the reduction in available services, the project services were less able to rely on the networks of support women in the project require, and worked hard to fill the gaps. Many services continued to provide support via phone or online, however, when women couldn't afford calls or data they were completely isolated. This was a particular challenge for more complex clients who struggle to remember appointments, to understand how to work technology or fund data to complete calls arranged. *"There were a lot of assumptions made about their ability to switch to online or phone support."*

### **Promising practice and opportunities**

One of the aims of this partnership is to highlight the different needs of women and the way gender neutral approaches disregard or even discriminate against women. The partnership has actively advocated for a female perspective, highlighting the different standards by which people are judged, and challenging the language and assumptions professionals use. In doing so, they have been able to change some decisions and outcomes for women requiring accommodation during lockdown. For example, undertaking educational work to advocate for women and make agencies more aware of survival strategies that women may use, such as exchanging sex for a bed, and that it is not a choice when it is the only option, has improved understanding and attitudes towards women.

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The partnership believe that more evidence about women's needs is needed, disaggregated by gender. The example given is how rough sleeping is a very gendered form of homelessness and visibly male, so reports going to MHCLG only include figures on predominantly male homelessness. However, the experience of the partnership and the women they are supporting demonstrates that women remain very hidden often sofa surfing or employing survival strategies to maintain accommodation and these figures are not gathered or reported upon so the view of homelessness is skewed. *"There isn't enough evidence because people don't understand women's needs. We're gathering that evidence. We don't want women to have more than men; we just want them to have what they need"*.

The women encountered by this partnership often lacked the resources and the skills to access online services. Organisations were able to adapt their offer very quickly in order to continue providing support to so many vulnerable women, however, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the gap that exists in people who can and cannot access technology. As organisations may continue to offer phone or online support, there is an opportunity to address the gaps and ensure more people are able to access technology.

Being a cross-sector partnership and providing rough sleeping support has also provided opportunities to be involved in discussions with two local authorities about developing the Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) approach in the area.

## Micro Rainbow

### Project Overview

Micro Rainbow's Ending Women's Homelessness grant funds accommodation for eight women and support to 43 women who are LGBTI asylum seekers and refugees in London.

Finding that, across all of their programmes, men accessed services much more than women, Micro Rainbow recognised that LGBTI women might not feel comfortable accessing refugee services, or feel comfortable as refugees accessing LGBTI services. They realised that they needed to make adjustments and create provision to fill that gap by providing a place the women feel safe to go.

*"We had to bear in mind the intersectional challenges LGBTI women face due to race, gender and sexuality. When we ran events they were attended mainly by cis-gender gay men. We had to make a conscious effort to make it comfortable for women. We have found it hard to reach women; now they are reaching out for support. Because there is a specific service there, they came. We had to make adjustments. They had to feel safe to reach out for support. A service that is specifically designed for asylum seeking women who are LGBTI is very rare, one that understands their needs in a way that mainstream refugee services or LGBTI services may not understand."*

### Impact of lockdown on services

Throughout lockdown there was a freeze on people leaving the country. For the women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) the restrictions to accessing accommodation were lifted temporarily. Technically, this meant that accommodation could be found, however, the process appears to have been slowed down by the increased numbers of people eligible, resulting in long waiting times. *"For a short time when*

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*it didn't matter if you didn't have RPF you could access emergency accommodation via the local council but we only managed to get it for one man. No women. LAs could support people with NRPF but we couldn't get it."*

Home Office waiting times have increased during lockdown, and because interviews are suspended, it has not been possible to submit new claims.

During lockdown, Micro Rainbow experienced an increased demand for its services which resulted in an expansion of its online social inclusion programme as well as its housing provision. Micro Rainbow housed vulnerable LGBTI asylum seekers in its safe houses, which provide over 17,000 bed-nights a year. However, during the lockdown there were not enough, and Micro Rainbow had to source hotel rooms for the first time. Over the last four months, Micro Rainbow provided 258 bed-nights in hotels to LGBTI asylum seekers in critical situations.

