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# Couples First? Understanding the needs of rough sleeping couples

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## Acknowledgements

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Thanks also to Brighton Women's Centre and Commonweal Housing for commissioning and supporting this important piece of work.

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Although a Sussex-based study, our call for evidence from Homeless Link members nationally added immense richness to our findings and we are appreciative of those staff who took the time to share their experiences and practice. Thanks also to Gareth Thomas, Information Manager at Homeless Link, who provided data and supporting evidence across the delivery of the project.

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# 1. Introduction

Over the last two years BWC has been developing gender specific and trauma informed support for homeless women through the BWC Women's Accommodation Support Service in Sussex. This work has made us more aware of the women who are sleeping rough and their known connections with men on the street. Homeless couples living on our streets are not a new phenomenon although it is a growing issue. Through our work, BWC was struck by the lack of action in this area and decided that a greater understanding of this issue was long overdue because of the growing incidence of women on the streets and hence the related growing incidence of couples.

With funding and support from Commonweal, BWC commissioned Homeless Link to research this area of social injustice which, as far as we can ascertain from investigation through our networks, has hitherto not been fully understood. Through this research BWC wanted to explore the nature of couples living on the street and consider whether they have come together for protection (women) and exploitation (men); and how couples previously living together have arrived on the streets.

The aim is to share the learning through this report with other service providers to ensure any service provision gaps can be addressed by proposing a best practice model for working with couples on the street.

Sussex Local Authorities estimate there are at least 25 couples (50 people) sleeping rough in Sussex at any one time. Official rough sleeping figures for 2017 show a 24% increase in Brighton and Hove (Homeless Link, 2017). Through intelligence gathered by multi-agency partners across Sussex, it is clear that a range of issues present when working with rough sleeping couples. Most relationships on the street contain elements of abuse, violence, crime, drugs, sex work and/or exploitation. Couples on the street are usually considered too volatile and chaotic to be considered for accommodation support from local agencies, even on the rare occasions that accommodation is available for couples without children.

This research engaged with varied local and national housing providers and homelessness agencies as well as statutory bodies. The evidence gathered by talking directly to service users and homeless agencies has resulted in a set of recommendations for a distinct and specific approach to working with couples and possible housing solutions.

The key findings of the report include adopting a 'Couples First' approach with best practice involving a gender specific and trauma informed approach. There needs to be a focus on being risk aware to take account of each couple's needs both as partners and individuals. Solutions need to include planning for a future together or independently depending on the needs of the individuals as part of the partnership and singly.

**Lisa Dando – Director, Brighton Women's Centre**

## Couples First?

*When adopting the terminology 'Couples First', we mean the adoption of the principles of Housing First not the process of it: the report seeks to see couples as an asset not a problem. They have come together to survive the streets and, as we know, living on the streets requires strength and resilience. But with this comes some complex and concerning behaviours which are a consequence of this survival together on the streets. Couples First advocates for a better understanding of the dynamic between individual couples in order to better support their on-going relationship or their decision to separate for the wellbeing of the individual/s in the couple.*

*It therefore does not conflate with the approach within Housing First which applies unconditionally the provision of a home as the first thing we do; however it aims to apply the principles of unconditionality to the acceptance of the relationship as presented and as the basis for the services offered (both support and housing) through which the couple can establish the best route for them jointly and individually.*

*It is our aspiration that this report will lead the way in raising awareness of the specific needs of homeless couples in the homelessness and housing sector. This should result in a greater understanding of the most appropriate housing solutions for couples and best practice for agencies supporting couples off the streets. Our aim is to work in partnership with like-minded organisations to pilot an approach that will take forward these recommendations in the next phase of this work.*

## Mary's Story

BWC and Worthing Churches Homeless Project (WCHP) have been working in partnership since 2015 to deliver gender responsive drop-in and case work support. Mary had been attending the women's group for a couple of months when she was sexually assaulted in the hostel where she was living. Following the assault Mary started rough sleeping with her partner Roy. Mary had met Roy, who was already rough sleeping, just before the assault. Mary reported that it took a long time for services to accept her and Roy as a couple. She also reported how very frightening and intimidating it is for women on the streets and particularly those new to rough sleeping where she felt 'all eyes' were upon her. She stated that she didn't access soup runs, because the areas they were located in were too rough and she didn't know who would be there and the potential conflicts she might encounter. She reported that although day centres are more controlled environments, they too can be very daunting for women.

Mary stated very clearly that as a woman sleeping rough, it was 'absolutely vital' for her to be in a couple and that she would not have survived without Roy. In her view, rough sleeping women are not safe on their own and need to be either with a partner or group of women. She identified that there is an issue of co-dependency in a rough sleeping couple particularly when substance misuse is present. The lengthy wait to receive help from services significantly increases the risk of women having to be in a relationship to survive on the streets. Without professional support Mary's view was that she and Roy 'were each other's services'.

Mary identified the immense strain being homeless places on a relationship when you have 'nowhere to go and are constantly together' and how limited access to showers and personal hygiene can impact on a couple's private life. There are additional challenges when other members of the homeless community try to create drama and conflict between a couple.

In the first few months Mary identified Roy as a supportive partner; however she has reported that his behaviour is becoming increasingly controlling. He accompanies her everywhere, will frequently interrupt appointments with her women's worker, checks her phone and diary, threatens to harm himself and their pet should she decide to leave him and repeatedly accuses her of sleeping with other people. Whilst Mary states that no physical violence had taken place, she is visibly impacted by the emotional abuse.

The break down in relationship with the housing provider, which left Mary feeling angry and helpless, was actively fuelled and sustained by Roy. It is a testament to the BWC gender responsive approach that the women's support worker was able to maintain some level of contact with Mary even when she was most angry and upset. For months this was Mary's only contact with services and without this support Mary would have been completely reliant on Roy. A combination of the trust between Mary and her support worker and the strength of the BWC and WCHP partnership has enabled Mary to re-engage with services. She is now accessing appropriate health and mental health services. She has enrolled on several courses and is developing her support networks with other women who have experienced similar issues. Most significantly, Mary has now identified that she would be prepared to be housed independently of Roy and has developed a safety plan should the situation escalate and she decides to leave the relationship.

*"We welcome this crucial piece of research into the experiences of couples being street homeless. We are pleased to have been given the opportunity to take part and will be working with partners to implement the recommendations."*

**Larissa Reed – Executive Director for Neighbourhoods, Communities and Housing, Brighton and Hove Council**

## 2. Foreword and Summary

**Bill Randall – Couples First? Advisory Group member**

Rough sleeping couples have become a familiar sight on the streets of many English towns and cities. Caught in the rising tide of street homelessness, they are an increasingly significant presence among the men and women living on our streets, whose numbers rose to 4,751 between 2014 and 2017 – an increase of 73%.

Some people become homeless as couples. However, as this study shows, most of these relationships develop among those already homeless, fuelled by a belief among highly vulnerable women that they are safer on the street in a couple, even where a relationship might be controlling, abusive or harmful.

The study was commissioned by Brighton Women's Centre in response to its increasing concern about the plight of the growing numbers of street homeless women generally, and the specific issues faced by homeless couples and the women within those relationships. Commonweal Housing, a charity whose mission is to pilot innovative projects and support new areas of research into social injustices, where housing can be part of the solution, funded the research.

The research concludes that, in most cases, the needs of street-homeless couples are neither acknowledged, investigated nor met. It found that most agencies are 'couple blind', or worse, 'single-centric', with fewer than 10% of the 1,215 homeless service providers in England accepting couples. Most solutions are devised around the single homelessness, with some couples opting to stay on the street rather than face separation. But positive outcomes are achieved by the handful of organisations that provide for couples. This study highlights the good practice that is taking place within those services and urges others to learn from their experiences and follow suit.

Next steps should include the adoption of couple sensitive approaches, improved recognition of the needs of rough sleeping couples under homelessness provisions and an increased supply of appropriate emergency and move-on housing to support the work. Organisations should adopt risk-aware approaches to take account of each couple's needs, both as partners and as individuals. A gender specific and Psychologically Informed Environment with a trauma informed approach should be taken throughout, to deal with complex needs. All options should be examined, including an exit strategy from the partnership where necessary.

Only by adopting this report's proposals can real solutions be found to the acute problems facing street homeless couples. Like all homeless people they deserve better.

**Bill Randall has been a housing campaigner and commentator since the 1970s. The founding editor of Inside Housing magazine, he is a former Leader of Brighton and Hove City Council.**

# 3. Methodology

## Definitions used

The study adopted the following definitions:

**Rough sleeping** is defined by the Government as ‘people sleeping, or bedded down, in the open air (such as on the streets, or in doorways, parks or bus shelters); people in buildings or other places not designed for habitation (such as barns, sheds, car parks, cars, derelict boats, stations, or ‘bashes’).

