

Solace Women's Aid

Written evidence to the Public Accounts Committee Inquiry - Covid-19: Housing rough sleepers

Introduction

1. Solace Women's Aid (Solace) welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Public Account Committee (PAC) inquiry into Covid-19 and housing rough sleepers, which is examining the facts around the Government's rehousing of rough sleepers during the COVID-19 pandemic and Government's plans for solving rough sleeping in the longer term.
2. Solace is the leading specialist charity in London supporting women and children experiencing domestic abuse and sexual violence. In 2019/20 we worked with 27,414 women, children, and young people across our services.
3. In addition to our core refuge and advocacy and advice services, Solace works in partnership to deliver several specialist projects to support women who are or have experienced street homelessness and / or multiple forms of disadvantage including homelessness. Current projects include:
 - Leading on the first Housing First scheme to provide support to homeless survivors of violence against women in Islington, and providing the support element of a Housing First scheme for homeless women in Westminster in partnership with Standing Together Against Domestic Violence;
 - Coordinating and providing advocacy for women facing severe and multiple disadvantage across eight London boroughs (the WiSER project) and providing a specialist refuge with 24 hour support for women with complex needs;
 - Supporting homeless women and children who have been subjected to domestic abuse in dispersed properties for 12 months, until those families are ready for independent living in partnership with Commonwealth Housing Association, commissioned by Southwark Borough Council;
 - Supporting women who have been either Trafficked, Sexually Exploited or exiting Prostitution in dispersed properties for up to 12 months in partnership with Commonwealth Housing and commissioned by London Borough Councils of Lambeth, Greenwich and Newham;
 - Providing intense support and crisis accommodation for women who have been subjected to domestic abuse or other forms of violence against women through a women's hub for three months, commissioned by Southwark. The project supports female offenders leaving custody as well as currently street homeless women.
 - In partnership with The Connection at St Martin, setting up a Women's Development Unit to support collaboration across the violence against women and girls (VAWG) and homelessness sectors, to advocate for and enhance the voice of homeless women across London.
4. With funding from the Mayor of London and the Julia and Hans Rausing Trust, Solace also worked in partnership with Southall Black Sisters (SBS) to set up an emergency

hostel providing crisis accommodation with specialist support to women and children fleeing domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG), across London during the Covid-19 pandemic, in response to the rise in demand during the first lockdown with specialist support provided by SBS for women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) The crisis project has been funded by City Hall to continue at a reduced scale until June 2021, with resettlement support for women to move on from the crisis period, with one-third of space for women with no recourse to public funds. The project had accommodated 135 women and 62 children up to November 2020.

Background

5. Abuse and homelessness go hand in hand. A joint report by Homeless Link and the Women's Resource Centre in 2018 found that domestic and sexual violence (as well as changes in welfare) were the main triggers for women's homelessness¹. A 2018 survey of St Mungos residents who slept rough found that domestic abuse had contributed to 33% of female residents becoming homeless, and 54% of female residents had experienced violence or abuse from a partner or family member².
6. Women's experience of sleeping rough often includes sexual abuse, exploitation, violence and stigmatisation. A 2018 evidence review by the University of York reported that 'experience of domestic violence and abuse is near-universal among women who become homeless'³.
7. Because of their experiences of and vulnerability to male violence, abuse, and exploitation, street homeless women are generally understood to be less visible than street homeless men, and are less likely to engage with gender neutral support and outreach services and there is a dearth of women-only provision. In 2016, Homeless Link found that only 11 per cent of homelessness accommodation projects in England offered women-only provision⁴.
8. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)'s snapshot of people sleeping rough on a single night in 2019 counted 614 women street homeless in England, around 14% of the population⁵, a similar proportion to previous years. St Mungos coordinates the pan-London CHAIN database, a multi-agency database recording information about people sleeping rough and the wider street population in London. In 2019/20, women made up 17% of people seen sleeping rough by outreach workers⁶.

¹ https://www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Women%27s%20research_March%2019_1.pdf

² <https://www.mungos.org/news/women-and-rough-sleeping-report-released/>

³ https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/138075/1/Women_and_Rough_Sleeping_Report_2018.pdf

⁴ https://www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Supporting%20women%20who%20are%20homeless%20March%202017_0.pdf

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rough-sleeping-snapshot-in-england-autumn-2019/rough-sleeping-snapshot-in-england-autumn-2019>

⁶ https://airdrive-secure.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/london/dataset/chain-reports/2020-09-09T09%3A03%3A58/Greater%20London%20full%202019-20.pdf?X-Amz-Algorithm=AWS4-HMAC-SHA256&X-Amz-Credential=AKIAJJDIMAIVZJDICKHA%2F20210107%2Ffeu-west-1%2Fs3%2Faws4_request&X-Amz-Date=20210107T151257Z&X-Amz-Expires=300&X-Amz-Signature=a81354092a3a66ddd5481436225cab047f3f06388fe3eab3af25327e78be3f42&X-Amz-SignedHeaders=host