### **Impact of lockdown on women**

Most of the women in this service do not have access to public funds (NRPF). Once they get refugee status, they can find accommodation. However, due to the delays in processing claims many women have not been able to find accommodation during lockdown.

*"For some we've seen a delay from Home Office (HO) waiting for accommodation since Feb/Mar/Apr. One woman is still homeless, sofa surfing with aggressive men in the flat. The police have been called several times. She is also experiencing homophobic bullying. We're trying to negotiate temporary accommodation while still waiting for Home Office to respond."*

The women used to be able to go out and get lunch, have social interaction, and see friends. Lockdown meant they couldn't leave the house they were in. Several women live in unstable housing and could be asked to leave any time, especially if the people they are staying with find out they are LGBTI. For some women it has become dangerous to stay. *"Everyone is at home in lockdown so sofa surfing is more difficult than when people were going out to work. It's now 24/7. In one case someone exposed themselves to her at a friend's shared space and she experienced homophobic bullying from other males in the accommodation."*

The service reported that women are experiencing high levels of anxiety about their asylum claim, as well as about coronavirus, in addition to their personal trauma and experiences. *"A lot of people's mental health has deteriorated and services haven't increased in response to that."* Micro Rainbow also recorded an increase in the number of LGBTI women in domestic violence situations.

Micro Rainbow provided online legal workshops facilitated by qualified immigration lawyers experienced in working on LGBTI cases, so women had a specific place to ask questions about their case and their situation. *"People were not sure if appeals would be dealt with, or for those who have had an interview and not heard back from Home office, they don't know how long they will have to wait. All of this has a negative impact on mental health. It affects people. They are getting really stressed but can't go home because not safe to do so."* In addition, Micro Rainbow created online social inclusion spaces that were exclusive for LGBTI asylum seeking and refugee women. In these spaces women could socialise and provide each other with peer support, an essential activity that kept people connected during lockdown.

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Financially the women are generally reported as being worse off, even those receiving HO support (£38). Previously they could access food at other services they visited, or could buy cheaper options, however, at the beginning of lockdown a number of supermarket lines were reduced, and others were not available, which made food unaffordable for some women. Period poverty is also very common for LGBTI asylum seeking women and Micro Rainbow was able to provide women in its safe houses with sanitary pads throughout the lockdown.

### Local Covid-19 emergency response

Micro Rainbow have benefitted from organisations pulling together and supporting each other. Southall Black Sisters have a NRPF fund. It has ensured women had some support during Covid. *“The relationship between our organisations has grown. The more we work with them the more we will see how we can work together and support more women. Each organisation in our network has access to legal support or wellbeing support. Great relationships are being built for networking or collaboration.”*

The Council have been helpful connecting them to the foodbanks or other agencies, however, as most of the women are not eligible for services there is no strategic relationship in meeting their needs during lockdown, or planning for the additional needs people will have as we come out of lockdown.

Due to successful fundraising efforts, Micro Rainbow was able to tackle the widespread digital poverty that LGBTI asylum seekers and refugees face. It provided laptops and unlimited WIFI in each of their 12 safe houses. It was also possible to top-up beneficiaries' phones every time they accessed Micro Rainbow's online programme of activities. Tackling digital poverty not only reduced isolation and kept people entertained during the lockdown, but it also helped asylum seekers to stay connected with crucial services like Micro Rainbow, their immigration lawyers and the Home Office.

