



HOUSING FIRST NETWORK WALES

HOUSING FIRST AND WOMEN IN WALES

A REPORT BY THE HOUSING FIRST FOR WOMEN SUBGROUP



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INTRODUCTION

Housing First, a housing-led, person-centred and trauma-informed approach to homelessness that has decades of international evidence supporting it, continues to develop and strengthen across Wales. Against the backdrop of a concerted shift by the Welsh Government towards rapid rehousing, Housing First will continue to remain the most intensive ‘end’ of the spectrum of housing-led approaches.

As such, identifying the people who most need the intense level of support that comes as part of Housing First, is a vital task. Recent conversations within the Housing First Network, and Accreditation Panel meetings, have identified the following issue: when it comes to Housing First, a focus on people sleeping rough – as mandated by the current principles – might result in other vulnerable populations being ‘missed’. (It is also worth pointing out that the COVID-19 pandemic has also shifted large numbers of people from the streets into emergency accommodation and other settings; this new context might also mean that the principles need to adapt somewhat.)

There might therefore be significant numbers of people who are not, or have not been, sleeping rough, but who are still in need of Housing First. It has been suggested that, women are over-represented within group, compared to those who already tend to receive Housing First support. Evidence from many Cymorth Cymru members and service providers shows that women experiencing homelessness are less likely to sleep on the streets, but are more likely to experience more hidden forms of homelessness such as sofa surfing.

Clearly, the principles – particularly the one that discusses the ‘target audience’ when it comes to Housing First – could do with some examination, to ensure they remain fit for purpose, while staying true to Housing First as has been proven effective internationally. We also have plans to review principle 8: ‘The service is delivered in a psychologically-informed, trauma informed, gender-informed way that is sensitive and aware of protected characteristics’ and consider how we can support organisations to be proactively gender-informed. This is an ongoing piece of work, led by the members of the Housing First Network.

An additional piece of work involves an exploration of the current context surrounding women and Housing First in Wales – including women who are currently receiving, or who have received, Housing First support, and women who might benefit from Housing First support.

The recently established Housing First for Women sub group of the Network discussed and agreed to a plan of a mixture of fairly informal research methods, to try and learn more about this context, the barriers and the opportunities to ensure that women are able to access and benefit from this internationally renowned model. This report explains what methods were used to investigate the relationship between Housing First and women in Wales, and the associated context. The findings are discussed, before some tentative recommendations and conclusions are made.

This work was a joint endeavour involving Cymorth Cymru, Welsh Women’s Aid, and members of both organisations across Wales. Members of the Housing First Network and the Housing First for Women sub group of that Network provided much of the insight and information in this document.

METHODOLOGY

A variety of research methods were used to gather the material discussed in this report. The work was fairly informal, as its aim was to build a general picture with insight and input from a variety of sources. Consent was obtained from the specific individuals who contributed by participating in informal interviews/conversation situations.

An idea of the context experienced by women in Housing First projects in Wales, potential issues affecting women who might be overlooked by Housing First projects, and the relationships between Housing First projects and specialist services, came from the following channels:

- Informal interviews and conversations with specific individuals/teams – both from Housing First projects and other organisations, services and agencies
- Discussions in the meetings of the Housing First for Women Sub Group of the Housing First Network Wales
- Information from presentations at Cymorth's Housing First Conference 2022
- Email exchanges with Sub Group members and specific individuals
- Examination of existing statistics, and gathering of new ones, by Cymorth Cymru, Welsh Women's Aid and Welsh Government

After the evidence was gathered via the methods described above, staff from Welsh Women's Aid and Cymorth Cymru collaborated on this report, with feedback provided by members of the Sub Group throughout.

STATISTICS

Various sets of statistics, gathered by Welsh Women's Aid over the course of 2021, contribute to an understanding of the context of women and Housing First in Wales. This section of the report was drafted by Welsh Women's Aid staff and, as such, uses the first person accordingly.

The organisation's annual membership data from 2020-21 shows:

- There was a 22% increase in the number of survivors who could not be supported by the refuge due to the lack of capacity or resources, when compared with the previous financial year.
- Refuge-based support services supported 283 children per quarter, showing a continued high number of children in refuge during the pandemic with limited access to specialist child support workers.
- Community based services received a 23% increase in referrals from the previous financial year and a 12% increase in the number of survivors who could not be supported by community-based support services due to resource and capacity issues.

Welsh Women's Aid Annual membership surveys demonstrated that most services feel confident they are resourced to deliver their current level of services this year. However, the consistent feedback from Welsh Women's Aid membership meetings is that existing funding provided covers only existing duties and leaves no surplus for emergencies, an unexpected rise in capacity or a need to be flexible in offering support.

