

# **Safe Accommodation for Women Leaving Prison: Feasibility Study**

Report for Brighton Women's Centre

November 2024

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## Contents

Glossary.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Background.....	4
Methodology.....	7
Women's stories.....	8
Woman 1 .....	8
Woman 2 .....	9
Woman 3 .....	10
Woman 4 .....	11
Woman 5 .....	12
Woman 6 .....	13
Existing women-only accommodation models for women leaving prison .....	14
Barriers to safe housing and potential solutions.....	19
The housing application process .....	20
The type and location of accommodation on offer .....	25
Availability of support to access and maintain accommodation .....	27
Impact where women are released to homelessness or unsafe housing.....	29
Proposed accommodation model .....	31
Two alternative models .....	31
Outline of the support model .....	33
Risks and mitigation.....	36
Potential impacts and learning .....	46
Impact for individuals in the project .....	46
Wider project level impacts .....	49
Qualitative and quantitative effectiveness assessment .....	49
Potential learning .....	50
Next steps .....	52
Business case.....	52
Governance.....	52
Conclusion.....	54
Appendix 1: Business case costs and explanatory notes .....	56
Appendix 2: References .....	57

## Glossary

Acronym	Explanation
AFO	Accommodation For Ex-Offenders (Moj-funded scheme)
BWC	Brighton Women's Centre
CAS	HMPPS' Community Accommodation Service
CAS1	Formerly known as 'Approved Premises': HMPPS accommodation used as a public protection resource to accommodate higher-risk offenders
CAS2	Formerly known as 'Bail, Accommodation and Support Service (BASS)': HMPPS accommodation for medium-risk defendants on bail and prisoners eligible for release under home detention curfew
CAS3	HMPPS temporary accommodation service
CRS	Community Rehabilitative Services
HMO	House with Multiple Occupancy
HMPPS	His Majesty's Prisons and Probation Service
IHM	Intensive Housing Management
MHCLG	Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government
Moj	Ministry of Justice
NRPF	No Recourse to Public Funds
RWC	Residential Women's Centre
WASS	BWC's Women's Accommodation Support Service

## Introduction

### Background

#### **Brighton Women's Centre**

Brighton Women's Centre (BWC) has 50 years' experience of delivering a range of trauma-informed, holistic and integrated services to women who have experienced multiple disadvantage and trauma. BWC is the current Ministry of Justice (MoJ) Community Rehabilitative Services (CRS) provider for women across Sussex, including through its Women's Accommodation Support Service (WASS) which supports women who are experiencing homelessness or insecurely housed, using a relational, trauma-responsive, strengths-based approach.

#### **The WASS service model**

BWC's WASS team has six members – a manager, a senior practitioner covering Brighton and Hove, three Women's Accommodation Support Workers and a Prison Link Worker who works throughout Sussex and remotely with women in prison and in the community post-release, or in HM Prisons and Probation Service (HMPPS) accommodation outside this area. The team focus primarily on the housing needs of their service users, delivering a holistic service involving a mix of one-to-one casework and women-only weekly hubs. Other areas covered include domestic abuse and sexual violence, understanding trauma and managing responses, engaging with children's services, mental health, benefits, physical health and disabilities, finance and debt, social isolation and education, training and employment.

WASS receives referrals from many sources including local foodbanks, sister organisations including domestic abuse and sexual violence services, mental health services, the local authority housing team, self-referrals and social prescribers. Many of their service users are involved in the criminal justice system. The Prison Link Worker's referrals come through the MoJ-funded CRS for support with accommodation or social inclusion. These are mainly women in HMP and YOI Bronzefield who have a local connection in Sussex.

The WASS team works closely alongside BWC's Inspire team of caseworkers, who offer holistic support to women in the community, also under the MoJ CRS contract. WASS and Inspire together make up BWC's casework team. WASS will work with any woman who is experiencing homelessness or insecurely housed, and they can also support other colleagues with housing issues. The Inspire team works with women under the CRS contract and other projects, including the recently established 'Care not custody' police diversion scheme. This provides early diversion from point of arrest and also picks up work around women at risk of breach of a community order.

## Context

As the House of Commons Justice Committee reported in its 2022 inquiry on women in prison, women in contact with the criminal justice system “have varied and complex needs. Many have experienced mental health problems, substance misuse, homelessness, abuse and trauma in their lives”.<sup>1</sup> The experience of imprisonment is liable to “[compound] the trauma and suffering of vulnerable women rather than working to rehabilitate them”.<sup>2</sup> It is widely understood, and recognised in the government’s Female Offender Strategy, that a gender-informed, trauma-responsive approach is needed to achieve equal treatment for women in contact with the criminal justice system and to address their underlying needs.<sup>3</sup> This includes a gender-informed approach to resettlement following imprisonment.

Increasing pressures on prisons and probation services have recently led to government schemes for the early release from prison of women and men on Standard Determinate Sentences and a Probation Reset. These developments have significant implications for services supporting women in prison and in the community, including BWC, as well as for probation services and local authority housing and other services. Although the number of women being released to Sussex will not increase dramatically, pressure on local services will arise due to a larger number of men being released and requiring support. This in turn is likely to reduce available support for women. Although early release will not be available to those sentenced for some domestic abuse-related offences, some domestic abuse perpetrators are likely to be subject to early release. This may increase risks to victim/survivors supported by BWC.

BWC has identified that there is a lack of safe, trauma-informed, easily accessible temporary accommodation for women leaving prison returning to Sussex. This causes harm to women leaving prison, who are in a poor position to meet their own basic needs and adjust to life in the community, let alone comply with probation requirements, without safe, suitable accommodation. BWC aims to fill this gap by establishing safe, trauma-informed, easily accessible, transitional accommodation in Sussex for women leaving prison that can be accessed at short notice and that will come with intensive support from BWC’s caseworkers. Having the ability to place women in such accommodation immediately upon release would allow the WASS team to support them more effectively to explore available ‘move-on’ housing options.

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<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Justice Committee (2022) Women in Prison: First Report of Session 2022-23, HC 265. Available [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Justice (2018) Female Offender Strategy. Available [here](#).

This new, transitional accommodation provision will be delivered through a pilot project from which BWC aims to gather learning which will be of wide benefit. The accommodation is envisaged as four to five self-contained or semi-equipped units in a building with a communal space and an office for security/staff, with opportunities for social interaction and other specialist professionals to meet with the women in the property where appropriate to improve accessibility. Women living in the accommodation will receive holistic, one-to-one support from a BWC Accommodation Scheme Caseworker, providing a period of stability – a ‘breathing space’ - during which they will receive emotional and practical support, including finding move-on accommodation.

“We are looking to provide breathing space for women”.

– Caseworker

It was originally envisaged that the accommodation pilot would be delivered by accessing social investment for a property to be purchased, with BWC acting as landlord as well as supporting the women (the ‘landlord model’). However, due to the challenges identified with the landlord model through this study, BWC has concluded that it will be more feasible, practical, and beneficial to deliver the pilot in partnership with an existing local registered housing provider, who would own or lease the property and act as landlord, while BWC manages referrals and supports the women while they are in the accommodation and for at least three months afterwards (the ‘support model’).

## Report

This report sets out the findings of a short feasibility study carried out from March to July 2024. The study is intended to inform the development of this new accommodation provision by establishing what kind of accommodation and attached support is needed by women leaving prison returning to Sussex and is feasible to implement; and what arrangements are needed to ensure the accommodation is easily accessible and effectively supports women to secure move-on accommodation, in order to improve women’s outcomes following release.

The study includes:

- Insights from service users – to understand their experiences, reasons for breakdown of placements, and their ideas about what a safe, supportive, temporary accommodation on release would need to consider.
- Insights from BWC staff, probation practitioners, and other agencies supporting women leaving prison about their experiences of what has worked.
- An appraisal of existing housing provision for women leaving prison to highlight good practice.
- A business case.

We seek to illustrate the potential positive impact of the proposed new provision, what challenges would be involved in implementation, and how these might be overcome. We seek to identify risks that would be involved, and these could be mitigated. Finally, we set out areas which require further exploration and suggest next steps.

## Methodology

The preparation of this report included desk-based research, interviews with women with lived experience, and focus groups with expert practitioners from April to June 2024. All participants were provided with information about the project and gave informed consent to take part. All experiences and insights shared have been included on an anonymised basis, and all women's names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

BWC caseworkers held face-to-face interviews with six women supported by the WASS service to seek their consent to inclusion of anonymised summaries of their experiences in the study, and to seek their insights into whether the proposed accommodation model would be beneficial and what should be considered to try and ensure this. Their names have been changed to protect their identity.

We facilitated three 90-minute online focus groups with a total of 25 practitioners to discuss the challenges faced by women leaving prison in obtaining safe and suitable housing, the potential benefits of the proposed accommodation model, and factors to be considered to address potential challenges in implementation. This included:

- A focus group with four BWC caseworkers.
- A focus group with 16 local practitioners from external organisations, including probation practitioners, prison staff, voluntary sector/social enterprise service providers, and local authority housing practitioners.
- A focus group with five representatives of local registered supported housing providers.

Informal discussions were held online with a total of six practitioners with relevant experience and insight, including local registered housing providers, women's service providers with experience of delivering similar accommodation models for women leaving prison in other parts of the country, and MoJ officials.

## Acknowledgements

Homeless Link was assisted in this review by Ruth Britsch, Nicky Robinson-Dalton and Rhiannon Greaves of BWC. We are grateful to the women who generously agreed to share their experiences and insights to inform this report, and to the practitioners who gave their time and expertise.

## Women's stories

The following anonymised accounts and comments have been provided by six women who have received support from BWC's WASS team.

### Woman 1

Woman 1, then aged 21 years, was referred by probation to the WASS team shortly before her release after spending three years in prison for firearms offences. The referral requested support to help her:

- Avoid experiencing homelessness and maintain housing.
- Develop emotional resilience, self-efficacy, and confidence to make more positive choices.
- Engage with professionals and comply with medication regime around her mental health diagnoses.
- Regulate her mood and practice self-care strategies.

Upon her release, Woman 1 was told to present at the local authority housing department, failing which she would be recalled. She was angry and scared about how she would manage, having been institutionalised since the age of 18.

Woman 1 was immediately placed in mixed emergency accommodation, which was full of adults using substances with many unmet needs such as post-traumatic stress disorder, domestic abuse, and undiagnosed learning needs. Within the first week there was a leak and many of her belongings were damaged, for which she has still not been compensated a year later. She was moved to another much larger, mixed emergency accommodation.

On her release, Woman 1 became involved in a co-dependent relationship with a young man already known to her. She reflects that this was the result of a mental breakdown and her need to feel safe and secure and states she "never really knew him". Woman 1 admitted she desperately needed an option away from her emergency accommodation which was triggering trauma from her childhood. Woman 1 would spend all day out of her room and received many notices suspecting abandonment of her room. She was evicted on one occasion and made to experience street homelessness over the weekend before her room was reinstated after the weekend.

Throughout the year since her release, Woman 1 has worked hard to engage with all services, despite having no stable, safe housing, and despite changes in her probation officer. Due to efforts from all professionals, she now has a positive relationship with her probation officer and feels heard. However, Woman 1's mental health has been severely impacted by the lack of security and constant anxiety about being evicted or attacked in her emergency accommodation.



Woman 1 reports she has frequent suicidal tendencies and has made many plans to end her life, she has felt unsafe and unsupported by the council, and completely overwhelmed by life's pressures and her lack of housing. Woman 1 is currently undergoing a full psychiatric assessment and has been waiting months for her next appointment. She is unable to attend appointments without support due to her trauma responses and anxiety about meeting strangers and having to explain herself again.

In the last two months Woman 1 has been offered temporary accommodation in a studio flat and accepted this opportunity. However, she now has the fear of not being able to afford her bills and the worry about how to keep herself safe and away from bad influences, because she is allowed visitors for the first time in over a year since her release.