### Promising practice and opportunities

*“The people we work with experience discrimination on so many levels and there are so many reasons they can't reach out to services, including fear of discrimination on sexuality and gender identity grounds. Going to the police isn't possible because of their immigration status plus relationships with police due to race/colour. If they experienced a hate crime because of their sexuality, they may not feel safe going to a conational community. There are so many different layers of complexity. It is so hard not knowing the best place to get that support.”*

Micro Rainbow raise the issue of tailoring services to meet needs. The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the ways in which many services do not meet the needs of all groups. They plan to advocate more widely for services that focus on the needs of people who are not usually considered. Micro Rainbow believes that there is a much higher demand for this type of service than they can currently provide *“We are rare because we have safe housing specifically for LGBTI asylum seekers. The need was always there and never addressed. We are the first safe housing for LGBTI asylum seeking women in UK. The women we work with weren't eligible for public funds, so they couldn't go to refuges and were falling through gaps.”*

## Simon on the Streets

### Project Overview

Based in Leeds, Simon on the Streets provides an outreach service to people living on the streets or who are vulnerably housed. The Ending Women's Homelessness grant funds the women's outreach worker who works as part of a wider partnership with the St Anne's Centre and Leeds City Council, supporting women in the safe space for vulnerable women hub.

### Impact of lockdown on services

Many services in Leeds were closed or reduced throughout lockdown. However, Simon on the Streets has continued delivering a full outreach service, and extended their outreach where other services have reduced or stopped.

The Safeguarding teams at Leeds Housing Options have continued providing support to vulnerable women, helping to make properties safe, providing panic alarms, and linking the women with intensive workers.

York St health practice have got a minibus with a nurse or a doctor, so they continued to give out prescriptions, dress wounds and visit women on the streets or in hotels. Throughout lockdown, contraception injections were stopped and everyone was put on the pill. Some women have required support to access emergency contraception.

Some hospital appointments are postponed or cancelled. GPs are doing phone calls within two hours and outreach workers can pick up prescriptions using their ID badges.

Drugs services closed for a while and issued fortnightly Methadone prescriptions, which proved very difficult for people to manage. The drugs service is now open and operating a reduced service, seeing up to 30 people a day from all over the city.

The organisations in Leeds supporting migrants usually offer hosting, but that stopped and the office closed during lockdown. For the outreach team this left a gap because they have the specialist knowledge about people's rights.

### Impact of lockdown on women

The majority of women have been offered somewhere to stay (90%). Some have got tenancies and need help to make it safe or feel like a home again. Some people are still on the streets, mainly people in relationships because couples are harder to accommodate. A few women are restricted from everywhere due to risk. A number of people haven't been able to meet their basic needs so the outreach workers have been out each day providing mobile phones, top ups, food parcels, water, sanitary products, and condoms.

Financially, many of the women have experienced hardship during lockdown. Many were in casual or cash-in-hand work. *"The sex workers have been unable to work, people haven't been able to raise money through begging or shoplifting, so all avenues for work have been shut down."* The outreach team have seen an increase in women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) who have lost jobs and become destitute. Many people have been failing the Habitual Residence Test for Universal Credit



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because their face-to-face appointments have been cancelled, or they don't have the technology or can't upload the evidence.

Women have found it difficult to discuss their problems or feelings in a telephone conversation. The loss of social and face-to-face contact has resulted in some becoming quite isolated.

Some women have children but haven't had contact with them during lockdown. There is no provision for mothers separated from their children to see them during lockdown. Where the team are supporting women to re-establish contact with their children, it has been even more difficult during the lockdown. *"If women have a plan in place to enable them to get back with their children like provide clean drug samples or attend probation we need to support them with that. We don't know what they need to do."*

Despite high numbers of women who are visible and included in the counts, there are still hidden women, believed to be mostly women with NRPF doing cash in hand work in factories who are scared to come forward, but further evidence gathering is required

### Local Covid-19 emergency response

Leeds City Council have provided a 15 space women-only hotel. This appears to be driven by two factors in particular: firstly, women are more visible in Leeds due to the managed sex working zone and the resulting good relationship with the council and PCC, so they were included in the rough sleeping counts. This led to the establishment of the women's safe to stay hub at the St Anne's Centre, with the SOTS women's outreach workers providing support to the women in the hub. When the pandemic hit and lockdown was announced, the council and services acted quickly to open the women-only hotel. Secondly, the team are well connected to an alliance of 11 women and girls organisations specialising in domestic violence, mental health, sexual health, sex work, trafficking, child sexual exploitation and education. This forum (Women's Lives Leeds) appears to be a positive force for generating solutions when working with women. The women-only provision is located centrally, but in a quieter part of the city and is staffed so the women are safe.

