

unSEEN: Women's Experiences of Sleeping Rough in Exeter

A Local Contribution to the 2025 National Women's Rough Sleeping Census

By Sarah Parkhouse

Acknowledgements:

Thank you to everyone at Colab and the Julian House Homeless Outreach Team for supporting this census; through joining discussions, raising awareness, completing surveys, facilitating follow-up discussion forums, or helping to part-fund the incentive gift vouchers.

Emily Walker for compiling, organising two years' worth of data.

Ella Chambers for transforming this report into a visually appealing and engaging document.

Dr. Harriet Earl-Brown for offering invaluable advice, guidance throughout this whole process.

Fran McElhone from Liminal Media for helping us to capture the photographs within this document.

Lucy Campbell, of the Single Homelessness Project for offering advice in the early stages of the census and part funding incentive gift vouchers for participants.

The wider team at St Petrock's for their support, time, and resources, ensuring both that I was supported throughout and that the women who participated were given the time and space they deserved.

Lastly, and most importantly, I wish to acknowledge all the women who took part. For offering their time, trust, and honesty. For feeling comfortable enough to share some of their most vulnerable moments, and for helping shape this report through their experiences.

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1 | Summary

Rough sleeping is widely recognised as one of the most visible and acute forms of homelessness. Yet for women, homelessness often looks very different. Many actively avoid sleeping visibly on the streets to protect themselves from gender-based violence and exploitation, staying instead in hidden or precarious situations. As a result, traditional street counts consistently fail to capture the true scale and complexity of women's homelessness.

This report presents the findings of the 2025 Female Rough Sleeping Census in Exeter. The census was carried out to develop a clearer understanding of women's experiences, circumstances, and support needs while sleeping rough. It sought to identify women currently without safe shelter, explore the pathways that led to their homelessness, and highlight gaps in local provision. It also captures women's voices on rough sleeping, including their access to available services and accommodation, and what they find helpful or challenging.

This marks the second year Exeter has undertaken a Women's Rough Sleeping Census, contributing to the wider national data collection coordinated by Solace Women's Aid and the Single Homelessness Project. It forms part of a broader effort to strengthen understanding of women's homelessness and ensure responses are shaped by more accurate, gender-informed data.

The findings offer valuable insight into the often-hidden nature of women's rough sleeping, the risks females encounter, and the types of support needed to prevent and reduce homelessness among women in Exeter.

Beyond numbers, this report reflects real lives. Each contribution represents a woman making difficult choices every day to stay safe, to endure, and to survive. Their voices are essential in shaping a local response that is informed, humane, and rooted in women's realities.



“I don't feel safe rough sleeping. I tucked myself away in a tent for 3 weeks and no one found me. I am careful, I make sure no one follows me back. Outreach have not found me, I don't want attention drawn to my spot.”

1.1 | Key insights

22 women took part in the 2025 Census which ran between 22–28 September.

All had slept rough or slept unsafely within the previous three month.

77.2% were aged 35–64

13 women were sleeping rough or in unsafe conditions the previous night of completing the census.

7 said they had rough slept **every night** over the past three months.

Women reported **86 different sleeping locations or situations across 22 participants**, showing frequent movement rather than fixed sleeping sites.

68% (17 women) reported walking around all night to stay safe

50% had come from supported or temporary accommodation, suggesting that existing placements are not meeting women's needs or are failing to be sustained.

67% (58 responses) of the sleeping locations reported were excluded from the government's definition of 'rough sleeping.'

On average women access **4 or more** support services within the city. The highest support services included homelessness day centres, substance use, and food support.

Year on Year:

In 2025, **59%** of women stated they were rough sleeping before completing the census, compared to **11.7%** in 2024.

In 2025, **32%** reported rough sleeping every night over 3 months, compared to 6% in 2024.

2025 saw an increase in women aged 45+ (**up by 16.3%**)

2025: **50%** were previously staying in supported or temporary accommodation before rough sleeping

2024: saw higher reliance on informal routes such as sofa surfing (**35%**). Whilst **35%** were previously staying in supported or temporary accommodation.



All 22 women were asked two additional questions about their previous or current accommodation:

What do you feel works/ed well in your current/previous accommodation?

What do you feel doesn't/didn't work well in your current/previous accommodation?

These are the key insights gathered from their responses:

What worked well:

- Basic safety and stability were the main positives (roof over head, bed, private room, ability to close a door).
- These basic provisions were especially valued by women who had experienced rough sleeping.
- Female-only spaces were viewed positively by some, particularly female-only floors or houses.
- Supportive staff relationships were a key factor in positive experiences.
- Structured routines and regular contact with support workers helped some women maintain stability.

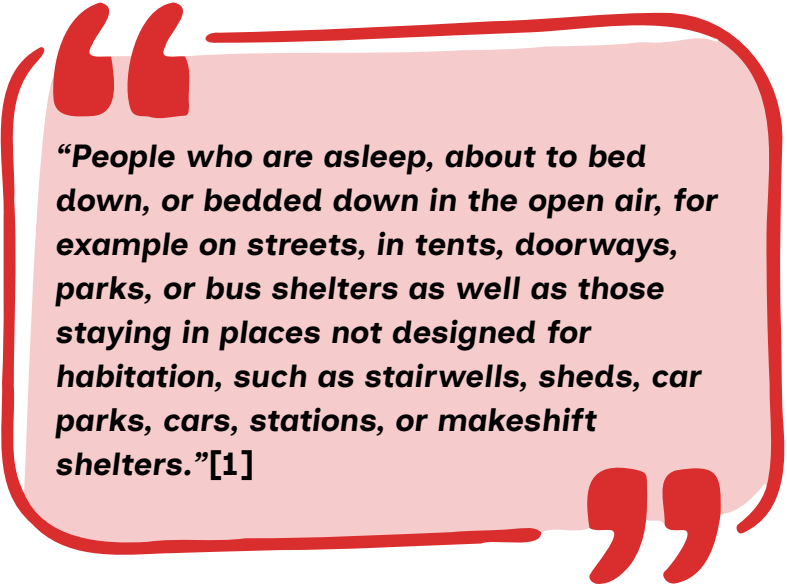
What did not work well:

- Lack of out-of-hours support was a major issue (evenings, overnight and weekends).
- Mixed sex environments and male staff/security
- Some women reported being unable to access support when most needed.
- Staffing gaps and lack of training led to unmet needs and, in some cases, accommodation breakdown.
- Safety concerns were common, including drug use, chaos, and unsafe behaviour from other residents.
- Exposure to drug and alcohol use made recovery and stability difficult.
- Presence of dealers/substance use contributed to relapse in some cases.
- Strict rules and expectations were often seen as rigid and unhelpful.
- Some women felt unsupported in completing required tasks or plans.
- Placement away from support networks caused isolation and reduced wellbeing.
- Emergency accommodation placements sometimes increased distance from support systems.
- Accommodation was not always seen as suitable for women with complex needs- Gaps in training.
- Mental health, substance use, and trauma needs were not always adequately supported.

2 | Introduction

2.1 Background

The UK Government defines rough sleeping as:



“People who are asleep, about to bed down, or bedded down in the open air, for example on streets, in tents, doorways, parks, or bus shelters as well as those staying in places not designed for habitation, such as stairwells, sheds, car parks, cars, stations, or makeshift shelters.”[1]

While this definition shapes how rough sleeping is counted and recorded, it does not fully reflect women’s experiences of homelessness, which are often shaped by safety concerns. Research and local experience show:[2]

- Women’s homelessness is often hidden rather than visible.
- Women are less likely to sleep in open public spaces due to fears around safety, harassment, and gender-based violence.
- Many women avoid visible rough sleeping and rely on unsafe or temporary arrangements to reduce risk.
- Hidden homelessness can include sofa surfing, survival sex, moving between locations at night, or staying in places such as hospitals, transport hubs, or fast-food restaurants.[3]
- These experiences are often not captured in official homelessness data.
- Women may actively avoid visibility to stay safe, often moving between transient or insecure spaces.

Overall, women’s homelessness is often less visible but still highly present, with many experiences taking place outside official rough sleeping counts and in unsafe or unstable environments.

[1] Health matters: rough sleeping - GOV.UK

[2] WRSC 2024

[3] What is hidden homelessness? | Crisis UK

2.2 Female accommodation in Exeter

At the time of writing, there is one female-only temporary accommodation provided by Exeter City Council for single applicants who have made a homeless application and have duty for accommodation with the council; the remaining provisions are mixed-sex. Council temporary accommodation consists of general needs accommodation (no dedicated support), often with shared bathroom and kitchen facilities.

