

Tips from the Frontline

Influencing for change: Women's Homelessness

Our practice forums bring together those who work with women experiencing homelessness across the country. In the forums practitioners connect, share best practice, and navigate problems together. The tips from the frontline series is informed by our most recent presentations and discussions, and provides practical guidance and recommendations for addressing these shared experiences.

This practice brief is designed to provide tips to leaders within the women's and homelessness sectors on how to influence for change.



Why is this relevant?

Women's experiences of homelessness are often less visible. If homeless, women are more likely to be in temporary accommodation, sofa surfing, unsafe accommodation, and other less visible locations, for example, on public transport¹. This means that while working on the frontline it is often necessary to raise awareness of the experiences of women.

If women are visible to a homelessness service, it is often the case the service might struggle to find provision to meet their needs. This is because services and systems which are meant to be for everyone can inadvertently bias their delivery towards men, when they do not understand and therefore respond to women's different experiences of homelessness. Only 11% of homelessness services are gender specific².

Many homelessness services are aware of the need to improve the system's response to women experiencing homelessness. Leaders and practitioners within the homelessness sector and beyond are developing new services to meet women's needs, promoting best practice responses to women experiencing homelessness and influencing for local and national systems change.

This practice brief summarises input from the Homeless Link policy team, and knowledge shared by practitioners on how to influence for the improvement of systems and services for women experiencing homelessness. It sets out a series of tips for how to effect change in your organisation, locally and nationally. It also highlights a range of projects which forum attendees had either led or supported with the goal of improving responses to women's homelessness.

¹ <https://mungos.org/publication/women-and-rough-sleeping-a-critical-review/>

² <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/2021-annual-review-of-support-for-single-homeless-people-in-england/#:~:text=Homelessness%20trends,-During%20the%202020&text=This%20includes%20194%2C670%20single%20households,increase%20of%2037>

Defining the change you want to see

A first step is to establish a shared objective for the delivery of an effective response to women's homelessness, and then, what changes are required to make it happen. The objective is most likely to be accurate and useful if it has been identified and co-designed with other stakeholders.

Once you have defined the change you want to see, it is possible to understand who might hold responsibility for making these changes. This might be a case of changing practice in one organisation or across the whole sector or it might require local or even national policy changes.

For example:

Change: To ensure women have improved access to a local homelessness service, they need to make their referral criteria less restrictive.

Decision makers: This may require a change to the practice of the homelessness services which can be implemented by its management team, so these are the decision makers to be targeted.

Change: There needs to be more local specialist services for women.

Decision makers: This could be determined by the local authority homelessness strategy – which might be “owned” by a local authority itself or by a local homelessness forum.

Change: There is inadequate funding for women's homelessness services.

Decision makers: National government could provide ring fenced funding through one of its existing homelessness programmes to specifically provide services for women's homelessness.

Understand Decision Makers

Once the change and decision makers have been established, it is important to understand the individual who has the power to deliver the change.

If the individual decision maker's existing interest, motivations and capacity is understood, you are in a better position to decide on the appropriate strategy for influencing change. Steps that can be taken to understand the individual may include:

- Doing research: consulting the internet; local news and media; asking other people who work in the sector.
- Building relationships: attending local forums and networking events; inviting people to visit the services; inviting people to one-one meetings (coffee and a chat).
- Establishing what is known: what are the individual's preferences and passions; what constraints do they face.
- Think about relevant timing – e.g. at what time of year are budgets set

This knowledge can be used to inform a strategy for making change. From the information gathered, next steps may include:

- Making the case for change, which may happen through existing channels and constructive dialogue or through developing a campaign.
- Providing the evidence and tools to support decision makers in their work. This might include quantitative evidence of local need, resources to understand the impact of the failure to address women's homelessness or opportunities to meet and consult with women with lived experience.
- Deciding who is best placed to influence, it may be that someone else has already established a relationship of trust with the decision maker.
- Plan when a good time is to effect change.

Building relationships with commissioners

Local authorities need to conduct adequate consultation to ensure their services are responsive to local need. The work is stronger when it recognises the voice of frontline practitioners and those with lived experience. To contribute to this work, build a relationship with the local commissioners. Provide evidence of the local need (quantitative and qualitative), as well as offering support with consultation process and future engagement work.

Things to consider

The approach you take to making the changes you want to see and influencing the relevant decision makers will depend on your sphere of influence. If the person is located within your or another local organisation, working within local systems or in a position of national power and influence.

Organisational

- Consider the barriers to the day-to-day delivery of services and the improvement of outcomes for the women you support.

Homeless Link

- Assess what is within you or your team's power to change, are there any policies or practices which you can introduce or improve?
- Engage with practice guidance to support the development of the organisation's response. Find relevant guidance on Homeless Link's website under '[Ending Women's Homelessness](#)':

Local

- Identify other organisations that are impacted by the problems you face and build a relationship with them to exchange information and support.
- Participate in existing local forums and networks, for example local homelessness forums. Utilise these forums to raise awareness of the experiences of women.
- Identify the relevant local decision makers to whom you can highlight the barriers you experience to improving practice and outcomes for the people you support.
- Find out if there are any existing solutions that you can highlight. For example, a women's homelessness pathway adopted in a different local area.

