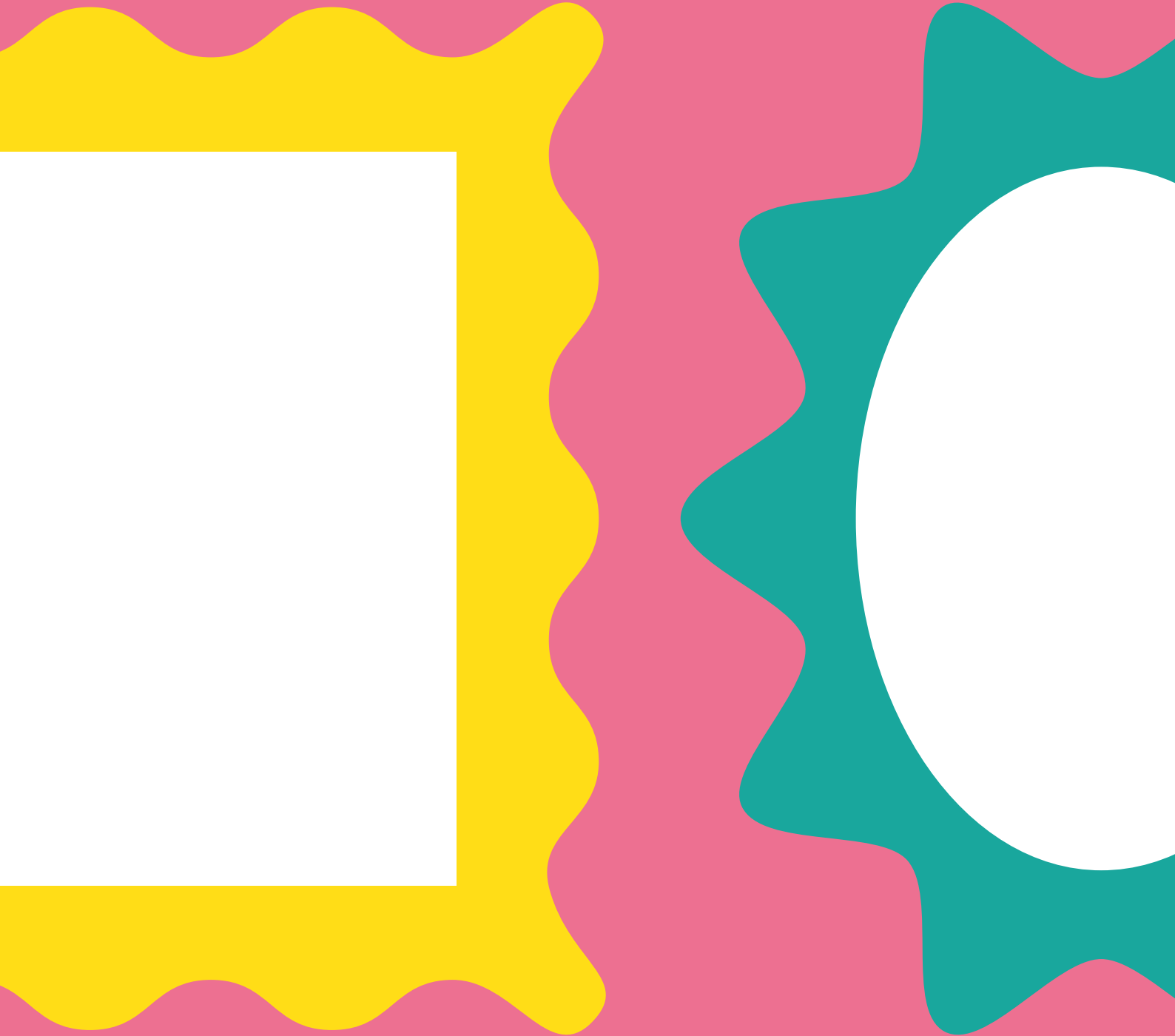


SAFE REFUGE ACCOMMODATION

IN THE NORTH EAST OF ENGLAND



A Learning Circles Event by
the Transforming Together Network

The event took place on the 2nd July 2025 at The Barn at Easington Colliery, England

Booklet published in July 2025 by the Transforming Together Network

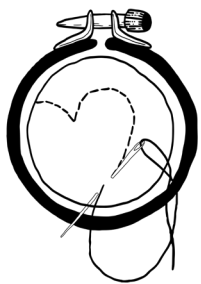
Transforming Together: Building place-based networks to improve services for women is a network of professionals, local decision-makers, and women with lived experience working together to improve support for women with multiple unmet needs in the North East.

All activities used to create this booklet were co-designed by Angelika Strohmayer and Paulina Malowaniec, with the Transforming Together network members who planned the event.

