



**'A YEAR IN THE LIFE' OF THE
WESTMINSTER VIOLENCE AGAINST
WOMEN AND GIRLS (VAWG) HOUSING
FIRST PROJECT
FOURTH YEAR EVALUATION**

WITH THANKS TO OUR HOUSING PARTNERS



Octavia



Peabody



L&Q



Southern Housing Group



Women's Pioneer Housing LTD



Guinness



SAHA



Sanctuary

With thanks to the Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities, and Westminster City Council for funding and commissioning the Westminster VAWG Housing First Project

ABOUT STANDING TOGETHER AGAINST DOMESTIC ABUSE

Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse is a national domestic abuse charity, working with multiagency partners to establish a coordinated community response to domestic abuse. We specialise in developing the housing and homelessness sector's response to domestic abuse and providing innovative solutions to survivors' housing needs. In 2017 Standing Together and Westminster City Council were awarded funding from the domestic abuse team at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) to develop a Housing First project for women with experience of homelessness, VAWG, and multiple disadvantage.



ABOUT SOLACE

Solace is a leading London charity supporting survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence. We know that women across London are experiencing domestic and sexual violence right now. Whatever form this comes in, from rape and trafficking to relationships based on psychological or financial control, we work to end it. But we know escaping abuse can be the hardest thing to ever do. That's why it's so important we're here.

solace

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Westminster Violence Against Women and Girls Housing First project responds to the unique and often unmet needs of women experiencing long-term homelessness, multiple disadvantage and male violence against women and girls (VAWG). The project provides a gender informed response that meets the needs of women, with the Housing First fidelity principles¹ at the core of our work. The project is provided through a collaborative partnership between Solace, Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse, Westminster City Council, and housing providers The Guinness Partnership, London and Quadrant, Octavia Housing Association, Peabody, Sanctuary, Salvation Army Housing Association, Southern Housing Group and Women's Pioneer Housing. This year's evaluation includes artwork developed by the women supported by the project, and colleagues across the partnership, celebrating 'a year in the life' of the Westminster VAWG Housing First project.



KEY SUCCESSSES THIS YEAR:

RELATIONSHIP AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION

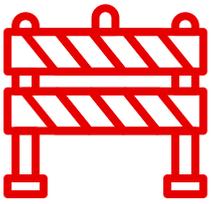
There have been incredible outcomes for some of the women this year around reconnecting with family members; including one woman who spent this Christmas with her family, after 10 years without seeing them, and others engaging in meaningful activity such as enrolling on a personal training course, learning to bake with the Luminary Bakery², and beginning their journey into further education and training. These achievements would not be possible without the holistic, flexible support provided by the partnership. Particular acknowledgement here needs to go to the Solace support team, who work tirelessly to support the women in the project to meet their goals whilst ensuring risk of domestic abuse and VAWG is managed and reduced.

TENANCY SUSTAINMENT

We had a tenancy sustainment rate of 100% for women housed within the partnership this year, and an overall tenancy sustainment rate for the whole project of 95%. This incredible achievement would not be possible without the partnership between Solace, Standing Together and the housing partnership.

[1] Housing First in England: The Principles, Homeless Link: https://homelesslink-1b54.kxcdn.com/media/documents/The_Principles_for_Housing_First.pdf

[2] Luminary Bakery: <https://luminarybakery.com/pages/about-us>



BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES THIS YEAR:

LACK OF AVAILABLE HOUSING

We have seen several women waiting this year for suitable studio or one bed flats to become available from our housing partners. This is due to shortages of properties, and legislative changes that has meant providing properties into the Housing First partnership has been re-prioritised for providers to ensure compliance with the law. We acknowledge the challenges currently faced by the housing sector, and stand by our colleagues within the housing partnership to call for the prioritisation of building more affordable social housing.

WIDER SERVICES UNDERSTANDING OF VAWG, MULTIPLE DISADVANTAGE AND PERPETRATOR BEHAVIOUR

It is not only the responsibility of domestic abuse/VAWG sector to understand experiences of these issues, likewise it is not only the responsibility of the homelessness sector to understand multiple disadvantage. There is a need for all services across all sectors to have an understanding of these issues to ensure an appropriate response is provided to both victim/survivors and perpetrators; to reduce the risk of harm to survivors and hold perpetrators to account for their behaviour.

RECOMMENDATIONS:



Increase the capacity for holistic, continuous commissioning.



Expand other services and sectors knowledge of VAWG and multiple disadvantage.



Continuous improvement in responding to the needs of perpetrators experiencing multiple disadvantage

Without these above three things, we will continue to see services that are inaccessible to women experiencing VAWG and multiple disadvantage, causing further long-term and entrenched rough sleeping, and continued risk of domestic abuse and VAWG.

It is vital that domestic abuse and VAWG is tackled at its source, with the perpetrator being held to account to reduce the risk of harm to victim/survivors.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 Introduction

2 The Data

2.1 The alternative data collection for year 4

2.2 Methodology

2.3 The women

3 Outcome for year 4

3.1 What the women said

3.2 Engagement

3.3 Safety: experiences of domestic abuse and other types of violence against women and girls

3.4 Housing and tenancy sustainment

3.5 Health and Wellbeing

3.6 Social integration

3.7 Partnership working

4 Recommendations

5 Conclusion

6 Appendices

6.1 Appendix A: Evaluation Questions

6.2 Appendix B: Housing First Coordinator Role Brief

1. INTRODUCTION

This report summarises the key learnings from the fourth year of the Westminster Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Housing First Project, as of the end of the project year in September 2023. It explores the successes and challenges of the service from the perspective of the women supported in the project, the Solace support workers, and other project partners.

