



Winter Women Evaluation Report

December 2024





Contents



- 5** Introduction and Executive Summary
- 7** Wintercomfort
- 8** What is Winter Women?
- 13** This Evaluation
- 14** Findings
- 20** Case Studies
- 24** Challenges and risks
- 25** Recommendations
- 31** Conclusion
- 33** Comment from Wintercomfort for the Homeless
- 34** About The Charity Spark



Introduction and Executive Summary

Winter Women is a programme delivered by Wintercomfort for the Homeless (from here on referred to as Wintercomfort). It aims to support the growing number of women in Cambridge who are at risk of homelessness, or who have been made homeless.

The programme offers a combination of services to women who have experienced a range of issues, such as homelessness, substance misuse, and sexual violence. The services include practical help, emotional support, and community-building social activities. Winter Women's practical services include accommodation assistance, referral to health services and information, financial guidance, and employability training. Participants can also access one-on-one counselling tailored to their individual needs. Where appropriate, support is provided by accredited Independent Domestic Violence Advisors.

Winter Women also provides access to health services, advice on safety, and essential items, such as toiletries and clean clothes. Wintercomfort partner with other organisations that are helping vulnerable women across Cambridge to ensure that as many as possible know about the programme and can benefit from the support that it offers. The Winter Women programme has had profound impact on service users, fostering an inclusive and welcome environment that encourages active participation and engagement. Women who previously felt intimidated and isolated now have a safe space to access essential support, without the fear of harassment or violence. The programme's user-led approach ensures that services are adaptable to the changing needs of the women it assists. Through tailored support and fostering a sense of community, Winter Women helps women rebuild their lives with dignity and self-sufficiency, greatly improving their chances of securing stable housing and achieving lasting positive change. This initiative reflects Wintercomfort's commitment to addressing the unique challenges faced by homeless or vulnerably-housed women, and to creating a safer, more supportive community for everyone.



Wintercomfort

Wintercomfort for the Homeless is an information, advice, training, and support centre in Cambridge for individuals who are homeless or vulnerably housed. Their mission is to encourage and empower service users to overcome challenges and make lasting positive changes in their lives. Wintercomfort have been serving the Cambridge community since 1990 in response to the increasing numbers of people experiencing homelessness in the city. After becoming a registered charity in 1991, the organisation initially operated out of a converted bus before moving, in 1994, to its current location, Overstream House. The charity is the only daytime service provider in the city, and it works in partnership with other providers to ensure a coordinated approach in support for those experiencing need across a range of services:

- **Housing support:** expert advice for individuals trying to find secure accommodation or who are at risk of homelessness.
- **Welfare:** daily meals, clothing, and access to shower and laundry facilities for those who are sleeping rough.
- **Money and debt advice:** assistance with money management, setting up bank accounts, and arranging payment plans.
- **Training and employment support:** a range of learning opportunities, including accredited training and help with accessing paid employment.
- **Counselling and therapy:** specialist support to improve mental wellbeing, with specific provision for those working to overcome addiction and past trauma.
- **Social and leisure activities:** a programme of social activities and sports to build self-confidence, improve mental health, and build friendships.
- **Health and wellbeing:** support to access healthcare services.
- **Migrant support:** support and advice for homeless non-UK nationals who have no recourse to public funds.
- **Reaching Out:** increasing Wintercomfort's presence within the community to support individuals who may not know about the organisation and provide a referral point to other parts of the support offer.
- **Winter Women:** dedicated support for women who are vulnerably housed or experiencing homelessness.

What is Winter Women?

Winter Women provides a gender-specific, safe, supportive environment, tailored to the particular needs of women who are vulnerably housed or experiencing homelessness. The programme offers a comprehensive range of services, including welfare information, one-on-one counselling, life skills workshops, job skills training, wellbeing and creativity sessions, health services and resources, social activities, and outings. By addressing both immediate needs and long-term goals, Winter Women aims to empower women to achieve stability and independence.

The need addressed by Winter Women

Homelessness among women in Cambridge has worsened in recent years, mirroring a national trend. The area's particularly high cost of living and shortage of affordable housing make the issue especially severe in the city. Many homeless women face extreme mistreatment, including sexual abuse and violence, and often feel unsafe accessing primarily male-oriented homelessness services. When Wintercomfort introduced Winter Women in 2019, the service encountered

challenges with low engagement and difficulties in gaining publicity. Increased demand during the COVID-19 pandemic saw the programme's lead Key Worker supporting 40 women each week, clearly demonstrating demand for an ongoing gender-specific service.