Woman 1 maintains that if it was not for the trauma informed care and partnership working from her Change Grow Live worker and her BWC caseworker, she would have gone back into prison within a short space of time of her release.

### Woman 2

Woman 2 has been to prison 30-40 times, and on each occasion has been released without housing being organised in advance. She feels that she has been let down by statutory services. Woman 2 feels that resettlement teams have given her false hope about being housed. Working with them was a positive experience at the time, but never actually resulted in preventing homelessness. She feels very disillusioned with this support now.

On most occasions after being released to no fixed abode, Woman 2 was recalled the very same day. At the time of discussion, Woman 2 explained that this was the longest that she had been without recall since she began going to prison (three months).

Woman 2 says that being in custody for short periods and released experiencing homelessness each time resulted in her concluding that longer stints in custody would give staff longer time to find her housing. This in turn led her to commit more serious crimes.

Most recently, Woman 2 was released from custody amid a scramble to procure evidence of priority need for the council, without a housing assessment being booked in advance. Woman 2's BWC caseworker met her at probation, where she arrived late after a long train journey with all her belongings. After discussing her licence conditions with probation, it was too late to present at her local authority housing department together and it was difficult to judge which local authority would be more likely to lead to a successful outcome.

In the end, Woman 2 decided to stay at her partner's mother's house for the weekend and take the time to think it over. This ended up in a relapse lasting several weeks, a breakdown of relationship with family members, and other harms, and resulted in Woman 2 being made to experience street homelessness. After this, Woman 2 re-rallied and her caseworker accompanied her to the local authority housing department. They agreed to house Woman 2 locally in a studio flat. Woman 2 was very happy with this outcome. However, she suffered some post-traumatic stress being alone in the new space at first and put her accommodation at risk by having her partner to stay.

Woman 2 has nonetheless maintained her accommodation. She thinks that accommodation for women leaving custody should be a studio such as hers is, with privacy, and floating support to help with issues that arise. Woman 2 knows firsthand how important it is to have housing sorted prior to release or women are being set up to fail. Homelessness has put a strain on her personal relationships and her recovery.

### Woman 3

Before her release, Woman 3 was in an open prison where she had a job. When she was released, she had to move to an Approved Premises (now known as CAS1 accommodation) some distance away for two months, before she was moved into MoJ-funded CAS3 accommodation in another location.<sup>4</sup> Of the CAS3 accommodation, she commented:

"The place was not great; it was very dirty, and I kept finding drugs paraphernalia. The area was scary, and I didn't feel safe."

Woman 3 was grateful not to have to pay bills while in the CAS3 accommodation, so that she could start saving up to "restart life". But being moved away from the local area meant she had to look for work again, before she was able to move back to the area, as she explains:

"Luckily my work kept it open for me to come back. Problem is you start to stabilise and reintegrate and have to start somewhere new with no work support network."

Woman 3 explained that it was "stressful and scary" not knowing where she was going to live on release, or whether she would experience homelessness. She felt confused about what was going to happen:

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<sup>4</sup> See below for a description of Approved Premises (CAS1) and CAS3 accommodation.

“Things were very different, leaving prison after several years. Everyone was using acronyms at probation and the council. I couldn’t look them up. No-one explained thing properly, like ‘What is a CAS3?’”

Woman 3 found the Approved Premises helpful. She felt that women with addictions struggled most there as they didn’t take as much advantage of the support on offer and were more likely to be “in trouble” for being substance affected or missing curfew. Woman 3 appreciated the daily activities in the Approved Premises, including crafts and movie night, and the support offered in relation to mental health, yoga, money management, and cooking. However, looking for housing was stressful, and the Approved Premises could not help with that.

Woman 3 suggested that it would help if there were more Approved Premises and CAS3 spaces in the local area, and “more help from the council for housing”. Having access to the internet would also help with looking for properties.

#### Woman 4

After leaving prison, Woman 4 had two CAS3 accommodation placements. The first was on her own – this was clean, and Woman 4 was able to maintain appointments and felt motivated to “keep it nice”, having a “nice place to cook in was an incentive”. However, she was moved at three days’ notice to new CAS3 accommodation which was shared with one other person, who she reports assaulted her with a knife.

Woman 4 felt that better security checks or risk assessment should have been done, given that this was shared accommodation. She also felt unhappy about how she was treated when she was moved on from the first accommodation placement. She felt she was treated “like an animal”, with staff threatening to throw some of her things away when she was having trouble organising for them to be collected. She was given no apology but “expected to be grateful”. This was when she started using drugs again.

Woman 4 commented that most women coming out of prison intend to stay clean but “end up stressed and homeless and using” and that it would “give a better chance to women if they have secure housing to go to”. For Woman 4, the impact of homelessness was that she was “using crack and heroin on the streets every single day, for survival” and having frightening experiences including a friend being raped. On one occasion she was chased and woke up in hospital. She still doesn’t know what happened.

Woman 4 felt it would be important to have some kind of security in the accommodation, such as CCTV, and a “nice clean space, fully kitted out” so that there is “no stress of finding money to get essentials”. She also pointed out the importance of

being near essential services, including drug treatment services, and being able to have visitors. For her it would be important to be able to have her daughter visit her:

“My daughter wants comfort and normality, not to meet in town.”

Woman 4 highlighted the importance of privacy, particularly after having to share a cell in prison. She commented that “shared space is a nice option” but that people shouldn’t be forced to share and should have their “own little space”. In the future, Woman 4 hopes to live in an area away from her former friends who are drug users, that is accessible and safe, and where she can have her family visit and have pets. She hopes to do an art course in the future, but for now she is concentrating on her weekly health and probation appointments.

### Woman 5

Woman 5 did all her release work in custody on the understanding that she would be returning to a particular local area, where her mother lives with Woman 5’s daughter, and where she had a social worker and caseworker set up for her. However, a few weeks before release she was told by probation that she had to go to a different area for post-sentence supervision with them for a month.

Woman 5 reports that probation promised to help her find housing in her preferred location, but this never materialised. She felt abandoned when her post-release supervision ended; she was left experiencing homelessness and received no further communication or support from probation. The local authority to which Woman 5 had been released then refused to house her due to alleged intentional homelessness.

Now Woman 5 has finally been housed in emergency accommodation; she feels the only thing that helped her was her own perseverance. She had no help from statutory services and had to do it alone. She sought out her current support workers, including a BWC WASS caseworker, a Criminal Justice Recovery worker at CGL, and a St. Mungo’s worker – together these practitioners helped her to get housed.

While experiencing homelessness, Woman 5 experienced a serious deterioration in her mental and physical health. While living in her car she was robbed and sexually assaulted at knife point by two members of the street community. The local authority eventually agreed to place Woman 5 in emergency accommodation after her GP emphasised the risk of death through overdose if she remained homeless.

Woman 5 recognises the need for specialised, trauma-informed, self-contained accommodation for women leaving custody. She understands the purpose of hostels for those who are not ready to deal with their substance use, but she feels women who

show they are capable of doing so should be given the opportunity to be housed in self-contained studios as she has finally been.

Woman 5 acknowledged that some women may benefit from a staff presence to offer practical and emotional support but felt it would be important for this to be different from being monitored and essentially feeling like you are still in prison.

Woman 5 is now in contact with a local authority housing officer and hopes to find a private landlord while she waits to be able to bid for social housing.

## Woman 6

After leaving prison, Woman 6 was placed in accommodation a long way from her mother and stepfather who are her “support network” and from her children, “which made moving towards contact very difficult”. Woman 6 has mobility problems and had to travel for an hour by bus and train to get to her probation appointments from the accommodation. She believes it would be helpful to have more CAS3 accommodation available in different locations. The impact of housing problems and homelessness for Woman 6 was that she became depressed and anxious, as she explained:

“I knew that I would have to move again because it was only CAS3, and you can only stay for about three months. Also, because I was...away from my family it was hard.”

Woman 6 is now in a private, rented studio flat which is having an impact on her health because it is too small:

“I sleep on a sofa bed and have to leave it out because the pain levels in my spine and knees are too much. I am also breathless due to the blood clots on my lungs which makes it too hard.”

Woman 6 suggests that creating safe, supportive, temporary accommodation for women post-release would entail providing a self-contained studio with its own bathroom, a little kitchen area with a fridge and a cupboard top stove. She thinks it would be beneficial to have a shared kitchen and living area, but also “your own personal space”. She also thinks it would be important for women to be able to access counselling, drug and alcohol treatment, domestic abuse support, and a mental health worker. Support from a GP and help setting up benefits and applying for housing would also be helpful.

Woman 6 suggested residents should pay a surcharge while in the accommodation, “to get used to paying some bills”, and that there should be security at night and at weekends, and security cameras in communal areas. She thought it would be important that the accommodation is women-only, with no male visitors allowed. Woman 6 believed that family members shouldn’t be allowed to visit – only

professionals, “as people who are not allowed to see or be around children and have no family would struggle”.

She concluded by summarising the benefits of the proposed accommodation becoming a reality:

“There will be a safe space for women to come to in Brighton, and the local area, coming out of prison. I would like to see this happen as I did not have this opportunity, and it would help other women in the future.”

In the future, Woman 6 hopes she will be placed in one of her preferred locations, in a one-bed council flat or bungalow because of her mobility needs.

## Existing women-only accommodation models for women leaving prison

Women-only supported accommodation is in short supply and is not available for the majority of women on release from prison. Most supported accommodation is mixed and, where women-only supported accommodation is available, local housing providers reported that there are considerable barriers to receiving women direct from prison into these facilities. Examples are given below of women-only accommodation models that have been established in the UK specifically for women in contact with the criminal justice system. Many of these have been set up independently, using a variety of models and serving a range of purposes.

### Anawim – Dawn House, Birmingham

In 2017 Anawim established Dawn House, a residential centre for women leaving prison, with support from The JABBS Foundation. Dawn House was designed to fill a gap in safe accommodation and support for women on short sentences leaving prison. It achieved this by providing a safe, trauma-responsive home with built-in, wrap-around support, allowing women to rebuild their lives and supporting them in moving on to more permanent accommodation. Anawim and JABBS stated that:<sup>5</sup>

“The first five years of this pioneering project have confirmed the belief that outstanding residential services like Dawn House can have an important role to play in improving outcomes for women leaving prison”.

– Anawim and JABBS

Despite the many successes achieved through the Dawn House project, in light of a number of ongoing challenges, the decision was taken by Anawim to close the facility

<sup>5</sup> Anawim (2022) Bridging the Gap: Dawn House – The First Five Years. Available [here](#).

in 2023, which was supported by The JABBS Foundation having listened to the concerns of the leadership team at Anawim.

### **One Small Thing – Hope Street, Hampshire**

Hope Street is a residential project run by One Small Thing, a charity that works to meet the needs of women in contact with the criminal justice system and their children. The Hope Street project provides community-based accommodation to women in contact with the criminal justice system, with specialist support provided in a gender-responsive and trauma informed environment.<sup>6</sup>

Women who require more intensive support move into the service's central hub initially for 12 to 16 weeks, before moving into Hope Street's supported accommodation units which are located all over Hampshire. In the hub there are eight flats, each with their own kitchen and lounge, with intensive support. The hub building has a large communal women's lounge and kitchen where all residents can come together.

Women move into Hope Street's dispersed, supported accommodation when they are ready for less intensive support. Women referred under One Small Thing's CRS contract may go straight into the houses, depending on their needs. Tenancies in this accommodation are for up to 12 months. In addition to this supported accommodation pathway, One Small Thing can pursue other options for women including private rented accommodation via the Accommodation for Ex-Offenders scheme (see below), with some going to specialist mental health provision and some into substance use provision. Some are eligible for local authority housing, but this currently has a seven-year waiting list locally. For care leavers the service has seen better outcomes.

