



A Strategy for Ending Women's Homelessness in London



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A call to action

The Government has committed to ending rough sleeping by 2024. This cannot be achieved without addressing the needs and circumstances of women experiencing homelessness and rough sleeping. We need to improve provision for women as a matter of urgency.

In the words of the Government's current rough sleeping strategy:

“...we often know less about [women] and their needs than we do about men who sleep rough.”

MHCLG rough sleeping strategy 2018

Our strategy for women's homelessness aims to begin to change this so that women's needs are understood and supported.

We strongly believe that the answers exist and are in many cases being demonstrated by expert but small-scale projects pushing for innovation. With commitment to and an understanding of women's homelessness, we believe that together we can make an immediate difference to women in London, ultimately end women's homelessness, and reach the goal of ending homelessness for everyone.

What is the strategy seeking to do?

This strategy aims to highlight the crisis of women's homelessness and propose solutions, focusing on working collaboratively and with innovation and best practice to end homelessness for women.

There is a growing recognition of the specific difficulties facing women experiencing homelessness whose needs aren't being met by current homelessness provision and approaches.

Women are remaining homeless for much longer than necessary, are facing increasingly high and long-term needs and remain in dangerous and crisis situations - all the while experiencing compounding trauma and finding it harder and harder to exit homelessness.

This strategy details solutions to meet the gaps in provision for women in London so we can begin to address this crisis.



Who is this strategy aiming to support?

Women's homelessness is far reaching, making up the majority of all homelessness when taking into account families in temporary accommodation, sofa surfing, rough sleeping and 'hidden' forms of homelessness.

Due to this wide range of experiences, this strategy is focusing on those most underserved and falling between the gaps in services. This

strategy describes women in this group as lone women facing multiple disadvantage and experiencing or at very high risk of rough sleeping (often experiencing what is referred to as 'hidden' homelessness).

These are women who have been repeatedly failed by systems, pushing them into highly precarious and dangerous housing situations and resulting in

the development of high levels of need, termed as multiple disadvantage or 'complex needs'. Women facing multiple disadvantage may have difficulties with mental health, substance use, violence against women and girls (VAWG), removal of children from their care and involvement with the criminal justice system, as well as homelessness. These difficulties may be a cause or consequence of homelessness, or both. Lone women may have children not currently in their care and may be in relationships.

Women's experiences of rough sleeping differ from men's and are often not captured in either statutory homelessness figures or rough sleeping figures. Many women experience 'hidden homelessness', a term that perhaps doesn't recognise that existing systems do not reflect their experience, putting the onus on women to be more visible and therefore in danger. Experiences of 'hidden' homelessness can include less visible street-based homelessness or rough sleeping, or very dangerous and precarious situations which women may resort to in order to avoid visibly rough sleeping.

This can include 'survival sex' (sex which could be exchanged for accommodation), walking and being continuously on the move through the night, using night buses or 24 hour outlets, disguising themselves as men or finding concealed rough sleeping spaces and sex working (often at night and therefore not visibly rough sleeping). Some of these dangerous situations can involve coercion, and women may stay with or return to abusive partners in order to avoid dangers of rough sleeping. Many of these situations can be as dangerous as rough sleeping but go unseen and unsupported.

Women in this group face very high access barriers to all services. This includes VAWG services, which are typically set up to support those with lower levels of need, and housing and homelessness services which are often male oriented environments. Lone women facing multiple disadvantage are a group experiencing high levels of need and very high risk, but are falling through the gaps between services.

What is this strategy based on?

The Women's Development Unit has been working for the past year with a wide range of stakeholders across London to understand the barriers faced by women and the services supporting them. We have conducted interviews, surveys, focus groups, and been supported by a strategic advisory group throughout this project. We have also examined the vast wealth of existing research

and best practice on what needs to change for women. More information on methodology and our evidence base can be found in our Evidence Report.



Who is this strategy for?

This strategy is aimed at those who can make change at a national level and across London, from national and regional policy makers to local authority commissioners and service providers. It aims to set out a range of actions to be taken at a variety of levels including by national policy makers, commissioners and service delivery organisations, and highlight a number of the key systemic barriers which need to be overcome to support women. We encourage those reading to do so with an enquiring view of which of the

following recommendations could be actioned by your team or department in the short term and the long term, and how these apply to your local situation.

In the long term, we hope to see a specific focus on women in national, regional and local strategies for homelessness and rough sleeping, with additional strategies on women's homelessness at these levels to take on the specific actions outlined in this strategy.

What does the strategy focus on?

