



A place-based systems change approach to gendered poverty

**Evidence from the Birmingham NRPF Women's
Support Network**

By Kezia del Carmen and Sarah Rojvithee for Smallwood Trust

September 2025

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Purpose.....	3
Methodology	4
Part 1: The Birmingham NRPF Women’s Support Network’s Story	5
About the Network.....	5
Their journey so far	5
Activities and achievements	6
Learning about gendered poverty	15
Evolving the network	20
Part 2: The Birmingham NRPF Women’s Support Network’s journey in systems change.....	25
Understanding systems change	25
Developing systemic practice	28
Supporting systems change	31
Conclusion	35

Introduction

Purpose

Smallwood Trust's approach to place-based systems change has developed through funding networks of women's organisations to work collaboratively to test approaches that target the root causes of gendered poverty in their place. By generating insights about how to change the systems that drive and perpetuate gendered poverty, this funding will support Smallwood Trust's mission to enable women to be financially resilient.

This report is part of a series documenting the journeys of the six networks currently funded by Smallwood Trust. It brings together the work of all six networks to summarise impact, analyse learning, surface insights around how a place-based systems change approach can shift gendered poverty, and make recommendations around how Smallwood Trust can effectively support this work going forward.

The fund aims are to:

- Enable Smallwood Trust to learn alongside organisations about what creates change for women via a “test and learn” approach
- Help networks further understand women's poverty in their local area, for different groups of women, and support them to define the change they want to see
- Stimulate ideas that are designed and delivered by the people closest to the problem, including women with experience of poverty themselves
- Help networks build strong relationships with a range of different organisations, individuals and decision makers so that after the programme is over these relationships remain
- Support networks to measure the change they are making.

To achieve these aims, Smallwood Trust has funded place-based networks of women's organisations that aim at systems change. Each network is taking a different approach to systems change, developed out of the needs and ambitions of the women they are working with, alongside their local context and the expertise of partners.

This report is part of a series of reports reporting on the journey of each place-based network that Smallwood Trust has funded, alongside three learning networks funded through the Gendered Poverty Learning programme. It focuses on the Birmingham No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) Women's Support Network.

Methodology

This report has been developed primarily through a Learning Workshop held on the 10th of July 2025, facilitated by Renaisi with the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network. The Learning Workshop brought together staff from partner organisations, including frontline workers and strategic leads, to identify the network's main achievements, collate evidence of its impact, and reflect on lessons learned in systemic change.

Insights from this workshop were supplemented by data from the network's ongoing reporting, and the following data inputs:

- Interviews with staff from the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network, carried out from June to August 2025
- A workshop with the NRPF Advisory Group in June 2025, where Renaisi facilitated a discussion across women with lived experience of NRPF and DA, reflecting on what is working well in the services they access, and what could be improved
- Observational data collected by Renaisi throughout our interactions with the Network during the course of our learning partnership (2022-2025)
- The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network's monitoring reports to Smallwood Trust

Throughout the report, we outline the Network's perspectives on its achievements and journey in place-based systems change, as revealed in recent interviews, alongside our own analysis and assessment of its progress.

Part 1: The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network's Story

About the Network

The Birmingham No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) Women's Support Network was formed to address the needs of women in Birmingham experiencing domestic abuse (DA) who have NRPF status. The network aims to provide holistic support for women with NRPF, maximise resources via inter-agency response and referral pathways and amplify women's voices to create an evidence base for systems change.

The six members of the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network are:

- Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid (BSWA): the lead partner for the Network. It provides specialist Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) support services.
- The Refugee and Migrant Centre (RMC): provides free casework, advice and guidance on immigration, housing/homelessness/destitution, welfare, education and health.
- Central England Law Centre – Coventry (CELC): provides free specialist legal advice across a range of social welfare issues to those most in need and uses legal processes to fight inequality.
- Baobab Women's Project: advocates with refugee and migrant women in the West Midlands, platforming women's voices and inspiring change in partnership with others.
- Roshni: supports Black and minoritised communities affected by domestic abuse by working with survivors through their journey to safety, confidence and independence to live free from violence, abuse and fear.
- British Red Cross (BRC): supports refugees adjust to life in the UK through a range of services, including providing emergency provision within the network.

Their journey so far

Background

Building on a history of collaboration across partner organisations, the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network formally came together in the summer of 2022, with funding from Smallwood Trust. In its first year, the network established the

infrastructure for collaboration and developed a referral pathway across partners that enabled women to access support for a range of complex needs without having to repeat their stories to multiple agencies. At the time of writing, the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network is at the end of its third year of working together. This report outlines the impact and learning that emerged throughout these three years.

The network's goals

In the first six months of the network, partners came together to develop a Theory of Change for the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network, in a workshop facilitated by Renaisi. This included agreeing on the following mission and goals:

Mission: Women subject to NRPF, particularly those experiencing DA, are protected from destitution and homelessness, and achieve economic stability and wellbeing, through accessing holistic and trauma-informed support from a cohesive range of services that can meet their diverse needs and ambitions.

Goals:

1. The network will improve coordination of services whilst building capacity to provide trauma-informed, women-led services that prevent NRPF women experiencing DA from falling into destitution and homelessness and demonstrate the need for increased funding over the long term.
2. The network will increase awareness around how to support women with NRPF to access services and collect evidence that demonstrates the impact of the current system, to advocate for policy change.
3. The network will work with those with lived experience to understand how to ensure more women can access the services they need

In a recent interview, a partner articulated their ambitions as twofold: to ensure women with NRPF and DA accessing services receive support that meets a range of needs and to understand how to change the wider system that fails to support them.

Activities and achievements

This section summarises the major achievements that partners highlighted when reflecting on the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network's past three years, alongside explaining the activities that have driven these achievements.

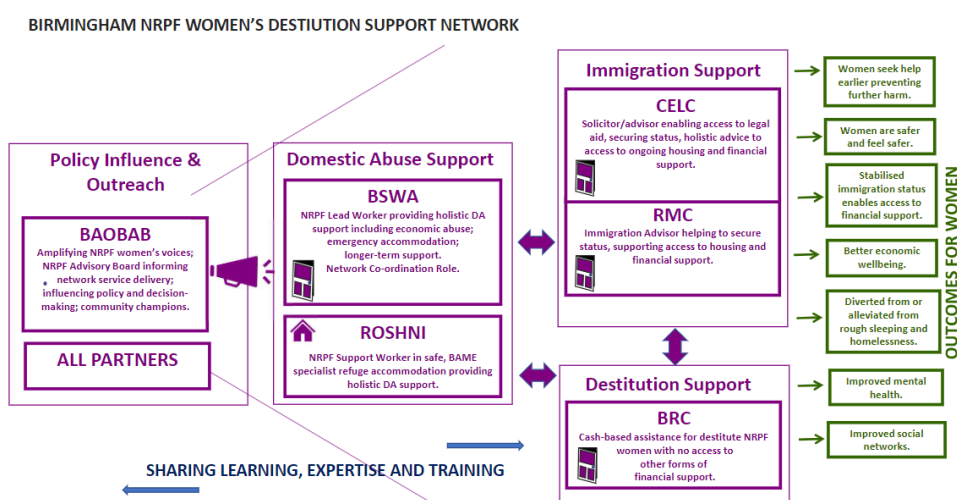
Better outcomes for women

The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network was established to ensure that women experiencing DA and NRPF could easily access coordinated support from multiple services. Its core aim was to prevent destitution and homelessness at crisis point and to stabilise women's immigration status. Between August 2022 and July 2025, the network successfully supported 1146 women.

