

Housing First for Women Experiencing VAWG Toolkit

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Standing Together is a domestic abuse charity based in London and since 2017 has been coordinating a Housing First pilot in London, which is for female rough sleepers who have experienced violence against women and girls.

Purpose of this toolkit

This toolkit is a reference guide for local authorities, housing providers and specialist domestic abuse services who are interested in setting up a Housing First project for women experiencing homelessness and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). It includes key considerations and practical resources for planning, implementation and monitoring quality and effectiveness of a Housing First project.

Background

This toolkit will focus specifically on the development and implementation of the Housing First model for women affected by any form of VAWG including domestic abuse, based on specific practice examples from the development of a service in the three London boroughs of Westminster, Kensington & Chelsea, and Hammersmith & Fulham.

This toolkit refers to 'women' rather than 'victim/survivors' as this service is for women only, and all the women supported have past or ongoing experiences of VAWG in recognition that they often experience multiple forms of gender-based violence. The Housing First model uses a holistic approach to address these experiences and needs.

What is Housing First?

Housing First is a housing and support approach which:

- Provides a stable home for people who have experienced homelessness and chronic health and social care needs so they can rebuild their lives,
- Provides intensive, person-centred, holistic support that is open-ended,
- Places no conditions on individuals; however, they should desire to have a tenancy.

The Housing First approach was first developed in New York and has now been widely adopted in the USA, Canada, Denmark, Finland and France. Since 2010, a growing number of local areas in England have established Housing First services to try and meet the needs of their homeless population. It is an evidence-based intervention that is proven to successfully support people with repeat histories of homelessness who experience multiple disadvantages, helping them into independent and stable accommodation. In the UK the majority of Housing First projects use scattered accommodation, meaning that clients live independently in private rented sector (PRS) or social housing in the community rather than in congregate, self-contained accommodation. The scaling up of Housing First has been widely recommended as part of a housing-led system that can help to end homelessness and the government has funded three demonstration pilots across England to expand and test the approach.ⁱ

Most Housing First services in England follow the seven Principles of Housing First (see resource 1), which were created by Homeless Link and York University. Research has shown that the effectiveness of the service is linked to how closely they adhere with these principles.ⁱⁱ

Why Housing First for women?

The majority of Housing First services across England are mixed gender, which is reflective of homelessness provision more widely. Homelessness data shows higher numbers of homeless men than women nationally, which has resulted in provision largely designed around men's needs. However, recent research has highlighted the methodological limitations in how data on homelessness is gathered, and that women are likely to be among the uncounted 'hidden' homeless populationⁱⁱⁱ. This is problematic as it means that most homelessness provision does not recognise women's gender specific needs, and results in them going largely unsupported.

The Housing First model is not immune to this trend, and many services tend to have a higher male caseload. However, many are working to implement and improve their gender informed practice and examples of best practice are starting to emerge; some areas are forming partnerships with local women's services to reach eligible women who tend to be less visible, or closing referrals to men for a period of time. Crucially, research has also highlighted how the Housing First model lends itself well to being adapted for certain groups, e.g. women.^{iv} There are now several women specific services across the country that have led the way in evidencing the distinct gender specific needs of the women they support.

A two-year evaluation of Threshold Housing Project's Housing First pilot for women with an offending history identified that most women using the service had experienced some form of domestic abuse.^v The management of domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG should therefore be a key function of any Housing First service supporting women: without ensuring women's safety and wellbeing in this way, a service cannot provide a sustainable end to their homelessness.

Research has shown that as well as domestic abuse, homeless women affected by multiple disadvantage experience a continuum of gendered violence and abuse.^{vi} Women are more likely than men to experience abuse from childhood and then repeatedly throughout their life. Trauma therefore accumulates as risk increases. Research has shown that women typically access services at a later stage than men and, by the time they do, their needs are high and they are often struggling with complex trauma.^{vii} Indeed, some studies have suggested that women experiencing long term and recurrent homelessness may have higher needs than men.^{viii}

The principles of Housing First dovetail with the key tenets of gender and trauma-informed support. In fact, Housing First has been identified as a good practice recommendation in a recent report exploring gendered approaches to supporting women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage. Housing First prioritises choice and control – women who have been routinely disempowered and abused by partners, services and the wider system are given the autonomy and agency to make decisions for themselves. Housing First support is intensive, flexible and open ended; it gives women the necessary time and space to consider their options, with the support of strong and trusting relationships with specialist workers who coordinate a multi-agency response around each woman.