Developing the programme

Wintercomfort adopted a participatory approach to designing Winter Women, consulting directly with female service users to understand their needs and preferences. This was crucial in ensuring that services and delivery would be user centred and responsive to the lived experiences and requirements of homeless women. These consultations highlighted several key insights:

1. **Safety and Security:** women expressed a strong need for a safe and secure environment, where they could access services without fear of harassment or intimidation from male service users.
2. **Gender-Specific Support:** there was a clear preference expressed for women-only spaces and services, especially for those who have experienced gender-based violence and trauma.
3. **Holistic Services:** women emphasised the need for a comprehensive service, with offerings that address both immediate needs (such as food and shelter) and long-term goals (such as mental health support, life skills training, and employability support).

To avoid duplicating services, Wintercomfort consulted with project workers and other providers who regularly work with homeless and vulnerably-housed women, such as Cambridge IDVA (Independent Domestic Violence Advisors), the Cambridge Street Outreach Team, and Cambridge Women's Aid. This collaborative approach identified specific service gaps, enabling Wintercomfort to design a unique, complementary programme that helps strengthen the support network for homeless women in Cambridge.

The participatory approach to developing Winter Women has continued, with service user feedback having influenced changes to delivery schedules. Now, two afternoons each week are reserved solely for women, when Wintercomfort ensures a safe space by implementing a no men policy. Listening to the women's suggestions has already led to the multiple sessions being introduced, and the session times changing from evenings to afternoons, which has improved attendance and overall satisfaction.

Current support offered

Winter Women operates five days a week, providing a dedicated women-only service between 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. This has created a space that allows women to express their emotions freely and receive empathetic support. Service users' safety and security are assured through measures such as operating with a separate entrance, away from Wintercomfort's main reception. All activities are facilitated by at least one female Project Worker and supported by specialist female volunteers, who are vetted and advanced DBS checked.

Beyond providing a safe space for women, Wintercomfort offer a wide array of activities and services through Winter Women:

Advice and practical support:

- Advice from support workers on a range of topics, which include benefits, housing, and debt management.
- Direct assistance with applications, which significantly benefits women as they navigate complex welfare systems.

One-on-one counselling:

- Personalised support to address mental health issues and trauma, including abuse, loss of children, and substance misuse.
- Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVA)-accredited one-on-one support for women who have experienced sexual violence.

Women-only group activities:

- Social activities inside Wintercomfort's building and out in the community.

Life skills workshops:

- Teaching practical skills, such as money management, eating on a budget, goal setting, and self-defence, to help woman manage their daily lives more effectively and empower them for independent living.

Job skills training:

- Improving women's employability prospects by providing them with skills necessary for employment and financial self-sufficiency, including IT training,

cleaning, catering, numeracy, and literacy, as well as offering interview and work clothes.

Wellbeing and creativity sessions:

- Promoting mental and emotional health through activities such as art, creative writing yoga, photography, cooking sessions, and mindfulness.

Health sessions:

- Access to healthcare services and information on maintaining physical and sexual health delivered by female nurses. Also, sessions to improve physical health and self-esteem, such as hairdressing, pampering, make-up tutorials, foot care, and massage.

External outings:

- Recreational opportunities for women to build social connections and reduce isolation, such as women-only sports activities and cultural visits.

Provision of hygiene products and clothing:

- Health and hygiene packs containing personal care essentials. Additionally, access to clean clothing.

Intended outcomes

Winter Women has five key aims for its service users:

1. Improved mental wellbeing and confidence
2. Reduced loneliness
3. Improved physical health from receiving healthcare and advice
4. Increased likelihood of securing accommodation
5. Increased employment prospects





This Evaluation

Our evaluation assessed the effectiveness of Winter Women in achieving its intended outcomes, using a mixed methodology of surveys and interviews with service users. A survey of user perspectives received 10 responses. As the women supported by Wintercomfort are vulnerable and may not have access to the internet, survey completion was sometimes facilitated by Wintercomfort staff. We also interviewed six service users during two visits to Wintercomfort in March and April 2024. The interviews aimed to capture detailed personal experiences, assess the programme's impact, and gather feedback on the services provided, exploring topics such as engagement and impacts on mental wellbeing, physical health, and housing stability. They also investigated women's views about the quality of support and any barriers or challenges encountered in accessing services, plus their recommendations for improvement and/or expansion of the programme.

The interview and survey samples are representative of the population of women who were accessing Winter Women's services at the time of our evaluation. Those we interviewed and surveyed represent a diverse range of living conditions and employment statuses, but were facing common socio-economic challenges, were unemployed, and were in receipt of benefits. The interviewees' living arrangements varied, with some living in council homes, and others in temporary accommodation or without a fixed address. Half of survey respondents reported having physical or mental health conditions, highlighting the complex needs of the women supported by Wintercomfort. Most had been engaging with the service for over one year, suggesting there is demand for sustained support.