In the network BSWA, Roshni, and BRC deliver domestic abuse and destitution services that ensure women can escape abusive environments without falling into destitution and homelessness. Their support includes case-based destitution assistance, accessed by two-thirds of women engaged in the network¹, and temporary housing provision. Caseworkers from BSWA and Roshni also offer wraparound support to help women out of abusive situations and improve their well-being. The caseworkers ensure that women have someone to speak to and rely on during traumatic experiences, while advocating for their access to basic services such as healthcare.

In parallel to this support, immigration advisers, legal caseworkers, and lawyers from RMC and CELC work to shift a woman's NRPF designation and stabilise her immigration status. As a result of their support, 98% of women who accessed the network had an immigration claim lodged, and 84% of those claims were granted.² Successfully shifting the NRPF designation enables women to access statutory support, including financial assistance, housing benefits, employability services and health services. Women in the NRPF Advisory Group highlighted the importance of this legal support and immigration advice, noting that women with NRPF are particularly vulnerable to poor legal advice, which can harm their cases.

This model for service delivery is set out in the visual below:



¹ Based on outcomes data from July 2023 to January 2025 collected by the Network and shared with Renaisi.

² Ibid.

Furthermore, all partners saw a significant increase in the number of women they supported presenting with NRPF throughout their time in the network. Overall, the number of women engaged in the network has increased by over a third each year. While it is not clear whether this is being driven by the network's reputation for its provision of impactful support for women with NRPF, or an increase in cases of women experiencing NRPF and DA, it is clear that the network is ensuring that more women access the support they need to avoid destitution, homelessness and abuse.

Alongside improving outcomes for individual women accessing the network, the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network drove a change in policy that expanded the rights of women experiencing DA and NRPF. This came through a successful case of strategic litigation against the Home Office, which expanded the Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Concession (MVDAC)³ eligibility. As a result of the case brought by the network via CELC, in March 2024, the Home Office amended the immigration rules to include partners with pre-settled status in the MVDAC scheme, enabling more women with NRPF who experience DA to pursue this route to access public funds.

Joined-up service delivery

The network has developed a smooth referral process, allowing women to access multiple specialist services that support them to meet their basic needs and access their rights. This process has increased the speed at which women can access support and has avoided women having to self-refer and repeat their stories to access new services. This reduces the risk of retraumatisation and referral fatigue that can lead women to disengage before their needs are met.

"We were able to look at their needs in a really holistic way, accommodation needs, financial needs, the needs of their children, etc., and then what we needed was also to shift the condition that stopped them from accessing a lot of the opportunities that should be available to them – the NRPF condition...to legalise their stay in the long term."
Interview with network partner, July 2025

The network established the infrastructure to support joined-up service delivery within its first year of work. In their first six months, partners developed and agreed on a memorandum of understanding for their partnership, a shared referral form, monitoring processes, joint digital platforms and a data sharing protocol. In

³ An MVDAC or Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Concession enables certain people whose migration status is dependent on their partner to access to public funds if they are experiencing domestic abuse from that partner. More information on those who are eligible for an MVDAC is available [here](#).

February 2023, a data-sharing protocol was agreed and the network established a SharePoint site for shared access to referral data. Given organisational cautiousness around data sharing and several challenges in aligning data protection approaches and digital platforms, partners reflected that this felt like a significant achievement that required a lot of thought and care. They shared that the protocol gave staff clarity about the roles and obligations of different organisations, the right amount of information to share at different stages and how consent is maintained throughout the process, providing the critical infrastructure for a functioning referral process.

“Just the logistics of getting a pathway system together - that's a massive achievement because we've put together a referral pathway where if a woman goes through the door of, say, RMC, or Women's Aid she's connected to all the different services and doesn't have to repeat herself”
Interview with network partner, July 2025

Partners shared that the referral process has improved women's experiences accessing services, particularly as it ensures they can access legal and immigration support without having to self-refer. Both CELC and RMC are oversubscribed services, with demand for support far outstripping their capacity. Because of this, women with NRPF experiencing DA often previously faced long waiting times, sometimes including physical queuing for hours, to access their services. These barriers to access could at times be too high for a vulnerable woman at crisis point to manage, meaning she would not receive the legal and immigration support needed to enable her access to long-term support around housing, health, finances and employment. Removing these barriers and opportunities for women to drop out of the support system has been critical in improving outcomes for women.

“Before, it was not easy. I mean, could you imagine suffering domestic abuse and then being told to go queue at five o'clock in the morning with loads of random men?”
Interview with network partner, June 2025

Joined-up service delivery is also supported by the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network's creation of spaces for frontline staff to communicate and build relationships. The Practitioners' Forum was established to bring together frontline staff to discuss emerging issues in their casework, share resources and address challenges in the referral process. This space has deepened staff's understanding of each other's services and supported them to build strong working relationships. This has supported a relational referral process, where staff can check in with their counterparts across the network before making a referral to assess its suitability and ensure the nuances of a woman's context are fully understood. Strong communication among partners has also enabled quick responses to urgent issues,

such as the need to challenge decisions from local authorities and the Home Office, which has made their challenges more successful.

Collaboration

In addition to the processes and spaces for joined-up service delivery described above, the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network has developed strong foundations for broader, long-term collaboration around shared ambitions for change.

Partners reflected that clarity on the network's goals and how these will be progressed has enabled them to collaborate successfully. They highlighted that devoting significant time at the beginning of the process to collectively develop these goals through in-person workshops and meetings, such as the Systems Mapping and Theory of Change workshops in early 2023, was critical to this. All partners felt they had been able to input on goals and were confident in these goals being owned by each partner organisation. A partner reflected that this process would not have been possible without BSWA coordinating the co-design of the Network's mission, goals, Theory of Change, action plan and subsequent regular review meetings, which they were not funded to do but chose to take on as the lead partner.

*“(workshops) provided the space for the network partners to build on our relationships and identify gaps in communication”
Interim report, March 2023*

The network also strengthened its collaboration by forming and maintaining an effective governance structure. Regular NRPF Network Meetings bring together strategic leads to revisit goals and milestones, helping to maintain focus and identify areas for improvement. This has helped the network respond to increasing demand for its services, while also fostering a more coordinated and strategic approach to influencing. These governance meetings have also built a culture in which partners openly reflect on their own limitations, empathise with those of others, and work through challenges in pursuit of shared ambitions.

All these spaces and structures have supported the development of strong relationships across partners, which have endured and strengthened despite staff turnover. Partners reflected that this has given all staff a deep understanding of each other's strengths, pressures, and limitations. They shared that being part of the network has allowed them to see themselves as part of a single team that is able to support, learn from, and challenge each other with a foundation of empathy and trust.

Capacity building

The network has also built the capacity of all partners by ensuring that all staff understand how to support women experiencing NRPF and DA. Staff shared that regular communication between frontline staff across organisations, the Practitioners' Forum and the network's capacity-building programme have all supported staff to respond effectively to women experiencing NRPF and DA. This has improved the quality of services women receive, ensuring that all services are gender-sensitive, holistic and trauma-informed, supporting joined-up service delivery and strengthening trust between partners.

*“Training from Women's Aid on support and advice to give women in emergencies to access support and training from CELC on MVDAC have both been really helpful”,
Interview with network partner, June 2025*

The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network launched a capacity-building programme in November 2023. Through this programme, each partner has delivered training sessions for staff from across the network (including organisational staff not working directly on network cases), on topics such as immigration, domestic violence, forced marriage, and honour-based violence. Feedback from these sessions showed that staff valued learning how to respond to abuse in a trauma-informed and sensitive way. Staff also valued gaining a deeper understanding of different types of immigration status and NRPF pathways.

Coproduction with lived experience

Partners in the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network also felt that one of their main achievements was the development of the NRPF Advisory Group. The NRPF Advisory Group was created to bring together women with lived experience of NRPF and DA to explore how they wished to influence policy and services. While in planning phases, some network partners hoped that the Advisory Group would contribute to their ambitions to embed lived experience in their services and advocacy work; ultimately, their aim was for the group to set its own goals.

