

Briefing 2: Crisis Response

Objective: All survivors fleeing VAWG are able to gain access to safe accommodation and access appropriate support at time of crisis.

In 2017 the London VAWG & Housing Group was established to promote access to safe and settled housing for those who need to move as a result of VAWG, through cross-sector and cross-organisational collaboration. This briefing outlines the issues and key asks raised on the theme of **Crisis Response** from the Operational and Strategic meetings held on 14th February 2018 and sets out recommendations for best practice.

Key ask 1: Sufficiently resourced refuge spaces or gender specific alternative accommodation is available for all survivors made homeless due to VAWG.

Key ask 2: Accessible refuge spaces or gender specific alternatives for all survivors in London.

Key ask 1: Sufficiently resourced refuge spaces or gender specific alternative accommodation is available for all survivors made homeless due to VAWG.

Women's Aid figures show that the 64% referrals to refuge were declined in London last year, in comparison to 60% nationally. There is also very limited gender specific homelessness provision in London.¹ It is vital that survivors of VAWG, who are at risk, are able to access safe and appropriate emergency accommodation. It is also important to note that only a small percentage of survivors use refuge accommodation and the majority remain in their homes using other forms of protection. At Solace under 3% of service-user in 2017-18 used refuge accommodation. For that 3% refuge was literally a life-line.

a) Pan London approach to resourcing of crisis housing options for survivors

Women fleeing forms of VAWG often cross local authority boundaries to access emergency accommodation. Where they are placed depends on the risk from the perpetrator(s) and the availability of a suitable space'. Factors such as whether the space is appropriate, for example size, accessibility, any additional needs, age of male children, also impact where women are placed. Refuge accommodation usually does not require local connection and can be accessed by women fleeing from any area of the country. Refuges are the most common form of crisis accommodation for those fleeing domestic abuse and provide more than just shelter. As Women's Aid SOS Report² highlights, the value of the holistic support that refuges provide should be recognised in

commissioning. While some specialist provision is commissioned Pan-London or funded by national government (see practice examples), the majority of refuge spaces are resourced and commissioned on a borough-wide level by local authorities.

Commissioning on a local level results in inconsistency and variation across London which can lead to inequality of access to accommodation for survivors of VAWG. It also results in specific gaps in provision for women with additional requirements, for example those experiencing multiple disadvantage, wheelchair users, or those with children (See Key Ask 2(c) below). The limited women-only hostels across London are also generally commissioned locally. Unlike refuge provision, frequently women need a local connection to the borough in order to access this pathway (With some exceptions, see practice examples).

The proposed new funding model for supported housing does not currently provide a specific ring-fence for refuges and other specialist women's accommodation. Instead refuges come under the short-term supported housing model, alongside supported housing for other vulnerable groups³ and there is a risk that local authorities will prioritise other vulnerable groups covered by this grant.

Grant sizes will be based on "current projections of future need (as informed by discussions with local authorities)"⁴ in Supported Housing Strategic Plans and needs assessments. Providing current and projected figures around domestic abuse is challenging, due to underreporting, lack of data from LA Housing, alongside, for instance, women being in 'hidden' homelessness situations and not accessing any services. The VAWG and Housing Group are concerned

¹ Safer London, Pan London Domestic Violence Needs assessment, 2016 <https://saferlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/PLDV-Needs-Assessment-Final-low-res.pdf>

² https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjlsoc4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/SOS_Data_Report.pdf p.8

³ Other vulnerable groups include: people experiencing homelessness with support needs; vulnerable young people; offenders and ex-offenders;

people with mental ill health; people with drug and alcohol support needs; vulnerable armed forces veterans

⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/655990/Funding_supported_housing_-_policy_statement_and_consultation.pdf p.24

that these assessments will not adequately assess and provide for demand. Finally the proposed model could lead to generic, high volume low cost accommodation being commissioned with the absence of specialist VAWG input and support.