Outline of the model

Building a Housing First Project

In 2017 Standing Together and Westminster City Council were awarded MHCLG funding for a Housing First and Homelessness Coordinator role. The Coordinator spent a year laying the groundwork for establishing a Housing First project for women who have experienced homelessness, any form of VAWG, and multiple disadvantage.

Further funding was secured for a partnership project between Westminster City Council, Solace Women's Aid and housing associations including Women's Pioneer Housing, L&Q, Peabody and Southern Housing. The partnership, known as the Westminster VAWG Housing First project, started taking referrals in Spring 2019 and was one of the first Housing First services in England to be delivered by a specialist domestic abuse support provider in the women's sector ([Solace Women's Aid](#)).

The Westminster VAWG Housing First project was a small pilot with the capacity to support 5 women with connections to the local authority of Westminster, and 5 women from other London boroughs.

Planning and Delivery

Identifying the need

Approximately 16% of all rough sleepers are women.^{ix} However, this may not reflect the actual figure as research has shown that women are much more likely to be among the hidden homeless, meaning that they are not accurately captured by current systems used for rough sleeping counts.^x

This group of women face additional barriers to accessing existing support structures for victim/survivors of domestic abuse. 'Many refuges are either unable to provide support to women experiencing multiple disadvantage or have limited capacity to do so. This leaves women experiencing multiple disadvantage who are homeless with very few women-specific safe options.'^{xi} Conversely, homelessness services often have little women-only provision and an overall lack of knowledge around women's experiences of violence and abuse, and what good gender informed support looks like.

When evidencing and identifying local need it is important to acknowledge the gaps in service provision and the barriers to accessing services for this cohort of women. Just because women aren't accessing or being referred to services, it doesn't mean they aren't there.

Finding sustainable funding

Housing First services are typically funded from various sources such as local authority budgets, trusts and foundations, and social impact bonds (SIBS). As Housing First is a model that aims to end long term and recurrent homelessness, support delivery has generally existed in the domain of charitable organisations that provide support around homelessness, or of housing associations that provide both support services and general needs accommodation. Ideally, every local authority budget would include funds for Housing First as part of its homelessness provision.

Partner agencies

Partner agencies can include the following:

- Specialist domestic abuse services who provide direct services and emotional support, a big part of which is building trusting relationships with women and providing practical support with maintaining a tenancy,
- Drug and alcohol service providers,
- Local statutory and non-statutory mental health services,
- Sexual health services,
- Local authority,

- Social housing providers and private landlords.

Project coordination and project management is also a key component. For the Westminster VAWG Housing First, this was provided by a dedicated Housing First Coordinator role based at STADV.

Sourcing housing and connecting with housing providers

Housing First projects across England utilise a range of different housing types. Each have their pros and cons and accessibility will vary according to local context.^{xii} In the London pilot, housing associations provided self-contained 1 bedroom units with a one-year starter tenancy and a view to providing a longer term, or in some cases life-time, tenancy on successful completion of the starter tenancy. This provides women with much needed stability and physical security, enabling them to build the emotional resilience needed in order to address their complex experiences of trauma.

In Westminster three large registered landlords, Peabody, Southern, L&Q, and a smaller local provider, Women's Pioneer Housing, provided housing for the pilot. The project team made use of excellent resources from [the Homeless Link Housing First England Project](#) to make the business case to the providers and were clear about the flexible approach they would need to take for Housing First to be successful, as well as the distinct gender-specific support needs of the women accessing the project.^{xiii} From the beginning of the pilot, the Housing First Coordinator and Solace Women's Aid met with all the providers together, which helped to foster a sense of partnership and made it easier to get consensus on key issues.

A service level partnership agreement (SLA) was developed collaboratively and was signed off by all providers. This meant that 100% of the accommodation offered to women was social housing, which is cheaper to rent than privately rented housing (an affordable rent rate at 80% of the average market rent) and usually provides a longer-term tenancy. As only 50% of Housing First projects across England have access to social housing with the rest mainly being privately rented housing, this is a great example of best practice in partnership.

Getting the right specialist domestic abuse support provider

The Housing First service delivery differs from how many specialist domestic abuse services operate and this can be challenging for some organisations to adopt. Therefore, when putting a tender together for a VAWG Housing First project there are some points that will need careful consideration:

- Quality domestic abuse service provision is key. This includes working with a specialist domestic abuse service that is accredited with one of the VAWG Sector Shared Core Standards. The specialist domestic abuse service must have a proven track record of delivering services to women experiencing VAWG who also have a range of complex needs

including homelessness, mental health, substance misuse and offending. Case studies are helpful in demonstrating a working understanding of the issues this group of women face.

