

Improving housing support for adult survivors of sexual exploitation

July 2020

This briefing raises awareness of the challenges faced by women who are adult survivors of sexual exploitation in accessing housing, and makes recommendations to improve housing support as part of a wider aspiration to create a new National Framework for Adult Survivors of Sexual Exploitation.

The briefing is based on learning from the STAGE Project, supported by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) Tampon Tax Fund to explore and highlight the nature and extent of sexual exploitation of adult women across our communities.

The STAGE Project brings together charities [Changing Lives](#), [GROW](#), [A WAY OUT](#), [Together Women](#), [Basis](#) and [WomenCentre \(Kirklees and Calderdale\)](#) to provide trauma-informed support for women who have been groomed for sexual exploitation across the North East and Yorkshire¹.

CURRENT CONTEXT

Time and again we hear of cases of systematic grooming of girls and women for purposes of sexual exploitation by groups of men operating across our towns and cities. The exploitation and abuse of women and girls who are targeted, who often have existing vulnerabilities, such as poverty, homelessness, poor mental health and past experiences of trauma, causes significant harm in our communities.

Since the STAGE Project began in July 2019, 95 women have been referred to the STAGE Project across the eight towns and cities where we operate. This demonstrates that the issue is pervasive and systemic across all of the places that we operate. We see cases continuing to emerge, yet find that services are not engaged with the issue. It is hugely saddening that as services, we have been supporting women for so many years and yet women and girls continue to be sexually exploited.

There is currently no statutory definition of adult sexual exploitation, and no specific statutory responsibilities, and as a result neither is there a coordinated national strategy. The impacts of this are: an inconsistent approach to commissioning of services, and lack of long-term sustainable funding; a lack of oversight and sense of urgency for responding to learning from serious case reviews and other investigations.

It is women who bear the ultimate cost of failures in our system of public services, experiencing devastating long-term impacts that have only been magnified by the Covid-19 pandemic. For most of the women we support, experiences of trauma

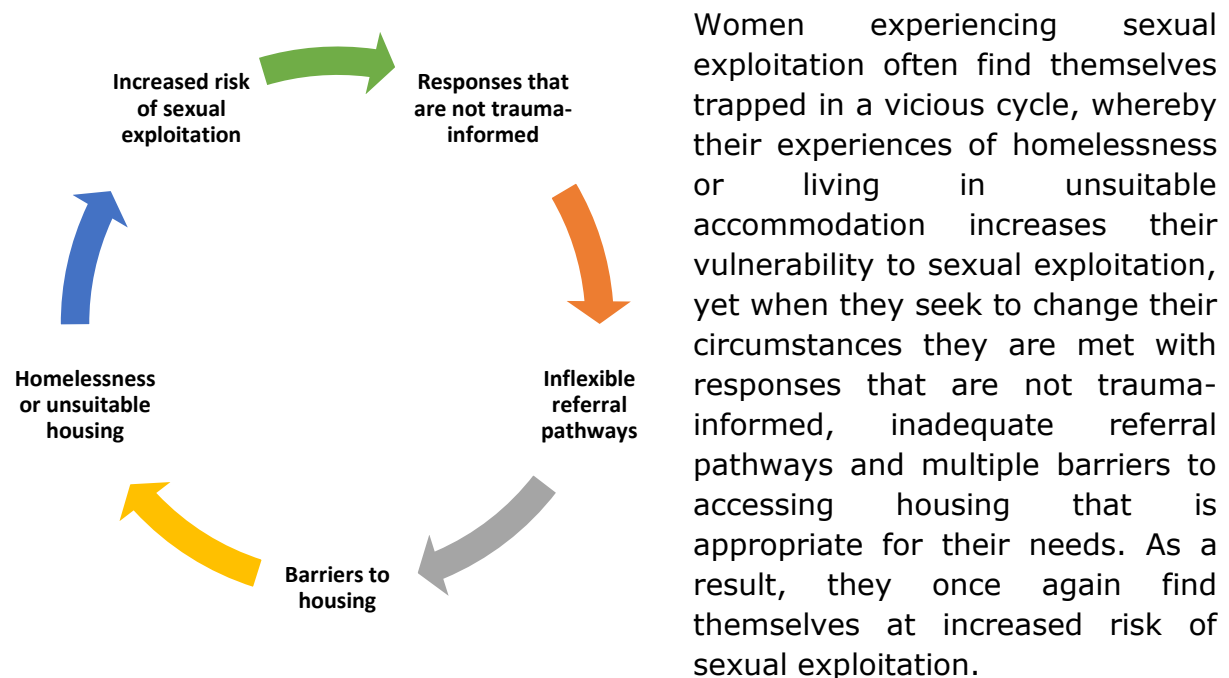
¹ Partners deliver services in eight areas where there are recent or live sexual exploitation investigations: Bradford, Huddersfield, Leeds, Newcastle, Rotherham, Sheffield, Stockton and Sunderland.

and abuse started in childhood. Often, they will move from one situation to the next, and domestic abuse runs like a thread throughout. It is well evidenced that adverse experiences in childhood can lead to lasting impacts on health and wellbeing. Many of the women we support present with issues including self-harm, eating disorders, overdose and attempted suicide attempts.