### **Social Interest Group Equinox – Brighton Women's Service**

Social Interest Group (SIG) Equinox Brighton Women's Service is a women-only residential project providing temporary accommodation with low, medium, and high support in Brighton for women who have experienced homelessness, substance use, criminal justice history, mental health, and domestic abuse.<sup>7</sup> A representative of the service confirmed that they accept women leaving prison and reported that feedback from women who live with them is that they feel safe. This has also been confirmed by some women supported by BWC who have been accommodated by the service. The service works in a trauma informed way and is run as a psychologically informed

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<sup>6</sup> Social and Sustainable Capital (2024) One Small Thing – Hope Street. Available [here](#). See also One Small Thing (2024) Hope Street. Available [here](#).

<sup>7</sup> Social Interest Group (2024) Brighton Women's Service. Available [here](#).



environment, managed by a qualified psychotherapist with one-to-one stabilisation sessions provided by a therapeutic lead, which are flexible and open ended.

The service offers temporary accommodation and support for up to 18 women in Brighton and Hove, provided at two multi-bed sites staffed 24-hours. The average length of stay is two years. The service aims to interrupt negative cycles and support women to move on to independent living. Their results show an 86% reduction in reoffending and antisocial behaviour and a 71% reduction in A&E admissions for women residing at the service.<sup>8</sup> BWC is in discussion with SIG Equinox about the potential to explore changes to the referral process to mitigate barriers to access for women straight from custody.

### **218 Service, Glasgow**

The 218 Service was an innovative residential service for women in contact with the criminal justice system, incorporating drug rehabilitation services and wider interventions to explore and address the causes of their offending behaviour. The service opened in 2003 and was closed in February 2024 by its operator Turning Point Scotland, after its funding was cut by 50%.<sup>9 10</sup>

### **Jasmine Mothers' Recovery, Plymouth**

Jasmine Mothers' Recovery (JMR – formerly known as Trevi House) is a women-only, abstinence-based residential drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre located in Plymouth.<sup>11</sup> In 2023, JMR launched a 'Blossom Women's House' appeal to open a new women-only accommodation in Plymouth, which has now opened.<sup>12</sup>

### **Willowdene Rehabilitation, West Mercia**

Willowdene has specialised in providing residential rehabilitation and respite services since it began in 1988. Originally operating as a male-only site, before more recently moving to a mixed facility, it now operates a female-only residential option. At the Women's Recovery Centre, women live in a rural setting in self-contained multi-occupancy log cabins, with access to a communal area.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Turning Point (2024) After 20 years of operation, Turning Point Scotland have made the tough call to close 218 service in February 2024. Available [here](#).

<sup>10</sup> Social Executive Justice Department (2006) Evaluation of the 218 Centre. Available [here](#).

Ward, A. (2024) Closure of 218 Service: A Blow to Women's Recovery in Scotland's Justice System. Available [here](#).

<sup>11</sup> Warwick, L., Morley, K. (2019) Trevi House: An Independent Evaluation. Available [here](#), and Trevi (2021) Jasmin Mother's Recovery Statement of Purpose. Available [here](#).

<sup>12</sup> Trevi (2023) Our Impact. Available [here](#).



Women may come through a public health referral (primarily for substance use), or through a criminal justice referral (primarily as an alternative to custody) and will stay for between seven and twelve weeks. During their placement, women access training, counselling and therapy, and work opportunities, before making a supported exit back into the community once their placement ends. They also focus on building the life skills they need to build a sustainable and purposeful lifestyle.<sup>13</sup>

### **HMPPS Community Accommodation Service (CAS)**

The then Minister for Prisons, Parole, and Probation recently gave an overview of all temporary accommodation offered via HMPPS:

“HMPPS Community Accommodation Service (CAS) currently provides transitional accommodation via three tiers of support, each focused on a different cohort. CAS1 (Approved Premises) is used as a public protection resource to accommodate higher-risk offenders. CAS2 provides accommodation for medium-risk defendants on bail and prisoners eligible for release under home detention curfew. CAS3 is our ground-breaking new temporary accommodation service.”<sup>14</sup>

– Edward Argar MP, former Minister of State

### **CAS 1 (formerly known as ‘Approved Premises’)**

CAS1 accommodation is approved under section 13 of the Offender Management Act 2007 to provide intensive supervision for those who present a high or very high risk of harm.<sup>15</sup> Men and women are catered for separately in single-sex settings. Referrals must be made by HMPPS. There are a relatively small number of women’s Approved Premises throughout the country, over half of which are provided and managed by the independent Approved Premises sector.<sup>16</sup> These include:

- Eden House, Bristol
- Adelaide House, Liverpool
- Elizabeth Fry, Reading
- Ripon House, Leeds
- Hestia Battersea, London
- Hestia Highbury, London

<sup>13</sup> Willowdene Farm (2024) Women’s Services. Available [here](#).

<sup>14</sup> UK Parliament (2024) Prisoners’ Release: Temporary Accommodation - Question for MoJ. Available [here](#).

<sup>15</sup> Prison Reform Trust (2022) Approved Premises (APs). Available [here](#).

<sup>16</sup> National Approved Premises Association (2021) Approved Premises (APs). Available [here](#).

### **CAS2 and CAS3 accommodation**

CAS2 provides accommodation for men and women on bail (formerly known as the bail, accommodation, and support service).<sup>17</sup>

CAS3 is a relatively new transitional accommodation service providing up to 12 weeks' accommodation and support for sentenced individuals (men and women) leaving prison at risk of homelessness. It should include "basic floating support", consisting of weekly contact with a support worker to assist in maintaining the accommodation and fortnightly home visits, and to sustain the temporary accommodation and support move on to settled accommodation, working with probation who have overall responsibility for resettlement planning and oversight.<sup>18</sup> The accommodation is all single-gender, with 10% dedicated for sole use by women.<sup>19</sup> In Sussex there is one three-bed property for women in Worthing and there are a number of single person units across East and West Sussex that can be utilised for all genders. HMPPS' supplier visits fortnightly and provides weekly phone calls to check on welfare and check the property on visits. Food packages and bedding/towels are provided.

### **Accommodation for Ex-Offenders (AFE0)**

AFE0 is a joint initiative between the MoJ and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to provide a pathway from prison to settled accommodation, by supporting prison leavers experiencing homelessness (men and women) into private rental tenancies. The scheme operates via central government grants to local authorities who successfully apply for funding. It is available for anyone who left custody within the last 12 months, so can be used by those released on licence and by those moving on from CAS1, CAS2 or CAS3 accommodation.<sup>20</sup>

### **MoJ-funded Residential Women's Centres**

Residential Women's Centres (RWC) are part of the government's plan to address the root cause of women's offending behaviour and reduce reoffending in England and Wales. The intention is for women who attend RWCs to receive one-to-one mental health therapy, counselling to address their trauma from previous abuse, and support to overcome addictions. The service is also intended to provide longer-term support for women to help them find a job and maintain family relationships as they transition from the centre to life back in their communities to help prevent reoffending. Centres

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<sup>17</sup> MoJ and HM Prison and Probation Service (2023) Community Accommodation Service – Tier 2 (CAS – 2) Policy Framework. Available [here](#).

<sup>18</sup> HM Prison and Probation Service (2023) Community Accommodation Service Tier 3 (CAS3) Regional Launch Materials for Stakeholders. Available [here](#).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison Initiative (2022) Women's Prison Release Practice Briefing. Available [here](#).

will be run by the probation service and during their stay, and the women will be required to agree to work with the staff and comply with a no alcohol or illegal drugs policy.<sup>21</sup>

The first MoJ-funded RWC is intended to be in Swansea.<sup>22</sup> A site has been purchased for a 12-bed residential service which appears to be intended for women accused of an offence which would be suitable for a community order.<sup>23</sup> A range of concerns have been raised about the planned service.<sup>24</sup> Planning permission for the service was initially refused and then granted on appeal in August 2023. In March 2024 the government confirmed, “the MoJ has a number of ongoing steps to re-mobilise the project and continues to work closely with partners in Wales”.<sup>25</sup>

## Barriers to safe housing and potential solutions

According to government figures, just under half (47%) of women left prison with settled accommodation in the year to March 2024. More than one in ten (11.7%) were rough sleeping on release, with 1.7% recorded as “homeless, not rough sleeping”. Nearly one in five (19.8%) were in bail or probation accommodation; 16.3% were living in other transient or temporary accommodation. Accommodation status was unknown for 3.5% of women.<sup>26</sup>

Measuring women’s accommodation outcomes post-release is difficult and complex, and the numbers can differ significantly depending on definitions used and when outcomes are measured. A granular approach, recording milestones over time and including qualitative input from women themselves, is needed to obtain an accurate picture. A recent thematic inspection by HM Inspectorate of Prisons and HM Inspectorate of Probation found:<sup>27</sup>

“...Only a third of the women we spoke to were being released to sustainable housing that was likely to last longer than three months. About half of the women we reviewed were being released to short-term accommodation, such as Approved Premises, CAS2, or CAS3 accommodation. Where longer-term outcomes were recorded by other providers, they were typically less positive than data from the day of release. The

<sup>21</sup> HM Prison and Probation Service (2022) Residential Women's Centres. Available [here](#).

<sup>22</sup> MoJ, HM Prison and Probation Service, Atkins, V. (2022) Location of first ground-breaking Residential Women’s Centre revealed. Available [here](#).

<sup>23</sup> MoJ (2023) Frequently Asked Questions - Residential Women’s Centre (MoJ). Available [here](#).

<sup>24</sup> Welsh Parliament Equality and Social Justice Committee (2023) Women’s experiences in the criminal justice system. Available [here](#).

<sup>25</sup> TheyWorkForYou (2024) Women's Centres: Swansea. Available [here](#).

<sup>26</sup> MoJ (2024) Offender Accommodation Outcomes Statistics Publication, Table 4: Accommodation at release from prison. Available [here](#).

<sup>27</sup> Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (2024) The quality of work undertaken with women. Available [here](#).

current cost and scarcity of housing meant that sustainable accommodation was an increasingly unlikely outcome for many women...”

– Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (2024)

The inspection report echoes the findings of other research in detailing the many barriers to women obtaining safe and suitable accommodation on release from prison and “frustratingly slow” progress in addressing these, as well as the severe impact of homelessness for women, including increased risk of abuse and exploitation and, in many cases, the risk of breaching post-release supervision requirements or reoffending, and potentially being recalled to prison.<sup>28</sup>

The findings of this feasibility study confirm that challenges for women seeking accommodation on leaving prison to resettlement in Sussex, as in other areas of the country, arise in three inter-related areas:

- The housing application process.
- The type and location of accommodation on offer.
- Availability of support to access and maintain accommodation.

## The housing application process

### Barriers

Barriers in the housing application process arise from a combination of factors including:

- Referrals being made at short notice by prisons, sometimes due to women receiving very short sentences and otherwise apparently due to lack of staff capacity.
- Delays by local authorities in processing applications, due to lack of staff capacity.
- Women not having the right identification and other documentation including health records, to allow their application to be processed on release.
- Local authorities finding they owe no statutory duty to women, having no flexibility about this, and there being insufficient time to challenge or engage legal advice where needed.
- Turnover of staff, and lack of knowledge and time needed to build working relationships between organisations.

BWC case workers described how the process should work:

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.4. See also: Safe Home for Women Leaving Prison Initiative (2022) Women’s Prison Release Practice Briefing: Improving accommodation outcomes for women in contact with the criminal justice system. Available [here](#), and Prison Reform Trust (2018) Home truths: housing for women in the criminal justice system. Available [here](#).

“There is an agreed process in partnership with probation around what they are supposed to do, and we are supposed to do. Women are supposed to be referred 12 weeks before release, then process for resettlement. The probation officer is supposed to do ‘duty to refer’ to local authority for housing. We then jump on and do the chasing and try to organise joint video meetings before they are released”.