Where refuge is mentioned in the new model, the provision of accommodation is targeted toward those experiencing domestic abuse, without taking into account other forms of VAWG, for example forced marriage or prostitution.

National or Pan-London resourcing of refuges and specialist accommodation would enable partners to work together to address the London-wide gaps in provision that can act as barriers to fleeing VAWG. Any approach should also consider viable settled move-on options for survivors accessing crisis accommodation options. Blockages in move-on pathways for survivors into settled accommodation affect the availability of refuge spaces for women in immediate crisis. Solace Women's Aid found that just under 40% of their clients moved in to alternative emergency/temporary accommodation when leaving their refuges.⁵

Key ask 2: Accessible refuge spaces or gender specific alternatives for all survivors in London.

a) Ensure boroughs follow HCOG in enabling women to approach and survivors are treated with respect and dignity by VAWG-trained staff

The Housing Reduction Act is a key opportunity to develop an improved housing response to survivors of VAWG in London. Local authorities are now obliged to provide meaningful individualised preventative assistance to all eligible and homeless (or threatened with homelessness) people.

Unfortunately, anecdotally VAWG sector organisations are finding that some local authorities are using the additional prevention and relief duties to gate-keep, for example a woman who presented as homeless and was told to come back two weeks after to do a prevention based risk assessment instead of being offered emergency accommodation.

A new statutory homelessness data collection system "Homelessness Case Level Information Classification" or H-CLIC has been introduced. This system should capture more information relating to domestic abuse and sexual abuse/exploitation (doesn't mention other forms of VAWG), and individuals journeys through the housing system. It also captures whether reviews of local authority decisions have been requested.

While multiple support needs can be captured through the new H-CLIC system, this is still at the discretion of the housing officer conducting the assessment. Local Authorities should work with VAWG agencies to put in place training for staff and policies to record VAWG whenever disclosed, alongside any other additional needs, even where it is not assessed or disclosed as the primary support need. Local authorities should monitor how many of cases that have requested a review also have VAWG captured in the 'support needs' 'reason for loss of last settled home' and/or 'priority need' sections. Also the detail of advice given and any referrals or partnership working that has allowed VAWG survivors to access crisis accommodation.

Local authorities need to follow the Homelessness Code of Guidance to ensure an appropriate and sensitive response to survivors of VAWG and DA such as providing a private space and female staff for the homeless interview, and providing an interpreter where appropriate. With new prevention duties, local authorities need to be certain that an applicant is safe to return home for this to be recommended- an offer of crisis accommodation should always be made and secured when required for survivors of VAWG. We recommend that Local Authorities adopt a 'whole housing' approach⁶ for survivors of VAWG, so alongside specialist crisis accommodation, all options can be explored including the Pan-London Housing Reciprocal⁷ between social landlords, Housing First schemes, sanctuary schemes, perpetrator management programmes and if appropriate, the private rented sector.

b) Survivors with NRPFs are enabled to access crisis accommodation and support. A London safety net for NRPFs survivors to enable them to flee VAWG.

Women who have experienced gender-based violence but do not have recourse to public funds (NRPF) are not eligible for housing benefit, or social housing and are therefore unable to access most emergency accommodation. This group is however particularly vulnerable to further abuse and exploitation due to their insecure immigration status. Women's Aid statistics show that there is less provision for women with NRPF in London than nationally (3.2% in London, 5.4% nationally). This equates to 60 bed spaces across London that would *consider* applications from women with no recourse to public funds. This is usually dependent on having access to the Destitute Domestic Violence Concession or funding from another statutory

⁵ Cost of Freedom, Solace 2014, p.5-6 <http://solacewomensaid.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/SWA-Finding-Costs-of-Freedom-Report.pdf>

⁶ See National DV and Housing group paper xx

⁷ www.saferlondon.org.uk/plhr

service.⁸ With cuts to legal aid and OISC accreditation required to provide immigration advice, support available to apply and access DDVC is limited.