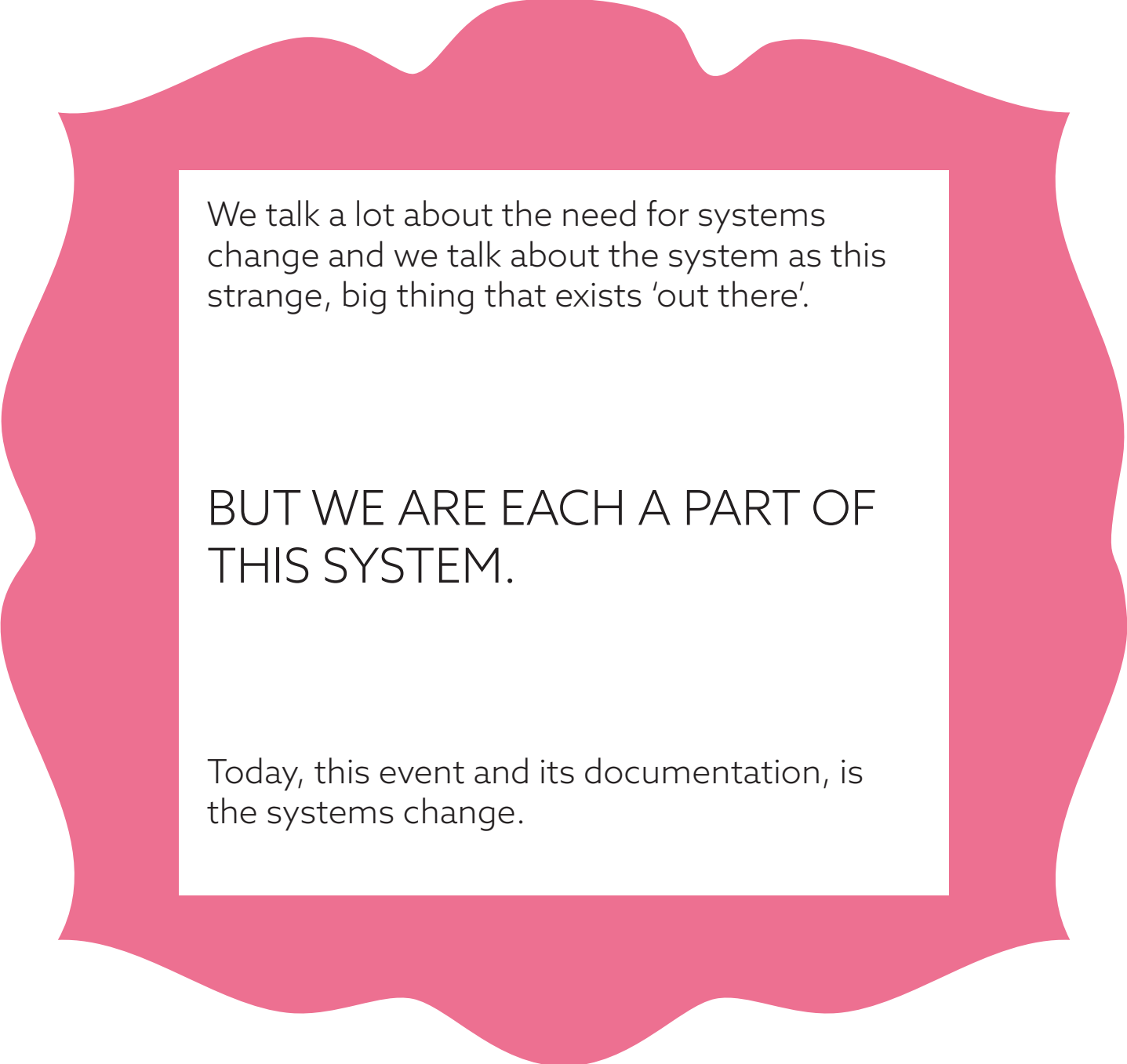
The resulting booklet was written by Angelika Strohmayer and designed by Paulina Malowaniec with some of the text written by Laura McIntyre (network coordinator). It was produced by Crafting Hope CIC for Agenda Alliance's Transforming Together Network's Data, Information Sharing, and Evidence subgroup.



AGENDA
alliance



**Crafting
Hope**

A thick, vibrant pink border with a wavy, scalloped edge surrounds the central text area.

We talk a lot about the need for systems change and we talk about the system as this strange, big thing that exists 'out there'.

BUT WE ARE EACH A PART OF
THIS SYSTEM.

Today, this event and its documentation, is
the systems change.

NEVER SEEN, NEVER HEARD

A poem by Kayliegh

No-one has ever understood me
In this big scary world I feel alone.
I am never seen, never heard, no-one to turn to
Never a safe place to call home.

I survived being beaten and broken
Sexual abuse, yet you say I act the victim.
So I took drugs to escape, because when I asked for help
I was met with your discrimination.

You then tore my family apart and demolished my worth
Now I am lost.
I just needed support, a little love and some guidance
Not more reasons why not to trust.

How can I communicate?
When I'm always met with stigma, judgement and shame.
Why should I know better?
When there is no-one to teach me
How dare you say I am to blame.

I am passed from pillar to post, each time same questions asked
This is retraumatising.
I am just another box ticked off your list
This is inhumane and demoralising.

And now you wonder why I have no hope or faith
And I wonder where is your responsibility?
You repeat the same cycles of harm when you have a duty of care
It's time for system change and for services to take accountability.

ABOUT THE TRANSFORMING TOGETHER NETWORK

The Transforming Together network builds on collaborative research and working, starting in 2022 with the 'Transforming Services for Women's Futures' project. This was a collaborative research project looking to understand the experiences of women seeking support in Northumberland and Tyne & Wear, and how public services could be redesigned post-pandemic to better support women and girls with multiple unmet needs.

