

Agenda's response to the Communities and Local Government Committee inquiry into homelessness

8 February 2016

Introduction

Agenda welcomes the opportunity to respond to this timely enquiry. As with other groups, homelessness amongst women is increasing. In London alone, 1094 women slept rough in 2014/15, up from 658 in 2010/11¹.

Homeless women are some of the most vulnerable in our society. The average age of death for a homeless woman is a shockingly low 43². Even within the vulnerable homeless population, the needs of women are particularly complex with higher levels of poor mental health and extensive experiences of physical and sexual violence and abuse.

The causes of women's homelessness and experiences of being homeless are quite distinct from those of men. It is important therefore that there is a particular gendered response to supporting women who are homeless.

Agenda recommends:

- Women's specific needs are included in all strategies to target homelessness at a national and local level and women have the choice of accessing women only services.
- Approaches to tackling homelessness include involvement from other relevant government departments and should include a focus on violence against women and girls (VAWG).
- Gender breakdowns be included in all rough sleeping counts
- We would welcome a review of the homelessness legislation with a view to either expanding or abolishing priority need criteria. Any review however, must ensure protection for the most vulnerable including women with children is maintained.
- For women whose children are temporarily cared for elsewhere, whether that be through the care system or by family or friends, the legislation must ensure that a lack of housing is not a barrier to children returning to their mother.
- Women fleeing domestic violence should be automatically entitled to housing, rather than having to meet any additional test of vulnerability.

1. Drivers and consequences of women's homelessness

¹ CHAIN Street to Home Annual Report Greater London, 2010/11 and 2014/15, <https://files.datapress.com/london/dataset/chain-reports/CHAIN%20Greater%20London%20full%20report%202014-15.pdf> and [file://platinum/downloads\\$/franki.hackett/Downloads/CHAIN%20Street%20to%20Home%20Annual%20Report%202010-11.pdf](file://platinum/downloads$/franki.hackett/Downloads/CHAIN%20Street%20to%20Home%20Annual%20Report%202010-11.pdf)

² Crisis, *Homelessness: a Silent Killer*, December 2011 <http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/Homelessness%20-%20a%20silent%20killer.pdf>

- 1.1 Women who are homeless often have particularly complex needs, with extensive experiences of abuse and violence and very high levels of drug addiction and poor mental and physical health. Their needs tend to be even more complex than those of homeless men.
- 1.2 Violence and abuse is both a cause and consequence of women's homelessness. Agenda research shows that 1.2million women in England have experienced extensive abuse as both a child and an adult, and a fifth of these women have been homeless³. By comparison, only 1% of women with little or no experience of abuse have ever been homeless.
- 1.3 St Mungo's reports that 44% of their female clients have experienced domestic violence, and 19% had experienced abuse as a child. 32% said that domestic violence contributed to their homelessness⁴.
- 1.4 Women who are homeless are particularly vulnerable to further being targeted by perpetrators of abuse both physical and sexual, with 28% of homeless women having formed an unwanted sexual partnership to get a roof over their heads, and 20% having engaged in prostitution to raise money for accommodation⁵.
- 1.5 As well as increasing the risk of experiencing further violence, prostitution puts women at risk of contact with the criminal justice system, which can create even further barriers to breaking out of homelessness.

2. Extent of homelessness amongst women

- 2.1 The most accurate statistics on women's rough sleeping come from the CHAIN database in London, but even this may not give a full picture. We know many women make efforts to hide away or try to keep moving, for example sleeping on buses or walking through the night, because of the perceived risks of violence. This may mean that they are less likely to be in contact with outreach workers and to be recorded on CHAIN.
- 2.2 Across the rest of the country, gender breakdowns are not included in rough sleeping counts, making female rough sleepers effectively invisible.
- 2.3 We also know women are less likely to use homelessness services, which are often male-dominated environments and can be intimidating, especially for women with extensive experiences of violence and abuse.

³ Agenda, *Hidden Hurt*, January 2016 <http://weareagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Hidden-Hurt-full-report1.pdf>

⁴ St. Mungo's, *Rebuilding Shattered Lives*,

⁵ Crisis, *Homeless women: still be failed yet striving to survive*, 2006 <http://www.crisis.org.uk/publications-search.php?fullitem=182>

2.4 Getting a more accurate estimate of the extent of women's homelessness is important therefore, not least to ensure commissioners and services make adequate provisions for homeless women's specific needs.

2.5 We recommend that gender breakdowns be made a mandatory reporting category for rough sleeping counts.

3. Provision of services

3.1 Women's needs must be recognised in local and national efforts to prevent and tackle homelessness.

3.2 Most homelessness services are designed for men by default. These male-dominated environments can be intimidating and unsafe for vulnerable women, and are rarely set up to meet women's distinct needs. Many women report that a women-only space is important in enabling them to feel safe and to start dealing with the issues they face.

