



Spotlight #5: Episode 5

Podcast Transcript

Title: A strengths-based approach: a new model for supporting women with an offending history to overcome homelessness and domestic abuse.

Introduction:

Spotlights is a series of online events and publications focusing on a particular group of victims and survivors who are often hidden from services. As a part of our Spotlight on homelessness and domestic abuse, my colleague Deidre has met with Amanda Bloxsome, Services Manager for Threshold's Housing First. In her interview, Amanda talks about how Threshold has used the Housing First model to successfully supported women with offending histories experiencing homelessness. She also talks about how each woman's experience of homelessness and offending history links to experiences of domestic abuse.

Key:

I: Interviewer

R: Respondent

I: Hi, Amanda, thanks for joining me today to talk about domestic abuse and homelessness.

R: Thank you, I'm really pleased to be asked.

I: Great, so the charity you work for is called Threshold and they provide a Housing First model response for women who have an offending history and are experiencing homelessness, is that correct?

R: Yes, just to add that Threshold's part of the new Charter Group but we've been operating the model for just over two years now for women offenders.

So the framework that you're providing that is different to what's been previously done is called the housing first model and we've talked about this in a previous podcast interview but some people might not have listened to that so can you give a brief explanation as to what Housing First is as a concept and how it's different to what's been previously done in the UK?

R: Yeah, so housing first is a whole understanding that housing is a basic human right so it's looking at Maslow's hierarchy of needs and putting housing at one of the basic, very basic human right to enable that person to be allowed to develop from a stable environment so they're able to sort out their issues and the complexities from a stable beginning really. So it's responsive and real client centred support and choice around the home and the support they receive. The support is open ended and traditionally in services in the UK we work on a specific timescale, for example somebody could work for three months or six months with somebody where they get just support. Also what's very different is we're working to people's strengths and assets and that's part of the model instead of looking at ... at working at people's issues and problems, we're working on their strengths. We also look at the housing and support so for tenancy and the support for the person and not linked they run separately. And the [unclear 0:07:49] given permanent housing. If that permanent housing doesn't work the support continues so we never give up on somebody. So we have a persistent and persistent approach. The housing first model has absolutely thrown supported accommodation ideas

on its head, but to get into supported accommodation people who've got support needs traditionally have had to jump through hoops, so, for example, you have to have no rent arrears, or you have to have had minimal anti-social behaviour, or you have to be drug free or alcohol free, or all these different types of things whereas Housing First issue the house first and then it allows you as a person to grow through that process.

I: Which makes a lot of sense. Because if you think about it how can you really deal with any of those other issues if you don't have a place to call home, to have that stability. And I can imagine it's not very good for someone to constantly have that pressure to know that any mistake that you make would lose you your home and you'd start over again.

R: Exactly, I mean a lot of our people, I mean I don't know that being street homeless we've had people who've been homeless for four years.

I: Yeah.

R: So women have been sofa surfing, they've been homeless for four years and in a homeless situation I mean the thing that the person is actually thinking of is a safe roof over their head. Especially for women who are particularly vulnerable if they're on the streets where there are all sorts of exploitation and abuse. So really they're trying to jump through hoops like paying off some rent arrears from previous accommodation, for example, would not enter somebody's head and I'm sure personally if I put myself in their shoes wouldn't enter my head either. I'd want somewhere to stay for the night.

I: Yeah, wouldn't be at the top of my priority list, nor feel very achievable if on a day to day basis I have nowhere to sleep.

R: And some social landlords at the moment have got they have to have no previous rent arrears. Now for people with complex or any type of support needs who's had an accommodation previously it's quite unlikely that they're going to have no rent arrears, no previous rent arrears.

I: Yeah. The other individual that I interviewed, Louisa Steel, she said that Housing First as a concept is great except for the fact that sometimes there's not enough housing and that you have to go to these social landlords who might not be quite as enticed by the model, what have you found?

R: So for us we've had a little bit of a different situation, also to our advantage we're part of the social, we're a social landlord ourselves. So we provide the support and as part of the new Charter Group, New Charter basically, had supported the project wholeheartedly and given us an allocation of accommodation. I think the proof has been in the pudding for the landlords really and we've been able to prove it to them really that having support for people in their accommodation is much more positive for them and beneficial for the tenancy than to get somebody on general let who they don't know anything about.

I: So it sounds like you've set a good example, as a social landlord you've kind of set a trend and then the outcomes that you have have convinced others to follow suite but I guess also they're seeing you doing a good thing and I think that goes a long way.

R: Yeah, I mean we've been able to ... I mean not only a good thing; it's been quite a two-way relationship. For example, in our service we've got 80% sustainability which means we've got somebody, the majority of our tenants are there because our customers and their tenants are not moving on so they're also reaping the financial rewards of one term income.

I: Yeah, kind of going back to talking about how the model works itself, I watched a video on your web page of the two women talking about their experiences and one of the women seemed to be really affected by the fact that, in a positive way, that she had a choice anywhere she lived and one thing you also mentioned was how choice and self-determination are quite key, why are those two things so important?

R: Okay, so Housing First is a client centred model and when I talk to people about housing first I'm very passionate about it being real client centred. I mean a lot of places in the past have said, oh, yes, we're client centred well actually they're not because they don't give the choice to the person.

