

Women's services

Our journey to becoming gender-informed

Laura Davis

Women's services development manager, Porchlight

lauradavis@porchlight.org.uk

Overview



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Introduction to Porchlight



- Kent's largest charity for homeless and vulnerable people
- Helping people with mental health, housing, education and employment
- Services for all gender identities



Motivation for change

- Increasing prevalence of female rough sleepers and homelessness
- Staff reported challenges of working effectively with women
- Reports from women that services weren't meeting their needs



“didn’t want to help me”

Where we began

- 2018 *Seeing the unseen* study conducted by Porchlight
- 40 female rough sleepers shared their experiences



Initial findings

- Homeless women with a severe mental illness are highly vulnerable
- Increasingly complex trauma
- No single cause
- Managing health and hygiene is challenging
- Not getting the help they need from statutory or support services



Initial actions taken

- Women's services development manager role created October 2019
- Steering group established – lived experience volunteers, frontline staff and partners
- Meetings with Kent network and working group with stakeholders created
- Follow up study – what are women's views on what needs to change?

Impacts of the pandemic

- ‘Everybody In’: women sometimes not eligible and lack of female-only provision in Kent
- Domestic abuse: increased risk and severity
- Health: higher barriers to services
- Children: more limited contact
- Isolation: decline in mental wellbeing; increased substance misuse
- Modern slavery: increased risk

How the project adapted

- Steering group and working group moved online
- Working remotely and engaging with women over the phone
- Continued at pace

Even more important now

- Universal Credit: end of the £20 uplift
- Protection for renters ending
- Furlough has ended
- Rents continue to rise as wages fall



Trends we're seeing

- 72% increase in women referred (compared to 64% for all clients)
- Almost twice as many women with high mental health needs (x 2 overall)
- 37% increase in women with high drug and alcohol use (x 2 overall)

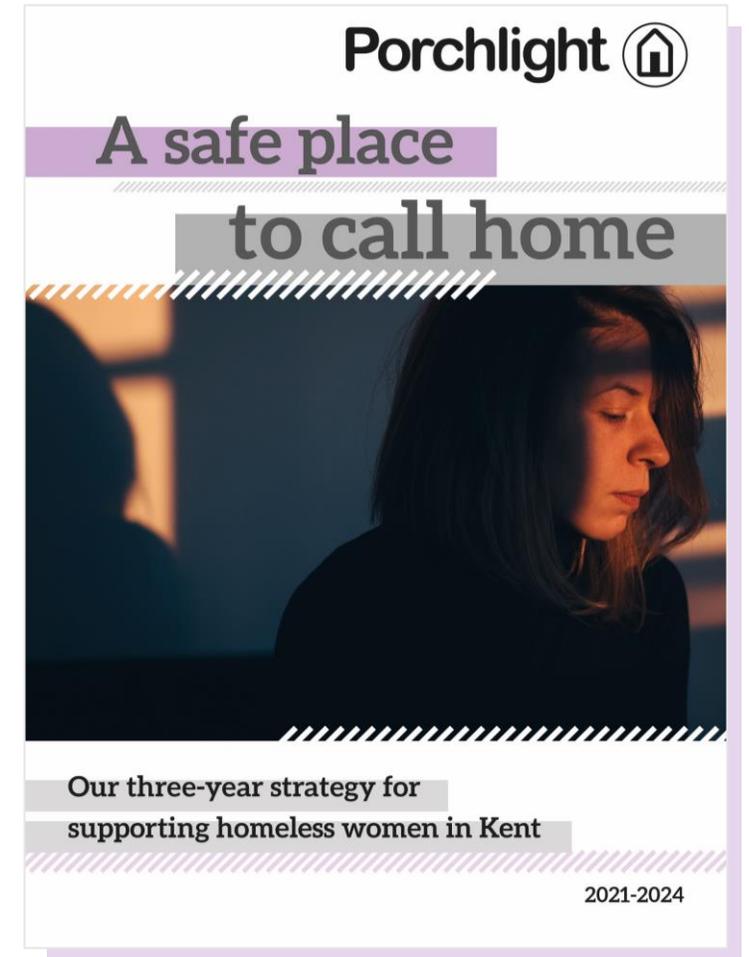


Source: Porchlight data

Progress: what's been achieved



- 3-year strategy – *A safe place to call home* – written and published
- Communications campaign – International Women's Day 2021
- Choice about gender of keyworker in homelessness services
- Toolkit produced and shared



Best practices toolkit

- Relationship with worker is key
- Learning from women and frontline staff who work with them – what makes an effective working relationship?

Working with homeless women

When we conducted a qualitative study with homeless women, we found that the relationship they have with their coach or worker is key to the experience they have in their recovery. We spoke with women who have experienced homelessness and the frontline staff who work with them to learn what makes an effective working relationship. These best practices are designed to be quick reminders of what women need and want.