The Covid-19 pandemic has meant that women with experiences of sexual exploitation have access to even fewer resources and sources of support. Many have found themselves destitute as a result of Covid-19, leading to them becoming involved in 'survival sex' for the first time, or returning to selling sex, and we have significant concerns that women in our services are increasingly experiencing sexual violence. Often, they find it challenging to engage with welfare services, are struggling to access other sources of support, such as food banks, and cannot raise income even through the most desperate of measures, such as begging. We are also seeing adverse impacts on women's physical and mental health, including a significant increase in suicide attempts and self-harm (see Appendix A).

The link between homelessness and sexual exploitation

Housing is the most common initial presenting need of the women supported through the STAGE Project. Rough sleeping and other forms of homelessness, such as sofa surfing, are common, and we see examples of women being completely reliant on perpetrators for their housing. This frequently becomes a vulnerability that perpetrators can take advantage of, demonstrating the inextricable links between homelessness, housing and sexual exploitation.



During the Covid-19 pandemic, these challenges have been compounded, as significant delays to and/or disbanding of investigations and criminal proceedings in some serious cases involving sexual exploitation has prevented women from completing a housing application in the usual way. This has led to women waiting many months before they can even begin the process of applying for housing.

A lack of trauma-informed support

The women supported through the STAGE Project often struggle to access accommodation because there is a lack of understanding amongst statutory services of what constitutes sexual exploitation, and how it affects women. When they apply for housing, women often met with responses and environments that do not take account of the trauma they have experienced. For example, the complexity of women's circumstances (e.g. contact with the criminal justice, substance misuse) may be perceived as their having made 'unwise choices' rather than as having experienced significant coercion and control, often lasting years.

As a result, they may encounter invasive questions, insensitive language and attitudes that appear judgemental. They may also be expected to attend appointments within environments that are re-traumatising and unsafe. For example, one woman who has accessed support through the STAGE Project felt unable to ask for help because her local housing office had glass walls, leaving her frightened that associates and perpetrators may be able to see her. Her support worker described this as 'like being in a fish bowl'.

Inadequate referral pathways

The women we support often struggle to access accommodation because their circumstances are not considered to meet the threshold for emergency housing – reflecting a lack of understanding about the trauma and abuse they have experienced, or are presently experiencing. One of our team members described the process as asking women to 'lay themselves bare', providing huge amounts of detail about their personal circumstances, which can be very distressing if it does not lead to a successful outcome and discourage women from engaging in further support. Our support workers describe how this means they must be creative with how information is presented to housing services, to ensure that applications are not simply rejected out of hand.

Barriers to housing

Even when women with experiences of sexual exploitation are considered to meet the threshold for housing, they often face significant barriers to securing a tenancy. Most common among these are the financial circumstances of the women we support, as providers often exclude or refuse women with rent and service charge arrears. Frequently, these are historic and unintentional: for example, service charges are usually paid as part of Housing Benefit, but the threshold for these payments is low (18 hours of part-time work), meaning that women can sometimes lose these benefits without their knowledge. Weekly payments of around £30 to £40 can suddenly become payable in addition to rent and other bills. This can lead to arrears which will take many years to pay back, excluding them from tenancies in the meantime. This locks women into unsafe sofa surfing arrangements, or rough sleeping, placing them at further risk of exploitation.

Some women face further barriers again, for example women leaving the care system. Care professionals work beyond their contractual obligations to help facilitate smooth housing transitions for young women leaving care, but the level of complexity the young women face means that these transitions are often not successful.

Lack of appropriate housing

Many of the women we support are reluctant to take on tenancies when they are offered them, or find that their tenancies fail, because the accommodation available to them is at best unsuited to their needs, and at its worst unsafe. For example, this may include mixed gender accommodation, accommodation where there is known to be high levels of substance misuse, accommodation where perpetrators are also housed, housing in areas which are unsafe, or accommodation in small towns where it is more difficult to find safe accommodation away from known associates.