In 2023, the Dismantling Disadvantages¹ report followed. This is a major report which found that, in 2021, a woman in the North East of England was 1.7x more likely to die early as a result of suicide, addiction, or murder by a partner or family member than in the rest of England and Wales. The research found that failures by public services to provide appropriate support was a contributing factor, and served as an urgent wake-up call for 'levelling up' efforts to combat regional inequalities and a post-code lottery for support.

Following the report, the Transforming Together Network was formed in 2024. We are made up of women working in, accessing, and advocating for changes in service provision for women facing multiple unmet support needs. We have three collective priorities:

- (1)** Data, information sharing, and evidence
- (2)** Commissioning, funding, and power sharing
- (3)** Collaboration and convening

Across these three groups, we understand there is a vital importance in developing strong, lasting, and equitable relationships (between women, experiences, and services) and working towards a common goal. For this, it is important that we have a consistent structure to our working and highlight the importance of local connections and power within a national structure. As this booklet will highlight, we also see incredible power in storytelling – bringing the often hard and cold numbers to life through lived experience, creativity, sharing, and connection.

1. Agenda Alliance & Changing Lives, Dismantling Disadvantage: Levelling up public services for women with multiple unmet needs (July 2023).

ACCESS TO SAFE REFUGE ACCOMMODATION

for Women with multiple unmet needs

Access to safe refuge accommodation can be life-saving for women. In 2023-24, local authorities across England reported 63,580 referrals in statutory, commissioned services. However, we know that there are simply not enough beds: in the North East, we had 3,980 referrals for 1,000 available beds in 2023-2024. These numbers are from the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2024) research report titled 'Support in Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation', which provides information only about statutory, commissioned services. The real numbers are even more stark.

When we start to look deeper into these numbers, we also start to see how women who face multiple forms of disadvantage have even more barriers to accessing this sparse availability of safe accommodation. Often, women with multiple support needs are referred into dispersed properties, of which there are only 70 recorded as commissioned services in our region. There are even lower numbers for beds with additional 'specialist' support available. This is where women would be supported who are often described as being more 'complex' – the number of these properties within commissioned services is so low, that the number is not identified but instead is recorded as 'low'.

There simply are not enough beds to be able to provide safe accommodation for all women in our region, and accessing the small number of dispersed properties is incredibly difficult for women who face multiple forms of marginalisation and disadvantages. While we do call for the expansion of the safe accommodation stock in our region, we also understand that this would not be a magical salve to the multiple, intersecting issues that many women in our region face. Instead, our network is asking how we can more meaningfully and better support women facing multiple forms of disadvantage beyond providing refuge spaces through innovative thinking and ways of working.

SUMMARY OF THE DAY

Systems Change in Action

Our Learning Circles Event was more than an opportunity to come together and learn from one another: it was systems change in action. The event highlighted that while we desperately need change in policy and commissioning practices, there is also a shift in culture that is needed in the sector: one that involves all roles and experiences on equitable footing, one that highlights collaboration not competition, and one that empowers all individuals within the system to make changes in their own spheres of influence.

This is what the day was. The day was systems change in action. The Transforming Together Network challenges more traditional approaches to systems change by not only being able to speak the language of systems change, but by having already implemented key tenets of required change.

WE REALISED: WE ARE THE SYSTEM.

This means that everyone who attended the day: whether commissioner, frontline worker, or woman who has accessed services, we were all there as women first. The role or job we had did not matter to our standing at the event – we all had equal standing, respected one another, shared our knowledge and expertise, and imagined alternative futures. This made us feel as equals, gave space for us to speak as equals, and operationalise a radically empowered system. All together, this allowed us to transform ourselves and the event into one where the process (how we do things) became a powerful collective way of making change.

We enacted this change through creative activities that allowed us to reflect and imagine differently: creating body maps, a gallery wall of 'good practice' and imagining a utopian village in a protective snowglobe that not only provides care to women who need it, but also nurtures alternative pathways forward for women who access services.

To highlight this shift, one attendee said: "At first, I was dreading it, thinking what is this going to be when driving down that rocky road, I didn't know what to expect but when I got there, I loved it and got so much from it."

Participants said that they were able to share their thoughts and feelings in ways they hadn't been able to before – not like they were at work, but like they were in a powerful room making change. A powerful day. This does not mean we only had lovely conversations, but it meant we sometimes had difficult conversations, where women were able to speak the truth. We acknowledged from the beginning that this 'truth speaking' can sometimes also cause harm – but that we should not hold this back. We understand that respectful conflict can lead to progress.

These kinds of conversations however require bravery. And it is this bravery that we tried to nurture at our event. As one participant said: "we need to be seriously brave right now, more than ever before, and in this space all women involved were being brave. The openness and willingness to be slightly vulnerable also creates a natural shared power."

Ultimately, our day was a space for women to come together, connect, and learn from one another. All of us working in different parts of the system that aims to support after, and protect women from, harm. Each one of us has different spheres of power we can influence, no matter how small or large. We must work within our individual spheres to make cultural change. And we must work together across sectors, metaphoric and sometimes physical boundaries, and across levels of the hierarchy to create deeper connections.

Our learning circles event was a starting point for so much change: we have planted the seeds and now must work to tend to the seedlings that have started to sprout throughout the summer.