“A year in the life of the Westminster VAWG Housing First Project”

This year, we focused on creative data outcomes to highlight the successes and challenges of the project in a different way, and held an in-person event in March 2024 to celebrate these. Our aim with this creative data collection is to display what a year across the project could realistically look like, shining a spotlight on the ‘soft’ outcomes, and the importance of these when highlighting the achievements of a Housing First service. The process behind this will be outlined in this report, and an accompanying report will document the artwork displayed at the event. It is hoped that the learnings from this project and the associated recommendations will be of use to support existing Housing First services and their service partners, in their ongoing implementation of Housing First; as well as organisations and/or commissioners who are interested in developing a Housing First service for women in their area.

We hope the successes demonstrate examples of best practice when delivering a Housing First service for women, and the challenges will show possible barriers others may come across when setting up a service like this. We hope that discussing these challenges will allow newly developed Housing First services to pro-actively prevent such challenges where possible, and also keep the conversation open regarding barriers currently faced by Housing First services nationally.



[3] Data collection focused on non-traditional methods of gathering data, such as art-based methods (painting, poetry etc.), to demonstrate and evaluate the impact of the chosen subject, in this case the Westminster VAWG Housing First project. Creative data collection and evaluation is particularly useful for participants who might be excluded from, or not feel comfortable with, traditional methods (i.e. completing a survey or an interview).

SERVICE AIMS

The service has five key aims:

1

To support women who are experiencing VAWG and multiple disadvantage, who are currently disengaged or not engaged well with existing services. This includes proactive and continuous engagement efforts made within reason.

2

To support women to access good quality independent housing, and to maintain this housing as per the Housing First principles.

3

To support women to reach an understanding of the abuse they have experienced, so that they are able to increase their safety and make informed choices.

4

To coordinate support and navigate treatment pathways with other services to ensure women are robustly supported in the areas of housing, substance misuse, physical health care, mental health care, criminal justice engagement etc.

5

To support women to improve their confidence and wellbeing and provide them with opportunities for personal development.

More information about the development of the project over previous years can be found in our 2022/23 learning report⁴

[4] Westminster VAWG Housing First Project: Year 3 Learning Report:
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ee0be2588f1e349401c832c/t/641c5adf3fdd7d19292975ea/1679579873842/Housing+First+Year+3+Evaluation++Designed.pdf>

There are three key elements to the project, which enable us to meet the project aims successfully:



SUPPORT

Support for the women is provided by specialist domestic abuse and VAWG support workers at Solace. Violence and abuse are a universal experience for women experiencing homelessness; and so this project particularly benefits from the partnership with Solace, who specialise in supporting women to be physically and psychologically safe. The team provide open-ended, long-term support to a small case load of women - a key element of a successful Housing First service.



HOUSING FIRST COORDINATION

Standing Together play a vital role in procuring the housing for the project, and building and maintaining relationships with housing partners. The Housing First Coordinator is the link between Solace and the housing providers, who provide permanent tenancies. Having a coordinator to work on the processes around the women obtaining and maintaining their permanent tenancies, takes this responsibility off the Solace team to undertake this work, allowing them to dedicate their working time solely to the women they are supporting.



HOUSING

Permanent, independent housing is provided by housing associations Peabody, London and Quadrant, Southern Housing Group, Women's Pioneer Housing, Octavia Housing Association, The Guinness Partnership, Sanctuary and Salvation Army Housing Association. All partners work on a service level agreement basis and allocate properties outside of allocations agreements with local authorities.

2.2 METHODOLOGY

FOCUS GROUPS

We conducted in-person focus groups with the women supported by the project, the Solace support team, housing partners and service commissioners at Westminster City Council. A virtual focus group was also held for project partners who were not able to attend the in-person groups. All focus groups were recorded using Microsoft Teams and transcribed and analysed using thematic content analysis. Files were deleted after transcription.



DATABASE ANALYSIS

One creative workshop was conducted by Arts & Homelessness International (AHI). The Senior Producer at AHI co-produced the workshop delivery plan with female artists with lived experience of homelessness, and delivered the workshop to women supported by the project in-person over one afternoon. The data collected in this workshop was in various creative formats – with this data being displayed at the in-person event in March 2024.

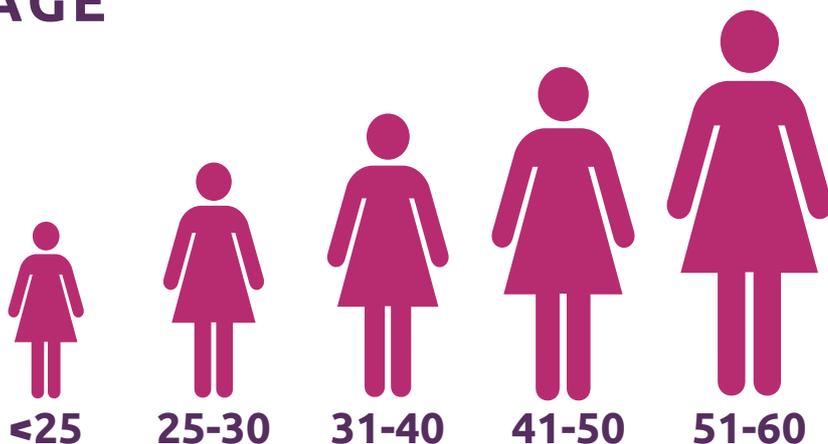
CREATIVE WORKSHOPS

We analysed data collected in an excel database set up to monitor the progress of each woman from the point of referral into the service. We focused on outcomes from this project year alone, to capture what one year across the project can look like, rather than looking back over the three previous project years.



2.3 THE WOMEN

AGE



3 women were under 25
 3 women were aged 25-30
 20 women were aged 31-40
 14 women were aged 41-50
 6 women were aged 51-60

This is in line with the average for Housing First services across England who tend to work with those aged between 35 and 59. The cohort has an average age of 40, slightly lower than last years average of 42. Considering the average age of death for women experiencing homelessness is just 43⁷ years old, it is important to note the impact Housing First for women can have – it can quite literally save the lives of women who otherwise may not have suitable support to meet their needs.

