

Executive Summary

“I became homeless because I got pregnant at 14, Mum threw me out and after that I got married. My husband raped me and beat me up. So I ran to London to escape him and have been on the streets ever since.” St Mungo’s client

Rebuilding Shattered Lives

Women who are homeless are among the most marginalised people in society.

Sadly, women’s homelessness often occurs after prolonged experiences of trauma, including physical, sexual and emotional abuse, frequently within the home. It often follows from and results in a cycle of mental ill health and substance use, and a myriad of other problems. Many homeless women are left grieving for lost childhoods and lost children, and the impact is felt across generations.

These women’s histories are full of missed opportunities to get the right help at the right time.

Working with a growing number of women, St Mungo’s has realised just how much women’s needs differ from those of men. We have also seen how women tend to do less well in support services which predominantly work with and are designed for men. With Rebuilding Shattered Lives we set out to change this.

“There is much good practice out there which warrants sharing more widely but we also need new approaches which fit the realities of women’s lives today. Our showcase is intended to be a crucible for new ideas which energise policy and good practice.” Charles Fraser, Chief Executive, St Mungo’s

Rebuilding Shattered Lives brought together different sectors all working with women who are homeless to share understanding of the particular experiences and challenges women face. We explored how organisations in different sectors are working with women to overcome these challenges, and how we can ensure women do get **the right help, at the right time.**

Drawing on the expertise of a panel of advisors we invited individuals, services and organisations to submit their experiences, ideas and research across nine themes.

Many thanks to everyone who contributed to *Rebuilding Shattered Lives*, especially to the women who shared their personal stories. We are also very grateful to the support of our expert group who have helped shape our ten key recommendations.

Women’s homelessness: why should we be concerned?

Homelessness is a growing problem in the UK. Government figures show that the number of people accepted as homeless grew 10% between 2011 and 2012,¹ and the number of people recorded sleeping rough has risen by 37% since 2010.²

Women make up 26% of people who accessed homelessness services in 2013, using approximately 10,000 bed spaces across the UK.³ 786 women were recorded sleeping rough in London in 2012/13, 12% of the total number.⁴ We believe many more women are ‘hidden homeless’, living outside mainstream support.⁵

¹ DCLG Live Tables on Homelessness Table 770: decisions taken by local authorities under the 1996 Housing Act on applications from eligible households <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness>

² DCLG (2014) *Rough sleeping in England: autumn 2013* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rough-sleeping-in-england-autumn-2013>

³ Homeless Link (2013) *Survey of needs and provision 2013* http://homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/SNAP%202013%20Final%20180413_2.pdf
There are an estimated 39,638 bed spaces for homeless people in the UK. Around 26% of those using bed spaces are women. 26% of 39,638 bed spaces equates to 10,306

⁴ CHAIN (2013) *Street to Home annual report 2013* http://www.broadwaylondon.org/CHAIN/Reports/S2h2013/Street-to-Home-report-2012_20132.pdf

⁵ Reeve, K; Casey, R and Goudie, R (2006) *Homeless women: still being failed yet striving to survive* Crisis http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/Crisis_Homeless_Women_2006_full_report.pdf

With cuts to public services, restrictions on welfare, rising housing costs and a lack of housing supply, there are real fears that homelessness will rise further.⁶ Women are likely to be particularly affected by the impact of welfare changes as they are more likely to be dependent on benefit income, including housing benefit.⁷ The concern is that we now face a 'timebomb' of women's homelessness.

As homelessness rises, funding for support services is being cut. Overall, homelessness services reported a 17% reduction in funding in 2013, with the proportion targeted at women falling from 12% to only 8% in the last two years.⁸ This is very concerning considering women make up a quarter of people using homelessness services.

The costs of women's homelessness can be devastating for women and their families. These high costs are also felt by the wide range of support services which women come into contact with during their experiences of homelessness.