9. These are likely to be greatly underestimated figures. While women head up the majority of statutorily homeless families accommodated in short-term and temporary accommodation⁷, we do not have an accurate picture of the scale of single women's homelessness. Research commissioned by Crisis in 2006 surveyed 144 single homeless women across English towns and cities and found that 60% of respondents had slept rough but only 12% had engaged with a rough sleepers' team.
10. When they do seek support, women often have negative experiences with statutory agencies. Our research published in 2019 found that fear of homelessness keeps women in dangerous situations and that 31% of women seek safe accommodation six or more times only to be turned away. Women with outside assistance from a solicitor or caseworker are more than twice as likely to be housed by the local authority (79 per cent of women with assistance were housed compared with 33 per cent without assistance)⁸.
11. Migrant women who are denied recourse to public funds are particularly vulnerable to homelessness and exploitation. Abusers use victims' insecure migration status as a tool with which to threaten them, and they face additional barriers to getting help from statutory agencies who they fear – not unreasonably – will share their information with the Home Office. Just under half of Southall Black Sisters' service users who have insecure immigration status are also identified as having problems with housing and/or homelessness. These are the most marginalised women in our society and are often discriminated against because of their status and not having recourse to public funds.
12. Despite research going back for some years highlighting the invisibility of women's homelessness and the need for a gendered approach that encompasses an understanding of women's experiences of domestic abuse and violence, national strategies have continued to be largely gender-neutral and therefore exclude women. Homelessness charities and services understand and recognise these gaps, which is why the Connection at St Martins (CSTM) in partnership with Solace has been granted funding for a new project, the Women's Development Unit, to work with stakeholders to assess the extent of women's homelessness across London and to produce a strategy for women's homelessness in the Capital. We hope that learning from this project can inform a national approach.
13. Whilst the Government is taking significant steps to tackle rough sleeping, there is also a need to look at other forms of homelessness that particularly affect women who have experienced abuse or violence. Many of the women we support are homeless whilst in temporary accommodation or in a refuge, with few options for permanent move on accommodation available in London. This prevents them from moving on from the trauma they have experienced and to begin building their futures.

Government response during the pandemic

14. The Government's 'Everyone In' scheme was widely welcomed in a time of great risk and uncertainty during the first stages of the pandemic in the UK. However, it was also a lost opportunity to gather better data on the population of homeless women, and to respond to women's needs by for example, ensuring women-only provision in some hotels and other temporary accommodation used by councils across the country, and

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statutory-homelessness-in-england-financial-year-2019-20>

⁸ https://www.solacewomensaid.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/Solace_SafeasHousesReport_FINAL_0.pdf

connecting women with specialist VAWG services where there was need beyond the specialist crisis hostel we set up with Southall Black Sisters.

15. Government data estimate around 15,000 people were moved into emergency accommodation by May 2020, over three times the number of people counted in the last snapshot in Autumn 2019, and by their own estimate accommodating 90% of the street homeless population. Whilst we understand the enormous pressures facing Government, councils and voluntary sector organisations during the first lockdown, as a frontline service provider ourselves, it should at least have been possible to collect sex disaggregated data by the time of the second data collection published in September 2020, when 10,566 people were still being supported.
16. The Government also took steps during the pandemic that went against their overall policy objective of supporting rough sleepers. The Government introduced new rules in late October 2020 that make rough sleeping grounds for refusing or cancelling someone's right to remain in the UK (although they have not yet come into force). These new rules hand over yet additional means for perpetrators to manipulate and control women and their children and caused untold distress and confusion when introduced in the midst of a pandemic with little clarity over how and when they would be enforced⁹.
17. These rules also conflict with section 17 of the Children's Act 1989, under which local authorities have a duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need in their area. Families made destitute fall under this duty in some circumstances, but proving destitution can mean proving homelessness and therefore triggering the rough sleeping grounds for refusing or cancelling someone's right to remain, putting women and housing officers in an untenable situation. Migrant women should be guaranteed safe reporting mechanisms and accessing public services including the police, social services, and health services without fear of immigration enforcement.
18. While local authorities went to enormous efforts to house rough sleepers under 'Everyone In', we also saw really poor practice in some housing departments' responses to women made homeless by domestic abuse during the first lockdown. We supported women with children by funding hotel rooms when they were turned away by housing officers who, for example, demanded evidence of abuse from the police or even called the perpetrators to substantiate survivors' testimonies. Without our support – enabled through a fundraising campaign – those women and their children could have become street homeless.