- Research has shown that women experiencing multiple disadvantage are more likely to remain in a relationship with the perpetrator.^{xiv} Therefore, in order to fully support a woman in a Housing First context, workers may have to have some contact with the perpetrator. Although many specialist domestic abuse providers are unable to support women in these cases, any provider committed to delivering Housing First would need to demonstrate awareness around this issue and indicate how they would address it.
- Women should have choice over how they spend their time and the focus of the activities they undertake with their worker. Specialist providers should show that they are able to take a more holistic approach focused on a woman's needs, a 'whole woman' approach rather than a singular focus on risk from domestic abuse/VAWG.
- Housing First workers will need to hold smaller caseloads and adopt a flexible approach that is led by what the women want to be supported with. They may also work with women for a longer period than the average domestic abuse service currently does in order to adequately address the complex issues they face. They may also spend several hours a week with a woman, offering practical support and attending appointments in the community.
- Direct support to women includes meeting them at a venue of their choice, including their home, so a Home Visits policy will need to be created if it does not already exist.

What should the partnership agreement include?

The following items were included in the London pilot SLA and are recommended for inclusion in any similar projects:

- Specifying the roles and responsibilities of each partner agency and how the partnership will work collaboratively to support women and best meet their needs;
- Housing providers agreeing to take a more flexible approach in their interactions with women and adapt their existing policies and procedures. For example, being flexible with the number of nomination/accommodation offers per woman and with the time of day that viewings take place.
- Providers agreeing to give support with providing decoration and white goods, as most social rent flats are offered unfurnished.

- Agreeing a 'minimal' approach to information at the point of nomination (see nominations form), as well as the paperwork/number of meetings involved in a tenancy sign up.
- The project team committing to providing briefings to all local authority housing and partner housing association staff involved with the project around 'what to expect' from Housing First, and the needs of women affected by multiple disadvantage. This is important as it enables providers to have a better understanding of and empathy around the issues this group of women face and helps to remove barriers for accessing these services.

Deciding on aims, objectives and outcomes

In Housing First there are several key 'hard' outcomes but the model also requires a reconsideration of what positive change looks like for this cohort of women; change is slow and incremental, and outcomes need to reflect this.^{xv} Person-specific and soft outcomes are therefore key to capturing this kind of incremental change. Instead of focusing on standard or traditional measures of success, such as the woman ending the relationship with the perpetrator, outcomes for Housing First services working with women might look different and be more flexible.

The aims of the Westminster VAWG Housing First project are:

- To support women who are experiencing VAWG and multiple disadvantage, who are currently disengaged or not engaged well with existing services. This includes proactive and continuous engagement efforts made within reason;
- To support women to access good quality independent housing, and to maintain this housing as per the Housing First principles;
- To support women to reach an understanding of the abuse they have experienced, so that they are able to increase their safety and make informed choices;
- To coordinate support and navigate treatment pathways with other services to ensure women are robustly supported in the areas of housing, substance misuse, physical health care, mental health care, criminal justice engagement etc;
- To support women to improve their confidence and wellbeing and provide them with opportunities for personal development.

Examples of positive 'soft' or person-specific outcomes:

- Woman talking about her controlling (ex-)partner and disclosing abuse to their Housing First worker;
- Woman calling the police to request intervention or the removal of the perpetrator from her property;
- Woman calling the Housing First worker when she needs to talk, when she has never called any other keyworker before on her own initiative.

Recruiting staff

There is some really useful advice and information on the qualities, skills and experience needed to be a good Housing First worker available on the Housing First England [website](#). However, when recruiting staff for a women's service there are a few key points to consider:

Experience

Applicants can have experience working in either the homelessness or VAWG sectors.

If from the homelessness sector they should be able to demonstrate strong knowledge around domestic abuse and VAWG (e.g. they were the DA lead for their team) and give case examples.

If the applicant comes from a VAWG sector background, an IDVA qualification doesn't automatically mean that the person will be an effective Housing First worker. VAWG knowledge is important, but so is experience working with women affected by multiple disadvantage and homelessness and experience or an understanding of how to build trusting relationships with women where services have historically been unable to maintain engagement.

The post should be advertised and circulated through both homelessness and VAWG channels to reflect this.

Skills

Countless studies have argued the importance of trauma informed support when working with women affected by multiple disadvantage.^{xvi} It is widely acknowledged that trauma informed, and strengths-based approaches work best for this group of women. What is harder is pinning down what this looks like in practice, therefore pre-interview testing, role play, or asking for specific examples of this at interview stage is essential.

See an example job description and person specification for a women's Housing First Project worker in the resource section of the toolkit.