Paralleling the structure of the Government's rough sleeping strategy, this strategy divides actions into Prevention, Intervention and Recovery categories.

Prevention: supporting women already in precarious, dangerous and crisis situations to avoid entering or returning to homelessness.

Intervention: supporting women to stabilise and access support and accommodation in order to be safe and begin to exit homelessness.

Recovery: supporting women to recover from homelessness and its traumatic impact in the long-term, being able to maintain stability, sustain accommodation and exit cycles of homelessness for good.

This strategy is accompanied by our Evidence Report, outlining why these steps are necessary.

Repeated themes

There are fundamental and recurring themes throughout this strategy as they apply to most areas of addressing women's homelessness. These are as follows:

- From strategies to language to support, we need an approach which is informed by gender and intersectional understanding.
- We need to improve data collection on women's homelessness.
- Services for women need to be made safe, suitable and readily available.
- At every step, we should consider and employ co-production.
- Without an increase in accommodation across the board, we can only do so much.



Overarching points necessary for ending women's homelessness

While there is an extensive and growing body of research into women's homelessness and there are examples of small-scale good practice, women's homelessness has yet to be tackled with a strategic approach. There are individual actions we can take from prevention to recovery, but to

succeed in ending women's homelessness (and homelessness overall), there are key broader points that must be addressed, including tackling some systemic barriers.

A comprehensive gender-informed approach

Women experience homelessness differently which significantly impacts women's routes to homelessness, needs, access to support and the collection of data. However, this largely goes unrecognised and is even more widely unaddressed. To end homelessness for everyone, we need to start acknowledging and meeting the specific needs of women, and we require a comprehensive gender-informed approach to do so. An intersectional understanding of gender and women's experiences is fundamental to this approach.

Strategies, policies and priorities must become gender informed, specifically and comprehensively addressing the needs and experiences of women.

- Ensure that women's homelessness becomes an urgent priority; develop women's homelessness strategies at national, pan-London and local authority level; and ensure that new and renewed strategies become gender informed.
- New and existing strategies should widen definitions of homelessness terms to encompass the 'hidden' experiences of women, and avoid focusing on terms such as rough sleeping and single homelessness which can miss the experiences of women and prevent strategies from being effective for them.
- National, pan-London and local authority homelessness strategies should coordinate with areas such as VAWG, health, social care and criminal justice so that they can play a joined-up role in prevention of women's homelessness and outline steps to address it.
- As a minimum or as part of co-production, undertake gender-informed walkthroughs (as recommended by Fulfilling Lives) and gender impact assessments of strategies, services and policies with women with lived experience and experts on gender-informed working to better understand the gaps.
- When conducting regular homelessness reviews and formulating strategies, housing authorities should ensure support addresses the needs of women (in accordance with the

Homelessness Code of Guidance).¹ This should include a comprehensive review of support delivered directly by housing authorities.

- The Homelessness Code of Guidance on conducting homelessness reviews and writing strategies (Chapter 2) should specifically include meeting the needs of women (with an intersectional understanding), to support housing authorities to meet this need.



Partnership working with intersecting sectors:

Homelessness cannot be ended through the work of housing and homelessness sectors alone, particularly due to the intersecting needs of women and support required for prevention, long-term recovery and ending cycles of homelessness. Increased partnership working can also support upskilling between sectors and widespread improved practices in working with women.

Interwoven policies, strategies and data collection methods, leading to combined initiatives in service provision.

- Develop and expand cross-sector strategic groups, creating joint strategies and policies to address women's homelessness. This could be between VAWG, health, social care and criminal justice agencies, at regional and local authority level and between local organisations.
- Partnership working to improve data collection on homelessness, particularly between VAWG and homelessness sectors, led by regional bodies and local authorities.
- Better integration across VAWG and homelessness, for example joint strategic actions for prevention and intervention, increased partnership working, joint commissioning and shared local forums. Strategic funding of partnerships is important for effective joint working.
- The new Domestic Abuse Act, particularly Part 4 duties for local authorities, offers an opportunity to better link VAWG and homelessness work and ensure domestic abuse provision works better for women with multiple disadvantage. A high-level VAWG and homelessness coordination role or team for London could support this.
- Develop women's spaces in every local authority with multi-agency teams including specialist staff and regular drop-in sessions from a range of sectors and services.
- Encourage partnership work to allow for multi-agency service provision, co-located staff (for example VAWG specialists in homelessness services and vice versa) and multi-agency forums to address high-risk cases of women experiencing multiple disadvantage and sexual violence.
- Develop partnership working on women leaving prison into homelessness, increasing understanding and adequate service provision for this group. With many women leaving prison into homelessness, this is a vital opportunity for prevention. Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison initiative has produced key recommendations for improving this work, and there are excellent examples of small-scale support programmes.²