Through Baobab's facilitation and engagement with its service users, the Advisory Group was developed to allow each woman to engage according to her own capacity and ambitions, recognising that enforcing predefined goals onto the group would not support genuine co-production. Since its launch in June 2023, the group has met monthly, with 9–12 women attending each session. Women in the Advisory Group chose to prioritise capacity building rather than influencing, which Baobab in turn responded to by supporting women to participate in training in digital skills, legal rights, community research and English language. As a result, three women with lived experience from the group are due to receive their diplomas in community

research this year. In a workshop with the NRPF Advisory Group in June 2025, women shared that they valued and enjoyed these sessions, highlighting that they supported individual ambitions to improve their understanding of their rights and build skills that would support future employment.

Alongside this, in line with women's choices, the Advisory Group has begun to input on the network's learning and advocacy work. For example, Baobab facilitated a session for the Advisory Group to collectively review and provide feedback on Birmingham City Council's draft domestic abuse strategy. The group also input on systems mapping and a review of current service provision, through sessions facilitated by Renaisi in March 2024 and June 2025.

Changing policy, practice and attitudes

Alongside creating a better system of support for women experiencing NRPF and DA, the network has also been influencing wider systems change. At a local level, it is influencing the broader system by putting NRPF on the agenda in local forums and consultations. All partners participate in multi-agency panels, boards, and forums, where they highlight the barriers women with NRPF face in accessing their entitlements. Examples include the Birmingham Migration Forum, the West Midlands Combined Authority Task Group on Homelessness & NRPF and statutory DA and homelessness forums. This engagement has already resulted in tangible changes in policy and practice. For example, NRPF has now been identified as a priority issue in Birmingham City Council's recent vulnerable adults contract tender. Both the Jobcentre Plus and the housing provider responsible for the local DA response have committed to improving their practice around support for women with NRPF experiencing DA as a result of evidence raised by the network.

"What we want to do is for them (police, children's services, vulnerable adults and our housing and homelessness partners) to recognise that women affected by domestic abuse who have this no recourse to public funds condition need a very tailored specialist response."

Interview with network partner, July 2025

Partners reflected that their influence on local policy development has been supported by the historic relationships they have with statutory services, with many being long-standing commissioned services. They leverage relationships and influence to advocate for improved policy around support for women with NRPF who experience DA. Through participation in a roundtable hosted by MP Jess Phillips, BSWA ensured that the experiences of women with NRPF who experience DA were centred in discussions, leading to the inclusion of NRPF considerations in Birmingham City Council's Domestic Abuse Strategy. Similarly, Roshni delivered a workshop on NRPF for statutory and voluntary sector organisations at the DA

Commissioners Conference, followed by a meeting with the DA Commissioner to emphasise the need for NRPF to be addressed in DA policy.

“We’re one of the key partners in developing Birmingham’s domestic abuse strategy. We ensured that no recourse to public funds was a key element of that strategy ... we’re doing lots around that kind of attitudinal shift”
Interview with network partner, July 2025

As a result of this influencing work and the strength of their service delivery, the network has built a strong reputation for supporting women with NRPF and DA, resulting in consistent increases in referrals from partners such as the police and Children’s Services, including from outside Birmingham. It has also established a referral pathway with the DA homelessness provider, creating a smoother route into support for women with NRPF.

The Birmingham NRPF Women’s Support Network has also driven policy change at a national level. As described above, through working with a woman accessing the network, CELC successfully pursued strategic litigation to bring a case against the Home Office, which led to an expansion in the eligibility requirements for an MVDAC to include women experiencing DA whose visa is reliant on a partner with pre-settled status. Through CELC, the network aims to continue to pursue strategic litigation to further eligibility for the MVDAC by identifying cases that highlight where the MVDAC is unjustly denied to a woman with NRPF experiencing DA.

Achievements: Summary

- **Better outcomes for women:** The network successfully supported 1,146 women with domestic abuse and destitution services, resulting in 98% of women having an immigration claim lodged and 84% of those claims being granted, which stabilised their status and enabled access to statutory support.
- **Joined-up service delivery:** The network created a smooth referral pathway that increased the speed of access to multiple specialist services and prevented women from having to repeat their traumatic stories, supported by critical infrastructure including a shared referral form and a data-sharing protocol.
- **Collaboration:** Strong relationships have developed across partners that have built a supportive, trusting network culture. This has been supported by devoting significant initial time to collectively developing shared goals and maintaining a focus on these through regular meetings
- **Capacity building:** Sharing learning across partners through regular meetings and formal training sessions improved the quality and responsiveness of services by ensuring all partner staff were trauma-informed and gender-sensitive, with a robust understanding of DA and NRPF
- **Coproduction with lived experience:** Women with lived experience were brought together in the NRPF Advisory Group, coproduced a plan for capacity building and subsequently received training to support their own goals.
- **Changing policy, practice and attitudes:** At a national level, the network successfully pursued strategic litigation against the Home Office, resulting in an expansion of the MVDAC eligibility in March 2024 to include partners with pre-settled status. Locally, the network's engagement in forums has raised awareness around NRPF, leading to commitments from the Jobcentre Plus and local housing providers to improve practice around supporting women with NRPF experiencing domestic abuse and the inclusion of NRPF in Birmingham City Council's Domestic Abuse Strategy.

Learning about gendered poverty

The Birmingham No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) Women's Support Network has provided insight into how policy and practice, particularly relating to NRPF, differentially place women in a position where they are vulnerable to abuse, destitution, homelessness, isolation and health crises. This work has demonstrated how this vulnerability is shaped by gender and the NRPF designation, but also by systems of oppression that marginalise according to race, ethnicity, class and disability. This section highlights significant insights that emerged around how gendered poverty manifests for women experiencing domestic abuse (DA) and NRPF.

The role of frontline statutory services

Throughout this work, network partners saw a rising demand for their services due to statutory services increasingly failing to meet their obligations to support women in poverty. Specifically, staff have seen a growing tendency for statutory children's services to fail to meet their obligations to support women experiencing NRPF and DA. Under Section 17⁴ duties to safeguard a child in need, a local authority must support a mother experiencing domestic abuse to stabilise her living situation, regardless of NRPF status. Staff across the network feel this duty is increasingly neglected or met insufficiently. For example, staff shared that when children's services do provide support, it is often only during the period the mother has NRPF status (while her MVDAC claim is being processed) and ends once the claim is granted, without helping her to navigate accessing Universal Credit or housing. This drop-off in support before a mother's living situation has been stabilised (and their duty has been met) forces the network to step in. Staff also reported experiences of statutory children's services providing harmful advice to mothers to avoid having to respond to their duties, including advising mothers to stay in an abusive home until their MVDAC is approved, and advising mothers to leave their children behind when fleeing domestic abuse, which can lead to long-term separation and removes children's services' duty to support the mother. Where children's services do not meet their obligation to stabilise a mother's living situation, more cases fall to the network.

“There's a real attitudinal concern from frontline social workers where domestic abuse is not viewed with the severity that it needs until things go wrong”
Interview with network partner, July 2025

⁴ Under Section 17 of the Children's Act 1989 a local authority is obligated to assess and support a child in need, regardless of their NRPF status. See more at <https://guidance.nrpfnetwork.org.uk/reader/practice-guidance-families/duty-to-assess-need/>

Staff also reported similar experiences with other statutory services, including the police and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). A lack of sufficient training on the interaction between NRPF and DA means network partners must spend time informing these organisations of their responsibilities and advocating for women so they can access the support they are entitled to. In the case of the police, this is compounded by a lack of cultural awareness and trauma-informed practice, which can lead to domestic abuse cases not being appropriately investigated or addressed. Partners reflected that work in the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network has required them to devote significant resources to battling with frontline staff at statutory services. These experiences highlight the importance of changing the practice and attitudes of statutory services in shifting gendered poverty. While the network can ensure that women engaging with its services have a positive experience, their reliance on statutory services for long-term support means that working with these agencies is critical to creating a better system for vulnerable women.