This provision is viewed as very successful, and has enabled the different services to maintain a high level of contact with the women. *"It's full all the time. Women have got somewhere safe to go and they've got their independence back. It's worked really well."*

Leeds City Council have also been monitoring whether women's needs are being met. *"There's quite a big network [Women's Lives Leeds] who share information with the council. They just understand that women have different needs. They are funding the 15 beds so they know who is in. When we do outreach we have a list of who we've seen. [When appropriate] we share that with the council. The women's hotel is staffed 24/7. They're doing the welfare checks 5-6 times every day".*

### Promising practice and opportunities

The outreach team were able to work flexibly, providing a responsive service that increased in response to need, or where other organisations were closed. They worked as part of a wider network of women's organisations raising awareness of the presence of homeless women and working together to find solutions.

The Local Authority has embraced the need for gender specific services, and was the only Authority in this study to provide a women-only hotel, staffed to ensure women's safety and the provision of wrap

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around on-going support from the network of services working in partnership. This case study highlights what can be achieved when women's gender specific needs are understood and accounted for in provision and rough sleeping figures, the role of a proactive local authority and network of services collaborating jointly to provide gender and trauma informed support during and beyond the COVID19 emergency response.

## Standing Together Against Domestic Violence and St Mungo's

### Project Overview

The Safety by Experience project is a collaboration between Standing Together Against Domestic Violence and St Mungo's. It operates across three pilot sites selected from St Mungo's services in London and the south of England. The partnership brings together a second tier women's specialist provider and a homelessness services provider to build a picture of the different types of violence and abuse experienced by women, based on the personal experiences of women in homelessness services.

The aim of the Safety by Experience project is to use this information to produce guidance and tools for staff working with women in homelessness settings, and to build knowledge and skills in the homelessness and women's sectors. There is an intention that the resources will also be shared more widely, thereby benefitting more women over time.

### Impact of lockdown on services

The lockdown delayed the start of the project. However, Homeless Link flexed the grant requirements, which gave them the time to set out what was needed and allowed them to build on the partnership, focus outwards and mobilise engagement and support with their project. *"We were able to get the support of 25 women's, housing and homelessness organisations for a letter to Dame Louise Casey. That kind of thing can happen a lot more quickly."*

St Mungo's provide outreach, emergency shelters, hostels, and work and learning support. They managed a number of emergency Covid-19 hotels commissioned by the GLA, and provide support in hotels in London and other areas. These hotels were much larger than a typical hostel (around 200-250 beds) and there was a mix of people - some were new to streets and some have been rough sleeping long term.

St Mungo's have been running The Green Room for the last two years, which provided pan-London emergency accommodation for women sleeping rough who are vulnerable and at risk of violence. However, this was also closed as a result of Covid-19 and the women were decanted in March to self-contained accommodation. As the hotels were mixed provision this meant that there was no women-only emergency provision available in London.

### Impact of lockdown on women

Some staff in homelessness services worked from home delivering phone based support. Some people did not have a phone, or access to the internet or have strong digital literacy, therefore organisations have provided access to Wi-Fi, phones and top ups to buy data to allow people to access support.

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There has been a recorded rise in safeguarding issues across services, especially with respect to domestic abuse. There has also been an increase in financial exploitation, usually by people known to them, and thought to be related to the impact of job losses and delays accessing benefits.

Standing Together are currently working in partnership with specialist women's service provider Solace Women's Aid and a coalition of housing providers on a VAWG Housing First pilot for women in Westminster. Many other women were housed just before lockdown which meant that the intensive face to face support they needed at the start of the tenancy was affected. A number of the tenancies are now potentially at risk, there has been a deterioration in the women's mental health, and it is thought that ex-partners (perpetrators of domestic abuse) have been present at some properties throughout lockdown.