A **couple** means two people who present together for accommodation or services. They may, or may not, be in a relationship. They may have come together through exploitation, or for protection. They may be family members or co-dependent friends. We invited perspectives on what constitutes a couple in this context.

A ‘**Couples First**’ approach advocates for a better understanding of the dynamic between individual couples in order to better support their on-going relationship or their decision to separate for the wellbeing of the individual/s in the couple. A ‘Couples First’ approach begins with unconditional acceptance of the relationship and the request to be supported (and, where requested, housed) together.

## Literature review

A brief review of literature covering couples who sleep rough was conducted using sources including academic papers and a number of independent and statutory and voluntary sector reports and studies. The review sought to uncover the extent to which rough sleeping couples are considered and covered in existing studies and to highlight gaps in knowledge and practice.

## Consultation and conversations with rough sleepers

The study set out to conduct interviews with up to 20 individuals within couples. Recognising that clients would need to feel safe and supported enough to take part in the study, it was agreed early on to involve local frontline workers in conducting the semi-structured interviews. The Homeless Link research team designed the tools to collect the data and held two workshops with 15 workers to run through and refine the Client Interview Pack.

Clients were each offered a £10 voucher of their choice for their contribution and in recognition of the time they gave.

The end result was 10 interviews with individuals with experience of being in a rough sleeping couple:

- 6 interviews with women
- 2 interviews with couples (both couples consisted of a man and a woman)

The interviews were carried out in Sussex, Lincoln and London. It is noted that all the people interviewed were, as far as we are aware, heterosexual. This may be due to lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and trans (LGBT+) rough sleepers choosing to keep their identity or sexual orientation ‘under the radar’ because of the possibility of attacks and harassment. We are conscious that LGBT+ hate crime is still an issue in many areas, even in areas deemed to be ‘gay-friendly’.



While the number of interviews carried out is lower than hoped, this is largely due to acknowledged difficulties in identifying and engaging with this cohort. Establishing trust and building sufficient confidence for people to feel safe enough to share information was part of the difficulty, along with identifying appropriate opportunities to speak to people with often chaotic lives and uncertain timetables. While using experienced, skilled workers helped to counter this to an extent, the interviewers' day to day priorities and workloads did not always allow time to commit to the interview process. The difficulties encountered in this study reflect a parallel process in the client's worlds.

The study also drew on qualitative data from six case studies presenting challenges and successes of working with rough sleeping couples. One of these, Mary's story, which is based on Brighton Women's Centre's partnership work with Worthing Churches Homeless Project, particularly captures the rationale for further work on rough sleeping couples and is included as part of the introduction.

### **Agencies working with people in rough sleeping couples**

The study sought feedback from two key sources:

- A call for evidence through Homeless Link's membership
- Interviews with partners and stakeholders

We were particularly interested in experiences, knowledge, and views on the following areas:

- Causes and extent of rough sleeping couples
- Establishing the nature of couple relationships
- Key issues for rough sleeping couples
- Challenges in providing accommodation and support services (to couples and individuals within couples)
- Policies and good practices that support working with couples

#### a) Call for evidence to organisations working with rough sleepers

Homeless Link issued a call for evidence to organisations<sup>1</sup> providing accommodation and services to rough sleeping couples. Using Homeless Link's Homeless England database, we identified respondents who had indicated that they worked with couples. We sought to find out about existing and emerging approaches to supporting couples, as well as any barriers and challenges faced in this work.

We wanted to hear directly from organisations working with rough sleeping couples and the call for evidence was circulated to:

- 99 accommodation providers that say they accept couples
- 12 day-centres that have female only provision

The Call received 11 responses (approximately 10%) from a mix of respondents, with a majority working directly with couples, and/or individuals within couples.

#### b) Interviews with partners and stakeholders

The study sought further input from other partners and stakeholders connected to rough sleepers through 14 telephone interviews with commissioners, frontline and senior workers and researchers.

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<sup>1</sup> Organisations registered on the Homeless England Database

# 4. Literature review

## Summary conclusions

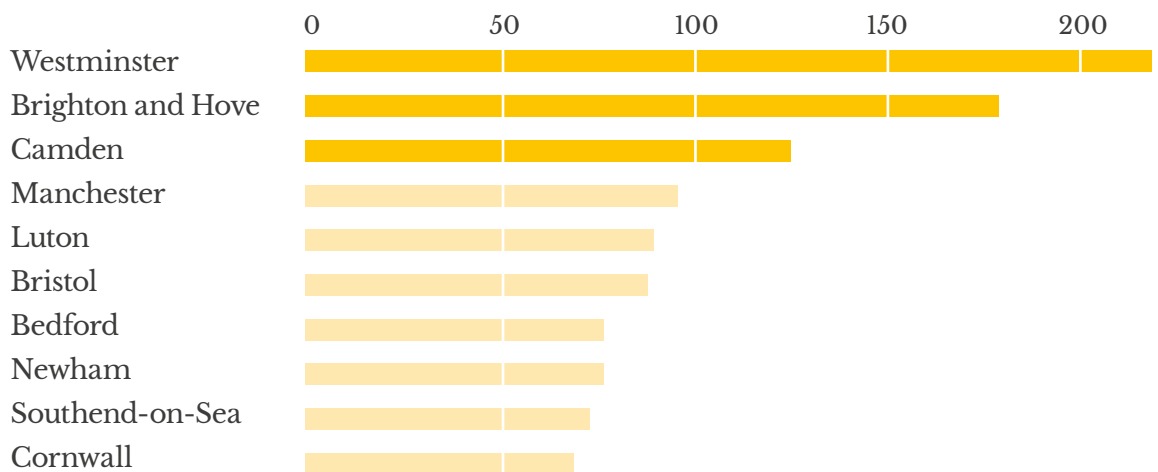
- Rough sleeping is on the rise
- Couples are invisible
- Relationship/couple status presented by agencies as problematic
- Challenges to staying healthy and safe
- More than homeless – associated issues
- Housing First for rough sleepers
- Notions of love and romance

## Rough sleeping on the rise

Recent reporting indicates that rough sleeping is on the rise (Williams, 2018 and Bulman, 2018). Rough sleeping count data published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government showed that the number of people sleeping rough in England has increased by 15% annually, with 4,751 people sleeping on our streets on any given night in 2017. This figure represents a 73% rise in rough sleeping over the past three years. Brighton and Hove was one of the areas showing the highest rates of rough sleeping in 2017.

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### **Westminster, Brighton and Hove and Camden saw the highest rates of rough sleeping in 2017**



It is noticeable, but perhaps not surprising, that the above reporting makes no reference to couples, given the limited recognition there is of rough sleepers who live as couples.

Official rough sleeping figures for 2017 show a 24% increase in Brighton and Hove (MHCLG, 2017). While the rough sleeping figures from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government are broken down by gender they do not highlight whether individuals are part of a couple. In terms of numbers of women sleeping rough in Sussex, the data is not broken down by county, only by region and local authority. The South East region had the highest reported number of women sleeping rough at 183, and Brighton was the highest in the South East with 19 women.

During the life of this project, the number of homelessness service providers registered on the Homeless England database increased from 1,199 in July 2017 to 1,215 in January 2018. The proportion of providers indicating that they work with couples<sup>2</sup> increased from 7.4% to 8% in the same period.

### Couples are invisible so are women

While there has been a considerable amount of literature published on homelessness, and within that rough sleeping, research to date has tended to focus on either 'homeless families' or 'single homeless' people, or men or women, rather than considering a couple as an entity or unit.

Recent projects and initiatives such as Galvanise Brighton and Hove<sup>3</sup> and No First Night Out<sup>4</sup> in East London focus on rough sleeping; the overwhelming emphasis is on single people.

It has been suggested that some commonly used language e.g. 'single homeless' is in itself unhelpful and perpetuates the invisibility of couples (Homeless Link, 2017). This is because the expression tends to relate to 'people who have no dependent children in their household and who are not owed a statutory homelessness duty by a local authority', rather than denoting any relationship status.

That less than 10% of service providers identify as 'accepting couples' (Homeless England Database, 2018) gives an indication of couple (in)visibility within overall homelessness service provision and suggests that couples' needs are not being identified and met.

The safety net operated thus far by local authorities has not extended to securing accommodation for homeless people who are deemed not to be in priority need. If a homeless couple approached a local authority for assistance and were found to be unintentionally homeless but not in priority need, the duty on the local authority, before 2018, was only to provide advice and assistance and ensure that housing needs were assessed (Wilson, 2017). The 2017 Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) in force from April 2018 creates a new duty on local authorities to relieve homelessness regardless of priority need (and intentionality). While relieving homelessness does not necessarily equate to providing housing, the process will involve an assessment and the production of a Personalised Housing Plan.