Practice Highlight

Nelson Trust and Shelter in Bristol established a Women's Action Group as a vehicle to support women with lived experience to try and influence change locally. The Women's Action Group evaluate how things could be done differently, communicate this to other professionals, local commissioners, and the public. They recently exhibited a mural on women homelessness in Bristol. This work was featured in the Bristol Post: [Women in Bristol with lived experience of homelessness working to create change - Bristol Live \(bristolpost.co.uk\)](#)

National

- Find out if there are voices highlighting the issue already, this might include membership organisations, other third sector and grassroots organisations. You may be able to contribute to work that is ongoing.
- Build a relationship with a local MP. Invite them to your service and provide them with local examples of why your work is important. Ask them to contact ministers and spokespeople with relevant portfolios.
- Identify government consultations on policy or existing vehicles such as all-party parliamentary groups (APPG) that you can contribute to.
- Provide intelligence to membership bodies such as Homeless Link.

Practice Highlight

Agenda Alliance was created in 2015 to bring together the voluntary sector to advocate for women and girls with the most complex unmet needs. The alliance coordinate policy and practice interventions with the goal of ensuring systems and services respond appropriately to women and girls with unmet needs. In 2023 Agenda Alliance collaborated with the national service Changing Lives to produce the report 'Dismantling Disadvantage': [TSWF Final Report \(agendaalliance.org\)](#). This report highlights the disproportionate impact cuts to public services have had on women with unmet needs in the North-East of England and makes recommendations for how public services can be reformed to effectively meet women's needs.

Make an argument for change

Presenting an argument for why there needs to be change can be challenging. It is important to remember that not everyone will be as familiar with the problem as you and therefore it may take time to convince them of the importance of acting on proposed solutions. This section sets out key tips for developing and convincing people of your argument for change.

1. **Develop a narrative, which can connect people to the problem.** Consider how you can help others care about the problem as much as you do. Do not assume knowledge others may not have, instead decide what the basic facts, key points and stories are that you want to share. Stories about individuals are always the most powerful tool if they are available. If you can encourage the other person to emotionally connect, that is a success.
2. **Prepare the evidence to support your argument.** This might include general statistics, quantitative evidence generated from service delivery and case studies. It may also include arranging service visits and connecting lived experience groups with the relevant decision makers so that they can observe the realities rooted in experience.
3. **Spend time developing your 'asks' for what needs to change.** Ensure your 'asks' clearly express what you want to change. They can be ambitious but think about how you can also present them as achievable. Tailor your asks for your audience, are you asking for something which is within that person's control?
4. **Prepare your counter arguments.** Difficult questions may be asked, and the more prepared you are, the more confident you will feel answering them. Try a workshop with your colleagues in which someone presents the argument while the other plays devil's advocate. Prepare for common questions and have key pieces of evidence to support your response.

5. **Explain why your issue is a priority.** Sometimes winning the moral case does not deliver change. Your target may agree with you, but you need to explain why it may be more important to make your change than do something else, especially where there is a cost involved.
6. **Understand the costs involved.** A lot of change involves cost, whether in terms of money or people. Do not ignore this point and be clear about the likely cost of the change. Sometimes the change can cause a saving elsewhere in which case you should point this out at the same time (spending x on this service will save y on another)
7. **Capitalise on knowledge and skills in your organisation.** Consider the skills and interests of those in your team and other people who access your service. How can you support them to become voices for change? If your team can consistently raise the problem and the related asks, in relevant forums with key decision makers and publicly, over time recognition and awareness will increase. The team can also play a role in educating other local services and professionals on what effective responses may look like.
8. **Reflect on your progress.** Identify key measures of success and redlines which you are prepared to stick to early on, this will help you reflect on whether you have met these expectations. Check in on the project regularly to reflect on whether it is developing according to these principles and objectives. This is also an important time to celebrate what you have achieved.

Practice Highlight

Women Against Homelessness and Abuse (WAHA), jointly led by Latin America Womens Aid and the OYA consortium, identified that barriers for black and minoritised women can be two-fold, experiencing disadvantage because of race as well as gender. To influence for change WAHA:

- Produced a briefing containing policy and practice recommendations for relevant local and national authorities: <https://lawadv.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/WAHAPOLICYBRIF-SEP12-min.pdf>
- Developed a practice tool for frontline practitioners on support for women fleeing domestic abuse: https://lawadv.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/WEB_WAHATOOLSPREADS.pdf

'What about men?'