Generally, there has been a downturn in women's emotional wellbeing and mental health because of isolation, stress and issues accessing regular support from mental health services.

### **Local Covid-19 emergency response**

Before the pandemic, Standing Together and St Mungo's were working independently and in partnership in Westminster. The borough had existing relationships with some hotels they use for temporary and emergency accommodation, so they were able to make use of those in their response to Covid-19. In many of the hotels, the hotel staff provided the building management and St Mungo's and other homelessness agencies provided support. While some hotel staff in some areas were unused to working with people facing homelessness, Westminster has some experienced security teams who are used to working with homeless and vulnerable people. These were deployed in the hotels which meant that there was generally a good level of understanding of people's needs, and their experiences of trauma.

It was felt that hotel owners have been quite flexible and sympathetic. People related to the additional threat from the virus and it made them more sympathetic. This made it easier to make the case to businesses to support people with complex needs.

Due to the work of the Safety by Experience Project and the strong relationship with Westminster, Standing Together was asked to provide an advisory role for staff who encountered complex cases of domestic violence and violence against women and girls (VAWG) during lockdown. The legacy of this work is a new monthly VAWG and multiple disadvantage forum where staff from homelessness agencies can bring cases of women they are supporting for reflective discussion and practical advice from domestic abuse and women's homelessness professionals, and a clinical psychologist.

Although no women only-emergency accommodation was made available, Westminster worked to address women's needs during the move on phase from hotels by holding weekly meetings to discuss women's move on specifically. Standing Together and Solace were also successful in obtaining funding to increase the capacity of the VAWG Housing First pilot in response to the need for move on. The partnership is optimistic that sufficient housing can be made available so that longer-term move on options can be secured for those housed during the pandemic, however it is not clear that sufficient women-only accommodation is available for all women who need it.

### **Promising practice and opportunities**

The partnership addressed an immediate need for guidance for staff working in services. They were able to hold regular online meetings to collaborate on the creation of guidance on [working with women who had experienced domestic abuse](#) and sexual violence, [other forms of violence against women](#), and

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[working with couples](#). This guidance was publicised through webinars hosted by Homeless Link and Feantsa.

The partnership has not only strengthened during the pandemic due to regular online contact and need to adapt services quickly, but moving online has also widened the reach of the partnership into other networks and organisations who have collaborated on the guidance and acted as a sounding board for ideas. In addition the flexibility provided by Homeless Link at the start of the pandemic, enabled the organisation to adapt quickly and broaden their reach into good practice guidance and policy influencing in response to the emergency resulting in the guidance above. Stronger collaborative working is a key success of this project, and provides an opportunity to develop skills and knowledge across the homelessness and the women's sectors, to tailor support to meet the needs of women with multiple disadvantage, and work more flexibly to reach more women. This will improve the quality and range of support available to women.

The pressure on Local Authorities to find longer-term move on accommodation for everyone leads to concerns that the specific needs of women may not be fully considered. The partnership will utilise their cross-sector expertise and the increased strength of their relationships locally to further influence and highlight the different needs and safety considerations for women.

## Sunflower Women's Centre (Trevi House)

### Project Overview

Based in Plymouth, Trevi House specialises in rehabilitation services for women and their children. The organisation has expanded and diversified, running Daffodil House, a mum and baby residential parenting assessment centre, and the Sunflower Women's Centre, providing support to any woman who needs it with an onsite trauma informed crèche. In collaboration with two other agencies, they are about to start a house offering trauma informed support for vulnerable women at risk of DA. The Ending Women's Homelessness Grant funds a Trauma Informed Resettlement Worker to build effective strategic relationships across third sector agencies, local authority, housing and hostels in Plymouth to help women in recovery at the Sunflower Centre who are homeless or at risk of homelessness navigate the housing landscape and remove barriers.