We also interviewed seven Wintercomfort staff to gather insights on the programme's effectiveness, challenges in providing support, improvement suggestions, and observations of the impact on women. Additionally, we reviewed reports, covering April 2020 to April 2024, which have been submitted by Wintercomfort to programme funders, including Pilgrim Trust and Henry Smith Charity. These provided quantitative metrics on service delivery, attendance and engagement, and an understanding of how Winter Women has developed.

Findings

Service reach

Winter Women aims to increase the number of women supported by Wintercomfort. Initially serving 20 women in 2019, the programme's reach has grown in every subsequent year, often exceeding targets, and despite periods when delivery was affected by COVID-19 constraints. During the year to March 2024, 167 women were supported, and 104 women accessed services in the six months to September 2024. The growth in service users demonstrates women's need and increasing trust and appreciation for the safe and supportive environment and holistic services that Wintercomfort provide.

Outcome 1: Improved mental wellbeing and confidence

“ I started joining a women's group and it's been absolutely amazing. They've helped me out really well.” – **Service user**

“ Before my self-confidence was really knocked down. It was next to none. But since I've been coming back here at Wintercomfort, again, it really helped my self-confidence, and it really helped to build my strength up.”
– **Service user**

We found that Winter Women has improved the mental health and wellbeing of participating women. One-on-one counselling has been pivotal in addressing issues such as trauma, abuse, mental health challenges, and substance misuse. Continuous support through regular check-ins has ensured that strong connections with women are preserved so ongoing needs can be serviced.

In 2023/24,¹ 32 women received mental health support on 181 occasions, and 30 women accessed mindfulness/wellbeing support on 183 occasions.

¹ Year ended March 2024

“ Oh, yeah. I will talk to everyone here. I wouldn't have done that. I got in, walked in, sat on a chair and stayed quiet. But I talk to everyone now.” – **Service user**

Survey results show that access to healthcare services, practical support, and welfare information and advice contribute to enhancing women's mental health. Half the respondents reported significant improvements in mental wellbeing, with most others noting some improvement. Women's confidence and self-worth have also benefited. In interviews, many described positive changes in how they view themselves and how they interact with others, with group sessions having helped to reduce isolation and boost self-confidence. In survey responses, the majority reported that involvement with the programme has increased their self-confidence.

Outcome 2: Reduced loneliness through peer support

Winter Women has reduced feelings of loneliness by connecting women with shared experiences and offering activities that enhance emotional and social wellbeing. Wintercomfort have established a safe community setting, where participants can freely share experiences and challenges, and where emotional healing and genuine connections can occur.

Social events, such as coffee mornings, cooking sessions, and arts and crafts, plus occasional external outings, have helped to build a community and alleviate isolation, with six women on average attending each event. Women-only evening

“ There's a lot of women that wouldn't have nowhere to go. If it weren't for the women's group, I wouldn't know where to go...whatever problem you've got, even if it's quite personal, you can talk to them, and they'll listen. Yeah, you know, I mean, whereas a lot of places I won't tell my private business to. Yeah, because I don't trust them. But I trust these people here at Wintercomfort.” – **Service user**

“ The staff here are absolutely fantastic. The group is brilliant. If you've got a problem, they will help you. They try and do the best they can. So that you're not feeling down and depressed, and you're walking out of the building more happier than you did when you first walked in. We all help each other if we can.” – **Service user**

sessions were also highlighted as a safe space for social interaction, further decreasing isolation. Service users believe that Winter Women offers a platform where they feel completely free to express their thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment or repercussions.

Outcome 3: Improved physical health from receiving healthcare and advice

“ I've had counselling here and everything. I did a 13-week counselling session.”
– **Service user**

Winter Women has improved service users' physical health through supported access to healthcare services and information, and referrals to specialised health services, such as counselling, where appropriate. Healthcare support is vital for enhancing overall physical health, particularly for women who are in situations where they face multiple barriers to accessing medical care.

Winter Women health sessions cover a wide range of topics: general and sexual health information, hairdressing, pampering, foot care, and massage. Women are given health and hygiene packs containing personal hygiene and self-care essentials, such as shampoo, conditioner, deodorant, menstrual products, and cosmetics. Additionally, wellbeing and creativity sessions, along with external outings to gyms and cultural venues, have encouraged physical activity and contributed to overall health improvement.