We also have six women who are 30 years old or younger, compared to only two last year. It is positive to see that Housing First in Westminster is being identified as a suitable support option for women who are younger than the average 35-59 age range, allowing them to access holistic support to break the cycle of homelessness, domestic abuse and VAWG and an earlier stage, rather than these young women becoming further entrenched in rough sleeping and risk of further harm.

DISABILITY



Similarly to last year, the number of women reported to have a disability was almost half of the cohort. This is likely to be a consequence of rough sleeping and homelessness exacerbating many women’s health conditions, in addition to the challenges they may face trying to access health related support.

[7] Women’s homelessness: the stats, SHP: <https://www.shp.org.uk/womens-homelessness-the-stats>

ETHNICITY

- 1** woman was Arab
- 3** women were Black African
- 1** woman was Black British
- 2** women were British
- 1** woman was Black Other
- 3** women were Mixed or multiple ethnic groups
- 24** women were White British
- 9** women were White Other
- 2** women were Not Known.



Just over half of the women supported this year identified as White British. This shows the cohort of women in the project is slightly more diverse compared to other Housing First services across England (approx. 89%⁸ are White British), however Black and Minoritised women are still underrepresented in the project. This highlights a need for more evidence and understanding of Black and Minoritised women's experiences of long-term homelessness and the barriers they face to accessing Housing First support.

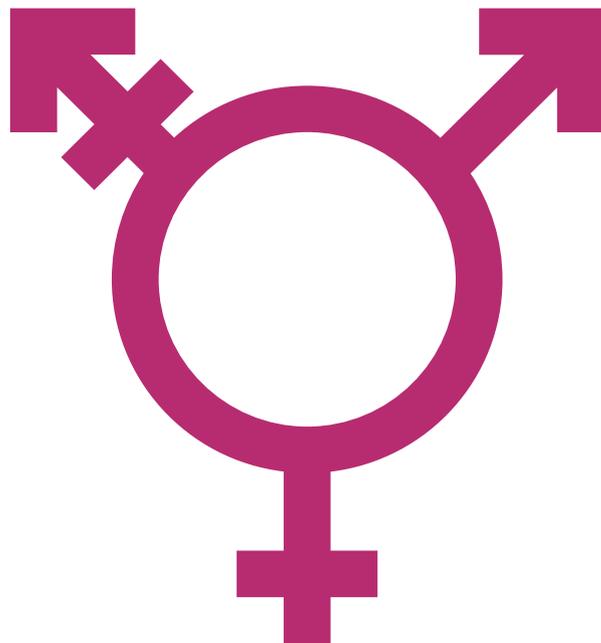
We recognised this year that Black and Minoritised women experiencing homelessness in Westminster were more likely to present to health care services, rather than homelessness services. Consequently, we reviewed our referral pathway for the project, and now accept referrals from health care professionals across the borough, as well as homelessness professionals. We hope that this will allow for more Black and Minoritised women to access the Westminster VAWG Housing First project; though we acknowledge more needs to be done to ensure these women are able to access the service, and will continue to review how we can make this happen throughout the next project year.

[8]The picture of Housing First in England, Homeless Link: <https://thinkhouse.org.uk/site/assets/files/2292/hl1220.pdf>

GENDER AND SEXUALITY

45 Cisgender Women
1 Transgender Man

25 Women were Heterosexual
2 Women were Bisexual
19 women were not known



One person within the project, who identified as non-binary when they came into the service; has shared this year that they identify as male with they/them pronouns. They have sought the support of the Solace team to transition; their Solace worker recognised the importance of accessing support from specialist services, and has supported them to access an LGBTQ+ homeless community centre. The Westminster VAWG Housing First Project is for those who identify as women, however we recognise that discontinuing support for this individual at this stage would not be in their best interests; they have built a successful working relationship with their Solace worker over the last few years and have been able to access support during that time that may have otherwise been unavailable to them.

The Solace team will continue to work closely with the LGBTQ+ specialist service, and the individual until such a time where moving out of the Westminster VAWG Housing First project is appropriate for them.

Many of the women chose not to disclose their sexuality, which makes it difficult to get an accurate picture of how accessible the project is to women that identify as LGBTQ+.

3. OUTCOMES FOR YEAR 4

This section will outline some of the key outcomes from the fourth year of the Westminster VAWG Housing First Project.

3.1 WHAT THE WOMEN SAID

The women's views of the specialist support from Solace were overwhelmingly positive:

“I've been homeless on and off since I was 13. I am 45 now and I've been working with Solace for about, yeah, 3 1/2 four years now. In all the years, these are by far the best.”

– HF Client

“She's helpful, she's nice, she's caring, she spends time with me. [To support worker] Don't change. She's got time, she don't put me down, she's lovely. Easy-going, not stuck up. Efficient.”

– HF Client

“When you've become homeless and they only they see you as homeless. As if you haven't had a life before that. But with Solace they actually do take into account like, you are actually a person you had a life before that and you do have a life to continue and that's what they're trying to do is actually make you continue from the life you actually had before.”

– HF Client

One woman appreciated that the support from Solace is easy to access, which is crucial to the success of the service:

“You don't have to jump through any hoops. And then they actually sort out, they actually sort out the problems.”
– HF Client

One woman spoke to the importance of having access to women's only services, whilst reminding us that services need to be encompassing of a wide range of issues and support needs:

“A lot of people just think the women places that help women are only for battered wives. But thing is a lot of women go through a lot of different things not just domestic violence, isn't just about domestic violence do you know what I am saying. In this situation and there's a lot of women that are on the streets that like, actually they they get looked over as people.”
– HF Client

3.2 ENGAGEMENT



46 women in total were supported by the Solace team this year.