– Caseworker

Under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, specified public authorities are under a duty to refer service users who they think may be experiencing homelessness or threatened with homelessness to local authority homelessness/housing options teams. This ‘duty to refer’ applies to prisons and probation services, requiring them to notify local authorities of anyone at risk of homelessness on release from prison.<sup>29</sup>

However, caseworkers reported that practice varies a lot, and that “probation officers often don’t know what they are supposed to do”. They added that a high turnover of local authority housing officers also creates challenges:

“Where there are new probation officers and housing officers, things can get lost”.

– Caseworker

The team identified turnover in probation women’s leads as problematic.

“They change often, and people may be women’s lead who aren’t necessarily interested in working with women. There’s a lot of turnover so sometimes teams are really strapped”.

– Caseworker

Late referrals were also identified as a key barrier, as one BWC case worker explained.

“One of the first challenges is that often we don’t get a referral until they are due out in 24 hours. It’s very short notice and often one of the last things they think about”.

– Caseworker

Early intervention was identified by all practitioners as essential to positive outcomes, but is often not possible, as one practitioner explained.

“We get a lot of women sentenced to custody getting short custodial sentences, and there are new measures being introduced including early release. Early intervention is needed but sometimes it’s impossible. There’s not enough notice of release or time in

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<sup>29</sup> Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison Initiative (2022) Women’s Prison Release Practice Briefing. Available [here](#). See the legislation [here](#) and the government’s Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities [here](#).

prison to do the work to prepare. There's not enough time to contact the local authority".

– Practitioner

BWC caseworkers reported that systems for processing referrals vary according to each local authority, and even between individual housing officers. This means that they spend a lot of time chasing things up and can be left in the dark about what is happening.

"Our first question is, 'has a DTR [duty to refer] been done or CAS3 referral been done?'. Sometimes we don't get a reply for weeks. A lot of the job is linking things up and making sure they have happened".

– Caseworker

Practitioners commented that women frequently fail to secure accommodation when local authorities determine that they don't have a statutory duty towards them.

"If someone's been issued with an intentionally homeless decision and it's not challenged within the 28 day time period, it probably won't get overturned and may still stand, and you can't move on to accept the full housing duty".

– Practitioner

Local authority representatives explained that local authorities used to be more flexible around interpretation of their statutory duties, following the COVID-19 pandemic, but that, seemingly owing to lack of resources and reduced priority given to tackling homelessness since the end of the pandemic,

"[There is] less and less scope for working with clients with multiple needs in that flexible way".

– Local Authority Representative

The same can be true in relation to flexibility around the identification documents needed to process an application, as one practitioner pointed out.

"Being a bit more flexible about ID documents can help, because women coming out of prison are less likely to have everything in place".

– Practitioner

Local authority housing teams are under significant pressure, which causes delays in assessing applications.

"The whole process is not geared to adequately support people with complex needs, including women leaving prison".

– Local Authority Representative

Supported housing providers reported that there are barriers to them accepting referrals of women straight from prison into their accommodation, even where it is women-only supported accommodation. This is because of the significant transition from prison to the community and the difficulty of being able to assess how the women will cope in the accommodation. One explained:

“We need time to do a proper risk assessment and to see the difference between their behaviour in custody and coping with probation and being more active themselves, keeping up with meetings.”

– Supported Housing Provider

## Solutions

BWC caseworkers identified that receiving multi-agency support immediately upon release was key to achieving good outcomes.

“What works well? A good team around the woman when they get out. A young woman I’m working with had a really good transition worker from CGL who was there from the get-go and has given a lot of support for getting benefits and grants and fighting for housing before we took over. Now we’re trying to support around mental health and housing; we have worked with her for over a year, so people listen. Immediate casework when they get out works”.

– Caseworker

Linked to this, case workers identified partnership working as key.

“Having all the right people involved – making sure that everybody is linked up – partnership working”.

– Caseworker

This requires good working relationships with probation, a shared understanding of women’s needs, and shared aims:

“I have a long history of good relationships with probation in East Sussex. Where you’ve got a women’s lead who understands what women are experiencing and what they need in terms of trauma and flexibility, who wants the women to succeed and works properly in partnership.

For example, a woman is frequently recalled. Sometimes she is met at the gate by another agency. We are all linked up. If she turns up at probation, we spring into action. It’s the real time connection and having relationships with people – shared aims, planning around it. We all have her release date in our diary. What their understanding is of women’s experiences and trauma, as opposed to expecting them just to turn up and meet the requirements.



When a good team works around a woman, people are flexible about who can do what, accompanying to appointment, meeting at hub, or BWC and being more creative, and asking the women what they are going to commit to and what will work well, e.g., not wanting to meet in a particular location as likely to use afterwards.”

– Caseworker

In terms of local authority contact, practitioners agreed that it would be helpful to have a dedicated worker for women generally, or for women leaving custody. Currently, that will vary from area to area.

Early intervention was identified as key to good outcomes, including where a local authority housing officer can meet women on release. They need to receive the referral as soon as possible and can then sometimes get women straight into supported accommodation that is more sustainable.

One local authority reported on a local “early intervention opportunity” as a positive development. Having a specific homeless prevention officer from the local authority available to the prison works well, as well as close communication between staff in prisons, local authority housing teams and other agencies – including through a monthly ‘pre-release panel’ meeting determining who is going to be released when, and what needs to be in place. This allows organisations to start working together as early as possible to prepare for release. All practitioners agreed that these pre-release panels are useful, but that local authorities sometimes lack capacity to follow up.

BWC caseworkers noted the positive difference when housing officers understand the nature of women’s needs. Describing a recent video interview with a woman in custody, one case worker explained:

“The local authority rep understood she was vulnerable although she was not ticking box of priority need, but they always try to get her accommodation amid repeated recalls. They get it”.

– Caseworker

Another explained:

“If you have a professional who looks at the whole picture – another local authority person who works with complex cases, women who have been in and out of the system, and placements are really difficult, someone who is looking at the additional evidence. And the willingness to keep looking.

Nearly all the women we work with have been evicted at some point, so you need someone who is prepared to look in more depth – this is because the accommodation doesn’t meet what they need and so what can we find that would work better.



They listen to our experience and knowledge and listen to the women – and they are looking for solutions.”

– Caseworker

Supported housing providers commented that it can be difficult for them to accept referrals of women where insufficient information is provided. If women were able to access transitional, trauma-informed, supported accommodation facilitated by BWC on release from prison, it would be easier for housing providers then to accept referrals for women to access move-on accommodation because fuller information would be available. One explained:

“We will sometimes get a referral through from the council and there is a lot of missing information about needs and support work – this causes delays, and we can’t take them onboard if we don’t have this. We need a well-rounded picture of the person; they will withhold a lot of information in interview, so we need this additional information.”

– Supported Housing Provider

As well as missing information, referrals can be out of date, as another provider explained:

“Sometimes probation will only send a ‘rush’ report. We had someone recently who they said [were] affected by alcohol linked to [their] offending history... [They were] confused and didn’t understand why [they were] being asked about alcohol and this was actually a drink driving offence 15 years ago. It’s a massive support to have a current risk assessment.”

– Supported Housing Provider

Caseworkers and housing providers also identified the need to manage women’s expectations about housing.

“Women come with an expectation that WASS can provide housing or find it very quickly. It’s about managing expectations”.

– Caseworker

## The type and location of accommodation on offer

### Barriers

The evidence base is clear that women-specific accommodation provision and support is needed to prevent women’s homelessness, particularly for women leaving prison who are likely to have been experienced past trauma, abuse, and exploitation, and to

have experienced poverty and mental health need.<sup>30</sup> In Sussex, as in other parts of the country, while support is available from BWC for women leaving prison, women-specific accommodation is in extremely short supply and unlikely to be accessible immediately on release.

Social housing is extremely limited in Sussex as in other parts of the country. Most women who are accommodated on release from prison are likely to be placed in CAS3 accommodation, local authority temporary accommodation, or private rented accommodation sourced via AFEO.

A probation practitioner managing the CAS3 team explained that there is now a two-bed property in Worthing specifically for women, and not many have been in the accommodation yet. They explained:

“We don’t get so many female referrals as males, so we can’t have as many properties because otherwise they sit there empty, although we can offer single properties that are stand-alone to women”.

– Practitioner

## Solutions

Practitioners identified AFEO as a useful scheme to help women access private rented accommodation. As one local authority representative reported:

“Despite the huge difficulties of finding private rented accommodation, [AFEO] are helpful”.

– Local Authority Representative

Local authority representatives noted that the AFEO team are increasingly successful at securing private accommodation. One local authority explained that they have an AFEO officer who works in their private rented acquisitions team.

“It’s been semi-successful. The challenges are finding affordable accommodation and landlords that have the appetite. There are risks to mitigate with clients and landlords. It’s still very challenging even when we throw money at it”.

– Local Authority Representative

A probation worker explained that different councils take different approaches to AFEO. West Sussex is an example of good practice.

“West Sussex have a great set-up (Stone Pillow) and they are now going to work in East Sussex, but though they have had success, it’s taken them a long time to build links

<sup>30</sup> Solace Women’s Aid, The Connection at St. Martins, and The London Community Foundation (2022) A Strategy for Ending Women’s Homelessness in London. Available [here](#).

with landlords and have evidence that it's worked out. It's been a long process to build that up. One thing that works well is they don't just offer the funding – deposit and three months' rent up front - but also a year's support work once they've moved on".

– Probation Worker

## Availability of support to access and maintain accommodation

### Barriers

The support available to women before release from prison varies depending on where they are being held. All prisons should employ specialist housing workers, but recruitment and retention of staff has been challenging. BWC's Prison Link Worker mainly supports women leaving HMP/YOI Bronzefield to resettlement in Sussex. The support begins as early as possible while the women are in custody and continues upon their release.

Support for women after release from prison also varies considerably. BWC's service users will continue to receive support from the Prison Link Worker or another caseworker, without a fixed cut off point. However, this can be challenging to deliver if women are accommodated out of area, or if they experience homelessness and lose contact with the service. In these circumstances, BWC caseworkers will proactively try to keep women engaged or encourage them to re-engage, or link with other local services if women are staying out of area, but this is not always possible.

Accommodation can also break down because of its location. One practitioner pointed out why location is important.

"Link and familiarity in a particular location and good support network".

– Practitioner

CAS3 accommodation is very limited in Sussex and has inadequate support. Local authority temporary accommodation is likely to be mixed and can leave women isolated and vulnerable. Women are unlikely to come out of prison into accommodation with attached support, as this type of accommodation is in very short supply and unlikely to receive referrals straight from prison.

The only other options for women for CAS3 accommodation in the region are in Kent and Surrey. BWC caseworkers explained how the distant location of the Surrey accommodation (which is no longer available) was problematic.

"It was in the wrong place but was similar to the model we are looking at. It was decent accommodation; they didn't have to share; the issues were more around location. One woman had found a job and couldn't stay there because it was only for

84 nights. She had to relocate and move to really awful accommodation. They weren't near support and services.

It doesn't work well when women in recovery come out into emergency accommodation in areas where they committed crime and are with other users."

- Caseworker

BWC caseworkers identified the lack of staff and support onsite in CAS3 accommodation as a barrier to sustainability for this provision, as well as its location and the expectation for residents to share without on-site support.

"They're put in an area they're not familiar with. Not only is it difficult to get to from prison, with no phone and no money, then they're lumped in with other people who were in prison with them which can cause problems".

- Caseworker

Travelling to accommodation was identified as a barrier to success:

"Transport can be a problem, even to get to the accommodation. It is usually a travel warrant, i.e., a ticket to get on a train – but there's no support to get there".