In 2023/2024:

Medical support
was provided on

148
occasions

Wintercomfort
attended

30
medical appointments
with women

Women participated
in sport on

138
occasions

21

women received
healthy eating support
and guidance

“ *My vision is very bad. And my caseworker, she gave me vouchers to go check my eyes, they paid for that.*”

– Service user

Seven survey respondents had accessed healthcare services through Winter Women. Some have benefitted from Wintercomfort's in-house services, with others requiring external referrals. Effective referrals have broadened the support available, addressing a wider range of health issues and promoting long-term stability. A joined-up approach

connects women to resources tailored to their needs. Several survey respondents reported being referred to external support services, such as Cambridge IDVA. Maintaining and expanding access to health services will be a key element in Winter Women's continuing success.

Outcome 4: Increased likelihood of securing accommodation

“ They help me with my rent and they're trying to help me get paid because of my illnesses.”

– Service user

Addressing housing needs is a critical step towards achieving long-term stability for vulnerable women. Winter Women has enhanced women's chances of securing accommodation by providing a supportive environment, where they can access housing services without fear, as demonstrated by the number who have accessed housing support.

Between March 2023 and April 2024, 95 women received housing support on 399 occasions, nine women successfully gained accommodation, and six women received a furnishing grant.

During the time in which Winter Women has been operating, Wintercomfort has increased its resources for housing support, through expansion of the Housing Advisor's working hours and introduction of a new Tenancy Support Advisor. Women benefit from practical assistance in adhering to housing plans, managing debts, and maintaining tenancies. This holistic approach has been instrumental in helping women secure stable housing and avoiding repeated cycles of homelessness.

Winter Women's practical assistance with housing applications and with navigating legal issues related to housing and homelessness has been crucial in overcoming barriers to seeking housing help. Through providing emotional support and advice for women who are dealing with housing, Winter Women has minimised the stress and anxiety associated with housing insecurity and legal processes. By addressing practical and emotional challenges around housing and focusing on safety and sustainability, Winter Women delivers comprehensive housing support that empowers women to secure and sustain stable accommodation, reducing their risk of becoming homeless again.

95
women received
housing support on
399
occasions in
2023/24

Outcome 5: Increased employment prospects

Winter Women aims to improve employment prospects by providing job skills training and support with job searches. Between March 2023 and April 2024, 17 women undertook digital skills training and 11 participated in job skills sessions covering a range of skills topics, including numeracy, literacy, catering, and cleaning. In this period, seven women volunteered and three women successfully gained employment.

The women who were interviewed for the evaluation indicated that Winter Women has had limited direct impact on their employment prospects through job skills training or job search support. This was because these women needed to prioritise stable accommodation before becoming ready to take up employability support or seek job opportunities. They also had to consider financial viability implications, such as benefit eligibility and housing status, when assessing job opportunities. These circumstances may be replicated for other Winter Women service users. In survey responses, two respondents had accessed employment or educational support, and one had participated in job skills training. Nevertheless, some women noted signs of personal empowerment and networking opportunities, which could indirectly benefit their employment prospects.

Service users commented that the wider offer from Winter Women, such as access to clothing, vouchers, and assistance in managing finances, helps women to establish a stable foundation for successful engagement with employment opportunities. Increasing visibility of the complete programme could help more women achieve stable employment, leading to financial independence and long-term stability.

“ Here, you can get a shower, you can get a change of clothes. You can get something to eat. Plus, they help you sort out your finances if you can't sort them out properly yourself.” – **Service user**

Case Studies

Discovering a community: Amy's journey with Wintercomfort

Names have been changed to protect individuals' privacy.

Amy is a 28-year-old woman who has been receiving support from Winter Women for a year. She had previously attended Wintercomfort, but stopped due to conflicts with other homeless individuals. Winter Women provided her with a renewed sense of community and support, especially after experiencing significant personal trauma.

Amy's primary motivation for joining Winter Women sessions stemmed from her struggles with depression and mental health issues, exacerbated by isolation and recent traumatic events. She shared a harrowing incident where someone tried to set her boat on fire, which severely impacted her mental wellbeing and sense of security. "I had to go to court in January because someone tried setting my home on fire... It was really bad."

Upon re-joining Wintercomfort, Amy found Winter Women to be a safe haven. She received funding assistance to repair her damaged boat. "Wintercomfort, especially the women's group, has been helping me... trying to get my boat up to standard again..." She also benefited from Winter Women's counselling services, which played a significant role in improving her mental health. The emotional support from other women in the group with similar troubled pasts has made her feel less isolated in



her struggles. "Just being about other women who have had a troubled past as well... it makes me feel like I'm not the only person in this world that has problems."

Amy has experienced several positive impacts from her involvement with Winter Women, including notable improvement in her mental health, reduced feelings of loneliness, and a significant boost in self-confidence. "After the Women's Group, when I go home, I feel a lot better... I don't feel like I want to hurt myself." The sense of community and understanding she found in the group have been particularly valuable to her. "I feel like I could literally say whatever I feel... because we are only human. Everyone has ups and downs."