“As third sector providers, we do what we can to make the journey as smooth as possible but unfortunately our hands are tied when it comes to such responsibilities...The responsibility lies with them (statutory services) and we want to make sure that they understand the appropriate response to domestic abuse and how they are part of that”

Interview with network partner, July 2025

Shaping local policy development

The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network has identified a systemic gap in statutory services' understanding of their obligations to women with NRPF, extending beyond frontline staff to those managing services and directing local policy. The network recognises that shifting gendered poverty requires a senior-level commitment to recognising the vulnerability faced by women experiencing NRPF and DA. While there is still significant work to be done, the network has been able to influence local policy around NRPF and DA (described in the section above). Partners believe that bringing together a group of respected organisations to speak with a collective voice about NRPF and DA has raised the profile of this issue and made statutory services, including DWP, local housing providers, Birmingham Children's Trust and Birmingham City Council, more receptive to their input.

More specifically, partners have found that sharing frontline evidence on statutory policymaking panels and forums is an effective way to influence policy at a strategic level. For example, where partners jointly highlighted that the misapplication of the Habitual Residency Test to women with an MVDAC at a local domestic abuse forum, this led to the Job Centre committing to resolving the issue, ensuring that

their front-line staff no longer request that women with an MVDAC take the test. The network also raised concerns about women with NRPF's access to statutory homelessness accommodation during a housing allocation policy consultation. As a result, the housing provider leading the domestic abuse response committed to assessing all women experiencing homelessness, domestic abuse and NRPF. The network's approach has demonstrated the importance of collectively engaging in policymaking discussions to influence senior statutory decision-makers to drive shifts in practice around women experiencing DA and NRPF at a frontline level.

Gendered impacts of a hostile environment

The worsening national narrative around migration, evidenced by the rise of far-right anti-immigration parties such as UKIP and Reform UK, increasingly anti-immigration rhetoric from mainstream political parties and the media, and violent anti-immigration riots in the summers of 2024 and 2025, has a gendered impact on the vulnerability of women with NRPF. Frontline staff shared that this environment affected the mental health and sense of safety of the women they worked with, alongside making it harder for women to access support to meet their basic needs.

Partners believe that the hostile environment has emboldened statutory agencies to avoid meeting their obligations to support women with NRPF (a trend described in the previous section). This has also practically increased the complexity of casework, with staff at RMC and CELC reporting a significant rise in the intensity of evidence requests from the Home Office for MVDAC claims, making each claim more time-consuming and delaying women's ability to access support to meet basic needs.

"We're in an environment also that is very anti-migration, very anti-immigrant, and so there's no support to lift the NRPF condition for lots and lots of people and the domestic abuse is almost ignored...It doesn't matter if these migrant women, are at risk of serious injury or death just purely because they're not British, they're not white, they're not seen as important enough"
Interview with network partner, July 2025

Gendered impacts of a broken welfare state

Furthermore, staff shared that the failure of the welfare state to keep up with the rising cost of living and housing crisis also has a disproportionate impact on the women they work with. The sharp rise in the cost of living, without a matched increase in funding for women escaping domestic violence, means the support women receive is often insufficient to meet their basic needs. As a result, more women are at risk of destitution. The network is increasingly responding to this need through cash transfers and in-kind support such as food, toiletries, and clothing.

Similarly, the housing crisis has disproportionately placed women fleeing domestic abuse at risk of homelessness. Partners reported that finding refuge space for women with NRPF became increasingly difficult, often requiring hotel placements. Moreover, when a woman's migration status stabilised, staff had to explain that moving from temporary accommodation into permanent social housing was unlikely. This could often worsen women's mental health and their ability to stabilise their living situation, extending the support they needed. Staff noted that advocacy with statutory services has little impact, as with the housing system currently so over-capacity, statutory staff now openly acknowledge that women are likely to remain in temporary accommodation longer than the legal limit.

This is representative of how changes around social services, welfare, housing, migration and other areas of social policy impact women more acutely. Partners believe that tackling gendered poverty in the long-term will require government, policymakers and frontline practitioners to acknowledge this and account for it.

“When the political landscape changes, the impact is felt more so than anybody else by women – when welfare reform happens, the impact is on women – when there is change around, carers legislation or homelessness legislation, the impact is felt by women.”

Interview with network partner, July 2025

Support that centres care and advocacy with women

Both staff across the Birmingham NRPF Support Network and women in the NRPF Advisory Group highlighted the importance of taking an advocacy approach to supporting women. Women with lived experience in the NRPF Advisory Group highlighted that the most impactful support came through having an individual with whom they could develop trust – who would listen to them, provide advice and guidance on a range of issues, and advocate for their access to support. Women shared that in situations that are isolating, traumatic and confusing (both due to the complexity of routes to access support and language barriers), having someone you can trust helps alleviate stress. Specifically, women reflected that this advocacy and guidance had been instrumental in meeting the requirements of immigration applications and accessing housing and healthcare. Those in the NRPF Advisory Group also noted that advocacy supports women to develop confidence in themselves and knowledge of their rights needed to advocate for themselves.

Similarly, staff across the network highlighted that taking the time to build a relationship with each woman, understand her story, and accompany her to advocate for her rights has proven the most effective way to ensure she receives the support she is entitled to from statutory services. As described above, the network has found that staff in statutory services often have a limited understanding of their obligations to women with NRPF experiencing DA, and of the routes to

support these women can access. Furthermore, when making claims to the Home Office for an MVDAC or a change in migration status, the network has uncovered that ensuring women have legal representation and advocacy makes a significant improvement in case outcomes. Taking an advocacy approach can compel statutory services to meet their obligations and treat women with more respect and care.

Learning about gendered poverty

- **The role of frontline statutory services:** Statutory services are increasingly failing to meet their legal obligations to support women with NRPF and domestic abuse (DA), forcing the network to spend significant resources battling frontline staff to ensure women receive support they are entitled to.
- **Shaping local policy development:** Speaking with a collective voice to raise awareness about the experiences of women with NRPF and DA, and sharing frontline evidence on statutory forums is an effective way to influence wider shifts in policy and frontline practice.
- **Gendered impacts of a hostile environment:** The worsening national anti-migration rhetoric and hostile environment have contributed to worsening women's mental health, reducing their sense of safety, emboldening statutory agencies to avoid their obligations, and increasing the complexity of immigration casework.
- **Gendered impacts of a broken welfare state:** The failure of financial assistance and social housing to keep pace with the rising cost of living and housing crisis, disproportionately places women fleeing DA at risk of destitution and homelessness, worsens their mental health and forces them to remain in temporary accommodation longer than legally permitted.
- **Support that centres care and advocacy with women:** An advocacy approach, where an individual builds trust with the woman and goes alongside her to advocate for her access to support, is most impactful for women. Expert advocacy can overcome barriers faced due to statutory services' limited understanding of their obligations, and significantly improves immigration outcomes when making claims to the Home Office.

Evolving the network

Throughout its first three years of delivery, the Birmingham No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) Women's Support Network has maintained a strong focus on shared goals and actions, which has been supported by periodic joint reflection. This section sets out reflections from network partners in recent interviews and the Learning and Evaluation Workshop, focusing on lessons learned and how they will be embedded going forward.

Aiming at long-term independence

The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network has demonstrated that a focus on ensuring women have access to the rights and support needed to be independent is critical to shifting gendered poverty. Both frontline staff and women in the NRPF Advisory Group highlighted that the ambition for most women experiencing domestic abuse (DA) and NRPF is to be able to work and support themselves financially, which depends on shifting their immigration status and building a community around them.