The HRA *Code of Guidance* says that local authorities need to help to secure, or to secure, an immediate safe place to stay for people who are sleeping rough or are at high risk of sleeping rough. However, despite campaigning from homelessness charities, this was not included in the legislation.

The HRA and, in particular, Personalised Housing Plans offer a new opportunity to work with rough sleeping couples in a proactive way, meeting the needs of each person at the same time as respecting relationships, especially for those authorities that embrace the intentions and principles that sit behind the HRA.

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<sup>2</sup> In the Homeless England context 'Accepting couples' means that an accommodation project is willing to receive applications from a pair who are reluctant or unwilling to be accommodated separately and that the project is physically set up to allow for this; it does not refer to any expertise of working with couples.

<sup>3</sup> *Galvanise Brighton & Hove* is a local interpretation of the European Campaign to End Street Homelessness.

<sup>4</sup> *No First Night Out* – Help for Single Homeless People is a tri-borough 18-month project, working across Tower Hamlets, Hackney and The City of London, piloting new approaches to prevent individuals from rough sleeping for the first time.

There are also identified issues around the invisibility of women in homelessness. There is some evidence that certain assumptions about women's homelessness are flawed e.g. that women are less likely to sleep rough. A recent study in Brighton found that homeless women are more likely to 'engage in informal strategies that keep them invisible: sofa surfing, hiding, engaging in survival sex, forming relationships to keep a roof over their head, or working in the sex industry' (Bunker, 2017). Another study in Brighton (Homeless Link, 2015) revealed a sense that homelessness services are more favourable towards men than women.

Women's homelessness could also be hidden as a result of coercion or exploitation within a couple where the partner is less keen to engage with services. This means that, in return for the protection the relationship affords her, the woman will find it difficult to access suitable support (Homeless Link, 2017).

### **Couple/relationship status presented as problematic**

Data from several studies identify the link between relationship breakdown and homelessness (Bretherton, 2017) and the particular incidence of abusive, coercive or violent relationships underlying women's homelessness (Burnet, 2017, Homeless Link, 2017 and Smith et al, 2017). This 'accepted wisdom' could be problematic in terms of how services are currently delivered and structured, as they tend to be shaped around moving on from a relationship rather than being in or entering in to a new one. Many agencies resist working with a woman in an abusive relationship, so placing additional pressure on the woman.

There is some evidence to suggest that women form a new relationship as a response to their homelessness (Bretherton, 2017). Another study found that homeless women form new relationships to seek protection from men and that some of these relationships lead to further violence (Bunker, 2017). Responses to these new relationships/situations need to be able to address both realities, dealing with a traumatic past and looking forward to a future, with or without the new partner, which fosters the understanding that individuals do not necessarily need to be within a partnership/relationship to move forward.

There is no evidence of relationships being seen as an asset in people's lives or of the adoption of a strengths-based approach to working with couples.

### **Challenges to staying healthy and safe**

Recent research into repeat homelessness in Brighton (Homeless Link 2015, Bunker 2017) revealed temporary solutions such as tents and vehicles that some couples adopt when faced with rough sleeping. This was found to be problematic in terms of being moved on, with just one example of a couple creating a more semi-permanent accommodation out of discarded furniture. The same research highlighted the notion that women need protection (Bunker, 2017) and that women themselves can internalise a belief that being in a couple is better/safer, offering protection from harm, including self-harm (Homeless Link, 2015). This belief can result in dependency on a partner, even where a relationship is damaging or harmful. Personal hygiene, including going to the toilet, periods and washing, is problematic due to limited facilities and lack of privacy (Homeless Link, 2015). This can cause additional difficulties such as having to miss contact visits with children or job interviews.

## **More than homeless... associated issues**

A number of studies reveal that homelessness can be both a cause and symptom of wider issues such as abuse or violence, controlling behaviour, exploitation (financial and sexual), substance misuse and mental health issues (Bunker, 2017, Holly 2017 and Homeless Link, 2017). Relationships with family members and contact with children can also be compromised by rough sleeping, and can be traumatic, particularly for women who tend to have been the children's primary carer.

## **Housing First and other approaches**

The Housing First<sup>5</sup> approach is to provide a stable, independent home and intensive personalised support and case management to homeless people with multiple and complex needs (Homeless Link, 2017).

The ethos behind Housing First is one of unconditionality where no conditions or preconditions are placed on the individual (such as being 'tenancy ready', having no historic arrears or having to be engaged in substance misuse services). The key aim is to secure the housing and then work at the individual's own pace on the rest.

Projects such as the No First Night Out (NFNO) work to identify those at imminent risk of sleeping rough for the first time. No Second Night Out commits, when identifying a rough sleeper, to ensure they don't spend another night sleeping rough.

The Housing First England principles are:

- People have a right to a home
- Flexible support is provided for as long as it is needed
- Housing and support are separated
- Individuals have choice and control
- The service is based on people's strengths, goals and aspirations
- An active engagement approach is used
- A harm reduction approach is used

## **Notions of love and romance**

A study from the United States found that existing research on love, dating, and sex among the homeless is very slim, and tends to focus on the problems rather than benefits of relationships (Rachel L. Rayburn & Jay Corzine, 2010). More recently, The Guardian reported on couples living in Portland and Seattle, exploring the challenges and rewards of being in a relationship while sleeping rough (Pires, 2017). There is an absence of UK material on this angle of rough sleeping couples' lives and this has been highlighted through this study's call for evidence.

As we will see throughout this study, this highlights the need for a non-judgemental approach by agencies to the nature of the relationship if we are to help women properly in these circumstances. It reveals the need for a gendered approach to identifying (and working with) the men and women within couples, as well as the couples themselves. Men's and women's different experiences of these wider issues underline the need for gender sensitive approaches in responding and developing solutions and support services. Organisations such as the Eaton Foundation are beginning to lead the way in creating bespoke support packages for men.

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<sup>5</sup> Housing First is an international evidence-based approach, which uses independent, stable housing as a platform to enable individuals with multiple and complex needs to begin recovery and move away from homelessness.

## 5. Consultation and conversations with rough sleepers

This section presents findings drawn from the interviews completed with clients with current or previous experience of being a partner in a rough sleeping couple. It also draws on the case studies. It reflects on how couples arrive on the streets; the nature of rough sleeping relationships; and the impact rough sleeping has on these. It also reveals some of the barriers and challenges rough sleeping couples face in accessing services and support, and what rough sleeping couples see as some of the solutions to their situation. The quotes from clients are unattributed to preserve anonymity and confidentiality.

### • Arriving on the streets

Clients described a range of experiences that led to their rough sleeping, with a majority citing previous homelessness. Hidden homelessness emerged as an issue, with examples including sofa surfing and staying with friends.

Issues surrounding the circumstances of people arriving on the streets include:

- Abuse and assault
- Complex or multiple needs<sup>6</sup>
- Eviction
- Having been in care or having children taken into care
- Previous relationship breakdown
- Prison or other involvement with the criminal justice system
- Substance misuse
- Violence

Where people did have access to any accommodation, this was frequently not together. People reported inappropriate and/or insecure accommodation and described how this was abandoned, lost or not taken up because of restrictions on a partner staying or visiting.

*“[We weren’t offered housing] – not together. I could have done but he couldn’t. So we were kept out on the streets because couldn’t get anywhere together.”*

*“Can use winter night shelters, but K banned so won’t leave her.”*

The following case study shows how sleeping rough together is preferable to being accommodated separately:

#### Case Study

Key to Patricia’s situation was her relationship with her partner Mathew. Mathew also has high level multiple needs. Although their relationship was not always positive, and indeed was at times highly volatile – they simply refused to engage with services separately. For instance, preferring to sleep rough than be accommodated individually.

These findings indicate that meeting the needs of one or both individuals in a couple through accommodation is not necessarily the best response for the couple as a unit, with the relationship taking precedence over accommodation that does not meet its needs.

<sup>6</sup> Complex and multiple needs are where people experience several problems at the same time, such as mental ill health, homelessness, drug and alcohol misuse, offending, and family breakdown.

## Nature of relationships

A majority of people described the person they were in a couple with as a 'partner', with the majority of relationships developing on the streets. There was just one report of a relationship akin to 'brother and sister' who wanted to be housed together due to disability and caring arrangements.

The notion of looking after each other, and of relationships creating or providing protection, safety and support came across:

*"We would look after each other."*

*"Got together to look after him – protection for him. On the streets together for about 6 months."*

For women, being in a couple can provide a notion of protection and security in an unsafe environment:

*"Being a woman is very frightening and intimidating – all eyes are on you especially if new to an area/community. In terms of being on the street vital (for me) to be in a couple – I feel I would not survive without that (being in a couple). We are the support for each other, we are each other's services."*

This sense of 'us and them' and the relationship being more reliable than services was echoed by others. This sense of mistrust of services needs to be acknowledged and responded to by agencies seeking to engage and work with couples.