The current funding circumstances are not meeting the current level of need. Welsh Women's Aid annual data shows an increase in the number of survivors unable to be supported across services, due to a lack of capacity and resources. When examining current resources, specialist services are not equipped to support the increase in survivors facing multiple disadvantages who are seeking support.

There was a significant increase in the following reasons for refusal from refuge over the previous financial year:

- Unable to meet support needs (around drug and alcohol) (27%)
- Unable to meet support needs (around mental health) (61%)
- Unsafe (perpetrator knows the location of the survivor/ refuge) (92%)
- No / limited recourse to public funds (29%)

The first two reasons point to the need for stronger multi-agency support for women with multiple, co-occurring support needs, something that Housing First for women projects should be better equipped to address.

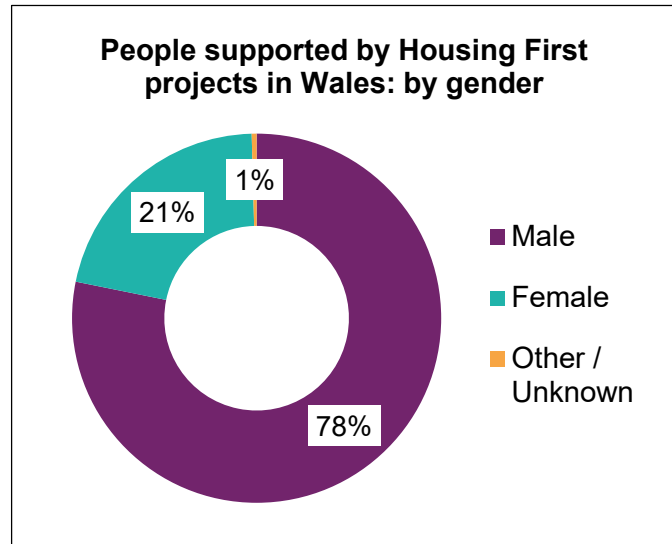
A total of 692 survivors were unable to be supported in refuge due to capacity and 312 survivors remained on waiting lists for sexual violence services at the end of financial year 2020-21. Welsh Women's Aid members do not currently feel able to widen preventative work, or to increase capacity in order to provide support to more survivors.

The COVID-19 pandemic has already resulted in an increase in contacts from survivors (22%) and concerned others (43%) to the Live Fear Free Helpline during 2020-21. The impact of COVID-19 restrictions on survivors' experiences of abuse and violence is likely to lead to increased long-term support needs, including provision for children and young people. Increased mental health needs are expected to increase as the long-term impact of COVID-19 and increased austerity affect people's health and wellbeing; it is likely that the demand for provision will only increase over time.

HOUSING FIRST STATISTICS

Seventeen Housing First projects in Wales were surveyed as part of an ongoing data collection exercise. At the time of writing this report, statistics covering the period from February 2018 to the end of September 2022 had been gathered and published.

One of the questions asked for a gender breakdown of people who had received support from the project over this period. Of 701 people supported by Housing First projects in Wales between February 2018 and September 2022, 150 were identified as women – that is 21%.



The question that will need answering over time is how many women who could benefit from Housing First support are being overlooked or otherwise somehow missed by services.



SUBGROUP MEETINGS

Once the work plan for this piece of research was agreed by the Housing First for Women Sub Group of the Housing First Network Wales, and certain content planned, a basic discussion about current context (when it came to women) in currently operating Housing First projects. What follows is a summary of the points made by representatives of different projects or organisations during meetings of the Sub Group.

We are currently working with a woman experiencing domestic abuse, and need to link in with MARACs (Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences), IDVAs (Independent Domestic Violence Advocates), and trying to work as closely together as possible, especially with safety planning. For this group of women, they are most likely to have the most complex needs, and therefore have the most difficulty in finding refuge, assuming they are motivated to accept it.

Working with IDVAs and MARACs is relatively smooth, as the processes are all in place and everyone is committed to supporting the clients. Closer links generally between HF projects and DA schemes in local authorities would be beneficial.

From talking to managers of DA schemes, many are supporting predominantly male perpetrators, rather than women experiencing DA, further demonstrating the gender disparity in the people we are supporting.

There's a huge experience of trauma, assertive outreach and building relationships is vital. Preventative mental health access is urgently needed, before people get to crisis stage and begin self-harming or self-medicating.'

Wales-wide organisation

'We currently work with Swansea Women's Aid who run the SWAN project which supports women who are sexually exploited in Swansea. We have two HF workers who volunteer to do one shift every 6 weeks, which allows us to identify potential HF clients and start building relationships. We have previously worked with Swansea's Women aid, a member of the team had been volunteering with the Swan Project which supports women who are sexually exploited in Swansea. We had reached out to the project as two newer staff members expressed interest in volunteering for the project. We also attend street vulnerable and Domestic violence MARAC meetings every month.

