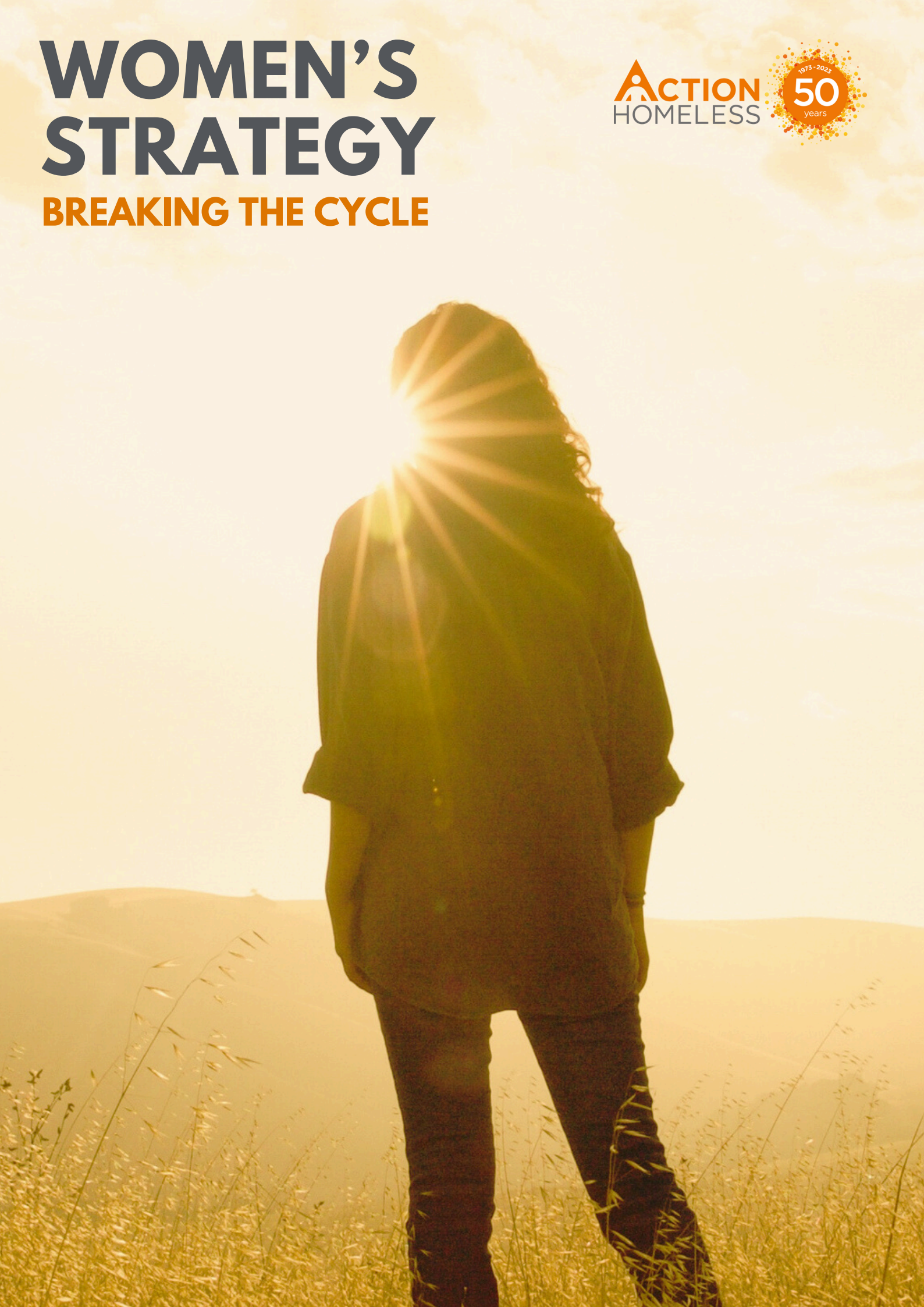


WOMEN'S STRATEGY

BREAKING THE CYCLE

ACTION
HOMELESS



FOREWORD

A message to women facing homelessness

“I hope you can find it in yourself to be strong. There is help out there, even when you feel like there's not or you can't see it, I promise it is there. When you feel like it's rock bottom, it's not, there is help when it gets hard and you feel lonely.”