Alongside this, there are:

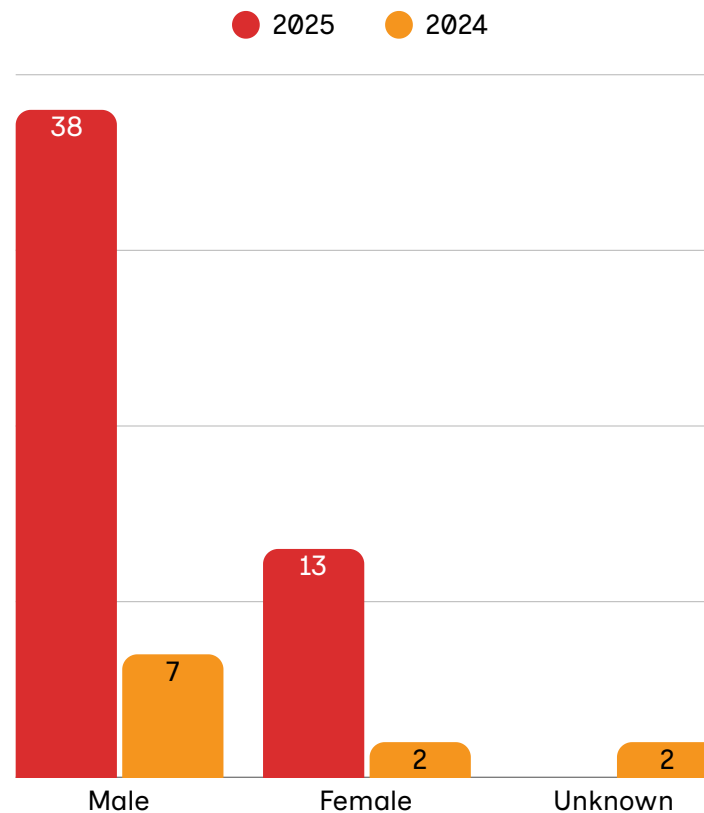
- A small number of low-support female-only accommodation options provided by several housing providers.
- There is also one low/medium-supported accommodation provider that offers a mixed-sex hostel, which has staff on-site continuously.
- One high-support mixed-sex accommodation service which includes a female-only top floor. This has a shared entrance, mixed-gender staff, and communal kitchen facilities. Exeter's 2024 Women's Rough Sleeping Census identified a clear need for female-only accommodation within the city, and the introduction of this dedicated floor was developed directly in response to those findings.



2.3 Exeter's Annual Rough Sleeping Snapshot and Verification Data

The UK Government publishes an annual Snapshot of people sleeping rough on a single night each autumn[4]. Local authorities choose one night between October and November to carry this out, and the figures are independently verified.

In Exeter, the 2025 snapshot recorded 51 people sleeping rough: 13 women and 38 men. This figure was reached using an “evidence-based estimate including a spotlight count”[5], this includes both people seen on the night and an estimate based on knowledge from frontline services.



This is different to 2024, where only a spotlight count was performed. This included only people who were visibly “bedded down” only. That year, 11 people were recorded in total: 2 women, 7 men, and 2 unknowns.

This difference shows the impact of the change in method. When only visible rough sleeping is counted, the decrease in female numbers is especially noticeable.

The snapshot only captures one night and does not reflect the full picture. For women who sleep in invisible spaces, are active at night, or are detached from services they are very likely to be missed from the data altogether.

Councils verify rough sleepers based on the government's official definition, this process confirms that a person is sleeping rough and is therefore eligible for council support. Verification helps councils target resources effectively, accurately record rough sleeping data, and enable outreach teams to assess an individual's circumstances and connect them with appropriate accommodation and support. However, while verification can help with the above, it can also create barriers for those who are difficult to locate or reluctant to engage with services. Those who are hidden homeless, such as those who are sofa surfing, active at night or hidden out of sight do not meet the official definition of rough sleeping and may therefore remain unseen.

During the census week (22nd and 28th September 2025), **seven** women were formally verified as rough sleeping under the official definition by the Homeless Outreach team. Yet **thirteen** women said they had slept rough or felt unsafe the night before they completed the census. This highlights that reliance on verification through seeing women bedded down is not accurately recording homelessness. [6]

[4] Rough sleeping snapshot in England: autumn 2025 - GOV.UK

[5] Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2025 | Homeless Link

[6] A National Plan to End Homelessness - 6.3 Access to services
- verification

3 | Methodology

3.1 Census Purpose

The census aims to

- Better understand the scale of female rough sleeping.
- Identify patterns and survival strategies used by women.
- Explore risk factors contributing to homelessness.
- Identify gaps in local services and support provision.
- Provide evidence to inform future policy and service development.



3.2 Census Design

The census was conducted nationally between 22 and 28 September 2025 and was open to all women who had slept rough within the previous three months. This also includes women who have felt unsafe, referring to women who reported feeling at risk of harm, threatened, frightened, or vulnerable because of where they were sleeping, staying, or seeking support while homeless.

The survey consisted of 10 core questions aligned with the national Women's Rough Sleeping Census framework, alongside two additional locally developed questions in Exeter. These focused on women's experiences of accommodation, specifically what works well and what does not.

The questions were largely presented as tick-box options, alongside open-ended questions that provided opportunities for written responses.

This allowed women to share more detailed, personal reflections and created space for further discussion and exploration of their experiences. Participation was entirely voluntary, and women were able to decline to answer any question or stop at any point if they felt uncomfortable.

3.3 Data Collection

Women were offered choices about where they felt most comfortable completing the survey, whether in a confidential space, outside where they could smoke, or alongside a friend. Where possible, they were also given a choice about who they completed the census with, as some women may have had a more trusted relationship with a particular staff member. Others preferred to take the paper version away and complete it independently before returning it.

This was left to each woman's discretion, and the flexible collection method supported these individual preferences.

It is important to recognise that choice is a key consideration for individuals experiencing trauma and housing instability. Many women experiencing rough sleeping have very limited control over their daily lives, routines, safety, and personal environments. Many have repeatedly had autonomy and decision-making taken away from them. Providing opportunities for choice, however small, can help foster a sense of safety, dignity, and empowerment.

The census used the following data collection methods:

- Paper and digital (Microsoft Forms) survey formats
- 1:1 support within an environment that felt most comfortable to the respondent
- Multi-agency approach through frontline services; St Petrocks, The CoLab and the Homeless Outreach Team.

Participation was voluntary, and all responses were collected anonymously to protect confidentiality.

As part of the pre-consultation with the Single Homeless Partnership prior to census week, the use of incentive gift vouchers was identified to encourage and improve participation. Women who completed the survey were offered a £10 gift voucher as an incentive which was funded between St Petrocks, The Single Homelessness Project and CoLab. The use of vouchers is recommended within the census guidance and had also been used successfully in Exeter the previous year.

3.4 2024 Methodology and Data Collection

The 2024 Women's Rough Sleeping Census for Exeter was commissioned by Exeter City Council and marked the first time this type of census had been undertaken. Dr. Harriet Earle-Brown led the 2024 census in her role as Rough Sleeping Coordinator at the time.

For consistency, the 2025 census methodology followed a similar format to 2024 census. In both years, the census was conducted during the final week of September. Women were identified either through outreach activity, when accessing services, within supported accommodation settings, and through an established women's group.

While completing surveys with the women in 2024, it felt most appropriate and trauma-informed to do so in spaces where they felt comfortable and reassured. Wherever possible, women were invited into environments where they felt safe and at ease when taking part.

The 2025 census continued this approach, with a greater focus on ensuring women were offered choice regarding where conversations took place and with whom. This recognised that completing a survey during outreach or within a public space may not always feel appropriate or safe for the individual, and that a more flexible approach could be offered.

Data collection was carried out using the same process across the two years. Surveys were completed using paper forms, although participants in 2025 also had the option to complete the survey electronically. All paper-based responses were entered into Microsoft Forms for collation.

The 2024 data included within this report was obtained directly from Exeter's 2024 Women's Rough Sleeping Report, written by Dr Harriet Earle-Brown.

3.5 Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings:

- Women experiencing homelessness may actively avoid engagement with services, meaning some individuals remain entirely hidden from data collection.
- This is a voluntary survey, and some women may opt-out entirely.
- The census only captures a week and relies on engagement with respondents.
- Staffing pressures, busy environments, and respondents' commitments all have an impact on census completion.

Despite these limitations, the census provides valuable insight into the experiences of women who are often underrepresented within official homelessness statistics

4 | Findings

4.1 Introduction

Twenty-two women took part in the 2025 census.

These are women who have shared, bravely, how frequently they feel unsafe in accommodation or while sleeping outside, the places they turn to when they need support, and the services they rely on. They spoke about what helped, what harmed, and the realities of their own experiences.

A further four women declined to take part.

These women were known to services as experiencing some form of housing instability. The reasons identified ranged from feeling uncomfortable sharing personal experiences, previous negative experiences with research processes, competing priorities linked to survival needs, and feeling too overwhelmed or fatigued to participate at that time.



