



Spotlight 5: Episode 8

Podcast Transcript

Title: A place of safety: Basis' Housing First programme for women who street sex work.

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. This week, as a part of SafeLives' Spotlight on homelessness and domestic abuse, my colleague Deidre has met with Joan Coulton from Basis, a Yorkshire based charity working with adult women who are sex working. Today, Deidre and Joan talk about the additional barriers and challenges these women can face and how the Housing First model can help to address some of those challenges.

I = Interviewer

J = Joan, Respondent

I: Hi Joan, thank you for joining me today to talk about homelessness and domestic abuse.

J: Hi Deidre, it's good to talk to you.

I: Good to talk to you as well. I know that Basis is a Yorkshire based charity and through your adult work you work with women who have been sex working. But today I know that we're going to be speaking more specifically about the work that you do with women who are sex working, but also experiencing homelessness, through a pilot that you've newly developed, it's called Housing First.

J: That's right.

I: Just to start out, can you tell me what the links are between homelessness and sex working?

J: Yes, a lot of our women who work on streets sex working have experience of periods of homelessness. They don't necessarily see them as visible, as some of the male homeless people in our city because women tend to sofa surf, they'll go and stay with friends. Sex working women will sometimes stay with clients, with the punters. Women will stay with men and exchange sex for a roof over their head for the night. So, most of the women that we work with who are working on streets will have experience of periods of homelessness in their life. And if they're not actually officially homeless, as it were, they can be very unsafely housed. They can be housed with landlords who expect sex from them as well as rent, all kinds of experiences. So homelessness is a huge part of their experience.

I: I guess, does sex working kind of keep them in that cycle? It sounds like, exchanging sex for a roof over their head sometimes seems safer than being on the street? Are they constantly weighting up those risks? Is that an issue they come across?

J: Absolutely. I've been involved with this charity for many years now, we did have instant access hostels in Leeds. If we were out on the outreach van until midnight, during an outreach session, and we saw woman who didn't have anywhere to go back that night, we could call and get her a bed at a hostel in Leeds for the night and then take her there. But because of changes in hostel provision in Leeds, that's not as readily available as it was. There is only one place now that women can go to and have a bed for the night. And it's not really a facility that we find that women use, it's a mixed facility, and lots of women don't want to go there. So often it will get to very late in the evening and then women are having to make decisions very quickly, in not very safe circumstances about what to do. Whether to sleep literally out on the streets, whether to go home with someone that maybe they wouldn't choose to go home with. They're very difficult decisions.

I: And they don't sound like much of a choice, they just sound like weighing up risks?

J: Absolutely. It's not the best choice, it's just the least worse. And often obviously there are other layers of consideration there. Women might be under the influence of drugs and alcohol, they might be experiencing the effects of needing to access drugs and alcohol, so withdrawal states. It's not the best choice, it's sometimes just the least bad at that moment.

I: How does domestic abuse come into this mix?

J: Again, with the women that we work with on street, and I keep saying on street, because Basis also work with women who are working indoors. Women who are sex working in saunas and their own flats and all kinds of different scenarios. The women that I work with, with Housing First, tend to be on street sex working women, because they're obviously often the women who are most vulnerable housed. For those women domestic violence is often, not always, but often been a part of their lives since they were very small. And it's pre-birth sometimes, their mothers were experiencing domestic violence before they were even born. For a lot of the women that I'm working with, domestic violence has been a part of their lives forever. And again, it can be incredibly complicated situations, we have women who are with men for 15, 20 years, who they have children with. Violence has been a part of that relationship the whole time. Often as well interestingly, and I do have to say this, the women can actually be the perpetrators of the violence. They're obviously incredibly, they're often chaotic and violent relationships, but from both sides. The women can often find themselves being arrested and charged with being perpetrators of violence too. Domestic violence is just part and parcel of the chaos.

I: It's all quite intertwined and interwoven?

