

Learning from organisations on supporting young women

Practice briefing for homelessness
services

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Produced by

National Practice Development Team

Published

March 2022

About this briefing

This document provides a summary of some of the key themes raised in Homeless Link's initial conversations with organisations who have developed gender-informed approaches to supporting young women. Most of the organisations were grantees of the Ending Women's Homelessness Fund,¹ which aimed 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. As such, the themes of the conversations focussed on violence against women and girls (VAWG) and homelessness).

Thanks to: The Y Project, 1625 Independent people, Young Women's Housing Project and Basis Yorkshire

Young women's experiences and support needs

Experiences of violence against women and girls

Organisations spoke about the prevalence of experiences of forms of violence in young women's lives and lack of support that is responsive to their experiences or able to meet their needs. This is consistent with findings from our [2020 Young & Homeless](#) research:

"Children and Young People's Mental Health Service (CAMHS) is absolute crap, thank god there's counselling available here and there's a domestic abuse worker."

Organisations told us how young women do not often recognise that they are experiencing abuse, but where they do and seek support, they are often not seen and/or taken seriously by different agencies including police, housing departments, and children's social services.

"We are getting young women coming through to our service fleeing domestic violence. Housing Options don't want to pick them up. Social services and the police are saying they need to go back home".

¹ Homeless Link's Ending Women's Homelessness grants programme was funded by the Government's Tampon Tax Fund. The aim of the grants programme was 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. In total twenty-nine charities from across England working with women at risk of, or experiencing homelessness were awarded grants. Eighteen organisations are to receive large grants of up to £100,000, and a further eleven small grants of up to £32,000. For further information see: www.homeless.org.uk/homeless-link%E2%80%99s-tampon-tax-fund-grants-programme#:~:text=Homeless%20Link's%20grants%20programme%20aims,and%20specialist%20women's%20sector%20charities.

Homeless Link

Organisations raised that there is a lack of understanding about the ways violence against women and girls affects young women, and consequently the reach of VAWG into young women's lives:

“We're barely scratching the surface on young women's experiences of abuse.”

They spoke about how young women experience domestic abuse differently to their adult counterparts, and that it often intersects with other forms of violence including exploitation. They highlighted perpetrators of abuse may be parents, partners or peers.

“There is a lack of understanding of the continuum of forms of violence against women and girls.”

“They may be fleeing parental or spousal abuse. ”

A lack of targeted services

As a result, services are not targeted towards, or responsive to young women's needs. Organisations raised that this means young women are often not aware of the support that is available to them. Where young women are aware of local supports, traditional services such as refuges are often not seen as relevant to their needs, experiences, or as somewhere that they'd be able to go to for help. Further issues raised were how the location of support services isn't convenient or close to where young women live and spend time, making them inaccessible, how referral pathways for some VAWG services could be complex making it hard for young women to access, and in some cases, how the type of support wasn't appropriate for what young women wanted or needed.

Gender-bias

Finally, organisations told us that they see young women being held to different or higher standards to young men when they become homeless. For example, young women are often expected to make more of an 'effort' to actively engage with services and supports available; where young women don't put this effort in, they are labelled as challenging or disengaged. Organisations also told us more pressure is placed on young women to repair fractious relationships with their families. These biases often mean young women are prevented from accessing youth housing/homelessness pathways, as they are told they can remain in the family home, even where this is not possible or safe.

What works?

Investment in staff

Throughout our conversations organisations highlighted the value and skills of their staff:

“There will be some really experienced workers and they will have supported them (young women) in really gritty circumstances. They're worth their weight in gold, and often that's not seen, [it's about] giving that work the status it deserves.”

Organisations spoke about the value of investing in staff and raised multiple examples of how this could be done and how it added value. They highlighted how investment in staff skills and knowledge increased the confidence the staff had in themselves, and the way they worked. They spoke about how training meant staff were able to identify what skills they were using and why, and how applying these approaches benefitted the young women accessing the service. They described the effect this has had was that staff worked with more intention and purpose, and how this added value to the overall support provided to young women:

“[Staff confidence and intention] in itself transfers to what you're modelling to the young women- it's very powerful stuff. We have what we need to recover. It's about confidence. ”

Organisations told us of how additional expertise such as VAWG champions or specialist roles could help build this:

“As well as being beneficial for individual colleagues and young women, having a colleague whose dedicated role was to address domestic and sexual violence and abuse was beneficial for our organisation as a whole. **Having the expert coach in-house available as a go-to resource meant that when colleagues did want to address DVA/SVA themselves, they could access advice efficiently and effectively.** ”

“For us, investing in key “championing” specialist roles and engendering our strengths based, trauma-aware and person-centred approach, to make that happen is proving to be a way forward. **Essentially, you're mirroring the best practice in your service delivery, to the growth and development of your team(s).**”

Organisations highlighted the need for meaningful staff support, such as reflective spaces to promote ongoing development. There was recognition that these spaces can be hard for staff and that they need to be safe, invested in and part of the organisation structure:

“Continuous development and reflection is personal, and can be challenging, but that’s what we’re asking the women to do [who access our service] we’ve got to ask are we willing to do that ourselves? But we can see the value in this: it creates a stronger team.”

Some organisations highlighted the value in incorporating staff support into specialist roles:

“The coach provided emotional support to colleagues who were supporting young women experiencing DVA/SVA who were then better able to support young women.”

Service design & type of support

Organisations highlighted the huge difference small caseloads made. They particularly identified that this enabled more meaningful relationships between staff and young women, and therefore the quality of the support that could be provided.

“There is a huge difference in the support that can be provided and relationships that can be built.”

