

From Harm to Home

The Westminster
Violence Against
Women & Girls (VAWG)
Housing First Year 5
Impact Report



solace

**STANDING
TOGETHER**
against domestic abuse



City of Westminster

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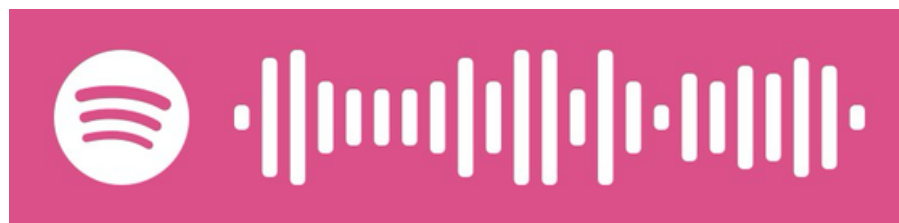
L&Q

Introduction

This report will evidence the impact of the Westminster VAWG Housing First project in its fifth year (September 2023 – September 2024). It is outcome focused as it is hoped that learning around the day-to-day operations of the service, what is working, and what isn't will be of use to service providers currently delivering Housing First for women or those who aim to. Additionally, it is hoped that this report will be of interest to those in strategic, decision-making roles, and aims to contribute to the evidence base on why a gender-responsive approach to Housing First is important if we are to end long-term homelessness for women at the sharpest end of multiple disadvantage. The report concludes with clear calls to action for service providers, local areas and national government. Throughout this report there are Spotify and QR code links to all six episodes of the From Harm to Home: Westminster VAWG Housing First Podcast. Each episode has been designed to provide more detail about individual elements of the project and their impact than is provided in this report. See below for more information about the podcast:

Methodology

The data presented and analysed in this report is collected in a series of spreadsheets, a master copy that is submitted to the local authority on a quarterly basis to meet contractual obligations, and individual narratives on each woman supported by the project that are completed by Housing First workers, also on a quarterly basis. Five in person interviews were conducted with women supported by the project, and two women agreed to participating in a film which can be viewed [here](#).



Look out for these **Spotify Codes** through this report that links to our From Harm to Home Podcast!



Look out for **QR Codes** through this report that links to our From Harm to Home Podcast on **YouTube!**



Background

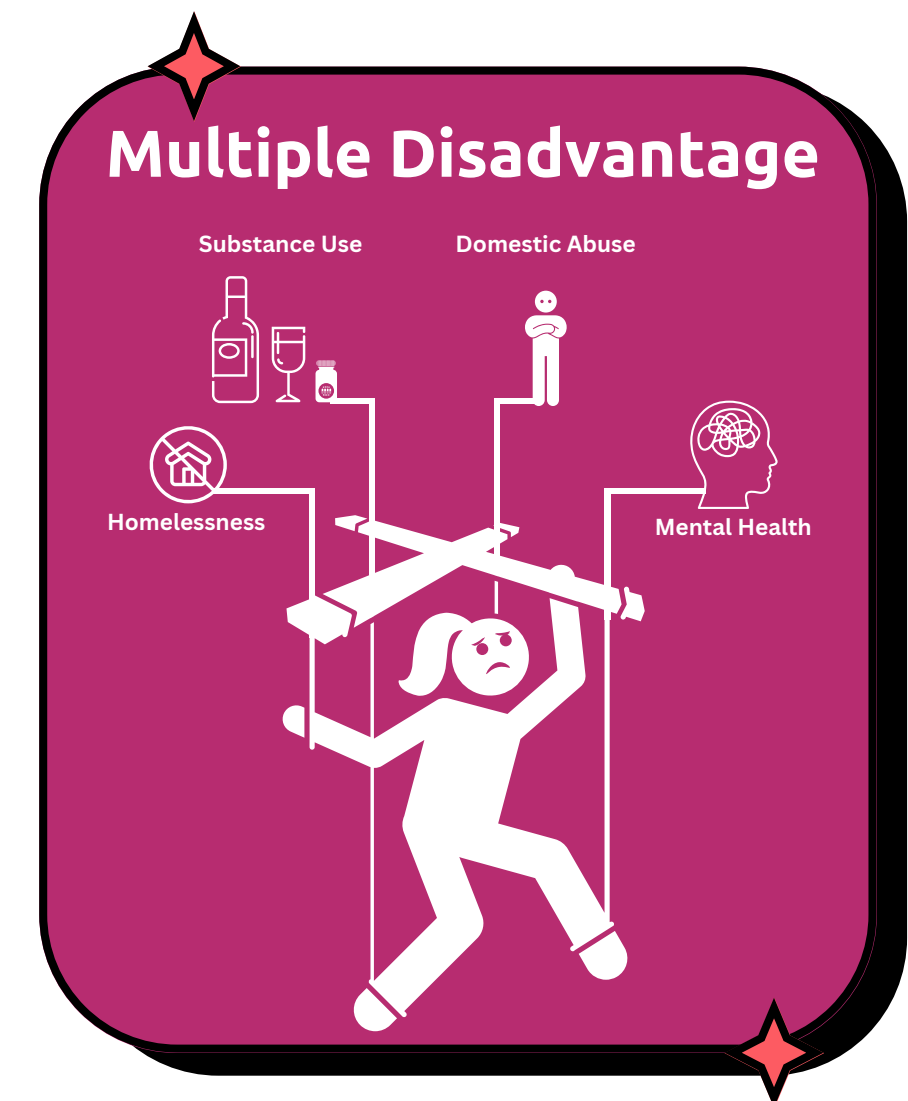
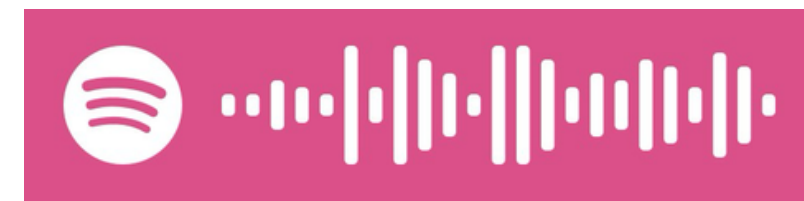
Housing First is an evidence-based, housing and support approach that originated in North America and is now widely adopted across the US, Canada and Europe. The Westminster VAWG Housing First aligns with the seven principles of Housing First that have been created as guidelines for services in the UK; see [here](#) for more information about the Housing First model.

Over the last few years, a large body of research and practice has evidenced the need for tailored services for women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage. In England the work of the [women's census](#) has been instrumental in highlighting what has long been known by services and professionals anecdotally: that women's experiences of rough sleeping and homelessness are not being accurately captured by current rough sleeping data collection methodology. The ramifications of this are far reaching, but ultimately means that women continue to be underserved and unsupported in a service landscape predominantly designed around the needs of men. It is this local, anecdotal understanding of women's experiences of homelessness, and how they are linked to experiences of VAWG and domestic abuse that paved the way for the Westminster VAWG Housing First project. Westminster Council housing needs department commissioned the project back in 2018 as a pilot that supported 10 women, and today has the capacity to support 40. To hear more about how the need for the project was identified and how the service was developed scan this code.