J: It absolutely is. And it's not as clear cut, certainly as I thought before I came into this kind of work, where the women would always be the victim, the male perpetrator, or a man forcing a woman to go out and sex work. It's not as clear cut as that, it's much more complex and complicated.

I: Great. You've got women who are experiencing homelessness, they're sex working experiencing, domestic abuse on some level as well. What led you to think that Housing First was a good approach to try in supporting these women, and I guess, what made you think Basis was the best place to do that?

J: I think in the years I've been a support worker housing has always been a humongous problem, it's always been absolutely massive that clients have either been homeless, they've been threatened with homelessness. They've been incredibly insecurely housed; they've been held in some horrible places. Working with women who are in prison, when they come out they've got nowhere to go to, so underpinning everything else that you're trying to do is the problem of secure housing. Without housing it's harder to get onto a methadone prescription, so it's harder to reduce your drug use. It's harder to register for benefits, because you can't get a bank account. Being safely housed underpins all the other things that women want putting in place for them. I think looking at it, housing is just a complete no brainer. It has to start with someone having somewhere safe to live before you can start on the other things. I'm looking at Maslow's hierarchy of needs. You can't start talking to someone about getting onto a methadone prescription, or about going back to college, or about volunteering if they don't know where they're gonna sleep that night. So housing just has to be in place. Why Basis, because we're the best at what we do.

I: **(Laughs).**

J: We are a fantastic organisation who've been going for a long time in Leeds, as I say we work with indoor sex workers as well, we're the only organisation in Leeds doing that. And we know the complexities, we know the chaos, we know the women, we've been working with them for so many years, they know us, they trust us, we've got a good relationship with them. We've got a great relationship with all the other services in Leeds. So, for getting women into treatments, for getting them on benefits, for all the other things that go around that, we have all those links in place. Basis was just the obvious choice for doing the Housing First pilot.

I: **And who are you partnering with to do it? Who's funding it and who's providing the housing, and all of that?**

J: The funding is coming through Big Lottery, it's only three years, so it was only ever going to be a pilot scheme, we are hoping to keep the funding going. We've got other things in the pipeline at the moment to hopefully keep the funding going. We are partnering with WY-FI, which is West Yorkshire Finding Independence project. They work with people with a three out of four, who tick three out of four criteria, which is offending, homelessness, mental health and drug and alcohol abuse. They are working with some of the most chaotic and hardest to reach people in the city. And our other partner is Foundation Housing, who are a Housing Association, again, who are very well established and well-respected in the Yorkshire area.

I: **The women that you refer in, or I guess who may access Housing First, do they have to tick three out of four of those criteria that you just mentioned?**

J: No, they don't, and this is really interesting, really interesting that sometimes the people who look as though they would meet the criteria on paper, aren't necessarily the people who would do best with Housing First. I am very lucky in that I've been given, really the trust of my organisation to assess women and to make a decision on who I feel will benefit best and get the most from the project.

I: **You got the funding for this Housing First project, I'm sure that must've been really exciting for the staff to think that you could actually provide housing response to the women that you are supporting. How did they react to that? Did they think it was an instant solution that you could provide all these women housing, did you have to narrow down their expectations, what was the dynamic?**

J: I was almost knocked over in the rush. I worked with a team of five workers on our adult team and all of them could have filled my caseload two or three times over, everyone had people. And as soon as I said this is going to be housing and we are going to be providing the housing via foundation, every one of my team said, 'that's fantastic I've got someone for you, I've got three people for you, I've got four people for you.' Yes, we did have to look at expectations, because as I said, it's so difficult to women housed in places that are appropriate, that are safe, that are permanent, that are just decent. My team, I think, immediately thought that if they had anyone that needed housing, then they could access Housing First. And it's very different housing and Housing First is really different. We've got so many women who need housing. We haven't necessarily got all those women who need Housing First. For instance, one person was referred to me, who has had long periods of homelessness, mental health issues, lots of chaotic drug use, offending behaviour, all kinds of things. When I assessed that woman for Housing First, I decided that she didn't really fit the criteria, because the bottom line was she didn't want a tenancy. She wanted to be somewhere where there was permanent staff, where she had support 24 hours a day. And said that having her on tenancy would actually add to her stress levels, it wouldn't help her. So although she needed housing desperately, she wasn't suitable for Housing First, because it wasn't what she wanted when I explained to her what Housing First was.

