



# Lives on Hold

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**Women's experiences of  
homelessness in Camden**



# Safe Space

A gender informed and trauma responsive approach to working with women experiencing multiple disadvantage living in the Camden Adult Pathway.

- Relationships
- Joint working
- Choice and Control

Approach piloted in Camden in a council commissioned hostel. Council and St Mungo's worked together on expanding the initiative.



A qualitative piece of research that sought to hear the voices of the most vulnerable women experiencing homelessness.

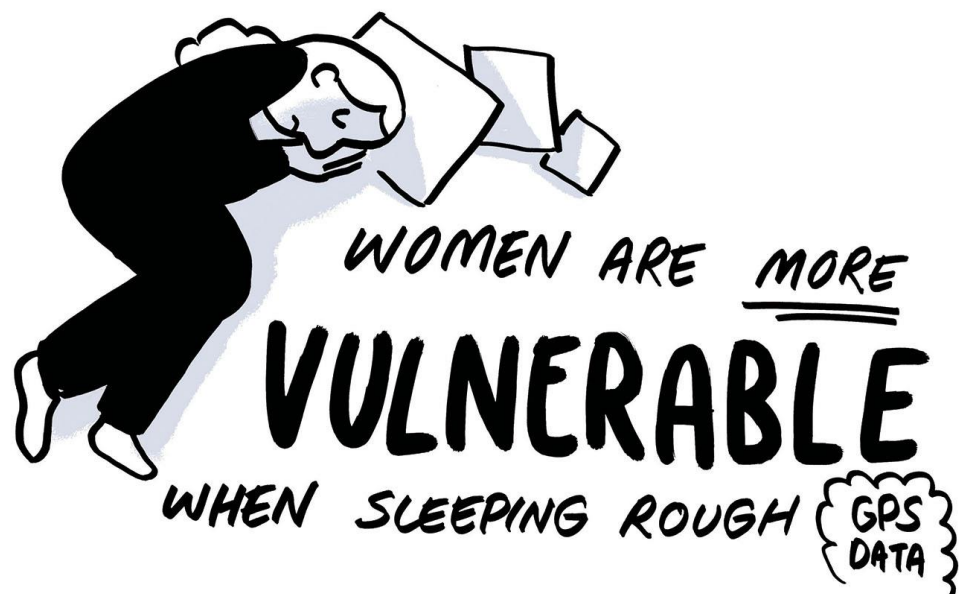
- Semi structured interviews
- Flexible approach to interviewing
- Quote heavy
- 31 women with multiple disadvantage
- 3 Focus groups – with Scriberia
- Diverse experiences



# We set out to gain a better understanding of:

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- How women with multiple disadvantage describe their experience of homelessness, living in hostels and other support services in Camden.
- What safety means to the homeless women using Camden services.
- What homeless women's attitudes are to mixed gender and women-only services, including supported accommodation.
- What makes a positive and supportive relationship with staff for homeless women.



"They rape you, beat you, burn you (...). You could just be sitting there minding your own business and.... it's horrible." (Natasha)

*“It’s not just like you haven’t got a roof over your head, you’re cold, you’re tired, yes? You’ve got to think about your life. You know, like, you’re just vulnerable. You’re just, like, thinking about men on the street. You know, like, physically you’re not strong enough to defend yourself if anything happens.” (Christina)*





*"Sleeping on the street, people rape you, beat you. Everything happens to you. When you're a man, you can fight your way out, but when you're a woman, you can't fight your way out.*

*You just take the pain. If you're fucking broke, you let people fuck you in the arse if you need that change."* (Blanca)



# What we found:

- Women want to be treated like a human by someone who acts like a human.

“You know when someone respects you...”