This absence of suitable (self-contained, single-gender) housing options for women experiencing sexual exploitation is creating a system characterised by 'failure demand', whereby women are pushed back into exploitative situations because their transition to housing cannot be sustained.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

We make a series of recommendations based on learning to date from the STAGE Project, which highlight the systematic and systemic nature of sexual exploitation across our communities.

We believe that the Covid-19 pandemic, for all its hardship, provides a unique opportunity to think radically differently about how women who are adult survivors of sexual exploitation can be supported. We have seen during this period an increased impetus for change among those commissioning and delivering support services, based on a shared sense of purpose and focus on outcomes for people. Equally, as a system of public services we have demonstrated an ability to quickly make changes to the way they deliver services to meet need, and to demonstrate considerable flexibility and creativity to keep people safe.

We ask that all stakeholders learn from and sustain changes to their ways of working where it has led to positive outcomes for people, resisting an urge to return to a status quo that has been failing so many women with experiences of sexual exploitation.

NATIONAL	• We would like to see the Government create a National Framework for Adult Survivors of Sexual Exploitation, led by the Home Office and including a statutory definition of adult sexual exploitation. The Framework should ensure that patterns of exploitation are embedded in strategic thinking across relevant government departments.
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	It is vital that this Framework recognises and responds to the links between housing, homelessness and vulnerability to sexual exploitation. We would like to see legislation brought forward to ensure that survivors of sexual exploitation are given automatic priority need for housing, as has recently been announced for domestic abuse.
LOCAL	- We would like to see greater recognition of the need for commissioned long-term support for adult survivors of sexual exploitation, including within housing. We would urge commissioners of housing services to: - Ensure there is adequate provision of self-contained, women-only accommodation options to accommodate women who have experienced sexual exploitation within their existing housing pathways - Draw on learning from approaches taken to accommodating rough sleepers during Covid-19 and invest in housing-led models of provision, enabling women to more easily access suitable accommodation, giving them a safe and stable environment from which they can begin to rebuild their lives. We would urge housing providers to: - Invest in training staff to respond more effectively to women experiencing sexual exploitation, using trauma-informed approaches - Ensure that women have access to safe, trauma-informed spaces to make applications for housing and attend appointments, without fear or intimidation - Wherever possible, simplify their housing pathways so that they are accessible for women experiencing sexual exploitation.

Appendix A: Impacts of Covid-19 on women experiencing sexual exploitation

Food poverty	• Women being pushed further into food poverty as food banks and free food outlets are no longer available, and loss of smaller safety nets (e.g. being able to get pot noodles filled with hot water at fast food chains overnight) • Women released from prison have had to use their discharge grant for taxis, as they are unable to get in cars with case workers or friends/family, leaving them with no money for food • Poverty and destitution is pushing women to sell or swap sex for survival.
Health, safety and wellbeing	• Many women are not able to wash clothes, meaning that they have developed sores and other health issues due to wearing unclean underwear and clothing • Women are left without appropriate sanitary protection, which can be hazardous and contribute to bacterial infections.
Mental health	• Mental health issues have escalated, with examples of case workers reporting that the 'majority' of the women they work with are now in mental health crisis • Examples of women previously in stable circumstances have now returned to the 'crisis' stages of their recovery from trauma. • Women describe living a life in 'limbo', as court cases have been suspended, as well as capacity tests and contact with children • Increase in the number of women facing extreme isolation, unable to leave homes where they might be living with perpetrators and losing coping mechanisms such as going for a walk or seeing peers • Instances of suicide attempts and self-harm have increased significantly • Exacerbated by digital exclusion, with many women unable to access support.
Sexual violence	Evidence collected from across Changing Lives services (including STAGE) suggests that: • More women in our services are disclosing that they have experienced sexual violence during Covid-19 • Women are reporting sexual offences more frequently, suggesting that repeat victimisation is becoming more common – often, involving a different perpetrator each time • Women who have reported sexual offences are also reporting more frequently that they are being victimised in other ways – for example, domestic abuse, physical assault and theft • We are also seeing more instances of women going missing from our accommodation services, which we

know from experiences is an indicator of sexual or other forms of exploitation. In the past two weeks, women have gone missing on four occasions, being held hostage and subjected to sexual violence.

We know from experience that the women we support can be reluctant to report crimes or cooperate with the police, because often it does not lead to further action. This is placing them at increased risk of harm.

Many of the women in our services who are victims of sexual violence are experiencing homelessness, and/or have a known dependence on drugs or alcohol. We are concerned that these women are being targeted by perpetrators because they know they are less able to access justice.