### Impact of lockdown on services

Many other rehab units didn't take anyone in. The drugs and alcohol service, the only prescribing service in the city, stopped prescribing for new people for a while, but then worked out how to deliver an adapted service.

DA services moved to full telephone services, and outreach services stopped. The Refuge was on lockdown so there was no move on.

The counselling services were online only but reports suggest it hasn't always worked. The art therapist at the centre was furloughed, and they tried to continue sessions online but it didn't work.

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The peer mentors got some WhatsApp groups going to communicate with the women. The service was able to make contact with every woman they were aware of on their books and had a core of 95 women they contacted every week.

### **Impact of lockdown on women**

Three times a week the Sunflower Centre usually ran a drop in with 30 to 60 women coming in to catch up with each other. The women wanted the social connection and that was completely lost during lockdown. *“It had a devastating impact. We are all about connection so isolation was really hard. Loss of human connection has been devastating to even the most resilient.”*

The women attending the centre are mainly unknown to homelessness services, described as typically sleeping on a sofa in return for sexual favours, or miles away in a park for safety. Many of the women that come into the centre are not even aware they are considered homeless, due to the hidden nature of their homelessness and vulnerable housing situations.

A few women have been into the Centre during lockdown, and the police have brought some women in, but there is fear about coming in. Staff report that, at one point, they were the only service that stayed open for those women who needed somewhere to go in a crisis.

This service works with children and, although they have not been coming into centre, they have had some child protection concerns. They anticipate that having to reduce the capacity of the crèche over summer will also affect the children. The experiences of the women, through isolation caused by shielding, or bereavements, or meeting new partners will increase the potential for neglect as the women have been struggling and less able to meet the children's emotional needs.

*“We are passionate about not having another generation growing up with untreated trauma. We need to break the chain. There will be a lot of work to do with women and children after lockdown, and that will need financing.”*

### **Local Covid-19 emergency response**

While there hasn't been any women-only provision in Plymouth, there is a growing recognition that women have different needs and require different services. The team run a Pause practice that works with women who have experienced, or are at risk of, repeated pregnancies that result in children needing to be removed from their care. The work aims to give women the opportunity to pause and take control of their lives breaking a destructive cycle that causes both them and their children deep trauma. The work with Pause has provided the leverage to influence the provision of a five bedroomed house for women in partnership with a housing provider, which would not have been a consideration even a year ago.

Plymouth Council opened two properties to accommodate everyone that was homeless. Not everyone wanted to go in because it was mixed provision, and some people felt it was too restrictive. The team have been able to raise awareness of the different needs of women in the emergency provision because they have a worker based there. Although there are still men in the service, the women have been grouped together away from the men.

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The team were not involved in decisions about homelessness provision during the lockdown, and feel there is still some work to do to join up conversations about women's services and homelessness provision for women but are encouraged by the interest the DA commissioner shows in their model.

### Promising practice and opportunities

Plymouth has an alliance of lots of organisations such as homelessness charities, public health, and DA services who all come together to agree how to make provision that doesn't replicate what other people are doing. Coordinating responses across disciplines is an encouraging sign.

In partnership with a local housing provider and Plymouth City Council, Trevi House have been instrumental in getting a five bedroomed house opened. This demonstrates a shift in thinking about provision for women. The project is developing relationships and working to bring about change, but recognises that gender specific provision is still uncommon so they are focusing on providing evidence that it works.