Emma-Jayne, lived experience expert



INTRODUCTION

This strategy is designed to complement our overall organisational strategy and will specifically inform our approach to supporting women experiencing homelessness over the next five years.

As with all individuals who come to us for help, our aim is to break the cycle of homelessness. This is no different for women, yet we recognise that women experience homelessness differently to men. We believe that responses and interventions should be designed and delivered via a gender-informed approach to achieve maximum impact.

“Having a thorough understanding of how women’s homelessness differs from men’s homelessness is an essential pre-cursor to responding in the most effective way” (Homeless Link: Exploring Women’s Homelessness, what we know 2022)

This document, which has been produced based on the insight of women who’ve experienced homelessness, sets out our current position and offer for women who come to us for support as well as our ambition to build and strengthen services that enable women to break the cycle of homelessness.

Recent consultation with both men and women accessing our homelessness services revealed six key elements that they felt must be in place to ensure that the cycle of homelessness is broken; stable home, health needs addressed, feels safe, feels connected and feels supported. This strategy sets out how we can enable women to achieve these foundations for a life away from homelessness.



WOMEN & HOMELESSNESS

Action Homeless provides accommodation and support to women who are experiencing homelessness. Women make up approximately 20% of our overall client group which means we currently see approximately 78 women in our services throughout the course of a year. The number of women accessing our services as a whole has gradually increased over the last 10 years, prior to this most of our housing projects catered only to men. Our data shows that the number of women entering our services who are facing multiple disadvantage has sharply risen.

February 2024 snapshot;

- 21 women receiving low levels of support and housed in our temporary or longer term accommodation (40%)
- 31 women requiring more intensive or specialist support (60%)

Across the majority of Action Homeless' 50 year history, our projects have catered predominantly for males, with the exception of Bridge House, a project for women and children who are fleeing domestic abuse and have lost their homes as a result. Bridge House opened over 30 years ago. It currently houses up to seven families at any one time and offers an in-house children's support service, Building Blocks.

Currently, we offer a range of mixed sex accommodation and support services to women, including specialist interventions such as;

Housing First, a project which offers people a tenancy with intensive wrap-around support to help them to address additional needs and maintain a secure home.

Flora Lodge, a partnership project designed to support men and women with long histories of homelessness with multiple and complex needs.

Community Transitions Project, a partnership with Leicestershire NHS Partnership Trust which supports people on discharge from inpatient mental health services to resettle in the community.

Women also access our lower level support services, living in both our temporary and more permanent housing projects with minimum levels of support.

Our data shows that the vast majority of women who access our services, even those requiring low levels of support, have at least one additional need (on top of housing).

Trauma is a recurring trend, with sexual violence and abuse frequently present in women's lives.

“I didn’t receive any support at the point my daughter was removed. I couldn’t process what was happening and felt an intense grief, akin to a bereavement. Years later, I struggle to deal with these feelings and feel they threaten my recovery”

Charlotte

Women described further challenges existing in relation to children, with some women dealing with the aftermath of having custody of their children removed whilst others continue to struggle with navigation of ongoing court proceedings and access or contact arrangements. Overall, women that we spoke to during the production of this strategy, felt that support related to children was a huge gap and something missed by existing services.

“Trauma underscores the life histories of women with multiple unmet needs. Experiencing trauma can impact an individual’s ability to cope and self-regulate. Their sense of safety and sense of self, their perception of control and self-efficacy and their interpersonal relationships”

(McCarthy et al. (2020) Understanding Models of Support For People Facing Multiple Disadvantage: A Literature Review)

Long term experiences of poverty and deprivation, chaotic upbringings as well as poor mental health also feature heavily. Many women described ‘falling through the gap’ and having to access multiple services before receiving the help that they needed.

“I’ve been homeless for five years. I fell right between the cracks. The system did not care and I didn’t know how or where to get support. I was left to my own devices and felt very trapped”

(Anonymous)

“It’s a different world for women. People think women automatically get more help but it doesn’t work like that.”