Women in the NRPF Advisory Group shared that their main priority was to shift their immigration status so they have the right to work and move past the experience of abuse. Similarly, in interviews, staff shared that the key strength of the network is that it enables women to access high-quality immigration support and legal advice, reaching women earlier in their cases. Beyond this, when asked to reflect on what other support they would like to see, women in the Advisory Group highlighted the value of opportunities to connect with a local community and to develop skills, resources and experience that could support them to find future employment.

The network has responded to this learning from its first three years of work by adding "economic opportunity & independence systems" as one of its three focus areas for systems change efforts in the next phase of its work. This intentionally focuses on shifting the barriers that women face in accessing education, training and employment, ultimately supporting their long-term independence.

Collectively embedding lived experience

The network's experience of the development of the NRPF Advisory Group has demonstrated that centring the voices of those with lived experience in its work requires an approach that is more integrated into shared activities. Whilst initially, the network aimed to bring together the NRPF Advisory Group based on referrals from all partners, in reality, those women who consistently attended the group were all Baobab service users. The support that women received from Baobab and the trusting relationships they developed with staff gave them confidence to join this

space and a belief that it would support their ambitions. Partners shared that many women experiencing NRPF and DA will be reticent about joining a group delivered by a service they have not engaged with, both due to negative experiences with some services and a need to focus their energy on engaging with services that can support them to stabilise their situation. Boabab's approach to combining casework with coproduction enabled the NRPF Advisory Group to develop in a way that genuinely responded to the needs and ambitions of its members but sometimes felt siloed from the rest of the network's activities.

"You help them with their case in terms of casework, then they'll come to your group, because they know you and they trust you... They're going through quite a painful part their life. So to come to a group without knowing who's there and the coordinator - it's really hard, So if you are going to have lived experience groups, having them embedded within support that helps them is really useful."

Interview with network partner, June 2025

Going forward, the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network is exploring how to embed lived experience more deeply across its work, recognising that coproduction with women with lived experience of poverty must be underpinned by supportive relationships that tangibly improve the lives of those women. In the next phase of its work, the network will appoint a Lived Experience Coordinator to lead on this embedding. The coordinator will be housed in BSWA as it holds supportive relationships with a large number of women engaging in all services across the network, having the highest number of referrals.

The approach will continue to build on learning from Boabab's work about the need to take a women-led, capacity-building approach to coproduction that ensures women's basic needs are met and their ambitions are supported. It will need to account for women experiencing DA and NRPF no longer wanting to engage in lived experience panels once their immigration status is stabilised and they can move on to further employment. This could include developing mechanisms that allow for shorter-term engagement alongside creating more permanent roles for women with lived experience who would like to build a career in advocacy and support.

Strengthening data collection and learning

While acknowledging that being in the network has resulted in improvements in data collection and learning across all their organisations, staff also shared reflections about how this could be more impactful. Network staff shared that they often lacked time to fully capture, share, and absorb learning from their own work and that of partners. Practically, this meant that evidence and insights that emerged

in meetings were often not captured, shared and used beyond that space due to more pressing priorities. More specifically, staff noted that they were not always able to capture valuable feedback on services and rich insights into the experiences of women that emerged in casework conversations. The need to provide support during these interactions and protect women's privacy meant this data was often lost. Developing tools to enable frontline staff to quickly and anonymously record these insights during casework would provide richer learning and evidence about women's experiences of their services and the wider system.

Staff also highlighted that having a better understanding of the long-term impact of their work with women would improve learning. This is currently not possible, as organisations do not retain women's data beyond the period of support and do not have the capacity to follow up once support has ended. However, staff suggested exploring how women with lived experience who have been trained in community research might be able to carry out this work to gain insight into how survivors who previously had NRPF reflect on the support they received and what has had the most impact in their journey. The Lived Experience Coordinator, who will be recruited in the next phase of funding, could work with the University of Birmingham and the community researchers to develop methods to incorporate qualitative feedback from those with lived experience into their work.

Intensifying a focus on systems change

The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network has demonstrated the importance of an intentional, consistent focus on systems change. Partners highlighted that dedicating time to map out the system they were operating in, codesign shared goals for systems change and periodically reflect on progress against these goals, supported them to maintain focus on system change.

However, despite this focus and the progress that the network has made, partners would like to better resource systems change work going forward. They reflected that delivering frontline, crisis-focused, overstretched services means that staff are often consumed by a focus on meeting immediate needs. Going forward, the network believes that bringing together strategic leads across partners in a Systems Change Steering Group, as well as appointing a dedicated staff member to coordinate policy and advocacy work, will safeguard against it being overshadowed by service delivery.

Partners also reflected that not being able to identify how they were influencing systems change has made it challenging to consistently focus on this. While they were able to identify the most visible, high-level changes – such as the shift in the MVDAC policy – significant local wins, particularly around shifting frontline practice, attitudes and policy detail, were not systematically captured. To address this, in the

next phase of the network, the Policy and Advocacy Coordinator will oversee all influencing work, track activities and record evidence of change.

Furthermore, the network has identified the strength of a coordinated, focused approach to systems change. Partners reflected that bringing together organisations to speak with a collective voice about NRPF and DA has raised the profile of this issue and made statutory services, including DWP, local housing providers, Birmingham Children's Trust and Birmingham City Council, more receptive to their input. This represents a shift from their experience prior to the network, when it felt impossible to find an audience for conversations regarding NRPF. It has resulted in the network being able to collectively input on Birmingham City Council's development of its Domestic Abuse Strategy, which resulted in the inclusion NRPF as a factor that should be considered in responding to domestic abuse.

Expanding capacity

Finally, the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network has identified a need to expand its capacity to support women in the next phase of its work. Throughout its three years of delivery, demand for the network's services increased – partially due to increased awareness of the partnership and expansions in the eligibility of the MVDAC – and began to consistently outstrip capacity. Staff reflected that this is putting at risk their ability to provide support with the level of care and responsiveness they aim at, and results in them sometimes having to turn women away, both of which are also detrimental to staff wellbeing. Going forward, the network is increasing its staff capacity to deliver services, particularly at RMC and CELC, where this gap has been felt most acutely.

Evolving the network

- **Aiming at long-term independence:** The main priority for most women with NRFP experiencing DA is their independence. To respond to this the network's focus on stabilising their immigration status will be supplemented by supporting them to explore employment goals and build financial independence.
- **Collectively embedding lived experience:** Centring lived experience requires a collective approach underpinned by supportive relationships between services and women accessing their services. The appointment of a Lived Experience Coordinator housed within BSWA will integrate the approach across all partner organisations, moving beyond the siloed success achieved primarily through Baobab's client relationships.
- **Strengthening data collection and learning:** The network would like to increase its capacity to systematically capture frontline insights throughout casework and understand the long-term impact of its services.
- **Intensifying a focus on systems change:** To prevent systems change work from being overshadowed by immediate service delivery, the network will create a Systems Change Steering Group and a dedicated coordinator to oversee policy and advocacy and systematically monitor its impact.
- **Expanding capacity:** Consistently increasing demand for its services is necessitating that network expand staff capacity, particularly at RMC and CELC, to maintain service quality and responsiveness without risking staff wellbeing.

Part 2: The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network's journey in systems change

Understanding systems change

Before moving to an analysis of how the Birmingham No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) Women's Support Network has been progressing system change, this section outlines the theoretical frameworks and learning questions that guide this analysis. Learning on a combination of Renaisi's tools for measuring place-based systems change and the network's perspectives on a place-based systems change approach to gendered poverty, this section frames the approach to understanding systems change that guides the remainder of the analysis.