Creating women-only services provides somewhere for women to go, and further highlights the 'hidden' nature of women's homelessness. *"We opened this centre in 2019 and we've worked with over 400 referrals. That's 400 women who potentially weren't engaging with anyone else."*

The project is passionate about supporting women and their children through trauma, and it is clear that project teams have adapted their practices to ensure that the women are supported. What has been reported is the need for appropriate levels of support for staff who are continually supporting women with 'harrowing' stories. *"The staff have been amazing, checking up on people, setting up a timetable of zoom activities. We are running virtual drop-ins - a lot of women come to that. We dropped off 95 survival packs – mindfulness colouring books, toiletries sanitary products and so on. I hear the staff dealing with the complexity of phone calls. They put the phone down and another call comes through. It's harrowing. They have such compassion."*

Trevi House believes that there should be a women's centre in every city and believe this could be done virtually by continuing with an online offer to supplement the face-to-face work, which would allow people who cannot get to the centre, or who live in an area without a Women's centre to access support, or just to talk. *"We've had phone calls from much further away. And some joined our zoom group. One woman couldn't find support near where she lived so it's good we've been able to support people from other areas."*

## Wearside Women In Need (WWIN)

### Project Overview

Based in Sunderland the WWIN Ending Women's Homelessness Fund project provides a residential recovery unit for up to eight women. A specialist counselling service supports this approach in partnership with My Sister's Place, Middlesbrough. The Recovery Unit provides a service to women who are unable to access refuge accommodation due to the complexity of their needs, are too vulnerable for mixed hostels, and women who are 'hidden' homeless (typically sofa surfing). For women who are street homeless, the service offers access to an onsite crash pad facility or supports them to access temporary accommodation while undertaking an assessment of their needs and suitability for the recovery unit.

### **Impact of lockdown on services**

Like many local authorities, Sunderland Council used COVID19 emergency funding to secure emergency accommodation, in the form of hotel beds, for local men and women facing homelessness. While this meant that homeless women were not left on the street, it did place them in mixed sex environments where many remained or were at further risk of physical, sexual and emotional abuse.

The only other single sex provision available in the area is a general needs refuge run by WWiN and the Athena Project (Changing Lives), providing a crash pad facility for up to 56 days for women with multiple support needs.

The domestic abuse outreach service provided by WWiN continued to work with survivors living in the community throughout this time, including two complex needs outreach staff who were based in the Recovery Unit. Prior to the lockdown these staff had been working into a variety of settings - such as the women's hubs run by the national probation service - and, despite the temporary closure of this and other public sector services, have continued to maintain contact with their service users, many of whom have been living in insecure and/or unsafe accommodation.

Outreach is a primary referral route into the Recovery Unit, and has played a central role in supporting the initial assessments for Recovery Unit referrals and due to their relationship with residents, have added value by delivering a range of individual activities and group work programmes offering continuity in support.

Conceived as a core element of the recovery unit approach, the structured programme of social, creative and therapeutic work was due to be delivered in partnership with a range of local services, businesses and community volunteers but the COVID19 lockdown meant that many were unable to visit women onsite.

In response, the recovery unit staff have developed and sustained an activity programme which, whilst flexible, revolves around a core offer of 3 sessions per day. The activities provided have included physical workouts – through such as boxing, hula-hooping, badminton and swimming – as well as more social activities – such as the project choir – which has been hugely popular and delivered very real benefits in terms of individual wellbeing and project cohesion.

*“We’ve only been going for 6 weeks but it has become embedded surprisingly quickly. For the women who have lost their children, and are now without a perpetrator that took up 99% of their day but isn’t there anymore, it has meant they can fill their time with positive things and deal with their trauma.”*

Another core service affected by the Covid-19 lockdown was the counselling work commissioned from My Sisters Place. Routed in a feminist understanding of trauma, the planned one-to-one and group-based therapeutic interventions for resident women had to be suspended for a period of time due to the lockdown but is now being delivered alongside clinical supervision and a group learning forum for Recovery Unit staff.

### **Impact of lockdown on women**

The lockdown has paradoxically offered a number of benefits for women residing in the Recovery Unit. Located in a communal residential building, the women have been able to mix as a single household

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when many in the wider community were living alone. Cut off from their normal associates they have also been able, with the support of on-site staff, to better manage any substance dependencies, to reduce the risk of harm from others and to prioritise their own emotional needs.