6 women's cases were closed over the year.⁹



1 woman successfully graduated from the service this year, having been housed in the partnership back in the first year of the project.

[9] Of these 6 women, 3 of them were closed due to moving out of Westminster and no longer residing within the service area, 1 was closed due to non-engagement and 1 was recorded at not meeting the service criteria.

Analysis of the case notes from Solace showed that engagement was sporadic and often fluctuated, for most of the women across the year. To be aware of this is important, as it is common for women within a Housing First service to have periods where engagement lapses, due to their varying and intersecting experiences of multiple disadvantage.

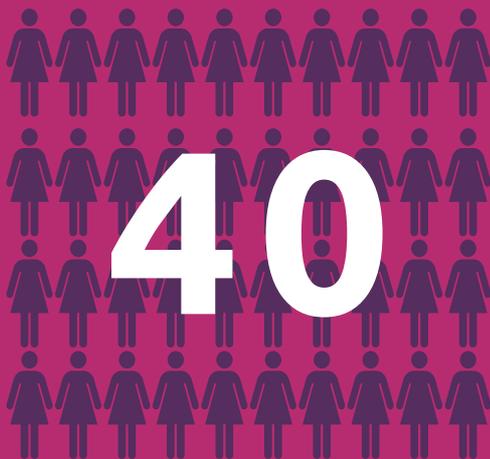
Importance of soft engagement¹⁰ was a theme identified as beneficial to boosting engagement, when talking with the women supported by the project this year:

“Yeah, I mean you need help with anything. Yeah, they are just there. Anything you know? And even if, even if you just feel down or something and you just want to call just to talk to them, yeah, they're, they're there for you like that as well.”

– HF Client

“I will call you and always someone will talk with me and do something, even if it's gonna be a little longer, but always you will, you will be helpful. So nice.”

– HF Client

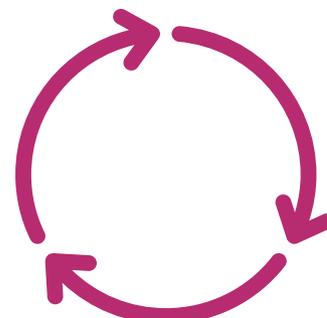


**40 women were engaging
with Solace at the end of
year 4**

[10] When using the term 'soft engagement' we are referring to engagement with the Solace workers that isn't necessarily focused on tangible outcomes (i.e: referrals to other services, accessing financial support/benefits etc), but more so on 'softer' outcomes such as engaging with their Solace worker for a coffee and a chat or relationship building. These types of engagement are crucial within the project, as it take time to build trust and a strong working relationship with women who are experiencing multiple disadvantage, and without these the tangible successes would not be possible.

3.3 SAFETY

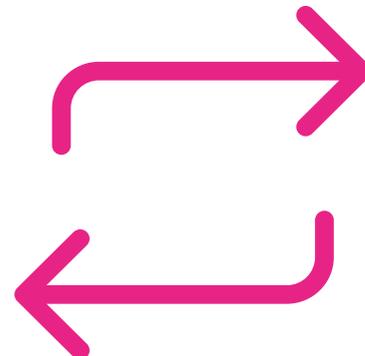
EXPERIENCES OF DOMESTIC ABUSE AND OTHER TYPES OF VAWG*



Number of DA incidents this year: **34**

Number of incidents of other types of VAWG this year: **24**

Number of women with ongoing DA at the end of year 4: **15**



Number of women actively discussing DA with workers at the end of year 4 : **15**

MARAC referrals this year : **15**

Number of women engaging in transactional sex : **15**

*Limitations of the dataset: These are only the incidents we are aware of and we anticipate there are further incidents of domestic abuse or other forms of VAWG that have not been disclosed to the Solace team. There have been some notable successes for some of the women this year around safety planning and reduction in the risk of DA and VAWG.

SUCCESSSES

Working as part of a Coordinated Community Response (CCR)

One of the Solace workers reflected on the benefits of multi-agency working this year, that has had a positive impact on risk reduction and safety:

“This constant like risk assessing and safety planning all the time. But we had a safeguarding alert opened with Westminster. And then we set up these weekly meetings with somebody from adult social care, safeguarding somebody from Turning Point and somebody from the outreach teams because she sleeps out a lot with her perpetrator and we have them every week and they've just been like, invaluable for communicating with each other, but also taking some of the weight off of my shoulders when there's a client who's so at risk, that you kind of are aware that at any time something really awful could happen.

”

– Solace Worker



We have seen one woman who was previously disclosing frequent serious physical assaults, experience a large drop in disclosures following a Domestic Violence Protection Notice (DVPN) being put in place. The same woman is looking to begin engaging with a detox for substance use.



Another woman has made her first disclosure of domestic abuse to her Solace key worker, after 3 years in the service. Disclosing domestic abuse can be challenging and scary for a victim/survivor, so the importance of this disclosure cannot be underestimated, especially for women who are experiencing multiple disadvantage – which can make disclosure of domestic abuse all the more challenging.



The Solace team supported one woman to flee high risk domestic abuse; she experienced a serious physical assault, threats to kill and the kidnap of her dog. Her Solace worker supported her to access housing in her area of choice, her dog has been returned to her, and she has been linked in to IDVA, mental health and social care support in her new area.



Another women decided to change her phone number with the support of the Solace team, which she has not shared with her ex-partner. She is now in control of the contact she has with him.

3.4 HOUSING AND TENANCY SUSTAINMENT



100%

Tenancy sustainment for the year was 100%.



95%

Overall tenancy sustainment across the four years is 95%



5

Five women were housed this year across the partnership.