Amy is highly satisfied with Winter Women's support and services, but suggested that more funding could enhance the programme. She recommended adding outdoor activities, such as picnics and sightseeing trips, to offer more opportunities for social interaction and a change of environment, which would further support the women's mental health and social skills development. "It would be nice if we could do activities... just to go out and have a picnic outside... maybe do some sightseeing."

Amy's experience highlighted the vital role of targeted support services like Winter Women in addressing the unique needs of homeless and vulnerable women. Access to practical assistance, emotional support, and community connection has significantly improved her wellbeing. Amy's story emphasises the importance of continued funding and expanded activities to enhance the quality of support for women in similar situations.

Obtaining stability: Susan's journey with Wintercomfort

Susan has attended Wintercomfort intermittently for over 20 years. Recently, she has become a regular participant in Winter Women activities, which she finds to be an essential part of her support system.

Susan struggled with alcohol addiction for many years, but has greatly reduced her drinking. Winter Women has played a crucial role in providing her a supportive environment. "I used to be a drinker... But I'm not that way anymore. I still drink,



but not like I used to.". The transition from heavy drinking to a more manageable level marks a significant milestone in Susan's journey. Winter Women has provided her with essential services, such as counselling, financial guidance, and general support. She recently completed a counselling programme, which she found exceptionally beneficial, despite usually not persisting with such commitments. "I did a 13-week counselling session... That was really good for me, because normally I don't stick at it." Financial guidance and assistance,

which Susan had never received before, has been vital in helping her manage her budget and develop a sense of stability. "I'm 60 years old, and I've never been given a support or anything like that. So, they helped sort that out for me."

Winter Women has greatly enhanced Susan's overall wellbeing, offering a sense of community and safety that she feels within the group. "There's a lot of women that wouldn't have nowhere to go if it weren't for the women's group." Feeling part of a group has helped Susan stay engaged and avoid isolation. "I can lock myself away and be on my own. But I can deal with this... I come here a quite a lot. I'm developing quite a lot as well, especially over these last few months." For Susan, having trust and openness with the Winter Woman staff has been crucial. "Because whatever problem you've got, even if it's quite personal, you can talk to them. And they'll listen. Yeah, you know, I mean, whereas a lot of places I won't tell my private business to. Yeah, because I don't trust it. But I trust these people here."

Susan is very pleased with Winter Women's services, but sees a need for more support for younger homeless women. "I wish there was more in place for them, for them to be able to stay somewhere, rather than staying out on the street." She believes that having a dedicated building with rooms for young homeless women would provide them with the safety and stability they need.

Susan's case highlights the substantial positive impact Winter Women has on its service users. The blend of counselling, financial assistance, and a supportive community has been crucial in improving her quality of life. Her suggestion for dedicated accommodation for younger women indicates a need for services that address the distinct challenges faced by different age groups within the homeless female population.

Finding support and confidence: Lisa's journey with Wintercomfort

Lisa, a long-time resident of Cambridge, has been supported by Winter Women for about a year. Although she suffers from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and asthma, she has found the services provided by Wintercomfort to be extremely beneficial, which has greatly improved her overall wellbeing.

Lisa's connection with Wintercomfort started with a friend's recommendation. She soon got involved with Winter Women's activities, attending sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The group has provided her a supportive environment, where she feels welcomed and respected. She highlighted the positive impact on her social life, helping her overcome feelings of isolation. "It's really helpful to get out, mix with people, and help each other."

The support Lisa has received through Winter Women has been varied and significant. She has benefitted from financial guidance, especially in managing her rent and dealing with her health issues. "They helped me with my rent, and they're trying to help me get benefits because of my illnesses. They're very, very supportive." The staff's expertise and willingness to help have been vital in reducing Lisa's stress and improving her quality of life. This supportive environment at Wintercomfort has led to noticeable improvements in her wellbeing. She expressed a deep sense of respect and safety when interacting with the staff. "We are very, very respected by the staff, and we respect the staff as well." This mutual respect has allowed Lisa to feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics, increasing her trust in the services offered. She also emphasised the emotional benefits of being part of Winter Women. "I'm always walking out of here with a smile on my face." Activities like basket-making and socialising have helped boost her confidence and given her a much-needed sense of purpose.

Lisa's experience showcases the transformative effect that Winter Women can have on its participants. Through financial assistance, emotional support, and a strong sense of community, Lisa has been able to improve her wellbeing and rebuild her confidence. Her story emphasises the importance of these support systems for women facing similar challenges.