- Caseworker

Being located out of their local area is problematic in part due to a lack of support near the accommodation.

"When women are released to somewhere not in their local area, they don't have a local probation officer – and I'm also not local.

If you're going to put someone in a new area, have someone there at the other end to meet and help them to engage."

- Caseworker

One woman had to attend a probation appointment in a different town an hour away on the day of her release, because the probation office in her area had closed. This is particularly challenging given the many other expectations on women on the day of release – such as finding accommodation and obtaining a prescription for any medication, including for women with problematic substance use.

It can be problematic that women do not gain experience of paying rent or bills in CAS3 accommodation.

"In CAS3 women don't pay rent or bills, so they come out with no knowledge of budgeting and paying bills, and without having saved money during that time. The CAS3 accommodation is quite nice, and they might do well. I tried to get them into

supported accommodation which they didn't want, and they ended up in temporary accommodation. If the package of support isn't there, how are you going to manage?

That then causes problems for women going into any housing because private landlords are asking whether they have paid bills, and they don't have the evidence to give. This makes them nervous – what makes you think you're going to manage a tenancy?

If services that should support them aren't supporting them, they will reach out to old habits.”

– Caseworker

### **Solutions**

Helpful factors in terms of accessing support to obtain and maintain accommodation, identified by women and practitioners, included:

- Having specialist housing practitioners in post in prison – this was identified as being very helpful.
- Being placed in accommodation within easy reach of key support services and essential appointments, including probation appointments, women's specialist services (like BWC), drug treatment services, and health services (for prescriptions).
- Being effectively supported, where necessary, to travel to the accommodation from prison.
- Having an effective multi-agency team around the woman immediately upon release from prison.

### **Impact where women are released to homelessness or unsafe housing**

Where women are unable to access local authority temporary accommodation, they are likely to have insufficient funds for private rented accommodation, and then face a heightened risk of going back and staying with an ex-perpetrator of abuse, or experience sofa surfing or sleeping rough. Even where temporary accommodation is found, without attached support this can be very challenging for women to manage on release. The devastating impact of homelessness is described in the women's accounts above.

Woman 2 described above dozens of experiences of being released from prison to no fixed abode, and how this frequently led directly to her being recalled to prison. Tragically, this experience even led her to commit more serious offences so that she would have more time in prison to allow for more effective preparation for her resettlement. On her most recent release from prison, because her housing had not been organised before her release, she was left with no realistic option but to seek accommodation in an unsafe situation; this led to her relapsing and could easily have led once again to recall. With support from her BWC caseworker to access temporary

accommodation, and with ongoing hard work by Woman 2 and the professionals around her, she has so far maintained that accommodation and stayed out of prison.

Woman 1's experience showed how detrimental it can be for women to be placed in emergency accommodation in mixed settings. This experience exacerbated Woman 1's already poor mental health and led her into a co-dependent relationship. It is important to note that both women received support from BWC caseworkers, without whom the outcomes could have been very different. As Woman 1 commented:

"If it wasn't for support from Brighton Women's centre and...CGL I would have gone straight back in."

– Participant

## Summary

As this section has demonstrated, having safe accommodation with adequate support is an essential foundation for women to resettle successfully following imprisonment. Being accommodated out of their local area, in accommodation without adequate support, in mixed settings, or sofa surfing under precarious arrangements with family or friends, is a recipe for failure.

However, women face multiple barriers to accessing suitable accommodation after imprisonment, due to difficulties navigating the housing application process, a lack of suitable accommodation in the right location and inadequate support in accessing or maintaining accommodation.

Through this accommodation pilot, BWC aims to overcome these barriers by:

- Supporting women pre-release to begin the referral process into the accommodation, including preparing their benefits claim, so that they can move into this gender-specific, trauma-informed accommodation immediately on release.
- Providing a period of stability (six to 12 months) while the women are in the accommodation, allowing time to find move-on accommodation and conducting a full, rounded referral in which move-on accommodation providers can have confidence, increasing the chances of successfully moving on.
- Through the support model, women would benefit from BWC's partnership with a local registered housing provider who may have access to suitable move-on accommodation, and whose partnership with BWC would offer greater confidence in referrals, increasing the chance of a successful placement.

## Proposed accommodation model

### Two alternative models

Through this study, two alternative models for implementing BWC's accommodation pilot were explored – the landlord model and the support model. For the reasons explained below, BWC has rejected the landlord model for this pilot and proposes to move forward with the support model.

#### Landlord model

When the feasibility study began, it was envisaged that BWC would work with a partner that would access social investment to purchase the accommodation and lease it to BWC. Under this landlord model, although some aspects of property management would probably still be sub-contracted to a local partner, BWC would effectively become the landlord for women living in the accommodation, as well as supporting them. This was the model used, for example, by Anawim at Dawn House.

Through the study, it was identified that this model would involve a number of challenges for BWC, requiring the organisation to adapt, upskill and increase capacity at every level of the organisation from the board to frontline service provision. BWC would probably also have had to work in partnership with an external service provider, such as a local registered housing provider, to deliver some aspects of the project. The challenges involved in the landlord model would include:

- The new administrative skills and capacity that would be needed for the organisation to take on the role of landlord, including meeting regulatory requirements for houses with multiple occupancy (HMOs), applying for exempt status to obtain enhanced housing benefit, meeting legal obligations and best practice as a landlord, collecting rental income and managing tenant relations, and property maintenance and repair.
- The new legal and financial risks that would be involved for the organisation in a new role as landlord.
- The implications of this new role for BWC's relationship with its service users. BWC operates through a relational model based on unconditional, positive support for its service users. Taking on the role of their landlord could have a negative impact on this relationship where difficult decisions needed to be made, including where women were not meeting licence requirements for the property, or where women did not want to move on.
- Difficulties recruiting and retaining staff to provide out of hours support.
- Managing all the above alongside BWC's existing work to support women with complex needs through the Inspire and WASS teams.

Some of the above challenges could be overcome by sub-contracting aspects of delivery to local housing providers. However, the central challenge of the change in

relationship (becoming the women's landlord) would remain. One caseworker described how this might be challenging for the team.

"Because people are caring, I know we are all boundaried, how will that sit with all of us...people won't want to move on".

– Caseworker

One existing service provider found that asking women to move on from the accommodation put a strain on their relationship with them as a support service:

"It's that feeling of being let down. A lot of women had a great time here and then felt they were being pushed out to somewhere horrible and that set them back. Even though they knew that from day one, once they liked it here, they would do everything to not move on. Feelings of rejection that compound the trauma".

– Residential Service Provider

This change in the relationship was also problematic when women had to be asked to leave the service due to behaviour.

"Women who broke the rules and were chunked out – you change the relationship. The case worker is left in a difficult position. It blurred the lines to make [the women's service] the enforcer and changed the relationship. You've got to put boundaries in place and make hard decisions".

– Residential Service Provider

The significant challenges involved in this change, both for the client/service relationship and in terms of practical and risk management aspects of the landlord role, was a major reason for rejecting the landlord model and instead deciding to move forward with the support model.

### **Support model**

The support model was arrived at through conversations with local registered housing providers that took place as part of this study and is considered more realistic, beneficial and lower risk as a pilot project. Under the support model, BWC would work with a local registered housing provider (the 'partner') who would be the landlord of the accommodation. Under this model, the partner would repurpose an existing property or rent a new one for the purposes of the pilot. The partner would then fulfil all its usual functions as a social landlord for the purposes of this project, relying on economies of scale to implement existing systems (including access to housing benefit exempt status). BWC's role would be to work closely with them to manage referrals of women into the accommodation, support the women while using the accommodation, help them find move-on accommodation, and continue to support them after they move on.



This model would allow the project to benefit from economies of scale, reduce the amount of new risk to be held by BWC, and gain learning and support from an external partner rather than having to build this capacity inhouse and potentially drain resources away from the organisation's core work. Crucially, it would also allow BWC to maintain its existing relationship with service users – which is one of support rather than enforcement. Safehaven, a local registered housing provider, has expressed interest in principle in taking part in such a partnership and this is under discussion.

Safehaven privately rents their properties. They are registered to receive enhanced housing benefit which covers intensive housing management (IHM). This covers the cost of their out of hours welfare team, rent collection, maintenance, and other aspects of the IHM service. The out of hours service consists of three welfare officers who work overnight from 4pm and visit all of the houses. This includes two visits for high need properties – residents can also telephone the out of hours team if they need assistance, and there is a manager on call.

Safehaven has mainly low support shared houses which are abstinence-based due to lack of support. They have a high needs property with 32 beds which accepts people with a range of support needs - this has more welfare checks each day but not support as with our model.

There may be potential for Safehaven to repurpose one of their shared houses or rent a new one for this project. This property would then run as described above, with BWC providing the support for the women. This would be provided by Accommodation Scheme Caseworkers, who would deliver one-to-one casework support to the women as well as being present in the house for three to four hours daily during office hours, Monday to Friday.

This would be a relatively low risk pilot for BWC and Safehaven as a potential partner. There is further work to be done to flesh out how the partnership would work in detail, and to ensure both parties have shared aims and expectations, as explained below under 'Next steps'.

### Outline of the support model

**Purpose:** The purpose of this new provision would be to provide safe, trauma-informed, supported accommodation for women on release from prison while longer term accommodation is found.

**Property ownership and management:** An existing local registered housing provider (the 'partner') will repurpose an existing property or rent a new one for the purposes of this project. The partner will then fulfil all its usual functions as a social landlord for the purposes of this project, while BWC will work closely with them to manage referrals

of women into the accommodation, support them while using the accommodation, and continue that support after they move on.

**Who is it for?** The accommodation is intended for single women who would otherwise be homeless on release from prison. The women are likely to have significant needs, including histories of domestic abuse and other trauma, mental health needs and substance misuse needs.

**Eligibility criteria:** Eligibility criteria for women to use the accommodation will include:

- Being a single woman leaving prison, or who left prison within the last three months, who would otherwise be homeless.
- Being prepared to sign a licence agreement which will include:
  - Standard requirements to comply with the law and ensure the property is maintained to a decent standard.
  - A commitment to engage positively with BWC's services and other support services.

Further eligibility criteria remain to be determined and will need to be agreed with the partner.

**Referral process:** Where possible, referrals will be made before women leave prison, by prison staff working in conjunction with BWC's Prison Link Worker and the wider WASS team. Women may also be referred who have left custody in the last three months, where their accommodation has broken down. Assessments will be led by BWC and will need to be discussed and agreed with the partner before a woman is accepted.

**Will it accommodate children?** This provision is not intended to accommodate children. It may be possible for women to have their children visit, subject to risk assessment.

**What will it look like?** BWC envisages utilising a HMO with four or five self-contained flats or semi-equipped units in one building with a communal space, and with support provided onsite in the office or the communal room.

**Where will it be located?** The intention is for the accommodation to be located in Brighton, which is central to the area covered by BWC, has good transport links, and is the location of some key support services that many service users will need to access, such as drug treatment services.

**How long would women live there?** This is intended as transitional accommodation. BWC aims to be realistic and flexible, not at the mercy of the timescale, which is part of

the service's benefit. The period of time is therefore envisaged as six to 12 months, without a definite cut off.

### **Staffing – who will do what?**

**Referrals and preparation for stay:** The Prison Link Worker will work with a BWC manager and two Accommodation Scheme Caseworkers to manage referrals into the service and support women to prepare for their stay, including support with benefits applications, risk assessments, and the licence agreement process. The Prison Link Worker will support women in custody to explore all housing options for release including this scheme. The Accommodation Scheme Caseworkers will work in partnership with the Prison Link Worker and a BWC manager to assess the suitability of the scheme for each woman and explore any preparation or motivational work that would be required. This will include explaining the scheme in detail to the woman, including the support offer and expectations around engagement, behaviour, length of stay, etc., and working through any potential barriers and risks. The Prison Link Worker will work in partnership with the Accommodation Scheme Caseworkers on a woman's release to ensure completion of any work agreed in the existing CRS referral and ensure smooth handover of longer term work/support around move-on and other support areas.