There were several challenges with housing this year due to external factors, outside of the project; one of these being an overall lack of available housing stock across our partner housing providers.

“ I think our biggest barrier is getting properties because we've had huge resource problems in London.”

– Housing Provider

Our housing partners noted that changing priorities for landlords regarding varying legislative changes that came into force in the last year (eg: around damp and mould) meant that properties that would have been allocated into the partnership had to be used to decant existing tenants into, to resolve other property concerns. Priorities such as this, and lack of housing stock in general have impacted how many women we have been able to house this year. Our commissioners at Westminster City Council also acknowledged the issues with housing stock as a barrier for the project this year:

“ The only challenge is getting the properties. Yeah, that, that is the main challenge. No, there's no issues in terms of commissioning it.”

– Service Commissioner

“ The kind of the smoothness and regularity of properties coming through would make a difference.”

– Service Commissioner

There are 22 women currently in the project who are yet to be housed by one of the housing providers. 9 of these women have been nominated for properties across the partnership, and 13 women are yet to be nominated. Of the 13 women not yet nominated, this is due to a variety of factors; including the women not expressing the want to manage their own tenancy quite yet, still being in the early stages of engagement and relationship building with their Solace worker, waiting for suitable accommodation options to become available (ie: with adaptations for care and support needs), and also due to lack of housing stock amongst the partnership, mentioned above. We will continue to work with our housing partners over the next year to increase the availability of properties for the project as required, however we recognise that lack of housing across London (and nationally) is a wider issue that impacts further than only this project.



There are also two women who are housed within the partnership but were not accessing their home at the end of the year

One woman had returned to rough sleeping with her partner, her perpetrator, and the other was placed in temporary accommodation for her safety, following an incident in her flat. It is important to acknowledge these two women and their circumstances, to remember that housing women who have experienced entrenched and long-term rough sleeping is not a straight forward or linear process, and it is crucial that colleagues across the partnership and service commissioners are aware of this, to ensure a flexible and safety-focused approach can be taken to ensure the long-term success of the tenancy.

SUCCESSSES

Strong communication and honesty within the partnership was identified as reason for this year's successes:

“ I actually don't think that we could manage the clients without the joint approach, some of them, as they're quite complex. And so yeah, I've only got positive things to say.”

– Housing Provider

“ Everyone's aware of the risk [to the individual] at the beginning and it's managed straight away so, I always found that was where you stood out, compared to others.”

– Housing Provider

BENEFIT OF THE HOUSING FIRST COORDINATOR

A key element of the Westminster VAWG Housing First Project is the role of the Housing First Coordinator:

“ Having you [HF coordinator] present on, for example meetings with housing providers, that is really helpful and supportive and balancing. You have the VAWG insight but also the insight and understanding into housing which is really useful.”

– Solace Worker

The project has had a tenancy sustainment rate of 100% this year. This is a phenomenal achievement, considering that all women accessing the service have experiences of long-term, re-current homelessness and have struggled to maintain accommodation in the past. All partners and the commitment to collaborative working has contributed to the success of this project, but particular acknowledgement needs to go to the Housing First Coordinator. She has worked tirelessly throughout the year with our housing providers, supporting them to work effectively with the women housed in their properties; with a focus on safety planning and risk management, which has allowed them to successfully maintain their tenancies.

CHALLENGES

Limited understanding/experience working with Housing First Clients

Those working across the homelessness, VAWG or multiple disadvantage sector will be aware of the challenges and complexities of working with individuals who are experiencing multiple disadvantage. However, this can be a new experience for colleagues across the housing sector, and can have a negative impact on the housing provider; with two of our providers reporting low morale at times when working with Housing First women:

“Even with the collaborative approach, where we have worked with you, I can still remember the tenants I’ve worked with, and left thinking I haven’t really done a good job. There’s still work to be done... [there’s not always capacity] to follow through things and action plan... there’s a lack of funding.”

– Housing Provider

“Sometimes it’s frustrating, I find it frustrating, you know, I do a lot of Housing First work, and love working with the challenges, the staff [Solace/STADA] help me to, to be a better worker and also to learn of what’s going on out there. But I do sometimes leave thinking I didn’t get a good result... you work with someone and you leave, you want to feel you’ve done your best or you gave it a really good shot.”

– Housing Provider

This limited understanding can also impact the confidence the women in the project have in approaching their housing provider for support:

“[Service user] still doesn’t feel comfortable themselves to call the housing provider because they say ‘They’re just not gonna get it. Can you just do it for me?’ So, because there’s that kind of lack of understanding, it hinders the independence almost because it’s something that you need to keep doing for them, even though they are very capable of doing it themselves.”

– Solace Worker

Part of our Housing First Coordination role is working with the housing providers at times like these, to ensure they are able to work with the Housing First clients as best they can, with a sound understanding of the realistic outcomes they can expect for a Housing First client, which may differ to their ‘usual’ tenants they work with across their properties.

HOUSING STATUS OF WOMEN AT THE END OF YEAR 4



18
women were housed



13
women were in supported accommodation



1
woman was in other temporary accommodation



1
woman was sofa surfing



6
women were rough sleeping



1
woman was in custody

3.5 HEALTH AND WELLBEING



82%

82% of women had mental health support needs



80%

80% of women had support needs around drugs/alcohol



30%

30% of women had significant physical health/mobility issues

We have had women access varying support for their health & wellbeing support needs this year, including access to cancer care and surgery, pregnancy care, sexual health and HIV treatment, trauma therapy, women's health screenings and access to substitute prescribing.

SUCCESSSES

One woman has accessed cancer treatment throughout the year, with support from her Solace worker where requested. This is something that may not have been possible without the intensive support Housing First offers:

“It’s [Housing First] helping health outcomes... maybe they've got a cancer diagnosis.. they're in survival mode. They turn down the two week wait referral. They say no, they're in survival mode and we've had young women pass away on the street in her 30s and for things that were treatable. Basically, this is their quality of life, but it's also a cold hard cash savings as well across public health.”