GROUND RULES AND VALUES

We experience the space together, reflecting on complex issues, and we listen and share with different insights and knowledges. The inclusion of various voices, particularly from women who have accessed support services, is crucial for fostering innovative solutions to systemic challenges. To create a space that is safe for sharing deep insights:

- ✱ We ask that everyone respects one another.
- ✱ We ask everyone to listen to one another, with the understanding that there are differing experiences and opinions.
- ✱ We do not take or give offense with anything said during the day. Instead, we learn to understand each others' perspectives, even when this does not relate to our own experiences.
- ✱ We ask everyone to be carefully curious.
- ✱ We ask everyone to be present throughout the day when engaging with activities.
- ✱ We ask everyone to work at their own pace, and to support one another throughout the day.

ABOUT THE LEARNING CIRCLES EVENT

On the 2nd of July, we met at the beautiful Barn at Easington. We came together in a series of learning circles, where we explored, ideated, and share knowledge together. We started and ended the day with a meditation, and came together to discuss three key questions through co-creative activities:

Question 1: How does it feel to work and access services in this space?

Question 2: What has been the best response or bit of work that you have seen or done?

Question 3: Thinking beyond 'refuge', how can we reimagine the system that supports women facing multiple unmet needs?

We came together to discuss these issues, intermingling various perspectives: women who have accessed services, women who provide support in services, service management, commissioning, research, advocacy, and everything in between. We also appreciate and acknowledge that those of us who were there on the day are also likely to have experienced various forms of marginalisation and harm throughout our lives, and that we bring along a variety of personal and professional experiences that go well beyond our current jobs.

SMALL CIRCLE DISCUSSION

CIRCLE 1

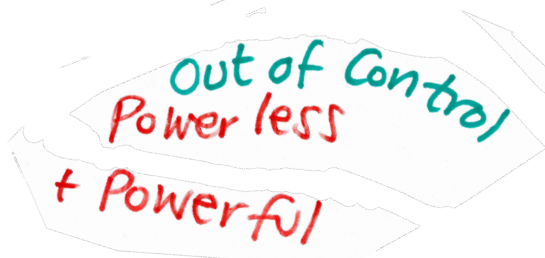
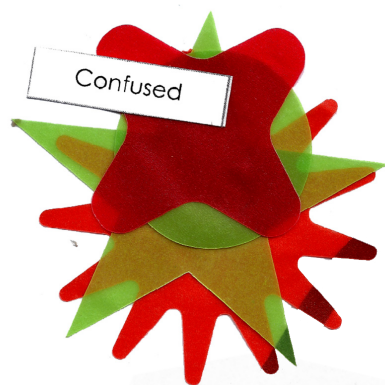
QUESTION

How does it feel to work in and access services and systems that relate to safe refuge accommodation for women facing multiple forms of disadvantage?

ACTIVITY

We created 6 body maps throughout the morning. From looking at all of these together, it is clear that working in this sector is not easy: it is fraught with a variety of emotions, feelings, and sensations. Many participants reflected on the powerlessness and simultaneous powerfulness of their roles.





Women who had accessed services reflected on how accommodation holds power. For example, they said that they often felt at risk of being evicted (which often felt like being punished). Furthermore, women felt that staff in refuge accommodations sometimes used the power they held over them as threats; even if this was sometimes done without intention or without realising this is what staff were doing. On top of this, the women felt that staff who are not employed by the refuge had huge expectations of them, which they said felt unfair, silly at times (they laughed out loud at some of the requests that they had heard over the years). Ultimately the use of power over the women in accommodation and the unrealistic expectations set on them by staff outside accommodation showed a lack of understanding of what was really important to women.

Some professionals felt restricted, frozen, confused, heavy, or crushed by the responsibility of their role: they were very conscious of the impacts that their actions, words, and practices can have on a woman's life. Staff in support services said they wanted to help women and were also aware that they may turn away women who are vulnerable. This led to women talking about the guilt and grief of doing this kind of work, and about how they felt stripped of their power on certain occasions. Sometimes it was lonely, hopeless, frustrating work; some staff sometimes feel victimised themselves by the system. Sometimes the work feels 'impossible' and incredibly slow-moving; like they are constantly met by barriers when trying to do the right, active, thing to support a woman.

Professionals also talked about the need to be honest in difficult situations. Sometimes they feel scared of what state they might find women in when they meet (eg. the very real risk of suicide, and a support worker maybe being the person to find a woman). Staff said that it was difficult to help women navigate some of the feelings and behaviours they were exhibiting due to experiences they might have had; and with empathy, staff also shared that they had experienced some challenging events with women where they felt at risk and sometimes coerced.

At the same time though, they felt powerful: they were aware their jobs were bigger than themselves and that they were empowered to make change in women's lives. Some staff felt brave about the work they were doing, making choices that could change someone's life. It was understood that this was not an easy task, but something that was in constant flux, trauma-informed working in particular was understood as something that required sustaining, a constant becoming.

Ultimately, it was understood that working in this sector required hopeful practice - it required practicing with hope and finding hope in the system.



SMALL CIRCLE DISCUSSION

CIRCLE 2

Regional working

Women highlighted the opportunity of working at a regional level in the North East to meaningfully support women. They linked this in particular to holding services to account. For example, asking difficult questions about evictions and refusal to house women in accommodation projects, as happens too often as women are seen as 'too complex' to support in traditional refuges.