A place-based systems change approach to gendered poverty

As a learning partner, for the past three years, Renaisi has worked with Smallwood Trust and the funded networks to support the development of their approaches to place-based systems change and capture ongoing learning about their impact.

In January 2023, Renaisi brought the Coventry, Birmingham and Wythenshawe networks together to coproduce an articulation of the "ingredients" for a place-based systems change approach to gendered poverty. These ingredients were:

1. Collaborative relationships and processes
2. Engaging women with lived experience of gendered poverty in directing work
3. Holistic services for women with multiple and complex needs
4. Capturing evidence and learning
5. Influencing wider practice, policy and funding

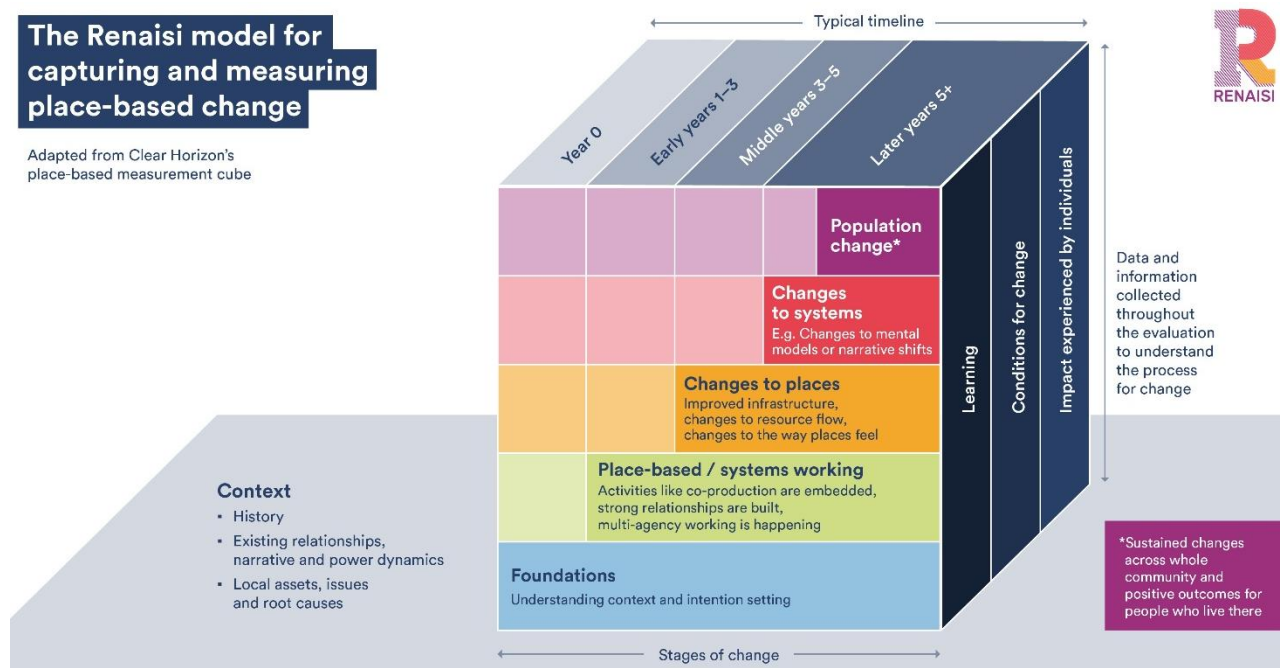
Throughout the programme, Renaisi captured evidence and learning around how the networks developed these ingredients for a place-based systems change approach to gendered poverty, which has been a key data input for the report.

Tools to understand and measure place-based systems change

Drawing on over 25 years of experience working with organisations, individuals and partnerships aiming to drive long-term, deep-rooted social change, at Renaisi, we

have developed tools to design, learn about and measure place-based systems change. Our model for capturing and measuring place-based systems change⁵ (below) sets out five key stages of change (on the front of the cube) aligned to the timeframes that initiatives often spend in each stage (along the top), and three cross-cutting process related data points (on the right-hand side).

As will be explained in the following sections of this report, the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network currently sits in stage two of the model, **Place-based and systems working**.

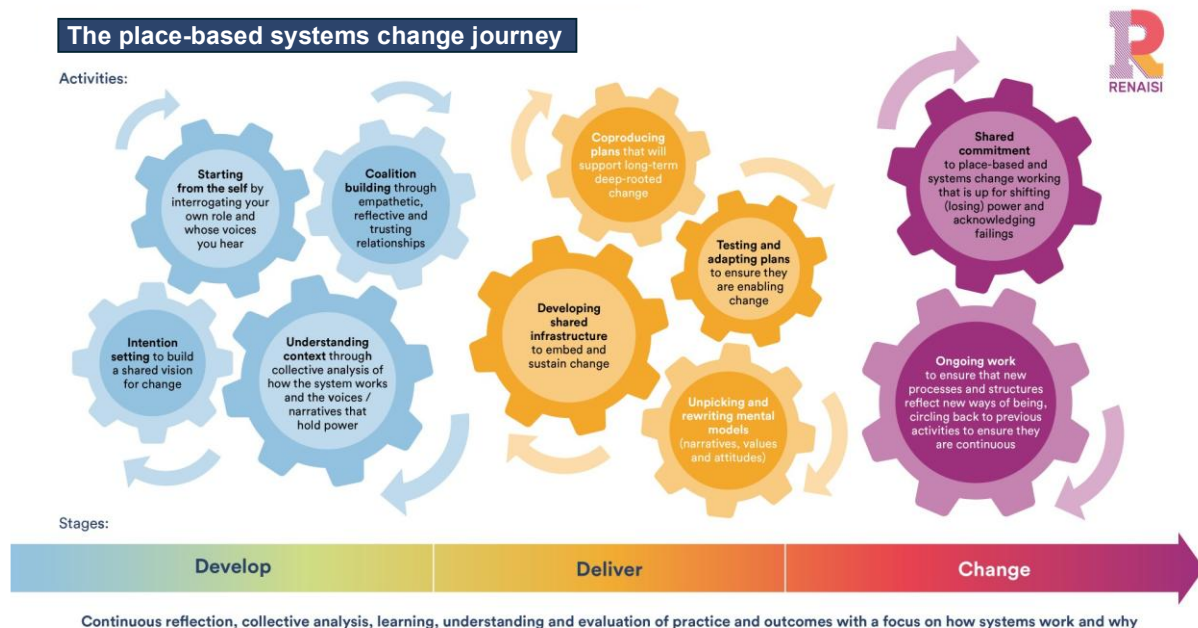


Much of Renaisi's work in programme design, learning and evaluation has focused on understanding how to identify and develop place-based systems working. Interrogating this stage more deeply through analysis of the place-based and/or systems change projects that Renaisi has historically worked on, we developed the model below, which describes the typical place-based systems change journey for an organisation or collective. The model sets out the activities that support place and systems working. The activities and sequencing in this model were also informed by a year-long inquiry exploring "what it takes to change a system"⁶ that culminated in our Guide to Systems Change⁷.

⁵ Renaisi has often drawn on Australian consultancy [Clear Horizon](https://clearhorizon.com.au/)'s place-based measurement cube as a useful template for capturing and charting this data. With their blessing, over the past couple of years we've tweaked it to better meet the needs of the UK-based programmes we're working on and to align it with our new model of evaluation. Read more about our model here <https://Renaisi.com/2023/11/01/solution-place-based-systems-change-evaluation/>

⁶ What does it take to change a system? Renaisi. <https://Renaisi.com/what-does-it-take-to-change-a-system/>

⁷ Launching our guide to systems change. Renaisi <https://Renaisi.com/2024/05/21/systems-change-guide/>



Combining activities in this tool with the “ingredients” developed by the networks, we developed a set of indicators for systemic practice. These indicators guided the analysis of how the networks are laying the foundations for systemic change beyond the timeline of their current funding.