Challenges and risks

While the Winter Women programme has been successful in supporting the women who engage with it, there are some challenges which may limit its reach.

Staff capacity and bandwidth

Each woman supported by Winter Women has a unique story, challenges, and circumstances. Providing comprehensive tailored support requires a considerable amount of time, which can naturally take an emotional toll on staff.

Issues finding suitable accommodation

Due to abuse they have suffered, many of the women require specialised trauma support and appropriate accommodation. Dedicated accommodation for homeless women is less common than services available to men or open to everyone, posing a significant challenge for Wintercomfort in securing suitable accommodation for the women they support.

Barriers to engagement faced by service users

Survey responses identified some barriers to engaging with Winter Women, primarily transportation issues and travel costs, which suggests that improved transport support or financial assistance for travel could enhance accessibility.

Other reported barriers included a lack of confidence in seeking help and challenges in managing mental or physical health.

These highlight the value of initial confidence-building measures, one-on-one support and a health service offer. Additionally, although less frequently, some respondents cited reaching the venue, fear of being judged, or language or communication issues as reasons for not having accessed Winter Women services. These potential barriers reinforce the importance of accessibility, an inclusive and non-judgemental environment, and translation or multilingual support.



Recommendations

The Winter Women programme has made a significant positive difference to the lives of the women who are benefitting from its services. The main recommendations from this evaluation are to continue and to optimise delivery of the programme, and to consider opportunities for strengthening the offer and expanding the reach, if deemed relevant for Winter Women service users, and if resourcing is possible. There are also some additional findings, where services rely on third parties for delivery. These represent opportunities that could be explored in the future, if they are thought to be appropriate.

Continue and optimise

Peer facilitation opportunities

Peer-to-peer interactions foster a sense of community and reciprocal support among participants and contribute to personal growth. Promoting peer-facilitated group discussions, on a variety of topics, encourages open communication and enhances feelings of mutual support.

Confidence-building activities

Activities on the theme of confidence building have significant impact upon the women involved. Topics such as public speaking, assertiveness training, leadership skills, and decision-making, combine with training in practical skills, such as job readiness, financial literacy, and creative arts, to further enhance women's self-esteem and empowerment.

Social events or outings

Social events and outings provide informal settings where women can interact and build relationships. Teamwork-focused activities are particularly valuable for fostering a sense of community. Expanding the range of social events and activities could increase the number of women who participate. However, this would depend on there being sufficient demand, as any expansion would need additional resources.

Opportunities to foster open communication and feedback

Regular discussion groups on topics such as mental health, self-care, and personal development, encourage open and honest communication, allowing women to share their thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment. Implementing anonymous feedback mechanisms, such as suggestion boxes or online surveys, could help gather honest input from participants to help identify areas for improvement.

Financial and budgeting support

Practical support, including funds for essential household items and recently extended one-on-one financial and budgeting advice, has been vital in helping women adhere to housing plans, manage debts, and maintain tenancies. Assistance such as facilitating access to financial aid for rent and utility bills, and offering workshops on budgeting, financial literacy, and managing household expenses, provides a holistic approach, ensuring participants are better equipped to sustain their accommodation.

Housing and accommodation Support

Continuing strong partnerships with local housing authorities, private landlords, and housing associations facilitates quicker access to available housing. Wintercomfort are part of a 'Streets to Homes' contract with accommodation providers and sit on the local housing panel. These actions ensure Wintercomfort's timely awareness of housing opportunities, including women-only accommodation.

Holistic support tailored to individual needs

Tailored support addressing individual circumstances, such as health-related financial support like Personal Independence Payment or Universal Credit, has proven effective, and it highlights the value of understanding individual needs to develop holistic support plans. Implementing regular follow-up sessions to monitor progress, and adjust individual plans as needed, also benefits service users.

Practical support services and resources

Practical services, such as vouchers for transportation and personal care items, help to address service users' immediate needs. Financial workshops on budgeting and managing personal finances enable women to achieve financial stability.

Continuing to develop the resource centre at Overstream House could afford more women who are in positions to be considering employment with access to computers, the internet, and job search tools, and support their job-finding efforts.

Outreach

Outreach with several organisations in Cambridge provides a natural referral pathway to Winter Women. Examples of women-only outreach partnerships include Change Grow Live, supporting women who have long-term experiences of homelessness, plus sessions at Cambridge Women's Resource Centre and 'The Haven', a relatively new twice-weekly, women-only space provided by It Takes A City working in partnership with the Women's Homelessness Action Group. Women are also referred to Wintercomfort through outreach partnerships that are not gender specific, such as through the Reaching Out programme. This programme sees Wintercomfort staff maintain a presence at, and offer support to users of, four local foodbanks across Cambridge on a regular basis. Wintercomfort are seeking to collaborate with more organisations in this space to grow awareness of and widen access to Winter Women.