4.2 Demographics

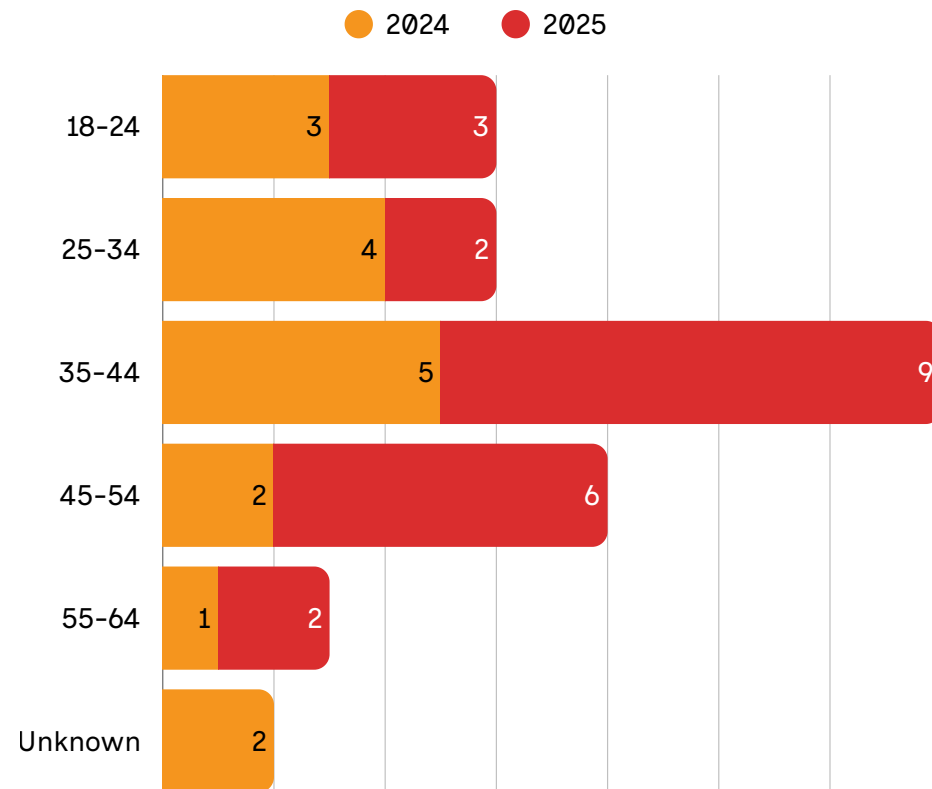
Age:

The data shows that over half the women surveyed were aged 35–54, suggesting that rough sleeping among women in Exeter is more common in mid-life adults than younger women.

2025 Age distribution:

- 35–44: 9 participants (40.9%)
- 45–54: 6 participants (27.2%)
- 18–24: 3 participants (13.2%)
- 25–34: 2 participants (9%)
- 55–64: 2 participants (9%)

Comparing the 2025 findings with 2024, a higher proportion of younger women were recorded. In 2024, 46.6% of women were aged 18–34, compared with 22.7% in 2025. In contrast, the proportion of women aged 45 and over increased by 16.3% in 2025, showing a shift towards an older age group within the cohort.



Ethnicity

Eighteen females identified as White British, three as White Other, and one as Romany Gypsy/Gypsy. Exeter has a low level of ethnic diversity; therefore, it is unsurprising that the dominant group in the data for both years is White British.

Gender

All respondents described themselves as female, although one participant reported being registered as a different gender at birth. For this census and the previous years, it was open to all women and people who feel the gender themes of this survey apply to them.



4.3 Frequency of Rough Sleeping

To maintain clarity on definitions, by 'sleeping rough' the census defines this as having nowhere safe to go to shelter/sleep in the day and night. It was explained to respondents that they may not do this every day and night, and that sleeping rough might not just mean sleeping outside.

2025 Data (22 women)

- 13 women (59%) reported sleeping rough or in an unsafe place on the night of completing the census, showing that homelessness was an immediate experience for most over half of the women.
- 4 women (18%) had slept rough or unsafely within the last week.
- Smaller numbers reported this within the last month (9%, 2 women) or within the last three months (14%, 3 women).

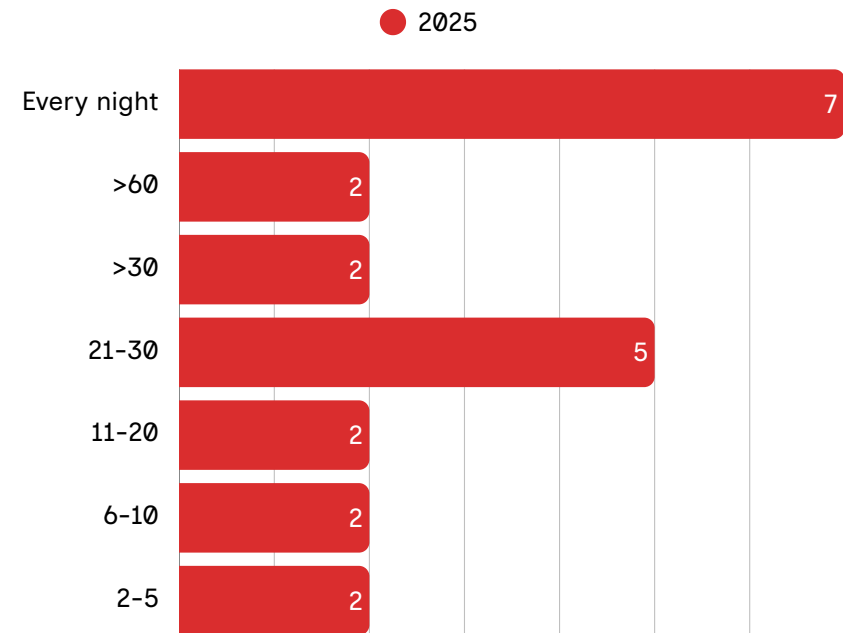
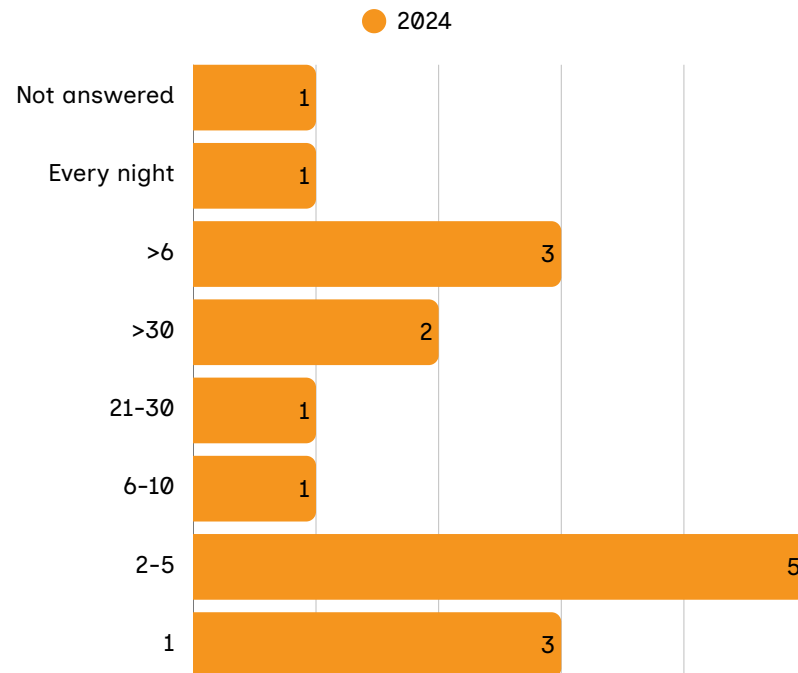
2024 data (16 women- 1 women did not answer):

- 2 women (11.7%) reported sleeping rough the previous night of the census.
- 2 women (11.7%) had slept rough or unsafely in the last week.
- 3 women (17.6%) had slept rough or unsafely in the last month.
- 9 women (52.9%) slept rough within the last 3 months.



Overall, this suggests a shift- In 2024, more women had recent but not immediate experience of rough sleeping within the last 3 months, whereas in 2025, more women were in acute, current situations. This points to an increase in immediacy and severity of need at the time the census was carried out, with more women experiencing rough sleeping as a present reality.

How many times have you rough slept in the last 3 months?



The 2025 data shows that a third (32%) slept rough every night, and others reported high numbers of nights, showing that homelessness was often ongoing and repeated, not occasional.

In 2024, the pattern was less severe. Just under half the women reported sleeping rough fewer than five times in three months, suggesting it was more intermittent for many.

Four women experienced rough sleeping for more than 60 nights.

Overall, the data shows a clear change from less frequent rough sleeping in 2024 to more constant and repeated rough sleeping in 2025, indicating increased instability.