Standing Together supported Westminster Council with the initial development of the service and have continued to coordinate its housing element, the key function of which is to provide women with safe, independent tenancies, that are separate from the support. Support is provided by specialist women's provider Solace Women's Aid and is intensive, flexible and woman centred. The project accepts referrals for women who are affected by any form of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), are experiencing long term or repeated homelessness, have a history of non-engagement with services and experience of multiple disadvantage.

The service uses a gender informed definition of multiple disadvantage as outlined in Lankelly Chase's report, [Gender Matters](#) which defines multiple disadvantage as the cooccurrence of homelessness, substance use, interpersonal violence and abuse and poor mental health.

To hear more about how the need for the project was identified and how the service was developed listen to Episode One of the From Harm to Home podcast by scanning the codes below:



The Data: Demographics

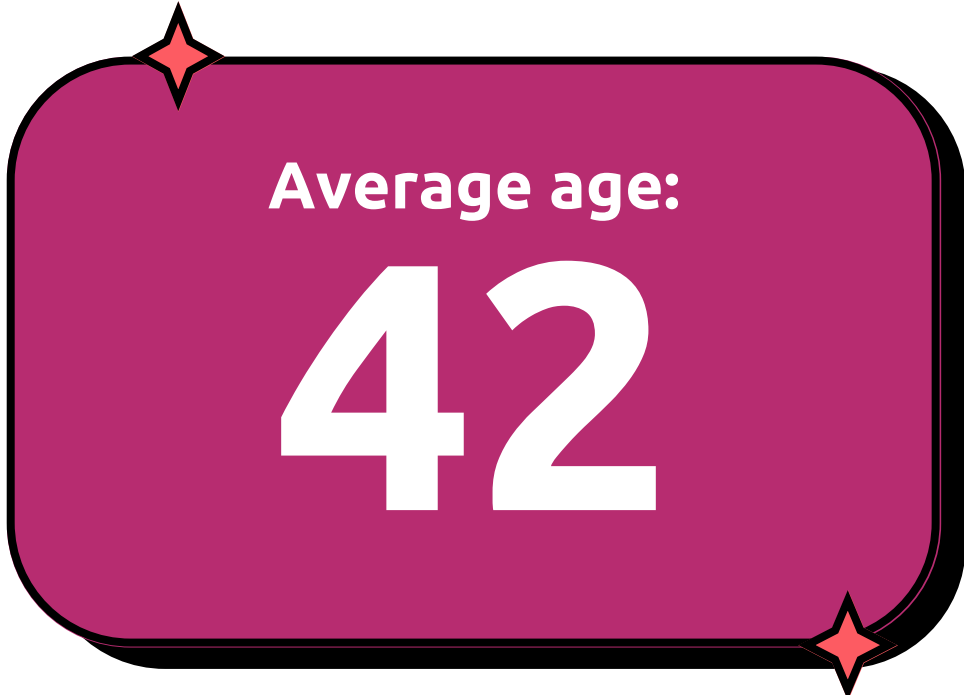
Age

The average age of women supported by the service in year 5 was 42, which is older than the average age of those supported by Housing First services in England which is 35-39. Additionally, the age profile of women looks different to year 4, with less women under 30, and almost double the number of women aged 51-60 than last year. Women in this older age category are more likely to have been homeless for longer, been at greater risk of domestic abuse and VAWG and have higher physical and mental health needs. This may require more of a Housing First worker's time and involvement from a greater number of agencies, particularly adult social care.

Ethnicity

Just over 70% of women supported by the project in year five identified as white. This is still below the national Housing First service average, which is 89% who identify as white British, but indicates that there is less diversity among the women supported by the project than last year. Black and minoritised women continue to be underrepresented in referrals to the project. This may well be because the vast majority of referrals to the service come from homelessness providers, and research has shown that although Black and minoritised women are at increased risk of homelessness, they are less likely to access generic homelessness support services.¹

Responses to this must go beyond efforts to increase referrals from specialist 'by and for' organisations supporting Black and minoritised people, although this is of value and should still be a priority. It is the responsibility of local areas to find out more about Black and minoritised women's experiences of long-term homelessness, where they stay at night and what services, if any, are encountering them. See references to the women's census in the 'Calls to Action' section at the end of this report.



- 1 woman was Arab
- 2 women were Eastern European
- 1 woman was Black African
- 1 woman was Black British
- 1 woman was Black Other
- 5 women were Mixed or multiple ethnic groups
- 24 women were White British
- 1 women were White Other
- 2 women were Not Known.

[1] "Where do I belong, where is home?": Experiences of racism and homelessness, Crisis, 2024

The Data: Demographics

Gender/Sexuality

All of the women being supported at the end of year 5 identify as cisgender women. Many of the women chose not to disclose their sexuality, or were not asked, which makes it difficult to get an accurate picture of how accessible the project is to women who identify as LGBTQ+.

18 women were Heterosexual

3 women were Bisexual

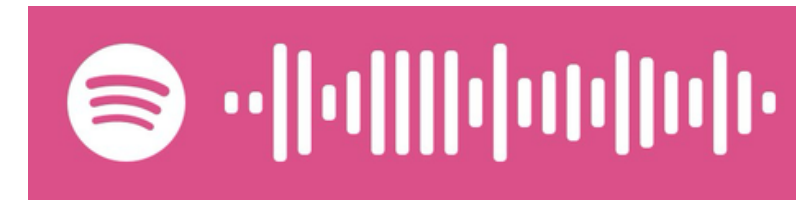
17 women were Undefined

Disability

23 women reported having a disability, making up 60% of the total number of women being supported by the service at the end of year 5. This is a high number but aligns with the fact that there are more women in the older age categories than last year, and the increased likelihood of this group having higher needs around health. It should be noted that the definition of disability used here encompasses a wide range of physical and mental health conditions.



To hear more about the demographics and the core figures from the year 5 evaluation listen to Episode Six of the **From Harm to Home** podcast by scanning the codes below:



Engagement

Similarly to other Housing First services, the Westminster VAWG Housing First workers work assertively and flexibly to engage women from point of referral and beyond. It is normal for women's engagement to fluctuate throughout the support relationship, as things change in a woman's life



**One woman died, two graduated from the service, one woman's support needs couldn't be met by the service, three women were closed due to abuse towards staff, two women were closed because they couldn't engage with the service, one woman didn't have local connection to Westminster and was closed.*

Key barriers to engagement noted by Housing First workers were:

- **Women struggle to trust** Housing First workers and other services after previous negative experiences of engagement with services, particularly mental health services.
- **Perpetrators control and block women's access** to the Housing First workers themselves and other much needed services and support.
- **Chaotic substance use**, particularly the use of spice in the Victoria area of Westminster.
- **Woman's mental health worsening** or in mental health crisis.

Most commonly, a combination of the above.

Despite these challenges the service has seen some positive outcomes:

1
3
of the women have been supported by the service for more than 3 years.