3.3 Homeless women should have the choice of accessing women only services and services for women must be able to respond to the complexity of women's needs.

3.4 There are a number of service models for supporting women with complex needs both within and outside the homelessness sector, but most struggle to access funding dispersed across a number of different funding pots. We need joined-up central funding for services responding to women with complex needs.

3.5 Providing housing support is necessary when responding to women's homelessness but it is not sufficient. Effective responses will require the involvement of other services and leadership will need to come from a number of departments, especially health, the home office, justice, and work and pensions.

4. Homeless mothers

4.1 Women facing multiple disadvantage often speak of the importance of motherhood to their identity, and as a motivating factor for engaging with services. Many "single" homeless women will in fact have children who are not in their care: half of the women St. Mungo's work with are mothers, and 79% of these mothers have had children taken into care⁶.

4.2 Having children removed into care, particularly when they are permanently removed, can be deeply traumatic for women. It can prompt or exacerbate mental health or substance misuse problems. Services which work with homeless women must recognise and respond to this. Women may need support to deal with the trauma of

⁶ St. Mungo's, *Rebuilding Shattered Lives*,

losing a child; to establish contact with children or around care proceedings.

- 4.3 Mothers who have become homeless, for example as a result of fleeing domestic violence, and whose children are temporarily out of their care can find themselves trapped in a vicious cycle. A local authority will not allow their children to be returned to their care until they have secured accommodation, however they are not a priority for local authority housing assistance until their children are returned to them. This can result in the ridiculous situation of children remaining in care unnecessarily simply due to a lack of suitable accommodation.
- 4.4 For women whose children are temporarily cared for elsewhere, whether that be through the care system or by family or friends, the legislation must ensure that a lack of housing is not a barrier to children returning to their mother.
- 4.5 In many cases, women with complex needs will need much more intensive support to be able to parent safely and well. The welfare of children must always be paramount, but in many cases supporting a child to live safely with its mother is best for both mother and child. We know the outcomes for children in care are very poor, with high rates of imprisonment, mental ill-health, and homelessness for children who leave care.
- 4.6 Where it is possible, it would be better for the life chances of both the mother, and children, and for the public purse to support homeless women into housing and support situations where they are able to be together.

5. The legislative framework

- 5.1 Current legislation states that women should be considered “priority need” if they are vulnerable as a result of fleeing domestic abuse. However, women fleeing domestic violence are not always considered by local authorities to be vulnerable and so to be in “priority need”.
- 5.2 Fleeing abuse in itself makes women vulnerable: both because they may be at risk from the perpetrator of abuse, and because of the physical and psychological toll abuse takes.
- 5.3 Agenda recommends that, if the priority need system is kept, women fleeing domestic violence should be automatically considered to be in priority need of housing, rather than having to meet an additional test of vulnerability.
- 5.4 Further, we would welcome a review of the homelessness legislation with a view to either expanding or abolishing priority need criteria. Any review, must ensure protection for the most vulnerable including women with children is maintained.

6. Conclusions

- 6.1 Women who are homeless often have particularly complex needs, with extensive experiences of abuse and violence and very high levels of drug addiction and poor mental and physical health.
- 6.2 Women are less likely to be included in rough sleeping counts and through data collected by services. We need a more accurate estimate of the extent of women's homelessness, both so we understand levels of need and to ensure commissioners and services make adequate provisions for homeless women.
- 6.3 Women's needs must be recognised in local and national efforts to prevent and tackle homelessness. Homeless women should have the choice of accessing women only services, and services for women must be able to respond to the complexity of women's needs.
- 6.4 Providing housing support is necessary when responding to women's homelessness, but it is not sufficient. Effective responses will require the involvement of other services and departments, especially health, the home office, justice, and work and pensions.
- 6.5 Motherhood can play an essential role for women facing multiple disadvantage, but homeless women often face the loss of their children. Women who have children taken into care should be provided with support, and where mothers can be safely kept with their children, it would be better for the mother, children, and for the public purse to support homeless women into housing situations where they can be together.
- 6.6 We know that currently too many vulnerable women are being turned away from help as they are not considered 'priority need'. We would welcome a review of the homelessness legislation with a view to either expanding or abolishing priority need criteria. Any review however, must ensure protection for the most vulnerable including women with children is maintained

About Agenda

Agenda is a new alliance of organisations and individuals who have come together to campaign for change for women and girls at risk. We believe society is failing to adequately protect and support women and girls who face the most extensive violence, abuse, trauma and extreme inequality. We are calling for systems and services to be redesigned with women and girls at their heart so that they can access the support they need to rebuild their lives and reach their full potential.

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