

**A safe place**

**to call home**



**Our three-year strategy for  
supporting homeless women in Kent**

**2021-2024**

# Contents

About us	3
Introduction	4
Our achievements	5
Our work in numbers	6
The impact of Covid-19	7
Our purpose	11
Our values	12
Our three-year strategy	13
Sadia's story	15
References	15

## About us

We are Kent's largest charity for homeless and vulnerable people. We're here for people who have nowhere to go and no-one to turn to.

We work with people on the streets, in our supported housing and in local communities.

We help people with their mental health, housing, education and employment so they can get where they want to be in life.

## Our vision, mission and values

### Our vision

We strive for a fairer society where vulnerable people find stability, the most excluded are included, and where homelessness and poverty are things of the past.

### Our values

- Inclusiveness
- Integrity
- Compassion
- Empowerment
- Passion
- Innovation

### Our mission

To change lives for the better, by:

- Preventing people from becoming homeless through the provision of timely and personalised support services
- Providing housing, education, employability and personal development support to the most vulnerable and isolated people in our communities
- Challenging negative attitudes towards people who are homeless, living with mental ill-health, or living in poverty



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Please note: the photographs used in this report illustrate Porchlight's general work and do not necessarily reflect the circumstances of those pictured.*

# Introduction

Kent has one of the highest percentages of women rough sleepers in the country.<sup>1</sup>

Since April 2020, just under 20% of Porchlight's rough sleeping clients have been female; that figure jumps to 45% of our clients who are at risk of homelessness.

In the same period, **we've supported over 450 women** through our homelessness services. Our other services across Kent, including our mental health and wellbeing and employment services, have **supported a total of 1,500 women**.



**Since April 2020, we have supported over 1,500 women across Kent to find secure housing, improve their wellbeing and obtain paid work.**

## Background



In 2018, Porchlight carried out a study with 40 women who were either sleeping rough or had done so in the past. The study's findings became a report, *Seeing the Unseen*, which highlighted the issues women face while sleeping rough.

These included serious mental illness, difficulties managing health and personal hygiene, loss of contact with children, substance misuse, violence and abuse. The women we spoke to said they were not getting the help they needed from statutory or support services.

As a result of our findings, we committed to changing the way we work with women and developing tailored services to meet their needs.

We have appointed a women's services development manager and two specialist workers for women. We've also launched a 'rapid rehousing fund' to provide emergency accommodation for women at risk of rough sleeping or in housing crisis.

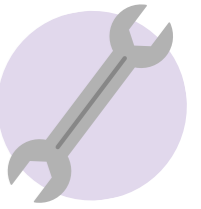
# Our achievements

Since carrying out the *Seeing the Unseen* study in 2018, we've changed the way we work with women and we're developing tailored services to meet their needs.

We've conducted a follow-up study **exploring the needs of homeless women** and identifying opportunities for improving our services



We've created a **toolkit of best practices** for working with homeless women. It was written in consultation with women and the staff who work with them



We've **developed and delivered specialist women's needs training** to



over 100 staff from Porchlight and partner agencies, including homelessness and domestic violence organisations and health services

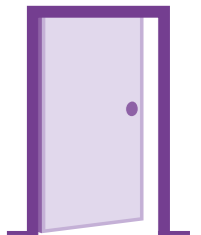
Our **two specialist workers are providing support to women** who are rough sleeping; their role is to secure housing, help women improve their wellbeing and obtain paid work, training, and volunteering opportunities



**10% of our supported housing is now allocated for women** and we've launched our first female-only properties



We've supported six women to stay in safe accommodation and avoid rough sleeping while awaiting more permanent housing, and we've secured private rental accommodation for one woman through the **rapid rehousing fund** as well as a bed, mattress, and fridge freezer



We have a **steering group which guides decision-making**

for our women's services; representatives include women with lived experience, frontline Porchlight staff and colleagues from partner organisations

We've established a **working group with key stakeholders** (police, probation services, domestic violence organisations, substance misuse services, day centres) to develop best practices for working with women, to share learnings and champion positive change



We're working with The Hygiene Bank to **deliver sanitary and hygiene products** to women in our accommodation and outreach services



We provide clients with a **choice about the gender of their keyworker**



While the steps we've taken so far are a good start, there is much more work to do. In this document we set out our strategy for making further progress in this important area.