The DDVC is also limited to survivors who are on a spousal visa. This concession needs to be extended to all survivors with NRPF or an alternative safety net needs to be provided to address the lack of housing support for this group.

Currently many women who have NRPF will only be able to access support through informal networks, such as hosting schemes and through religious organisations and churches. These networks could be a useful resource, however they sit outside statutory systems and are unregulated. While this accommodation could be life-saving, the informal nature can leave survivors vulnerable to further abuse and exploitation. Individuals and families supporting survivors in this way also need support and training around safeguarding and hosting those with experiences of VAWG. In addition women who are in accommodation through hosting or church schemes should be able to access support provided independently from the scheme.

The VAWG and Housing Group call for a Pan-London strategy to support survivors of VAWG with NRPF. The strategy should address and acknowledge the range of needs women with no recourse to public funds may have, and provide services accordingly, including legal, practical, financial and emotional support, alongside access to safe accommodation.

c) All groups facing additional access barriers- e.g. women facing multiple disadvantage, young/older, BAME, LGBT and disabled survivors have improved access to housing/support

There is a current lack of specialist accommodation for particular groups of women fleeing VAWG in London. Safer London found specific gaps in specialist support for those with no recourse to public funds, BAME women, LBT Women, older women, 16-17 year olds, disabled victim/survivors and women experiencing multiple disadvantage, with few targeted support services, refuges or accommodation pathways across London.⁹

AVA found that while refuges often include some level of requirement to support women with drug and alcohol and/or mental health problems, many also operate a partial blanket policy relating to certain types of substance use and/or mental health problems, most

commonly women using opiates (including methadone) and those who have been diagnosed with schizophrenia, autism spectrum disorder or dementia.¹⁰

Women's Aid data shows that in London there are less bed spaces that are accessible for certain groups of women than nationally. For instance only 1.1% of refuge spaces in London were wheelchair accessible (21 spaces) in comparison to 1.7% nationally. Of the vacancies posted in London, 31.3% could take a woman with two children, and only 6.5% could accept a woman with three children.¹¹ This is in comparison to 45.4% and 17/19% nationally. In terms of move-on accommodation these families are also disadvantaged, as evidenced by the huge lack of 3 bed or larger accommodation across London available to the Pan London Housing Reciprocal in the first year.¹²

For survivors who are homeless, a further barrier to accessing safe accommodation, is the need to be verified on the CHAIN database in order to access certain hostels. Research shows that women are often in 'hidden homelessness' situations such as temporarily with friends; relative's partners or squatting. Where women are rough sleeping, they often try to reduce their own visibility and therefore still remain uncounted. CHAIN verification should therefore not be a requirement for homeless women.

The Housing & VAWG group calls for strategy and commissioning at a Pan-London level to address the needs of underrepresented groups which include specific bed spaces and services, and support for current services to reassess their accessibility.

We specifically call for a greater number of family sized units; wheelchair accessible rooms; accommodation for: women with NRPF; women experiencing multiple disadvantage including women with mental health needs and problematic substance use; LBT women and BME refuges 'led-by and for' specialist organisations. . . Local government and the VAWG/Housing sector should work together to identify and access funds that will develop current provision and create new provision. For example the GLA Capital funding for refuges could be utilised to make buildings accessible for wheelchair users, or improve buildings to make them more psychologically informed environments.