**Intensive support during stay:** Each woman will have her own Accommodation Scheme Caseworker for one-to-one holistic, practical, and emotional support and advocacy during her stay and for at least three months afterwards. This will include intensive support to find move-on accommodation and ongoing floating support once she has moved on. The women will also be able to access activities and appointments at the women's centre as needed.

**Staff onsite during office hours:** The Accommodation Scheme Caseworkers will be onsite for at least three to four hours per day during working hours (Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm) for ad-hoc practical and emotional support as needed. BWC aims to reach arrangements for external agencies, including probation services, to come onsite to deliver support during office hours.

**Out of hours support:** It is envisaged that out of hours support will be provided by the partner, through an 'on-call' system. Any issues would be managed through handovers to BWC support staff the following day.

**Support post-move on:** BWC will offer three months' support post-move on. This is anticipated to be continued support from the woman's Accommodation Scheme Caseworker. There would be flexibility for different staff members to support if needed, for example if the service user left the BWC accommodation in an unplanned

way or was not able to be supported by the current member of staff due to conflict or another relevant consideration.

**Property management:** The partner will be the landlord and as such will be responsible for all aspects of property management, including rent collection and property maintenance.

**Management hours:** Additional BWC management hours will be required for all the above.

## Risks and mitigation

### Organisational capacity

BWC's WASS manager has past experience of managing supported accommodation for women. This will be valuable for the delivery of the new service. However, the role of landlord will be taken on by a registered housing provider acting as the partner. BWC's role will be to manage referrals and support women during and after their stay in the accommodation. This will be within the organisation's existing experience but will require some additional capacity and close partnership working.

### Basic safety features

Women and practitioners suggested that, in order for the accommodation and attached support to be safe, trauma-informed, and suitable for women's needs, it will need to:

- Have links to the nearest substance use service and pharmacies to ensure any scripting can be carried straight over from custody so there are no interruptions. This should be accommodated by locating the service in Brighton. BWC works closely with local women's substance use services and has previously had their staff co-located at BWC offices to improve women's access.
- Be accessible for women with disabilities, e.g., hand rails, ramps, door openers.
- Have a key safe in case women lose their key.
- Have safety features in place to protect women against someone known to them who is exploiting them and trying to access them in the building. This could include CCTV at the entrance and/or in communal areas. This would require careful consideration as part of a wider assessment of getting the right balance between freedom and privacy on the one hand, and security on the other.

### Accommodating visits by children

Ideally BWC would want women to have their children be able to visit, but this would depend on how self-contained the accommodation was, and case-by-case risk assessments. Most of the women BWC support don't have much or any contact with their children and so this is not expected to be a relevant issue for most service users.

### **Ensuring proximity to key support services and/or good transport links**

Practitioners have identified the importance of ensuring the accommodation is within easy reach of women's support networks and key support services. BWC's service covers the whole of Sussex – including Brighton, East Sussex, and West Sussex. The accommodation is intended to meet the needs of women returning to this area.

Brighton is the proposed location for the service because it is central to the local area and is the location of some key support services that many service users will need to access, including substance use services. Brighton is the most expensive location in the area, so there will need to be flexibility about the location of the accommodation within the Brighton area. It will, however, need to have good transport links.

One probation practitioner wondered whether having only one property to cover the whole of east and west Sussex would meet the needs of all women who might want to access the service. While it would be even better to be able to provide accommodation in a range of locations, it is envisaged that accommodation in the Brighton area is likely to meet the needs of most women. Working with multiple properties would involve additional costs which would be beyond scope for a pilot.

### **Finding a suitable property**

BWC envisages utilising an HMO, of which there are a great deal available in Brighton. Under the support model, this will be helped by the fact that the partner would have access to properties and good relationships with landlords to source additional property if needed. It will be more difficult to find a property with self-contained units than semi-equipped.

### **Compliance with local authority regulations on HMOs**

It will be the responsibility of the partner to ensure compliance with Brighton & Hove City Council's licence requirements for HMOs. This may require the use of semi self-contained units as an alternative to fully self-contained, with shared kitchen and potentially shared bathroom facilities, although an en-suite may remain an option.

### **Level of risk to be taken on**

A probation practitioner wondered whether the accommodation would be open to high risk women as they are difficult to place. Most of BWC's clients are high risk, so they would not be ruled out, but there would be a case-by-case assessment. The women are likely to have complex needs, including past history and potentially ongoing risk of domestic abuse and other forms of abuse and exploitation; other past trauma; mental health needs; and problematic substance use needs.

The highest risk women supported by BWC could not be accommodated in this model. However, many women who appear to be high risk on paper and are rejected by other

providers could be considered with the extra knowledge and work with the woman and the partner that BWC would be able to do pre-release, to understand the actual context of risk. For example, many women BWC supports are identified as 'high risk to professional' on their probation risk assessment, and on paper have a record of violent offending. However, in fact a high percentage of these women have only ever been violent towards police or other emergency services at the point of arrest. While BWC does not condone this, it is understood to occur in the context of a trauma response to being suddenly out of control, powerless, and often physically manhandled.

The partnership between BWC and the partner that is envisaged through the support model would provide an opportunity for the partner to take on women as tenants that they might otherwise have rejected, because they can have confidence in a fully rounded referral by BWC, and in the ongoing support that BWC will be providing to the woman while she is in the accommodation and following move-on.

### **Benefits and challenges of shared accommodation model**

BWC is committed to a shared accommodation model, which would concentrate resources in one place and bring the benefits of a potentially supportive community of peers. One existing women's service provider who had experienced challenges managing shared accommodation of a similar type, suggested that dispersed one-person units with floating support would work better, as this would remove the complications that can arise from shared accommodation. However, this would still leave women open to the risk of 'cuckooing', abusive partners moving in, and would not reduce the risk of fatal overdose. Women can be particularly vulnerable to this following release, being potentially isolated after being in a highly populated prison environment.

There are certainly challenges involved in a shared accommodation model, but also benefits in terms of the relational support that is at the heart of a trauma-informed approach, including the value of peer support and community.

Whether accommodation is shared or dispersed, a number of risks may arise from residents' behaviour or relationships, particularly connected to problematic substance use or relationships with perpetrators of abuse and/or exploitation. It is acknowledged that some of these risks may be complicated by the fact that the accommodation will be shared, as they could put other residents at risk, and this will be an important aspect of managing the provision.

A probation practitioner commented:

"In shared CAS3 properties for women, one of the main problems is that if one uses then it impacts everyone in the building and that's one of the downsides of the

accommodation being shared – one person brings drugs in, and it affects everybody. In the same way if one person brings in a boyfriend. What have you thought about tolerance level of someone using in terms of their recovery and impact on others in the property?”

– Practitioner

A BWC caseworker acknowledged the benefits and potential drawbacks of sharing accommodation.

“...We get a lot of talk about how people negatively impact each other, but there is a lot of benefit from community...in dispersed properties we would lose the community...”.

– Caseworker

BWC caseworkers acknowledged that relationship dynamics can be difficult to risk assess and manage because they depend on who is in the property. They envisage mitigating this through thorough referral processes, good relationships with probation practitioners making referrals, and good knowledge of the women they work with. They would also be supported by increased staff presence in the house at time of new residents moving in to support and manage adjustments.

The aim would be to identify any potential issues early on, make clear the expectations on women through pre-release work, including signing a licence agreement, and providing support to address issues that arise as early as possible. Seriously disruptive behaviour or safety concerns would, however, need to be addressed quickly and firmly, and inability to engage with support to manage this would have to result in eviction. Women would be given additional support and clear goals to get back on track. BWC’s support for the woman would continue even if she was evicted. The fact that BWC will not be the landlord will make this easier, although it is acknowledged that it will not entirely remove the challenge involved, as BWC will be associated with the landlord under this partnership project.

### **Substance use**

One of the main challenges identified by practitioners and women was around risk assessment and risk management around problematic substance use. BWC envisages being led by legal responsibilities and would encourage residents towards recovery but would not expect abstinence. Any action around this or around people being brought in to the property would be in response to behaviour, and having staff presence would be intended to moderate this. It will be essential for the partner to be aligned with this approach, with the confidence that BWC will be closely supporting the women pre-release and while in the accommodation.



Any potential issues would be likely to be identified early on, due to the close relationship between the woman and her BWC caseworker, beginning pre-release. All women will be required to sign a license agreement and will be made aware of expectations through pre-release support. Each individual's support will be tailored depending on the situation. A relapse could end up having positive consequences if the woman's support is managed well.

A BWC caseworker commented:

"If you made it abstinence [as a prerequisite for tenancy] then at some point you would have to evict people. Also, if you do allow people to just use as they like, that might mean we need staffing all the time..."

– Caseworker

Another caseworker commented:

"It's about risk assessment and trust and you can never underpin all that completely...if you're a landlord, you can't collude in breaking the law...in terms of different people's recovery, it's about putting structures in place that accommodate different people's journeys. You can't stop people influencing each other – that is life. It's about boundaries.

It's like harm reduction – NHS giving out clean needles – advocating for safe use, and the balance and boundaries around that".

– Caseworker

BWC recognises that risks around substance use will be challenging to manage and must be led by the law, with one caseworker commenting:

"If there's an awareness or acceptance that it goes on, but do you have to do a certain amount of welfare checks – what is your legal responsibility to ensure people aren't overdosing in the home?"

– Caseworker

Some women's accommodation providers require their residents to be abstinent from controlled substances and to take regular tests. This is not envisaged for BWC's proposed accommodation model. It will be necessary to ensure the law is complied with, in terms of ensuring there is no production or dealing of drugs on the premises. However, the residents' own drug use will not be monitored by BWC staff. BWC prefers to focus on the women's behaviour rather than on their drug and alcohol use per se. As one BWC caseworker commented:



“We don’t want women going into another prison”.

– Caseworker

This will require very careful management, particularly given that accommodation is shared.

### **Levels of support and supervision in the building**

BWC does not plan to have staff onsite 24/7, but for the Accommodation Scheme Caseworkers to be onsite for three to four hours a day during working hours (Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm). Out of hours support would be provided by the partner through an ‘on call’ service.

Views on the level of staff presence that would be needed in the accommodation varied amongst providers who took part in the study. One residential women’s service provider commented that 24/7 staff cover would be needed. Another service has managed out of hours staffing by outsourcing an out of hours service to a local registered housing provider.

Decisions about the level of staff presence must take account of cost, recruitment (the difficulty of recruiting and retaining staff with the necessary skills to undertake this type of shift work) and also consideration of what level of supervision is appropriate in community accommodation which is not supposed to be a prison environment. There is no level of supervision that will eliminate all risks, and this is part and parcel of managing a service of this type.

BWC’s conclusion is that it is the type and quality of support that reduces risk, rather than the hours covered. This includes, for example, knowing the women and their potential crisis points and triggers, and having the safety net of ‘out of hours’ welfare checks and numbers to call.

One service described how they work with a local housing provider who provides their out of hours support:

“They already have out of hours supervision for all their properties. We pay into that service. They drive past and check out and then they can call our on-call managers. The team we use from the local registered provider are a first port of call. If they need to, they call our on-call managers. This works.

For example, a woman was in the property and was at high risk of [domestic abuse]; none of that information was shared with us. She was accommodated by us, and the perpetrator had been in custody, so no one had thought to flag the concerns. He was released and turned up out of hours. He assaulted her after she let him in through the window. A resident called the police and on-call team who turned up and contacted our

managers. They were there immediately, and our manager arrived within the hour, and they then took over providing emotional support.”