– Service Commissioner



The project has linked in closely with Street Talk¹¹ this year; a project that engages vulnerable women with experiences of street based prostitution in with care they may have been excluded from or had trouble accessing in the past, such as trauma therapy and other forms of healthcare.

“I think that the partnership with Street Talk is a brilliant one this year and it's lovely to see the people taking that up... it was a gap that we didn't have before, and it seems an incredible and fruitful partnership. I see women that I remember a few years ago, and they were nowhere near ready to be talking about things, in that way with their therapist. There were nowhere near ready then, and so it's amazing to see them engaging with that.”

– Service Commissioner



24
women were supported to apply for benefits



10
women were in education/training/volunteering



7
women were supported to open a bank account



12
women were engaging in meaningful activities



9
women were supported to connect with family/friends



24
women were discussing/creating future plans with their worker

VOCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT



The Solace team have supported women who have expressed a desire to engage in further vocational training and education to help towards their employment goals. One woman has started to attend the Luminary Bakery, she is learning how to bake and has ambitions to start her own cake making business. Another has been making her own jewellery and has set up an Etsy account to sell these online. One woman has been supported to enrol onto a personal training course, while another has begun training in hair and beauty.

RECONNECTING WITH FAMILY



Several women have made steps to re-establish relationships with family - one person spent Christmas with their mother and sister who came to stay, after 10 years of not seeing each other. Another woman has been able to maintain regular communication with her mother and daughter. One woman was supported to engage with children's social care following the removal of her child; which has enabled the child to be placed under a Special Guardianship Order with a family member rather than adopted. She has been supported by her Solace worker to remain in contact with her daughter.

CHALLENGES

A number of women are suspected to have been financially exploited by their abusive partner or other known person. The Solace team have supported these women where possible to establish financial independence through safety planning, assisting them to apply for separate benefits claims and in one instance moving the client to an alternate women's only hostel.

A further challenge identified is the isolation tactics used by the abusive partner, and the impact this had on the women's ability to engage with family, friends, their workers and within meaningful activities. In a few instances, this was exacerbated when the abusive partner would stay at the client's address, alienating them from neighbours and at times placing their tenancies at risk. One key theme that was consistent with findings from previous years, was the sense of how women felt alienated from, and judged by 'mainstream' society, and how this created a significant barrier to community integration. One woman spoke of feeling "ostracised":

“I know when I've been,
when someone judges me, I
feel it.”

– HF Client

“Like a lot of people, when you've become
homeless and they only they see you as
homeless. As if you haven't had a life before
that.”

– HF Client

3.7 PARTNERSHIP WORKING

BACK 



A crucial element of effectively supporting women experiencing multiple disadvantage is having a strong partnership of multi-agency colleagues around the project. This section highlights some of the key successes and challenges of partnership working within the project this year.

SUCCESSSES

Impact of the project on wider services and the importance of collaborative working



One of our Westminster City Council commissioners identified the project's positive impact on the wider service landscape across the borough:

“Role modelling that fabulous trauma informed and proactive outreach style of work... and that's like good... a great impact on the system, the sort of [service] ecosystem...so grateful to have a VAWG specialist with these situations that feel so incredibly risky and frustrating.”

– Service Commissioner



One of the Solace team also identified a service gap for women experiencing multiple disadvantage that would be evident, without the project:

“Safety planning for maybe... like non-MD [a woman not experiencing multiple disadvantage], and survivors of DA and VAWG look very different.”

– Solace Worker



Another member of the Solace team also identified how they were able to work collaboratively with wider services to support the perpetrator:

“[We] will link up with the professional support for the perpetrator as much as possible, whether that means doing a joint visit, just kind of having to separate them, inviting the perpetrators workers to multiple multi-disciplinary team meetings to have their input to keep one another updated from a safety planning and risk assessing perspective.”

– Solace Worker

This example of good practice shows the importance of linking in with wider services, in this case support for the perpetrator, to ensure the best possible outcome for the woman being supported by the project.

CHALLENGES

Other services understanding of VAWG, multiple disadvantage and perpetrator behaviour has been identified as a barrier to successful partnership working this year:

“The knowledge of VAWG and knowledge of perpetrator behaviour by professionals supporting perpetrators sucks.”
– Solace Worker

“[There was] threat of eviction because of the perpetrator...I remember at the time, we were really advocating that this is because of his behaviour it wouldn't happen if it weren't for him. And I feel like again, they've still held [victim/survivor] responsible.”
– Solace Worker

Lack of flexibility in other services has also been highlighted:

“A negative about partnership working would probably be the lack of flexibility that other services have, which is often not, you know, through the worker themselves. It's the design of the service.”
– Solace Worker

Overall, knowledge and understanding of multiple disadvantage and its impact on women needs to be improved across all sectors, to ensure women like the one's supported in this project, are met with an appropriate response to their circumstances and support needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS



INCREASE THE CAPACITY FOR HOLISTIC, CONTINUOUS COMMISSIONING

“You need long horizons with Housing First, you need a couple of years.. we're only up to 2025, so that that's difficult.”
 – Service Commissioner

“Honestly, the funding should really go into more places like this because they do, they do what they say. And they do what they said on the tin.”
 – HF Client

Our Housing First project, like many others, relies on short-term pots of funding – meaning stability and continuity of the service is not always clear. Housing First is a model that aims to end long-term and recurrent homelessness; therefore it is crucial that continuous funding can be obtained where possible, to appease the minds of the women using the service, and to prevent high staff turnover that we often see across the homelessness sector due to short-term employment contracts.