2
women have graduated from the service and no longer need the level of intensive support provided.

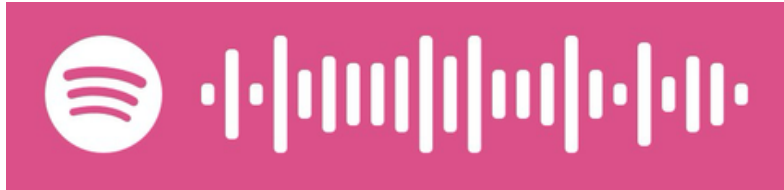


Engaging women and maintaining that engagement is not the job of the Housing First worker alone: a partnership approach to engaging women is essential, particularly when the woman is sleeping rough. When engagement falters, or is difficult to get going, Housing First workers work with rough sleeping teams, navigators and other key services to make contact with women and maintain that contact.

The partnership with the local rough sleeping navigator team has been particularly successful in supporting Housing First workers to establish relationships of trust with women. Navigators and Housing First workers will often co-support women for a period of time when support starts. This approach is important as women referred into the service often have very high needs, as has been found in other Housing First services for women², therefore having two pairs of hands, and a thorough handover period with a trusted professional makes all the difference.

Relationships, and the importance of women feeling connection with a worker are another key factor in positively engaging women. Scan the QR code to hear some thoughts from women supported by the service about the bond they have with their Housing First worker, what that relationship means to them and how it has helped them achieve their goals.

To hear some thoughts from women supported by the service about the bond they have with their Housing First worker, what that relationship means to them and how it has helped them achieve their goals. Listen to Episode 5 of the From Harm to Home Podcast by scanning the codes below:



[2] *The Threshold Housing First Pilot for Women with an Offending History: The First Two Years*, Deborah Jayne Quilgars, Nicholas Pleace, University of York Centre for Housing Policy, 2018

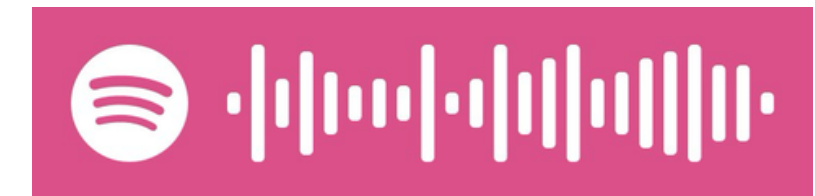
Housing Tenancy and Sustainment

Accessing good quality housing remains the biggest challenge for Housing First services in England. Despite this the service has maintained its partnerships with registered social providers and has been able to offer a greater number of safe, independent tenancies to women than last year.

Successes: The impact of dedicated Housing Coordination

Access to an independent tenancy is a non-negotiable for Housing First services. Women are offered independent, safe tenancies by the project's housing partnership, which is coordinated by STADA.

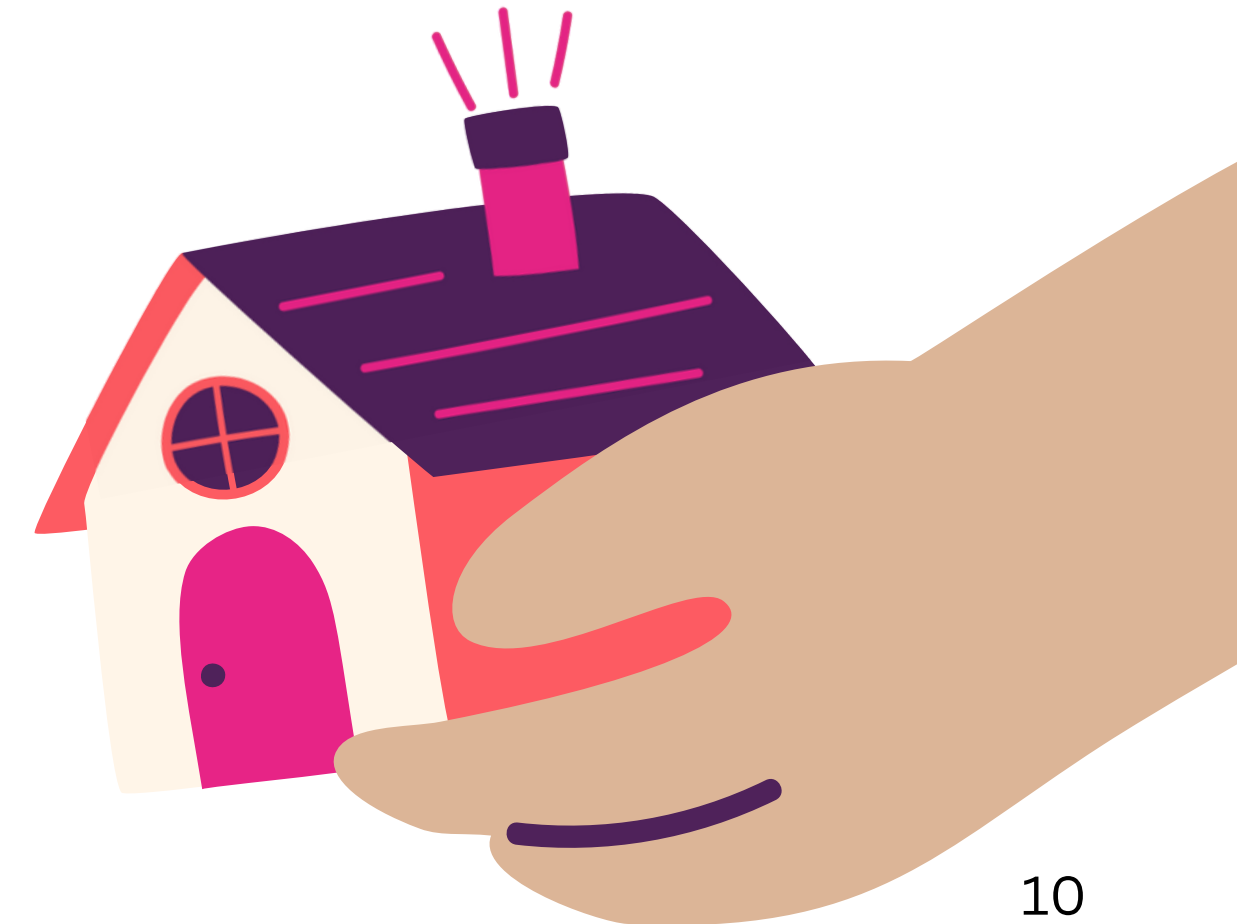
To hear more about the Housing Coordinator role and the difference it makes to the Westminster VAWG Housing First service. Listen to Episode Two of the From Harm to Home podcast by scanning the codes below:



