

Simon Community Scotland Roundtable Report

Housing



NRPF

Shelter



Disability

Work



**Social
Security**

**Public
Services**



Children

Asylum



Schools

**Welfare
Reform**



Thursday 13th December 2018

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Introduction

The Simon Community works to combat the causes and effects of homelessness. Their vision is that everyone should have a safe place to live and access to the support that they need. Everything that the organisation does is about and for people - the people they support, their staff, their partners and everyone affected by homelessness.

The organisation's values are built into every area of activity and tell the story of how people remain at the heart of the Simon Community. Key values are:

- Inclusion and Partnership
- Personalised and Creative
- Warmth and Regard
- Partnership and Collaboration
- Supportive and Ambitions.

As part of the Scottish Women's Convention's ongoing work on homelessness and housing, roundtable discussions were held with the organisation and women they work with on the 13th December 2018.

Women's Experiences

Accommodation

The Simon Community provides short-term accommodation for women in crisis. Many of the women that the organisation works with have alcohol or substance misuse issues, while others are often seeking refuge from an abusive partner.

The first port of call for those who present as homeless is the Local Authority, who have a duty to provide safe accommodation. Individuals are then subject to assessment. Those who are deemed to require the care and assistance provided by the Simon Community are referred onto them. Women are housed in self-contained accommodation, where there is a team of trained staff on hand to provide comfort and support.

"Each individual has different needs. It's so important to take that into account when putting in place their programme. The aim of this tailored package of support is to help these women reach a point where they are able to live independently."

When women arrive at the centre, they are usually at "rock bottom". Sitting down with a worker for a chat over a cup of tea can take a huge weight off their shoulders. This informal, supportive environment allows workers to break down women's barriers and begin to gain their trust, which is essential to their progression and overall wellbeing.

The safe environment created by staff within the Simon Community house can mean that many women do not want to leave the service. Within this type of situation they are supported to make basic decisions and attend appointments. The security that they are afforded can make it difficult for them to move on to permanent accommodation.

Women who access services via the Simon Community tend to come from chaotic backgrounds. As such, they need to be provided with the necessary support and assistance to be able to manage money, turn up on time for appointments and look after and run a house. They need to have these basic skills before they can be moved into permanent accommodation.

When individuals are moved on from the service, they are too often *“left to get on with things themselves”*, without any form of short term, follow-up care to ensure that they are dealing with their transition.

“We hear so many stories of women we have helped within the service struggling when they’re out on their own. They can forget to pay rent and bills and do not turn up to meetings and appointments at the Jobcentre. This leads to sanctions, which can send them back into the spiral of drug and alcohol abuse and debt.”

Key workers from the Simon Community require access to these women, as the trust they have built up over time means they are more likely to engage. Trained staff would also be able to spot any issues quickly and attempt to resolve any problems before they escalate. There are also issues with where women are housed, particularly around the suitability of the accommodation and where it actually is.

“Women can be placed in completely different parts of the city from their families, friends and other support networks. The Council say they’ve done their duty by simply housing the individual, but never take into account their circumstances and often complex needs.”

Financial Support

Interaction with the benefits system is an issue for women who have experienced homelessness. Applications are expected to be completed online, however many have neither the knowledge or experience to even turn on a computer, let alone fill in complex forms. The lack of support available to claimants means that applications are incorrectly completed, which leads to delays in payment, or underpayment.

“Some women are unable to read or write, yet they’re expected to complete pages and pages of difficult, personal questions online. Support services are stretched so thin that it’s difficult for claimants to get any kind of help. Even if there are workers available within the Jobcentre, for example, women can struggle to get there due to location. Universal Credit and PIP are setting people up to fail.”

The way in which benefits are paid can also be problematic. Universal Credit is paid in one instalment every four weeks. Claimants can ask for payments to be made every two weeks, however the individual would have to know that this was an option. The result is that women are being given a large sum of money, without any budgeting and money management advice. This is also the case for those who are underpaid and are given backdated money.

“If you give someone who has a drug or alcohol dependency a lump sum of money, they are likely to use it for those purposes. This completely sets individuals back with regards to any treatment or counselling they are receiving.”

More needs to be done to provide support to women who have experienced homelessness and who are now in their own accommodation. They rely on the support provided via social security benefits and, as such, should be given the help they need to ensure they claim this correctly. Without this support, they are in real danger of ending up back on the streets.

Key Concerns

Through discussions with workers from the Simon Community and women currently using the service, there are some key concerns which are making it difficult for women to go on to live independent, safe lives in their own accommodation.

The key issues as noted are:

- Lack of support once women leave the service and get their own home. In the past, there was a 'Care Through' package provided, which continued to provide support and assistance when women were transitioning from supported to independent accommodation. Women need reassurance and help during what is a very difficult time for them, but that is simply not available.
- In the main, all communication with the DWP - particularly with regards to completing application forms - is expected to be carried out online. Little to no regard is paid to those who do not have access to a computer and the internet, or the skills to use either.
- Too many women accessing the service cannot read or write. Access courses should be available to help these women gain the most basic of skills.
- There are issues for those who are able to gain and sustain employment, as once they get a job they cannot stay on in supported housing. They may have secured a job, however sustaining it can be difficult if they are expected to move into their own house and instantly deal with the responsibilities that brings about.
- Little to no regard is paid to a woman's location versus the support she is expected to access. The closure of more Jobcentres and Citizens Advice Bureaux means that women are having to travel further in order to attend appointments and seek help. Many of these women have serious, complex mental health issues, which makes it difficult for them to remember when they are to go to meetings. This is not often recognised, however, it can lead to a vicious cycle of sanctions, debt, alcohol and drug misuse and homelessness.

Conclusions

It is clear that women rely on the support, trust and care provided via accommodation through the Simon Community. It is also clear, however, that once women leave this environment, they are given little to no support when it comes to help with benefits, courses and classes to improve literacy and numeracy, budget management, seeking employment and running and maintaining a roof over their heads. The reality for many women who have benefitted from the excellent service provided by the Simon Community is that the lack of through-care and after-care is leading them back into addiction and, ultimately, back onto the streets.

It is essential that more is done to support women who are experiencing homelessness. The SWC is grateful to the women who were involved in this roundtable and who shared their stories and experiences with us, as well as their ideas for change.