Some of our first HF clients were in relationships and were well known to Housing Options and other services, which made it fairly easy to place them.

We have our own temporary supported accommodation for single people available, besides B&Bs, with referrals direct from Housing Options. Mental health seems to be the only area that we haven't had buy in from in Swansea.'

Swansea Housing First project

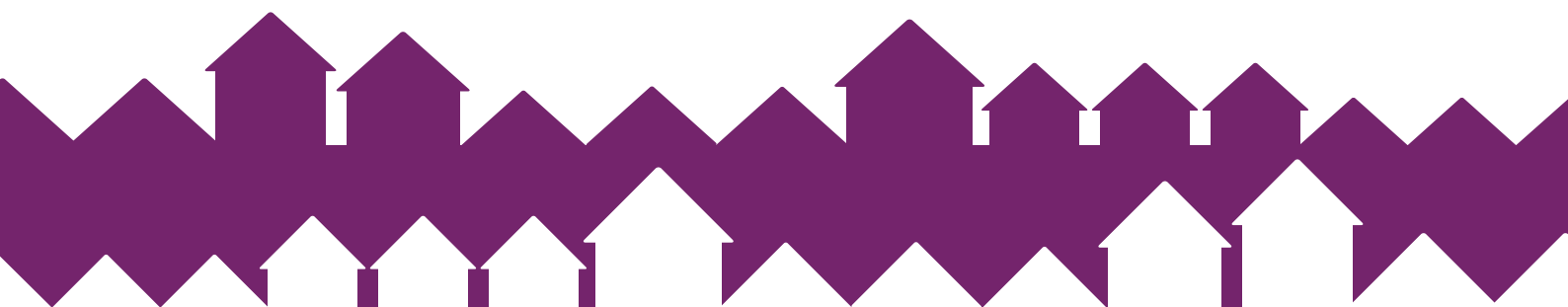
'We are supporting a young woman who is street homeless who refuses to go anywhere without her male partner. This makes it difficult to house as the partner needs to be assessed as well, some places (e.g. B&Bs) do not wish to house them in the same room together.'

Gwynedd Housing First project

'As part of Welsh Government's asks for the Rapid Rehousing Transition Planning, we want local authorities to plan on a partnership basis, and we will be contacting local authorities to find out the answers to questions like these: In your experience, what kinds of needs do women in Housing First projects tend to have? Do they require a unique kind of support? How have you and your colleagues tended to work with women, and what good practice would you recommend?'

Welsh Government

It is worth noting that these are the kinds of questions this report seeks to shed some light on.



INTERVIEWS

Interviews were carried out with stakeholders interested in discussing the support of women via the Housing First approach. What follows is a summary of those interviews, highlighting key points. The interviews have been anonymised as far as is reasonably possible.

INTERVIEW 1

The first participant represented an organisation supporting women in a particular part of Wales. For clarity, this specialist organisation will be called Organisation A in this summary. Organisation A has links with a Housing First project operating locally, which will be called Organisation B. Because members of staff from Organisation B deliver outreach work in collaboration with the Organisation A, vulnerable women in the area learn about the Housing First project, and this outreach can act as a pathway into the Housing First – this active engagement approach is discussed in the Housing First principles used in Wales. Becoming familiar with these members of staff is very positive, as it makes any future interactions easier. Actual referrals from this specialist Organisation A into the Housing First project Organisation B also take place.

Interestingly, the Organisation B seems to have ‘actively promoted’ the inclusion of women in the project, according to the interviewee. A more cohesive collaborative project that was initially discussed before the COVID-19 pandemic, wherein Organisation A would provide specialist support to clients at Organisation B, has unfortunately stalled because of said pandemic. That said, one of the women being supported by Organisation A did move into the Organisation B during the pandemic. During the interview, a kind of ‘upskilling’ process was referred to, in which Organisation B staff initially involved in outreach then begin working with vulnerable women and develop their skills in delivering support to this client group.

Describing the context of the woman in question, the interviewee said this: ‘[The person was in a very] complex situation...from...the age of 12, [there had been] long-term exploitation. Very...poor mental and physical health, high substance misuse, and my God, [the support has] been the making of her. What a difference. What an absolute difference. It’s been quite mind-blowing really...’

The interviewee went on to further highlight positive aspects of the situation and the way support has been provided: ‘Having [a] dedicated worker who works from that non-eviction [perspective]...from that ‘we’ll stick with you no matter what’ perspective, has made a huge difference...[the support worker is great and] has made a huge difference to [the client]. Just that consistency, and that ability to keep the exploiters and abusers away...she’s managed to break that cycle she was in and the circle of contact. Yeah, it’s been amazing, really.’