(Emma-Jayne)



INFORMING OUR APPROACH

Led by lived experience

In the preparation of this strategy, we have sought extensive input from women in our services and those who have used our services in the past. To aid our organisational understanding of 'lived experience' inclusion and to promote its value, we first developed a lived experience definition which is now used across our teams to encourage lived experience input. It extends beyond direct experience of homelessness to encompass a range of themes and issues related to homelessness as we know homelessness rarely occurs in isolation and that contributing and consequential factors have a significant bearing on an individual's experience.

We have listened to the experiences of a range of different women and have put in place mechanisms to encourage conversations around the subject of women's homelessness. To enable this continued dialogue, we have created a number of regular spaces and opportunities for women to engage with us and feed in their lived experience, expertise and insight.

Women's Only Open Space – a monthly informal session held in partnership with fellow local homelessness charity 'The Bridge Leicester' attended by women and children who have personal experience of homelessness. This may be current, recent or past experience.

Women's Only Wellbeing Space – a monthly session for women currently living in Action Homeless temporary accommodation held within our Community Lounge. This session is targeted to women who have multiple and complex support needs. Children are not able to attend this session.

Connections Weeks and Conference – we hold bi-annual connections weeks and an annual conference which bring together people using our services, our staff and volunteer teams and wider stakeholders. These events enable connection with a focus on listening, sharing and learning. We have worked hard to eliminate barriers to attendance for women including arranging transport, facilitating childcare onsite and creating women's only rooms or spaces within larger mixed-sex venues.



Annual Customer Survey – we run an annual customer survey which is sent to everyone living in Action Homeless accommodation and is available in paper and online formats. We also provide translated versions for anyone who needs the survey in a different language.

As well as supporting the formation of this strategy, these events and activities will remain throughout the life of the strategy to enable continued dialogue, coproduction and opportunities to review and reflect on the success of individual initiatives as well as this strategy as a whole.

Learning from others

To further support our understanding of women's homelessness, we have also learnt from others working in the field, reviewing literature and research from experts including Homeless Link and The Agenda Alliance. We have also reached out to other local organisations supporting women who are experiencing homelessness.

Where are we now?

To support our thinking and produce a 'state of the nation' starting point for this work, we completed an internal review, measuring Action Homeless' current services and practices against Homeless Link's 'Five key principles for effective working with women'. This review was undertaken jointly by staff members working across Action Homeless' services, a nominated trustee and women who've used our services.

HOMELESS LINK'S KEY PRINCIPALS FOR EFFECTIVE WORKING WITH WOMEN

- 1. INCORPORATE WOMEN'S LIVED EXPERIENCE ACROSS DIFFERENT LEVELS OF THE ORGANISATION**
- 2. PUT TIME INTO UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT FORMS OF SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE**
- 3. NOMINATE A FEMALE LEAD TO ADVOCATE FOR WOMEN IN THE SERVICE**
- 4. BE PROACTIVE AND TAKE SERVICES TO WOMEN, DON'T WAIT FOR THEM TO COME TO YOU**
- 5. CREATE WOMEN ONLY GENDER AND TRAUMA INFORMED SPACES TO HELP THOSE WHO'VE EXPERIENCED VIOLENCE AND TRAUMA TO FEEL SAFE**

The review found that;

- Women's lived experience was incorporated within the organisation to some level although it was more consultative i.e we speak to women when we want feedback on a particular issue or project. More work needed to be done to understand the level of lived experience within our staff teams and at Board level. More meaningful and ongoing dialogue with women must be achieved to move towards coproduction.
- Action Homeless, over its 50 year history, has developed a strong understanding of different forms of social disadvantage but has never specifically looked at social disadvantage through a gendered lens. However, Action Homeless does deliver a series of specialised projects designed to meet the needs of individuals facing social exclusion and is consistently learning from its internal delivery and external networks.
- Although no one designated 'female lead' exists, Action Homeless has established a working group to advocate for changes and improvements to women's services. To ensure that this is effective, it must regularly listen to and engage with women in services.
- Action Homeless' personalised approach to support and coaching support means that we are already able to and, in many cases do, flex our support offer for women. Our support isn't fixed and can be delivered 'where women are' and where they feel comfortable. This notion of taking support to women could be expanded upon, directing resources to where women are. We know not all women need in person support to access a particular service and that providing the right information in the right places could be a powerful tool in empowering women.
- Action Homeless has already invested in training and environments which enable services to become more trauma-informed. We have also established some women's only spaces, although these are only available at certain times in particular venues. There remains a huge challenge around our existing property portfolio in that mixed-sex services are delivered in temporary accommodation where people are required to share bathroom facilities and communal spaces. Further review and innovation is required in this area.