The introductory case study highlights this as does the following:

### **Case Study**

Carey and Jack have been living together for 8 years, most recently in a tent. They have a five-year-old son, who was removed by Children's Services and has been adopted. Carey and Jack are both alcohol dependent. Carey has started smoking heroin again recently. Both Carey and Jack have been arrested at different times for assaulting the other. Carey describes Jack as her 'finer half'. Some of the services involved believe that Carey is a victim of Domestic Abuse and needs rescuing from the relationship. Carey believes that she would be dead if it wasn't for Jack and that she can't trust services anyway.

Women described their experiences of sexual exploitation on the streets in a range of ways:

- Being pimped
- Prostitution
- Selling sex for money for drugs
- Survival sex: expectation of sex to get access to accommodation and washing facilities

*"Yes, men quite routinely use women."*

The extent to which women are exposed to this range of sexual exploitation suggests that a rough sleeping environment is fertile ground for those who seek to exploit women and other vulnerable individuals. Awareness of this additional risk, and how it can play out in practice, needs to be built in to work with rough sleeping couples.

## Accessing services and support – barriers and challenges

Clients were asked which services they did access when on the streets and they outlined a range of statutory and voluntary sector services they drew on for support, the majority of which they tended to access as individuals rather than as a couple.

These include:

- Drop-ins
- Drug and alcohol services
- GPs
- Hostels
- Housing
- Mental health services
- Night shelters
- Probation
- Social services

A number of specific agencies and projects providing services for individuals were mentioned as follows:

- **Freedom Programme** – the Freedom Programme is a domestic violence programme primarily designed for women as victims of domestic violence, and examines the roles played by attitudes and beliefs on the actions of abusive men and the responses of victims and survivors.
- **MEAM services** – the Making Every Adult Matter Approach helps local areas design and deliver better co-ordinated services for people with multiple needs. It's currently being used by partnerships of statutory and voluntary agencies in 15 local areas across England.
- **Seaview** – a well-being centre based in Hastings, providing a range of services primarily to clients who feel that they are living on the edge of society and are often struggling with life.
- **Spires outreach and day centre** – Spires' services are offered 5 days per week (Monday to Friday) throughout the year to those who access the centre in South London or who meet outreach workers on the streets. Along with the basic provision of food, clothing, showers and healthcare, Spires provides for clients' longer term needs by offering them appropriate support, advice and referral from its team of fully trained support workers.
- **BWC and WCHP women-only service** – based at St Clare's and led by an Outreach Caseworker from Brighton Women's Centre. The BWC Women's Accommodation Support Worker is also co-located here. There is a drop-in group which gives women the chance to socialise and take part in group activities. There is a relaxed atmosphere with music, snacks and crafts set out across the table and the opportunity for one-to-one chats if needed.
- **St Giles** – provides a range of targeted services for vulnerable people in South London and intensive peer-led support for adults with complex needs.

Women in London gave positive feedback about the support they gained through the outreach service they accessed through Spires, which offers rough sleeper and women-only spaces:

*“Outreach worker is the key to most things and the conduit to other things. You can trust them and they help you access services.”*

*“Outreach worker made the difference – attempts to befriend and support.”*



Women in Sussex gave positive feedback on the services and staff at the BWC and WCHP women-only service at St Clare's:

*"St Clare's was great and the staff were very helpful and understanding... very supportive of our needs as a couple."*

In terms of how being in a couple affects access to support services, a number of clients revealed experiences of their couple status not being recognised.

*"The council blatantly told us we were a support to each other on the streets, and therefore would not help us... it's very frustrating... it is also annoying to see other people get housed and us remain on the streets."*

*"It is hard to remain as a couple as services are happy to work with us but often not together."*

A number of couples reported difficulties with housing applications where the partners have local connections to different local authorities.

*"I cared for him – I was his carer but they still wouldn't house us together... I had no connection with Lambeth and he had no connection with Southwark."*

The following projects and organisations were highlighted as providing services to, and working with, couples:

- **Opportunity Nottingham** – works to improve the lives of people with multiple and complex needs in Nottingham City, delivering work through a partnership of specialist agencies. Once referred, Beneficiaries are allocated a Personal Development Co-ordinator who provides a very high level of support, tailored to the Beneficiary.
- **P3, Lincoln** – provides a street outreach service for rough sleepers and support to access wider services such as drug and alcohol services, stable and safe accommodation and physical and mental health services.
- **Soup Run, Brighton** – serves hot soup to anyone who needs it, seven days a week on Brighton seafront locations and provides food and conversation every evening.
- **St Clare's Day Centre, Worthing** – provides a safe environment for men and women where rough sleepers can access washing facilities and refreshments, along with advice and support from a project worker; access to personal hygiene services such as a chiropodist, hairdresser and laundry and to specialist advice on issues such as access to supported housing, mental health and substance misuse.
- **Outreach Café at Storm House, Worthing** – offers support where clients can pop along to talk to a member of staff or meet with friends for a game of cards or a chat. It is part of helping form a new social network. The group runs several outings each year and acts as a support network for each other, helping with any problems or lending

Where services do work with couples, clients provided positive feedback on the couple-inclusive approach, alongside being treated as an individual:

*"P3 were happy to work with us as a couple... we were happy with the approach of working with us as a couple as well as us as individuals."*

*"St Clare's was great – staff were very helpful and understanding and very supportive to our needs as a couple and to each of us as an individual."*

Organisations have observed positive outcomes for clients through working with them as a couple, as the following case study shows:

#### **Case Study**

Patricia's Personal Development Co-ordinator (PDC) began to involve Mathew in support sessions, encouraging him to help her make sure that she is taking all of her medication. She is now taking Subutex and only occasionally uses street drugs. Her alcohol intake has also reduced significantly. Meanwhile, Mathew's PDC has been working to stabilise his behaviour and address his support needs – the outcome being he is in a better place to support Patricia. Recently his NDT7 'chaos index' score has declined from 33 to 20.

There was also recognition that where services do work with couples, they can be limited and take time to put in place:

*"WCHP have been helpful but are also limited."*

*"We now have support as a couple but it took time for this support to happen."*

#### **Impact on relationship and other issues**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most clients reported their experience of rough sleeping as a couple as having a negative impact on their relationship as well as on health:

*"Physical impact – health has deteriorated and we argue a lot."*

*"Becomes a strain – nowhere to go and constantly together."*

The strain and stresses of sleeping rough and constant togetherness are often accompanied by destructive activities and behaviours.

The following case study highlights this:

#### **Case Study**

L said that although she felt it necessary to stay with her partners for safety, living rough was really stressful as a couple and on both occasions she describes a lot of fighting and drinking between them, even before the relationships became abusive and she had to flee.

The lack of access to personal hygiene and privacy was raised as problematic, particularly for women in relation to periods and private lives, this having a negative impact on well-being.

*"Personal hygiene – not being able to access regular showers affects private life."*

*"Felt very low. Self-esteem rock bottom. Dirty. I would go back to a guy's flat to shower even though I knew what he expected."*

A number of people felt that being on the streets creates a sense of co-dependency, particularly in relation to drug use:

*"When you're using and on the streets there is a co-dependency that is not good in the long run."*

In spite of the challenges of rough sleeping, there were some accounts of rough sleeping as a couple being a positive thing for a relationship:

*“Being on the streets keeps you together.”*

*“[Rough sleeping]... makes it harder. Can put the relationship under a lot of pressure. But also because you need each other, it can make you stronger as a relationship.”*

### **What good would look like**

Most people in a current couple had clear aspirations to be re-housed with their partner and similar aspirations and dreams to most people:

*“My dream is to be working, doing what I like, have hobbies and have a future together (kids etc).”*

While joint housing was the aspiration for most people in a couple, some women interviewed felt that support services should be provided separately.

The women interviewed separately, who either knew couples or had previously been in a couple on the street, but were not currently in a couple, were clear that individuals should be housed and supported separately:

*“I feel strongly that people should be supported separately as this is the best way to achieve your independent goals.”*

*“Give them each their own place – they can get together within that if they want.”*

These perspectives on housing and support solutions are somewhat contradictory, beginning to confirm that there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution. Each couple needs to be supported on a case-by-case basis in a gender sensitive way from the outset to ensure that the nature and nuances of the relationship are taken in to account, alongside individual aspirations and concerns, some of which will not be revealed until trust has been built up.

In addition to housing, other key areas were highlighted where ongoing support will be required and key to successful move-on:

- Children – access and visiting
- Education and employment

On a more general note, the point was made about the need for ongoing awareness raising about the actual experiences of rough sleepers and challenging some of the negative stereotypes, e.g. that rough sleepers are just after money, or that rough sleeping is a ‘lifestyle choice’. Challenging negative stereotypes could help address some of the stigma around rough sleeping and reveal the range of experiences and needs of the individuals and couples who find themselves in those circumstances.