The need for a female support worker was discussed, as well as consistency in support. Organisation B’s counselling provision was also highlighted as a key positive aspect of the support being delivered – in particular, to ‘address long-term trauma’.

Other elements of Organisation B’s support, as well as the Housing First model more generally, came up during the interview – client choice of accommodation and location, in particular, as well as the community and services around the person. Although the person being discussed doesn’t have children, the fact that a person might need to be schools and family members also arose.

When asked how Housing First projects can improve access for women, the discussion went as follows. Ideally, an organisation working with women would provide the support. Interestingly, in the case of this client, there was the local perception that Organisation B worked with homeless men, as a matter of policy. This is not true, of course, but this demonstrates the effect that the more visible homelessness that tends to disproportionately affect men can have on perception. In this case, the guarantee of a female support worker helped make the difference.

The interviewee emphasised the importance of specialist women's organisations, and being able to apply specialist gendered analysis to a client or situation. Specialist women's organisations can offer a wide range of services and support, and avoid the perceived problem of women having less strong voices in organisations that don't specialise. It is worth noting the fact that this interviewee pointed out that this problem comes about because there are fewer women in those organisations, but also because the organisations 'don't particularly target women'. This suggests that a more inclusive approach by organisations that don't exclusively work with women would be a positive thing. Some of the subsequent aspects of support that are attributed to women's organisations - finding what works for a client, such as walking on a beach, for example – would be expected at any Housing First project.

It was also pointed out that the more women are being supported by a project, the more comfortable the women might feel.

The interviewee was asked what advice they might give to a Housing First project trying to establish links with specialist organisations working with women. Primarily, 'it's about making contact' – that initial approach is obviously key. There can be different views on where specialist workers sit – in a Housing First project itself, or within a specialist organisation that collaborates with the Housing First project. It is worth noting that the Housing First for Women Sub Group of the Housing First Network Wales has heard about different approaches to this, and they have worked in their contexts. As such, one approach should not necessarily be seen as better than another, as long as women are receiving specialist support. Ultimately, support workers involved in a Housing First project need to develop at least a basic understanding of the issues affecting women experiencing different kinds of homelessness. Additionally, as is the case with Organisation B and their outreach staff, developing relationships and familiarity with women locally is vital. Things like educational programmes, skill development, and as wide a variety of offerings as possible can work well with women.

A question about existing gaps in resources that could help specialist organisations link up effectively with Housing First projects was asked. According to the interviewee, a sexual exploitation project run by Organisation A would benefit from some additional staff. Additionally, longer more involved meetings with sector partners – which happened in the past – with different partners being able to influence the agenda would be welcomed.

When asked what one thing the interviewee would change about the relationship between Housing First projects and specialist women's services, the participant emphasised 'the link' between organisations, and how this link needs to become daily, common thinking. That is to say, as soon as a woman presents to the Housing First service, a specialist organisation should be contacted and involved immediately. This requires organisations knowing about, and understanding the roles of, other services locally.

Additionally, the interviewee discussed the need for better, more widespread understanding of different forms of violence against women, which does include but isn't limited to domestic abuse. Other forms include forced marriages and coercive control.

INTERVIEW 2

A second interview took place; the participant is a senior member of staff at an organisation that works with young people who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness. The participant understood that the interview in question was oriented around the experience of women, and the answers should be taken as such. In this section, the organisation for which the interviewee works will be called Organisation C.

Organisation C has links with various Housing First projects. In terms of Housing First and its relationship with women, this person highlighted the need for Housing First projects, particularly during outreach work, to 'hook [women]', to convince them the model can work for them, and that the support will be consistent and reliable – traits that vulnerable women might not have experienced for a long time. In terms of some of the issues that might need to be considered, the interviewee highlighted: 'previous history of abuse, exploitation, and trauma, possibly childhood through adulthood, mental health issues, substance misuse issues and possible criminal justice issues as well.' The interviewee specifically highlighted the fact that these clients or potential clients would have a wide range of potentially complex contexts and needs.

Certain aspects of the Housing First model were also highlighted as being potentially crucial to developing relationships with women who need support: 'so many different types of services [say], "if you don't turn up to your appointment three times then you go back to the end of the waiting list" [which doesn't happen in Housing First]'. Similarly, when people have control over their support and routine, this can have a hugely positive impact. As the interviewee put it, 'if [someone doesn't] feel like engaging on a particular day then they don't need to.'