One woman who had been rough sleeping for a month, and had rough slept that night explained that:



“Sometimes I have a secret spot that I hide away to when things get too much. I hate the weekends. No support, I just want to sleep my way through them. I use more crack in the weekends. It’s tough out there. I’m not sure how much longer I can last”

4.4 Locations and Movements

Women reported staying in a wide range of locations while rough sleeping.

Across the dataset for 2025:

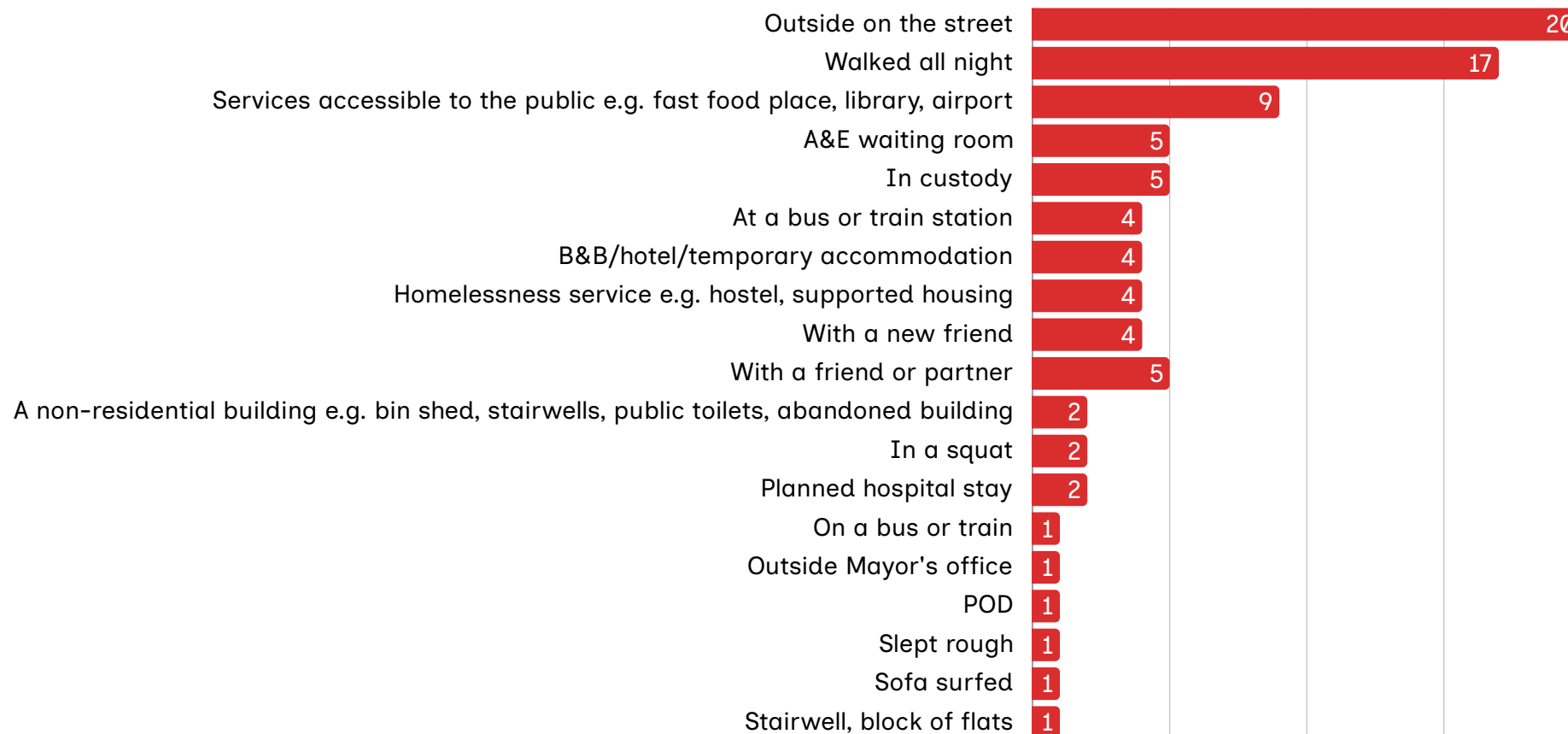
- 86 separate sleeping locations were recorded,
- On average women used 4 different locations or strategies throughout the night.

One woman who has rough slept, continuously for the 3-month period reports of staying in 10 different locations across Exeter. Another woman reported rough sleeping within the last week, had already spent the nights in 5 different locations.

Common sleeping locations or situations included:

- sleeping outside: 20 (91%)
- walking around all night: 17 (68%)
- public buildings such as fast-food restaurants: 9 (41%)
- bus or train stations: 4 (23%)
- hospital waiting rooms: 5 (23%)

Where have you rough slept in the last 3 months?



58 of the responses did not fit neatly within the government's definition of "rough sleeping", accounting for 67.4% of all responses. This shows a clear gap between the official definition and what women experiencing homelessness are actually describing, with many staying in hidden, unsafe, or temporary situations that are not captured in the current classification.

One woman described how staying safe while rough sleeping required constant planning and awareness. To reduce the risk of harm, she avoided drawing attention to herself and tried to blend in with other people using public spaces. By appearing to be a traveller waiting for transport rather than someone experiencing homelessness, she felt less vulnerable and more secure:



These accounts highlight how women often make decisions based on personal safety and risk management, which can mean their homelessness less visible. On average, women reported staying in four separate locations.

“I rarely bed down in the same spot; feels safer that way. I don’t like people to know where I am.”

These experiences demonstrate a prioritisation of personal safety over access to support services. Because of this pattern of movement, women are often disconnected from on-street support and must actively seek services, a process that can be particularly challenging when support settings are unknown and heavily male dominated.

Alongside this, women who remain on their feet throughout the night and sleep during the day often miss support from daytime services. Currently, in Exeter, there is no out-of-hours provision for those experiencing homelessness, further isolating women from essential support and resources.

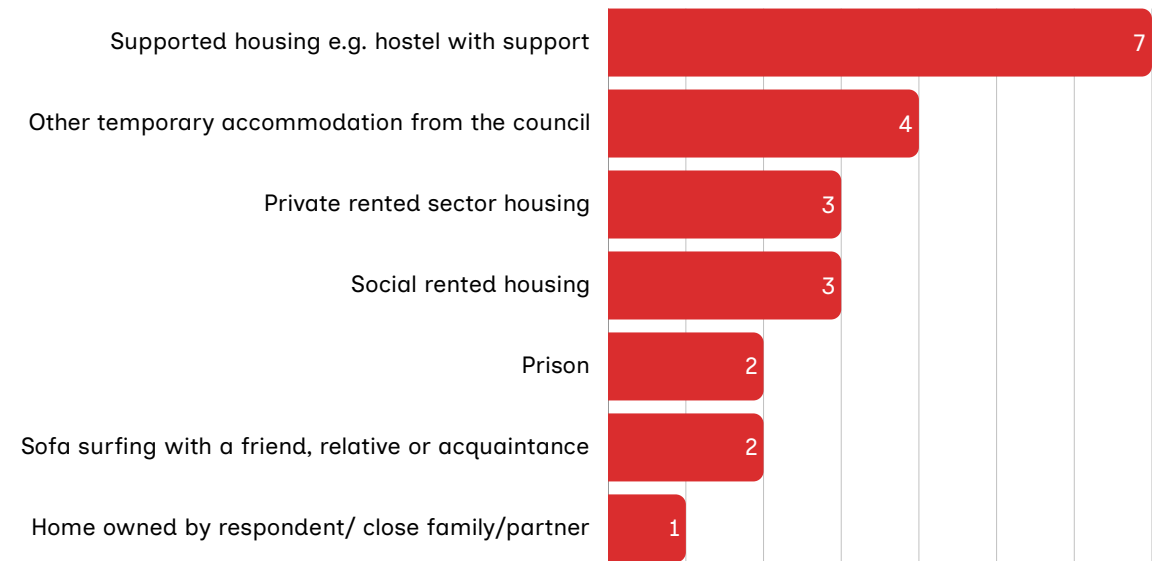
It is important to recognise that not all women experiencing rough sleeping move around at night, remain hidden, or regularly change location. Some choose to remain visible in public spaces, such as the high street or other well-used areas. For these women, visibility can provide a sense of safety, offering reassurance through being in view of others and within natural surveillance, under CCTV and closer to peer groups.

This choice is often made despite the risks that may be present in these environments, such as gender-based violence. While remaining visible in busier areas can offer a sense of protection and reduce feelings of isolation, it can also expose women to additional vulnerabilities. Even so, for some, the perceived safety of being seen and around others outweighs the risks and becomes an important part of how they manage and navigate their circumstances.