*“I feel it’s not really money that helps, but rather being treated with the same respect as others, rather than people feeling sorry for me.”*

## Summary

These findings from clients' perspectives begin to add to our understanding of rough sleeping couples' experiences. Their experiences, some positive as well as frequently negative, help shape thinking on provision for couples and present some opportunities to better respond to couples' needs in future. Changes are needed in a number of key areas including improving access to appropriate housing and support and challenging attitudes, structures and working practices that fail to recognise couple status.

In terms of appropriate housing, providing only separate housing options may stop couples who want to be housed together from engaging with services, thus increasing the likelihood of them returning to rough sleeping. Mistrust of agencies results in couples not engaging and becoming each other's support – this in turn fosters co-dependency and exacerbates issues within abusive relationships.

Sexual exploitation is a big issue for rough sleeping women and is a factor in their seeking relationships as a route to protection. Failing to provide services for couples, or refusing to support women where they choose not to leave (what is perceived to be) an 'unhealthy' relationship, pushes those vulnerable women back into high-risk situations. Where services do work with couples/women in couples, results are usually positive. Where they don't, or don't recognise couple status, this is a significant barrier to engagement.

Co-dependency emerges as a key characteristic of street relationships, especially where drugs are involved. There are differing (contradictory) views on whether couples should be supported and housed separately or together; however a key message across this study is that a tailored support package is needed for each couple as well as for each individual within the couple, as each couple's relationship and inter-dependency will differ.

## 6. Perspectives of agencies working with people in rough sleeping couples

This section presents findings from the call for evidence and interviews with partners and stakeholders. It explores practitioners' and professionals' perceptions of the causes and extent of rough sleeping couples, including observation on prevalence. It covers the approaches taken to establish the nature of rough sleeping couples' relationships, considers the issues rough sleeping couples face (and whether these are different for men and women) and the challenges organisations face in working with rough sleeping couples. It provides some examples of services working with couples. Quotes from the call for evidence are attributed to the organisation/service that responded or of which the respondent had recent experience.

### Causes and extent of rough sleeping couples

A number of causes for couples sleeping rough emerged, in many instances echoing the clients' stories. People reported abuse, affordability, eviction (due to anti-social behaviour, including substance misuse-related issues or rent arrears), financial problems and poverty, previous homelessness (frequently hidden e.g. by sofa surfing), mental health issues, inappropriate accommodation, lack of housing options and substance misuse as the key contributors to couples sleeping rough.

There appears to be a prevalence of couples coming together on the streets, rather than arriving on the streets together, and a perception amongst practitioners is that these relationships are not long-term:

*“Most couples seem to get together on the streets – relationships often don't last long.”*

**Worthing PCSO**

*“Not uncommon for couples to get together on the streets – co-dependency.”*

**Probation Officer, Littlehampton**

There is also a perception that women are likely to pair up with men for 'protection':

*“Women rough sleepers say they are likely to pair up with men – not necessarily as a choice – it's about safety and the lesser of two evils.”*

**Area Lead, Fulfilling Lives, Hastings**

*“For women, most are not in relationships prior to rough sleeping – relationships tend to be forged on the streets. Women enter relationships for protection from other rough sleeping men and other predators.”*

**Commissioner – Single Homeless and Rough Sleeping,  
Brighton and Hove Council**

Along with clear recognition of the general increase in rough sleeping, there were mixed views on the extent to which there has been an increase in rough sleeping couples in the last two years. There was a sense that the recent increase in numbers of women sleeping rough is a key contributor to greater numbers of rough sleeping couples for the reasons cited above:

*“Some couple-up on the street – women seek someone to protect them. Not necessarily a relationship or love – more a case of sexual favours for protection.”*  
**Women’s Accommodation Support Worker, Brighton Women’s Centre**

Linked to this is the perception that women are more likely to be in a couple than men and that the relationships are not always a positive thing for women:

*“Women are more likely to be in a couple than men – most relationships are negative and unsafe for them.”*  
**Commissioner – Single Homeless and Rough Sleeping, Brighton and Hove Council**

*“Women are in relationships where they are co-dependent with the partner for support and share a ‘unity against the world’ – can appear healthy and supportive from the outside but are unhealthy underneath.”*  
**Women’s Accommodation Support Worker, Brighton Women’s Centre**

### **Establishing the nature of couple relationships**

Key to establishing the nature of couple relationships is time to develop trust and build open channels of communication:

*“We need to build up trust before people will start disclosing things.”*  
**Service Manager, St Mungo’s**

At the same time, there is recognition that in the first instance a relationship needs to be taken at face value, and personal perceptions of what constitutes a ‘healthy relationship’ should not result in either a judgement about the quality of the couple’s relationship or, worse, the support they are then subsequently permitted.

*“On first presentation accept as presented – whether you may think a relationship is healthy or not and whether it’s days, weeks or years long – the couple are two adults. Then go on to investigate risks about aspects of the relationship.”*  
**Operations Manager, P3**

*“Accept self-definition of connection with each other.”*  
**Fulfilling Lives, Nottingham**

The importance of this initial acceptance and a non-judgemental approach, even where there may be a sense that the relationship is unhealthy for one or both people, is essential to engaging with the couple (and individuals) on a longer-term basis. Professionals making decisions based on assumptions/judgements takes away couples’ agency/decision-making, whereas such decisions need to be arrived at by the couple themselves. There are often also issues for agencies with regard to managing risk. Accepting clients whose behaviour, if continued, may result in harm to self or others, means agencies tend to either try to remove that risk or decline to work with the individual. Accepting that not all risk can be avoided will remove that barrier to organisations working with vulnerable (and potentially exploited) people in these situations.

*“Ask open questions – no pre-judgment.”*  
**Operations Manager, P3**

*“Can’t be judgmental and tell people what to do.”*  
**Partnerships and Development Manager, Brighton Women’s Centre**

Following this initial acceptance, account can be taken of signs that further clarify and reveal the nature of the couple’s attachment. These include:

- Language used e.g. boyfriend, girlfriend, partner
- Joint benefit claims/housing applications
- Previously living together/desire to stay together
- Sharing resources
- Looking to the other person for support
- Each person’s view of their ‘role’ in the relationship
- Dependency/co-dependency
- Behaviours and expression of emotion
- What brings and keeps them together and joint aspirations

People value the contribution made by street outreach workers in gathering intelligence to establish the nature of a couple’s relationship and ongoing assessment of this. Ongoing work with the couple, and crucially with the two individuals within a couple, gathers wider intelligence on the nature of the relationship and any changes.

*“Need to have effective street outreach to see couples functioning together in their system.”*

**Multiple Needs Service, London Borough of Hackney**

*“[Gain information from] communications with outreach teams who observe interactions on the street.”*

**Service Manager, St Mungo’s, London**

People feel that a multi-agency approach to sharing referral and risk assessment information is critical to understanding the dynamics of a relationship. This helps all agencies develop a clear picture of all aspects of the couple’s support needs and ensures consistency of record keeping and support. Comments highlighting the importance of effective multi-agency information sharing included:

*“[We need] multi-agency working to get history (e.g. abuse) and assess risk – information sharing agreements very important.”*

**Fulfilling Lives, West Yorkshire**

*“Establish the relationship through referral paperwork and strong interagency working.”*

**Service Manager, St Mungo’s, London**

These findings have implications for future work with couples, highlighting the need for meaningful interventions based on intelligence gathered through observation, outreach and information-sharing, as well as effective engagement to build trust. Sharing up-to-date information between relevant agencies is key to developing and maintaining an understanding of the (possibly changing) nature of the relationship, as are mechanisms to ensure this information occurs dynamically and effectively.

Additionally staff with experience of working with couples suggest adopting a strengths-based approach to assessment of the couple. To survive on the streets and to maintain an ongoing relationship means that people have great resilience and many coping mechanisms. Recognising these skills as strengths and assets, rather than seeing their circumstances as a set of 'problems to be solved' (and in couples a double set of problems) enables a more positive approach for staff working with couples.