The participant then listed aspects of support that might be more specifically useful when supporting women: 'In terms of women specifically [we need] that gendered approach. [This means] having someone that [a] woman can feel safe to go to, having a place that can be target hardened and safety planned for, to keep [female clients] safe from exploitation from males, or whoever it happens to be that they're at risk from. [It's also important to make] sure that [women] feel comfortable to have those conversations that they wouldn't if it wasn't in a place that was specifically designed for supporting women and making them feel comfortable really and achieving outcomes for them.'

The interviewee also mentioned a statistic, estimating, 'our...traditional HF for young people [currently supports] about 48% female referrals...which is higher than most adult housing first services.' This was followed by an attempt to explain this relatively high percentage: '[Perhaps] as...female young people, they're more visible to services? Because there are more services tailored to young people, maybe it's more difficult to [fall] through the gaps in those early years.'

Subsequent discussion would identify a key factor in the Housing First Network Wales to decide to review the Housing First principles currently in use across the country: while it is hard to attach specific numbers to this phenomenon, evidence suggests women are less likely to sleep rough, or experience homelessness in such an overt and visible way.

This mirrors the interviewee's experience: 'there can be a lot of women who don't necessarily get to the rough sleeping side of it, but are still homeless...due to being vulnerably housed. [They are] sofa surfing or moving from maybe abusive or controlling relationships to [other] controlling relationships...It's a slightly wider field of trying to make sure people are aware of Housing First projects for women and making sure we're linked in with the sector for all the stuff around women's aid services, domestic abuse services, VAWDASV services, sex work services.'

The interviewee emphasised the importance of these links and relationships between service providers, as well as for a like the Housing First for Women Sub Group of the Network, and local forums which can lead to referrals being identified.

Next, the interviewee was asked about specific good practice when it comes to supporting women via the Housing First model, and young women in particular. The participant addressed this question, as well as discussing the strengths an organisation needs in this area, as follows.

‘Caseloads [need to be] relatively low...the workers [need] flexibility in terms of their hours of working...and make sure [clients] are confident that they can reach out for anything...[we have] a multi-tiered on-call system in case there are any issues when the teams aren’t on duty...’

Support from other specialist individuals and organisations – as is mandated by the Housing First principles used in Wales – was also highlighted, with specific examples. ‘We...have fundraised to employ a team of psychologists and counsellors...[to ensure our members of staff] are...well supported around reflective practice and...discussions about cases.’

The interviewee went on, turning to the topic of mental health, saying, ‘[Services have] all been in situations...desperately trying to get mental health support for women or individuals, but because...the system’s been underfunded...it’s just so difficult to get. Particularly if there’s co-existing issues like substance misuse...But having our in-house psychologist [speaking] the same language as the services can make a real difference.’

Building on this idea, the interviewee discussed the importance of multi-agency collaboration and partnership when it comes to Housing First generally, but to support women in particular. Such partnerships have a ‘massive[ly] beneficial effect’. The interviewee also highlighted the importance of flexibility, which can have a positive effect on ‘cases that are stuck’. It is important to ‘make system navigation easier’ and not wait until people are ‘in absolute crisis’ before support can be accessed – key tenets of the Housing First model. The interviewee also highlighted potential issues with long waiting lists for support of various kinds, and the fact that people need to be able to ‘access support when they’re motivated to’.

The next question dealt with ways of improving links between Housing First projects and specialist services working with women, at local and national levels. The answer reinforced the importance of awareness and understanding of the Housing First model across local partners, and building links between Housing First projects and other services operating in a particular area. (It is worth noting that these issues are often discussed, not just in the context of women. Understanding of the model, and building buy-in, are vital for involving other sectors in the delivery of true Housing First. This idea has also come up during meetings of the Accreditation Panel, with associated good practice appearing in the accreditation reports.)

The interviewee discussed ‘the ability, not just for landlords, to follow through with an eviction but to [ask], “If this isn’t working here why is it not working? Maybe if we move [this tenant] to another flat could that be a fresh start that might make all the difference in a different area? Maybe with less known people around who are a risk to them, that kind of thing.”’ The interviewee went on to say ‘the more [that can be done] in advance, the more [people can be brought in] to agree...it’s...system navigation...making it much less complicated and difficult for people to get the support they need when they need it.’

When asked about current gaps in resources that could potentially be filled to improve links between Housing First and specialist services, the interviewee highlighted the need for the health sector to be properly involved as a key challenge. In part, the participant explained, this is because, ‘different health boards operate in slightly different ways.’ The interviewee also acknowledged the challenges and stresses under which the health sector is currently operating.

