

# Hosting Her

Research exploring host housing options for women

## Executive Summary

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## About Commonweal Housing

Established in 2006, **Commonweal Housing** is an independent award-winning charity working to investigate, pilot and champion housing-based solutions to social injustice. By using charitable resources Commonweal Housing provide experts and partner organisations the opportunity to trial and test new approaches designed to enhance housing equality and justice. Commonweal Housing has worked with partners such as Housing for Women, Praxis Community Projects, Thames Reach, St Mungo's and Stonewall Housing.

## About the researchers

**Lisa Young** has over fourteen years' experience across research, project management, training and front-line service delivery with an interest in social research methods, gender and crime. Lisa holds an MSc in Criminology and Social Research Methods (dist.) from London South Bank University. As a consultant Lisa conducts mixed methods research and evaluation across the VAWG and Social Care sectors to enhance the quality of service delivery and help organisations make strategic decisions.

**Tessa Horvath** is an experienced consultant researcher specialising in gender and ending violence against women and girls (VAWG). Since working freelance, Tessa has conducted a range of research and evaluation projects, and has a Master's degree in Woman and Child Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU - distinction) where she focused on sexual exploitation.

## Acknowledgments

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

In the context of a homelessness crisis and cuts to welfare and public services, more women are experiencing homelessness and find it increasingly challenging to access appropriate housing. Without adequate funding or an effective government response, it is uncertain when the situation may improve.

At the same time, host housing schemes have grown and developed for different groups including young people, those with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) and adults with care and support needs. To assess the value in developing women specific host housing for women this research explores the risks, challenges, successes and potential opportunities of host housing for women.

## Delivery of host housing

Hosting operates through a variety of models developed for different groups such as asylum seekers, refugees and migrants with NRPF, young people and care leavers as well as adults with care and support needs. Each model shares the principle of an individual or a family offering a spare room in their house to someone in need. Hosting models are either delivered informally, or through small grass roots voluntary schemes as well as through more formal schemes led by larger organisations.

## Findings

This research has uncovered wide variations in the design, set up and delivery of hosting schemes as others have documented (DCLG, 2008; NACCOM, 2017; Shelter, 2018). A clear distinction can be made between guests who have recourse to public funds and those that do not, which influences the funding streams, the support pathways and the types of additional services that are required. These variances have important implications for the consideration and development of women specific hosting.

## Benefits of host housing for women

This research found that when delivered well, hosting could be beneficial in the following ways:

- Hosting can expand the options available to women to access temporary accommodation in a supportive environment whilst longer term suitable housing options are found. For women with NRPF, it is often the only option that prevents them from destitution.
- For some women, an informal, empathic home environment coupled with committed and trained hosts can be extremely valuable and complementary to women's recovery journeys.
- Guests stated that when it went well, living with a host enabled them to build positive, trusting relationships with people, which helped to build their confidence.
- Informal, practical help offered by hosts can be effective in supporting women to develop life skills, build their confidence and community connections, and improve support networks.

## Challenges of host housing for women

As well as the benefits noted above, challenges were identified regarding host housing for women that would need careful consideration if developing women specific hosting. These include:

- The availability of options for women with NRPF may shrink if hosting is widened out further for all women.
- Widening out voluntary hosting schemes risks letting the Government and Local Authorities 'off the hook' from providing sustainable and appropriate housing solutions for all women.
- Potential abusers may also be drawn to volunteering as hosts. Women and hosts may be at risk from violent perpetrators. In some cases, it might be challenging to maintain appropriate boundaries particularly when hosts lack training, and where there is insufficient additional support for hosts and guests resulting in hosts becoming over involved in guest circumstances.
- Hosting remains a temporary option and securing appropriate move on options is a significant challenge when hosting comes to an end.

## Who might hosting be suitable for and in what circumstances?

21 out of the 23 participants from across hosting and housing schemes, women's services as well as guests and hosts, were supportive of host housing as an option for some women. It must be noted, however, that although the majority supported it, some participants had mixed feelings about hosting, stating that it is not an ideal option, but a reality within the context of the current challenges women face in accessing appropriate housing. In addition, many stated that hosting should not be viewed as a replacement for other existing options, including statutory housing and specialist services.