So within the Housing First and also within Threshold our customers are at the heart of our services and valued and their decisions are valued. The customer makes their own choices and when they make their own choices and changed then their choices become final decisions and their decisions and it's giving them self-confidence, they're totally engaged with that decision. If you compare it to traditional homelessness services if somebody goes to a homelessness service and asks to be rehoused they get one offer and they have to take that offer but with housing first they don't get that, they get the choice. It also enables them to gain firm roots in the community so that it's a long lasting choice, it may be that they move near to family or where they've got friends or where they're hoping to go back to college. So that's the reason why the choice is so important. We're finding that women, when engaged in their own decisions and why shouldn't they be, they're adults and, you know, fully functioning human beings the same as the rest of us, and therefore they're committed to making their own choices in the service. This is enabling a positive spiral to success, so once they've made one positive choice, they're able to make other positive life choices.

I: It must give you a new sense of ownership of your life, it must give you a choice you might not have had in a long, long time.

R: Yes, I mean lots of our women and I'll talk about it later on when we talk about DV but lots of our women who have been through our services in the last two and a little bit years have all been in DV relationships, every single one, which is not part of the service, it's just been something that's happened to them women. They've all been in a DV relationship, quite often controlled, not making their own decisions, so this is a change for these women.

I think just ... that positive engagement is key to the women making lasting changes. And we support women to facilitate their own change using a co-production approach. So I think for us we're quite often ... people who have used our services have things done to them, now we're doing things with them. So it's about their decision, that's really good. And I think previously services has worked on a deficit approach and we work on an asset based approach.

I: And what does that mean?

R: Building on somebody's strengths. So you can build on somebody's strengths but our women who come to our service, if you say, can you tell me what you're good at they say nothing. Can you tell me what one of your strengths is they'll say nothing? So we have to unpick that and really get to know them and find out what their strengths are. Even when somebody's currently offending they have used skills to offend, like organisation, planning, manipulation. Their skills may be used for something else, so they're assets if used in the right way. Just a quick example, really.

I: I talked to Lucy Allright from AVA and she was talking about interviews that she did with women and I thought one of the key things she said is everybody keeps asking me about all this horrible stuff that happened to me and that's negative but nobody's recognising that I've managed to stay alive. And that she's probably had to do a lot of brave, difficult things to just stay alive and its kind of focusing on that and those strengths rather than what's been done to her repeatedly.

R: Yes.

I: So we've obviously talked about the Housing First model for women with an offending history, and I'm sure people are thinking, yes, but how does this relate to domestic abuse, how have you found the women that you supported through this model, how have they experienced domestic abuse if at all?

R: As I said earlier, every single woman has experienced domestic abuse. And in particular we're seen correlations between domestic violence and offending. Every woman in our service, bar one who was the perpetrator, have been coerced into offending by their partners. Those patterns of persistent and consistent offending by the woman and funnily enough the partner has got a clean record. Both substance misusing and quite often in this relationship where one person is exploited to offend, the women on our service are very, very high on the chaos index so they ... a chaos index highlights the complexity of needs and they've got alcohol, substance misuse, mental health and mainly low level but persistent offending. Every single one of them has been in a DV relationship, quite sadly, every single one of the women in our service has had their children removed. The service is for twelve women and obviously there's throughput so in the last two years we've worked

with 33 women and in this service there's been 63 children removed. And these have all been, bar two, all due to DV relationships that the woman and the family were unable to keep the children safe. Even just costs alone, if you think about the cost, the costs are major to the public purse about children being moved. Not just the cost, the differences to them families. We hope in the future that our service can change policy, I hope to change policy, around how children and the whole family is treated.

I: Yeah, definitely. So just to recap, the women that you support through your service are referred to you because they have a history of offending and they're homeless not because of domestic abuse yet you find that for almost every single one, bar one, they have experienced domestic abuse and this domestic abuse has a very strong link to their history of criminal behaviour?

R: Yeah.

I: Wow.

R: I: What you're saying in practice I think matches up with a lot of the theory that other people I've talked to said which is basically women experiencing homelessness oftentimes have multiple disadvantages, violence in childhood, violence in adulthood, the trauma related to that, the mental health needs, the drug and alcohol use all comes together to mould a very different experience that they have.

R: Yeah. Oh, definitely, very, very complex and it started quite often very, very young. Lots of our women have also been through the care system and ...

I: Themselves.

R: Yeah, you can see lots of correlations from them going through the care system, quite a lot of the reports that you can read at the moment there's links between people being in care and people offending, people losing children, having very early on childhood trauma and that never really going away really, that seems to be the beginning of all the problems for somebody. We've got lots and lots of examples of people who've had ... lived in families where there was alcohol use, substance misuse, there's been sexual, physical, financial abuse and this just seems to be perpetuated from mum to child, and then children removed, we're hoping to stop that cycle, , for women who have never really been able to manage as a fully functioning person without offending, without substance misusing with nowhere to live, with being exploited, there's DV relationships, we'd hope that our service gives them a stable home and then one by one they can begin to address the issues at their own pace.

I: That makes a lot of sense, makes a lot of common sense.

R: Yeah. And it is seeming to work, it's not an instant answer, it doesn't happen within weeks, it happens within years usually so it's not instant. The average time that someone's in our service has been one year. So that's the average time, yeah.

I: Great, well, I could talk to you for a very long time about this but I think that's all the time we have. . Well, thank you very much for speaking with me.

R: Yeah, okay, thanks very much, nice speaking to you.

Conclusion:

Thank you for listening. If you'd like to find out more about Safelives Spotlight on domestic abuse and homelessness, go to our website SafeLives.org.uk where we will be uploading content every week from different experts from the 7th August through the 15th Sept. And we want to hear from you-we need your views, experiences and practice tips, so join the conversation on Twitter with the hashtag #SafeAtHome and get involved on the SafeLives Community.