However, in the view of this person, there needs to be a better linkage between the health sector and other agencies and organisations. In some ways, these relationships have deteriorated, according to the interviewee: ‘They seem to have moved into [the frame of mind that] “we will only take the word of the person we’re working with”.’ The interviewee referred to this phenomenon as ‘almost like GDPR and confidentiality [taken to] its extreme.’ The interviewee concluded that ‘we need to build back up that partnership working with [health].’

The interviewee was asked about the impact of the pandemic on these relationships. ‘Undoubtedly,’ came the reply. The interviewee went on to discuss specific examples of negative impact: ‘People who were suicidal were told not to bother going to A&E because they wouldn’t get seen! It was just unbelievable. And I get that the NHS has to pull resources from everywhere into the COVID effort, but it definitely didn’t help anybody, and it left providers dealing with issues which – don’t get me wrong we’ve dealt with before – but more of them, and going on for much longer, in abject crisis really, [with] real risk to life. So I would say those relationships have definitely struggled...’

The final question dealt with what changes could be made to improve the interactions between Housing First and other sectors and organisations, as well as to improve how women are supported via the Housing First model. The interviewee emphasised the importance of ‘communication, GDPR and confidentiality.’ The participant discussed the issue that some clients and/or potential clients have when it comes to sharing their stories, and the need for organisations to share the relevant information with these stories with each other. This is necessary in order to effectively support people, but in the view of the interviewee, some people are ‘still scared to do that, particularly health’. The participant went on to suggest some strategic guidance could help address this issue, ensuring that insight from a wide variety of agencies and organisations were involved in support provision. The interviewee also accepted that the health sector is ‘moving towards’ trauma-informed provision, which is of course mandated in Housing First.

Once again, the stresses and challenges currently being posed for the ‘front line’ of health were acknowledged, with these perhaps being a reason for the slow move towards trauma-informed work. During the answers to these questions, the person speaking emphasised and re-emphasised the dangers associated with essentially waiting for people to be in crisis before the right support is available to them.

The timing of partnerships was also raised – organisations need to work together ‘from the outset’ [emphasis added] in order to make Housing First support, including Housing First support for women, work well. The interviewee talked about another aspect of the relationship between support providers and similar organisations, and the person receiving support: ensuring that somebody ‘feels they’ve been listened to’.

Summing up, the person being interviewed added that the ‘consistency of support’ is key, as is ‘being able to pull in...other agencies when [a client] is ready to engage with them.’

INTERVIEW 3

A third interview was carried out, with a member of staff representing a Housing First project recently set up to work specifically with women.

The project has experienced a large influx of demand, now that people locally are aware of the service. Caseload is now at capacity, but support remains community-based, because none of the clients have yet been housed. The interviewee discussed the attempts made to improve the understanding of Housing First on the part of housing associations locally, as well as to increase buy-in to the model. The interviewee's perception was that Housing First can still seem daunting to external partners, explaining: 'We send a referral, and it's a bit like [the response is] ... "This is more complex than the last one you sent! How are we going to manage this?"' The common issue of a lack of housing, particularly in desirable areas, was also highlighted. There are huge risks in temporary accommodation for vulnerable women, almost on par with living on the streets.

The participant listed the same kinds of issues that the women this project works with are experiencing: nearly all of the clients on the current caseload have experienced domestic violence. Many have substance and/or alcohol issues, as well as mental health issues. Additionally, several of the women are currently involved in sex work. These issues are 'rife,' according to the interviewee, who emphasises how this project has brought to light 'how much these issues...affect homeless women.'

When asked about good practice, the participant highlighted the need to build trust with women, who might have been repeatedly let down by the system. This is true of Housing First generally, but seems worth emphasising in this context. Support workers need to be extremely patient, and to act according to what they've promised. For example, the interviewee highlighted one client who repeatedly doubted the fact that the support workers would continue to work with her – support workers would frequently turn up to meet the client, which was received positively.

Personalised budgets came up as a key part of support. Recent accreditation work has also found that individualised budgeting is a vital aspect of the Housing First model. However, the right level of budgeting is needed. 'We envisaged that to be used when that person has that tenancy, for whatever that person needs,' the interviewee explained. 'But actually, we're really utilising that now...it may be that they need the basic...we need to be able to get hold of them to be able to deliver support, so we've bought lots of phones already.' Clearly, the right level of resourcing and pre-tenancy support is key. The quicker that people can be accommodated, of course, the quicker that budgets can be turned towards making houses feel like homes.

Links with specialist organisations and agencies, as well as accommodation providers, were identified as being vital. Specific examples were provided – this project's support worker was enabled to deliver support effectively and safely because of professionals from organisations working specifically on VAWDASV issues, as well as a women exploited by the sex industry specialist. Professionals from substance misuse organisations have also worked closely with project staff, and been vital. When the interviewee was asked what kinds of resources and additional support this project would benefit from, they emphasised the importance of these partners, and how in an ideal world, this would be built on. Thinking about projects more widely, the interviewee highlighted this way of working, and how key it is to providing effective support to women.