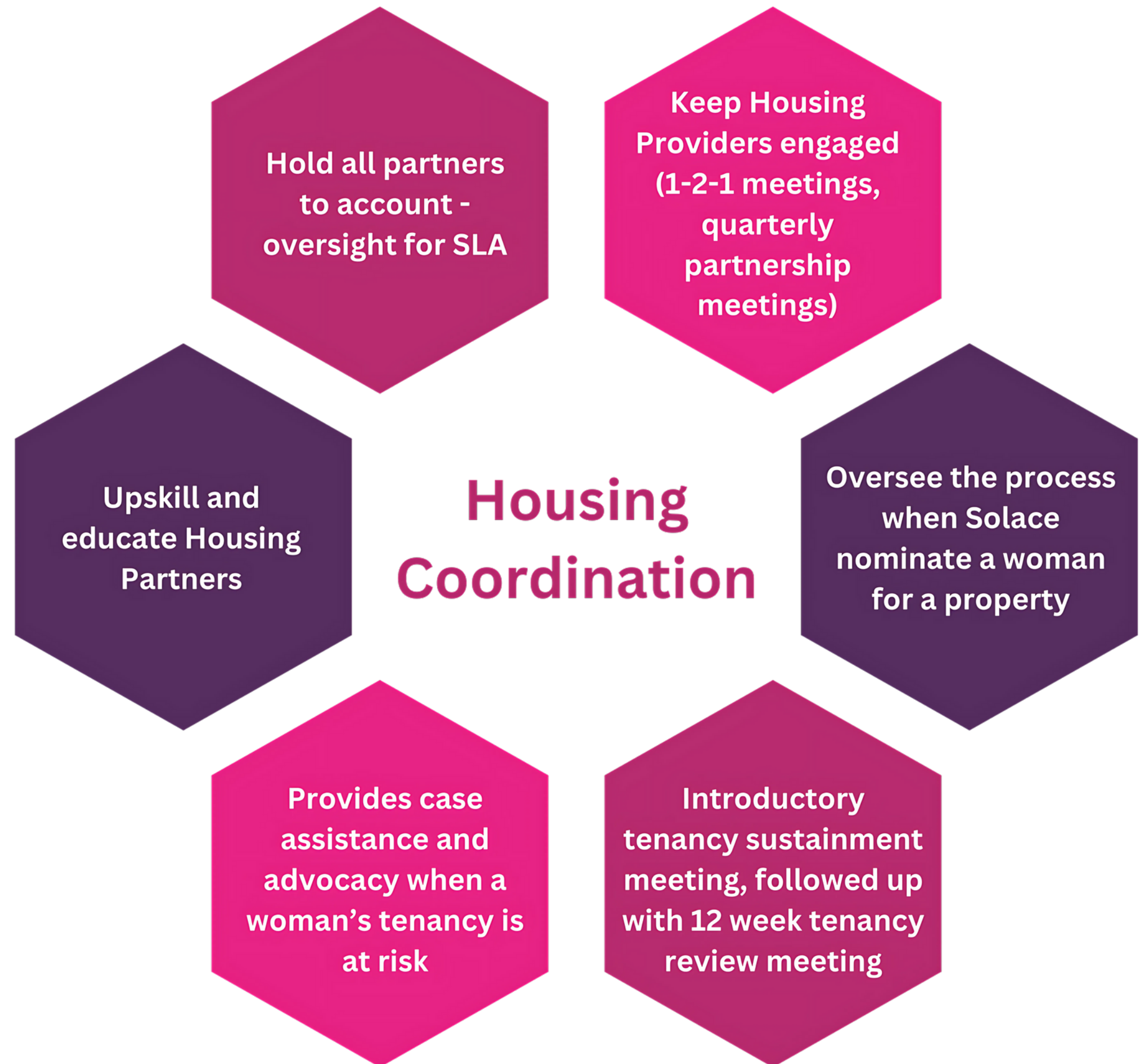
Tenancy sustainment
for the year was: **95%**

- **Overall tenancy** sustainment across the five years is **90%**
- **7** women were housed this year across the partnership.
- **10 property offers were made** by housing partners across the year.³
- The housing coordinator at STADA chaired **4 Housing Partnership meetings** to bring Solace and housing partners together to discuss successes and challenges.

[3] Not all offers of housing were suitable, some were too far out of London and some the women turned down for their own reasons.

