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# COVID-19



## Couples and relationships guidance for homelessness settings (July 2020)

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During the COVID-19 outbreak, the unique housing and support needs of homeless and rough sleeping couples should be considered, reducing the risk of abandonment and return to rough sleeping.

**A couple** refers to two people who have each identified as being in a relationship with the other. They may have other partners, there may be unhealthy aspects to their relationships and they may separate and reunite repeatedly.

Couples should be recognised and supported both individually and as a couple, using a **strengths-based approach** in an appropriate and safe way.

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### Guidance for outreach workers and workers based in emergency hotels

- **Rough sleeping couples should be offered two separate rooms** in the same hotel/accommodation, unless one or both partners have asked not to be moved into the same accommodation.
- **Couples need their own space**, particularly clients who have complex needs. Housing couples in the same room reduces the chance of an open and honest conversation during phone call welfare checks or visits.
- **Couples should be able to go into each other's rooms to spend time together**, unless a female partner has a room in a women-only area in which case a male partner should not have access.

### Approaching and assessing rough sleeping couples:

1. **Explain** the situation regarding COVID-19 and self-isolating to the couple.
2. **Assess** rough sleeping couples individually before they are moved into separate rooms in a hotel/ accommodation.
3. **Allocate** two separate key workers
4. **Carry out** the individual assessments separately and in private

### Individual assessments:

- Ask the client if they would like to be moved into the same hotel/accommodation as their partner in separate rooms. If one or both partners asks to be in separate

accommodation, they should be moved to separate hotels/accommodation. **Do not tell the other partner that this has been requested as it may cause conflict.**

- Explain that their information is confidential and will not be shared with their partner.
- As well as assessing the mandatory areas, ask the client about their relationship: “*How is everything going in your relationship?*”, “*How did you and your partner meet?*”, “*What are the best things about your partner?*” Use this [prompt sheet](#) for further detailed guidance.
- If any suspicions of domestic abuse are flagged, refer to: [COVID-19 Domestic abuse and sexual violence guidance for homelessness settings](#).
- Ask the client if they need contraception (condoms, dental dams) and provide the client with a sexual health information leaflet. Ask the client if they need support with reading the leaflet.
- Refer to [St Mungo’s Pregnancy Toolkit](#) for further guidance on sexual and reproductive health.

### Next steps:

1. Speak to the partner’s key worker and share information given in each assessment. Raise and assess any risks and concerns that arise.
2. Let the couples know that they will be supported both individually and as a couple. Arrange the next welfare call/visit with each partner and the next call/visit with the couple together.
3. Complete a safety and wellbeing plan or risk assessment for each client.
4. Check in with your client regularly on the phone to discuss their needs and ask how everything is going in their accommodation. Ask the client if they are able to talk in private.
5. Catch up with the partner’s key worker regularly to share relevant information, possible risks, concerns etc.
6. Each key worker should communicate regularly with any other professionals who are supporting the couple.

### Drug and alcohol use:

- If both partners need access to prescriptions for drug and alcohol treatment, ensure their drug and alcohol worker is able to provide both partners with their treatment on the same day. This reduces the risk of one partner sabotaging the other’s recovery.
- If one or both partners are using substances, see your organisation’s policy or guidance on how to support them with treatment.

### Multi agency case reviews:

- If the couple are in the hotel/accommodation for longer than two weeks, hold a virtual multi-agency couple case review to include key workers associated with both partners:

hotel/accommodation key worker, drug and alcohol worker, mental health worker, physical health practitioners, palliative care workers etc.

- These meetings should be held on a regular basis in order to create a support plan for the couple and ensure relevant information is being shared.

### Couples that have been separated

Homeless couples are likely to abandon their place in accommodation if they are separated from their partner.

- Try to move the couple into separate rooms in the same hotel/accommodation and follow steps given above.
- If the couple are separated and are not attempting to leave the hotel accommodation, follow from step 4 above.

### Couples that have been moved into the same room

Couples need their own space, particularly clients who have complex needs. Housing couples in the same room reduces the chance of an open and honest conversation during phone call welfare checks or visits.

- If domestic abuse is occurring in the relationship, placing the couple in the same room heightens the risk of incidents. If you suspect domestic abuse, refer to: [COVID-19 Domestic abuse and sexual violence guidance for homelessness settings](#).
- Move one of the partners into a separate room. Explain that this is the policy and do not say that the other partner has requested the separation as this may cause conflict.

### Move on:

- If being placed in separate rooms in the same hotel works well for the couple, advocate for them to move into the same hostel in separate rooms as a move on option once lockdown restrictions have been lifted.
- For further guidance on supporting couples to navigate the 'Single Homeless Pathway', refer to St Mungo's [Homeless Couple and Relationships Toolkit](#).

### Guidance for accommodation/hostel workers

Staff in homeless accommodation setting may find that clients who have partners outside of the service are abandoning self-isolation to see them.

- If the client's partner is also being supported by an outreach worker or are living in homeless accommodation, make contact with the organisation and their key worker.
- Work with their key worker to ensure the partner also understands the risks of abandoning self-isolation.
- Use the 'distraction packs' and other resources included on [Homeless Link's COVID-19 page](#) to help clients focus on other activities.

- Use the good practice and guidance included in St Mungo's [Homeless Couple and Relationships Toolkit](#) to design key work sessions with clients where you can talk about their relationship using a positive approach and help your client to look to the future.

### Supporting LGBTQ+ clients and couples:

Follow the steps above to support LGBTQ+ rough sleeping couples but try to refer them to the LGBTQ+ specific support agencies in your local area. Bear in mind that:

- LGBTQ+ couples may face homophobic and/or transphobic abuse from other residents and staff members in hotels/non-specialist accommodation.
- LGBTQ+ couples have some support needs that may differ from heterosexual/cisgender couples related to: sexual and reproductive health, mental health and wellbeing, safeguarding, domestic abuse, drug and alcohol use.
- As with any assessment, workers should ask about demographic information. Use the following questions to safely identify LGBTQ+ clients during the separate assessment:

*How do you identify your sexuality? Straight, bi, gay, lesbian, anything else?*

*How do you identify your gender? Male, female, non-binary, trans, anything else?*

Use this [prompt sheet](#) for further detailed guidance.

- If an LGBTQ+ couple are moved into the same hotel, regularly check in with each partner regarding possible homophobic and/or transphobic abuse from other residents and staff. If this is the case, follow the organisational safeguarding procedures and raise this with the organisational safeguarding leads.

### Get support

For detailed guidance on supporting homeless couples, refer to St Mungo's [Homeless Couple and Relationships Toolkit](#).

#### Sexual health and wellbeing

- [CliniQ](#): for trans and non-binary clients
- [The Naz Project](#): for BAME clients
- [Terrence Higgins Trust](#): specialists in HIV support
- [Well Woman Clinic](#): for women only sexual health services

#### Domestic abuse and sexual violence

For support regarding domestic abuse, refer to [COVID-19 Domestic abuse and sexual violence guidance for homelessness settings](#).

- **National Domestic Violence Helpline, 24/7: 0808 2000 247**
- **LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline ([opening hours](#)): 0800 999 5428**
- **Men's Advice Line ([opening hours](#)): 0808 801 0327**
- **Respect perpetrator helpline ([opening hours](#)): 0808 8024040**



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