I: **Can you give a bit of an explanation as to what Housing First is? 'Cause we've discussed it in a few other podcasts that people might have listened to, but they might not know what the basic concept is and why it's different to just providing somebody with housing?**

J: It's very intensive support, it's a tenancy alongside intensive support. I have a caseload of six and I work full-time, so that's obviously quite a small caseload for a full time worker. What it does mean is that, for instance, last week when one of my clients contacted me and said, "I need some help today", I was able to spend the whole day with her, which most support workers obviously you can't do that, people carrying caseloads of 15, 20 people. It means that I can put a lot of time and attention into each of my clients as and when they need it. It is much more than just giving someone a tenancy. And as the name suggests, it's Housing First, so it's not about saying to people, the supported housing model for instance, you need to jump through certain hoops. In, Leeds for instance, the model has been that women have gone into the instant access hostel, after a little while in there they've moved to a hostel where the staff aren't there 24 hours a day. From there they've moved in to short term supported housing and then from there hopefully into a council property, a local authority property, maybe nine, 12 months down the line. And at any point in that process if they don't, or can't abide by the rules, maybe meet with their support workers, being at a certain time in the hostels, or this kind of thing, then the system stops working from them.

That's where a lot of our sex working women would fall down, because they go out to work at midnight and get in at six in the morning, so they can't be back at a hostel for 11:00 pm, it's not possible. Then they're sleeping through the day so they can't necessarily meet with their key worker. It's not been an ideal system for them. To be able to come along and say this is Housing First, what you need first and foremost is somewhere safe and permanent to be. And then we'll put in the support around that, as and when you need it. If a client said to me, I don't want to see you for two or three weeks, then that's fine, so long as they know I'm there if they do need me in that time. Maybe I'll just ask if they wouldn't mind checking in with me, just so I know they're safe. But there's no, it's not a case of you have to meet with your key worker once a week, or we're giving you written warnings and this kind of thing. And that's how a lot of hostel accommodation, and how a lot of supported housing, works by gazetted, there are certain criteria need to be met.

I: Yeah, definitely. And it all sounds like sometimes you're set up to fail and that failure, feeling of failure must be really difficult to deal with?

J: Absolutely yeah. Absolutely it's very much set up for people who are ironically quite organised and quite structured. You must be in at a certain time, you must meet with people, you must attend all your appointments, you must do all your support plans every [inaudible 21:07], which it's a great system, if you're in a place where you can work with that, it's really supportive. But if you are not in a place where you can fit in with that, it can be quite difficult. This is why I think, as you were asking about how the team responded to Housing First, the response was huge. Because this is fantastic, this is something that can be tailored to the needs of the women, rather than them having to fit in with. The team were all very much, this is amazing, Joan's going to house all our difficult to house women and it's all going to be wonderful. But unfortunately because it can't work like that, because we've got six spaces.

I: You gave an example of a woman who looked like she'd fit the criteria for Housing First, because she was experiencing chronic homelessness, she's got very complex and multiple needs. But at the end of the day she didn't want it and it sounds like choices are centre of what you do through Housing First. Do you have an example of a woman who it has worked really well for, that has stopped that cycle of homelessness? I think in our phone call you mentioned a woman in an out of prison?