# Our work in numbers

Since April 2020:

- **50%** of clients supported across all Porchlight services are women
- **32%** of clients supported by our homelessness service, Kent Homeless Connect, are women
- **21%** of clients supported by our street outreach services are women
- **3%** of all Porchlight clients are transgender
- **Just under 1%** of Porchlight clients are non-binary

Comparison data of men vs. women accessing Porchlight services since April 2020:

• By age:

AGE RANGE	WOMEN	MEN
18-30	42%	33%
31-60	53%	63%
60+	4%	4%

• By ethnicity:

ETHNICITY	WOMEN	MEN
White British	89%	88%
White Other	4%	4%
Black or Black British	3%	2%
Mixed	3%	3%
Asian or Asian British	1%	2%
Other ethnic background	1%	1%

- By sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, bisexual or questioning): **8%** of women / **3%** of men
- One or more types of disability (including mental health, chronic illness, mobility impairment, visual impairment, hearing impairment, learning disability, utitstic spectrum): **80%** of women / **74%** of men

## Our LGBT+ services

This document provides an overview of our work with all women, including cis and trans women. Our women's services are open to trans women, in line with the law but also our position as an organisation.

We have developed a women's strategy because we understand that cis and trans women have different experiences of homelessness from those of cis men. We are aware that there are also differences in the experiences of trans men and non-binary people, however we acknowledge that our current understanding and practice in this area is limited.

Porchlight has recently employed a LGBT+ service development manager who will lead on our work to better understand and meet the specific needs of these client groups.

Find out more about our current work supporting LGBT+ young people at [theyouproject.co.uk](http://theyouproject.co.uk)



# The impact of Covid-19



In 2018, we highlighted the issues facing women in our report *Seeing the Unseen*, including:

1. Homeless women with a severe mental illness are highly vulnerable.
2. Women rough sleepers experience increasingly complex trauma.
3. There is no single cause of women's homelessness.
4. Managing health and personal hygiene is challenging for women rough sleepers.
5. Women rough sleepers are not getting the help they need from statutory or support services.

Women told us about their fear of violence and abuse, the stress of constant cold and how turning to drugs and alcohol increased their risk of harm. The women we spoke to felt that no one cared about them, leaving them isolated and alone.

The devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has made the issues facing women even more pressing.

## Not eligible for emergency accommodation

During the first national lockdown in March 2020, the government launched its 'Everyone In' initiative, providing emergency accommodation to everyone who was rough sleeping.

But many homeless women were excluded from the support available because they were not visibly rough sleeping at the start of the lockdown.

Women are far more likely than men to fall into the category of 'hidden homelessness'. Homeless women may be staying with friends and family, engaging in survival sex (exchanging sexual favours for accommodation or drugs), staying in overcrowded properties, or remaining in abusive relationships for lack of anywhere else to go.

Other women may be rough sleeping but doing all they can not to be found (walking the streets at night, sleeping in sheds): an estimated 62% of all homeless people are hidden from support services and therefore excluded from official statistics.<sup>2</sup>

## Increasing risk and severity of domestic abuse

For those experiencing domestic abuse, home is not a safe place to be. During lockdown, however, there was often nowhere else for women to go.



As the lockdown went on, many women ran out of places to stay, relationships broke down and women were left with nowhere to go.

**"That's what I'd do, walk about. Or I'd go somewhere like... I'd walk around where I used to live, because I thought I don't want to stay in the town centre."**

**"So, I got turned away from a lot of my mates' house. So, I just ended up living in my car. That's how it is now."**

In March to June 2020, there was a reported 7% increase in domestic abuse cases compared to the same time the previous year. There was generally an increase in usage of domestic abuse victim support services, including a 65% increase in calls and contacts logged by the National Domestic

**Since April 2020, at Porchlight we have seen domestic abuse as an increasingly frequent cause of rough sleeping and being at risk of homelessness**

Abuse Helpline between April and June 2020, compared with the first three months of the year.