EXPAND OTHER SERVICES AND SECTORS KNOWLEDGE OF VAWG AND MULTIPLE DISADVANTAGE

As the Westminster VAWG Housing First Project, and other Housing First projects, continue to operate and expand across the country, increasing numbers of people experiencing multiple disadvantage are being housed and integrated into our communities. The homelessness sector’s knowledge of VAWG and multiple disadvantage needs to continue improving, but so does other services and linked sectors’ knowledge. Organisations should turn to recognised training providers, with experience in developing and delivering training around domestic abuse, VAWG and multiple disadvantage to support with improving knowledge across their staff teams and services. Multiple disadvantage is not just a homelessness services issue; and increased understanding of these systemic issues, particularly the impact they have on women, will improve how women experience access to services and their Housing First tenancies.



CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT IN RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF PERPETRATORS EXPERIENCING MULTIPLE DISADVANTAGE

“That the woman feels ohh, he's being he's being supported, he's alright. I don't have to be looking after him as well. I don't have to be sacrificing my needs for him”
 – Solace Worker

Perpetrators will often have their own support needs and their own experiences of multiple disadvantage, and it is important that they have access to their own support network to meet these needs. This will include support to access specialist services including health, mental health, substance misuse, and others, including behaviour change services when appropriate. By supporting perpetrators, we are reducing the likelihood of victim/survivors having their access to support controlled or jeopardised. Quite simply, if we don't work to meet the needs of the perpetrators of abuse, we do not address the problem. If they cannot remain with and control their current/most recent partner, they will, inevitably, move on to build a relationship with another vulnerable woman and the harm they cause continues.

CONCLUSION

“What 3 words would you use to describe your Housing First journey this year?”

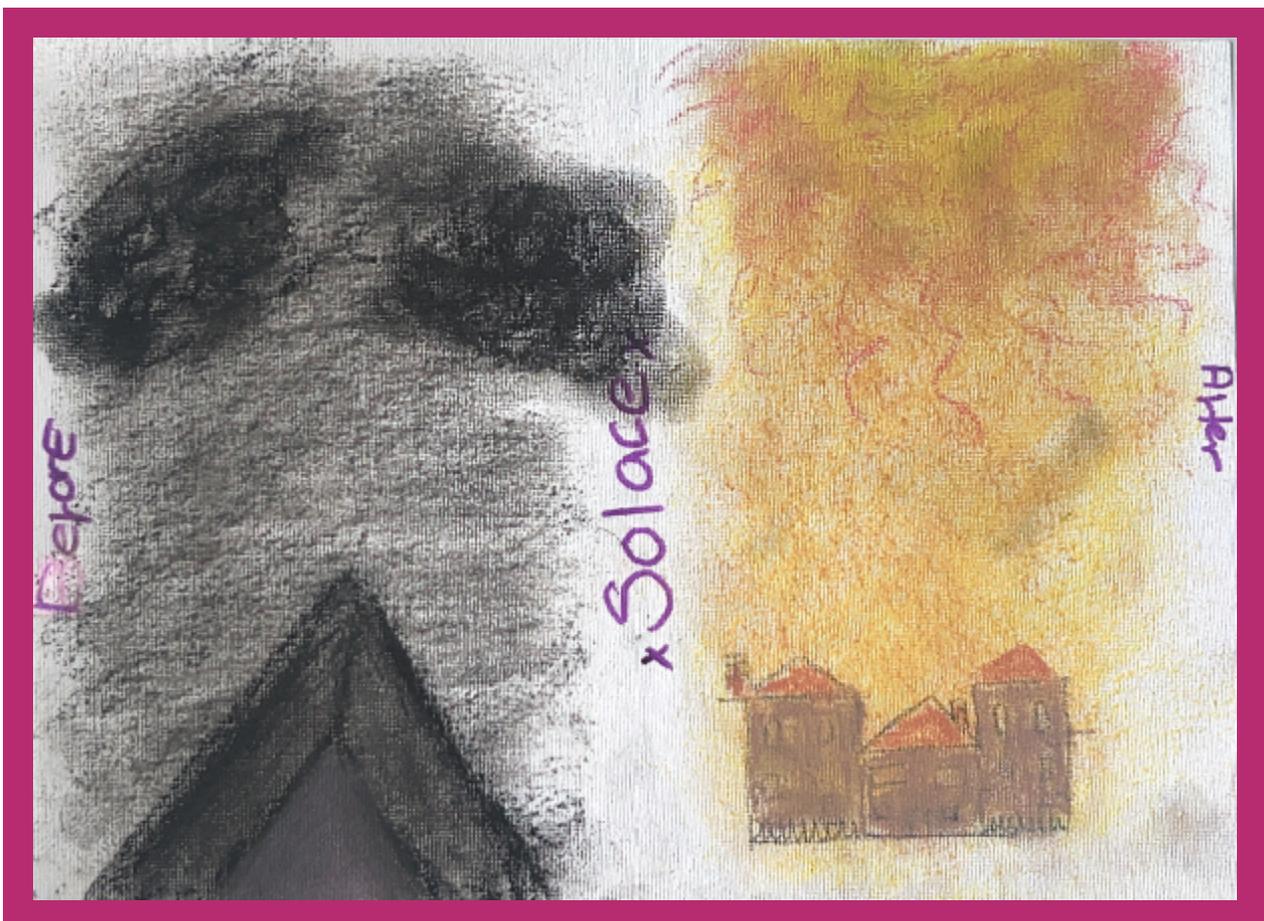
Careful Inspiring
 Challenge **Grateful**
Hopeful
 Enlightening
 Supportive

As the fourth year of this project comes to a close and we look forward to next year, we can be confident in our learnings from this project; having a dedicated Housing First provision for women who have experienced long-term rough sleeping and multiple disadvantage, works. Of course, there will always be room for development and further learning as the project continues; but long-term funding is desperately needed for this, and other Housing First projects across the country, so that they can be effective long term, ensuring the best possible outcomes for the clients in the project.