J; Yes, that's right. Another of our women, she'd had her own tenancy for many years and she done really quite well. But then her addictions had spiralled a little bit more out of control. She lost her tenancy and started to get into quite a bad cycle of offending and then short prison sentences and then coming out to nowhere to live. Again, doing all the sofa surfing and all the things that we were talking about, and then offending again and then short prison sentences. What we find with a lot of our women is that they don't get the long prison sentences that often men get, women tend to go to prison for shorter periods. We might have women who go to prison for, they may be arrested for shoplifting and then they don't turn up for court. Then a warrant's out for them and then they don't turn up at court again and then when they do get to court it's maybe a six-week prison sentence, so they served three weeks of that and then they're out with nowhere to stay. This can very quickly become a revolving door. I got a referral from the WY-FI worker, saying that this woman that he was working with was doing a lot of very short sentences, she was coming out with nowhere to live, going back into sex working, drug addiction, offending again, back in prison for two or three weeks again.

So she'd had a lot of short sentences, not long enough to get a lot of support from the prison system, not long enough to get onto a drug methadone programme and this kind of thing, but long enough sentences to disrupt everything. She came into Housing First, she got a permanent tenancy in the area of her choice, which is how the model is supposed to work. She had quite a lot of intensive support from me at first to get onto a methadone prescription and to stick with that, to get to her appointments, I physically took her to appointments and this kind of thing. To engage with probation regularly, because again that was reasons why she'd gone back to prison before, not reoffending just not keeping her probation appointments and her licence conditions. And she has only stayed in the housing First system for maybe four or five months and she is now stable enough to not need that any more. She'll keep her property because that's permanent tenancy, so she'll keep her property, she's been referred on to some much, much lower level support. And now she's out of the Housing First system, which is great. So she came in, she stayed in for a very short period of time, with a lot of intensive support when she needed it. She doesn't need that any more, that's fine, she's moved on. I've got someone else who was only the second person I moved in, 9 months ago, and she's still with me and I'm still seeing her 2 or 3 times a week and she's

still needing that quite high level. Again, the beauty of it is being able to tailor the support to what each individual needs, which is just fantastic.

I: And it's what they tell you they need?

J: Absolutely, it absolutely is. And when people are ready to move on, in either short steps or a giant leap, that's fine. But it's never where everything's taken away, it's always the support is always there for people to access if they need it.

I: For the woman that you were supporting, who was at first in and out of prison for re-offending, why do you think that having a permanent housing is what stopped that cycle of offending?

J: I think it's several factors, as a lot of these things are. She's come out of prison and she would go and stay with someone, anyone who would put her up, maybe a friend she'd been in touch with in prison, or something. That person might be offending themselves, so being around other people going out shoplifting, you're more likely to do it. That person might be drug using quite a lot. She might have gone to stay with someone who said yes, you can stay with me, but you've got to pay me with heroin. Then she's going out and she's shoplifting, or she's sex working, or she's whatever, to not only fund her own habit, but to pay her rent. Coming out to something that is hers, if she still wants to go out and sex work that's fine, this is not about stopping women sex working, it's not stopping working drug using. But she has a safe place. She's not going out and shoplifting to give someone else money, or heroine, or whatever for a roof over her head. If she is still sex working, she's doing it to fund her own habit. If she is still choosing to shoplift that's her decision, that's her choice. But she's doing it from a place where she has her safe place to work from. And also, if she chooses then on an evening, after she's been out sex working, or whatever, if she chooses to go home with someone else to their property, then that's fine.

But if she chooses she's got her own place, she's got her own front door and a key. It's about having that oasis away from a situation that maybe you don't want to be in, but if you don't have any alternative you have to be in that situation.

I: And this is the thing, it's not about saying by having a home no one ever offends, or no one drug uses, or whatever, it's saying you've got choices. And the other thing is that, I don't know if you're aware of this, but if a person goes to prison and serves less than 13-week sentence, their housing benefit will continue while they're in prison. Even if that person, she hasn't gone back to prison as it happens, which is fantastic. But even if she did, if she went back to prison for 3 weeks her home would still be there for her to come out to. Even if that behaviour takes a little while for her to choose to change it, the security remains.

I: It's what anybody should be able to have, regardless of what they do, or don't do.