Key findings

Complex and interrelated needs⁹

"We know from our own clients that women who come to our emergency shelters, hostels or into our supported housing have a complex mix of problems. We need to look deeper and try different approaches." Charles Fraser, Chief Executive, St Mungo's

The overwhelming finding from submissions to *Rebuilding Shattered Lives* was that women who are homeless have a number of severe, interrelated and exceptionally complex problems which contribute to their homelessness and make recovery challenging. The submissions reflected our experience that women tend to enter homelessness and other support services at a later stage than men, when their problems have escalated significantly and they are less ready to begin their recovery journey.

- Shockingly almost half of our female clients have experienced domestic violence, and 19% had experienced **abuse as a child**, compared with 5% and 8% of men
- A third of the women we work with said domestic violence had contributed to their homelessness, compared to 8% of men

⁶ Crisis (2013) *Homeless Monitor England 2013* <http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/HomelessnessMonitorEngland2013.pdf>
⁷ Fawcett Society (2012) *The impact of austerity on women* <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/The-Impact-of-Austerity-on-Women-19th-March-2012.pdf>

⁸ Homeless Link (2013) *Survey of needs and provision 2013* http://homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/SNAP%202013%20Final%20180413_2.pdf
⁹ References to St Mungo's clients taken from the 2013 edition of our Client Needs Survey unless otherwise stated

¹⁰ For the purpose of this report we have used 'women involved in prostitution' as a term that does not define women by the act of selling sex, but also recognises that selling sex is not a job like any other: We are aware that different agencies use different terminology and as part of *Rebuilding Shattered Lives* we actively sought contributions from a range of different standpoints

¹¹ HM Inspectorate of Prisons and HM Inspectorate of Probation (2001) *Through the Prison Gate*, London: Home Office

¹² Reeve, K; Casey, R and Goudie, R (2006) *Homeless women: still being failed yet striving to survive* Crisis http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/Crisis_Homeless_Women_2006_full_report.pdf

- Almost half of our female clients are **mothers**. 79% of these women have had their **children taken into care or adopted**. Many are traumatised by the loss of their children and struggle to cope with limited contact
- 70% of women we work with at St Mungo's have **mental health** needs, compared to 57% of men
- 27% of our female clients have a combination of **mental health, physical health and substance use** needs (26% of men)
- More than a third of our female clients who have slept rough have been **involved in prostitution**¹⁰
- Almost half of our female clients have an **offending** history and a third have been to prison. Over a third of women in prison have nowhere to live on release, women are more likely than men to lose accommodation while in custody¹¹
- A survey of homeless women carried out by Crisis found that 37% **have no qualifications**.¹²

Trying to unpick these needs is challenging, and it's clear that they often can't be addressed separately. Women need support that is easily accessible and responds to the full range of their complex needs; the right help at the right time. This report explores how this can best be provided.

"Women's homelessness is so often invisible. I have no contact with my family – I had a very traumatic childhood and don't want to see them. I did a lot of sofa surfing after I left my violent partner. But then I ran out of friends and became homeless." St Mungo's client

Trauma and abuse

Much of the complexity of women's needs is rooted in histories of violence and abuse often stemming from childhood. It was striking across the different themes just how many women's lives had been marked by physical and sexual violence and how the resulting trauma often erodes resilience to cope with later challenges. Women may turn to drugs or alcohol in order to self-medicate. Involvement in prostitution and offending may follow to fund substance use or indeed survival, resulting in criminalisation and imprisonment. The impact of trauma is undeniably complex and long-lasting; it is a recurring theme throughout both this report and the lives of many homeless women.

Relationships with children

Many women who are homeless are separated from their children, and some lose custody of their children permanently. We heard again and again how devastating this separation is for women, yet they are often expected to cope with this loss with little or no emotional support. Services are often ill-equipped to understand and respond to the further trauma that arises from separation from children and the internalised shame and guilt of 'failing' as a mother. For many women a failure to address this can be a significant blocking factor in recovery from homelessness and wider issues.¹³

Stigma and shame

Also prominent from the submissions was the feelings of stigma and shame experienced by women who are homeless. Women may experience multiple stigmas which experienced concurrently can have a reinforcing, demoralising and debilitating impact. We heard how women feel that society expects them to be feminine, to be good mothers and to maintain a home. Much of what they experience while homeless conflicts with these expectations, and they feel judged as women because they do not meet these ideals. A perceived failure to live up to these expectations can be a significant barrier to recovery.