“I Sleep on the high street as I feel safe around other people. I have a bit of shelter and people know where to find me. I like to watch people and feel connected. It’s like my own TV in my own living room. I am close to services; they know where I am”

4.5 Previous living situation

Where were you staying most recently before sleeping rough? 2025 data



21 females answered this question, with 1 declining to answer. Just under half the women's previous accommodation was from supported or temporary accommodation accounting for 50% of the females who participated.

- Supported housing: 7 women (31.8%)
- Council temporary accommodation: 4 women (19%)

Half of the women interviewed (50%) had been in some form of housing accommodation immediately before sleeping rough. This suggests that current housing services are not always effective in preventing women from becoming homeless. It also shows that many of these women were already known to housing services before they ended up sleeping rough. Their situations point to breakdowns in housing pathways, where accommodation was not sustainable or did not provide enough stability or prevention support to keep them housed.

5 (23.8%) of the women asked where previously staying in more stable housing, such as:

- Social rented housing: 9.5%
- Private rented housing: 9.5%
- Home/family/partner: 5%

Qualitative data suggests that a key factor within this dataset is domestic abuse, which plays a major role in women's pathways into rough sleeping. These women experienced a loss of stable housing for a range of reasons, including relationship breakdowns, rent arrears or affordability issues, eviction, and tenancy breakdowns. However, domestic abuse frequently emerged as a central trigger that contributed to housing instability and breakdown.

One woman, who reported sleeping rough every night for the last three months, described previously living in housing association accommodation and leaving due to abuse and safety concerns. Her account highlights how women may feel forced to leave formal housing arrangements when they are unsafe or unsupported, even when this leads to homelessness and ongoing risk.



“Not feeling safe and at risk. Housing association not helping me, staff are not trained to support me. I abandoned the accommodation. I have a sole tenancy up country and at risk of losing it. I do not want to return. Just want to feel safe.”

5 | Access in support Provisions.

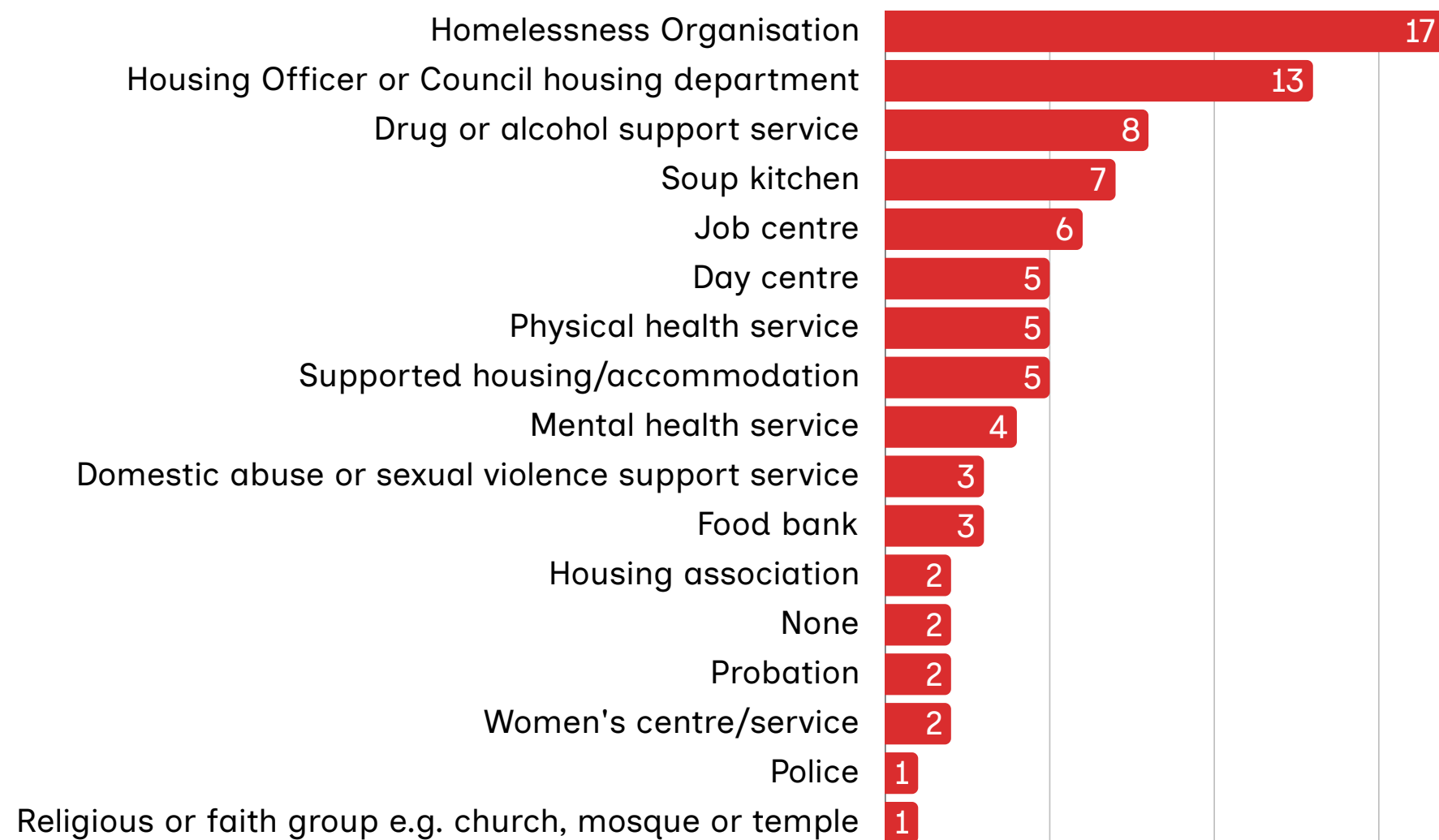
These findings aim to understand where women are currently receiving support from, and the areas where they would like additional support. This is not a reflection on services, but a way of identifying the most common points of contact and where further support may be helpful. It also helps to give a clearer picture of how women experiencing rough sleeping or housing instability navigate systems of support, often moving between different services and agencies depending on need, availability, and circumstance.

5.1 Where women are currently accessing support

- A total of 86 responses were given by 22 of the women.
- There was an average of approximately 4 support services accessed per respondent.
- 2 out of the 22 female respondents reported not accessing support at all.



Which services are you currently accessing support from?



This shows a strong level of engagement with services, with many women accessing support from several places rather than relying on one service alone. It is important to recognise the effort this can take while also managing homelessness, poor mental health, trauma, substance use, exhaustion, and concerns around safety.

For many women, staying connected to support means attending multiple appointments, travelling across the city, navigating different systems, and repeatedly sharing difficult experiences. Against this backdrop, the fact that many women remained in contact with several services reflects significant resilience and determination to seek support despite the challenges they face.

The 2025 data highlights which types of services are most frequently accessed:

- **Homelessness organisation – 19 (86.4%)** The dominant service, showing homelessness support is central to almost all individuals' support journeys.
- **Housing officer / council housing department – 15 (68.2%)** Very high engagement, reflecting widespread ongoing housing need and system involvement.
- **Drug or alcohol support service – 8 (36.4%)** A significant proportion, showing substance use support is a common parallel need.
- **Supported housing/accommodation – 6 (27.3%)** Over a quarter are involved in supported accommodation pathways.
- **Job Centre – 6 (27.3%)** Regular engagement with benefits and income support systems.
- **Soup kitchen – 6 (27.3%)** Indicates continued reliance on emergency food provision.
- **Mental health service – 5 (22.7%)** Moderate engagement, often alongside other complex needs.
- **Physical health service – 5 (22.7%)** Similar to mental health, showing broader health-related support needs.
- **Probation – 4 (18.2%)** Smaller justice-involved subgroup.
- **Food bank – 3 (13.6%)** Ongoing food insecurity for a smaller but notable group.
- **Domestic abuse / sexual violence support – 3 (13.6%)** Reflects a vulnerable subgroup with safety and trauma-related needs.



The findings suggest that these women are known to services and actively engaging with support across the city, accessing an average of four different services each. This demonstrates significant engagement despite the challenges associated with rough sleeping, poor mental health, trauma, substance use, exhaustion, and concerns around safety.

It is also important to recognise that women do not have to attend many homelessness and community-based services; they choose to. Unlike some statutory services, such as probation or Jobcentre appointments, which may be linked to legal requirements, engagement with these services is a requirement rather than a choice.