Disaggregated data collection and gender-informed understanding of homelessness:

Prevalent narratives around homelessness and particularly rough sleeping tell us it is predominantly a male experience. However, data isn't capturing the experiences of women. Homelessness provision corresponds to this narrative and existing data, yet it is presumed to be broadly gender-neutral and therefore meeting the needs of everyone. Data collection on street-based homelessness is rarely disaggregated by gender and is collected through practices which focus on the male experience of rough sleeping. As a result, the proportion of women who are homeless is underrepresented, underestimated and therefore underserved.

Gender-informed data collection to provide a more accurate and nuanced picture of women's homelessness, better informing prevention, funding and service provision.

- Ensure all homelessness data is disaggregated by sex and ethnicity and improve gender-informed collection of data and analysis to aid understanding of the causes, patterns and means of prevention of women's homelessness. More accurate and comprehensive data on the homelessness experiences of Black and minoritised women is required to help address overrepresentation amongst those experiencing homelessness.

- Implement gender-informed collection practices including developing outreach sessions informed by an understanding of how and where women experience homelessness and when they may be more street visible. These should be conducted with connected services such as mental health and VAWG services.
- Increase sources of data to reflect different routes into and help understand the extent of homelessness among women who do not access homelessness services, with a particular focus on women primarily accessing VAWG rather than housing and homelessness services.
- Reduce reliance on verification data from CHAIN (a multi-agency database recording information about people sleeping rough in London) as a method of understanding the full picture of need as it does not accurately capture the experiences of women who experience street-based homelessness. CHAIN verification should be removed as a gateway to accommodation services for women as it creates additional access barriers and spaces reserved for women are under-utilised. Where CHAIN remains in use, data collection processes and street counts must become gender informed.



An intersectional understanding of women's homelessness:

Intersectionality is “the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalised individuals or groups”.³

Women experiencing homelessness are not a homogenous group and have a wide range of backgrounds and experiences which impact

routes into homelessness and access to support. Stigma and discrimination common to those experiencing homelessness is compounded through experiences of misogyny, racism, Islamophobia, homophobia and many other forms of discrimination, whether from the general public, family and communities, or even support services. We don't yet have a comprehensive understanding or data picture of these needs and experiences, despite knowing that, for example,

Black and minoritised women are overrepresented within homelessness figures, the proportion of young women becoming homeless is growing, and disabled women face significant and unaddressed access barriers.

Comprehensive understanding, support and provision to meet the intersectional needs and experiences of women.

Actions to improve intersectional working and understanding include:

- Examination of access barriers through an intersectional lens, with steps to reduce these at every level from policy makers to service providers. Women with intersecting characteristics face access barriers in addition to those experienced due to being women, such as physical and language barriers, for example for Deaf women, and barriers created by lack of safety, including feeling unrepresented, unwelcome and not understood in services.
- Greater collaboration with organisations supporting Black and minoritised women, older women, disabled women, LGBTQ+ women and young women (known as led 'by and for' organisations) and increased specialist provision. This support can be improved through partnerships and co-locations with specialist services, in-house workers and increased financial support for led 'by and for' services.
- Greater collaboration with services supporting women who are sex working. Women who are sex working are a highly excluded, unrecognised and unsupported group, facing

judgement and stigma which create significant barriers to support.⁴

- Training to upskill whole organisations in delivering intersectional support. Those working with women experiencing homelessness should receive training on cultural competency, VAWG, multiple disadvantage, working with LGBTQ+ women, and understanding needs of women who are sex working or sexually exploited.
- Improved research, data disaggregation and collection for better understanding of the whole picture of women's homelessness, particularly in poorly documented areas, including the experiences of trans women, Black and minoritised women and the growing proportion of young women.
- Co-production within strategic work, commissioning, policy writing and service design to include the voices of those with lived experience, producing well-informed provision which meets the needs of everyone.





Prevention

This section focuses primarily on immediate actions to help women avoid homelessness when they may be at great risk of it, and importantly, avoid ever having to rough sleep or resort to dangerous and precarious situations. This also includes actions which can help to prevent renewed cycles of homelessness for those at risk of relapse.

Women at risk of homelessness do not always access support through traditional housing and homelessness routes, often remaining unknown to services until after they have been homeless for an extended period and developed increased complexities of need. There is positive work which can be done to better understand routes into and key opportunities to prevent homelessness. Often this is about access to the right support at the right time.

