



Fighting for hope for
homeless people

Improving Services for Homeless Women Cross-Sectoral Exchange Event

**Tuesday July 24th, 2007
Crisis Skylight**

Workshop Material

Workshop 1

Improving Services: What do Homeless Women Need?

This workshop will consider how services can be improved to better meet the needs of homeless women, paying particular attention to ways in which homeless women's needs and preferences may differ from those of men.

Workshop participants may like to focus their discussion around the following key questions:

1. How do homeless women's need differ to those of homeless men?
2. If you were designing a service for homeless women what would the key features of that service be?
3. What perceptions do homeless women have of services and how can agencies engage women who have negative perceptions of services, or think that some services are 'not for them'?
4. How can services working with homeless people (day centres, hostels, support services) be made more accessible and relevant to homeless women?
5. What can be done to make sure homeless women benefit equally with men from the presence of these services?

Overleaf are some comments made by women interviewed for research conducted by Crisis which may help inform discussion in this workshop.

Homeless Women's Experiences and Views of Services

"I wouldn't be coming here if there hadn't been this [women's] group - without any doubt, having that space, sometimes just to get over the overwhelming impact of men"

"The psychiatric [hospital], right, they was always putting my problems down to drugs and alcohol, yeah. My psychiatric problems, my problems started before the drugs and alcohol, know what I mean?"

"I woke up to find £3 gone and this guy with his hand stuffed in my bra..."

"Oh there's loads of things you can't get help with because everything's for men really."

'It was run in a really nice way, it wasn't like someone was checking up on you....it was nice because I felt cared for but not observed'

"So I get in there and you get the, you know, the stony faced bloody looks from these people behind glass windows in council offices."

"It's the staff....people don't look down on you for what you do..... they don't see you for your problems here, they see you for the person you've got inside"

"When I looked up their [web]site you could just drop-in, just come and have a drink and it didn't seem to be a whole load of bureaucracy and paperwork and so forth."

"My room at the hostel was immaculate. I used to keep it absolutely spotless because I really treasured it because it was my refuge and my place that I could run to and lock the door. So I had my own space"

"it's like everything that you could expect from home – nice living room, nice bedroom, somewhere you know you are safe and can call your own"

Workshop 2

Local Authority Homelessness Decisions and Practices: Rethinking the Statutory Response to Homeless Women

This workshop will discuss the ways in which local authorities respond to homeless women who approach them for assistance. It will consider how adequate the existing legislation is for meeting the needs of homeless women, and how this legislation and associated guidance is interpreted by local authorities. Thought will be given to how legislation, policy and practice could be improved.

The workshop may like to focus their discussion around the following key questions:

1. What elements of homelessness legislation and policy need to be addressed or revised and in what ways?
What would the impact of the suggested changes be (for women, for services and for local authorities)?
2. What is the impact of Local Authority decisions on homelessness service providers? And what are the consequences for homeless women?
3. Should frontline staff be held responsible for 'snapshot' decisions that have a long-term (negative or positive) effect on a homeless woman's life?

Overleaf is a case study example of one homeless woman's experience of approaching a local authority for assistance which may help prompt or guide discussion. In particular, the workshop might want to think about the following:

- Did the local authority fulfil its statutory obligations towards this woman and act in accordance with the legislation and guidance?
- What could / should the local authority have done differently?

Case Study: 'Marcia's' Experience of Approaching a Local Authority for Assistance

Marcia, a woman with a long history of mental health issues, was asked to leave the house of a friend (Diane) with whom she had been informally lodging and went to stay with another friend. When this temporary arrangement came to an end a couple of months later Marcia contacted the LA out-of-hours team who arranged B&B accommodation for her for a maximum of 3 nights. They advised that after this time Marcia she should go to the housing office, which she duly did. She continues her story:

"They told me I had to produce my passport before they'd see me...All my papers were at [Diane's] house and she was refusing to let me have my stuff back so....they sent me away but I didn't have anywhere to go so I was really upset and was sat in the offices crying. The manager came out [and] said he'd call security if I didn't stop crying. Eventually he told me that if I phoned the out-of-hours team after 6 O'clock they'd put me in a B&B and I said 'are you absolutely sure about that?' and he said 'yes'. But when I phoned the out-of-hours team they said that wasn't true and they couldn't help me"

Marcia eventually persuaded the out-of-hours team to place her in a B&B for the night. She also contacted the police to help her retrieve her belongings from Diane's house and returned to the housing office the following day with identification. She explained what happened next:

"They started questioning why hadn't I gone until December when I'd been homeless since October? The thing is, at that time my priority was my mental health and it wasn't until December that I could start sorting out my housing. Then they said I wasn't homeless because I had a friend to stay with. Then they said I needed an eviction letter from [Diane]. But it wasn't like that with her – I wasn't really supposed to be there in the first place for a start... but they just said they couldn't help me without a letter.