The increase in demand for domestic abuse services does not necessarily indicate an increase in the number of victims, but perhaps an increase in severity of those cases as normal coping mechanisms (such as leaving the house or attending counselling) were unavailable.<sup>3</sup>

In a Women's Aid survivor survey in June 2020 with 63 participants,<sup>4</sup> women reported the impacts of lockdown on their experiences of domestic abuse:

- 58% said they felt they had no one to turn to for help during lockdown
- 52% said they felt more afraid during lockdown
- 51% said the violence/abuse had got worse.

There can also be an intersection of factors that make domestic abuse more likely, such as:

- women who identify as mixed/multiple ethnicities were more likely to have been

**High barriers to health services**

As reported in *Seeing the Unseen* in 2018, women sleeping rough face severe challenges managing their personal hygiene and health.<sup>8</sup> Women who experience this type of homelessness have a much younger average age of death than the general population – the average age of death of a woman sleeping rough is 43, compared to 81 years old among women generally.<sup>9</sup>

The most common mental health issues experienced by homeless women are depression, dual diagnosis (co-existing mental health and alcohol and drug misuse problems), and personality disorder. The most common physical health issues are joint aches or problems with bones and muscles, dental problems, and chest pain.<sup>10</sup>

In *Seeing the Unseen* we reported that, while just over 60% of women were able to access healthcare services such as a GP while sleeping rough, 10%

abused in the last 12 months (10.1%) than those from any other ethnic background<sup>5</sup>

- disabled women are twice as likely to be abused and typically take longer to seek/access support than women without disabilities<sup>6</sup>
- bisexual women are twice as likely as heterosexual women to have been abused in the last 12 months (10.9% compared to 6%).<sup>5</sup>

Since April 2020, at Porchlight we have seen domestic abuse as an increasingly frequent cause of rough sleeping and being at risk of homelessness. We have also managed an increase in severity of domestic abuse cases.

This is echoed by evidence heard by the Home Affairs Committee, that domestic abuse incidents are increasingly complex and severe, with physical abuse and coercive control becoming more prevalent.<sup>7</sup> As the negative effects of the pandemic continue to be felt, we expect that many more women will present with issues and be at risk of homelessness because of domestic abuse.

**"I have nobody to tell what I am going through. I am desperate to get out, but he is always home."**<sup>4</sup>



could not access healthcare services and 16% had not tried to do so. Reasons included having no proof of address or identity, while trauma from past experiences and trust issues also presented a barrier.

Data shows<sup>11</sup> that people who are sleeping rough are nearly seven times more likely to miss or fail to attend outpatient appointments than the general

population, highlighting the challenges they face in accessing healthcare services.

Our staff report that Covid-19 has increased the barriers to health services for our clients. Safety measures have added further layers of complexity to existing systems: contact now has to be made by phone, referral systems have become more complicated and would-be patients now need to tell receptionists the nature of their needs in order to access help.

**More limited contact with children**

Of the women who took part in our *Seeing the Unseen* study, 68% had children and the majority of those (85%) still had limited contact with their child or children while sleeping rough.<sup>8</sup>

Maintaining a relationship with a child while sleeping rough, or experiencing any form of homelessness, is challenging and can be stressful and difficult, but the coronavirus pandemic has created additional barriers, including the closure of many access facilities.

One woman, who is being supported by one of our specialist workers, was unable to see her son for five months. This separation is devastating for both child and mother. The feelings of guilt, shame and loss associated with separation from their children have become greater for many women.