Indicators for systemic practice

- Deep understanding of the system and the local context
- Adaptable plans and activities that target the root causes of issues, while using learning to pivot towards interventions that can bring lasting change
- Shifts in the voices, perspectives and evidence that shape decision-making
- Collaboration across the system that is underpinned by strong relationships and shared ambitions for change
- Infrastructure and policy that can support new and shared ways of working
- Shifts in the attitudes, practices and narratives that were driving harm

A systemic approach to gendered poverty would aim to develop all these indicators, but we would not expect to see activities to neatly match with each indicator. Systemic practice will target many of these indicators simultaneously – for example, by building collaborative work that deepens a collective understanding of the system while also shifting the voices that shape decision-making. Because of this, the following section on systemic practice does not report on each indicator separately but uses the set of indicators as a framework to assess how the

Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network practically developed a systemic approach to gendered poverty.

Developing systemic practice

The Birmingham No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) Women's Support Network was established to drive systemic change to ensure that women experiencing NRPF and domestic abuse (DA) can access holistic, trauma-informed support from a cohesive range of services that protect them from destitution and homelessness and help them achieve economic stability and wellbeing.

The network's plans, outlined in its Theory of Change, were developed based on a participatory systems mapping exercise in January 2023 that brought together staff across partner organisations, women with lived experience and local voluntary and statutory sector services to identify issues, relationships and opportunities across the system. This process identified three systemic problems that the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network would target:

1. Problem 1 – The voluntary sector is unable to provide the support needed by women with NRPF who are experiencing or at risk of DA. This is driven by a lack of consistent and flexible funding, leading to limited capacity and little coordination across voluntary sector organisations. In this context, organisations are unable to provide trauma-informed, holistic, women-led support, and there is a particular gap in funding to support women ahead of their MVDAC concession, leaving women highly vulnerable to crisis, homelessness and destitution.
2. Problem 2 – There is a lack of sufficient rights for women with NRPF experiencing DA and a lack of knowledge of the rights they can claim. Services and women are unaware of how to legally advocate for women with NRPF and support them to access their rights. The legal frameworks around NRPF can trap women in situations of abuse and destitution.
3. Problem 3 – Many women with NRPF who experience DA are not accessing support that could prevent serious harm. Women with NRPF are often not aware of the services that are available to support them and their rights. Experiences of abuse, combined with uncertainty about their immigration status, can also lead women to fear reaching out to services.

The network's approach to progressing these goals reflects many of the indicators for systemic practice and has laid a solid foundation for systems change. This section highlights how the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network's work has reflected and built its systemic practice.

Deep and established collaboration

The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network has been working systemically through its development of processes and relationships critical to sustaining systemic work.

Staff reflected that the degree of trust and understanding developed between organisations is both interpersonal and structural, as evidenced by it withstanding key staff turnover midway through the work. They highlighted that having regular spaces for peer-to-peer connection, such as the Practitioner's Forum and Network Meetings, enabled ongoing relationship development. This has also been supported by the development of the referral system, which practically enabled and drove staff to communicate and work with each other, to better support women.

Collaboration in the network is also underpinned by confidence in partners' alignment around their values and ambitions for systemic change. Taking time to collectively map out the system and develop a Theory of Change ensured that all partners understood the motivations of each partner and the values that drove their current approach to service delivery. This was strengthened by the development of an action plan that was regularly referred to and reviewed to guide activity, which gave partners clarity on how they were working together towards their shared goals. Joint capacity-building also further embedded collaboration by cultivating values-driven approaches to work, such as through training all partners on trauma-informed and culturally sensitive service delivery.

Systems change requires long-term collaboration that is underpinned by strong relationships, alignment in ambitions and values, and processes that can support collective working. The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network's established and active collaboration reflects systemic practice.

Shifting power and decision-making

At Renaisi, we have seen that systems change requires not just deep collaboration but shifts in who holds power in decision-making. The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network reflects a development and strengthening of already established working relationships between partners. As a result, there is a risk, as flagged by one partner, that the Network is too integrated into the current systems of support to be able to radically change them. With most partners regularly receiving statutory and public funding, they shared that they must carefully balance a conviction that these systems of support are fundamentally sexist and racist, with the need to maintain relationships that fund their delivery of critical services.

“The network is effective at being able to tackle small changes in the system and make the current legal frameworks more

inclusive, but they might not be well placed to be able to advocate for big systems change to get rid of NRPF entirely.”
Interview with network partner, June 2025

This challenge is shared by many delivery organisations that aim to drive systemic change. In our experience at Renaisi, the most effective way to ensure that ambitions for radical systemic change do not get subsumed by organisational needs to support the current system is to ensure that there are strategic, long-term shifts in who holds power in decision-making, which ensure that those with lived experience of harm in the system can direct change. The excerpt to the right from our Guide to Systems Change⁸ highlights why shifts in power to those with lived experience and a culture that supports critical dialogue are foundational for systemic change.

Doing this work requires changing whose voices shape your organisations’ understanding of the system by creating mechanisms for people with direct experience of marginalisation and exclusion to design and oversee work. Individuals who benefit from the current system, especially unknowingly, are unlikely to fully grasp its harmful effects and power imbalances. Shifting power to those with experience of harm will uncover your organisation’s blind spots and build deeper understanding of system dynamics.

As described above, the network’s creation of the NRFP Advisory Group did not embed the voices of those with lived experience in strategic decision-making. This was in line with a genuinely co-productive approach, as women with lived experience in the NRPF Advisory Group chose to focus on capacity building before considering the role they might have in strategic influencing. However, going forward, it will be critical for the network to sustain the relationships developed with women in the NRPF Advisory Group to explore how these women might want to engage in shaping influencing and advocacy. With Baobab stepping back from its role in the network to focus capacity on casework, the new Lived Experience Coordinator will need to invest time in establishing strong relationships with these women to explore how they might take on a more strategic role. Alongside this, partners should continue to strengthen and develop their own approaches to centring lived experience at a strategic level through the recruitment and progression of staff members with lived experience. Ensuring that those with experience of the harm created by the current system are genuinely shaping the strategic direction of the network will safeguard against a tendency towards inertia

⁸ Renaisi’s Guide to Systems Change. Renaisi https://Renaisi.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Renaisi_Guide-to-Systems-Change_final.pdf

that can develop within organisations which are forced to integrate with and placate the established system.

Revealing the system as it is

Systems sustain themselves by hiding their faults and presenting these faults as natural or unavoidable. Developing a clearer understanding of the system and challenging narratives of inevitable harm are essential parts of systemic practice.

The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network is actively building and platforming a clearer picture of how the system is failing vulnerable women. Within the network, systems mapping processes, Practitioner's Forums, Network Meetings and capacity-building sessions have supported partners to develop their understanding of the system as a whole and how it works together to put women experiencing NRPF and DA at risk of destitution and homelessness. This has enabled the network to develop a model for service delivery that addresses systemic issues and to target its influencing activity at shifting the root causes of these issues.

In its influencing activity, the network is creating greater awareness of how the system is failing women with NRPF who experience domestic violence, and using this to drive shifts in attitudes, practice and policy. At a local level, the network is using consistent messaging and frontline evidence to highlight systemic issues and their impact on women's lives in local policy forums. The network is also working to influence local practice through a combination of advocacy and capacity building for frontline statutory services. While partners reflected that seeing this translate to changes in practice is slow, they have already seen an increase in visibility of NRPF at a strategic level, where statutory agencies now recognise the importance of including considerations around NRPF in policy around DA. Alongside this, at a national level, the network is leveraging evidence about injustice in the system to pursue strategic litigation against the Home Office.

The networks' efforts to ensure that powerful stakeholders across the system cannot ignore the experiences of women with NRPF experiencing DA reflect how it is laying the foundation for local systemic change that has the potential to have ripple effects nationally.

