



Safe As Houses?

How the system is failing women and children fleeing abuse in London

solace

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Foreward

Solace is the leading specialist Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) charity in London, with over 40 years' experience working with survivors of all forms of violence and abuse.

We deliver a range of empowering services that support women and children, from the point of crisis to recovery and independence. Our services are holistic and trauma-informed, responding to individual needs. Last year we supported almost 23,000 women, children, young people and a number of male survivors. Our service users represent the diversity of London and we offer dedicated support around housing, immigration, older women, children and young people.

Our work across London gives us a deep body of evidence and important insights from our service-users and staff, who tell us that safe housing is the number one barrier to leaving abusive relationships. When they have finally left, being able to find housing security in order to even begin the journey to create new, safe and stable lives for themselves and children, is the greatest challenge they face.

Throughout our long history, we have focused on safety in crisis and recovery so women and children can live independent lives. Many of our service users are forced to leave their homes because of male violence and abuse. For this reason we provide safe, secure and suitable housing, including: crisis refuge accommodation; second stage and supported housing and work with women to secure their housing rights.

The housing situation in London has worsened significantly over the last five years and this has impacted most severely on those in the greatest need of support, including our service users. This report reaffirms our long-term commitment to putting housing at the top of the agenda for women fleeing VAWG and builds on our report published in 2016, 'The Price of Safety'.

It evidences the need for radical change but also offers solutions to improve the situation for women fleeing abuse in London.



Mary Mason
CEO to Sept. 2019



Fiona Dwyer
CEO, October 2019

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.

Introduction

Abuse and homelessness go hand in hand

The connection between all types of VAWG and homelessness, either as its cause, or a precipitating factor, is well documented.

For example:

- Research by the Child and Women Abuse Studies Unit in partnership with Solace found that 87 per cent of the women in their study had moved to escape abuse (Kelly et al. 2014)
- Crisis (2011) found that 54 per cent of female survey respondents had experienced violence or abuse from a partner, and 43 per cent from family members or friends of the family
- St Mungo's (2014) found that 35 per cent of women who had slept rough had left home to escape violence
- Crisis' Nations Apart research (2014) found that 61 per cent of homeless women had experienced abuse from a partner
- Research by Agenda (Scott and McManus 2016) found that one in five women (21 per cent) with experience of extensive physical and sexual violence have been homeless
- A joint report by Homeless Link and the Women's Resource Centre (2018) found that domestic and sexual violence (as well as changes in welfare leading to an inability to cover housing costs) were reported to be the main triggers for women's homelessness.

Places of safety are shrinking for women fleeing abuse

Many women who have experienced male violence will actively avoid traditional mixed-gender homelessness provision from fear of (or lived experience of) exposure to further violence and exploitation (Bretherton and Pleace 2018). Nevertheless, women-only provision for homelessness remains vanishingly rare. In 2016, only 7 per cent of homelessness accommodation projects in England offered women-only provision – a 50 per cent reduction from 2013 (Homeless Link 2018). The majority of areas in England (60 per cent) have no homelessness services specifically for women (Holly 2017).

Increasingly, a postcode lottery also applies to domestic abuse services. Total local authority spend on refuge services has fallen by a quarter since 2010 (BIJ 2017) and increased pressure to demonstrate value for money has seen a shift from specialist VAWG services to larger generic providers, resulting in a loss of expertise and local capital (Women's Aid 2014). Specialist Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) providers have been particularly affected by this trend – in London, several organisations have had their services absorbed by larger providers or closed entirely (Imkaan 2016).

Women presenting with additional support needs are even less likely to have access to the help they need. In their 2016 pan-London review, Safer London found specific gaps in specialist VAWG 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 (Safer London, 2016). This threadbare provision is worsened by local commissioning arrangements (London VAWG and Housing Group 2018).

Where services still exist, women are still being let down by the lack of a holistic, women-focused approach. Many services fail to recognise the needs and trauma arising from women's experiences of VAWG (Homeless Link and Women's Resource Centre 2018; Sharpen 2018). Some specialist VAWG services are unable to support women facing multiple disadvantage – for example, those struggling with street homelessness, problematic substance use and/or acute mental health needs (Harvey et al. 2014). Time and time again, services are failing to identify and respond to the full complexity of women's lived experience of abuse.

Women are being failed by local authorities

Domestic homicides in London rose to 29 in 2018, more than three times those recorded in the previous year (MOPAC 2019). Although the point of separation represents an escalation to extremely high risk of homicide for women escaping abuse (Lees 2000), homeless survivors of VAWG are not automatically considered to be 'priority need' by local authority housing departments. In 2017, only 2 per cent of people were found to be in priority need and made an offer of settled housing because they were vulnerable as a result of domestic abuse (MHCLG 2018). Research into women's experiences of local authority housing teams has shown repeatedly that women presenting as homeless due to VAWG are likely to be turned away or met with disbelief and even hostility.

This includes:

- Gatekeeping, either through "traumatic and near-impossible" demands for evidence of abuse or vulnerability (Crisis 2018: 20) or through emphasis on local connection
- Insensitivity around domestic abuse, for example, being told to go back to perpetrator, being interviewed in a public space, (Dobie et al 2014) and assuming a family member, including children, will interpret for you

- Being prevented from making a valid homelessness application, and ignoring priority need criteria such as disability or dependent children (Women's Aid 2018)
- Racism and unsafe practice for women with no recourse to public funds and BAME women (for example, using the perpetrator as an interpreter) (Ibid) and not accepting women who are highly vulnerable as being in priority need
- Young people being told to return home, or being put at increased risk of harm by housing officers calling their parents to 'check up' on the abuse that caused their homelessness (Centrepoin 2016).