The need for a gendered, trauma-informed response now

19. Now that we are in a third lockdown with an ongoing expectation that councils will accommodate rough sleepers to stop the spread of Covid-19, the Government must:
 - a. urgently clarify whether it will continue to reimburse councils for accommodating rough sleepers;
 - b. collect sex disaggregated data on the people being supported in emergency accommodation;
 - c. work with councils to assess the extent to which there is women-only accommodation and provide it for women who request it;

⁹ <https://www.crisis.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/leading-homelessness-charities-urge-uk-government-to-reconsider-dangerous-new-immigration-rules-targeting-people-sleeping-rough-for-deportation/>

- d. provide reassurance that immigration controls should not be enforced while public health restrictions are in place and consider whether these rules should be brought into force at all; and
 - e. Send clear communication to local authorities reminding them of their existing duties to support people made homeless by domestic abuse.
20. As the Government works with local authorities and NHS trusts to roll out the vaccine with this vulnerable group, it has another opportunity to gather data to understand more about the demographics of the homeless population. In so doing it must ensure that migrant homeless people will be able to access health services and register to receive the vaccine without data that would identify them being passed to the Home Office.
21. Through the work we do with homeless women in two Housing First schemes supporting women to rebuild their lives starting with safe and secure housing, we advocate for and support survivors with their ongoing relationships with perpetrators of domestic abuse - and if and when they are ready - to be safe as they leave them. As set out above, we also know that homeless women are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, violence and abuse.
22. Working with specialist violence against women services, homelessness organisations and councils, the Government should ensure that women in general emergency accommodation have access to the support they need as it is likely they too will have experienced an escalation in abuse but with less access to support.
23. The escalation in incidents and scale of abuse and violence experienced by women and children living with perpetrators of abuse during lockdown has been well documented, with a spike in calls to helplines just before the lockdown was imposed and as restrictions lifted, when survivors were able to access support. Total enquiries to the pan-London Ascent Advice hubs coordinated by Solace and the Women and Girls Network increased from 1,536 in April to 2,484 in June 2020, a 62% increase.
24. We also saw greater demand for our core refuge service provision across all seven of the boroughs our refuges are located in. The week before lockdown was announced we were receiving around two enquiries for every one refuge space we flagged on the national database, which is fairly normal, but by the time survivors had been locked down for four and then five weeks enquiries spiked, and we were getting around four enquiries for every one refuge space that became available. While we were grateful to the Government and London Mayor for support to open a crisis hostel with Southall Black Sisters at pace, we reached 70% of the 70 room capacity within a fortnight and were full within weeks. We now have 30 rooms and continue to operate at full capacity.
25. We welcome the Government's crucial Ask Ani and #youarenotalone initiatives, but these assurances to survivors currently living with abusers must be backed up with sufficient funding for frontline services like ours. Leaving an abuser has been documented to be one of the most dangerous points for survivors. If victims reach out for help and are not accommodated, many face a choice between staying with an abuser or homelessness. If their abuser becomes aware of their attempt to seek help, they are likely to face an escalation of abuse compounded by household isolation under covid-19 restrictions. During the first and second lockdowns the Government provided emergency funding that was welcome but fell short of need. This time, which may be the longest lockdown yet, there have been no such announcements.

Solving rough sleeping long-term

26. The Government's 2018 rough sleeping strategy acknowledges women's lower visibility in street homelessness, however its only women-specific plans are for residential centres for female offenders¹⁰. While there is a causal link between female offending and homelessness, with around a third of street homeless women estimated to have been in prison¹¹, the issues around women's homelessness are more complex and need greater focus on their experiences of VAWG. Our women's hub in Southwark is a good model of responding to the needs of both groups.
27. The Government's Domestic Abuse Bill brings in a new duty on tier one councils to provide safe accommodation for victims of domestic abuse and their children, and will enshrine and grant powers to the Domestic Abuse Commissioner to map need and provision for domestic abuse services across England. Statutory guidance under the legislation should specify the need to understand and provide for the specific needs of street homeless women, who are almost certain to have experienced domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG, and the Home Office's renewed cross-Government VAWG strategy (currently under consultation) should link to its rough sleeping strategy.
28. The Government must also ensure that local authorities carry out their existing duties under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, and adhere to their forthcoming duties under the Domestic Abuse Bill. Amendments already made to the Bill mean that people made homeless as a result of domestic abuse should be guaranteed priority housing, the Government should set out in its statutory guidance that they should also be given the highest banding/points so that their priority status translates into provision of a new home.
29. Informed by information it collects now, and by pilots and projects including Housing First schemes, the Women's Hub, and the pan-London Women's Development Unit, the Government's long-term rough sleeping strategy should be updated to address the needs of women in relation to VAWG, and must include ring-fenced funds to support rough sleeping women in a safe and effective way.

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/domestic-abuse-bill-2020-factsheets/local-authority-support-for-victims-of-domestic-abuse-and-their-children-within-safe-accommodation-factsheet>

¹¹ <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/portals/0/documents/home%20truths%20june%202018.pdf>