*“Covid has been quite good because it’s restricted some things. It’s easier for the women because the pub down the street isn’t open. It was Covid that restricted them rather than it being our rules”.*

While unit staff were able to use the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 lockdown to create a safe, physical space for the women, they quickly recognised that the women’s continued use of social media – to connect to people, make new ‘friends’ and gather ‘likes’ as a measure of social acceptance and validation – was exposing them to the risk of further harm. Unable to prevent the use of personal phones within the project, staff deliver digital safety awareness within their wider personal safety work with the women.

The increase in welfare benefits during the lockdown also meant that the women were financially better off and able to improve their physical health. Asked to pay a relatively small service charge, which helps to cover the cost of gas and electricity as well as communal breakfasts and evening meals, the women have been able to eat regularly, to enjoy the camaraderie of cooking and eating together and to witness the physical and psychological benefits of good nutrition and reduced substance misuse.

All the women in the unit have children, although many have been placed with other family members or accommodated within the wider care system. Often unable to maintain contact due to the chaos created by substance misuse, poor mental health and abusive relationships, the relative stability provided by the Recovery Unit has enabled some of the women to reconnect with their children through apps such as FaceTime and to plan socially distanced visits; visits that have helped to rebuild relationships despite the Covid-19 lockdown.

### **Local Covid-19 emergency response**

The local Covid-19 emergency response has not been a huge success for women. Money was made available to ensure that homeless men and women could be brought in off the streets, but the relative safety from infection that this temporary accommodation provided didn’t mean that women were safe from abuse. Many women entered the Recovery Unit having endured weeks of sexual and physical violence at the hands of other male residents, both associates and strangers.

This has caused dilemmas for the Recovery Unit staff who know that *‘if she can’t go into refuge and she’s not suitable for the Recovery Unit right now... putting a woman in a hostel may have a detrimental effect’.*

Staff have therefore had to be creative. The use of a single ‘crash pad’ facility has been replaced with an approach that allows every bedroom, as it becomes available, to be treated as a crash pad meaning that, where ever possible, women have been brought into the unit for a period of 7 days to undertake their initial assessment and to gauge for themselves whether they are ready to join the Recovery Unit.

Where this hasn’t been possible, staff have worked with council officers to secure a space in a local hotel (using the additional Covid funding) whilst actively encouraging the woman to engage with unit assessments on a daily basis. For some women, previously viewed as impossible to place after multiple periods of ‘intentional homelessness’, even this intervention has provided a period of relative stability



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and an important opportunity for staff to listen to them and gain an insight into the world from their perspective because, as one staff member put it:

*“We need to find the best solution for that person so they don’t keep going round the system for 20 years.”*

### **Promising practice and opportunities**

Having the additional Covid government funding to enable the women to complete their assessments for the recovery unit has been a welcome and positive step. Initial costs to fund the placements throughout the assessment, are offset by the savings generated by not having to fund repeated interventions as the women present multiple times at different services.

These savings are already being noticed by some of the key services that the Recovery Unit has been working with during the lockdown – such as the police and housing – and it is hoped that as restrictions ease and other agencies return to direct work with their clients, further collaborative work will be possible, including with wider members of the local community.

At present, the unit continue to do all they can to share information through such as local MARAC and MAPPA arrangements, and to support the women in the unit to manage the impact of the abuse they have experienced as well as the risks they continue to face. They are nonetheless conscious that there are many more women out there still trapped in their homes by COVID19 and the messaging that has surrounded it:

*“Everything they are told on the media reinforces the message that they should not go out. Covid has created additional psychological barriers to leaving. The government did say that if you are in a violent relationship you can leave, but the messaging was subtle. We should have been much clearer – We should have got messages out there saying you’re safer out than in. We are [also] starting to ask ‘do you know someone who is subject to domestic violence and do you know how to respond?’ We should have been saying that from the beginning.”*



## **What we do**

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

## **Let's end homelessness together**

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