Accurate, safe and accessible advice and support

Women experiencing homelessness can experience shocking levels of discrimination, disbelief and retraumatisation when they try to seek support, as well as inaccurate advice. Difficulties are acute for women seeking statutory homelessness support or housing transfers to flee dangerous situations, and women facing multiple disadvantage are particularly excluded. For Black and minoritised women, this is compounded further by racism as well as dangerous assumptions and lack of understanding of forms of gender-based violence. Similarly, young women face damaging assumptions when trying to resolve situations of violence or homelessness, and women who are sex working face high levels of stigma and lack of understanding about risk. This requires proactive and urgent culture change across services, particularly statutory housing services, to improve responses to women when seeking help. To address this completely, we need to acknowledge that gatekeeping practices are fuelled by pressure on services and lack of accommodation options, and are impacted by societal sexism and poor attitudes to those experiencing homelessness.

Whole organisational training, minimum standards and collaborative upskilling opportunities across services working closely with women experiencing homelessness.

- Increased application of gender and trauma-informed principles in service delivery and assessment processes, including empathic and flexible approaches. This could include development of gender and trauma-informed policies and protocols.
- Introduce specialist in-house VAWG and multiple disadvantage teams, workers and leads within services supporting women experiencing homelessness, including local authority housing departments. Encourage the co-location of specialist VAWG and multiple disadvantage workers and critical friend approaches to support skill-sharing, integration between services and reduction of system blockages.

- Develop and share best practice on gender-informed audits and toolkits. These should be based on gender-informed walkthroughs or gender impact assessments of services to help raise and develop consistent minimum standards.
- Implement whole organisational training on VAWG, multiple disadvantage and trauma-informed working for services working with women facing homelessness, including housing, health, social care and criminal justice services.
- When training and accreditations are commissioned for housing authorities and housing officers, it should be ensured these are gender informed.
- Develop close collaboration and strong referral pathways between statutory and non-statutory services to prevent clients falling through the gaps. Effective information sharing processes and communication (internally and externally) reduce trauma and increase engagement.
- Establish support for staff working with women experiencing homelessness, such as reflective practice, to avoid burn-out and secondary trauma which can contribute to poor standards of support to clients. Ensure funding sources can cover such support.



Women's safe drop-in spaces:

Women often feel unsafe in and avoid accessing male-dominated spaces such as mixed-sex homelessness services, creating severe barriers to accessing support. Women's routes into homelessness and support also differ from those typically taken by men. Women's safe spaces may be accessed for reasons such as fear of violence, or support with pregnancy or health, and these can support prevention work through providing a safe space to access support and advice prior to homelessness.

24-hour women's safe drop-in spaces with multi-agency support in every borough.

As part of their new women's homelessness strategy, each local authority should look to establish a women's safe space with the following attributes:

- An integrated multi-agency approach, specialist multiple disadvantage support workers and drop-in sessions from services such as VAWG, sex working services, health (including support for pregnant women), sexual health, mental health support, immigration advice, homelessness, statutory housing and substance use services.
- Some spaces should be standalone rather than based within housing or homelessness settings in order to respond to different routes to homelessness, enable earlier homelessness prevention and provide 24-hour and comprehensive support. These could be connected to community spaces, for example, and should be multi-agency.
- In addition, mixed-sex homelessness advice, drop-in and accommodation services should be supported to develop regular in-house women's spaces. (The Women's Development Unit has produced supporting guidance on this).⁵
- Unrestrictive and choice-based support for women, responding to their priorities and pace, with a primary focus on creating psychological and physical safety and working to more relationship-based outcomes around building trust.
- Access for women with no recourse to public funds and provision of specialist immigration

advice and support for migrant women, including victims of trafficking.

- Assertive gender-informed homelessness outreach could be connected to women's spaces, conducting sessions in conjunction with other services, focusing on locations more likely frequented by women, and times when women are more likely to be seen.
- Strong integration with single-sex emergency accommodation, including crisis out of hours placements: 24-hour spaces must not be a replacement for accommodation.
- Strong links with and training by led 'by and for' organisations to ensure improved understanding and specialist support for clients and staff. Language support should also be provided, particularly informed by local need.
- Proactive and accessible advertising in multiple formats, languages, locations and online.



Immediate access single-sex accommodation:

There is very limited existing immediate access single-sex accommodation and provision varies widely by borough, yet women report feeling unsafe in mixed-sex accommodation and are often at risk of violence and abuse. Immediate access options which can support women facing multiple disadvantage and higher needs are even more rare.

Enough single-sex emergency accommodation across London, able to meet low to high support needs and available for immediate access for women.