“I was on the street.
There was nothing
beautiful on the
street. It was awful.”

“How would you
compare that to
now?”

“Like *life*
and *death*”



APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: EVALUATION QUESTIONS AND CONVERSATION PROMPTS

Questions for art inspiration

How has Housing First made you feel this year?
What has been a key moment of Housing First for you this year?

Questions for everyone

What 3 words would you use to describe this year in Housing First?

Questions for Housing Providers

What are the differences you've noticed within the Westminster VAWG Housing First compared to other Housing First models?

What are your thoughts on the 'coalition' approach to partnership and the effectiveness of this, what are the positives/negatives to this?

What is the biggest barrier you face in fulfilling your role in the partnership?

What have you seen that has impacted and proved successful in sustaining a tenancy with a Housing First client?

Questions for the women

How was your life before you started on the Housing First Project?

In 3 words, describe what you like about the support you received from your Housing First worker?

If there anything different about your life, now you are receiving support?

How do you feel you could be better supported by other services and is there anything you find challenging about other services?

Is there anything else you'd like to say?

Questions for commissioners

Why do you commission a specific VAWG Housing First service? Why do you think this is needed?

Is there anything different in the approach to commissioning this project compared with a generic mixed Housing First project.

What are the challenges for you in commissioning this project?

What do you think the Westminster VAWG housing first service brings to services in Westminster?

Questions for Solace team

General:

What piece of advice or key learning around supporting women in House First would you pass on to another Housing First worker?

How do they see themselves as different from generic Housing First services?

In what ways do you think the support that you provide in this Westminster VAWG Housing First service is different to that of a generic service?

VAWG & risk

What do you do to support women around domestic abuse or other forms of violence against women and girls? And how do you manage risk?

What are the key challenges you face and how do you manage or overcome these?

What do you do to support women to feel physically safe? And what do you do to support women around emotional safety?

Housing

What are your thoughts on your partnerships with the housing providers?

What are your thoughts on how the housing is set up? i.e Engagement from housing leads & providers? Do you feel like they understand what housing first is and the clients that you support?

Is there anything that you believe would help women to sustain their tenancies?

What are the key factors that contribute to tenancy breakdown when housing women? And what do you do? How do you work with partners to overcome these?

Partnership working

What partnerships have you built that have been key to supporting women? What does that partnership work look like?

Are there any barriers to forming and sustaining partnerships with any particular services?



Overview

Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse (STADA) currently provides a Housing First coordinator role as part of the Westminster VAWG Housing First project. The role of the Housing First coordinator is to lead the housing coordination element of the project, maintain strong working relationships with housing partners, and act as a point of contact between the support and housing providers.

Responsibilities include:

- Oversight of the service level agreement between the project and social housing providers to ensure accountability of all partners for their respective roles and responsibilities.
- Facilitate the housing nominations process and ensure that this is adapted to remove any barriers to nominations/viewings/sign up; to ensure that this is accessible for the women to engage with.
- Conduct introductory tenancy sustainment briefings between the support provider, Housing First lead, allocated housing officer and service user to ensure that each party has an understanding of each other's roles, and that adaptations can be made to support the service user. The briefing also allow the opportunity for any safety measures/risk management interventions to be implemented, and routes of escalation to be established.
- Conduct a 12-week tenancy review meeting, to identify and address any issues early on. These meetings are led by the tenant to ensure that communication with the housing officer is maintained and any issues which have arisen within the first 3 months can be addressed. This is also an opportunity for the housing provider to raise any issues which may have arisen.
- Arrange quarterly partnership meetings with lead contacts from support services and housing providers.
- Meet regularly on a one-to-one basis with providers where required.
- Troubleshoot and escalate any issues which may arise during the course of a Housing First tenant's tenancy, and co-ordinate meetings between agencies to ensure any issues which arise are addressed and resolved.

Housing First evaluation & report: STADA also plays a critical role in the Housing First partnership by monitoring and evaluating the project outcomes on a yearly basis. The Housing First coordinator supports data collection, analysis and drafting of the final report.

Housing First training for housing providers: The coordinator also supports the delivery of training to providers on Housing First as an accommodation option for women experiencing VAWG and multiple disadvantage. The training component of the project is essential to ensure housing providers are equipped to respond to the unique needs of the women accessing Housing First.

Benefit of the Housing First coordinator role

The role of the Housing First coordinator in the Westminster VAWG Housing First project has been evaluated, and found to have significant benefits to the running of the project:

The role takes the onus away from the support provider to liaise with the housing provider, meaning they can dedicate their time fully toward supporting the woman.

- The coordinator played a vital role in building and maintaining relationships with housing providers, ensuring they meet their quota for housing stock, as per the service level agreement.
- Creates a platform for partnership working amongst housing providers: the coordinator arranges quarterly meetings where all housing providers attend to feedback about the project, share best practice and support colleagues with any issues.
- Preventing evictions: if there are concerns regarding a tenancy, the coordinator will step in and work with the housing and support providers to find solutions. Eviction can often be a point of contention between housing and support providers, and so the Housing First coordinator can act as a 'point of liaison' between partners to maintain relations and generate an effective outcome.

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Thank you to our housing partners for their commitment to the project, we acknowledge the challenges in terms of lack of available housing and stand side by side with you to call for the prioritization of the building of more social housing in London (and the UK). Thank you to the Standing Together team: Hannah Brown, Housing First Coordinator, for her dedication, passion and tenacity to coordinate an effective community response for the women; and for her support to gather the evidence for this evaluation, and to Holly Ringrose, DAHA Homelessness Development Lead, for assisting with the evaluation and designing the final report so that it engages the reader.

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