– Residential Women’s Service Provider

Under the support model each woman will have her own Accommodation Scheme Caseworker for wraparound, trauma-informed support. These caseworkers will be on-site for three to four hours Monday to Friday, during office hours, for ad-hoc support as needed. The women will be able to access activities and appointments at the women’s centre. There will also be the option of external agencies coming onsite to deliver support. It will be a case of finding the right balance, providing a supportive presence without creating an oppressive environment. One BWC worker commented:

“Some of the best [supported housing] I’ve worked in recognise that release is a pinch time and that you maybe want enhanced support for first two weeks, so it’s flexible. It’s a case of looking at the dynamics and crisis points”.

– Caseworker

BWC would like staff to be present regularly, but not 24/7 because this would be too expensive and not sustainable.

“There are arguments for and against – there is safety and security but also being policed in your own home, especially for women from custody who have been under control. We will learn from other providers”.

– Caseworker

Probation colleagues noted that women may be entitled to additional statutory support, such as support under Care Act. It will also be beneficial for women to build and widen support networks in the community. BWC would do this through their weekly Hubs where women can socialise with peers and access other BWC services such as Peer Groups and Therapeutic Services. Relevant professionals and services with whom they already have good relationships, such as Survivors Network, CGL, Oasis and RISE as well as others identified by women, will be invited into the house to share information about available services and improve access. BWC staff are regulars at Probation Breakfast Clubs.

Additional funding will be needed to cover the cost of the Accommodation Scheme Caseworkers. This would be likely to come through applications to grant-making trusts, for which BWC has a strong track record of success. Having demonstrated the impact of the work, BWC would then look to potential commissioning through more sustainable funding streams, such as HMPPS and local authorities.

**Gaps in rental income due to non-receipt of benefits**

Gaps in rental income could arise if there is a delay in receipt of benefits after release. This will be mitigated by ensuring strong relationships with prison staff to facilitate early referrals so that women can be effectively supported to collate and complete necessary paperwork before their release in preparation for an early application for benefits, completing as much of the process as possible before their release to ensure backdated benefit is paid from point of move in.

**Service is not accessible to women with no recourse to public funds**

BWC very rarely receives referrals of women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF). Where such referrals are received, BWC would like to be able to make the accommodation available to those women. However, this will only be possible if alternative funding is secured to cover their rent. This requires further exploration by BWC.

**Securing move-on accommodation**

Local practitioners welcomed the proposed new accommodation model but worried that it would “get silted up” where no housing duty is owed and there is no pathway for women into suitable move-on accommodation. Practitioners described the risk of “postponing the inevitable”. One BWC caseworker commented:

“It could be seen as postponing, but I think if a woman manages to stay in a project like this and receives trauma-informed support and we are able to build some stability, support networks, and resilience during that time, and work in that relational way to develop their own strengths, the idea would be that they would have continued casework support from BWC – then if they went into local authority [temporary accommodation] they would be in a better place to cope with that than on the day of release. We’re not suggesting this is a golden ticket to solve everyone’s problems. We’re saying it would improve a lot of people’s chances if properly funded and worked”.

– Caseworker

Moving women on from the service is likely to be a challenge for a number of reasons, including limited availability of accommodation and the fact that move-on accommodation is likely to be of a lower quality than the BWC accommodation. BWC intends to mitigate this by managing women’s expectations from the outset, and by continuing to support women after they move on.

One existing women’s accommodation service enters into 12-month tenancies with new residents and finds it takes this long to find suitable move-on accommodation. Another service experienced challenges moving on women, even though they included in their eligibility criteria that women must have a local connection and that their

offence “must not be of a nature that would mean move-on would be too high risk or difficult (i.e., some sexual offences or high profile cases)”. A local women-specific accommodation provider offers two-year tenancies.

Local authority practitioners commented that “good buy-in” from all agencies would be needed to try and avoid women getting “stuck” in the accommodation. A probation practitioner agreed, adding that finding move-on accommodation in the right location is also key.

“It takes a long time to sort move on, longer than people think. Location is also really important – Sussex is a big area, and if their support network is all in Hastings and they’re going to Bognor they won’t get so much wrap around support. We get those issues loads in CAS3. Because it is such a big area, they need to be near a train station or bus route to make it accessible”.

– Practitioner

A local authority representative commented that women need to access affordable private accommodation after they leave.

“If they’re not in the priority need gap, it’s how can they afford that move on accommodation? And finding someone that will take someone that has come out of prison and isn’t in employment...”

– Local Authority Representative

The solutions to this could include “all the normal things that councils do such as guarantor schemes”. One local authority representative wondered whether BWC could put in place an additional move-in fund, an offer to private landlords, or interim support to help women settle into private rented accommodation. They also wondered whether BWC would work with local authorities to build relationships with private landlords, in recognition of the severely limited social housing stock. BWC has done this before but found networking too time consuming. BWC manages this by relying on local authority housing departments’ relationships with private landlords which is currently relatively effective.

One residential service provider found that women did not want to move on because their facility was so much nicer than any available move-on accommodation.

“Everything we could find for them to move on to would always be worse”.

– Residential Service Provider

This service grappled with the potential benefits of allowing women to stay longer.

“The women that did become stable and benefited from being in [the accommodation] needed to benefit a bit longer to work through their issues. That was always a pressure...”

– Residential Service Provider

BWC recognises that supporting women to move on to new accommodation will be one of the key challenges in this provision. The accommodation provision will not solve all these problems, but it will put women in a better position than they would have been without it. This is intended as transitional accommodation, and it is acknowledged that women will not be moving on to ideal accommodation from here. The period of time for women to live in the accommodation is envisaged as six to 12 months, without a definite cut off. BWC aims to be realistic and flexible, not at the mercy of the timescale – which is part of the service’s benefit.

The following features of the support model are intended to help overcome at least some of the challenges identified above:

- WASS is a specialist housing support service; it is WASS’ core work to support women around securing and sustaining accommodation and the service has a proven track record in this area. The service works with women to understand available, achievable, affordable options. It supports women to manage less than ideal accommodation, and to view this in the context of longer term goals.
- BWC’s intention is that each woman will be exploring move-on options and planning from their first encounter with the service. It will be made clear that this is temporary accommodation, and transparent conversations will be had about what housing is available, affordable and sustainable for each woman from the outset.
- Local supported housing providers commented that having a thorough, well informed, and up to date referral and risk assessment from BWC would assist them in being able to take women into their accommodation as a move-on option. They would also be encouraged to do so by the offer of continued support for the women from BWC. It is therefore hoped that this will increase women’s chances of securing suitable move-on accommodation.
- The support model may make it easier for women to move into other, lower support accommodation models available from the partner.

It is acknowledged that even with all these helpful features in place, securing move-on accommodation will be a significant challenge. This is a key area in which the project will seek to capture learning which will be of wider interest.

## **Property ownership and management**

Under the support model, the partner will be the landlord and as such will own or lease the property and will be responsible for all aspects of property management.

## Potential impacts and learning

### Impact for individuals in the project

Practitioners and women taking part in the study were united in recognising the significant potential benefits of the proposed accommodation model. For individuals in the project, this would:

- Provide women with a safe place to live on coming out of prison.
- Allow work to begin on other pathways.
- Allow adequate time to think about future planning.

One local authority representative commented:

“This would be a really positive improvement on standard accommodation which is all we can offer at the moment. Most single people get an offer of hotel type accommodation and it’s very likely to be out of area. Sounds more like a good transition from prison to eventually move on options. A good holding place rather than temporary accommodation which is ripe with risk”.

– Local Authority Representative

A probation practitioner agreed, adding:

“Also, BWC caseworkers can do key-working so it would be wrap around. Keyworkers can work in trauma-informed way. They won’t have to go out specifically to a probation office but can be in safe space”.

– Practitioner

It was noted that coming out of prison is a crucial moment of risk where women can lose contact with agencies.

“This is a way of making sure local authorities and other organisations have them on their radar because of the support [they will be receiving in the accommodation]”.

– Practitioner

A voluntary sector representative commented:

“I think this sounds wonderful and I think we need more of this. Four to five flats is a drop in the ocean given how little there is in terms of women only spaces. I’m reminded of an evaluation for a pilot LGBTQ+ homeless hostel. It’s not there anymore but worth looking at that evaluation. It helped to build confidence and little community.”

– Voluntary Sector Representative

BWC case workers considered the benefits of the new accommodation:

“[The new accommodation would] allow women to make a choice about their recovery, instead of putting them with people who are using heavily and have a range of unsupported needs.”

– Caseworker

While the service will not exclude women who have substance use issues, as this would be unrealistic, BWC will ask that women make an honest commitment to addressing/managing their substance use and accessing support from local substance use services. Some practitioners pointed out that the new provision would prevent women feeling triggered by mixed living:

“Men trying to get in their rooms, sexually assaulting them, accidentally going in their rooms after drinking”.

– Caseworker

“We get feedback all the time about wanting to live in women-only. Women would feel a lot safer and less risk of sexual assault and domestic abuse”.

– Caseworker

Caseworkers welcomed the fact that the accommodation would be supported by staff that are working to trauma-informed practices, understanding addiction and behaviours, which is not available in mainstream accommodation.

In mainstream accommodation there can be sixty-odd beds.

“Being smaller can also work well.”

– Caseworker

In this small facility, staff would know the residents, which is not possible for security staff on the door of a 60-bed place. The dynamics between residents will be less complex to manage; residents and their needs and triggers will be better understood by staff and therefore co-produced support will be more possible. Residents will know who is in the building and will not be subject to ‘surprises’ or triggers they are not expecting. They will have a calm, safe space and support to process any crisis/event that may occur.

The accommodation should prevent triggers of being surrounded by other people screaming and shouting, and children sounding unhappy; there would be support on-site and women wouldn’t feel they had to intervene to support others when they were not equipped to do so. In other words, they would not have to deal with “other people’s distress and the sense that no one is looking after them”.

The women would receive six to twelve months of support to build resilience and stability while looking for accommodation, as opposed to coming out of custody and finding themselves unsupported, with hopes of recovery hard to maintain. This would allow time for women to build relationships with other professionals; to link with services and resources; to learn to budget; to recognise their existing skills and build new ones; and to build a support network ready for when they encounter problems in their move-on accommodation.

Having time in the accommodation will allow women to demonstrate that they are able to manage. It will allow time and opportunity to receive legal advice and potentially overcome difficulties such as ‘intentionality’ decisions, which could help to improve women’s access to other housing options. This would also allow time to explore the fact that options are limited and work on what is manageable for each woman, what are the boundaries.

“We start with what women want ideally and try all options, let them go through it themselves; they come to trust you and understand the reality of what options are and feel stronger themselves about what they can manage.



Some women who insist they need a self-contained place with a garden sometimes comes from a place of fear that they can't manage".

- Caseworker

Having more time would allow BWC caseworkers to be more proactive.

"We are reactive usually and this would allow us to be proactive, having stability to do all this work to get there".

- Caseworker

Instead of throwing women "into the deep end", they would start with support:

"You're not going to make good choices if thrown into the deep end with nothing. In emergency accommodation you create your own support network but may not be a healthy one".

- Caseworker

Recognising that relapse is a natural part of recovery from problematic substance use, providing this "breathing space" would allow women time to begin that process, learning that:

"Relapsing isn't necessarily the end of everything – having that experience of working through it, without judgement or fear. They aren't going to be written off if they mess up – that's just part of life, you have to just keep on working".

- Caseworker

## Wider project level impacts

Developing this project would have a number of wider project level impacts, including:

- Allowing BWC to develop stronger and closer links with supported housing providers, strengthening referral processes and increasing women's chances of securing stable medium term accommodation.
- Illustrating the benefits of this small-scale project could be a start in developing a larger-scale solution to women's homelessness on leaving prison.
- Providing stable, supported accommodation for women on release will reduce the burden on police, prison and probation services that can arise where women are unsupported and go on to reoffend or breach licence requirements. This would also be of benefit to wider society in terms of reducing reoffending. This service would also reduce the burden on health services and local authority social services and housing services by reducing the need for crisis support.