Consider

Opportunities that Wintercomfort may wish to consider developing if appropriate to the cohort of women who are being supported through Winter Women.

Further Developing Community Connections

Encouraging participants to engage in community activities and foster a sense of belonging can aid in their overall stability. Organising neighbourhood meet-ups, community clean-up projects, and other social events could help women integrate into their new environments and build supportive community networks. Whilst it has previously been challenging to engage service users in these types of activities, their benefits may be longer term and so should be considered wherever possible.

Expanding Support for Physical and Mental Health

Opportunities to expand the type and frequency of health sessions

- Introducing a broader range of health topics, such as nutrition, fitness, chronic illness management, and preventive care, and providing more health sessions in general, could address a wider array of health issues.

Tailored healthcare packs

- Introducing customised health packs that address specific needs, such as winter care and allergy relief, and including appropriate informational brochures or leaflets on personal hygiene, self-care tips, and local health resources, will further support participants' wellbeing.

Personalised health plans

- Facilitating access to regular health assessments offered by other providers could create personalised health plans that would address participants' unique health needs and goals. Implementing a system of regular follow-up access would support providers in identifying any necessary adjustments to plans and help provide comprehensive, individualised care for service users.

Health Days

- Acting as a hub for dedicated Winter Women Health Days that feature a variety of health-focused activities and services, such as health screenings, and wellness and fitness workshops. Delivering these Health Days in partnership with local healthcare providers would enable a broad range of health topics to be covered in a single event.

Adding to Capacity for Housing and Accommodation Support

Housing advisory services

- Expanding Winter Women's Housing Advisor service has already increased the number of women accessing accommodation support. Further developing this capacity could increase this reach and allow more women to receive personalised assistance with housing applications, benefit claims, and navigating legal issues.

Educational workshops on housing rights and resources

- Workshops with housing experts or legal advisors on housing rights, application processes, and available resources empowers women to take more active roles in securing their accommodation. Through a partnership with legal advisers, Lawstop, Wintercomfort also provide evidence in court to support women who face legal challenges and eviction.

Additional findings

Opportunities relating to services that rely on third parties for delivery.

One-on-one counselling sessions

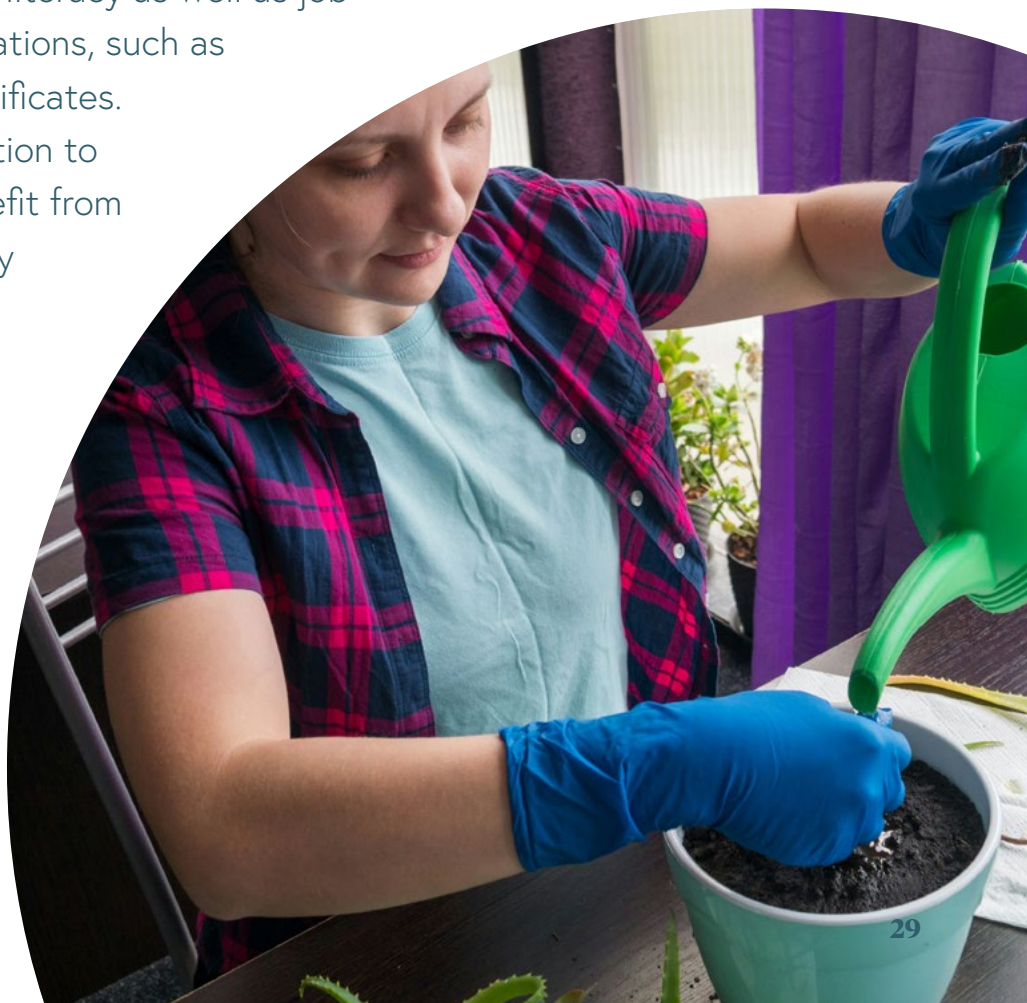
It is crucial for counselling sessions to be highly accessible. If it is possible to find the resource, then offering extended hours for these sessions during evenings and weekends could accommodate more participants with varying schedules. Ensuring counsellors are trained in trauma-informed care and cultural sensitivity is essential to offer inclusive support and meet the specific needs of women who have experienced trauma.