CONTEXT – OUR OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

The external environment and local housing system compounds some of the challenges that women face in escaping the cycle of homelessness. In 2022, Leicester City Council declared a Housing Crisis caused by the continued reduction of social housing in both the city and county. As has been the case across the Country, Leicester has experienced significant increasing numbers of people who are homeless and require temporary accommodation, approaches to the Local Authority are up 14% on last year with further increases expected . A recent report found that only 3% of private rental homes were affordable to those on low incomes or benefits aligned with LHA rates. These factors present a very challenging backdrop against which to find routes out of homelessness.

OUR STRATEGY

MISSION: TO BREAK THE CYCLE OF WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS

OUR OBJECTIVES:

HOUSING

WOMEN HAVE ACCESS TO SAFE TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION WHICH OFFERS DIGNITY AND PRIVACY

- Women are given choices wherever possible about where they access temporary accommodation and whether they enter mixed-sex or women's only spaces
- Housing environments are psychologically informed and meet women's cultural and faith needs
- Action Homeless' accommodation strategy prioritises properties which offer private bathrooms and kitchenettes and seeks to create women's only areas within existing schemes
- Women are able to achieve a stable home and can access any support that they need to keep it
- Women are offered choice during the resettlement process and are encouraged to explore different options and locations
- Women are empowered to access community services and support outside of Action Homeless

SUPPORT

WOMEN RECEIVE HIGH QUALITY AND PERSONALISED SUPPORT TO BREAK THE CYCLE OF HOMELESSNESS

- Support is gender-informed and delivered by staff who have an understanding of women's homelessness (and how this differs from male experiences of homelessness)
- Women can access trauma-informed support which addresses other challenges or barriers in their lives i.e. relationships with children (including for those women who've had children removed), violence and abuse, criminal justice proceedings, addiction and recovery
- Women receive timely support to navigate pathways and manage transitions in their lives

OUR STRATEGY

SUPPORT CONTINUED...

WOMEN CAN ACCESS SERVICES AT A TIME AND IN A PLACE WHICH THEY FEEL SAFE, INCLUDING PRACTICAL AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT WHICH ENHANCES WELLBEING

- Women's only environments are made available wherever possible
- Support is delivered in flexible locations at varying times, avoiding women having to attend an area or space in which they feel uncomfortable
- Transport options are explored with individuals enabling them to travel safely to appointments and support sessions
- Specific welfare budget is available to meet the needs of women, enabling support to be responsive and timely
- Sanitary products and other wellbeing essentials are made readily available wherever women are accommodated and supported

WOMEN'S HEALTH NEEDS ARE ADDRESSED BY FLEXIBLE ACCESS TO APPROPRIATE HEALTH SERVICES

- Women know how and where to access a range of physical and mental health services in their locality
- Routine general women's health and sexual health screenings are promoted and women are supported to attend
- Harm minimisation is actively promoted and women are supported to take steps to prioritise their own safety and reduce risk

CONNECTION

WOMEN EXPERIENCE A SENSE OF BELONGING AND COMMUNITY

- Women can access spaces and opportunities which offer informal peer support and friendship
- Women are able to make choices about how and where they connect with others and develop positive and supportive relationships
- Women are empowered to become active members of the community and feel able to access facilities in their local area

OUR STRATEGY

CONNECTION CONTINUED...

WOMEN'S VOICES AND EXPERIENCES INFORM RESPONSES AND SOLUTIONS TO HOMELESSNESS

- Women have opportunities to share their lived experience, insight and expertise
- Women's experiences are highlighted and appear front and centre in communications and conversations about homelessness
- Solutions and responses to women's homelessness are co-produced

Action Homeless recognises that we cannot achieve our objectives as one organisation in isolation. Central to achieving the objectives set out in this strategy, will be our ability to develop relationships and cultivate partnerships with other groups working to support women. Our ambition is to support the founding of a women's partnership for Leicestershire which specifically addresses the needs of women who face multiple levels of disadvantage and for whom breaking the cycle of homelessness is most challenging.

