

Kerslake Commission evidence submission

Women's Homelessness Action Forum

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?

The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) emergency.

Covid provision for women fleeing domestic abuse delivered by specialist women's services Solace Women's Aid and Hestia; this was an effective model and crucially included units for women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF). However, NRPF spaces were filled in the first week and homeless women experiencing multiple disadvantage could not access this provision as it was not resourced to support that level of need (i.e. It was not staffed 24 hours per day). Evidence from Greater Manchester highlighted the provision of women-only hotels coordinated by the Women's Support Alliance, with female security staff trained in trauma and domestic abuse. Both of these models are examples of good practice that could be replicated beyond the Covid crisis.

They worked well as they were either delivered by women's specialist providers, or in the case of the Manchester model, women's specialist providers were involved in the planning and development. Providers delivering accommodation provision for rough sleeping women should work with specialist women's providers to train staff and ensure that service design and delivery is gender informed. WHAF members also fed back that multi-disciplinary teams worked particularly well during the pandemic. Collaborative working— having health, drug and alcohol services and legal advice support under one roof – made it much easier for women to access support, and helped to overcome some of the existing obstacles and hurdles they face. In Westminster Standing Together and Solace Women's Aid were successful in obtaining emergency Covid funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) domestic abuse team to expand the Westminster Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Housing First project. This funded an extra worker who could support 5 more women and was crucial in providing housing and intensive support for women experiencing long-term homelessness who had been temporarily housed in hotels.

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

Hotel accommodation as part of the first phase of the 'Everyone In' programme was effective in providing shelter for a huge number of rough sleepers. However, front-line workers in London raised serious concerns over the risk for homeless women hastily placed in male dominated mixed-gender hotels, including risk of domestic abuse, sexual exploitation and violence, and trafficking. As mentioned above Covid emergency accommodation provision for women experiencing domestic abuse was another crucial initiative, but it could not accept referrals for women with multiple disadvantage; many homeless and rough sleeping women would fall into this category. Rough sleeping women therefore fell through this gap in emergency service provision; unable to access women's specialist support, but also not having their needs met in 'mainstream' mixed gender hotel provision.

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.

A large proportion of those placed in Greater London Authority (GLA) hotels and local authority provision during the pandemic were NRPF and now need alternative accommodation. This is in line with women sector organisations calls to lift the NRPF condition for all survivors of domestic abuse as part of the Domestic Abuse Bill. Until this is achieved, local and regional authorities need to increase their housing provision to cope with local need. Feedback from front-line workers raised concerns about the lack of impartial and confidential immigration advice for women. Social housing providers in London including local authorities and housing associations need to prioritise new allocations for women coming out of refuge and Covid emergency housing projects. As lockdown eases, domestic abuse organisations are facing an increase in demand for emergency housing support and will need to support women to move-on to free up spaces. Women are more likely to experience economic disadvantage and to be impacted by the benefit cap, raising the need for affordable housing to prioritise women. Housing providers can use projects such as the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA) initiative to link up with their local refuges and offer move-on accommodation (see <https://www.dahalliance.org.uk/> for further information). Innovative practice from housing associations offering peppercorn rent schemes for destitute women is also a good practice that should be replicated. For those homeless women who have experienced long term or repeated homelessness, and have the highest needs, we ask local authorities and the Mayor of London to increase commissioning of long-term

housing pathways such as Housing First schemes for women experiencing long term homelessness.

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?

The GLA should ensure that a proportion of the funding from the Next Steps Accommodation programme is allocated to safe women-only emergency accommodation for rough sleeping women facing disadvantage. The projects funded in London during the pandemic were either women-only accommodation for low support needs, who could not accept women with mental health needs or substance misuse for instance, or male dominated mixed-gender provision. Research has shown that male-dominated accommodation is not safe for homeless women who are likely to have experienced male violence before, and as a result stay in hidden homelessness, often in exploitative situations, or remain at risk in abusive relationships. Where women-only accommodation options are not available, local areas should ensure that appropriate, gender informed support is in place as much as possible for women in mixed environments. Women's only floors, the provision of toiletries and sanitary products, and above all, appropriate, gender informed support for women are all essential. Commissioners of emergency housing projects including local authorities, the GLA and MOPAC also need to break down data by gender and carry out equality assessments. Data needs to be consistent and transparent to enable service planning for women at the Pan-London level. Through our evidence gathering work, it has proved difficult to find out information on the number and the needs of women hosted in emergency accommodation, as well as those who could not access support. We know for instance that the women-only MOPAC emergency pathway received almost twice as many referrals as they could support, but we need to explore what happened to those who could not be supported and the scale of services that are still needed to ensure no woman has to choose between homelessness and violence. Local authorities can use gendered-data to implement specific interventions for women, for instance Westminster held a weekly multi-agency meeting to discuss women and couples options.