Identifying the cohort

Housing First England advocate that services should be primarily available to people experiencing 'chronic' homelessness and severe forms of multiple disadvantage. The Westminster VAWG Housing First project prioritises those who face the highest level of vulnerability and for whom other services are inaccessible. It cannot therefore be considered as an alternative to refuge, for example, as typically the needs of this cohort would be too high to access refuge support.

In order to be referred to the Westminster VAWG Housing First project, women must:

- 1) Be affected by any form of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG);
- 2) Be experiencing recurrent or long-term homelessness;
- 3) Have a history of non-engagement with services;
- 4) Have poor mental health and/or alcohol or substance misuse issues.

There are likely to be more women in the area who would fit the criteria than spaces available on the project, which makes it important to ensure that the referral process is thorough and fair. In Westminster, the project was not able to advertise the service and accept open referrals as demand would have been too great for the ten spaces available. This is where partnership working, in the form of a multi-agency panel or steering group, is vital. The process of partners coming together to make referral decisions promotes joint working and the development of a shared vision. Ideally the steering group should meet bi-monthly, if not quarterly.

Westminster City Council invited key homelessness services (outreach and supported accommodation) across the borough to identify women on their caseloads who met the above criteria. The project team then met with commissioners from WCC and service providers from the VAWG and homelessness sector to discuss each case and decide on a final cohort. A back-up list was also made, as it was not expected that every woman approached would be able to engage with the service.

Personalisation budgets

Individual personalisation budgets, which could be from a flexible funding pot, are often overlooked when budgets for Housing First services are put together but are crucial to service delivery. Building trust and relationships are at the heart of effective gender and trauma informed support and personal budgets underpin this process, making it smoother and easier. The budget can go towards everyday things: a chat with the Housing First worker over coffee and a piece of cake or buying items to decorate a new flat. In some cases, it will be needed to purchase electronic goods, new beds etc, or to aid meaningful engagement e.g. swimming lessons or gym membership. These budgets shouldn't be prescriptive, and clients should have control over how they are spent.

Staff induction and training

It is important that staff make key links and form relationships with partner services as soon as they come into post, therefore the induction period is vital and staff should be given lead in time to do this before taking on referrals. Please see the resources section for an example induction schedule for the workers on the Westminster VAWG Housing First project. For any VAWG Housing First the relationships between local homelessness and specialist domestic abuse providers will need particular focus.

In order to support women effectively staff need to have strong knowledge around the dynamics of VAWG, including not only domestic abuse and coercive control and its impact on victim/survivors, but also how this links to wider structural inequalities and forms of multiple disadvantage such as mental health, substance use, homelessness and poverty. Generic domestic abuse dynamics training is of course important, but ideally staff would have access to training that looks at these issues through the lens of multiple disadvantage and trauma. [AVA](#) and [My Sisters Place](#) offer respected training in this area.

How support is delivered is also crucial. Staff should be trained to understand how to undertake holistic and needs-led interventions which reflect the full breadth of life stressors affecting women. Staff should also have knowledge around the impact of trauma, what trauma-informed support looks like, and how to build on women's strengths and skills. Staff will also have to advocate for the clients they support with a wide range of partner agencies, therefore strong advocacy skills are also crucial. Homeless Link run a range of trainings on trauma-informed care and advocacy skills – find out more [here](#).

Clinical supervision

Women accessing Housing First services are likely to have very high support needs. Research has indicated that women with experiences of long term or recurrent homelessness may have higher support needs than men.^{xvii} This makes it essential for any organisation delivering the Housing First model to integrate trauma-informed approaches throughout their organisational structure, a key tenet of which is ensuring staff have access to good quality team or one-on-one clinical supervision.

The Westminster VAWG Housing First project workers have case supervision with their service manager once a month, as well as monthly clinical supervision sessions with a psychotherapist, and access to monthly reflective practice based at another Solace Women's Aid service. Clinical supervision is essential in helping Housing First workers to give the best possible support to their clients, whilst keeping themselves safe at the same time.

What support is provided and how should it be delivered?

The Housing First principles state that support should be flexible and provided for as long as is needed, and that individuals should have choice and control over the support they receive. The support provided by the Westminster VAWG Housing First service is woman-led and holistic. There is no 'set' service offer: support may be emotional or psychological; help to build or rebuild relationships, to access leisure, educational, social or voluntary activities; to manage the tenancy; to budget and claim benefits. Women can engage, dis-engage and engage again as their cases will not be closed, and a harm minimisation approach is used.

The Westminster VAWG Housing First uses an 'intensive case management' model, in which Housing First workers support women to access mainstream services. This requires strong partnerships at both the operational and strategic level, making both advocacy skills on the part of the worker, and the work of the steering group essential elements of any successful Housing First service.