Integration with Mental Health Services

Wintercomfort are dependent on other providers to deliver some of the specialised services that help women develop effective coping strategies for mental health challenges. Any opportunities that arise for closer integration with these services could be explored to enhance Winter Women's mental health support.

Supporting Employability

Employability assistance has to be at an appropriate level, supporting numeracy and literacy as well as job-specific skills and qualifications, such as COSHH and Hygiene certificates. Women who are in a position to take up employment benefit from personalised employability support that helps them to identify their own strengths and find work that matches them and their personal situation.





Conclusion

This evaluation of the Winter Women programme demonstrates its significant and positive impact on the lives of homeless and vulnerably-housed women in Cambridge. By offering a combination of personalised support, practical assistance, and a nurturing community environment, the programme has effectively addressed key areas such as mental wellbeing, social engagement, housing stability, and overall confidence.

Service users report high levels of satisfaction, with many expressing strong feelings of trust and reliability in the services provided. The programme has successfully met, and often exceeded, user expectations, as shown by the high likelihood of recommendations and positive qualitative feedback.

Despite Winter Women's success, the evaluation highlights some opportunities to strengthen the programme's ability to support more women and enhance the overall impact.

In conclusion, the Winter Women programme plays a crucial role in offering comprehensive support to some of the community's most vulnerable members. Its ongoing evolution and dedication to addressing emerging needs will ensure that it remains a vital resource for homeless and vulnerably-housed women who are seeking stability and independence.



Comment from Wintercomfort for the Homeless

On behalf of Wintercomfort, I extend our thanks to Charity Spark for their thorough and insightful evaluation of the Winter Women programme. Your expertise has provided us with invaluable insights that will help shape the future of this essential initiative.

It is deeply encouraging to see the profound impact Winter Women has had on the lives of so many women, from improving mental wellbeing and reducing loneliness to increasing housing stability and creating a sense of community. The findings on the programme's client-led, holistic approach reaffirm our commitment to addressing the unique challenges faced by homeless and vulnerably housed women in Cambridge.

The case studies particularly stand out, highlighting the transformative effects of personalised support and community connection. Their journeys demonstrate the power of safe, gender-specific spaces where women can rebuild their lives with dignity and self-sufficiency at a pace appropriate for them. Additionally, the recommendations, such as promoting more peer-facilitated group discussions and more confidence building activities, provide a clear roadmap for future growth.

We are proud of what Winter Women has achieved so far and remain committed to building on this success. Thank you again, Charity Spark, for helping us understand where we are making a difference and where we can go even further. Together, we will continue to create lasting positive change.

Sarah Halls, CEO Wintercomfort for the homeless

About The Charity Spark

The Charity Spark (trading name for R Denny Consulting Limited) is an evaluation and research agency established in 2019. We are an agile team of five staff, including three specialist evaluators. Our expertise lies in supporting charities and non-profits with independent evaluations, impact frameworks, and insight-led strategic development. We take a tailored approach to every evaluation, considering the needs of the project and ensuring that the voice of the beneficiary is elevated throughout our work. Our UK non-profit sector expertise is broad. We have particular experience and interest in partnering with health and social welfare charities, particularly those involved in community engagement and the housing sector. The team responsible for this evaluation was Dr Andrea Martinez (Research and Evaluation Officer), Daniel Pledger (Research and Evaluation Officer), Rebecca Denny (Director) and Sarah Jenkins (Research and Evaluation Officer).



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