Our ten recommendations

Providing holistic, gender sensitive support for complex needs

Rebuilding Shattered Lives underlined the importance of ensuring women have access to holistic support that recognises and responds to the complex interrelation of needs and enables them to improve the aspects of their life that matter most to them. Expecting women to simply fit into traditionally homelessness services which have been designed for homeless men is not good enough. Service providers must understand the particular needs of homeless women, how these differ from those of men and (re)design or (re)configure services accordingly.

Recommendation 1: Services working with women who are homeless or at risk should be based on principles of holistic, gender sensitive support for complex needs

Services that work with homeless or otherwise vulnerable women should incorporate the following features. These

¹³ Revolving Doors and St Mungo's (2010) *Missing families: St Mungo's women and families research: a summary* <http://www.revolving-doors.org.uk/documents/missing-families/>

apply to both women only and mixed services, and to the full range of sectors covered in this report.

- 1. Women only support and space:** Including women's projects, women's groups within mixed services and access to female staff. Particularly important for women who have experienced gender based violence.
- 2. Psychologically informed responses which recognise trauma:** Including access to counselling, supportive key working and peer support groups to address past and current trauma, including around past abuse or loss of children.
- 3. Staff training to enable gendered responses:** Training on the specific challenges women often face such as domestic violence, sexual exploitation or family and children issues.
- 4. Partnership working to address multiple support needs:** Services working with a range of other services including mental health, substance use, criminal justice and social services in order to meet the full range of women's needs
- 5. Building confidence and motivation:** 'Pre engagement', the steps that help women feel safe, confident and ready to move forward with their lives. Often needed before hard outcomes such as work and resettlement can be attempted.
- 6. Client involvement:** Including women specific opportunities. To give women a voice to determine how and what services should be delivered.
- 7. Peer Support:** Support from others who have been through similar experiences and can share, advise and inspire.
- 8. Supporting women with children:** Services should provide access to childcare and facilities for children to visit where possible; advocacy, psychological and emotional support is needed through adoption proceedings and to help deal with the loss of children.

National leadership to reduce women's homelessness

We believe that urgent action is needed to reduce the number of women who are homeless, and to ensure that women can access support that helps them recover.

Recommendation 2: The Minister for Women and Equalities should hold relevant government bodies to account for preventing and tackling women's homelessness

Recommendation 3: The Minister for Women and Equalities should be added to the membership of the Ministerial Working Group on Homelessness to ensure that it expressly considers women's homelessness

The Ministerial Working Group should regularly publish data of the women's homelessness, setting a benchmark against which change can be measured.

Leadership in local authorities

Recommendation 4: Each Local Authority should identify a senior member of staff to lead on women and homelessness, including improving and coordinating service provision and strategy, and monitoring progress on ending women's homelessness

Preventing missed opportunities for help

Recommendation 5: Local Authorities should ensure organisations that come into contact with vulnerable women recognise the risks of homelessness and are equipped to provide, or signpost to, preventative support

This includes specialist services working with those with mental health problems, experiencing domestic violence, or leaving prison for example. However, mainstream services such as GPs, family services and housing associations can also play a crucial role in prevention.

Commissioners as champions of innovative services

Recommendation 6: Innovative approaches to tackling women's homelessness should be identified, tested and developed, specifically lead practitioner approaches; multi agency case management; and cross boundary initiatives

Recommendation 7: Commissioners must ensure that local provision gives women a choice between women only or mixed services

Recommendation 8: Commissioners should invest in cost benefit analysis of services aimed at preventing or resolving women's homelessness, and of women only services in particular

Getting responses right in childhood

It is clear that many of the problems that lead to homelessness begin in childhood. More support for early intervention programmes is vital.

Recommendation 9: The government should ensure that the Troubled Families Programme addresses the needs of girls who are at risk of homelessness in adulthood, identifying girls who need support

This should include longitudinal research to assess the longer term outcomes for girls and women.

Recommendation 10: Access to parenting support and perinatal interventions which address the root causes of homelessness should be more widely available to families most at risk