Key principles of emergency accommodation should include:

Wide referral access and pathways with reduced limitations on local connection, contact with homelessness services or CHAIN verification. Self-referral options for those without support. *(For example, as provided by refuges for women experiencing domestic abuse).*

Out of hours intake for crisis situations by staff with specialist VAWG and intersectional understanding. This should include an ability to support emergency transfers in the case of changing safety risks.

Accommodation should provide physical and psychological safety in a gender and trauma-informed environment.

Specialist VAWG support, particularly around immediate risk and safety, with understanding of intersecting experiences and cultural competency.

Access for those without recourse to public funds. Accessible, including in terms of disability, affordability, travel and access to language support.

Support for women with no recourse to public funds and complex immigration status:

Many visas allowing residence in the UK have 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) conditions attached, excluding their holders from accessing housing support and benefits. This can be a factor in causing and sustaining homelessness. Prevention isn't possible without responding to the full picture of homelessness, including provision of emergency accommodation for those without recourse, in order to prevent rough sleeping, disengagement from services, long-term homelessness and increased complexity of

need. In order to respond effectively, no recourse to public funds conditions should be lifted, but in the absence of this, there are steps that can be taken to support women at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

Increased access to emergency and long-term accommodation and support for women with no recourse to public funds.

- More accommodation for women without recourse to public funds, (in addition to refuge

provision). Accommodation should include language support and support with specialist understanding of intersectional and cultural experiences. This could be provided through specialist provision for migrant women and women with NRPF and/or through funded spaces within existing accommodation options.

- Funding provided for fully resourced immigration advice within led 'by and for' organisations and within women's spaces to provide high quality specialist advice with an understanding of VAWG.

- When commissioning services, ensure resources are included for specialist training to all those working with women experiencing homelessness on the support needs and VAWG experiences of migrant and trafficked women. This should include understanding of the use of immigration status as a form of abuse, discrimination and gatekeeping.
- Provide access to public funds, including benefits and public housing for all victims of gender-based violence and exploitation (as called for by Southall Black Sisters).

Specialist support and understanding for women who have children removed from their care:

There are well-established links between child removal, domestic abuse and homelessness. Following child removal, support can rapidly fall away and women may lose their housing. Women supported by homelessness advice and accommodation services are often mothers whose children aren't in their care, but aren't recognised as such. This is an unsupported need and cause of trauma and addressing this is key to homelessness prevention and recovery.

Specialist support and advocacy for mothers prior to and beyond removal of children from their care, and exploration of the recurring links between homelessness and child removal.

- Specialist programmes to provide support during and following child removal to help prevent homelessness and recurrent child removal. Support could be linked to accommodation and involve partnership working between sectors.
- Improved referral pathways and communication between children's social services, housing departments and homelessness support services following removal of children.
- Training on support around child removal for organisations working with women experiencing homelessness, and greater recognition of this as a cause of homelessness and a support need impacting recovery.

- Training and use of existing guidance and toolkits on supporting pregnant women who are experiencing homelessness (and multiple disadvantage) for homelessness and maternity services. Improved referral pathways and co-locations between both services.
- Improved referral pathways between homelessness services and services supporting child contact (where possible) to support long-term recovery.
- In-depth research into the impacts of child removal on women experiencing homelessness and steps which can be taken to reduce these causal links and trauma.





Intervention

Women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage are more likely than men to have higher and more complex levels of need. Inability to address and effectively support these needs ensures women remain homeless or endure repeated cycles of homelessness. Services must

specifically address the needs of women, must be made safer, and workers must be equipped to deliver support to women. Change is needed from commissioning to service delivery. There are numerous opportunities for positive change and organisations setting expert examples.

Safe, suitable and specialist single-sex accommodation:

Women feel unsafe in mixed-sex accommodation, but have access to very limited single-sex options. Where single-sex options exist, they are usually required to cater to a wide range of needs, impacting support and hindering progress for those in later stages of recovery. It is vital to increase the provision of single-sex accommodation and ensure all women can be offered this as an option as a minimum standard. Women may also turn down mixed-sex accommodation due to safety concerns, meaning they remain homeless or are deemed to be refusing support and disengaging. Accommodation must be suitable for each woman's level of need to effectively enable stabilisation before they can begin their recovery journey out of homelessness.

An adequate range of suitable and safe single-sex accommodation options which are appropriate for level of need and stage of recovery.

- Accommodation for every stage of recovery. This includes immediate crisis provision, short and long-term supported accommodation, second-stage and move on accommodation. Supported accommodation could include emergency bed spaces with 24-hour intake to support crisis provision.