## Qualitative and quantitative effectiveness assessment

Assessing the effectiveness of the new accommodation model will require holistic measurement of outcomes at a series of milestones for each woman, informed by

qualitative input from the women and the practitioners surrounding them. Inevitably the project will serve a relatively small number of women, but it will still be important to include quantitative measurement of reductions in reoffending and recall.

This will include measuring improvements in well-being, social support, understanding choices and feeling of control over life and having hope for the future, as well as more concrete measures such as improvement in areas of support identified across the pathways of accommodation, recovery, family and relationships, finances and education, training and employment.

### Potential learning

There would be significant potential learning from an evaluation of the proposed pilot project. The challenges faced by women leaving prison obtaining safe accommodation on release occur nationwide. A relatively low risk, practical solution such as the model proposed here could be widely applicable elsewhere. Demonstrating how this can work in practice and the benefits that can be achieved could be instrumental in improving outcomes for women throughout England and Wales.

### What is the key project hypothesis?

The hypothesis for this new accommodation provision is that the chances of a successful placement on release will be increased through:

- consistent trauma-informed support beginning pre-release and continuing through the accommodation period and for at least three months afterwards;
- good relationships with stakeholders such as the partner, prison and probation staff, substance use services, and potential future housing providers;
- fully rounded referrals into this accommodation and move-on accommodation;
- risks being identified and management plans explored prior to accommodation being taken up.

The accommodation could also be made available to women who have been placed in emergency accommodation, CAS1 or CAS3 accommodation post-release, where that placement has ended for any reason.

### What is different about this model, compared to existing models?

One key difference in this model will be the consistency and flexibility of support beginning pre-release, continuing in the accommodation and for three months after move-on. This will include flexibility to meet enhanced periods of need, such as when a new woman first moves in, or if there is a crisis necessitating support for all residents to manage change. This flexibility will mean, for example, that women will not lose their place in the accommodation if they are recalled to custody for a short period (usually 14 days). In addition, women will be eligible for access if they have already left

custody but planned accommodation has broken down, as BWC's experience is that this is a frequent cause of women's homelessness.

Unlike some other existing models, the support provider (BWC) will not be the landlord of the accommodation. This makes the model more feasible for BWC to embark upon, allowing them to benefit from economies of scale and expertise held by others, and to focus on their own area of expertise, namely supporting the women. In this way, the risk of draining excessive resources away from the service is reduced. This could make the model more accessible to other women's services, as well as opening up opportunities for local housing providers in other areas to approach local women's specialist services to explore similar arrangements.

### **What key questions would an evaluation address?**

An evaluation of this project should seek to identify:

- How effective the project is in providing women who would otherwise be homeless or in unsuitable accommodation post-release with immediate access to safe, gender-informed and trauma-responsive accommodation on release from prison.
- How effective the project is in supporting women to maintain that accommodation for six to twelve months.
- Establishment and analysis of effective move on pathways.
- How effective the project is in supporting women to move on after six to twelve months.
- How effective the project is in supporting women to maintain their 'move-on' accommodation for at least three months.
- Outcomes for women using the service at key milestones.
- Sustainability of the service for both BWC and the partner, in terms of cost/benefits, staff resources, and any other impact on the organisations.

### **What learning would any project evaluation to capture? What is the key issue or issues being tested by the pilot?**

Key learning would include the effectiveness of the model in overcoming challenges including:

- The effectiveness of working through a partnership model between a housing provider and a women's specialist service to provide a gender-informed, trauma-responsive accommodation for women on release from prison, including challenges involved and how these are overcome.
- The effectiveness of supporting women and managing risks in shared accommodation, including problematic substance use, through a caseworker model and without staff onsite 24/7.
- Securing move-on accommodation and managing that transition through continued BWC caseworker support for three months post-move on.

- How the service enhanced referral processes both into the accommodation and into move-on accommodation.

### **Who would be interested in this learning – what impact could it have?**

This learning would be of significant interest to all those concerned with supporting women to access safe, suitable accommodation following imprisonment, including in particular:

- MoJ, HMPPS, and MHCLG.
- Women's specialist services.
- Social housing providers.
- Private landlords.
- Local authority housing departments and social care departments.
- NHS services.

The potential impact would be to improve women's access to safe, suitable accommodation following imprisonment, not only in Sussex but in other areas of the country.

### **Next steps**

Before the pilot can be implemented, a number of next steps need to be completed, including:

- Initial discussion and agreement on this course of action from BWC's Board of Trustees.
- Agreement on all details with the partner and conclusion of a legal agreement.
- Ensure the impact of the Renters' Rights Bill has been fully considered.
- Identifying a suitable property and making any necessary adaptations.
- Recruitment and training of additional staff.
- Fundraising for any currently unfunded costs.

### **Business case**

The costs and explanatory notes supporting the business case for the support model are set out in Appendix 1. This model is based on a partnership in which BWC would not be the landlord but would manage referrals and provide support. The landlord would be an existing registered housing provider working in close partnership with BWC (the partner).

### **Governance**

Under the support model, BWC's role would fit within the organisation's existing staff structures, governed by the Board of Trustees, and would not require any structural change. The project would be governed by a contract between BWC and the partner. This will need to be carefully drawn up to ensure clear allocation of roles, shared

values, and principles underlying the project, a shared understanding of the purpose and parameters of the project, a shared understanding of eligibility criteria and risk management, and a clear process for managing difficult decisions, for example around women at risk of eviction from the accommodation.

The key operational and reputational risks to BWC for this project, and their mitigation, are summarised below and set out in more detail above.

**Not overburdening BWC's organisational capacity:** This is mitigated by the support model under which BWC will focus on its core expertise, namely supporting the women, rather than acting as landlord.

**Ensuring basic safety features are included:** BWC will benefit from its staff expertise, the expertise of the partner, and the detailed feedback obtained through this feasibility study from women and practitioners.

**Accommodating visits by children:** This is not anticipated to be a frequent issue as most of BWC's service users do not have much or any contact with their children. When it arises, BWC staff are in a strong position to assess risk on a case by case basis in partnership with other services.

**Finding a suitable property and ensuring proximity to key support services and/or good transport links:** This will be a key necessary feature of the accommodation; BWC will benefit from partnership with the partner and their ability to access accommodation in a suitable location.

**Compliance with local authority regulations on HMOs:** This will be mitigated by the support model as this will be the responsibility of the partner, for whom this is core business.

**Level of risk to be taken on:** BWC has strong expertise in managing risk while providing support to women with complex needs and it will also benefit from the expertise of the partner as landlord. It will not be possible to accommodate the highest risk women in this service.

**Challenges of shared accommodation model and substance use:** BWC has strong expertise in dynamic risk management and will rely on its one-to-one casework model to ensure women's risks are known about and that support is flexible and attuned to women's needs. BWC will need to work effectively with the partner to identify circumstances in which eviction cannot be avoided and will continue to support women post-eviction in these circumstances.

**Ensuring the right balance of levels of support and supervision in the building:**

BWC will need to retain flexibility to adjust support and supervision levels if needed during the course of the project. They will benefit from support from the partner through provision of 'out of hours' support.

**Gaps in rental income due to non-receipt of benefits:** This risk should be mitigated by BWC's close work with women pre-release to prepare all necessary documentation for their benefits claim.

**Service is not accessible to women with no recourse to public funds:** BWC aims to secure additional funding to enable women with NRPF to access this service.

**Securing move-on accommodation:** This is acknowledged as one of the chief challenges of the project and will be a key indicator of success. The risk of not obtaining move-on accommodation for women after six to twelve months will be mitigated by the close support provided by BWC to the women from pre-release through to post-move on, which it is expected will give other accommodation providers confidence in a successful placement, increasing the chances of successful move-on.

**Property ownership and management:** This is not a direct area of risk for BWC as this will be the responsibility of the partner.

## Conclusion

All parties agree on the lack of women-specific, supported accommodation for women leaving prison and the severe negative impacts of this for individuals and the wider community. All parties agree that this model would alleviate some of those problems by providing a "breathing space" for women to receive support in a safe environment and have time to find move-on accommodation in which they would start from a more stable base, having benefited from the transitional support from BWC. This would have potentially significant benefits for a relatively small number of women and would offer learning for wider implementation.

This project will effectively provide a place in the journey of women leaving prison which offers a stepping stone between prison and an eventual move into long term, stable accommodation. This will allow women to avoid some of the immediate pitfalls of leaving prison to no fixed abode and provide a platform for onward progress.

Delivering the model will require BWC to work closely with an existing registered housing provider. Discussions with potential partners therefore need to be progressed as a first step, as well as securing support in principle from BWC's Board of Trustees. There may be areas in which BWC will need to compromise on the trauma-informed model in order to meet requirements of the partner. It will be critical to ensure the

right balance is struck and that inappropriate compromises are not made. Key areas to ensure alignment will include eligibility criteria for referrals and circumstances in which eviction may be unavoidable.

If terms can be agreed, this could well provide a pragmatic model which is feasible for BWC to take on. Based on the analysis above, it appears financially viable for the organisation and likely to have the impacts sought.

In the face of appalling outcomes currently for women leaving prison to experiences of homelessness, BWC remains committed to working towards implementation of this pilot. The overriding message from the experts who took part in this research was that there are many challenges, but it can be done. The message from women and practitioners alike was that it is desperately needed. As one existing provider commented:

"It's definitely worth doing."

– Women's Service Provider



## Appendix 1: Business case costs and explanatory notes

Budget per annum	
Two Accommodation Scheme Caseworkers – 20 hours per week	£35,572
Cover for sickness, annual, and other leave and training	£10,795
Service lead for scheme – 14 hours per week	£15,172
Cover for sickness, annual, and other leave and training	£5,234
Three mobile phones	£792
Staff travel	£150
Staff training	£450
Supervision	£1,549
IT	£2,100
Full Cost Recovery (24% of costs)	£17,317
<b>Total:</b>	<b>£89,131</b>

### Notes

- The two Accommodation Scheme Caseworkers will be working part-time to provide one-to-one caseworker support to the women, including onsite support for three to four hours daily, Monday to Friday. They will work in partnership with BWC's CRS funded Prison Link Worker pre-release, while in the accommodation and for at least three months post-release. They will share three mobile phones for contact with service users and other services.
- The figures for travel and training are minimum amounts per annum. If the project requires specific charges this needs to change.
- IT refers to three laptops, to be shared between the caseworkers and onsite support staff. If the project is for current staff this can be taken out.
- The above table sets out BWC's costs of participation in the project. None of these costs will be covered through rental income, service charges, or any other income through the tenancies, neither will these costs be covered by CRS funding. All the costs will need to be funded by additional sources, which are likely to be charitable grant funding at least initially; other BWC services will work in their usual way around and alongside this distinct service.
- All rental income will go to the partner and equally all risk in terms of voids and arrears will be held by the partner.

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## About Homeless Link

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for organisations working with people experiencing or at risk of homelessness in England. We aim to develop, inspire, support, and sustain a movement of organisations working together to achieve positive futures for people who are homeless or vulnerably housed.

Representing over 900 organisations across England, we are in a unique position to see both the scale and nature of the tragedy of homelessness. We see the data gaps; the national policy barriers; the constraints of both funding and expertise; the system blocks and attitudinal obstacles. But crucially, we also see – and are instrumental in developing – the positive practice and ‘what works’ solutions.

As an organisation we believe that things can and should be better: not because we are naïve or cut off from reality, but because we have seen and experienced radical positive change in the way systems and services are delivered – and that gives us hope for a different future.

We support our members through research, guidance, and learning, and to promote policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

## What We Do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

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# Let's End Homelessness Together