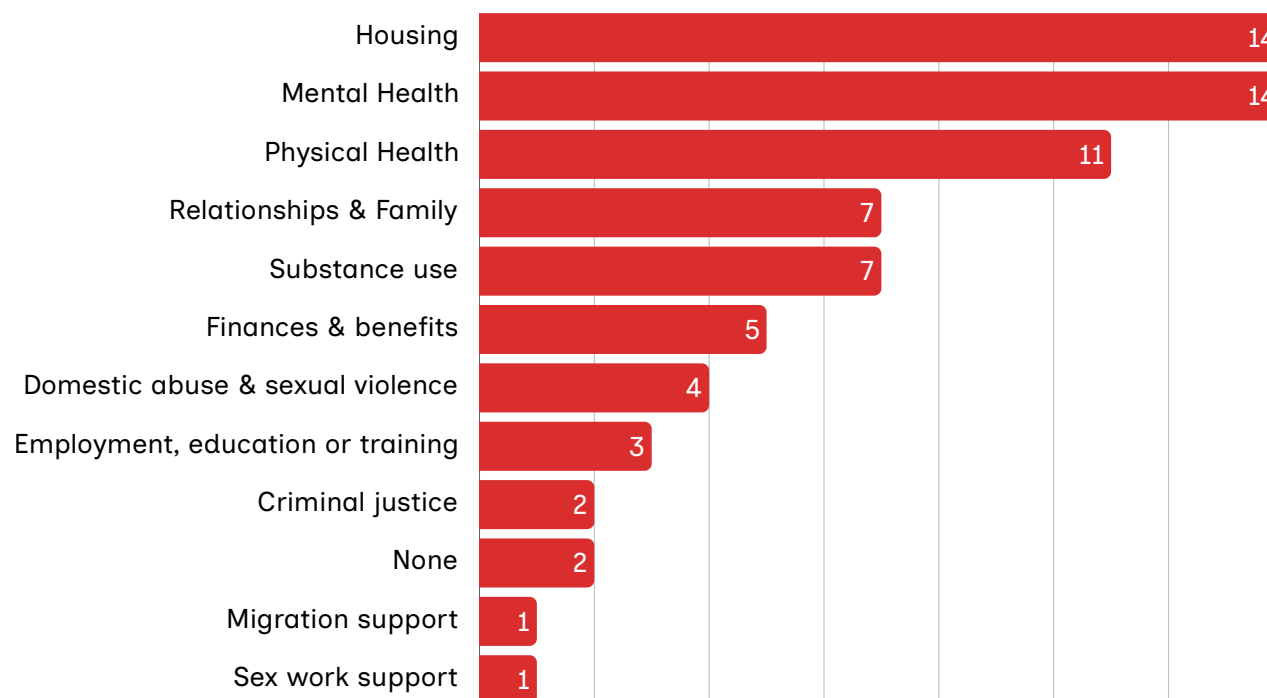
From a trauma-informed perspective, women are more likely to engage with environments where they feel safe, respected, listened to, and able to build trusted relationships. The continued use of homelessness services suggests they provide a sense of safety, consistency, and support that encourages women to return and engage voluntarily.

5.2 Areas Women Feel They Need Additional Support

Support needs vary from person to person and are shaped by individual circumstances and experiences. Some women may already be accessing support, while others may not feel ready or able to engage at a given time.

This question is important because it centres women's own voices and choices, allowing them to identify the areas where they feel they would benefit from additional support. It opens up a space for women to express their perceived needs and priorities in their own words, rather than being defined by services they are required to access or are already engaged with.

Are there any areas of your life that you require additional support in?



- In total, 77 responses were given to this question
- All 22 women gave an answer to this question
- On average women felt they needed support in 3 separate areas

Housing

63.3% of women feel that they require additional support or not receiving the support they would like with housing

For many women, housing is the highest area of need. It reflects ongoing difficulties with finding, keeping, or moving into stable accommodation. This shows where women feel they need the most support to improve their current situation.

One woman described how she has been cycling through the system for an extended period. Despite engaging with the appropriate services and progressing along her housing pathway, the overall outcome has been a pattern of moving between projects without settling into stable accommodation:



“I’ve bounced between supported accommodation and council for ages; I think I’ve stayed everywhere in Exeter... nothing works. I was kicked out of my last accommodation and am now waiting to go into council temp. It’s pointless because I’ll just be starting the cycle again.”

Mental and Physical health

Engagement with mental and physical health services shows a different pattern to housing, with a much wider gap between access and need.

Both mental health and physical health were identified as a key area of need of support.

- 64% of respondents saying they would like more support with mental health
- 50% of women said they needed support with their physical health.

This highlights a significant gap between the support women feel they need and what they are currently receiving. While services are available and being accessed by some, many women require more consistent or ongoing support.

One participant described how a combination of factors, including accommodation, support, and substance use, had an impact on both her physical and mental health:



“I was on medication to help with my health, but due to no support and wrong accommodation I have stopped it now. I am back drinking again as my mental health is all over the place. I feel I am dealing with everything on my own. Just getting through the day is enough now.”

This account illustrates the multi-complex nature of need where housing instability, lack of support, mental health difficulties, and substance use are closely interconnected. It highlights how gaps in one area of support can have a knock-on effect across other areas.

Substance use support

- 36.4% reported currently accessing drug and alcohol services.
- Substance use was identified by 31.8% of respondents as an area where additional support is needed.

Although access to drug and alcohol services is close to the level of need, substance use can still make it harder for women to get and keep housing. Some housing services have rules about drug and alcohol use, which can be a barrier. It can also make it harder to engage with support or maintain a tenancy. However, for some women, substance use is also a way of coping with difficult situations, especially when rough sleeping. This shows the need for housing support that is flexible and understanding of individual circumstances.

One participant described how substance use forms part of her coping during difficult periods, and while rough sleeping, this is an element of escape that allows her to navigate her current situation.



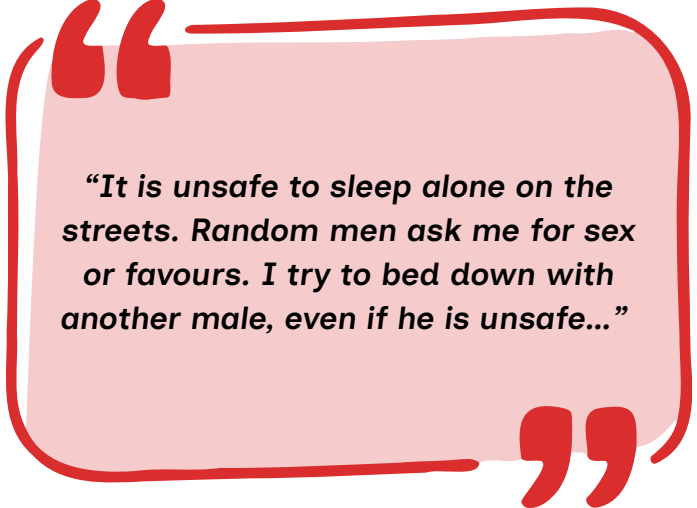
“Sometimes I have a secret spot that I hide away to when things get too much. I just want to sleep my way through the days. Crack gets me through the days, not ready to give up yet. It’s that warm fluffy blanket that I don’t have right now”

Domestic Abuse and Relationship/Family support

- 4 (18.1%) said they would like additional support
- 3 (13.6%) were already receiving support

Domestic abuse support shows a lower level of reported access and need. 11 women referenced domestic abuse within the qualitative responses, suggesting it remains a significant and ongoing factor in many women's current situations and is often closely linked to experiences of homelessness and instability.

There may be several reasons for this. Women who are rough sleeping are often focused on meeting their immediate needs, such as safety, shelter, food, and day-to-day survival, meaning seeking domestic abuse support may not feel like a priority at the time. For some women, staying with a man, even where there is ongoing risk or harm, can feel safer than being alone on the streets. One participant explained:



“It is unsafe to sleep alone on the streets. Random men ask me for sex or favours. I try to bed down with another male, even if he is unsafe...”

4 women described domestic abuse as a key contributing factor in leaving their previous accommodation.

One woman described that she fled her housing association (HA) property due to not feeling safe and being in an abusive relationship. This caused her to up route her life entirely, place her social tenancy at risk and rough sleep:

A key theme in the qualitative responses is the impact of domestic abuse on housing, support networks, and access to services. For some women, leaving their previous accommodation has led to major changes in where they live, who they can rely on, and how easily they can access support. This can also affect how connected they feel, especially when placed away from familiar areas and people.

***“Not feeling safe (Domestic abuse)
Housing Association not helping me,
staff are not trained to support me. I
abandoned the accommodation. I
have a sole tenancy up country and
risk loosing it. I don't want to return.
Just want to feel safe. ”***

31.8% - 7 women identified relationships and family as an area where they need more support



One participant, who after being placed in accommodation out of the area, returned to Exeter and began rough sleeping due to feelings of isolation and distance from services, explained:

This had a profound impact on her ability to sustain the placement and highlights how relocation away from familiar support networks can worsen vulnerability. The lack of accessible, face-to-face services, combined with delays in healthcare provision and reduced contact with substance misuse support, contributed to her sense of isolation and disconnection. As a result, rather than providing stability, the accommodation placement increased her sense of isolation, ultimately influencing her decision to return to Exeter and leading to a return to rough sleeping.

