

Executive Summary

The London context:

A bleak landscape for women fleeing abuse

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) in all its forms is well-documented as being the context of, and/ or the precipitating factor in, women's homelessness. For the majority of women, fleeing abuse still means finding somewhere new to live.

A prolonged period of austerity, deepening housing crisis and funding cuts to specialist services, has created a bleak landscape for women fleeing abuse in London. It is within this challenging context that Solace continues to seek opportunities to innovate, educate and collaborate around better housing options for women fleeing VAWG.

New evidence, old failures

In the summer of 2019, Solace carried out research into current homelessness practice across London, including the impact of the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) one year after its implementation. We surveyed both survivors fleeing VAWG and frontline workers on their experiences of London's housing and homelessness systems.

The results of both surveys were comprehensively damning, indicating that:

- The current system is failing to protect women and children when they need it most; and
- Except for isolated pockets of good practice, the implementation of the HRA (2017) has so far failed to deliver the hoped-for improvements for women seeking safety in London.

Our research with survivors found that:

- Fear of homelessness is keeping women in dangerous situations
- Seeking shelter can be a long and arduous process
- The majority of women have had a negative experience of the Local Authority Homeless Services
- The involvement of a specialist advocate/ solicitor doubles women's chances of accessing their housing entitlements
- Relocation due to VAWG causes wide-scale disruption, and the majority of women need to move more than once
- Seeking safety damages most women's housing prospects.

Our research with frontline workers found that since the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017) in April 2018:

- The majority of workers have observed that the homeless process as a whole has not improved and a significant proportion feel it has worsened for service users
- Women with no recourse to public funds and single women have experienced little improvement in their treatment by the local authority
- There have been no improvements for the vast majority of disabled women seeking safe accommodation
- The system is slower and more complex
- The needs and circumstances of women fleeing VAWG are still poorly understood by statutory services.

30% OF WOMEN SEEKING SHELTER ARE TURNED AWAY SIX OR MORE TIMES

WOMEN WITH ASSISTANCE FROM A CASEWORKER OR SOLICITOR ARE MORE THAN TWICE AS LIKELY TO BE HOUSED BY THE LOCAL AUTHORITY

53% OF WOMEN LOSE THEIR SECURE TENANCY AFTER FLEEING ABUSE

JUST 4% OF FRONTLINE WORKERS THINK SUPPORT FOR WOMEN WITH NO RECOURSE HAS IMPROVED UNDER THE HRA

60% OF FRONTLINE WORKERS THINK THE SYSTEM IS NOW SLOWER TO MAKE DECISIONS UNDER THE HRA

Key asks

While these failings are largely systemic and compounded by a wider housing crisis, there are tangible actions that can take place in each borough to materially improve the situation of all survivors made homeless through VAWG.

To this end, Solace has three key asks.

1

A minimum of five per cent of Local Authority social housing lettings, plus five per cent of all permanent new social homes built in London, are allocated each year to women and children made homeless through VAWG.

2

Every London borough signs up to an agreement that:

A
All women made homeless through VAWG and presenting at a local authority for housing assistance are found to be in priority need;

B
All women accepted for rehousing as a result of VAWG are automatically awarded the highest possible banding/points; and,

C
All women moving borough due to VAWG are able to maintain their housing priority status between boroughs.

3

All boroughs put in place cross-departmental strategies to ensure a clear pathway for women threatened with homelessness/ made homeless due to VAWG. This should ensure safety from the point of crisis through to long-term, safe and suitable accommodation. A prevention strategy should also be in place.