The location that services are provided was one of the most frequent factors to be raised by organisations who felt that young women need in-house support around health, wellbeing and experiences of abuse. They highlighted young women are often hesitant, or fearful of supports available, and when these services are a bus ride away, or in a location that isn’t known to the young person, this increases young women’s doubts about accessing support. In addition, as with anyone under 25 young women have reduced Universal Credit and the cost of travel is a barrier in itself.

Another common theme was ensuring young women could access the right level of support at the right time. While organisations highlighted the value of therapeutic support, they also spoke about how young woman are often not ready for the intensity of support.

“Engagement with the counselling was not as good as we had hoped for. The girls have a lot of resistance to counselling finding it quite difficult. ”

Roles such as 'wellbeing coaches' were successful. These roles drew from both youth and VAWG specialisms and focussed on young women's self-worth and self-esteem:

"The Confidence Coach completed her confidence building sessions which proved to be popular, and the feedback was very good. Collectively they have learnt the importance of self-first and self-care, not to be doubtful about themselves and to stop saying sorry all the time and how to compliment themselves and working as a team. The group would like to continue with the follow-on assertive sessions.

"... the pandemic restrictions made it even more difficult than usual to support young women to engage with counselling, as it had to be delivered remotely. **Part of our journey was recognising the value of the Wellbeing Coach and how, for the vast majority of our young women this was the most effective intervention for them at this time.** "

One organisation particularly highlighted how bringing both less intensive therapeutic approaches alongside longer-term support in-house increased the flexibility of their offer:

"The value of less intensive therapy has come through. The women are young, so where they're at may mean they need wellbeing and psycho-educational support, rather than more intensive therapeutic support. But having skills in team to provide deeper work as and when young women are ready for it is so valuable. **Our model of longer-term support allows us to establish relationships with young women, and having established these relationships provides opportunity for real wrap-around support for women that is flexible.**"

Finally, one organisation reflected on how the values of a service should be reflected across the organisation

"It's about the importance of mixed settings providing gender specific services having feminist values/theory inherent in their approach and similarly these values should be reflected in a strong thread of equality across the board which recognise the complex differing layers of barriers faced by individuals from minority groups...which of course to be meaningful, has to be part of a culture of reflect, learn, do, repeat- at all levels within the organisation."

Partnerships

Organisations spoke positively about partnership working and how partnerships enable training needs to be identified and met, as well as improving service delivery, while not reinventing the wheel:

“We were able to share learning with [domestic violence charity] around the barriers young women experience which led to the organisation to restructure their service and referral pathways, which meant one of the young women was able to access the support on offer.”

“We received specialist LGBTQI+ training was delivered with the aims of increasing knowledge of transgender identities, experiences, and transition processes, developing awareness and understanding of the barriers and issues trans people face, gaining knowledge and feeling more confident about working with and supporting trans people and families. This training was important as a young person with the project expressed their wish to transition from female to male and was still being supported through the project although subsequently decided to engage with support with the wider team instead.”

“The partnership enabling joined up working and steps towards systems change. Through joint working, there was an increase in knowledge and understanding that enabled work together towards shared. Specifically, the partnership led to better collaboration and the use of existing model. **All partners learnt new ways of working that will enhance their organisation in the future.**”

Organisations also highlighted the value in working in partnership with colleagues internally, and how this facilitated a more holistic approach to supporting young women:

“We were able to take a more holistic approach to support and reduce the amount of different agencies involved. Working closely with colleagues who specialise in mental health enabled quality, wrap-around support to be provided without the need for another, different worker to engage directly with the young women.”

Challenges

Organisations spoke about the positive learning experience from delivering gender informed support to young women. They did however raise a few challenges when developing this support.

Organisations highlighted young women often need support to continue for longer than it is available. They spoke about the detrimental effects of young women transitioning out of a service before they are ready:

“The process of achieving ‘good’ transitions has been challenging as some young women did not feel ready to end their relationship with the Wellbeing Coach and would have benefitted from being able to continue this support for longer”

As discussed above young women's readiness to engage with support largely relates to whether they have a relationship with, and trust, staff. The amount of time it will take to build this trust will vary from person to person, and this needs to be acknowledged when planning and designing services/support interventions, including the length of time they can be delivered for.

Finally, organisations highlighted the operational challenges of managing women-only spaces within mixed-sex accommodation projects. This was particularly the case for organisations working with young women who were experiencing multiple disadvantage who often came into conflict with one another. Organisations told us that this was challenging as usually they would manage conflict by separating residents, moving them into different rooms within the accommodation project, however this was not possible without moving young women into mixed-sex areas.

Reflections

This briefing summarises some of the learning on young women's experiences from our Ending Women's Homelessness Grants programme. Our conversations particularly highlighted the need for age-informed, gender-informed and intersectional approaches to women under 25 experiencing homelessness and the need for greater awareness and better responses to young women experiencing VAWG. Below we summarise our key reflections.

Services design was highlighted as a way to break down barriers to support. Organisations highlighted that less intensive support delivered in-house such as coaching was particularly valuable.

Meaningful relationships between staff and young women particularly affected the quality of support provided; organisations highlighted how small caseloads positively impacted staff's ability to form meaningful relationships.

Investing in staff, through providing meaningful reflective spaces, support and development opportunities was seen as integral to delivering effective support for young women.

Specialist and or champion roles were highlighted as particularly effective ways to support young women and develop organisation-wide awareness, confidence and skills when supporting young women.

Building partnerships across the women's sector and the homelessness sectors was an important way to share learning, identify shared values and provide holistic support.

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.

Homeless Link

Minorities House
2-5 Minorities
London
EC3N 1BJ

www.homeless.org.uk
@HomelessLink

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