***I was placed in Council accommodation out of Exeter after being A banded and fleeing domestic abuse.. Lost support network in Exeter. Drug and Alcohol appointments only over the phone... GP long waiting list. I am a complex person with complex needs...the support just is not there. Its a beautiful place there. But that is not going to fix my problems. I don't want to be isolated. I am a social person;
I need people around me.***

Overall, relationships and family is a wide and important area of need. It includes partners, children, and wider family networks. It is not a single issue, but something that affects many parts of women's lives.

For some women, changes in housing or experiences of domestic abuse can affect their relationships and how much contact they have with family and friends. Being placed away from familiar areas can also make it harder to stay connected or build support networks.

6 | Accommodation Experiences: what works & what does not

By listening directly to women's voices, these additional census questions bring forward insights that are often absent from purely numerical data. They help to surface what it feels like to move through different forms of accommodation, and what support has meaningfully helped, or fallen short along the way. They also highlight the kinds of environments that feel safe, supportive, or destabilising, and the reasons why these experiences matter.

Taken together, these accounts reflect journeys shaped by transition, uncertainty, and resilience. They highlight not only the systems women move through, but also the emotional reality of those pathways; what stability feels like when it is found, and what it means when it is not. This understanding is essential to shaping services that are not only more effective, but to genuinely respond positively to women's needs and experiences.



6.1 What worked well?

Basic safety and stability

For many respondents, the most positive aspect of accommodation was simply having a roof over their head and a private space.

Women frequently referenced the importance of basic stability:



*“Having a roof over my head
and a bed.”*



“Being able to shut my door.”



*“A bed and a room and my
own bathroom.”*

Beyond these essentials, most responses did not go into further detail, suggesting that the main value of accommodation was the immediate relief of having somewhere to stay. The focus was on the clear contrast between having no secure place to sleep and having access to even a basic form of shelter.

Female only spaces

Female-only accommodation was viewed positively by many women and helped them feel safer and more comfortable. Comments such as “Liked the women’s only floor” and “Like all female house” show the value of spaces designed specifically for women, particularly for those who may have experienced gender-based abuse.

However, some women said the wider environment still felt male dominated, especially when communal spaces like kitchens were shared with men. This suggests that female-only sleeping areas alone may not fully create a sense of safety. Women also expressed a need for female-only communal spaces where they could relax and build supportive relationships. Overall, the feedback highlights that while female-only provision is important, women benefit most from environments that feel safe, supportive, and designed around their needs.

However, even where female-only spaces existed, some women still felt that the wider environment remained male dominated.



“I like being on a female-only floor, but it still feels like a male dominated space I have to share a kitchen with men I don’t know...I would like a female communal area... with a telly, somewhere we can hang out, watch films and do normal stuff like I used too”

Supportive staff relationships

Positive experiences were also linked to supportive relationships with staff.

One woman described how structured support helped her manage daily life, describing positive staff relationships within supported accomadation.



For some women, having accessible staff also helped to reduce feelings of isolation that can come with living supported accommodation, where building wider social connections can take time and peer support can be inconsistent. Knowing there was someone present to talk to or rely on was described as an important protective factor, contributing to a greater sense of safety, belonging, and emotional stability.

6.2 What did not work well?

While some positive experiences were identified, many responses highlighted significant challenges within accommodation provisions.

Gaps in Support within Accommodation

A recurring theme across women's experiences was the lack of consistent, trauma-informed support outside standard working hours, particularly during evenings and overnight periods when many felt most vulnerable. Women described nights as the time when feelings of fear, isolation, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts intensified, yet meaningful support was often unavailable.

Several respondents raised concerns about inexperienced or temporary night staff who lacked the training or understanding needed to respond appropriately to women in crisis. Frequent staff changes and limited mental health knowledge left some women feeling unheard, unsafe, and retraumatised.

One woman explained:

“Transient staff, too young and inexperienced. The night staff were unsupportive. That is when I need the most support. Sh*t always happens at night.”

One woman described the frustration at having to repeatedly explain her needs, feeling they were expected to educate staff about trauma and mental health themselves. She also wanted more proactive and female-focused support, including regular welfare checks, meaningful activities, and staff trained in trauma-informed and mental health-informed approaches:

“More support when in accommodation would help. Staff to be more mature and real about my situation. I feel like I am training them...I'm too old for that sh*t. Repeating myself all the time its traumatising and I'm tired of it. I just need someone to get it Take a load off not add a load on”

For some, the lack of support directly contributed to accommodation breakdowns. Requests for help were reportedly unmet due to staffing shortages or limited staff capability:

“I asked for support approx. 3-5 times every time this was not given due to staffing issues. Night staff not trained in any MH 1st Aid or support.

These findings highlight the importance of consistent, trauma-informed, gender-responsive support, particularly out of hours, to help women feel safe, supported, and able to sustain their accommodation, build trust in support networks and aid wellbeing.

Safety concerns within accommodation

A significant concern raised by women was feeling unsafe within accommodation settings, often linked to the behaviour of other residents and the overall environment.

Several described chaotic and unstable living conditions, particularly where substance use and disruptive behaviour were present.

One respondent said:

“Drug dealers in the building. Chaotic. Full of drinkers.”

This highlights how substance-related activity within accommodation can create an unpredictable and intimidating environment.

For some women, mixed-gender accommodation added to feelings of vulnerability, especially when combined with past trauma or existing mental health needs. One woman explained:

“I was in a male and female hostel. Some of the men are really scary, this gives me anxiety and all my fears escalate.”

Overall, the feedback shows that unsafe or unpredictable accommodation environments can significantly heighten anxiety, reduce feelings of safety, and negatively impact mental health, particularly for women with previous trauma or high support needs.

Exposure to substance use

Several respondents described the difficulty of maintaining recovery in environments where substance use was common.

One woman explained:

“Being around drink and drug users was difficult. A sober environment would have been better.”

Another described how the environment contributed to relapse:

“Dealers in the building. I relapsed within a few days after coming out of rehab. Back to square one. I lost the accommodation for using drugs in my room. Set up to fail.”



Restrictive environments and accommodation rules

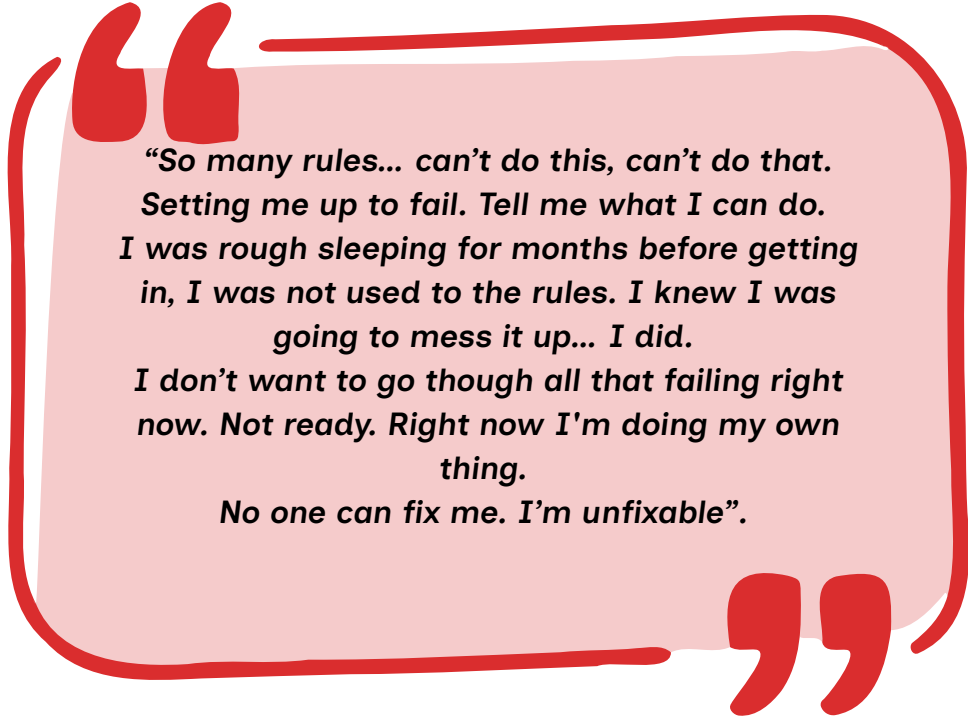
Some respondents also described how strict accommodation rules and expectations could feel overwhelming or unhelpful, particularly when they were already struggling.

One woman expressed this frustration clearly:

She describes finding the transition from rough sleeping to a council temporary accommodation placement difficult due to the lack of support and the strict expectations placed on her in a “general needs” setting.

She reports that the rules felt hard to follow while she was still adjusting after rough sleeping which contributed to repeated difficulties in maintaining the tenancy. Over time, this appears to have affected her confidence, with an expectation that she would struggle rather than succeed.