Assertive workers challenging the system

When working in meaningful partnership, women's journeys are not fractured. It creates an environment where women can stay in touch with key support workers, while also navigating specialist support. This can happen in two distinct ways:

(1) well-networked staff who are able to move between different services via link workers, secondments, navigator roles, or similar models. These kinds of roles allowed staff to individually upskill, but also to provide peer-learning across different services, leaving behind legacies of connection and understanding.

(2) providing holistic services at all points of entry for a woman accessing services. This means that, for example, when a woman accesses a probation hub, she is able to get support for additional support needs she might have, such as experiences of domestic abuse, addiction/recovery, or other connected needs.

This way of working subverts 'the system' and creates new ways of working. It also creates spaces for staff to become advocates, working with the women they support to build confidence and to elevate their voices in professional settings.

QUESTION

What have been the best responses or bits of work that you have seen or done?

ACTIVITY

Women were able to share many examples of good practice that they have seen or been a part of. Often, this practice was something that related to specific pieces of work, but that were linked to good partnership working and meaningful long-term commissioning practices.



Continued
trusted
relationship

Think
outside
the box

NOT one referral
fits all!
Referrals are too
complex

Working with
+ having a relationship
with partner agency
to pull together as a
team - NRPf

Wrap
around
care & joint
working

Finding
Allies in
Private
Sector too
(Private Rents)

Colocated
Support
Services
eg. Drug & alcohol
Domestic Abuse

Multi Agency
Working SO SITUATIONS
AREN'T HAVING TO BE
RETOOK EACH TIME

Womens Hubs ->
'One Stop Shop?'

Relaxed
that all the
agencies are
working together

Planned move
following prison
release into
safe accommodation.
"Too complex" to go
elsewhere

Multiagency
working

DRUG + ALCOHOL/
+ MENTAL HEALTH
WORKERS WITHIN
REFUGEE ACCOMMODATION

One-stop shop

Place-based working also raises the importance of providing what women called a 'one stop shop'. This is a space where multiple services are co-located; either physically in one location or through strong connections between staff and services.

While holistic support is of course essential, it was raised consistently that highly specialist services were a necessity: they were powerful in supporting women with very specific aspects of support. At the same time however, these were raised in conjunction with other services: working in partnership, where each specialist partner is respected and plays an equitable role. While partnerships are often talked about at the organisational level, it was highlighted that these kinds of partnerships are built on individual relationships. For this kind of working to be sustained, we require long-term funding.

Health
in hotel
/ house
- Go to the
clinics

Health Squad
visiting refugees
for "MOT"
checks

Challenging the norm

Women wanted to document that it was difficult to navigate complex systems, not just for women who are accessing services but also for the staff who support them. Challenging this through empathy, non-judgemental services, and meeting women where they are at were raised as examples of good practice.

Choice in refuge

Having a bed to sleep in should not be the minimum requirement for safe refuge. Women should be able to make choices about the space they live in, they should feel like it's a safe environment that they can make their own. Whether this is in a room, apartment, or specialist units, women should be able to make decisions about their furniture, pyjamas; they should be able to bring their pets and children. Women should be able to create a beautiful environment in which they can not only survive, but thrive and redefine their purpose.



In shared safe
accommodation \Rightarrow
solidarity of
women. What
do they think
should happen?

peer
mentor training
has been a
successful
tool.

Time based,
Feel as safe as poss.
Crutch & drops +
alcohol must be
acknowledged.
KEEP DOORS OPEN

Co-designing services

Women who have accessed support and continue to access support should be central in our development of new refuge and other safe accommodation spaces. They should be hired as paid staff, should be provided with peer-mentoring opportunities, and should be involved throughout all design stages of an intervention or service. It is vital that this co-production is genuine, and goes beyond tokenistic involvement of women.

Further to this, the women found it incredibly important for commissioners to be a part of the conversation of designing new services and interventions: the best relationships were those where commissioners were invested in the services they funded and contracted, and where the relationships and funding remained somewhat flexible. This allows for services to be designed in conversation with commissioners and the people they support simultaneously.

When commissioners
speak to people
who work in + have
lived it!
like Cinderella.

Positive relationship
building / working

Lived Experience
Staff.
Paid.

REAL!
CO PRODUCTION
&
CO COMMISSIONING

Ultimately, the best practices were built on relationships - between various specialist services, between services and commissioners, and of course between service providers and the women who access these services.

Restrictions
Gate Keeping
Crappy Funding

Stigma
Judgement
Blame + Shame



• Misogyny • Racism • Bigotry • Ableism
Homophobia • Transphobia • Sexism



RECOMMENDATIONS

The Transforming Together Network builds on the visions set out by our members; and our recommendations in relation to safe refuge accommodation for women are built on the visions we created during our retreat at the Barn at Easington. Our recommendations bring together our collective learning and point towards a need for a whole-system approach to supporting women with multiple unmet needs and that this must work effectively on a regional North East level, not based on individual councils.

1. WE MUST WORK WITH A HOLISTIC AND HOPEFUL ETHOS, NOT JUST CHANGE OUR PRACTICE

To be successful in transforming the systems that we all work and operate in, we must not only adapt our practice to be trauma-informed, caring, and hopeful, but we must also change our foundational ethos of why we do this work. Rather than working in competition, we argue for meaningful collaboration across highly specialist and more broad services. This kind of work should be forward-looking, hopeful work with the women rather than focusing on risk management. To be able to do this, it is imperative that workers across different services and sectors come together regularly to reflect, share knowledge, and build connections.