### Issues for rough sleeping couples

There was broad consensus about many of the issues couples present with, and face, when seeking accommodation or support services. Time and again the following complex, and frequently multiple, issues were highlighted as being prevalent within rough sleeping couples:

- Abuse (including emotional, financial, physical and sexual)
- Chaotic lives
- Substance dependency and misuse
- Co-dependency
- Criminality and access to criminal justice
- Loss of previous housing
- Mental and physical health
- Unemployment
- Violence

*“The issues are interconnected and highly complex, exacerbated by chaotic lives.”*

**Area Lead, Fulfilling Lives, Hastings**

Looking at these issues with a gender lens, there were some stark examples of women being particularly affected and disadvantaged by certain issues including:

- Abuse – emotional, financial, physical, sexual
- Children being taken away
- Coercive, controlling and manipulative behaviour
- Exploitation – financial, sexual, prostitution
- Loss of housing
- Violence

*“Women tend to have had different experiences to men – systems, children being removed, losing housing, trauma and substance misuse – [are a] blueprint for many women ending up homeless – 9/10 homeless women have had children.”*

**Probation Officer, Littlehampton**

Coercive and controlling behaviour emerged as a significant feature of many women's involvement in a rough sleeping couple, with strong perceptions of women's activities being limited or prevented by their male partner:

*“Can be hard for women to access services because of partner suspicion”.*

**Single Homeless Co-ordinator, Adur and Worthing Councils**

*“Males prevent women accessing women-only services and often disrupt/interrupt attendance. Women's access to services is frequently difficult due to controlling manipulative behaviour, abuse and violence.”*

**Partnerships and Development Manager, Brighton Women's Centre**



*“Where partners are controlling and engagement is difficult, the partner either stands nearby during conversations, exerting pressure on the woman to hurry up, is always present, or does not allow the woman to have her own phone – so keeping in contact and one-to-one work is difficult.”*

**Women’s Accommodation Support Worker, Brighton Women’s Centre**

The particular risks for rough sleeping women emerged as a theme, along with the recognition that while there may be risks to housing a couple whose relationship is violent, the risks for that couple will always be greater on the streets:

*“Women are more likely to earn money on the street... financial exploitation... this sort of thing... is easier to control on the streets.”*

**Area Lead, Fulfilling Lives, Hastings**

*“Should house couples together – would be safer than on the streets – more risks there.”*

**Women’s Accommodation Support Worker, Brighton Women’s Centre**

*“It’s nonsensical – two people are on the streets and providers are saying they can’t house them because of abuse and associated risks. The risks are greater on the streets. Need to work with the couple to address the abuse – with the perpetrator and victim – get the perpetrator to understand the consequences of their actions.”*

**Operations Manager, P3**

These views can be seen as counter to those expressed by some clients, that housing and support should be provided separately to individuals within couples, although a number of women who expressed this view were no longer in the relationship. At the same time, providing housing as a first response in no way precludes individual support interventions following the immediate housing solution. These contrasting perspectives again underline that there is no one solution that will work for every rough sleeping couple – each pair needs to be taken on a case-by case basis and solutions framed around their aspirations and needs as a couple, as well as those of the two individuals in the couple.

In terms of the issues rough sleeping couples face in accessing accommodation and support services, the messages are again consistent. Couples encounter unhelpful policy approaches and structural barriers, along with attitudes and practices that do not cater for or recognise couples and result in them remaining on the street for longer.

The following emerged as consistent themes that acted as barriers to getting support together:

- Lack of access to accommodation and support services together as a couple
- Lack of emergency accommodation in the short term as a couple and available housing in the longer term
- Invisibility and not being recognised as a couple
- Legislation – unhelpful implementation and interpretation and language (always ‘single homeless’ or ‘families’)
- Risk aversion in providers to work with couples to address the complex issues they present with
- Sense that services try to drive couples apart
- Services being geared towards working with individuals, and primarily men
- Services that won’t work with a woman if they believe she is in an abusive relationship, leaving the woman unsupported

*“Some providers will accommodate couples, but not in the same room – as a policy decision.”*

*“Couples want acknowledgement of relationship and one unit – most providers cater for single homeless and provide single person rooms. Couples are often not housed at the same time – can’t guarantee there will be spaces for both, especially women – spaces are at a premium.”*

*“Being perceived as a ‘genuine’ couple by statutory housing services – can be hard to evidence.”*

**Commissioner – Single Homeless and Rough Sleeping, Brighton and Hove Council**

*“Services can end up driving a wedge between couples which discourages contact and forces them down a route with no safety plan – who’s listening? No one.”*

**Probation Officer, Littlehampton**

## **Challenges to providing accommodation and support services**

### **Lack of provision and single homeless pathways**

People overwhelmingly reported lack of provision and of pathways geared to the single homeless as one of the key challenges, with limited or no dedicated accommodation and support services for couples.

*“Finding any placements [is the greatest challenge] – all services say they don’t take couples.”*

**Probation Officer, Littlehampton**

*“Would be easier if there was more housing for couples together – to provide somewhere safe that isn’t a carpark.”*

**Women’s Accommodation Support Worker, Brighton Women’s Centre**

*“Worked in outreach for 6 – 7 years and observed that there is no provision for couples, absolutely zero, in supported housing.”*

**Operations Manager, P3**

*“Challenge is single homeless pathways that do not respond to couples wanting to live together and needing support to do so – all solutions are around single homelessness.”*

**Manager, St Mungo’s, Brighton and Hove**

Alongside this overall lack of provision, there is recognition that services for couples need also to take account of the individuals within the couple who frequently need different interventions and support:

*“Lack of services and accommodation for high needs and high-risk couples that work with the perpetrator and the victim – nowhere will take them both. They’d rather stay on the streets than be accommodated separately in different night shelters.”*

**Single Homeless Co-ordinator, Adur and Worthing Councils**

This lack of provision is contributing to keeping couples sleeping rough and perpetuating unsafe situations. There are some key issues that providers face if they accept a couple in their supported housing/support service.

- Whether to offer the couple one room or two. Two rooms mean the couple has more space but feels to the couple like a ‘non-recognition’ of their relationship. Two rooms also mean two rental charges. On the other hand, one room is acknowledgement of the relationship, but is often a very small living space.
- Complications linked to claiming benefits as a couple – lower overall income and difficulties in extricating themselves from the joint financial arrangements if the relationship ends.
- One room also means that the support provider is housing and supporting more clients than allowed for in the funding they receive. This may not be an issue with just one couple, but a provider reported supporting 4 couples. This has a significant impact on case loads and needs to be recognised by commissioners/funders alongside any expectation to accept couples into the service.

### Understanding what drives a relationship

People identified the importance of understanding what drives a relationship and how it is perceived by the individuals within the couple. This is particularly challenging where the perception of the worker does not chime with perception of the individual and there is concern about the relationship being harmful for one or both of the individuals in the couple. It is vital to build trust to overcome suspicion and fear of being told what to do. The belief that the couple will not stay together or that the relationship is a negative one may be borne out over time, but it is important to support both parties throughout that process to come to their own conclusions:

*“Keep her engaged and work with her to get her to see how the relationship is impacting on her – her perspective may be that the relationship is keeping her safe, so we have to balance that.”*

**Partnerships and Development Manager, Brighton Women’s Centre**

*“It is challenging when it is clear that the relationship is harmful and/or unhealthy for one or both of the couple e.g. domestic violence or abuse, and where the couple perceive the relationship as a positive thing.”*

**Commissioner – Single Homeless and Rough Sleeping, Brighton and Hove Council**

### Building up an accurate, complete picture in a constantly changing context

The chaotic and constantly changing nature of many rough sleepers’ lives was cited as a challenge, along with conflicting information from different sources. This underlines the need for effective joint and multi-agency working to ensure that information sharing is straightforward and timely with appropriate referral and follow up mechanisms in place:

*“Street community is chaotic with frequent changes of partners/relationships.”*

**Manager, St Mungo’s, Brighton and Hove**

*“Sometimes get one version from a client then a different story from another service provider working with the partner e.g. issues of control and dependency. It’s like putting together pieces of a puzzle.”*

**Probation Officer, Littlehampton**

### Organisational and staff expertise

Linked to the lack of provision of dedicated couple accommodation and support services, a number of people commented on limitations around organisational and staff expertise in working with couples:

*“Less experienced organisations can make a mess of couple aspects of work e.g. supporting the least vulnerable partner.”*

**Area Lead, Fulfilling Lives, Hastings**

*“Workers struggle with some aspects of the work, e.g. asking questions around sexual health – not sure workers equipped to deal with this side of work with couples.”*

**Manager, St Mungo’s, Brighton and Hove**

*“[Some organisations show] a lack of understanding of the client group.”*

**Multiple Needs Service, London Borough of Hackney**

Risk aversion and concern about meeting different needs also emerged as issues that impact on ability and willingness to work with couples.

*“[There are] issues of high-risk couples and women needing specific things.”*

**Probation Officer, Littlehampton**

*“Other providers just won’t take the risk of taking couples.”*

**Single Homeless Co-ordinator, Adur and Worthing Councils**

Risk aversion is in part ascribed to the nature of relationships where there is harmful activity or behaviour. Organisations fear the risk of colluding, or being seen to collude, with harmful behaviour – not working with couples who present with these issues is a way of avoiding this, rather than taking proactive steps to address issues e.g. challenging perpetrators of abuse and getting them to think differently.