Hosting was more often advocated as being more suitable for women with NRPF due to the difficulties and lack of alternative options they face. Benefits were also recognised for women who do have recourse to public funds including young women who face housing benefit caps which limits their statutory housing options. Hosting was deemed not suitable for women at high risk of harm from perpetrators, and not suitable for those who face significant challenges such as drug and alcohol dependency and significant mental health problems.

## Integral elements to be included in women specific hosting

The following aspects were deemed crucial in the development of a good quality women specific host housing.

### Developing a women-centred model through a partnership approach

Hosting schemes for women must be developed and delivered by, or in partnership with, a specialist women's service so that a woman centred approach would be inherent throughout. Specific funding for a partnership approach between a women's specialist service and an experienced hosting scheme would demonstrate a commitment to high quality provision.

### Defining a target group

The most significant decision to make when developing a model is to define whether the project is designed for women with NRPF or not. This will have important implications for:

- the type of funding available
- the pathway of support for the guests and strategic partnerships
- inward and onward referrals and partner support services
- available move on options

The practical application of hosting including the style of engagement, support for hosts and guests during the stay, how hosts are recruited, and the processes used to ensure the safety of hosts and guests would be similar across projects, no matter whether guests have recourse or not.

## Developing effective pathways and strategic partnerships

The way in which hosting services are situated within local support pathways is an important consideration. This will differ according to whether women accessing hosting are eligible for statutory support. It would be beneficial for hosting schemes to communicate with the local statutory and voluntary sector services in the early phase of set up to implement agreements and protocols for ensuring women who access temporary hosting have support to access appropriate support and statutory rights and entitlements (where applicable).

## Delivery and processes that prioritises women's safety

Ensuring women's safety in a hosting context is paramount. Strategies to achieve this include employing a rigorous approach to recruiting, training and supporting hosts, matching and supporting guests as well as assessing the suitability of hosting for women on a case by case basis by looking at women's whole circumstances.

## Conclusion

This research found that host housing options can be an appropriate option for some women including those with NRPF, at certain points in their journey on the pathway to independent accommodation. Hosting for women was not advocated as an ideal or simple solution for women, but was often noted as a reality within the context of the challenges women are currently facing in accessing suitable housing from the existing options. Where hosting is used, the priority is that it is delivered to a high standard, prioritises safety and meets women's needs. Any further development of hosting must be alongside continued campaigning and lobbying for appropriate statutory, sustainable solutions for women. Hosting should not be a replacement for access to appropriate statutory housing options and specialist support services and should not become part of the homelessness pathway to be relied upon by Local Authorities.

## Recommendations

Key recommendations from this research are included here. More detail is in the full report.

### Recommendations for Central Government

Central Government should address the drivers for all women's homelessness. There are a number of ways that this can be achieved. Firstly, through building more social and affordable housing and creating a benefits system that acts as an appropriate safety net for all women. Secondly, by funding specific and specialised

women only services for women experiencing violence and other social injustices that increase their risk of homelessness. Thirdly by ending the destitution of migrant women by creating a better safety net for those with NRPF.

## Recommendations for Local Government

Local Authorities should address the drivers of women's homelessness in the first place, as well as:

- Ending the use of mixed-sex temporary accommodation for women and instead fund specialist women's services who are best placed to meet the needs of women who are homeless and who have experienced violence or other social injustice.
- Ending gate-keeping practices which prevent women from accessing their housing rights and entitlements.
- Work with local hosting schemes to ensure that all women accessing temporary hosting are also supported to access their housing rights as well as suitable move on options.

## Recommendations for host housing services

- Offer all women access to women only host housing options.
- Prioritise the safety of women by implementing rigorous strategies and processes for recruiting, training and supporting hosts.
- Work with specialist women's services to apply for specific partnership funding and develop gender informed hosting services capable of providing wrap around support for women.
- All hosting schemes should make use of available good practice guidance information available through NACCOM membership when developing hosting for women. All structures and processes should be reviewed to meet the specific needs of women.

## Recommendations for women's services

- For those services that work with or alongside hosting schemes, consider applying for specific funding to partner with a reputable hosting scheme to develop a women specific hosting with wrap-around support.
- With specific funding, develop and deliver a package of gender informed VAWG awareness training for hosts as well as confidentiality, boundaries, health and safety.

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For the full report, visit [commonwealhousing.org.uk/our-projects](https://commonwealhousing.org.uk/our-projects)



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