Frontline practitioners identified this as a common question asked when they raised the need for improved response to women's homelessness. Key to providing a response to this and similar questions is a well-practiced answer. The following response was shared as an example:

We know that women experience homelessness differently, responses that work for men won't work for women in a lot of cases. Hidden homelessness is a gendered experience, and women are more likely to remain unseen for longer. Transient forms of homelessness experienced over the long term are damaging to health. The average age of death for women experiencing homelessness is 43, lower than the life expectancy of men. When women do become visible to homelessness services, they are more likely to be seriously unwell, and the intervention that might work for men are less likely to work for women in these cases. We need to do more to step in earlier. We need a pathway to support women who might be sex working and staying somewhere unsafe, we cannot wait until they are rough sleeping and can be verified.

When preparing your own answer, write down the key points you want to make and the evidence you want to use to support it. This might include national statistics on health and other outcomes of women experiencing homelessness, evidence of repeat homeless applications made by women in your local area, data on women accessing your service who are homeless. This may demonstrate that women experience homelessness, the current solutions are not working and there may be a more efficient use of resources.

Evidence on how to respond to questions about women's homelessness can be found in this briefing: https://homelesslink-1b54.kxcdn.com/media/documents/Myth_Busting_cVUs0i9.pdf

Build alliances

People live multi-issue lives. Therefore, a multi-disciplinary approach is valuable in day-to-day service delivery and the work of influencing for change. The challenges that frontline services recognise are often shared. Support that can be provided to each other to help overcome those shared barriers can sustain and strengthen the work of influencing for change. Building alliances is important work and can be developed with organisations you might usually consider allies and those you would not. You can also contact the [Homeless Link partnership team](#) for support with building local relationships. This section sets out what to consider when building alliances.

- 1. Attend partnership meetings.** This can include communities of practices, which provide a forum to connect with other professionals locally and nationally. This also includes attending local network meetings and events, such

as homelessness forums, local consultations and events coordinated by organisation to raise awareness of local and national issues.

- 2. Make time for your influencing.** Building relationships with other services, relevant decision makers and attending forums and networking spaces can take time. Try to ringfence this time and fund the work if possible.
- 3. Build unlikely alliances.** Identify common ground with services and decision makers you might not usually expect to build alliances with. This might include organisations who are not in your sector, but nonetheless share similar grievances and goals. There also may be local decision makers, who if approached, might be interested in learning more about, and eventually supporting your work. Remain open to unexpected alliances. Be conscious of red lines, you may not be able to work with everyone if you do not have shared values or vision.
- 4. Find ways to improve communication.** If there has been a breakdown in communication with key partners and decision makers, including the local authority, consider what you still have in common and what barriers you might both find frustrating. Connect with people in organisations with which you might have a common ground, consider how you can support each other to improve the communication overall.

Practice Highlight

The Women's Homelessness Action Group (WHAG) is an initiative that emerged from the organisation '[It Takes a City](#)' in Cambridge. WHAG came together following a workshop held at the summit on homelessness in November 2018, with the goal of raising awareness of women's homelessness locally.

The group has a range of members, including those currently working in the homelessness sector, academics, student activists and volunteers, those with lived experience, city council and county council officers, those with past work experience in homeless provision, the CEO of local women's aid, the voluntary sector and those who care passionately about changing services for homeless women.

Members of WHAG attend as many local meetings as they can to raise the issue of women's homelessness. In 2022, the WHAG commissioned a report to lay out the local context of women's homelessness and look into how they could work towards providing a 'Haven' for women to use at night-time in Cambridge. You can find this report here: [The-Haven-Tackling-Womens-Homelessness-in-Cambridge-together-Aug-2022-PDF.pdf](#) (ittakesacity.org.uk).

Further Resources

- Myth Busting Women's Homelessness (Homeless Link): https://homelesslink-1b54.kxcdn.com/media/documents/Myth_Busting_cVUs0i9.pdf
- Ending Women's Homelessness resources (Homeless Link): <https://homeless.org.uk/areas-of-expertise/meeting-diverse-needs/ending-womens-homelessness/>
- Policy and Practice Briefing (Women Against Homelessness and Abuse) <https://lawadv.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/WAHAPOLICYBRIF-SEP12-min.pdf>
- Report - Tackling Women's Homelessness in Cambridge (It Takes a City) [The-Haven-Tackling-Womens-Homelessness-in-Cambridge-together-Aug-2022-PDF.pdf](https://ittakesacity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/The-Haven-Tackling-Womens-Homelessness-in-Cambridge-together-Aug-2022-PDF.pdf) (ittakesacity.org.uk)
- Projects and Campaign (Agenda Alliance) <https://www.agendaalliance.org/our-work/projects-and-campaigns/>
- Resources and training (Against Violence and Abuse) <https://avaproject.org.uk/>

What We Do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it. Our social enterprise supports the homelessness sector through specialised software, engaging training, expert consultancy, and impactful events that also helps to fund our wider work to end homelessness for good.

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Let's End Homelessness Together