Marcia provided lots of documentation about her situation so the council could make their assessment. She *"gave them all these documents and the telephone numbers for my herbalist, and doctors, and the police and for social services and occupational health. The housing officer went to see the manager and came back and said 'you're not priority'. But they hadn't checked any of the information – they said they could tell just on face value, by looking at me. They said if I had to sleep rough I wouldn't fair any worse than anyone else so I wasn't vulnerable enough.... I did ask for a decision letter because I knew I was entitled to that and I've still got it. I'd told them I've suffered from depression for 30 years and the letter said 'everyone gets depressed"*

Marcia had made a point of obtaining information about her rights and *"I knew by law they had to give me advice but I had to ask to see a housing advisor, they didn't offer that".* When she did see an advisor *"they just asked for all the same documents as they had before, like an eviction letter and said I couldn't go on the private scheme until I had one."*

In the end the only assistance Marcia received was the telephone number of a shelter operating over the Christmas period.

Workshop 3

What Roles do Non-Homelessness Services have in Reaching and Meeting the Needs of Homeless Women?

This workshop will consider homeless women's use of non-homelessness services and spaces, the reasons why these places are important to homeless women, and whether the sector can play a role in meeting the needs of homeless women.

The workshop may like to focus their discussion around the following key questions:

1. How can non-homelessness organisations and services help shorten women's homelessness careers and meet their needs?
2. What are the problems / barriers associated with the non-homelessness sector's involvement in meeting the needs of homeless women?
3. How can we increase engagement with homeless women through non-homelessness services without jeopardising the normality, anonymity, and non-homeless identity which those environments provide?
4. Can non-homelessness services and the staff within these services be expected to play a role in meeting the needs of homeless women?
Which services or types of services should be expected to play such a role?

Overleaf are selected extracts from publications relating to the Crisis research which highlight some key findings regarding homeless women's use of non-homelessness services and spaces. This information may help inform the workshop discussion.

Homeless women's use of non-homelessness services and spaces: Key research findings

Extracts from *Homeless Women: Still being Failed yet Striving to Survive*, Crisis, 2006

'The apparent frequency with which homeless women appear to use 'non homeless' services such as libraries and art centres will be of interest to a range of public service providers. In relation to libraries, for example, aside from the obvious practical service provided (books, information, access to the internet), women reported feeling comfortable in 'safe' public spaces where attention is not drawn to their homeless status, and where they can maintain a certain amount of invisibility.' (p62)

'In public places and services such as libraries they [women] felt safe because they were able to blend into the background, did not stand out amongst other service users and hence were unlikely to attract an adverse reaction by virtue of their homeless status. Public services, in effect, provide resources without having recourse to homeless services. Some respondents actively sought out these non-homeless spaces for two main reasons. In some cases they did not want to be identified as homeless and using public services allowed them to avoid using homeless services. Others felt the need to avoid other homeless people for a variety of reasons such as wanting to distance themselves from drug users when they were trying to stay off drugs themselves.' (p72)

"I joined the [X] library and it's one of those places, I wouldn't have survived so long if I hadn't..." (p53)

"In the library I used to get a CD, to put the CDs on in a booth. I mean they are open sided but you can still, I put my head down. I used to get two or three hours sleep." (p59)

"Every day [I go to the library] if I can get down....go on the Internet, look for support agencies and going to see people in my situation....and 'ow other people coped when they were homeless" (p70)

Extract from *Resistance and Identity: Homeless Women's Use of Public Spaces*, a short article based on the Crisis research, by Rionach Casey, Rosalind Goudie and Kesia Reeve, forthcoming in *PPP Online Vol. 2* (www.ppp-online.org)

'Public spaces, buildings and facilities featured heavily in the narratives of the women interviewed, and represented a key means through which they met their daily needs. Women occupied museums, galleries, parks, bookshops, libraries, public toilets (on-street and in buildings such as hospitals), public transport, car parks, art galleries, the streets, business and retail parks, airports....They slept in these spaces, they ate, washed, rested, sheltered from harsh weather, laundered and changed their clothes, charged their mobile phones, and engaged in leisure activities (reading, listening to music)...For many, these spaces and facilities represented an essential resource in the absence of (appropriate) service provision. Public places also, however, represented positive, viable, and preferable spaces of everyday life and survival: in some instances the public realm was perceived as safer than domestic spaces or institutional environments such as hostels or day centres, where it was not uncommon for homeless women to experience violence or feel threatened by the male dominated milieu of the homelessness service. Homelessness spaces can also represent a threat to women's identity and perceptions of self.'

Workshop 4

Women's Homelessness Careers: Identifying Points of Intervention

The purpose of this workshop is to try and understand women's homelessness careers and identify critical points in these careers when intervention may be most beneficial.

The workshop may like to focus their discussion around the following key questions:

1. Is the repeat and cyclical nature of women's homelessness (as described in the report, and illustrated by Katie's homelessness career overleaf) to be accepted as inevitable and unavoidable?
2. If not, at what points in the cycle could intervention change the path of women's homelessness careers?
3. What kinds of interventions would assist in ensuring that woman's homelessness careers are "progressive"?
4. Can services be held accountable for the longer-term impacts and consequences of their actions, or non-actions?

Overleaf is Katie's homelessness career. The workshop may like to root their discussion in this case study. In particular, the workshop may like to consider the following:

- What issues does Katie's homelessness career highlight?
- Where are the 'critical points' where intervention could have prevented Katie's homelessness career from developing in the way it did?
- What interventions, actions or decisions (or alternative actions or decision) could have ensured that Katie's career took a more positive path? Is it realistic to suggest that these should have been implemented?

Katie's Homelessness Career