Asked what needed to change to improve the access women have to Housing First in Wales, the interviewee was emphatic: housing. The accommodation needs to be there, to ensure that these women can live in a safe space, away from the risky situations associated with sleeping on the streets, or in temporary accommodation.

CASE STUDY - BASIS YORKSHIRE

Basis Yorkshire run a Housing First for Women project in Yorkshire, working exclusively with women exploited by the sex industry. In July 2022, staff from the project presented at Cymorth Cymru's annual Housing First conference. Elements of the presentation have been included in this report, to act as a kind of case study. This case study, we hope, can demonstrate some good practice that is currently taking place.

Established in 1989, Basis champion an evidence-based, non-judgemental, unconditional approach, which also takes a stance of harm reduction. The project works with adult women and non-binary women exploited by the sex industry.

The project works with other agencies and organisations wherever it can, including but not limited to: the local police force; the health service; and sexual health services. Basis carries out outreach work, hosts drop-ins, and also offers one-to-one appointments with clients. The project also offers training

Women who sex work are disproportionately affected by homelessness, even though they are less likely to encounter homelessness services, and as such are less likely to show up in rough sleeper counts. In situations like these, there is a risk of additional trauma, as more exploitation from abusers is possible.

Various barriers to accommodation exist – things like stigma, addiction, digital exclusion, not having identification, coercive control. Many clients and potential clients have pets, often a very positive part of someone's life, and this will need to be taken into account when it comes to accommodation. Project staff have been known to foster some of these pets to enable clients to get suitable accommodation.

The breakdown of clients at the time the project presented was as follows:

Complexity	Out of 7 clients
ACEs	7
Mental health issues (psychosis, depression, anxiety/disorder, PTSD PD)	7
Physical health issues (DVTs, heart issues, COPD, septic arthritis)	7
COVID-19 – tested positive	2
Domestic and sexual violence	7
Problematic drug use (heroin, crack, spice, prescription drugs, often combined)	7
Problematic alcohol use	1
Time in prison	6/7 before HF 1/7 once housed, only for 24 hours
History of attempted suicide or overdose	5
History of self-harm	6
Children removed prior to HF	6
Children returned to live with mother/now in regular contact	3/7 since housed via HF

During their presentation at the event, the two members of staff from Basis Yorkshire went on to highlight some of the aspects of the Housing First model they saw as particularly important. They specifically emphasised the importance of delivering Housing First in line with the principles, highlighting those that had been particularly important in their project.

Separation of housing management and support was discussed as absolutely critical, as was individualised person-centred support. Staff from Basis emphasised the importance of their partnership with the social landlord providing the accommodation. The concepts of being non-judgemental, trauma-informed, and respectful were also highlighted.

The presenters listed the outcomes they have seen arise from their project's work – outcomes often associated with Housing First. They include, but are not limited to: increased engagement with other agencies; fewer returns to prison; cost savings for the council and other statutory agencies; and, ultimately, women no longer being trapped in a 'spiral of chaos'.

Challenges were also identified, however: the scarcity of housing being a major one (and not uncommon in Wales either). The need for an understanding of the model on the part of all partners is, again, something that has been seen in Wales. In particular, there needs to be a mutual understanding of 'unconditional' support. The community around Housing First clients needs managing and attention; the Basis staff presented some examples of neighbours 'surveilling' their clients. Tensions like these can come up and present as challenges for Housing First projects.

Finally, the presentation focused on the lessons learned: Housing First doesn't work for everyone straight away; people might need to make multiple attempts to stabilise their lives; property location needs careful consideration; safeguarding also needs to be thought through properly; and, finally, support workers need to be mindful of compounding trauma, which can have negative effects on self-esteem.



WIDER NETWORK CONTEXT

It is worth pointing out a piece of work being undertaken by members of the Housing First Network at present. The Housing First principles that have been used across Wales since 2018 are being reviewed by a task-and-finish group, specially set up to do this work.

While the spirit of the principles will not change, and the Network's desire to reinforce and reaffirm fidelity to the Housing First model will remain strong, some of the principles might benefit from slight changes that would better reflect the current Welsh context when it comes to housing and homelessness. Some of the reasons for, and context surrounding, this principle review, are relevant to this research and report.

The current third principle being used in Wales explicitly puts the focus of Housing First support on people who have chronically slept rough. There is a clear assumption made that the Housing First model is most effectively used to provide support to people experiencing very visible forms of homelessness, like rough sleeping. While the principle as written has been useful up to this point there are issues with focusing on people sleeping rough. Women, for example, are less likely to sleep rough than sofa surf or stay with people. The local and national response to the COVID-19 pandemic has also reduced the number of people living on the streets, but that is less relevant to this specific report.

