

Kerslake Commission evidence submission

Solace Women's Aid

1. Thinking about the response to rough sleeping during the pandemic, which measures, policies, practices or joint working do you think worked well and why?

Solace Women's Aid (Solace) is one of the largest providers of services for survivors of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in England, touching the lives of over 27,000 women and children a year. We run a Housing First service for women who have experienced VAWG and multiple forms of in Islington. We also work in partnership with Standing Together Against Domestic Violence to deliver the support element of a Housing First service in Westminster. Street homeless women have a near universal experience of male violence. Most homeless shelters are unsuitable because they are mixed sex, and many refuges are unsuitable for women who have experienced multiple disadvantages and as a result may have behavioural issues or problematic substance use. There is only one women-only hostel in London, the Marylebone project, and provision – like most hostels – requires residents to complete paperwork so they can access funding to cover costs. Like many homeless hostels facilities at Marylebone are shared by residents, which can be a barrier to women who have experienced multiple disadvantages and are often unwilling to move into shared. 'Everyone In' removed these barriers, meaning they were housed without needing to complete paperwork, in self-contained hotel rooms with bathrooms. Some women referred to our Housing First service were housed in the 'Covid hotels' and benefitted from the 24hr intensive support. As a result, they were able to stabilise, access GPs and medical prescriptions, and meet with their new keyworkers. One woman was sleeping in a tent in 2019 and often refused to leave her tent to speak to our staff. Since being moved into a hotel in spring she is engaging with caseworkers and we have been able to get her the nominations she needs to be housed in one of the Housing First flats.

2. In contrast, which measures, policies, practices or joint working do you think have not worked well and why?

'Everyone In' missed an opportunity to collect some accurate data on the prevalence of women's street homelessness. National estimates of around 15-20% of rough sleepers being women are likely to be an underestimate because the additional risk of violence, abuse and exploitation women are exposed to means they are more hidden from the annual national count, and they are less likely to engage with general homelessness services. Women

have been put at risk in large-scale accommodation shared with men where they risk abuse and violence from perpetrators already known to them or from strangers. Previous and often recent experiences of abuse and violence, including sexual violence, have made women feel particularly unsafe in these environments and in some cases women have chosen not to occupy this accommodation as a result. Domestic abuse is the third biggest cause of homelessness and has spiralled over the last year. Calls to our advice line have fluctuated in line with the restrictions opening and tightening. In March this year, we saw a 117% increase in calls compared to March 2020 when the first lockdown was imposed. Government funding enabled us to set up an emergency refuge in partnership with Southall Black Sisters in May 2020, which was extended at a smaller scale with funding from the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime until June this year, but despite continuing demand for safe accommodation at a higher rate than before the pandemic, there has not been additional funding for this or other emergency projects. Migrant women with insecure migration status and/ or no recourse to public funds face additional barriers to accessing. As the emergency refuge project comes to an end and without a replacement, more migrant survivors of VAWG are likely to become street homeless.

3. Please describe the specific challenges, and opportunities, in the next phase of the Everyone In programme and helping people to move on from hotel accommodation.

Where it has been successful, hotel accommodation through the 'Everyone In' programme has enabled some women to build trust with services, increase their stability and reduce or end contact with perpetrators: having gender-informed accommodation and specialist supported accommodation to move to would allow women to build on this, rather than move to situations in which their vulnerability is increased again, or return to rough sleeping and other risky environments. The challenge is the severe lack of specialist supported accommodation for women to move onto, including second-stage or long-term accommodation in which women can build up independence alongside specialist support. Women were made homeless during the pandemic following experiences of violence, but many could not access 'Everyone In' accommodation, were turned away from housing departments and couldn't access refuge accommodation due to the lack of spaces. There has been increased need for and slower move on from refuge spaces meaning fewer women are able to access the vital specialist support refuges provide. Lack of social housing remains an acute difficulty that has kept women in abusive environments or in emergency accommodation spaces

due to the lack of affordable and appropriate accommodation to move onto. Many women need to transfer their existing social housing due to dangers to them in their homes: the suspension of social housing moves in many areas for many months and the subsequent slow move on meant that women in some cases fell foul of the 52 week rule for dual housing benefit, meaning they had to choose between returning to dangerous accommodation, giving up their social tenancies or rapidly building up crippling arrears. The Pan London Housing Reciprocal providing safe transfers experienced slow move on and closed their waiting lists in December 2020.

4. And finally, what do you think needs to be put in place to embed the good work that developed during the pandemic, or improve upon it?

We would like to see the principles of providing accommodation that is safe, secure and affordable without conditions and with as little administration as possible embedded into all support for street homeless women. Demographics including sex and gender of street homeless people engaging with services should be captured at the next phased of support for those still in hotels or other short-term accommodation to gain a better understanding of how many women would otherwise be street homeless. The Government needs to join up their strategies for ending violence against women and girls, housing and homelessness so that services recognise the prevalence of VAWG among street homeless women and ensure they are supported by specialist VAWG services when they access homelessness services. We are calling for at least 5% of all current and newly build affordable and social housing to be ring-fenced for survivors of violence against women so that they have somewhere secure to move on to. We would also like to see at least 20% of funding for street homelessness ring-fenced for female rough sleepers, so that more services are designed with their needs at the centre. Local commissioners should ensure they commission a mix of safe accommodation in discharging their new duties under Part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Bill when it reaches Royal Assent, s including wholly funded places available for women with no recourse to public funds and funding allocations for immigration support and intensive resettlement support as provided in the emergency refuge.