**"I've had no contact with my child for weeks."**

**Impacts of isolation**

Ongoing research from the University of Essex has reported that women experienced twice the level of decline in mental wellbeing as men after the first lockdown period in 2020. Most of the difference is explained by social factors: women reported more close contacts before the pandemic than men, and increased loneliness after the pandemic's onset.<sup>12</sup>

For women who are homeless, and especially those who are sleeping rough, isolation is a major challenge. With few social connections and without a stable support system, women often struggle to find someone to talk to when they need to.

These additional barriers and triage protocols could be off-putting to our clients, and we are concerned that preventable illnesses – such as abscesses, infections, or even poor mental health – are becoming much more serious than they need to be in the absence of prevention and early treatment.

**"It's been hard to get hold of the GP, my mental health team. That's been stressing me out."**



**The closure of many access facilities during the pandemic has made it more difficult for homeless women to see their children**

**"I can't access things like I used to; this leaves me isolated and now my sister is moving which will leave me stressed and alone."**

**"I'm more anxious. Because I can't access the activities that usually help me. I have other health conditions that make me vulnerable to illness so it's heightening my health anxiety."**

We've worked hard to maintain contact with clients – face-to-face, by phone or online – as appropriate to individuals' needs and coronavirus restrictions.

**"Yes, we walk and do meditation each week and she makes sure I have food."**

**“Always reply to my communication and supporting me as best as possible in these difficult times.”**

**“Getting support from lots of different Porchlight staff, I message workers on WhatsApp when I need help.”**

Covid-19 has put extra pressure on those who were already struggling to cope. We have heard

from women who are bored and lonely; some are increasingly vulnerable.

Some women have experienced increased issues with substance misuse and mental health as a result: 50 of our female clients were recorded to have experienced self-harm or suicidal ideation, or to have made a suicide attempt in 2020.

### Increased risk of modern slavery and sexual exploitation

At Porchlight we are committed to supporting the victims of modern slavery and sexual exploitation in Kent. Internationally, more than 70% of people trafficked for sexual exploitation are women and girls.<sup>13</sup> In 2020, Porchlight supported 18 women who have experienced modern slavery and/or sexual exploitation, although we know many female victims in Kent remain undetected.

Women experiencing poverty, homelessness, mental health issues, substance misuse and other risk factors are vulnerable to exploitation. Women can often be befriended by someone who appears trustworthy, generous, and kind, only to be lured

into a dangerous, exploitative situation that they cannot escape.

One report, from the United Nations, suggests that the coronavirus pandemic could cause women and children to be increasingly vulnerable to trafficking due to rising unemployment and poverty.<sup>14</sup>

We believe this presents an area of significant future concern, with more people in need of support here in Kent. Our support is particularly crucial in helping to fight for the rights of victims, who are often the ones to be blamed and punished, rather than their traffickers.<sup>14</sup>

Trafficked women need protection and advocacy to help them find safety and the freedom to live their lives without fear of exploitation and abuse.

### Rising rates of homelessness

**We expect an additional 400 women to be made homeless, or put at risk of homelessness, in Kent due to the pandemic**

There are higher numbers of women working in the retail and hospitality sectors, so Covid-19 is likely to have a bigger effect on their earnings. At the start of the crisis, women were about a third more likely to work in a sector that is now shut down than men: one in six (17%) women in employment were working in these sectors, compared to one in seven (13%) men.<sup>15</sup>

As unemployment continues to rise, family resources dwindle and protection measures – such as the ban on evictions and the Universal Credit



uplift – come to an end, many will face the risk of homelessness.

Based on analysis conducted by Porchlight, we expect an estimated additional 400 women to be made homeless, or put at risk of homelessness, in Kent due to the pandemic.

## Our purpose

Through our women’s services we aim to drive forward Porchlight’s vision and mission (see page 3) for the women we support. In the next three years our purpose is to:

- Prevent homelessness by working with women earlier in their journeys and making them more aware of the support available
- Become a leading provider of rough sleeping and homelessness services in Kent tailored to the needs of women
- Become a thought leader in the homelessness sector, across Kent and beyond, contributing ideas, studies, and tools to further the development of specialist services for women.

