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A house of cards

Social housing needs when moving on from domestic violence

Briefing paper, September 2014

Domestic violence is a crime that takes place in the home; this means access to safe and secure housing is crucial for women and children seeking to rebuild their lives free from abuse.

Background

This briefing paper draws on the findings of a three year longitudinal study which followed 100 women and their children as they rebuilt their lives after accessing domestic violence services from Solace Women's Aid (Kelly, Sharp and Klein, 2014). It provides an overview of women's social housing needs and makes recommendations to local and central government to ensure women and children can settle in safe and affordable homes.

Key messages

- Having a home in which women and children can feel and be safe is vital, removing the fear and insecurity which domestic violence creates.
- The social housing situation in London has led to a critical situation for those fleeing domestic abuse with a lack of move-on accommodation.
- A quarter of women had to move three times or more after leaving a violent partner.
- Some women were forced to trade secure housing for safety.
- Many women ended up in inappropriate and sometimes unsafe temporary accommodation for lengthy periods of time.

Accessing safety: Housing is not only a practical need for women and children who have to flee domestic violence but is integral to beginning to feel safe and being able to move forward with their lives. Within the study, 87 per cent of the women had to move house to end the abuse. Of this group: 44 per cent had moved once; 31 per cent had moved twice; 14 per cent had moved three times; six per cent had moved four times; and five per cent had moved five or more times. A lack of move on accommodation, decreasing availability of social housing and barriers to accessing private rented accommodation meant that many women had to wait several years to settle safely and some were still waiting to do so by the end of the research period. This insecurity and repeated disruption interfered with all the processes the study found that enabled women and children to begin undoing the harms of domestic violence, including growing supportive networks, addressing health concerns and taking steps to (re)enter education and the workplace.

Refuge accommodation: Just over a quarter of women (n=27) were in refuge accommodation at the beginning of the project. Although this had more than halved (n=12) by the round two interviews, some women were living in refuge accommodation for at least 12 months or longer. The shortage of social housing meant that they were forced to stay in refuge for unnecessarily long periods of time.

Maintaining tenancies: The shortage of social housing meant that maintaining tenancies was even more important. Women who are joint tenants in social housing have a right to the property they have fled, however in practice local authorities and housing associations proved reluctant to remove the perpetrator – a condition which would enable women and their children to either move back in or transfer to another

property. Awareness of the social housing shortage meant some women were very hesitant to give up tenancies and this led them to prioritise housing over their safety. As the housing situation in London worsens this is likely to happen more and more frequently, and is at odds with both the Greater London Authority (GLA) Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy and borough policies, all of which notionally prioritise women's safety.

Local authority housing departments: Women presenting as homeless to local authorities reported that housing officers were frequently unsympathetic and seemed 'uninterested' in their domestic violence histories or alternatively did not understand and/or were disbelieving. After three decades of law reform and policy changes establishing rights to re-housing for survivors, this has become more and more difficult due to lack of social housing stock and welfare reforms. Women reported being asked for a crime reference number even though this was not required by law or policy. Those women who had experienced coercive control, but not physical assaults, had a particularly hard time, with some reporting the housing officer advising them to return to the relationship. This contradicts the judgment in *Yemshaw vs. Hounslow Borough Council* (2011) which held that 'domestic violence' as defined in the Housing Act (1996) is not limited to physical assault, and encompasses threatening or intimidating behaviour. Whilst one woman was able to use this to challenge her exclusion, those without the support and advocacy of a specialist domestic violence service may not fare so well. For women relocating in the aftermath of domestic violence, the 'right' place to live was important if they and their children were to begin to feel safe. But when these concerns were voiced, housing officers were unlikely to take these considerations seriously. More commonly women were told 'if you were really unsafe you would take anything': this resulted in families being placed in hostels with men and/or in accommodation where there were known problems with drugs and violence. Some treatment was so poor that women made complaints as well as representations to the Head of Housing and local Councillors. A fifth of women reported seeking help from their Member of Parliament (MP). Almost two-thirds (60 per cent) of women were living in social housing at the end of the study.

Welfare reform: Changes to housing benefit meant that women who relied on it reported being fearful that they would be forced to move again once the benefit cap was imposed, since they would not be able to afford paying any top-up required. For women on housing benefit with empty rooms i.e. where children had grown up and left home, the bedroom tax was also an issue. Housing benefit more generally was a source of inconvenience and worse; some women had to pay back over-payments and others were in rent arrears because of delayed payments. Considerable costs were also incurred by women who had fled and who had to set up a new home from scratch. The cutting of community grants and crisis loans meant women were reliant on the good will of their social networks and charities signifying a return to a 'make do and mend' approach which the first refuges had to contend with in the early 1970s.

Recommendations

- Refuge provision, at the level recommended by the Istanbul Convention should be guaranteed and funded through a national refuge fund with a move on pathway.
- In cases where women are joint social housing tenants, local authorities and housing associations must consider removing the perpetrator so that women and children can live safely.
- Women and children made homeless through domestic violence should be recognised as a unique group fleeing crimes that take place in the home. This needs to be recognised through special measures including the offer of a social housing tenancy.
- All women in social housing in Greater London who flee domestic violence should be guaranteed a move to equivalent social housing within Greater London, unless they want to move out of the city.
- Women should not have their housing benefit reduced for an empty bedroom for at least two years following the perpetrator leaving the family home and then the situation should be reviewed.
- A central fund for families having to relocate due to domestic violence for resettlement costs should be created by central government.

Kelly, L., Sharp, N. and Klein, R. (2014) Finding the Costs of Freedom: How women rebuild their lives after domestic violence can be found at: <http://www.cwasu.org> and <http://www.solacewomensaid.org>