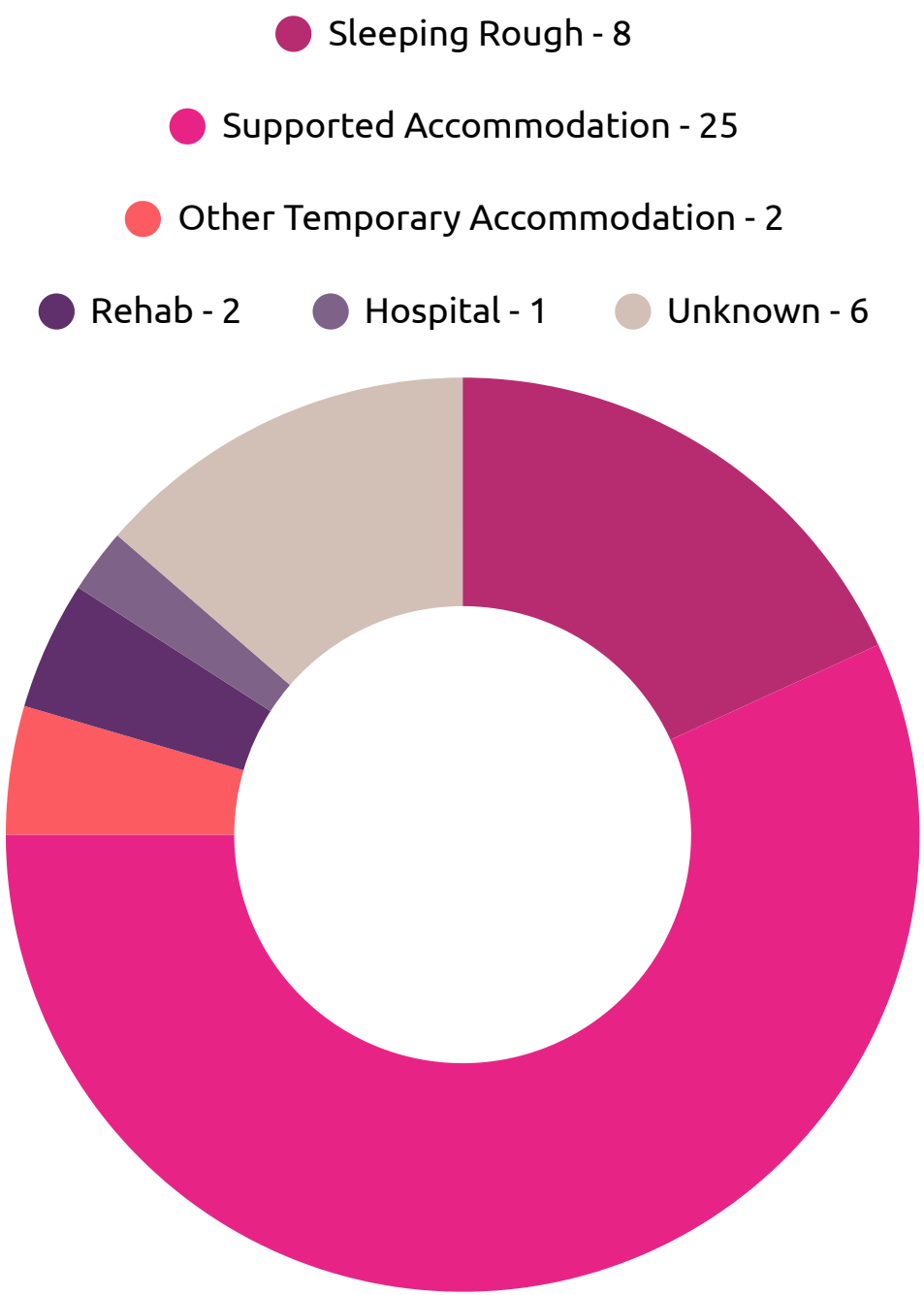


Housing Coordination: A snapshot of what's involved

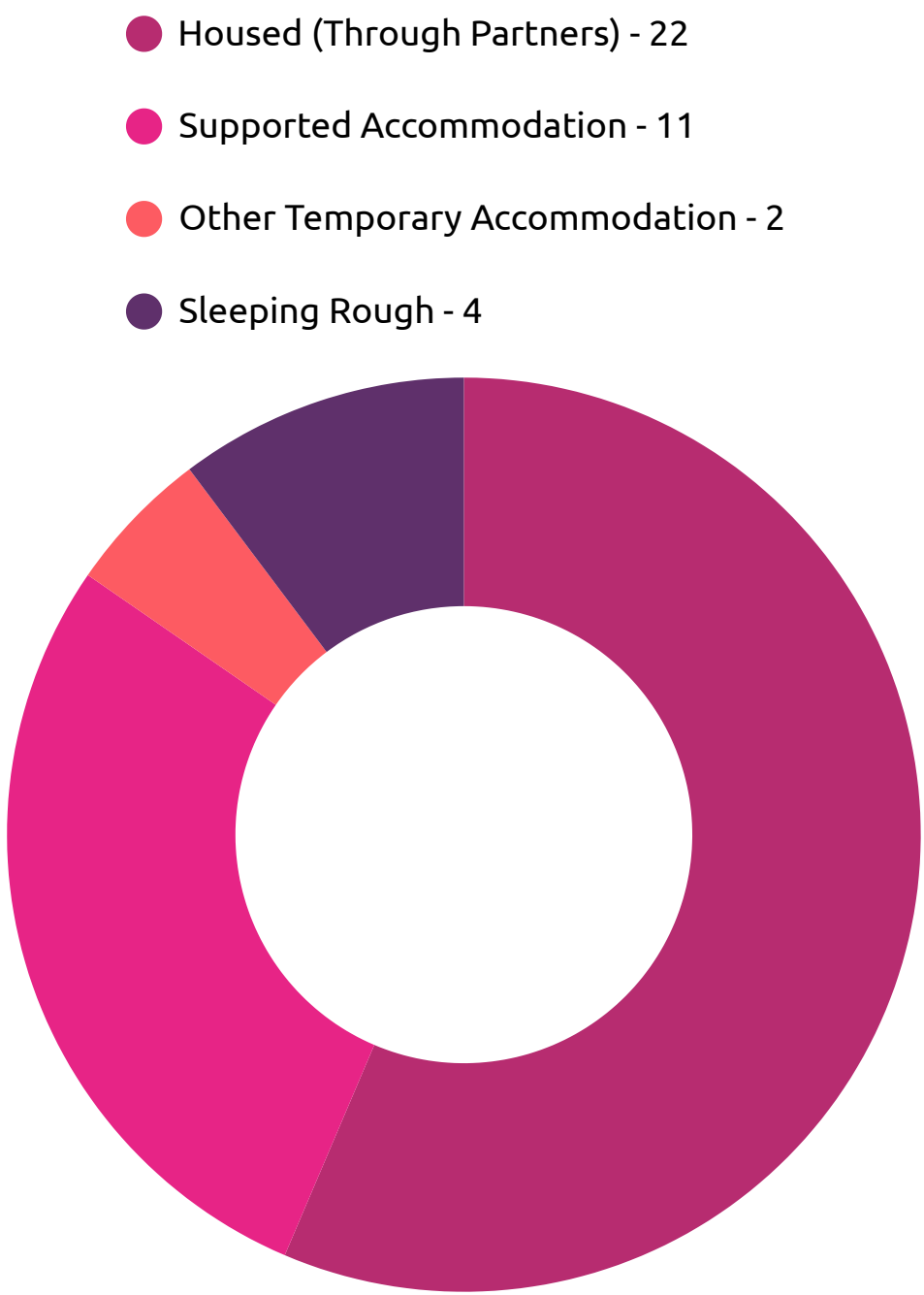


Wider outcomes around housing:

It is useful to compare the accommodation status of women when they were first referred into the project, and then at the end of year 5 as it shows that over half of the women now have independent tenancies, offered through the housing partnership. Housing First workers have also supported women to move from rough sleeping into supported accommodation in Westminster, which explains why several women remain in supported accommodation at the end of year 5. This allows the team time to build relationships with women, and for a suitable housing offer to be made.

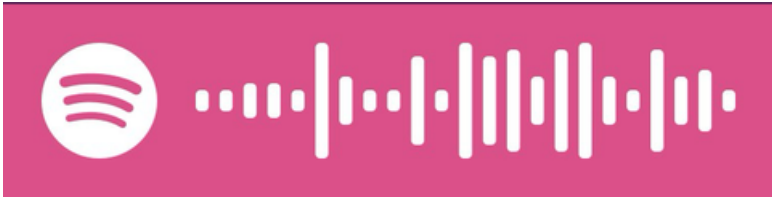


Housing status at point of referral



Housing status at the end of year 5

To hear more from Southern Housing Association, one of the project’s housing partners, about their experience of working with the Westminster VAWG Housing First service. Listen to Episode 3 of the From Harm to Home Podcast by scanning the codes below:



Challenges:

Despite this, barriers to accessing and maintaining housing remain. At the end of year five:

- **17 women are currently waiting for an offer of housing.**

The reality is that competing demands on housing providers make it increasingly difficult for them to offer properties to Housing First services. Many of the housing providers working with the project have undergone mergers and restructures which have impacted on their capacity to engage with the project. STADA continue to work with the housing providers engaged with the project to increase the availability of properties for the project as required, however we recognise that lack of housing across London (and nationally) is a wider issue that impacts further than only this project.

Not all women have been able to maintain their tenancies. There are a number of reasons for this, but as has been found in previous years, experience of VAWG is the greatest risk to tenancy sustainment.