Key considerations – A national initiative for Housing First for women

Alongside supporting the development of the Westminster VAWG Housing First project, a national group was set up and is co-facilitated by Standing Together with support from Homeless Link and the Housing First England project. The forum is attended by Housing First practitioners from across the country who are able to share some of the key challenges and successes of delivering Housing First for women. Three key areas of support have been identified through these forums, which practitioners feel need attention:

Engagement

Housing First practitioners have noted that homeless women experiencing multiple disadvantage are particularly difficult to engage. Negative past experiences with services and an ever-present perpetrator, or multiple perpetrators, can go some way to explain this. An active engagement approach is therefore vital; workers understand why a woman might decline support or push them away and need to be creative around how they engage that person. The Westminster VAWG Housing First project workers have shared what has worked well for them in terms of engaging women:

Meeting them where they are. Being flexible, 'if you are not ready now, we can come back later' and keeping coming back so they know we are there for them. Not making false promises and following through with what we promise.

being understanding, empathetic and non-judgemental, listening to them and working with them at their own pace, and of course being led by them in terms of what support they want from me

Managing Domestic abuse/VAWG

This needs consideration as many women are likely to continue relationships with perpetrators and remain at considerable risk of harm. Recommendations around the management of domestic abuse from the Housing First for women practice forum include:

Don't underestimate women's feelings of guilt and shame around their experiences of abuse. It may take a woman accessing a Housing First service a long time to open up to a worker, but if that worker regularly asks about abuse, and shows that they are open to talking about it, this will gradually open up a safe space for discussion. It's all about planting the seed!

Work with other agencies involved in the woman's support to help them understand her experience. Involve them in that woman's safety plan.

Accept that you cannot eliminate risk for this group of women. At times workers might have contact with the perpetrator in order to engage the woman. What measures need to be put in place to do this kind of work safely?

Children

Many victim/survivors accessing Housing First services will have children who have been removed from their care or have lost touch with adult children and other family members. Recommendations around supporting victim/survivors with children from the Housing First for women practice forum include:

- Ask the question - it is important to establish if the woman is a mother in the first instance,
- Consider housing needs in the context of children or potential contact with children,
- Use personalisation fund to support engagement with children if appropriate,
- Upskill staff to understand the basics around child protection processes,
- Upskill staff to talk about grief and offer emotional support to women whose children have been removed from their care.

Case Study from Solace Women's Aid

Background

BT is an extremely vulnerable woman who has been affected by multiple disadvantage for many years. She is 30 years old and has experienced trauma throughout her life. She was using crack on referral to the service. She has a daughter who was taken into Care. BT was herself a Care Leaver.

BT was referred to the Westminster Housing First Project by the Street Engagement Team at a central London homelessness service; she had been rough sleeping in central London for approximately one year. Prior to this, BT lived in a homeless hostel for 2 years; she was forced to flee due to the physical and emotional abuse, rape and sexual exploitation she experienced from her then partner.

He was aware that BT had fled the borough to escape him and would occasionally visit central London in an effort to find her sleep site.

Work completed and outcomes achieved since BT started to engage with the Housing First Westminster Project.

When BT joined the Housing First Project she had no stable income; the only money she had was obtained via begging on Underground trains and outside stations. She had never had a bank account, and was not registered with a GP. Her drug use was high and she was not on a Methadone Script.

In the first 3 months of working with her, we successfully set up her Universal Credit claim and helped her open a bank account. We also helped her to sign up with the Scripting Clinic at a Day Centre. BT also registered at a GP surgery.

BT was the first Westminster Housing First client to move into self-contained accommodation. She has been really enthusiastic about furnishing and decorating her flat – this is the first time she has had a home of her own.

Currently, BT is managing her home with help from her HF Support Worker particularly around paying bills and budgeting. She was supported to pay the first month's rent as soon as she received her Benefits, as she acknowledged her budgeting difficulties. She attended her last Job Centre appointment on her own and procured the required sick note. BT now uses online and telephone banking – she manages her UC Claim online. In addition, BT has transferred her script from the drop-in clinic to her GP surgery as the latter is closer to her new home.

BT is on the journey to recovery and independence; she is building a new safer life with support and encouragement. She looks better and says she is feeling better, more in control of her life and more positive about the future.

Resources

- [Housing First England - Housing First Principles](#)
- [Example PowerPoint presentation – the ‘sell’ to housing providers.](#)
- [Housing First SLA.](#)
- [Nominations form.](#)
- [Example Job description and person specification.](#)
- [Housing First worker induction schedule.](#)

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