2. WE REQUIRE A REGIONAL CASE-MANAGEMENT SYSTEM THAT ALLOWS FOR CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION ACROSS THE REGION

This kind of regional approach would allow women to move away from harmful spaces and stay within areas where they feel safe. For this to work, we require a budget that gives space for organisations to collectively support the women, provide appropriate accommodation, and multidisciplinary, cross-sector wrap-around support. This does not require a complete rebuilding of our structures, rather it can lean on existing services and care, but should be facilitated through a specialist role that works across the region

3. STAFF WELLBEING MUST BE CENTRAL TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF ANY NEW SERVICES

Staff can only support women if they themselves are healthy enough to provide good care. As such, it is integral to any new contracts that staff are provided with adequate peer-reflexive practice and clinical supervision. On top of this, service structures should facilitate them to work with hopeful practices with the women they support and the staff they collaborate with. This requires space and time for community-building and networking; building confidence in staff to create the support work they and the women develop together.

4. WOMEN IN OUR REGION REQUIRE A SAFE SPACE FOR RESPITE AND RE-BUILDING

We require spaces for respite that women accessing care can make use of individually and collectively. On one hand there simply are not enough properties available in our region to safely and appropriately house women facing multiple unmet support needs and on the other hand this accommodation doesn't always provide accessible and appropriate wrap-around care. On top of safe accommodation though, women also require access to meaningful respite activities to physically, emotionally, and psychologically learn to feel safe again, re-build confidence, and develop strategies to care for themselves.

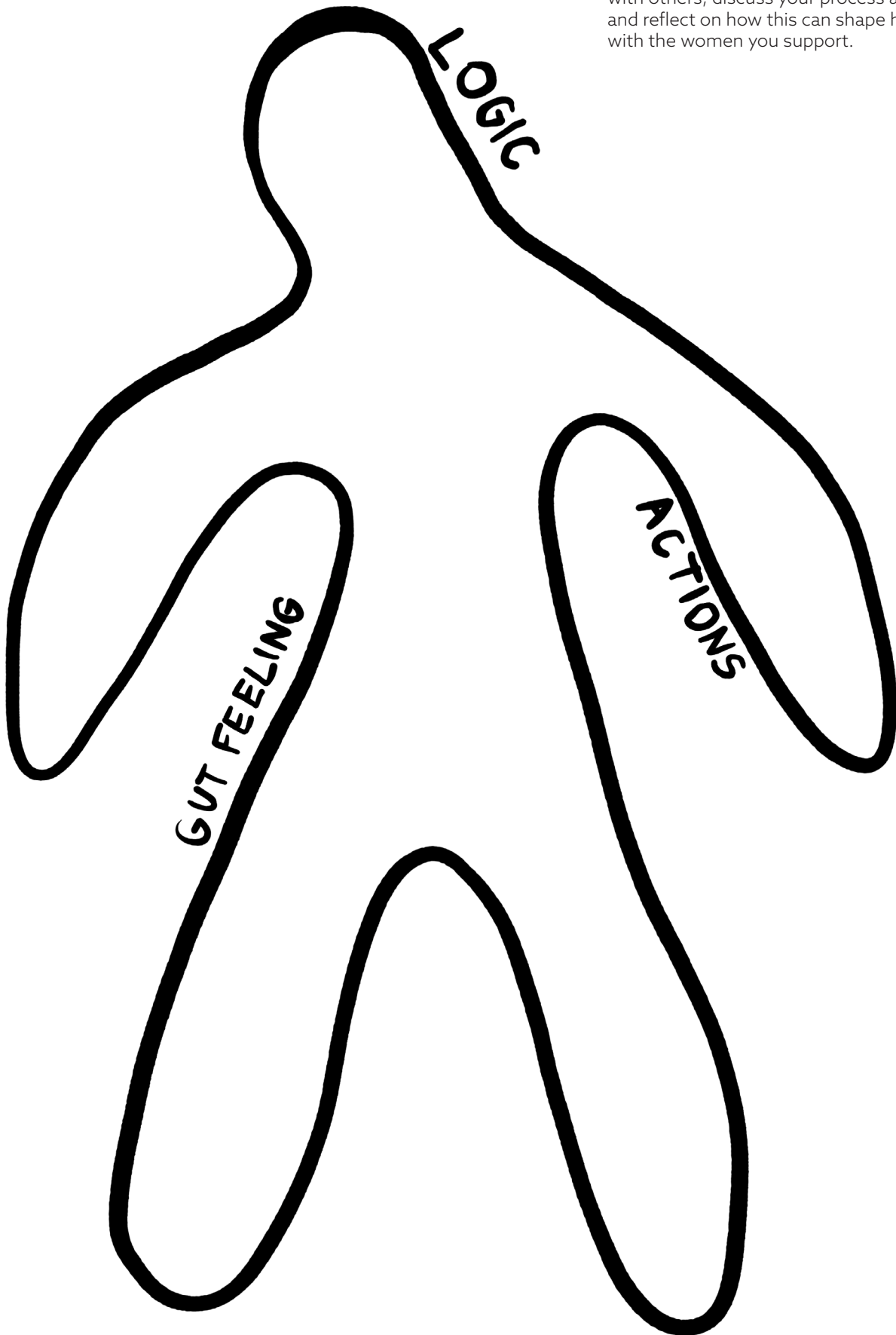
Some of these recommendations might seem utopian, or unattainable – but that is not the case: our event was an example of all of these recommendations in practice. We were able to create a space where women who access support and who provide support across public health, medical, domestic abuse, and other sectors were able to contribute to discussions equitably. We worked in a hopeful, forward-looking way; developing meaningful connections along the way. We were in a space of respite, the Barn at Easington, re-fueling our energy-tanks through conviviality, playful activities, and reflection. We require more of these kinds of events; a pattern that can be sustained to work together to improve access to safe refuge and meaningful support for women facing multiple unmet support needs in the North East of England.