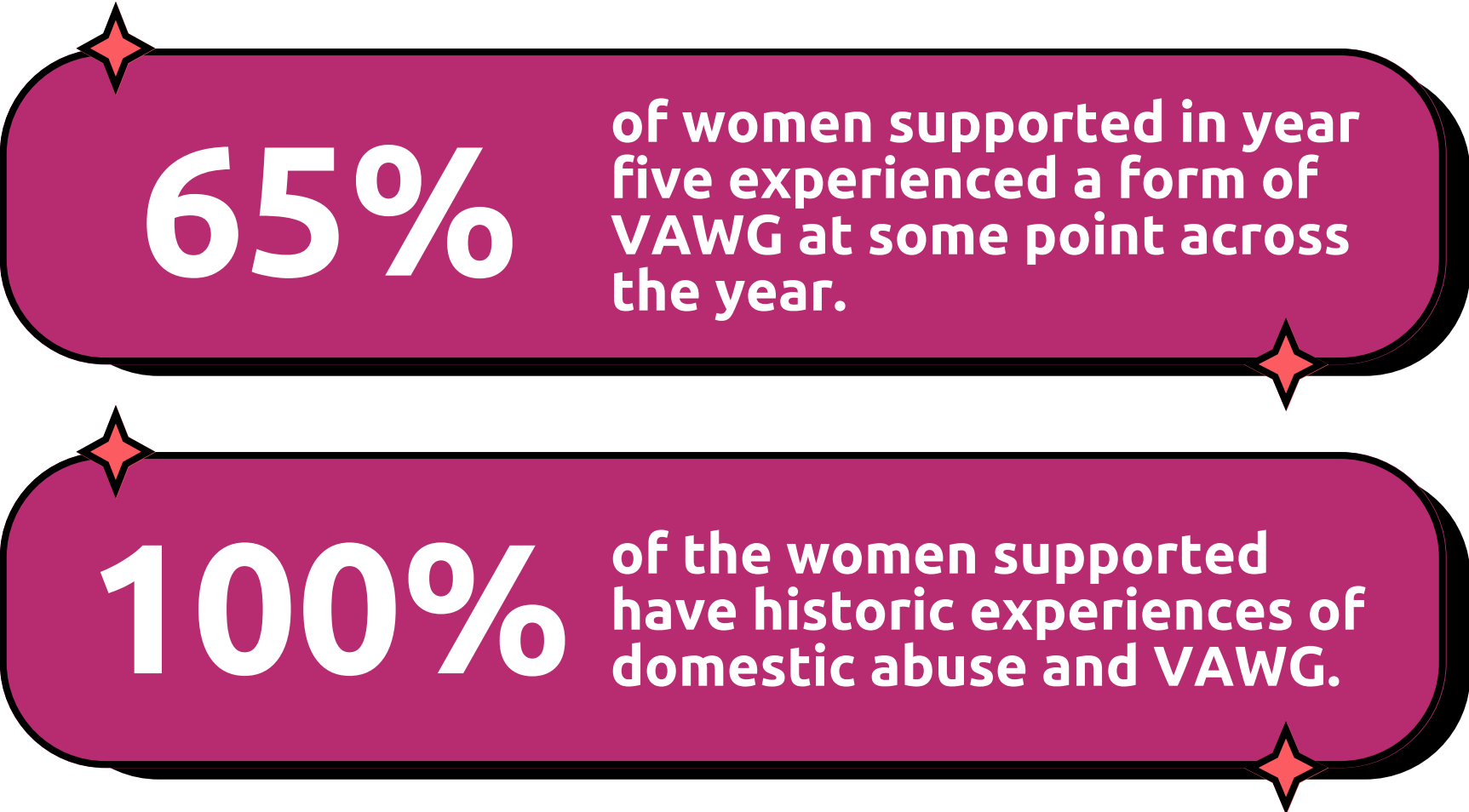
- **2 women were not using their Housing First flat after experiencing assault in their tenancy.**
- **2 women** had been served notice to **evict following incidents of domestic abuse** being reported and **dealt with as anti-social behaviour.**
- **7 women were sleeping rough with their perpetrators.**

Once housed, it is often difficult for women to maintain housing as they are at increased risk of experiencing male violence and abuse. Both women who were not using their Housing First flat at the end of year 5 were assaulted by men in their flats and were moved into temporary accommodation to give them time to decide what they wanted to do next. Both women who were served with notices to evict are experiencing domestic abuse from their partners, and it is this abuse that is behind what on the surface may appear as anti-social behaviour. It is situations such as these where gender responsive housing coordination, and the upskilling of housing providers around domestic abuse and VAWG makes all the difference. You can also read about the difference the STADA Housing Coordination role makes when a woman's tenancy is at risk [here](#).