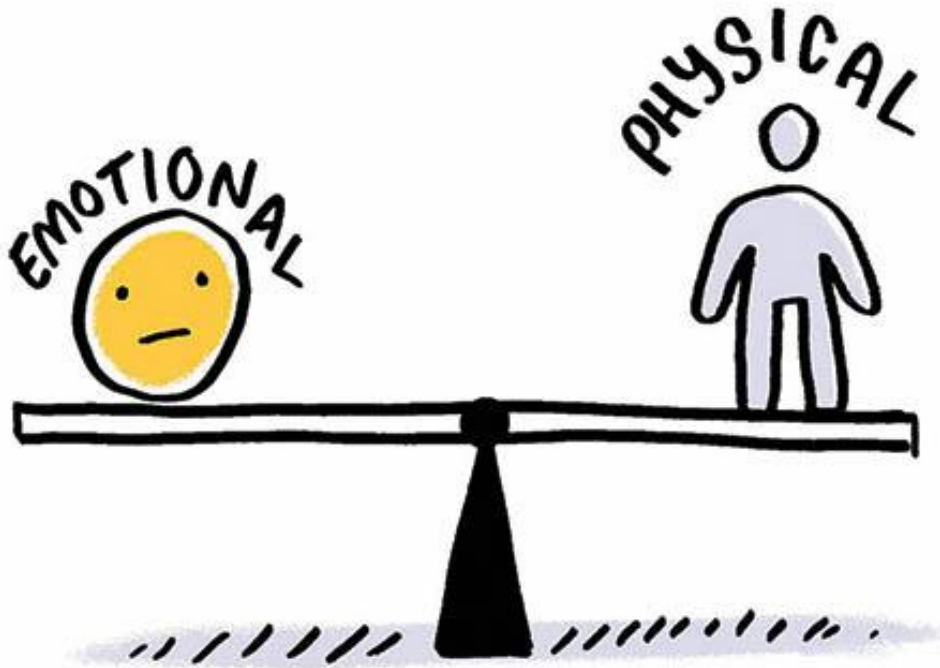
(Blanca)





# What we found:

- Physical safety Vs Emotional safety

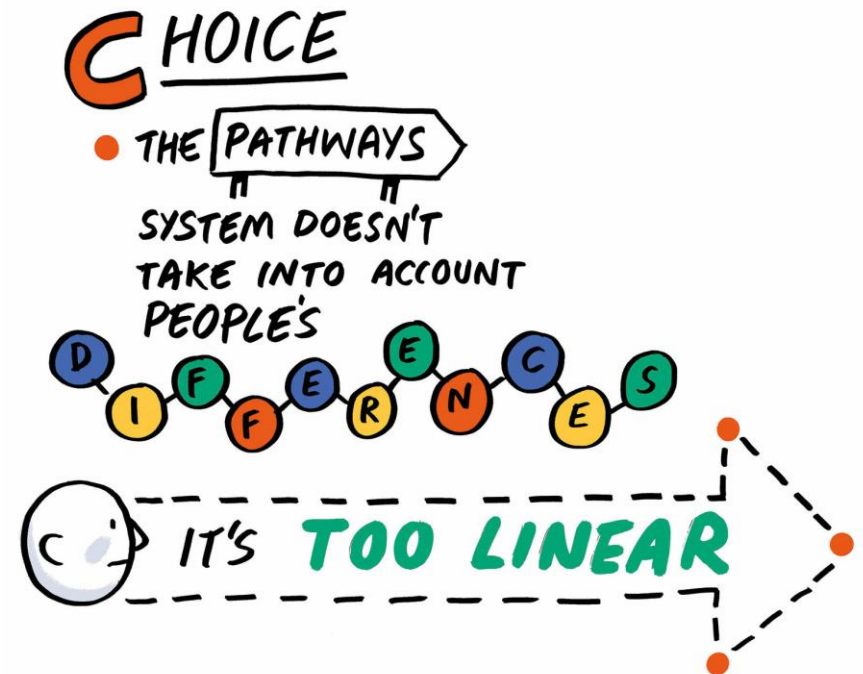


*“I feel like the most important thing is I feel safe. (..) Another thing that makes me feel even more safe is that if I have any problems, I have somebody to go and ask for help.”  
(Claudia)*

# What we found:

- Choice and Control

“No, I don’t want to do that,’ but I felt, in my position, I’ve been in a shelter and I don’t have any work or money, I can’t say no, do you know what I mean? You then feel obliged to thank everyone for their help because they are helping you.” (Billie)