Additionally, principles covering trauma- and gender-informed work, as well as a strengths-based and person-centred approach, could be amended to encourage a more active kind of inclusion. (It is worth mentioning that, while a principle itself might not be amended much, or at all, the scoring and supporting information associated with a principle might be changed more.) That is to say, rather than simply being open to supporting anyone regardless of background, support providers should look for ways to actively welcome people based on who they are. This, of course, would include women receiving Housing First support. By amending this principle, the Network hopes to ensure that women who might benefit from Housing First support can be offered that support.

Finally, the last principle in the current list, which mandates the involvement of non-housing organisations and agencies in the Housing First model, is also relevant here. As this report has discussed, links with specialist organisations that work with women are vital, and this could be emphasised in an updated set of principles. This is not to say that Housing First projects should not or cannot develop relevant skills and specialisms in-house, of course.

The Housing First for Women Sub Group will be updated, and continue to provide insight, as this principle review goes on. Relevant knowledge and specialisation in issues affecting women are represented strongly in the task-and-finish group.

THE RIGHT TO ADEQUATE HOUSING

In their [response](#) to the recent Welsh Government consultation on adequate housing, Welsh Women's Aid highlighted the particular challenges faced by VAWDASV survivors and women exploited by the sex industry

Being unable to secure tenancies due to receiving housing benefits or due to financial difficulties may lead to survivors of VAWDASV being sexually exploited. The All Wales Operational Group on Sexually Exploited Women, held by Welsh Women's Aid, highlighted that adults who are sexually exploited are coerced, forced or manipulated into engaging in sexual activities by a third party or out of necessity to finance basic needs. This includes sex for rent arrangements, where an individual offers accommodation at a reduced rate or for free, in exchange for sexual acts. Some survivors may feel that this is the only option to secure accommodation, however this leaves individuals vulnerable to further abuse and violence. A 2022 briefing further highlighted that out of 101 women who had sold or exchanged sex or images, 63 had been homeless at some point in their life. The barriers that survivors face when trying to access to suitable and safe accommodation can hinder their process of taking control of their own lives and living without fear.

Welsh Women's Aid coordinates a sexual exploitation workers forum, for workers on the front line. In a recent forum, it was identified that the homelessness assessment that was being conducted for many survivors with complex needs and those who had been exploited, was not appropriately trauma informed. It was highlighted that the homelessness assessment did not take into consideration multiple disadvantages or the different needs of survivors. There is currently often a need for the local authority to get into contact with a survivor, without accounting for the fact that some individuals may live a transient lifestyle or may not have access to a phone. There is a lack of a strength-based, person-centred approach in situations where those who are sexually exploited are not understood, and this is marked against them when they miss appointments or are difficult to get into contact with. They are therefore labelled and stigmatised as unreliable and unwilling to engage. Shelter conducted some research into the current housing and homelessness system and further highlighted that individuals felt that they were re-living traumatic events, and that there was often an expectation that they would have official documentation with them. The expectation that individuals will carry official documents with them does not, for example, account for the circumstances of VAWDASV survivors who have had to flee imminent risk of serious harm. This highlights the lack of understanding by some conducting the assessments, both of the unsuitability of their requests and of the lasting retraumatising impact.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Specialist VAWDASV organisations should be the lead organisation in the delivery of Housing First for Women projects
2. Generic Housing First projects should work in partnership with specialist VAWDASV organisations to ensure appropriate referrals and support for women
3. Generic Housing First projects should take steps to actively promote their services and ensure they are being inclusive of women
4. Generic Housing First projects should encourage and enable their staff to develop their knowledge and skills about the particular challenges facing women experiencing homelessness and the approaches needed to support them (and their children where appropriate)
5. Generic Housing First projects should ensure their staff understand the full range of issues within VAWDASV, not just limited to domestic abuse
6. Commissioners should ensure there is appropriate Housing First provision for women within their local area, including specialist Housing First for Women projects where appropriate
7. Commissioners should ensure that specialist VAWDASV organisations are involved as partners in the delivery of generic Housing First projects
8. Welsh Government homelessness and VAWDASV teams should be aware of, and provide appropriate guidance on, the needs of women experiencing homelessness and co-occurring, complex support needs as part of the move to Rapid Rehousing and expansion of Housing First in Wales.
9. The Housing First for Women sub-group should consider whether the Housing First principles need any amendments or additional emphasis for Housing for Women projects, once the current principle review has been concluded. This should not, however, depart from the spirit of the internationally recognised Housing First principles.

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