20 best practices

- Down-to-earth, friendly approach – “I can just be myself!”
- Give women choice – “this might be the first time they’ve had the opportunity so we give them choice wherever we can – even where they choose to sit”
- Be compassionate – listen and show that you care about what you hear 
- Go the extra mile – make sure there’s always someone available for them to contact; be there for women (e.g. attend appointments with them)
- Share professional experiences (anonymous, limited detail) to show you understand but be clear that each woman’s experiences are individual to them
- Active listening and empathy – show that you are listening and respond constructively 
- Start small – achieve little things to show progress and create a positive working relationship
- Look for what is unsaid – ability to look beyond the presenting issue to ascertain if there are additional risks or concerns
- Safety first – for women experiencing violence or involved in sex work, put a safety plan together 
- Ask questions to challenge current behaviours – help women to see their situation differently with open questions that help them to reflect (eg, how did that make you feel?)
- Trauma-informed approach – understand that past experiences influence present behaviours; be aware of possible triggers
- Set healthy boundaries – be clear about what you will and won’t do and stick to it
- Keep in touch – have regular communication with the women 
- Show no judgement – “Demonstrate that we can understand them; we do not judge them; it’s OK”
- Be creative – engage in activities such as making a diary of their journey. “Create what they want to create: Make it practical – quotes, reminders, budgeting plans, goals, dreams”
- Go at her pace – help her set specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound (SMART) goals that work for her and walk alongside her in a supporting role 
- Open up possibilities – focus on the current needs of the woman while opening up the option of other possibilities and future goals and dreams
- Praise – show your appreciation of their progress and help women find healthy ways to reward themselves (e.g., a cup of tea)
- Take a person-centred approach – get to know her and her needs and work in a way that supports her best; empower her to take action herself 
- Support women to rebuild relationships – help women to learn to communicate and set healthy boundaries in their relationships

10 things to avoid

- ✗ Minimising / normalising
- ✗ Victim-blaming / shaming
- ✗ Telling them you know how it feels when you don’t
- ✗ Forcing women to make decisions
- ✗ Telling women what to do
- ✗ Patronising
- ✗ Dismissing
- ✗ Rushing
- ✗ Undervaluing rapport
- ✗ Pushing solutions when the woman is not ready

What women say about our support

“[My worker] is down to earth and lovely... [my worker] will listen to your experiences and give advice. Without textbook. Yeah. But if something causes her alarm. Obviously she has to report it. But she’s very good.” 

“They’ve all been supportive, helped me, like when I was going through my hip operation, my worker used to come to the hospital, and she picked me up from the hospital. She didn’t have to do that.” 

“More a normal person. Not bigger than you. She’s more open. She talks to you, like you want to be talked to... If I need anything, if I need to talk, she said she’s always there and always answers her phone.” 

“I was really lucky that [my worker] came along. She saved me... and she rung me, I met her on the Wednesday and I was in [temporary accommodation] the next night or something. And within a month I was in my house.” 

“If it wasn’t for them, I don’t know where I’ll be.” 

“My keyworker, I won’t mean about him, coz he’s nice, I can ring him up and he’ll be there. I can text him he texts me back. I’ve got a good keyworker here – that’s how it should be.” 

Final tip

When designing new services and initiatives, involve women in the process from idea generation, to creative design to organisation. This enriches the services and helps make sure we provide the services that matter most to the women we support.

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Progress: what's ongoing

- Two specialist workers in Outreach team
- Rapid rehousing fund
- 10% of supported housing allocated for women
- Working with The Hygiene Bank to deliver sanitary and hygiene products



Progress: what's ongoing

- Women's needs training delivered
- Women's only Porchlight Open Door (hub)
- Mental health training specialising in domestic abuse



Progress: what's in plan?

- **Knowledge development:** developing training and toolkit around domestic abuse and homelessness/complex needs
- **Knowledge sharing/building:** continued communications and events
- **Housing First:** building on initial findings to develop programme for women
- **Supported housing:** moving towards everyone deserves their own front door

Impact so far

- **Training:** reached over 130 professionals
- **Toolkit:** reached over 250 professionals and social media campaign
- **Specialist workers:** 39 women reached
- **Rapid rehousing fund:** 37 women supported
- **Porchlight workers:** 321 women in our homeless services benefiting from enhanced knowledge

Source: Porchlight data

Key learnings

- Income from trusts and major donors provides flexibility to learn and try new things
- Even small steps make a difference and begin a movement
- Ask women what they want/need and involve them in the process
- Involve frontline teams in consultations and steering groups

Questions?



Thank you very much for listening.



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