### Our aims

Our aims for our women’s services include improved outcomes for:



**Reducing the impact of rough sleeping on women in Kent**

**Intervening earlier to reduce the risk of exposure to harm for women**



- Duration of time spent rough sleeping by women will reduce or be avoided
- Duration of time spent sofa-surfing by women will reduce



**Women securing and maintaining accommodation**

**Women improving their wellbeing**



- Better management of physical health needs
- Better management of mental health needs
- Better management of substance misuse
- Improvements to confidence, self-esteem, self-respect – sense of identity and independence



**Women obtaining paid work**

**Women feeling that services are suited to their needs**



- Fewer women will have trouble getting help from statutory and support services (73% of women in our *Seeing the Unseen* study found it hard to get help when they needed it)
- Women will engage with services (engaging where previously they did not; engaging for longer; accepting B&B accommodation where previously refused; setting healthy boundaries in relationships)
- Supporting women who are experiencing domestic abuse effectively and ensuring we are listening and responding to what women want



**Women developing positive relationships**

- Women will report being more socially connected from start to end of their engagement with Porchlight, including rebuilding relationships with family and children where possible



**Sharing Porchlight’s learning to further the development of specialist services for women** (blogs, speaking opportunities, sector and professional publications)

# Our values

All of the work outlined in this plan aligns closely with all of Porchlight's organisational values: inclusiveness, integrity, compassion, empowerment, passion, innovation. Each of these is embedded in our women's services.

**Inclusiveness.** A key element of this work is the involvement of the people we support. At each level of the project – from strategic decision-making to co-designing surveys – we want women with lived experience to be involved in shaping this project.

So far, this has included a study with 40 women that formed the basis of *Seeing the Unseen*, a study with a further 10 women to understand their needs and a survey with clients to explore the impacts of the pandemic.

We also have two female volunteers with lived experience as part of the women's services steering group, who are helping to guide the direction of our work. We want to design our services so that women feel our services are for them and offer the help and support they need.

**Integrity.** We want to fight for women's rights where they are underrepresented and to help the women we support to understand and know their rights. As staff, we aim to always act with integrity, being honest with our clients and building transparent, trusting relationships.



**Compassion.** We want to be a voice of compassion in the conversation about women's homelessness. We always seek to understand the 'why' behind a person's behaviour and to engage with people through a strengths-based approach that builds on their positive resources.

**Empowerment.** We want to raise women's aspirations, improve their wellbeing, and help them to develop their skills. We will be working closely with Porchlight's work, health and learning team to provide tailored opportunities for women to get involved in a range of group activities, as well as volunteering and job opportunities.

We believe a safe place to live is a human right and we will work with all women to help them find that place.

**Passion.** We care deeply about changing the way we support women who experience homelessness. We are committed to this process – we have already made lots of improvements and many more are underway. We bring energy and enthusiasm to each group that we run for women, each new idea, and every piece of training.

**Innovation.** We want to discover new insights from the women we support and use them to develop fresh, new initiatives. We will be creative about how we tailor our services to women, from launching specialist services to thinking about the little details that can have a big impact.



# Our three-year strategy

This plan sets out how Porchlight aims to expand and improve the support available to homeless women in Kent over the next three years.

## Provide safe housing-related services for women. This could include:

- Launching a **Housing First\*** scheme for women who are entrenched rough sleepers or experiencing other forms of long-term homelessness, with a particular focus on supporting women who have experienced violence and abuse



**\*Housing First** is about supporting people with entrenched homelessness who often struggle to engage with typical support services. **People are moved straight into a home of their own with no conditions placed on them to change.**

With stable accommodation and wraparound support they will, in their own time, start to recover and make positive choices about how they live their life.

- Continuing to grow and develop the rapid rehousing fund, providing emergency accommodation or a fresh start in private rented accommodation for vulnerable women with nowhere else to go and no access to other funds
- Providing specialist women's accommodation projects
- Developing services such as mediation to help restore relationships between women and the family/friends they have been living with
- Investigating the need for domestic abuse services for women with complex needs and input to their development alongside specialist partner providers.

