

Helping street sex workers break the cycle of homelessness

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A pioneering project has proven successful in helping women sex workers escape a downward spiral – and in one case was a life-saver.

The Leeds pilot scheme saw women's charity Basis Yorkshire use an approach known as "Housing First" to secure homes for a number of sex workers with extremely complex needs.

Thought to be the first of its kind in the country, the [project](#) has now been evaluated by a researcher from the University of Leeds – her report is published today.

Gemma Sciré, CEO of Basis Yorkshire, said: "Our non-judgemental, unconditional and flexible approach to working with sex workers is focused on reducing harm and providing choices for women. It made our service an ideal fit with Housing First."

With little women-only housing provision in the city and high levels of sexual and [domestic violence](#) risks associated with street sex work, Basis identified an urgent need for a service that was driven by women's experiences, applying the principles of Housing First.

Housing First provides permanent, affordable and safe housing as quickly as possible – backed by the unconditional support people need to stay in their new homes.

The Leeds project started in November 2016, funded by the Big Lottery

Fund and West Yorkshire Finding Independence (WY-FI)'s Innovation Fund. Its aims were to relieve homelessness, alcohol and drug use, re-offending and mental health issues. It also provided a dedicated caseworker from Basis Yorkshire and a housing support worker from Leeds homeless charity Foundation.

Hidden homeless

Report author Emma Bimpson, from the University's School of Sociology and Social Policy, said: "The journey these women took through the project was far from straightforward and at times chaotic, so the intensive and immediate support provided by Basis' support worker and by Foundation's tenancy manager was absolutely vital."

Women helped by Basis Yorkshire's Housing First project were a part of the country's growing group of "hidden homeless", so-called because the nature of their employment or lifestyles means they are often not counted in official statistics.

For some of these women, access to housing means enduring domestic violence or other unhealthy relationships. For some it means staying with drug dealers, exchanging sex for somewhere to sleep, "sofa-surfing" with friends – or sleeping on the streets.

Other approaches to housing are not designed to meet the sheer complexity and volume of such women's needs. Even temporary housing options such as hostels or sheltered accommodation are often not an option because of strict access conditions relating to substance abuse or curfews – which restrict [sex workers](#)' access to an income.

The project included eight women during the year, of which six remained in the homes found through the scheme – one left shortly after starting her tenancy and another moved on after deciding she did not

need the intensive support provided. Three of the women ended their intensive support towards the end of the year, demonstrating the value and cost benefits of the scheme.

The dedicated, assertive, trauma-informed and flexible support provided by the caseworker and housing support worker was critical, supporting multiple visits by some of the tenants to healthcare professionals and coordinating multiple services.

This approach saved two of the women from having to have leg amputations, and another was not expected to survive her alcohol-related illness beyond the project – she is now making positive progress in her health.

Two of the women have stopped sex working since joining the project; two more have reduced their frequency of sex work and others reported a positive impact in terms of safer working practices and a reduction in harm. Five have started on programmes to address their drug use – all have stayed on track.

In addition to the stability and lifeline this provided to women facing debilitating stigma and hostility were benefits such as:

- Costs savings through reduced need for acute emergency services, as well as less demand on these services; a reduction in drug or mental health-related crisis situations, and costs related to abandoned tenancies
- Improved engagement with other services such as drug rehabilitation and domestic abuse support, as well as more effective access and improved collaboration with other agencies – this went from sporadic at best, to regular engagement
- Services users who had a history in the criminal justice system did not return to prison and were not arrested during the project.

While acknowledging that the investment is significant in the short term, Ms Sciré pointed out that cost savings could be found in both the short and long term.

"The wider benefits of this programme to both service users and stakeholders cannot be overstated either. Women with highly complex needs are no longer in a spiral of chaos, and improved housing stability was found to lead to stability in other aspects of their lives too," she said.

As one of the [women](#) taking part in the scheme said: "This is the first time in a couple of years that I have felt secure and happy with my housing situation – things can only get better."

Ms Bimpson, a postgraduate researcher who looks at ways housing and homelessness providers have responded to austerity, added: "Housing First can't solve homelessness alone, nor should it be the only solution. But it demonstrates how people's needs might not be met by existing [housing](#) and homelessness services, and the evidence collected from the Basis project and others across the UK is a testament to the success of this approach.

"It's also really important to note that Housing First sits within a wider system of essential services, so those have to be in place and effectively coordinated for it to work."

Basis Yorkshire has now successfully secured a further three years of funding for the scheme, from the Tudor Trust.

"We are excited to see the outcomes for [service](#) users and partners alike and are particularly pleased we've been able to work with the Tudor Trust to secure funding to continue this work in Leeds," Ms Sciré added.

More information: An evaluation of Basis Yorkshire's Housing First

pilot: [basisyorkshire.org.uk/wp-conte ... eport-March-2018.pdf](https://basisyorkshire.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/eport-March-2018.pdf)

Provided by University of Leeds

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