# What we found:

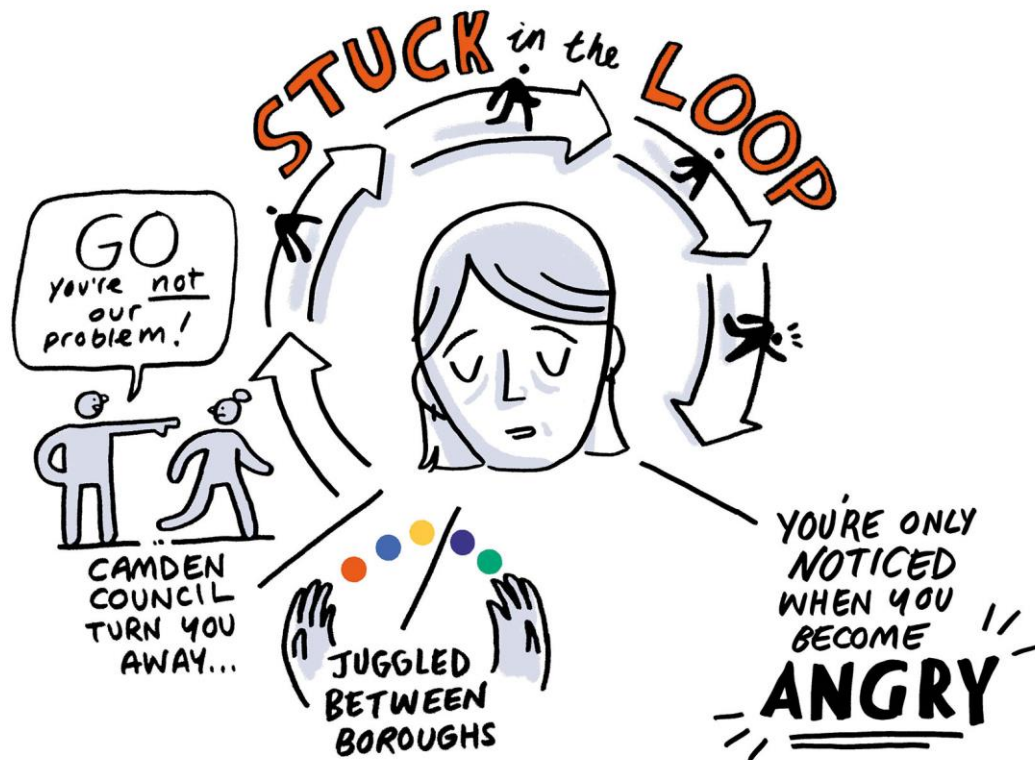
- Unheard or seen as aggressive



*Like, my strength is, like, made to magnify like it's what's bad about me. (..) I will stand up for myself (...) when you go through a lot you will, you learn to defend yourself." (Christina)*

# What we found:

- People who care but a system that doesn't



“You just get caught in this big loop. And that’s where I was for twenty years, in this big loop. I managed to get out of it, if not for (...) getting the property after (a partner) died, I’d still be in that loop. (...) The loop is horrible, it’s like you’re not existent. You’re here but you’re not here. (...) It’s not nice.” (Amina)

# Recommendations

## For commissioners

## For support services and homelessness services

### Choice

Women told us that lack of choice led to them feeling unsafe, out of control and unworthy of our support. When women are offered choice and control, they feel empowered and hopeful for their future.

### A choice based Adult Pathway for all women

Including:

- Women only hostels with staff trained in VAWG, Exploitation and Trauma.
- Mixed gendered hostels where staff are trained to deliver gender informed and trauma responsive support.
- Increase in Housing First style provision for women with a long term commitment to funding.

### Choice and Control in hostels

- Create a culture within your service that offers as much choice and control to the client, whether that be room moves, choice of keyworker, where and how key working takes place.
- Create an environment where trust can grow.

### Choice and Control in services

- Offer options and information so that women can decide for themselves.





# Recommendations

## For commissioners

### Safe spaces for women

Women spoke of the difficulty in accessing support when first homeless as well as how challenging they found spaces that also worked with men. They also described how mixed gendered environments rarely offered that feeling of safety and respite found in women only services.

### A 'One Stop Shop' women's centre

- A safe space that seeks to meet the range of needs of homeless women from across the borough. It should be a collaborative cross sector, women only, trauma responsive service, with input from all support services and a space for all women in Camden with experiences of homelessness.

## For support services and homelessness services

### Make your service a safe place to be

- Support your team to understand that women value their emotional safety as highly as they do their physical safety within your building or project.
- Train your staff to understand both the impact of trauma and the broad spectrum of violence and exploitation homeless women experience.
- Create women only times and spaces for your service.
- Create women only clusters in hostels.



# Recommendations

## For commissioners

## For support services and homelessness services

### The First Contact Matters

Women spoke of long and difficult assessment processes that focused on their 'bad behaviour' and not who they were or what they had been through. They told us this approach made it hard for them to be honest with services.