## Provide specialist non-housing interventions for women, such as:

- Developing emotional support services for women
- Developing more activities, spaces, and groups that appeal to the women we support
- Building a communications campaign to reach women at risk of homelessness and help prevent women resorting to sleeping rough

- Supporting homeless women to better manage their health and personal hygiene and to access health services.

## Provide specialist workers for women

- Developing more specialist worker roles to support women who are sleeping rough or at risk of homelessness to secure accommodation with the ability to maintain that accommodation
- Continuing to help develop the role and influence of Porchlight's domestic abuse and modern slavery and human trafficking champions, with a specific focus on understanding and responding to the needs of women.

## Develop training and resources to be shared with all frontline Porchlight staff and external agencies

- Continuing to develop and deliver training and other resources on women's needs and how to best support women
- Seeking to better understand the needs of women from the LGBT+ community, women from ethnically diverse backgrounds and women with disabilities
- Developing and delivering resources and training on domestic abuse, including honour-based violence and female genital mutilation, coercive control and domestic abuse, stalking and harassment (DASH). Part of this work will be in partnership with domestic abuse organisations



## Our three-year strategy

- Raising awareness of modern slavery and sexual exploitation and ways to effectively support women exploited through these means.

### Develop better protocols for working with women supported by Porchlight/other agencies

- Reviewing policies for managing suspensions and evictions and updating with more strengths-based and trauma-informed approaches
- Further developing our approach to providing meaningful support needs assessments
- Further developing policies and procedures for supporting staff and clients experiencing domestic abuse and implementing a consistent standard of practice across the organisation.

### Develop relationships with other agencies and partners in Kent and beyond; championing the cause of homeless women and instigating change across the sector

- Growing our stakeholder working group, including domestic abuse and women's organisations, to explore ways to improve and promote collaborative working and develop improved services for women
- Producing a report into the service's findings, interventions made and opportunities to improve the ways we work with women
- Producing other media on specific interventions and learnings
- Sharing our findings and progress with the wider sector.

We are aware that this strategy does not include the needs of all women, but we have sought to prioritise the greatest need and the areas in which we believe we have the most capacity to instigate effective change over the next three years.

## Future work

Important areas of need that we hope to address in more detail in the future include:

- women with convictions
- couples
- women still living with their children
- trans men and non-binary people who were assigned female at birth
- trans women

## Monitoring

Porchlight's women's services development manager will be responsible for overseeing the implementation of this strategy and monitoring its success.

They will report to the women's services steering group, which will guide strategic decision-making for the service, ensuring work continues towards the agreed purpose, aims, principles and strategies.

Based on findings made in the early stages of this work, we will learn more about what is needed

to make the service successful and implement changes to the way we support our clients.

As such, the specific deliverables of this work may change: there may be additions or subtle changes in the way that we deliver support that make the difference to its success against agreed outcomes.

To find out more or to support our work with homeless women, visit [porchlight.org.uk/safeplace](https://porchlight.org.uk/safeplace)

## Sadia's story

The reasons that someone becomes homeless are rarely straightforward. For Sadia, it was a combination of mental ill health, losing custody of her children and eventually losing her home when it was sold by a former partner she used to live with.

"I was having panic attacks, feeling isolated and became unable to work at my job as a solicitor. I was using drink as a coping mechanism."

Sadia spent a month sleeping rough in freezing winter conditions, occasionally finding somewhere to sofa surf for the night.

Like many homeless women, Sadia was wary of accepting help from men so Porchlight assigned her a female support worker.

"Amanda was non-judgemental and understood my needs. She found me support for my mental health and assisted when I was applying for housing, including speaking to the council on my behalf when the situation became very stressful."

Now, Sadia is living in her own flat. She plans to begin working as a solicitor again and has a job



waiting. She is also getting help to apply to see her children again.

Sadia is working with Porchlight to develop specialist support for other female rough sleepers in Kent.

"I want to use my experience to give something back to other women who are on the streets right now."

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