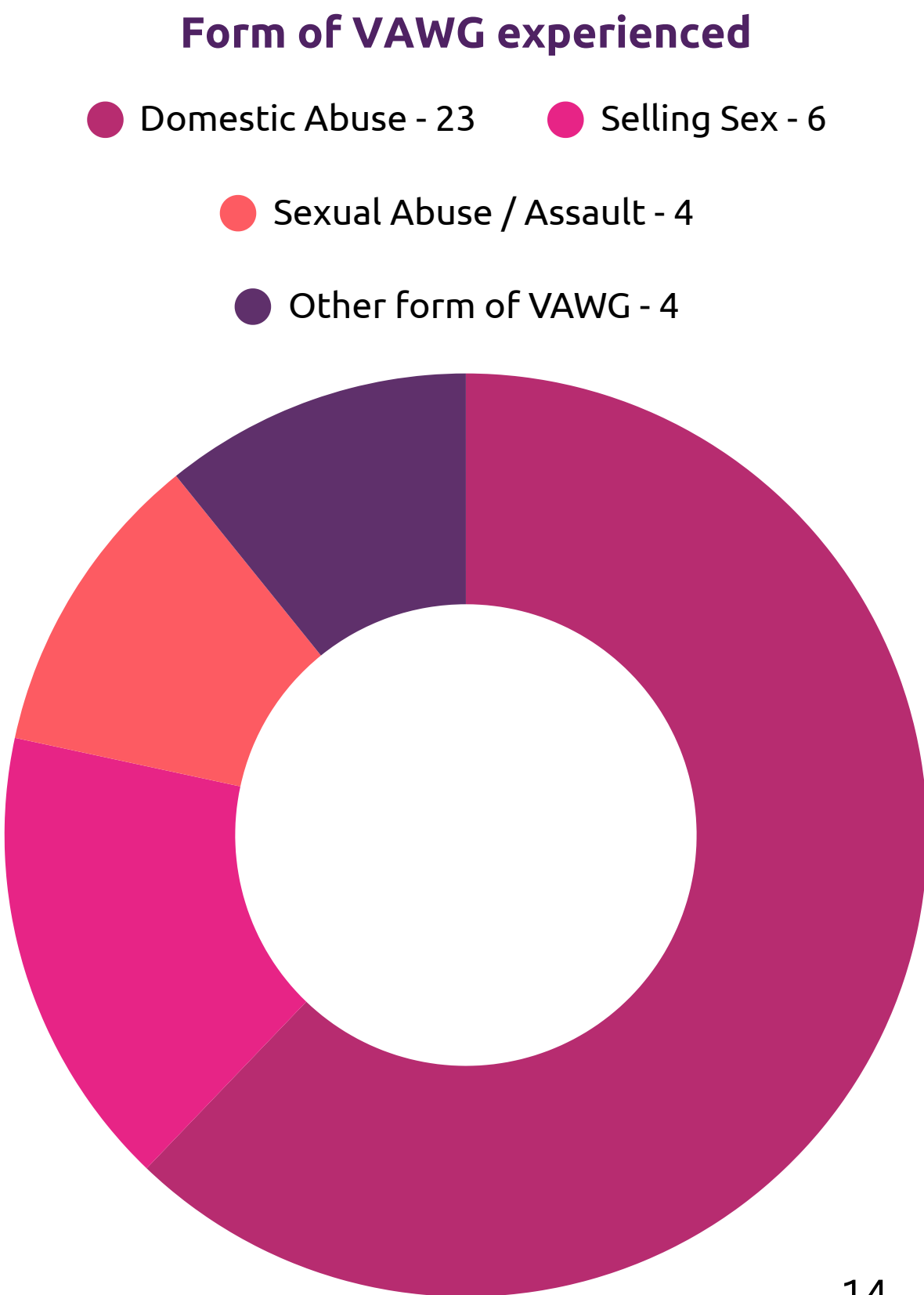


Domestic Abuse/VAWG and Safety

Research has shown that domestic abuse is a near universal experience for women experiencing homelessness⁴ it can therefore be assumed that women with experience of long-term and repeated homelessness will have been at increased risk. It is important to recognise the impact of this on the women, their chance of keeping a tenancy, and engaging with services around their health and wellbeing, as well as the implications this has for Housing First providers. Experience of domestic abuse and VAWG was almost universal for the women supported by the project.



In year 5 there were 36 incidences of domestic abuse, and 17 other VAWG related incidents reported to the Housing First team. The reality is that this is likely to be much higher as it is well known that survivors of domestic abuse, particularly those experiencing multiple disadvantage, face considerable barriers to identifying domestic abuse and opening up to professionals. Just under half of the women who experienced domestic abuse in year 5 (11 of 23) had ongoing domestic abuse at the end of the year, notably one woman was being abused by four different perpetrators.



[4] *Women and Rough Sleeping. A critical review of current research and methodology*, Joanne Bretherton and Nicholas Pleace, University of York Centre of Housing Policy, 2018

The implications of the above for Housing First services are wide ranging, but ultimately mean that when supporting women, services must prioritise domestic abuse as a core learning need for staff and ensure that they are working in partnership with specialist services for advice and support.

As Solace Women’s Aid is a specialist provider, their skills and expertise around domestic abuse and VAWG are of distinct value when supporting women in a Housing First context. The team know how to gently raise the subject of domestic abuse and VAWG, which often must be approached slowly and carefully with women who are experiencing ongoing abuse and at high risk of serious harm. They have also adapted domestic abuse risk assessments and safety planning to meet the needs of women impacted by long term homelessness and multiple disadvantage. This specialist, woman centred approach has resulted in some positive outcomes:



The team made **37 MARAC referrals** and supported cases through this process.



4 women impacted by domestic abuse in year 5 **were no longer experiencing it** at the end of the year. Two women managed to leave relationships with their abusers with the support of the team, and two women’s abusive partners died.

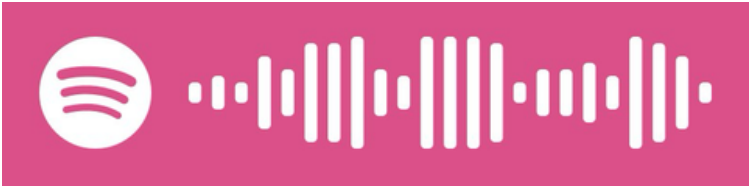


15 women were actively discussing domestic abuse/VAWG with their Housing First worker at the end of the year and openly discussing safety.



2 women called the police to report incidences of **domestic abuse**.

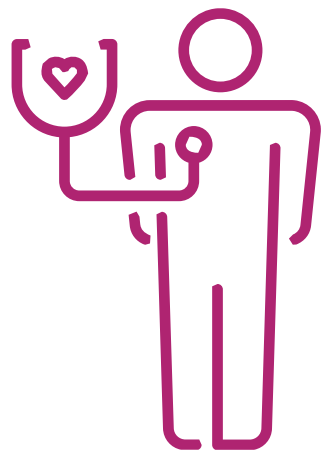
To hear more from the Senior Housing First Worker for the service talking about the support they provide and what a typical day looks like for them. Listen to Episode 4 of the From Harm to Home Podcast by scanning the codes below:



Alongside, and often interconnected with experiences of domestic abuse and VAWG, women’s safety was also impacted by issues such as self-neglect, poor mental health, particularly suicidal ideation or attempted suicide, and substance use/overdose.

Health and Wellbeing

As mentioned above, experience of long-term homelessness is linked to high levels of need around physical and mental health and substance/alcohol addiction. We also know that women who have faced extensive abuse in childhood and adulthood are 8 times more likely to be drug dependent and twice as likely to have an alcohol problem compared with women who have experienced little or no abuse⁵. Women impacted by homelessness and multiple disadvantage may also find it difficult to engage with services around their health⁶, and face specific barriers to doing so, such as being blocked from engaging with services and support by an abuser. This results in health issues becoming more entrenched and getting worse over time. The overall picture of women's health across the year aligns with these findings.



30%

women had significant physical health/mobility issues. This is a relatively high number and is most likely linked to the fact that a large proportion of the women supported by the service are in older age categories e.g. 10 of the women are over 51.



1

woman died of cancer in a hospice aged just 34. She was in a long-term relationship with an abusive partner whose control around her access to much needed housing and healthcare services and support contributed to her death.



90%

women had support needs around their mental health, with 3 women experiencing suicidal ideation or suicide attempts.



87%

women had support needs around drug or alcohol use.

Despite this, the woman supported by the project took some positive steps forward around their health last year, supported by the Housing First team and network of homeless health specialist services available in Westminster.

- **14 women were engaging with a homeless health service around mental health or physical health** at the end of year 5.
- **3 women actively engaged with women's health support**, in the form of cervical screening, breast screening and specialist support around menopause. As a result of this, 3 women have been prescribed with HRT.
- **23 women were openly discussing their mental health** with their Housing First workers.
- **28 women were openly discussing their substance or alcohol use** with their Housing First workers.
- **16 women were engaging with support from a drug/alcohol service** and 9 were on script at the end of year 5.
- **There were just 11 ambulance call outs across the course of the year.** This is a relatively low number given the complex health needs outlined above.

So, what has helped women to engage with support around their health? Housing First workers supported women to attend GP and hospital appointments around their physical and mental health and engage with drug and alcohol services around addiction issues. They initiated conversations around coping mechanisms, grounding techniques, safe usage and harm reduction.