- A range of single-sex accommodation options to meet different levels of need. This can allow for movement between accommodation services and form a pathway for women as they decrease or increase dependence.
- Safe and suitable accommodation for high level of need, providing intensive multi-agency support using gender and trauma-informed approaches.
- All accommodation supporting women should include specialist support around VAWG. Accommodation should provide psychological safety through a trauma-informed environment and provision of in-house or integrated psychological support is highly beneficial.
- Specialist support for areas of particular need should be provided, including specialist staff or close links with led 'by and for' services supporting Black and minoritised women, migrant women, women who identify as LGBTQ+ and women who are sex working. Services must be proactively inclusive and safe for trans women.
- Detail on attributes of safe and suitable accommodation can be found in Appendix B.

Improving mixed-sex accommodation:

Many women do not feel safe in mixed-sex accommodation as they are often male-dominated. Women experience a lack of specialist understanding, are at risk of violence and abuse, and sex workers can feel targeted, a particular risk as women may be pushed into sex working and survival sex because of homelessness. Offering specialist single-sex options in the first instance is crucial and increased provision of this is a vital priority, but some women prefer to be in mixed-sex environments and this option must therefore be made safe.

Mixed-sex accommodation must become safer and better able to support women as an urgent priority.

- Existing mixed-sex accommodation should be made safe and gender informed with resources and support to do so, including whole service VAWG training, gender-informed walkthroughs, supportive audit tools, specialist VAWG and multiple disadvantage workers and co-locations.
- Funding pots should be made available for services to apply for resources to support gender-informed improvements, supporting Government aims to end homelessness for everyone.
- Safety and suitability of placements within mixed-sex accommodation should be consistently assessed based on known risk of e.g. abuse to women (as practiced by experienced providers). Incidents and risk must be addressed through solutions that do not solely rest on moving women to alternative accommodation, refocusing attention on perpetrators.
- All mixed-sex accommodation should have ring-fenced spaces for women. Services should have wider referral pathways (including via VAWG services) limited restrictions based on local connection and CHAIN, and increased time for move-in to improve access for women with multiple disadvantage.
- Risks and incidents in unsupported mixed-sex accommodation, for example local authority interim accommodation, must be urgently addressed for improvements to safety, security and suitability of placements.
- Detail on how mixed-sex services can be supported to become more gender informed can be found in Appendix B.



Couple's pathways

Women experiencing homelessness can be in complex, dependent and sometimes abusive relationships which may also provide a form of protection and be self-identified as the least bad option. Relationships among homeless couples are also frequently invalidated, assuming women are in danger and want to leave. Homelessness pathways which do not account for women in relationships, whether unsafe or not, mean that women may be unable to accept accommodation options safely or at all, prolonging homelessness and abuse.

Safe couples' pathways which include accommodation, specialist support, guidance and training.

- Appropriate accommodation options in which providers are equipped to safely support couples. This is likely to be within existing mixed-sex supported accommodation where couples should be allocated a room and separate support workers to provide

individualised support and navigate any conflicts of interest, for example where VAWG is occurring within a relationship. In such cases, it is particularly important that specialist VAWG or perpetrator support is provided for each party.

- When commissioning services, ensure funding includes resources for training on working with couples (including LGBTQ+ couples), perpetrators and domestic abuse for services supporting women experiencing homelessness. Commissioners and services should refer to and disseminate existing guidance and toolkits such as the Homeless Couples and Relationships Toolkit.⁶
- Develop protocols, local agreements and regular multi-agency forums to share risk and responsibility and support accommodation providers. Improve data collection on relationship status.

Wraparound and multi-agency trauma-informed support

Women experiencing homelessness can have a range of needs which require the support of many different agencies. Breakdown of communication and coordination between agencies reduces trust, increases chances of disengagement and can retraumatise women due to the need to repeatedly retell their stories. Women with multiple disadvantage also face discrimination and exclusion from services, requiring specialist advocacy to ensure they receive support as well as assistance in navigating services and processes. Complicated journeys, high levels of need and length of recovery time also require support that is consistent and long-term.

Specialist wraparound and multi-agency support available in every borough for women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage.

- Extend, expand and replicate small-scale specialist projects which provide highly effective intensive wraparound support and successful multi-agency working.
- Specialist women's multiple disadvantage workers or navigators providing long-

term wraparound support independent from accommodation. This support should follow women as they move through services, ensuring consistency throughout accommodation changes and supporting long-term relationship building and engagement with services.