You can use the activity sheets on the following pages, to start to think about how you can apply our recommendations and ways of working into your own practice.

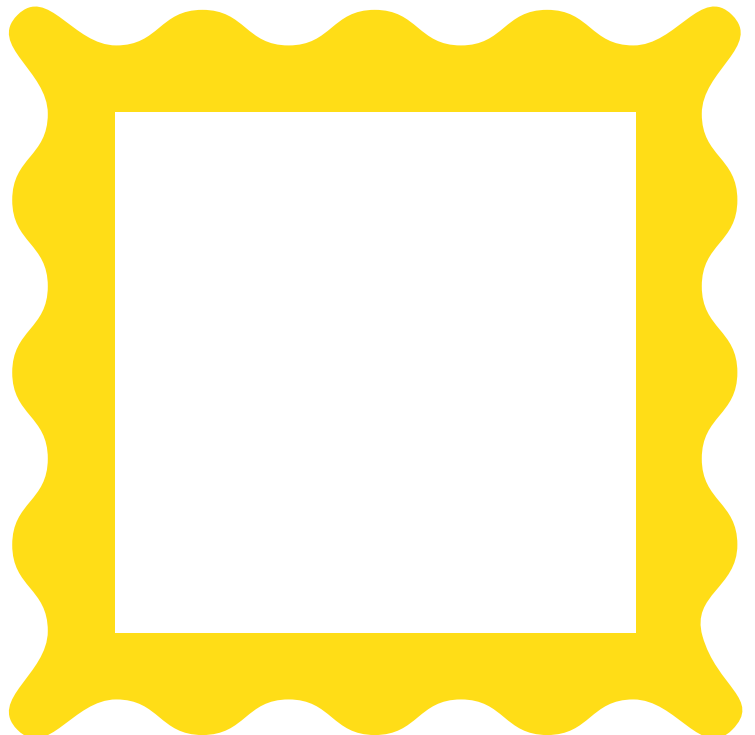
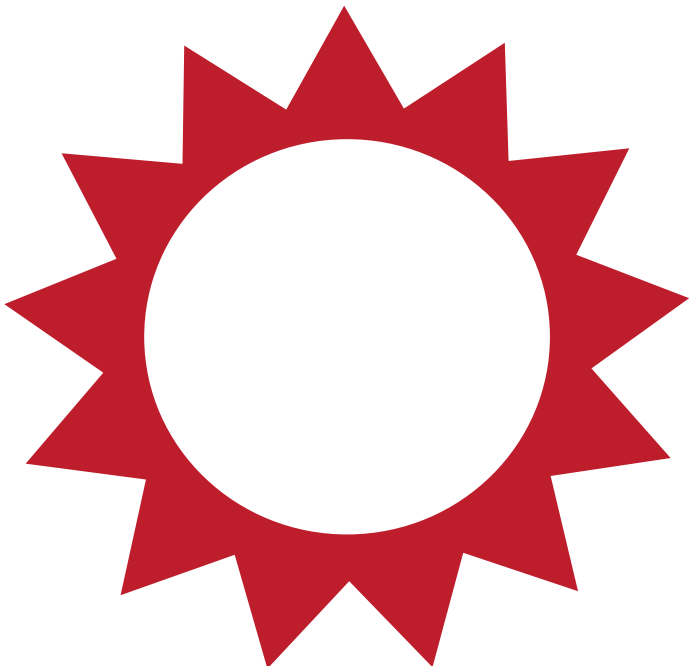
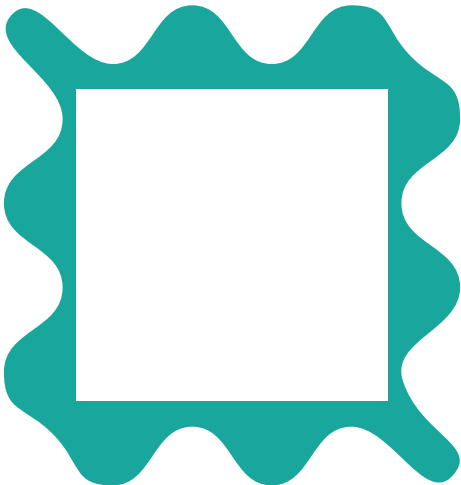
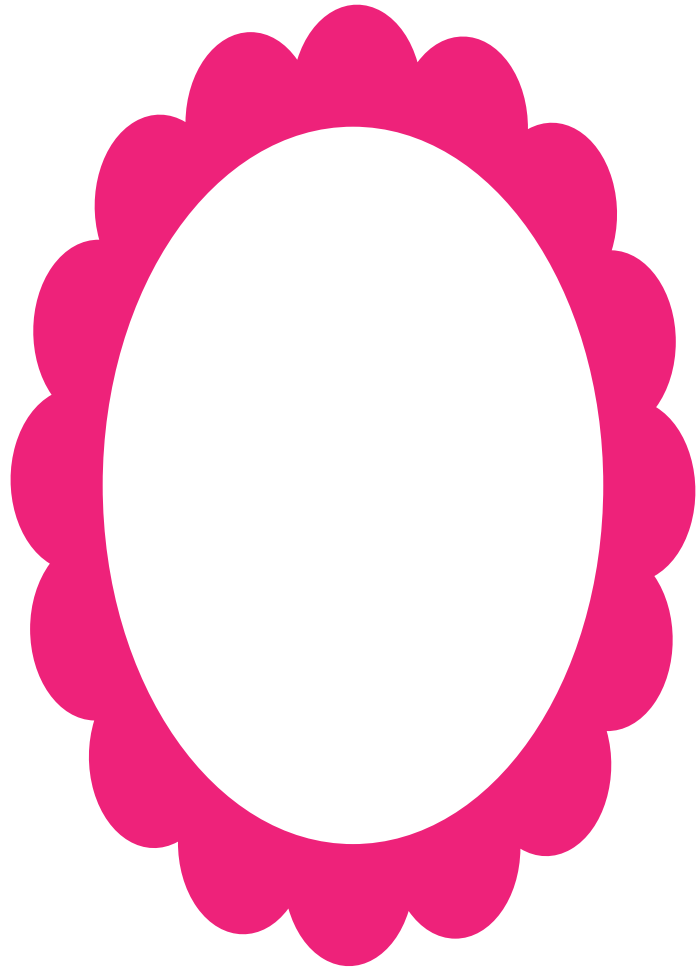
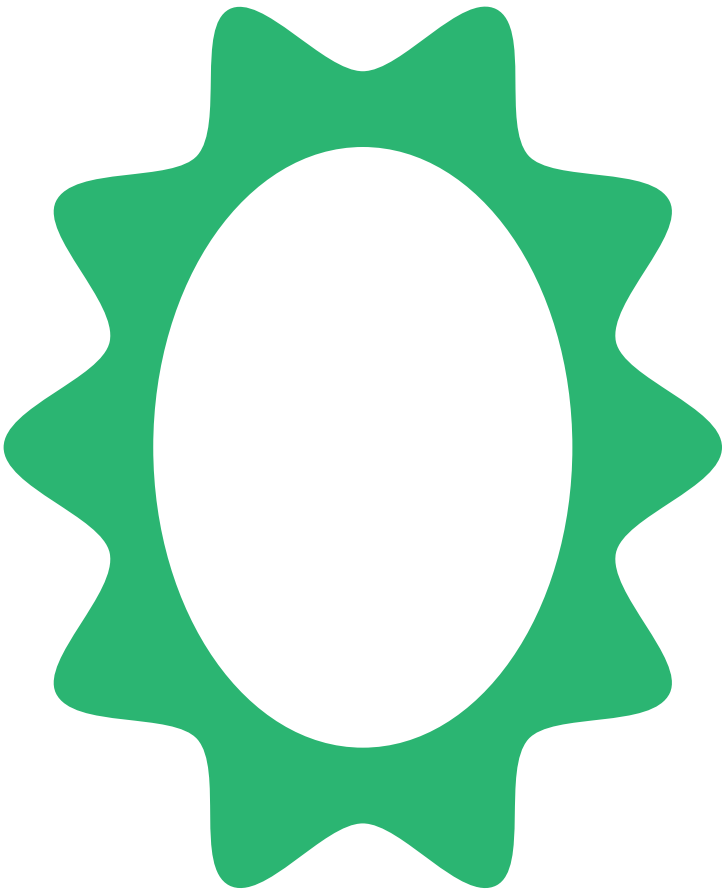
WHAT CAN YOU DO?