They also liaised with adult social care, and advocated on a woman's behalf when her needs met this threshold. Specialist homeless health provision available in the homelessness pathway in Westminster also has a key role to play in positive outcomes around health. These services are designed with homelessness and multiple disadvantage in mind, take a flexible approach, and are staffed with health professionals that understand the barriers that this cohort face in accessing healthcare.



**Health services are a
lifeline for women
experiencing Multiple
Disadvantage.**

Social and Financial Integration

Social and financial integration is a key focus in any Housing First service, but when supporting women, it is important to acknowledge the specific gendered barriers that they face in this area, in that they are at greater risk of experiencing VAWG.

Financial:

- Analysis of data from the last quarter of year 5 showed that **5 women were being financially exploited by their abusers**. Two of these women's benefits were being paid directly into the abuser's bank account.
- **28 women were supported to access benefits across the year**. Analysis of narrative data provided by Housing First workers highlighted a focus on supporting women to maximise their income, particularly around applying for Personal Independence Payment (PIP).
- **6 women** were supported to **open bank accounts**.



Social:



16

women had children removed from their care. Research has shown how this experience makes it difficult for women to trust services and engage with support, as well as exacerbating mental and physical health conditions and substance use. This isolates women further from family, friends and community.

Analysis of narrative data provided by Housing First workers suggests that isolation is a key barrier to social and community integration. It is known that women are isolated from family, friends and support as a tactic of control used by perpetrators, but even for those who are no longer experiencing abuse, the impact of this is still felt. When isolation is used as a tactic of control and then combines with experience of long-term homelessness, addiction and poor mental health, women can end up estranged from family members and friends long term. When a woman doesn't have this social support network, moving into a new community and tenancy can be a very isolating experience, particularly when coming from supported accommodation. Additionally, as has been found in previous years, feedback from women supported by the service highlighted how disconnected they felt from society, and the impact that the judgement and stigma faced by women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage has on their lives.

To address this, Housing First workers put effort into 'meaningfully engaging' women, which is essentially, asking them what they enjoy doing and linking them in with opportunities to do it. They also supported and encouraged women to engage with family and friends. This year:

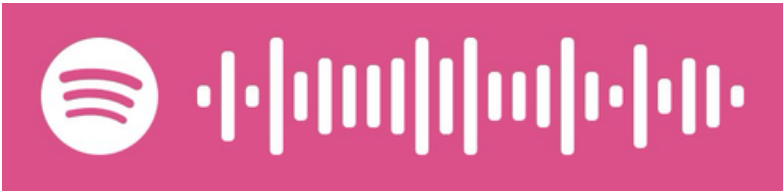


11 women were supported to engage in meaningful activities such as reading, sport and exercise and creative pursuits. The Housing First team organised a 'pamper day' attended by 10 women where women had their nails and hair done by volunteer nail technician and hairdressers.



5 women were supported to engage with education/volunteering/training. One woman started GCSE's in maths and English and another enrolled in her local college for ESOL classes.

To hear some thoughts from women supported by the service about the bond they have with their Housing First worker, what that relationship means to them and how it has helped them achieve their goals. Listen to Episode 5 of the From Harm to Home Podcast by scanning the codes below:





Over half of the women were supported to connect with family and friends. One woman met up with her son after not seeing him in person for five years.



In the final quarter of year 5, **21 women were discussing future plans** with their worker.

A Call To Action...

Housing First is only part of a wider response to women's homelessness, but it is a crucial area to get right if we are to end homelessness, and provide adequate support for some of the most vulnerable women within our society. The following calls to action outline what is needed to achieve a gender responsive approach to Housing First in England.

For Government:

- ❗ **Develop a Housing First Strategy** which will scale up Housing First across the country, with **specific reference to the needs of women** and the need to take a **gender responsive approach** to developing and delivering Housing First services.
- ❗ The **strategy should be accompanied by dedicated cross government funding** to scale up Housing First across England.

For Local Areas:

- ❗ **All local authorities should lead and deliver an annual Women's Rough Sleeping Census** to gain a full picture of homelessness in the area and inform strategic, funding and commissioning decisions accordingly.
- ❗ **Involve VAWG sector partners when planning and procuring Housing First in your area.** Consider commissioning a partnership VAWG and homelessness model and/or women-specific Housing First.
- ❗ **Ensure newly commissioned or existing Housing First services are gender responsive** and deliver effective and safe support for women.
- ❗ **Ensure there is budget for a dedicated Housing Coordination role within the staff team,** alongside support workers.



For Service Providers:

Make domestic abuse and VAWG a core priority within your team.



- **Ensure staff teams complete training around VAWG and domestic abuse.** This should include training on working with couples (and perpetrators of abuse).
- Ensure the service has procedures appropriate to **responding to VAWG within the context of multiple disadvantage.**
- Consider **integrating some of the learnings from this report into your day to day practice**, including adequate VAWG risk assessments and gender-responsive tenancy advocacy.



Ensure your service is gender responsive in that it understands the specific needs and experiences of women, including VAWG, child removal, women's health and low levels of trust.



Forge or strengthen relationships with local specialist services that can support your team around DA/VAWG and delivering a gender responsive approach.

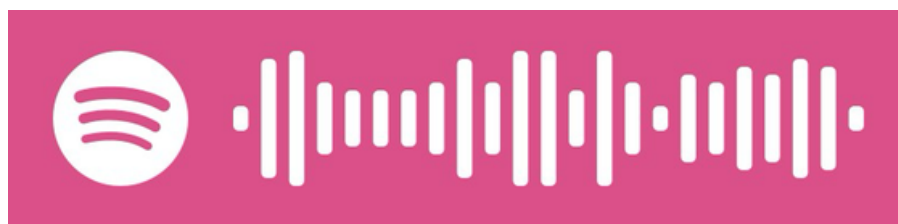


Consider the proportion of women and Black and minoritised people within your service and build understanding of barriers and expand referral approaches if these proportions are low.



Build confidence in challenging professionals citing anti-social behaviour when incidents are masking domestic abuse.

To hear more about the Westminster VAWG Housing First Project. Listen to the From Harm to Home Podcast by scanning the codes below:



Acknowledgements

A big thank you to all of the women who shared their experiences with us and gave us feedback for this evaluation - we always bother you for this every year and you are always so generous in giving your time and sharing your experience. Thank you also to the fantastic Solace team for their tireless and passionate work to engage the women who have benefited from this project.

Thank you to our housing partners for their commitment to the project, we acknowledge the challenges in terms of lack of available housing and stand side by side with you to call for the prioritization of the building of more social housing in London (and the UK). Thank you to the Standing Together team: Hannah Brown, previous Housing First and Multiple Disadvantage Lead, for her dedication, passion and tenacity to coordinate an effective community response to the women; and for her support to gather the evidence for this evaluation, to Holly Ringrose, Housing Business Support Officer, for producing an incredible podcast, creating and delivering the communications and designing the final report so that it engages the reader and lastly to Nika Noakes our Communications Manager for securing, orchestrating and organising communications for this event.

Finally, we would like to thank the MHCLG for funding this project for a fifth year, and to Westminster City Council Housing Needs department, for your support and commitment to this project.

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