- Wraparound and multi-agency projects providing comprehensive, gender and trauma-informed support based on the client's pace and choice. These may come in different shapes and sizes, but key principles are detailed in Appendix E.
- Multi-agency forums for complex and high-risk cases of women experiencing multiple disadvantage, and multi-agency forums on sexual violence, exploitation or trafficking. Existing set-ups such as MARAC should include multiple disadvantage advocates as standard.
- Shared referral processes across local agencies to aid collaborative working and reduce barriers to access.

Gender-informed outcomes

Services supporting women experiencing homelessness are predominantly designed with men in mind as their primary user. Even where women-only services exist, they are often created in a traditional model without recognition that women's experiences differ and women are likely to respond better to gender-informed approaches and goals. For example, relationship-based

models focused on building trust and engagement are particularly important for women due to experiences of trauma and repeated breakdown in trust with services. Many existing outcomes miss signifiers of progress that can be the most meaningful for clients, meaning the impact of the service is not truly reflected and the service isn't fully supported in the nuances of its work.

Gender-informed outcomes for services supporting women experiencing homelessness.

- Gender-informed outcomes which are specific to women's needs and allow services to work effectively with women towards positive long-term housing and recovery. Considerations for and examples of gender-informed outcomes can be found in Appendix C.
- A combination of outcome types within a gender and trauma-informed approach, recognising that "softer" outcomes, which include relationship-building outcomes, are crucial to successfully and sustainably achieving long-term outcomes.
- Gender-informed outcomes should have a measure of flexibility in response to the needs, pace and priorities of individuals.
- Complementary gender-informed working practices, including smaller caseloads, sufficient support, training and specialist staff, longer timeframes and working at the client's pace with client-led practices.
- Commissioners to support the use of gender-informed outcomes by recognising and encouraging them as positive practice (particularly in new women-specific services) and adapting application processes to allow better explanation of the impact of different types of outcomes.



Gender-informed commissioning

Women's homelessness is largely unrecognised as a specific need with different causes, experiences and recovery journeys, meaning existing provision does not account for or meet women's needs. Likewise, commissioning practices based on existing and more traditional provision can restrict the development of services better suited to supporting women. Gender-informed commissioning practices can help to ensure and promote equality of service and safe, gender informed and effective support.

Gender-informed commissioning requirements, procurement processes and funding models to address the gaps in provision for women.

- Commit resources to services which can effectively support women, including ring-fencing funding.
- Gender-informed requirements in tenders, based on gender-informed practices (see Appendix A). Support re-commissioned services to improve gender-informed practices.
- Look for evidence of gender-informed practices in received bids and applications, using examples as detailed in Appendix A.
- Add criteria to procurement processes for positive scoring of inclusion of gender-informed practices. Provide opportunities for exploration and negotiation of projects prior to decision making, accounting for innovative projects which may not fit into traditional application structures.
- Develop systems and networks which enable swift consultation and co-production with women with lived experience.
- Cross-borough or pan-London commissioning and exchanges to reduce local connection restrictions and allow for consistency of support when women need to relocate for safety.
- Further considerations for gender-informed commissioning can be found Appendix D.





Recovery

Women experiencing homelessness should be able to look forward to and achieve recovery, allowing them to live full and independent lives. However, women face a lack of move-on accommodation and that which exists is often inappropriate and has significant barriers to access. These include safety concerns, pathways centred around the male experience (such as a focus on homelessness outreach and CHAIN verification) and lack of support. Women are therefore set up to fail in accommodation which may be unsafe and unmanageable for them: with inappropriate accommodation and support, risk of returning to homelessness is high. Alternatively, they have to remain in accommodation which no longer suits them, and in turn, this

accommodation is limited in the new referrals it can accept. Furthermore, women's recovery journeys are hindered due to lack of appropriate and specialist support for their needs. The high risk of 'cuckooing' or tenancy hijacking for women moving into new accommodation is also often unsupported.

We must also have a greater acknowledgement of the difficulty of recovery, the emotional toil this takes, and that many people will face relapse which can cause shame. Recovery is rarely a linear journey and support services must allow for this without judgement. Where this isn't recognised, lack of understanding may lead to exclusion and disengagement as women feel repeatedly rejected.

Second-stage and move on accommodation and support

There is a limited supply of safe and suitable second-stage and move on accommodation to meet the varying needs of women experiencing homelessness. Many women will require a form of support for a long time or even indefinitely, but there are limited options, reducing turnover in first-stage supported accommodation, increasing dependence on services and hindering recovery.

Enough suitable, safe and supported second-stage and move on accommodation to meet the range of needs of women recovering from homelessness.