⁸ <https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjlsoc4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/NWTA-Full-report.pdf> p.27

⁹ Safer London, Pan London Domestic Violence Needs assessment, 2016 <https://saferlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/PLDV-Needs-Assessment-Final-low-res.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://avaproject.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Case-by-Case-London-refuge-provision-Full-Report.pdf> p.5

¹¹ Women's aid statistics presentation

¹² <https://saferlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Full-PLHR-Year-1-Learning-Report.pdf>

We recommend that crisis accommodation and Housing First schemes are developed for individuals fleeing overlapping forms of VAWG, including prostitution, sexual violence and exploitation, honour based violence and stalking (see practice examples)

Recommendations Summary

- A Pan-London approach to commissioning crisis accommodation with viable move-on options for survivors of VAWG, including refuge provision and other forms of gender specific accommodation.
- All forms of VAWG to be addressed and prioritised by local authorities when commissioning crisis accommodation not just domestic abuse.
- Local authorities to ensure they are providing an appropriate response to survivors who present as homeless/at risk of homelessness through staff training and appropriate resources (e.g. a private space, the opportunity to speak to female staff, availability of interpreters).
- Commitment from London local authorities to offer crisis accommodation alongside all available housing pathways for survivors of VAWG using a whole housing approach.
- Local authority housing departments to record VAWG when disclosed through new H-CLIC monitoring system, even where it is not deemed to be the primary reason for presenting as homelessness. To review quarterly the numbers experiencing VAWG, the response given including partnership work and access to crisis accommodation and number of reviews for VAWG survivors.
- Pan-London and local commissioning should include specialist accommodation and refuges for underrepresented groups including 16-17 year olds, disabled victim/survivors, BME survivors, women experiencing any form of VAWG, with no recourse, more than one child and those experiencing multiple disadvantage.
- A Pan-London strategy to support survivors of VAWG with NRPF that addresses women's need to access legal, practical and financial support, risk intervention, emotional support and accommodation.

Appendix: Practice Examples

Ascent is a Pan-London project delivered by the London VAWG Consortium. It provides a range of services for survivors of domestic and sexual violence across London. 23 organisations work on the Ascent project across six strands: Prevention, Domestic and Sexual Violence helplines, Advice and Counselling, Specialist Refuge, Ending Harmful Practices and Support Services to Organisations.

The Green Room - emergency accommodation for homeless women currently at risk of or have experienced VAWG and have experienced severe and multiple disadvantage. There is female only staff, including a night team who offer holistic and mindful activities for guests and conduct assessments around VAWG. There is a specialist Domestic Violence Worker and an Assessment and Reconnection Worker, who continue to support guests during the day. The services accepts women with pets, has no requirement around local connection although women have to be verified on CHAIN.

East London Women's Project (ELWP) is shared supported accommodation for single female survivors of domestic violence or other forms of gender based violence, who have multiple support needs such as mental health issues, health problems, street homelessness, offending history, sex working or substance use. It is a partnership between 8 local authorities (East London sub region) to fund a women-only accommodation service for survivors of VAWG. One bed is funded for a survivor with NRPF.

The Advance Outreach Advocacy, Multiple Support Service supports female survivors of domestic abuse to lead lives free of violence and abuse, providing specialist risk management and safety planning on a 'housing first model'. Support workers provide intensive, assertive outreach in flexible locations and timing of sessions. Clients are provided with individually tailored, holistic specialist domestic abuse support including around maintaining their tenancy.

Amari Project (Solace Women's Aid) consists of 7 flats for single women or those with a child under 2, over the age of 18, who have been sexually exploited through prostitution or trafficking.

Rhea Project (Solace) – 8 dispersed units of family size accommodation for homeless women and children who approach Southwark Housing solutions and need support around any form of VAWG

Frances House (Solace) – refuge for women with multiple/ complex needs, including mental health and problematic substance use

No Recourse to Public Funds (Ashiana and SBS) – NRPFs refuge bedspaces (Ashiana) & NRPFs assistance fund (SBS).

Specialist refuge (IKWRO) for Middle-Eastern and North African women fleeing harmful practice.

The Emma Project & Daria House (Nia) The Emma Project is a refuge and outreach service for women who have experienced domestic and sexual violence including women who have been exploited through prostitution and who also use substances problematically Daria House is a refuge for women who have been sexually exploited, with a particular focus on, supporting women who been exploited through their involvement in prostitution.