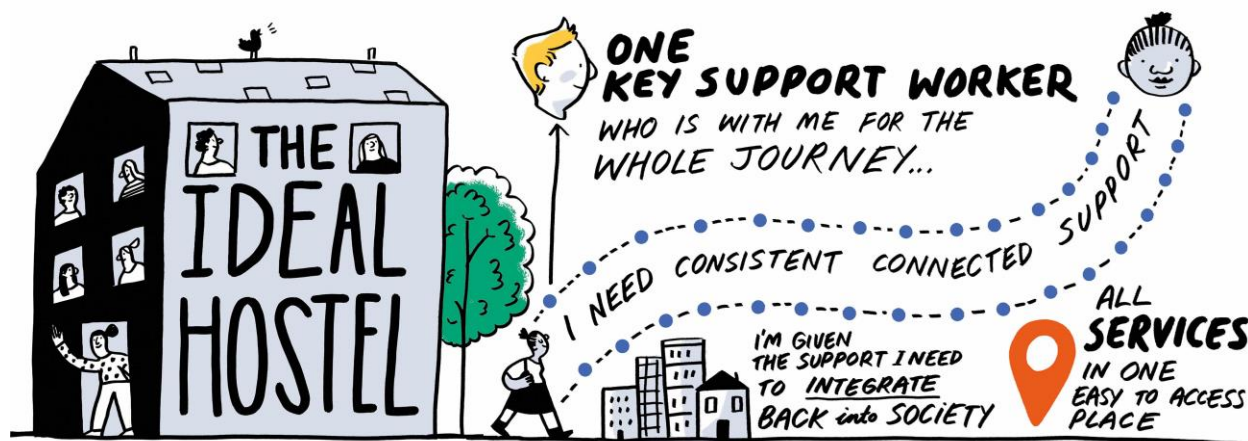
- Commission services that recognise the significance of the first contacts and have adopted psychologically and trauma informed approaches.

### Women specific homeless prevention worker

- Provide a housing officer within the HPS team who has been specifically trained in VAWG, sexual exploitation and trauma. Someone who is able to support women through the housing process and make referrals in a proactive and client centred way.

### Review your assessment & interview process

- As a team review, your triage and booking in process.
- Consider how much you need to ask at the first meeting, how honest women will be with a service that is focusing on risk rather than recovery, who will do the assessment and how urgent the information is.





# Recommendations

## For commissioners

### Joint Working

Women said they could feel the difference when 'everyone was on the same page'. They felt safer and more in control of their own recovery, but also that it improved outcomes for them. Improved joint working across the Adult Pathway and support services to work more effectively for the client.

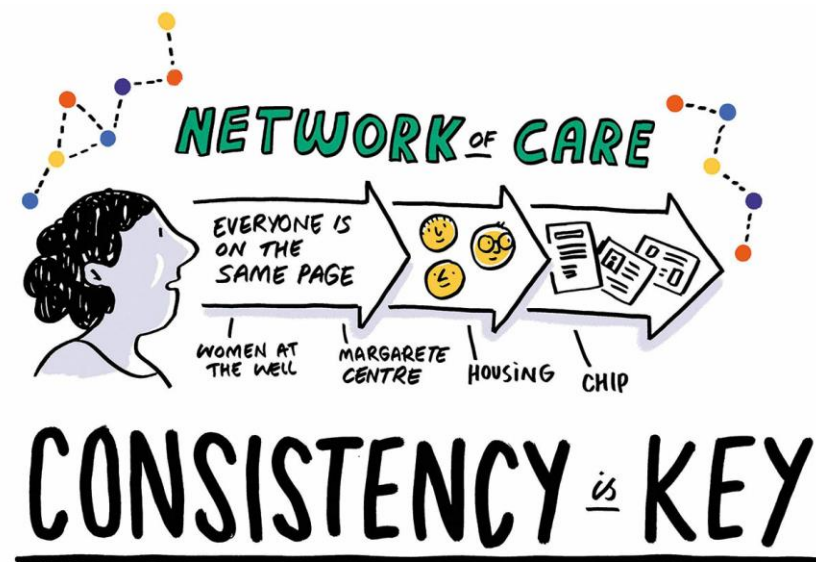
### Joint Commissioning

- Jointly commissioning services, across sectors (physical & mental health, substance use, housing and women's sector) would greatly impact the scope and ability for teams to work flexibly and collaboratively for better outcomes for women.

## For support services and homelessness services

### Build relationships locally

- Invest in your relationships with external services locally. Invite them to your team meeting and ask to visit their service.
- Share learning and positive feedback between services.
- Train your team on effective, client centred case conferencing (Team around Me).



# Recommendations

## For commissioners

### Strong and Resilient Workforce

Women knew when they were working with someone who wanted to be there and who saw her as 'a human being', investing in teams across services will directly impact women's recovery.

- Commission services with staff skilled in psychologically and trauma informed approaches.
- Continue Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE) training across the Camden Adult Pathway.
- Support teams to access reflective practice.

## For support services and homelessness services

- Commit to recruiting staff who demonstrate the skills, compassion, and resilience to support homeless women.
- Actively seek out training for your team around women's recovery.
- Provide the time and space for reflective practice for teams working with multiply disadvantaged clients.





# Thank you

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