- Ring-fence safe accommodation options for women to enable appropriate move on from high support accommodation and remove requirements for CHAIN numbers and verification to access.
- Increase number of second-stage and move on options specifically for women, and expand and replicate existing supported models, including floating support in dispersed properties or small clusters of properties for those with higher needs.
- Ensure that move on schemes have rents set at the London Affordable Rent levels as existing projects have challenges around affordability, particularly when provided at Local Housing Allowance levels which have decreased in real terms.
- Specialist support at the level required, ranging from regular telephone support to assertive floating support, intensive one-to-one support and accommodation-based support.
- Expand and develop models which enable women fleeing violence to maintain tenancies through coordinated transfers, for example the Pan London Housing Reciprocal. This provides for women experiencing multiple disadvantage and could include support.
- Accommodation should provide physical and psychological safety through trauma-informed environments and approaches. Accommodation should be gender informed, including the principles detailed in Appendix B.
- Accommodation should be accessible and suitable in terms of affordability, longevity, location, suitable for child contact, and suitable for couples moving on together.
- Provision of consistent, fully resourced and tailored resettlement packages to ensure women regaining independence are set up to succeed, helping to end cycles of homelessness. This should include practical support and resources for setting up a new home, including when 'moving on' from move on projects which can last for two to three years.



Mental health support

Women experiencing homelessness are identified as having more severe mental health needs which often go unsupported for many years. They are also likely to have experienced specific forms of trauma, including a range of gender-based violence and trauma of child removal, compounded by the trauma that homelessness and rough sleeping brings in itself. Women may also avoid accessing mental health support due to stigma around mental health in general as well as around particular diagnoses such as personality disorder. Stigma may be particularly prevalent within personal networks and communities.

Improved pathways and partnerships to support access to and engagement with mental health services for women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage.

- Improve understanding within mental health and statutory housing services of the mental health needs of women experiencing homelessness. This should include an intersectional and culturally informed understanding of the range of barriers to accessing mental health support faced by women. Lack of understanding of trauma responses also increases rates of exclusion from services and flexibility around engagement with mental health support should be increased to reflect this.
- Links to and expansion of specialist therapeutic support which can meet women-specific needs, including access to support in their first language, from a female therapist, and therapists with an expert and cultural understanding of VAWG, its impacts and risks.
- Support and expand programmes providing dual diagnosis support for those with severe mental health needs and active substance use, including services which understand the needs and experiences of women. Advocate for more flexible engagement with and access to mental health support for those often excluded due to substance use, particularly when positively engaging with substance use support services.
- A wider range of responses to meet mental health needs. This can co-locations and partnership programmes to bring mental health support with multiple disadvantage understanding to women via women's spaces, drop-in spaces, wraparound services, accommodation and gender-informed outreach sessions, based on existing successful models. An increase in residential (in-hostel) provision which is flexible in terms of engagement would be highly beneficial, particularly for supporting complex trauma.
- Promote and develop cross-borough/trust partnerships and pathways to ensure women needing to flee an area can continue to access support, or can transfer into a new trust without having to restart processes.

¹ "Housing authorities...when drawing up their homelessness strategies...must consider the needs of all groups of people in their district who are homeless or likely to become homeless." Homelessness Code of Guidance, 2.16.

² The Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prisons initiative has produced key recommendations and is developing a Women's Prison Release Protocol to support the release of women into safe accommodation. www.londonprisonsmission.org/safe-homes-for-women-leaving-prison

³ www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intersectionality

⁴ Basis Yorkshire and Homeless Link have produced a detailed report on the experiences of and recommendations for women who are sex working and experiencing homelessness. basisyorkshire.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/COVID-19-AND-WOMENS-HOMELESSNESS.pdf

⁵ The Women's Development Unit has produced guidance on setting up women's spaces within homelessness settings

⁶ www.mungos.org/publication/homeless-couples-and-relationships-toolkit/



Solace

Solace is a leading specialist charity in the UK supporting women and children experiencing domestic abuse and sexual violence. Whatever form violence comes in, from rape to trafficking to relationships based on psychological or financial control, we work to end it. We know that escaping the effects of violence can be the hardest thing to ever do. That's why the lifesaving support that Solace provides to more than 23,000 women, children and young people each year is so important.

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Solace Women's Aid is a charity registered in England & Wales. Charity number 1082450. Company number 3376716.

The Connection at St Martin's

The Connection at St Martin's works with people who are rough sleeping to move away from, and stay off, the streets of London. We're alongside people as they recover from life on the streets and move towards a meaningful, fulfilling future. We do this by tackling the underlying causes of rough sleeping as well as offering practical help and support to get into accommodation.

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