She ultimately disengaged from the accommodation process, stating she preferred to “do her own thing,” which indicates withdrawal from further housing at that time.



***“So many rules... can’t do this, can’t do that.
Setting me up to fail. Tell me what I can do.
I was rough sleeping for months before getting
in, I was not used to the rules. I knew I was
going to mess it up... I did.
I don’t want to go through all that failing right
now. Not ready. Right now I’m doing my own
thing.
No one can fix me. I’m unfixable”.***

These responses highlight the importance of support that is practical, flexible, and empowering, rather than systems that focus primarily on restrictions.

Isolation from support networks

Some women described being placed in accommodation away from their support networks, particularly when fleeing domestic abuse.

“I was placed in a Travelodge near the motorway for three weeks. I had no money and felt cut off from support.”

“I lost my support network. I don’t want to be isolated. I am a social person.”

Overall, these accounts highlight the isolating impact of being placed in accommodation in a new area. Moving away from familiar surroundings and existing social connections can leave people feeling disconnected at a time of significant uncertainty. For some, this meant losing regular contact with friends, family, or trusted professionals, reducing access to emotional and practical support. These experiences suggest that social connection and a sense of belonging are important factors in how temporary accommodation is experienced.



Lack of appropriate support for complex needs

Many women described having complex needs, including mental health challenges, substance use, and experiences of domestic abuse.

However, some felt accommodation providers were not equipped to support them.

***“Apparently, I am
'chaotic'... I have mental
health and it makes me
scared, so I kick off.
That gets me in trouble”***

***“I need Trained staff who can
support complex needs and are
resilient. Fed up of snowflakes
who don't know what they are
doing. To be supported I need a
strong support worker, who gets
it”***

Overall, women with complex and multi-faceted needs often felt that accommodation providers were not equipped to offer the level of support required. Participants emphasised the importance of skilled staff who understood mental health, substance use, and trauma, and described how unsuitable accommodation could worsen their wellbeing. These accounts suggest that housing alone was often insufficient without appropriate specialist support. There is also a sense of women feeling misunderstood or labelled when expressing distress. The same respondent added that their reactions to unsafe or challenging environments were not always recognised as reasonable responses to anxiety, but were instead sometimes interpreted as problematic behaviour.

7 | Conclusion

The 22 women who took part in this census shared more than statistics. They shared fear, exhaustion, resilience, loneliness, survival, and the daily reality of trying to stay safe without somewhere secure to be.

This census provides a clearer picture of what women experiencing homelessness in Exeter are facing. Much of women's homelessness remains hidden. Many avoid sleeping visibly on the streets, instead moving between locations, staying awake through the night, or relying on unsafe and temporary spaces until morning.

The findings show an increase in both the number of women rough sleeping and the severity of their situations compared to 2024. More women reported rough sleeping on the night before completing the census, and more were doing so repeatedly and for longer periods. There has also been a shift in who is affected, with most women aged 35 and over and increasing numbers in mid and later life. Half had recently been in supported or temporary accommodation, highlighting repeated breakdowns in housing pathways.

Many women are known to services and are engaging with multiple agencies. This points to ongoing, complex needs rather than a lack of support, but also highlights gaps in coordination and the limitations of existing responses.

A significant theme throughout the census was safety. Women consistently described feeling unsafe, both while rough sleeping and within some accommodation settings. Experiences of violence, exploitation, drug use, poor mental health, domestic abuse, and trauma were common. Women repeatedly told us that accommodation must be more than a bed. Housing alone does not guarantee safety, stability, or wellbeing.

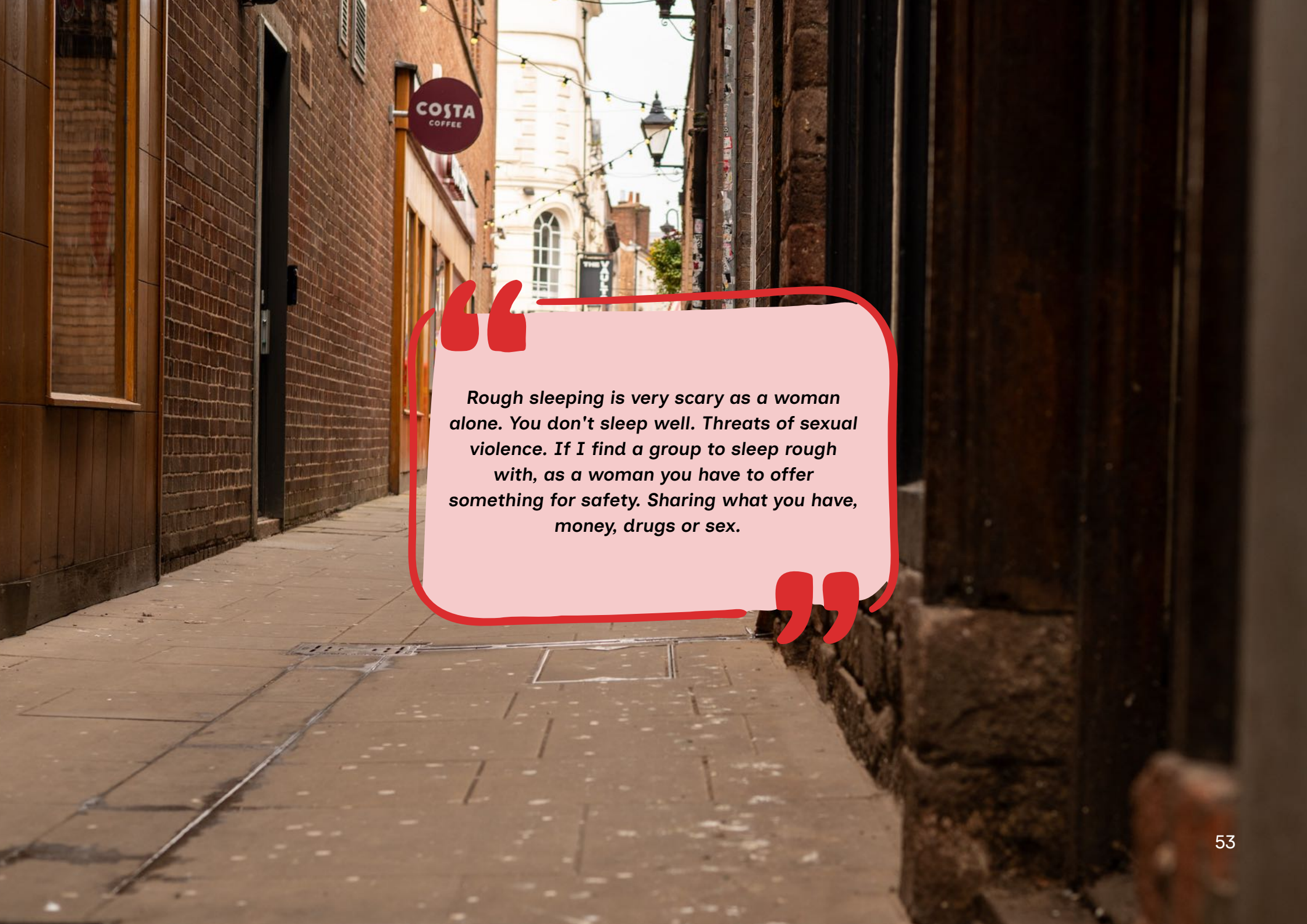
Women called for more trauma-informed, female-centred accommodation and support, including single-sex provision, female staff available around the clock, environments that support recovery, and spaces that foster connection and peer support. They also highlighted the need for greater flexibility, recognising that rigid rules and expectations can create barriers to engagement, particularly for women moving on from long periods of rough sleeping.

Choice emerged as a key theme. Women were more likely to engage when they felt listened to, respected, and involved in decisions about their support. When choice was limited through unsuitable placements, mixed-sex environments, strict rules, or being moved away from support networks, women often felt unsafe, isolated, and more likely to disengage or return to rough sleeping.

The census also highlighted a significant flaw in current rough sleeping verification processes. Many women described going to great lengths to stay out of sight at night because being visible can increase the risk of violence, exploitation, and abuse. Women spoke of moving constantly, staying with strangers, sleeping in unknown flats, or remaining awake until morning rather than bedding down in public. For many women, being “seen” rough sleeping is simply not safe. As a result, several reported never being verified– and therefore not eligible for Council support – despite experiencing homelessness and sleeping in highly precarious situations. These findings reinforce the hidden nature of women’s homelessness and highlight the need for trauma-informed approaches that recognise staying hidden as a survival strategy.

Above all, this census shows the importance of listening to women properly. They shared their experiences with honesty and courage, often while in crisis, and their voices are essential in shaping meaningful change.





Rough sleeping is very scary as a woman alone. You don't sleep well. Threats of sexual violence. If I find a group to sleep rough with, as a woman you have to offer something for safety. Sharing what you have, money, drugs or sex.