Supporting systems change

The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network was established with the ambition to work towards systems change. In three years, the network has made significant progress towards this, developing a systemic practice that has laid strong foundations for systems change. It currently sits in the "Deliver" phase of Renaisi's

model for a typical place-based systems change journey, with many of its interventions in the system at early stages.

The progress made by the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network has occurred within a wider system that is pushing in the opposite direction of the change it aims at. In the June 2025 Learning Workshop, staff described how their work has become increasingly challenging over the past three years despite the major improvements in service delivery brought through the referral process. The change driven by the network should be understood in the context of it working against the following forces of resistance, identified by partners:

- A growing tendency for statutory services to fail to meet their obligations to support women experiencing NRPF and DA, requiring intensive advocacy work
- A sharp rise in the cost of living, which has not been matched by an increase in funding for women escaping domestic violence, meaning the statutory support women receive is often insufficient to meet their basic needs
- A significant increase in the intensity of evidence requests from the Home Office for MVDAC claims, making each claim more time-consuming
- A less stable funding and commissioning environment, which has led some partners to see frontline services decommissioned, absorbing significant senior capacity and impacting staff morale
- An increasingly hostile national narrative around migration, making influencing attitudes and narratives feel like a steep uphill battle

In this context, the following section outlines how the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network is beginning to change the system facing women experiencing NRPF and DA.

Building a nested system that addresses systemic problems

The current migration system dictates that women with NRPF do not have a right to the support that others are entitled to in order to meet their basic needs. While navigating the fundamental injustices in this system, women with NRPF who experience DA also have to battle a system where the support they are entitled to is not understood by those supposed to provide it, placing them at risk of destitution. A significant part of the network's work focuses on supporting women experiencing NRPF and DA to access the rights that they are entitled to.

The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network developed a model for service delivery that remedies the systemic problems that leave women with NRPF vulnerable to destitution and abuse. Through the development of a referral route that ensures women with NRPF experiencing DA have quick access to refuge space, financial assistance, legal and immigration support, the network has created

an improved support system where women experiencing DA can shift their NRPF status and expand their access to support.

This approach reflects the creation of a nested system that responds to the systemic problems identified in systems mapping. However, the sustainability of this system is dependent on the continued philanthropic funding of the network's services. Without guaranteed long-term funding, the nested system of services created by the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network has changed the system, but might not translate to a lasting change. Embedding this nested system into the wider system of support would require policy change that prescribes statutory and public sector commissioning of services which ensure women with NRPF who experience DA do not fall into destitution before they receive an MVDAC and provide the legal support needed to access an MVDAC.

Influencing attitudes, practice and policy

The alternative to embedding this nested system is to use it to leverage wider change, which makes the wider system function similarly to the one created by the network.

The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network's work influencing policy, practice and attitudes around NRPF is pursuing this route to system change, and beginning to result in changes to the system. For example, network partners shared that previously to its formation, it was incredibly challenging to get any audience from statutory agencies for issues around NRPF. This has now shifted. The network is now consistently invited to input on local forums and strategy consultations to ensure the inclusion of considerations around NRPF, which has led to these considerations being included in Birmingham City Council's Domestic Abuse Strategy and commissioning. Going forward, this work has the potential to increasingly change the wider system that women experiencing NRPF and DA face, creating one where network partners no longer need to battle frontline statutory services to ensure women can access the rights they are entitled to.

The network's use of strategic litigation to expand the rights of women with NRPF experiencing DA has changed the system. Its success in broadening eligibility for the MVDAC to include women whose visas are dependent on partners with pre-settled status has created lasting policy change that enables more women to access public funds. Partners have agreed to continue to pursue this work to ensure that all women experiencing NRPF and DA can access the MVDAC. This approach is systemic in that it leads to permanent changes in the policies that leave women with NRPF vulnerable to destitution.

Recommendations for progressing systemic change

Drawing on the evidence in this report and Renaisi's experience working with organisations and partnerships driving systemic change, we recommend that the Birmingham NRFP Women's Support Network pursue the following avenues to progress systemic change:

- **Leverage training to shift narratives:** Engage all levels of statutory services – frontline, managerial, and strategic – in training to shift narratives around immigration and improve responses to women experiencing NRPF and DA.
- **Aligning messaging:** Continue to repeat key messages around NRPF and DA with a collective voice to shift understanding, attitude and narratives.
- **Improve data collection:** Build light-touch, efficient processes to systematically capture and analyse frontline evidence to highlight systemic failures and impact on women experiencing NRPF and DA, for learning, influencing and advocacy.
- **Respond to women's priorities:** Continue to adapt service delivery in response to feedback from those with lived experience. This includes formalising and embedding a caseworker-led advocacy model where a woman can be supported by a single caseworker who provides person-centred support and advocates for her with statutory services and the Home Office. It will also include focusing on supporting women's access to financial support and advice, and education, training, and employment.
- **Embed lived experience:** Adopt a network-wide approach to embedding lived experience that ensures women's voices shape decision-making and advocacy at all levels. This could include creating flexible engagement mechanisms for women with lived experience, offering both short-term opportunities and pathways into long-term advocacy and leadership roles. It should also sustain relationships with NRPF Advisory Group members who have expressed an interest in influencing and trained in community research, creating structured opportunities for them to influence advocacy, evaluation and strategic direction.
- **Effectively resource systems change and delivery:** This should include increasing delivery capacity across partner organisations to meet rising demand and avoid staff burnout without undermining systemic influencing work. Alongside this, dedicated and safeguarding staff capacity for systems change work through the Systems Change Steering Group and Policy and Advocacy Coordinator, will prevent capacity from being absorbed by operational pressures.
- **Continue pushing for national policy change:** The network should continue to pursue strategic litigation to ensure fair access to the Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Concession (MVDAC) and achieve durable policy reform.
- **Platform learning:** The network should work with national partners to share learning and evidence about its model for service delivery to support the adoption of similar models to support marginalised women nationally.

Conclusion

The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network has developed a nested system that has supported over 1000 women to avoid destitution, escape domestic abuse and stabilise their immigration status and ensured this support is delivered in a trauma-informed and culturally sensitive way. It is also influencing local and national policy and practice, leveraging frontline experience to mainstream considerations around NRPF locally and expand the rights of women with NRPF via changes to national legislation. By amplifying experiences often overlooked by social services and creating safe, accessible spaces for people to engage with support, the network is transforming individuals' experiences at a local level. Its experience shows that place-based, collaborative approaches can generate meaningful change for highly marginalised communities, even within deeply resistant systems.

However, the scale of the resistance facing the Birmingham NRPF Network cannot be understated. In this context, the network's impact to date in influencing the system that women experiencing NRPF and DA experience is a clear testament to the effectiveness of their approach. This impact is critical within a wider system that continues to worsen. Rather than undermining the importance of this work, the scale of the challenge underscores the need for it to continue, be better resourced, and be replicated in other contexts where similar foundations exist.

As the network continues its journey in place-based systems change, it will be critical that it maintains a focus on strengthening the resilience of the nested system it has created, alongside pushing for the narratives, processes and outcomes in its system to be mirrored more widely. Strengthening the resilience of its system of services will require expanding capacity to relieve pressure on staff, diversifying funding, and embedding lived experience at a strategic level. These developments, alongside a continuation of its current approach to influencing local and national policy change, have the potential to lead to deep systems change in Birmingham that has ripple effects impacting women with NRPF who experience domestic abuse nationally.

Get in touch

Find out more about our work at renaisi.com

Follow us on LinkedIn for news and insights

Email: info@renaisi.com

Renaisi-TSIP

The Rain Cloud Victoria, 76 Vincent Square, SW1P 2PD, London, United Kingdom