How does it feel to work in services that relate to safe refuge accommodation for women facing multiple forms of disadvantage?

Using the shape on this page, draw, doodle, or create a collage of what it feels like to work in this space for you. You can try doing this exercise by yourself or with colleagues in your team. If working with others, discuss your process and outcomes, and reflect on how this can shape how you engage with the women you support.



What have been the best responses or bits of work that you have seen or done?
Add to this gallery wall, by adding doodles and short statements about the best kinds of work you have seen or been involved in. Let's celebrate the good practice when we see it, raise it up as an example, and strive to see more and more of these good practices in reality.



Thinking beyond 'refuge', how can we reimagine the system that supports women facing multiple unmet needs?

Use the snowglobe on this page to create a protected, magical village for women experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage in the North East of England. There are three tasks on this page, you can pick which order you do them in and you can choose what you want to focus on

1. Think about what the basis, the foundation, on which this magical village should be built is. Write this ethos into the 'base' of the snowglobe.

2. Build your village: draw your village and/or write things into the snowglobe to create your utopian vision of what a system could look like to better support women facing multiple disadvantages. This village is protected from reality, because it is housed within this snowglobe. Place elements you feel are important in your circle, making sure to stay within the magical boundaries of the circle. As you are doing this, feel free to colour in your village and add small details to bring it to life.

3. Think about and discuss the kinds of things you want to keep out of your magical village. Write these around the outside of the snow globe – the glass protects your magical world from these things.