Some respondents felt that there is also a financial disincentive and risk for providers in terms of reduced income from housing a couple rather than two individuals.

### **Policies and good practices that support working with couples**

A number of elements were consistently highlighted as effective practice and key features of couple-inclusive approaches.

People overwhelmingly cited the importance of a person-centred approach in working with couples, working with each individual at the same time as respecting their status within a couple. For a couple, a person-centred approach needs to be gender sensitive with separate workers:

*“Gender sensitive and person-centred support with male and female workers [works best]. Recognise they are a couple but treat as individuals within that.”*

**Operations Manager, P3**

*“Male and female workers and a gendered approach [are needed].”*

**Partnerships and Development Manager, Brighton Women’s Centre**

There is a strong sense that gender sensitive interventions are a critical success factor in delivering appropriate and relevant support.

Work with couples needs to ensure all options and routes are explored. Being housed together as a couple may be the ideal option or, for one or both partners, the beginnings of a route out of a harmful or unhealthy relationship; staff need to be confident and competent to work across these issues and to establish the most appropriate pathway(s).

*“Raise awareness of alternatives and options, if one or other wants to leave, or if they want to remain together.”*

**Fulfilling Lives, West Yorkshire**

*“Find ways to have private one-to-one conversations, introduce exit strategies at the start.”*

**Operations Manager, P3**

*“The relationship could be for a purpose when women are on the streets – [we need to provide the] right level of support – for men as well as women – to unpick this. Make it safe for women to say that the relationship isn’t what they want – support for vulnerable women to end relationships if they want to. Help men and women separately.”*

**Executive Director for Neighbourhoods, Communities and Housing, Brighton and Hove Council**

A positive approach to managing risk was identified as a critical factor in effective work with couples, with an emphasis on risk awareness and robust assessments:

*“Need good risk assessments and risk awareness.”*

**Operations Manager, P3**

*“Really clear risk stuff in place... not to be risk averse. Can’t always use risk as a reason not to do things. Need a culture change.”*

**Partnerships and Development Manager, Brighton Women’s Centre**

Effective risk management will consider impact and likelihood of harm, degrees of risk and likely triggers. It is responsive to changing circumstances and contexts and considers dynamic risk factors, involving clients in developing and reviewing risk assessments. It recognises that risk management plans aim to minimise and reduce over time, rather than entirely remove, risk.

The majority of people felt that couple specific housing is really the key to lifting couples out of their circumstances and that the ‘Couples First’ approach outlined earlier is required, nuanced to reflect the specific circumstances of couples. While this approach would adopt the principle of unconditionality that Housing First applies, the ‘Couples First’ approach would begin with the unconditional acceptance of the relationship and the request to be supported (and, where requested, housed) together, regardless of the eventual outcome of the relationship.

There is also recognition that accommodating couples needs to involve appropriate accommodation where they can live together comfortably:

*“Large units big enough for a couple where they can live together. Need a different offer.”*

**Commissioner – Single Homeless and Rough Sleeping, Brighton and Hove Council**

A ‘Couples First’ approach is not a universal solution. It needs to be considered in the contexts of the person-centred and gender sensitive approaches mentioned earlier and implemented when deemed to be the most appropriate pathway.

As well as housing, people felt that focusing on wider issues is beneficial, for example anger management, mental health and well-being and healthy positive relationships. Other areas that emerged as key to effective work with couples are:

- Low caseloads and appropriate budgets
- Specialist workers
- A clear couples' pathway
- Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE<sup>8</sup>) and approaches
- Unpicking co-dependency issues
- Working with other relevant agencies e.g. anti-social behaviour teams, drug and alcohol workers, domestic abuse workers.

The stark choice of working with the couple or not at all is a key point, mirroring the rough sleeper finding that sleeping rough together is preferable to being accommodated separately.

*“A crucial area for Opportunity Nottingham however has been developing a psychologically informed approach. An important part of this means understanding Beneficiaries’ relationships and the significance of them – and where it is safe to do so, working with, rather than against these. Moreover, the stark choice was – we either worked with the couple together or not at all.”*

**Opportunity Nottingham**

*“Need to take a psychologically informed approach – [it is] not psychologically informed to not live with your partner when it is safe and appropriate to do so. Need to look positively at the impact and challenges, and how to manage these and risks.”*

**Commissioner – Single Homeless and Rough Sleeping, Brighton and Hove Council**

While there is consensus that there is insufficient provision to cater for rough sleeping couples, there are some examples of approaches and initiatives that are addressing this shortfall.

### **Brighton and Hove Council**

Brighton and Hove Council commissioning requirements now require that providers work with couples, rather than only with single people, which will contribute to meeting couples' needs.

The contract now states: ‘The Council encourages the provision of some accommodation which is accessible to those with physical disabilities, people with a history of arson, couples, and that allows pets. All services tendered should accommodate couples where possible, some are more suited to this than others due to the design of the buildings.’

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<sup>8</sup> A Psychologically Informed Environment (PIE) ‘... is one that takes into account the psychological makeup – the thinking, emotions, personalities and past experience – of its participants in the way that it operates.’ It’s an approach to supporting people out of homelessness, in particular those who have experienced complex trauma or are diagnosed with a personality disorder. It also considers the psychological needs of staff: developing skills and knowledge, increasing motivation, job satisfaction and resilience.

Feedback has highlighted that when requiring providers to accommodate couples, commissioners must remain mindful that where a couple is accommodated in one unit, this may impact on benefit claims and hence the income of the provider and also that this must be counted as two 'support units', even where only one accommodation unit has been chosen by the couple as their preferred option.

### **Opportunity Nottingham**

Takes a proactive approach to working with couples, seeking to understand beneficiaries' relationships and the significance of them – and where it is safe to do so, working with, rather than against these.

### **The Passage**

Montfort House – provides temporary accommodation in self-contained studio flats for 16 former rough sleepers, including men, women and couples, targeting the most vulnerable long-term entrenched clients with long and complex homelessness histories.

### **Riverside**

Brydon Court – based in Manchester, Brydon Court works with entrenched rough sleepers to help empower them to become stable in accommodation. The service works with single people and couples and provides a high tolerance approach to support that is person-centred. The Outreach Team works to engage those most in need.

Newbury House – a supported accommodation project in Manchester, for people who have experience of long-term rough sleeping and complex needs. Support and accommodation are provided for any gender, singles or couples with or without animals, who are currently rough sleeping, people with complex needs or those who have found that other services are not suitable for their needs. The age range is from 18 years upwards. Access to Newbury House is via the dedicated outreach team, which works across Manchester identifying customers who need support.

Brydon Court and Newbury House both accept people from the streets without assessment and use a range of options, including Housing First, to offer couples joint housing and support.

The team at Newbury includes staff with lived experience, and men and women of different ages. This gives residents choice and flexibility about who provides their support, and a range of perspectives among the team which strengthens colleagues' ability to support each other.

### **Worthing Churches Homeless Projects**

Lyndhurst Road, Worthing – a 38-bed short-stay accommodation for local homeless individuals divided into contained flats that will provide temporary accommodation for different client groups: couples, women only, men only and mental health referrals. The ground floor will also provide office space for WCHP staff, and a multi-agency team of 10 to 15 staff. WCHP's vision for this service is to create a more joined up and effective and efficient front for tackling homelessness locally.

*“Lyndhurst Road was designed and developed based on the need, and the gaps in the area, for those who are homeless. During the design phase, and*

*alongside our Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) project, we identified numerous individuals who would like the opportunity to live together but there were no services set up to be able to cater for this. Being a part of the Couples First? research, and from seeing this gap in provision, WCHP made the decision to create two larger units at Lyndhurst Road to be able to offer couples an opportunity to be housed together. The first couple moved in May 2018 and we hope to take the learning and feedback from our clients in these units to design further provision in the future.”*

**April Baker – Head of Homelessness, WCHP**

## Summary

The general perception across agencies is that street relationships most usually emerge on the streets, rather than before, are usually because a woman seeks protection and are unlikely to be long term. That women enter relationships for protection and/or to escape sexual exploitation rather than for positive reasons is a contributory factor in unhealthy relationships.

Time to build up trust is vital to support workers in understanding the nature of a relationship. Trust is established by working with a non-judgemental, open minded approach to gain people’s confidence.

On first presentation, it is essential to accept the couple’s self-definition of their connection with each other as presented – whether the worker may think a relationship is healthy or not and whether it’s days, weeks or years long. The next step is to investigate risks of aspects of the relationship, developing a working relationship of trust with the couple, which will enable longer term work that supports them to consider their relationship and whether it works. Taking a positive approach to the relationship and working with a couple gives them space to work this through for themselves.

A multi-agency, joined up approach is needed to both identify couples and understand the nature of their relationships on an ongoing basis to respond to changing circumstances and contexts. The work will be 3-layered, working with each person in the couple and with the couple together.