J: It absolutely is. We all have a right to be safe and often sex working women aren't safe, they don't have that place of safety. To be able to contribute to that, even if it's only for a small number of women, is a fantastic thing for us as an organisation to be able to do.

I: Great. You've got funding for a year, this is a pilot and you're trying to prove that this is a wonderful thing that you wanna keep going. What have you learned so far from the pilot? What do you want to showcase to make sure it continues?

J: Well, we only have 3 months more of the year to run, so we're being evaluated at the moment and that's a really exciting process. Because, as a worker, you tend to be so busy doing that you don't stand back always and look at the bigger picture. Working with Emma, who is doing our evaluation, we are interviewing the women. That's

obviously being done by an independent person, I'm not doing that, someone's been interviewing the women and talking to them about the differences that Housing First has made to them. We're also saying to them, what could we do better, what aren't we getting right. Because we want to learn from it. I think what I'm learning, one of the big things, and this may sound rather strange. But being in a permanent tenancy is completely different to being in supported housing. One of the biggest reasons that I think I've noticed, the biggest evidence of that is, that I've been a worker in a supported housing project and what I found a lot was that women, when they were desperate, would sell possessions from the house.

They would sell the white goods, they would sell the fridge, they would sell the washing machine, they would sell the microwave. Things like this. Because they needed that money. Since we've moved people into the Housing First project, and it's their tenancy, it's theirs, it belongs to them, we've not had anything sold. And I think that's made me realise how much the women value having something of their own, somewhere they can call their own. The other thing is that women have often let other women come and stay with them in their housing First tenancies, which is completely understandable. Because as we've talked about sofa surfing, most of the women have had friends do that for them, so now they've got the opportunity to help other women, they are doing. But any incidences that we've had of anti-social behaviour have usually been as a result of the guest that they've had staying with them. Women have tried to get this situation sorted out quite quickly because they've said things to me like, "This is my flat and I don't want to upset my neighbours." Or, "This is my house and I don't want to put that at risk."

Again, it's about the language that women are using in Housing First, to the language I've heard women use in supported housing. Which is more of, "Well, I know I'm here for a little while but it's not mine, and when I move to somewhere else." Now it's, "This is mine and I care about it and I want to keep it and I want to get on with my neighbours." And it's a completely different feel. Again, it's about something that most of us can take for granted about having something that we call our own. And it makes a huge difference.

I: It sounds like it's about dignity, and independency and choice and just a say over your life can have a massive impact on how you view what you're capable of doing, and what you want for yourself, really. That sounds like it plays a massive role of who you are?

J: Yes. It is. And I think all those words that you used about dignity and choice and everything, people have said to me when they find out the job that I do, "Oh, so you stop women sex working then?" And it's not about that, I'm not here to tell women they should, or they shouldn't sex work, they should or shouldn't use drugs, how they should live, how they should be. But I think to be able to help a woman to have a choice to think, I can do this and I can do this! It's fantastic and yes, the thing about dignity and respect and everything is absolutely huge.

I: Giving them a home actually gives them the space to make that choice without the fear of coercion, or violence, or whatever it is.

J: Yes. We've had one woman who has a very violent partner and she's been housed. And on several occasions she's chosen to give him a key, and that's fine, because then the next day, or couple of days later she's come and said, "Will you please change the locks." And we've said we will and we're working together to talk about safe relationships, about respect, about healthy relationships, about all that kind of thing. But we're also saying, it's okay if you need the locks changing, it's okay that you're making a decision and then making another one, because we can do that. Again, in some supported housing it would've been, you can't have a lock changed, or if you do you've

got to pay for it yourself and this kind of thing. Again, it's not about saying to someone, this is what you should be doing. It's about saying, you can make choices and you can have, as you just said, that space to think, to be, to relax. That's your space. And that's a really precious thing, again, it's something that most of us can take for granted. It's important.

I: I think so as well.

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 safelives.org.uk info@safelives.org.uk 0117 403 3220 6 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.