Those who sleep rough face myriad issues, and women are particularly negatively affected by these; services need to understand the gendered nature of the issues and the impacts for women.

There is often a strong perception that the male partner in a male – female rough sleeping couple will exert control over and/or have a coercive influence on the woman. This can hinder or even prevent women from engaging. This needs to be understood and worked with, as failure to recognise this dynamic results in women in that position not being reached and so continuing to be unsupported, even if there is a willingness on their part to engage.

Alongside this, there is a need to understand the risks of working with couples. Currently, agencies may avoid working with couples, or women in couples, because of the complexities they present or the difficulty they express in accepting support, but the risks to that woman/couple by being on the street and not engaging are far higher. Agencies need to provide tailored support packages that take into account that the best option for one couple may not be right for another couple. Support packages must be person-centred with a gendered approach to working with the individuals and with the couple.

Recognising individual and joint skills as strengths and assets, rather than seeing their circumstances as a set of ‘problems to be solved’ (and in couples a double set of problems) enables a more positive approach for staff working with couples.



## 7. Recommendations for next steps

The recommended next steps seek to improve the experiences of, and outcomes for, rough sleeping couples. The need for change, and to do things differently – a shift to action and away from risk-averse approaches, both individual and organisational – are now needed to drive this agenda forward.

The recommendations are presented in three themes and designed to be adopted either as a stand-alone action, or as one of a number of actions as part of a wider approach. The themes flow from the findings discussed and are:

- Accommodation and housing related solutions
- Best practice in supporting couples
- Raising awareness.

There is also an over-arching recommendation of:

Adopting an agreed definition of the term ‘Couples First’ approach to ensure consistent understanding and application of provision.

- A ‘Couples First’ approach advocates for a better understanding of the dynamic between individual couples in order to better support their on-going relationship or their decision to separate for the wellbeing of the individual/s in the couple. A ‘Couples First’ approach begins with unconditional acceptance of the relationship and the request to be supported (and, where requested, housed) together.

The recommendations are intended to be an invitation to action and it is hoped that each reader will find something to take away and use in the course of their involvement and work with rough sleeping couples and in developing new approaches and services.

### **Best practice in supporting couples**

1. The study shows the **need to be ‘couple inclusive’**. Approaches need to take account of each individual as well as the couple, so to be gender sensitive and person-centred at the same time as ‘couple inclusive’. This will probably mean encountering a range of risks and managing these effectively. Each couple should be worked with on a case-by-case basis and decisions made together with the couples about the support they receive.
2. Further **work with providers to showcase good practice** and to identify what needs to be in place to make this successful. A pilot service delivery project based on the BWC/WCHP model of support and Lyndhurst Road provision could form the start of this further work. Developing a toolkit of good practice would support providers and commissioners in this work. Subsequent points in this section represent ingredients for that toolkit.
3. To better respond to the needs of rough sleeping couples, **additional research into gender specific interventions**, such as the BWC work in partnership with WCHP and Seaview, will help develop bespoke gendered responses to meet the needs of each partner in a rough sleeping couple.

4. The study also shows the **need to adopt risk-aware approaches** to working with couples. Services need to become less risk averse and more open to identify in and minimising risk in a dynamic way. A robust risk-aware approach as part of needs assessment will help reveal the most appropriate accommodation and support pathways.
5. Learn **what approaches and support are effective** from services that are working with couples, e.g. a gender sensitive approach, supporting the couple to develop healthy relationship skills, practical support provided by outreach workers, access to personal hygiene facilities and safe spaces, timely interventions, more bespoke services and less judgemental attitudes.
6. Create the conditions for **effective joint and multi-agency working**. This needs local co-ordination, good channels of communication and information sharing arrangements.
7. Ensure **organisations and workers are equipped with relevant knowledge and skills** e.g. through training and awareness-raising on the issues couples face, and on gender and power issues; training to support outreach agencies and supported housing providers on benefits, legal statuses, access to services and building confidence to understand the nature of the relationship and enable a more person-centred approach.
8. Begin to **address the wider issues around exploitation** to which women are particularly vulnerable, and which echo women's experiences in wider society as covered by the #metoo campaign. For women, housing and support are likely to respond to their immediate needs while other longer-term interventions will empower them to lead fulfilling lives, with or without their current partner, and give them the space to make that latter decision. The extent to which women are exposed to this range of sexual exploitation suggests that a rough sleeping environment is fertile ground for those who seek to exploit women/other vulnerable individuals.
9. Acknowledge and respond to **the sense of mistrust of services** in seeking to engage and work with couples.
10. Adopt **gender sensitive PIE and trauma informed approaches** to deal with complex needs, trauma and wider issues.
11. Ensure that **relationships are respected. Avoid assumptions and judgements** and take time to establish the nature of the relationship and what drives it, particularly where the relationship may appear to be harmful.
12. Ensure **people are supported to reconnect with children** who have been removed (where it is safe to do so).

### **Accommodation and housing-related solutions**

13. Alongside the 'Couples First' approach and recognising that there is no single solution, there is a need for **more supported housing options for women** for whom provision is more limited than men. This will address the woman's immediate housing crisis and enable all potential pathways and routes to be explored safely, where accommodation and support is not tied to relationship status. More supported accommodation for women might remove the need for them to seek protection in a rough sleeping, potentially unhealthy, relationship.

14. The invisibility of rough sleeping couples highlights the need for **improved recognition of rough sleeping couples under homelessness provisions**. The process of assessment and Personalised Housing Plans under the new Homelessness Reduction Act need to take account of the immediate and short-term needs of each individual and the couple as well as longer-term aspirations. Commissioners need to be specific about the requirements for providers to accommodate and cater for couples.
15. Commissioners should proactively **require within their contracts that providers work with couples** to minimise the risk of harm couples face on the streets. The systems that support this must recognise that the provider is therefore providing support for two people.

### Raising awareness

16. To address the invisibility of rough sleeping couples we must act to **raise awareness of the needs of couples** across initiatives and projects working with single rough sleepers e.g. Galvanise B&H, NFNO and Assertive Outreach Services.
17. Be prepared to **learn from others through networking and asking questions**, being curious, interested and open to doing things differently and learning from failure – adopt an ‘Agile Problem Solving’<sup>9</sup> approach.

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<sup>9</sup> Agile Problem Solving (APS) is an adaptive approach to tackling complex challenges. APS teaches leaders how to address complex challenges such as homelessness by developing a core set of mindsets and skills to embed in their daily work. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is piloting APS to tackle poverty in Hartlepool through its Hartlepool Action Lab and £1,000,000 challenge.

# 8. Epilogue

## **Commonweal Housing's Perspective: Why is Commonweal interested in rough sleeping couples?**

Commonweal is an independent charity working to pilot and champion housing based solutions to social injustices.

Using our charitable funding we provide experts and partner organisations with the space and opportunity to trial and test new approaches designed to enhance housing equality and justice.

This support for expert partners helps them ask questions and scratch beneath the surface of an issue they think might be important but which quite frankly they don't know enough about. In Commonweal speak using our project framework we describe this as a pre-pilot phase: identifying a social injustice and early stage feasibility study.

When we were approached by our friends at Brighton Women's Centre, the issues they brought to our attention around rough sleeping couples – namely, the options available to them as couples and indeed the nature of the relationships – were compelling. For Commonweal, issues of systemic injustice is what really annoys us and the notion that inadvertently (or deliberately) current services and systems supporting the homeless were not supporting mixed couples was something we wanted to know more about. We are pleased that this report starts to add to the knowledge around this group and identifies next steps. We hope that this report of itself will start to address the 'invisibility of rough sleeping couples' highlighted here and will enable a conversation across the sector that may challenge some stereotypes, unhelpful assumptions or even the unintended negative impacts of some well-meaning services.

Rough sleeping couples may not be the biggest issue (numerically) in terms of homelessness and rough sleeping but an 'issue' it most certainly is. It is also something that Brighton Women's Centre have identified, through their tireless work with vulnerable women, as particularly a women's issue too. Our independent funding allows us to use our resources to raise the profile of issues that may otherwise be overlooked, and with the number of rough sleeping couples on the rise, it's imperative that we do so in order to explore an appropriate way forward.

Seeking housing solutions to social injustice is what Commonweal does, and we hope this early stage research may be one step along the road to finding solutions for how to support rough sleeping couples.

**Ashley Horsey – Chief Executive, Commonweal Housing  
June 2018**

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## About Brighton Women's Centre (BWC)

BWC prides itself on its commitment to working across Sussex, with agencies, to provide bespoke, holistic and trauma informed women specific services to women with multiple complex needs. BWC has a track record in partnership and multiagency working with statutory, voluntary and private sector agencies across Sussex and leads the award winning Inspire partnership which addresses the rehabilitation of women offenders.

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