The historic failure of local authorities to respond sensitively or adequately to survivor needs is compounded by a very real shortage of funding. Research by the Local Government Association estimates that councils face a funding gap of £5.8 billion by 2019/20, leaving them without the resources required to address the national housing crisis (LGA 2017). Spending too, on housing support services, has been slashed by 69 per cent between 2010 and 2017 (NAO 2018).





The housing crisis compromises every stage of women's journeys to safety

A prolonged period of austerity has had a profound impact on women's ability to flee abuse: dwindling benefit entitlements; cuts to legal aid support for benefits and debt; an inadequate and unsuitable supply of social housing and diminished access to an increasingly unaffordable private rented sector form a web of "intersecting nets" (Kelly et al. 2014:3) that serve to entrap women, preventing them from finding safety when they need it most.

Escape is deferred as women, fearing homelessness, are forced to prioritise a secure tenancy over a safe home (ibid). Women seeking refuge space are turned away by an underfunded and diminished national network of services, with 60 per cent of referrals in 2016-17 left unaccommodated (Women's Aid 2018). Journeys to safety have become punishingly long and complex. Women's Aid's 'No Woman Turned Away' project, which supports access to refuge for women with additional needs, found that on average, women spent more than two weeks in limbo while trying to find a place of safety. 10 per cent of the women supported had slept rough while waiting for a refuge space; some of them while pregnant or with their children (ibid).

Women and children become trapped in emergency accommodation. A shortage of suitable, affordable housing means women find themselves unable to move on and resettle. Survivors who are unable to move out of refuge prevent access for the continued stream of new women coming up behind them who are in immediate crisis (London VAWG and Housing Group 2018).

Departure from refuge can often be the start of a long period of instability and uncertainty – research by Solace found 87 per cent of women left the emergency shared accommodation provided in refuges for continued temporary accommodation (Solace 2016). Many women leaving refuge find their housing status is less secure than when they entered – the same report found a 41 per cent decrease in the number of women and children housed in secure tenancies after spending a period in a refuge compared to those with secure tenancies prior to fleeing (ibid).

These findings echo the conclusions of longitudinal research by the Child and Women Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU) and Solace on women seeking safety, where a quarter of women had to move three times or more after leaving a violent partner (Kelly et al. 2014). Without a settled base, women and children are unable to complete the recovery work required to build social networks; address ongoing physical and mental health issues, and focus on employment and education (ibid).

Women leaving refuge are disadvantaged by being considered to be at medium to low risk of VAWG following this stay and so not entitled to continued support from the Local Authority. For many, this is an extremely difficult time when ongoing issues of child contact (or formalised child arrangement orders), immigration status, high cost private rented sector accommodation and poverty create an environment which impedes recovery and increases vulnerability to repeated abuse.

The comparison between the experience of women fleeing VAWG and the experience of perpetrators, finds that forced displacement is the exception rather than the rule. Solace's previous housing review found that in almost a third of cases where women had joint tenure, the perpetrator remained in the home – the majority of which were family-sized units (Solace 2016). 45 per cent of perpetrators in Solace's most recent research were known to have remained in the family home (Solace 2019). Data from SafeLives (2018) shows that the perpetrator was evicted in just 3 per cent of cases where the client needed support with housing. More often than not, it is still not the person who has caused the breakdown of the family home who is finally forced to leave it.



Challenging times, promising practice

In spite of this challenging context, London has its share of innovative and specialist services. There are boroughs like Camden, working closely with VAWG providers to build a pathway out of refuge and into settled accommodation; Southwark, nurturing best practice in housing staff through training and the co-location of a full-time Solace Advocate in the Housing Solutions department, and collaborating with Solace to provide alternatives to refuge accommodation and support to women facing multiple disadvantage. Other services including: the Pan-London Housing Reciprocal, coordinated by Safer London, which enables many women each year to maintain their security of tenure in a new safe location; DAHA's accreditation which provides guidance for housing providers and the new Greater London Authority's move-on from refuges programme which provides much-needed longer term accommodation (with support) for women moving from refuges. The Green Room, in Westminster provides a crisis shelter to rough-sleeping women who have experienced/ are at risk of VAWG, and Solace's Champions training which enables non-VAWG professionals to gain the expertise to act as a semi-expert within their own organisation, helping to improve VAWG practice across a variety of sectors and to improve outcomes for survivors.

Solace has been supporting women and children affected by VAWG for over forty years and has continued to develop opportunities to innovate, educate and collaborate around better housing options for women fleeing abuse. This includes offering services which are gender-specific and trauma-informed, which take holistic account of women's circumstances and experiences, restore choice and control to survivors, and which offer tailored, comprehensive support across a range of needs.

This report showcases some of these services, setting out their history, ways of working and early outcomes. It demonstrates the crucial importance and positive impact of commissioning specialist services led- by and for women to support those fleeing VAWG. Most importantly, it highlights survivor experiences of homelessness in London; of using services; navigating complex pathways and striving for safety and well-being in the face of adversity.



Survivor Perspectives

Introduction

Solace's research (2019) exemplifies women's experiences of homelessness through VAWG in London. Eligibility criteria for responding to the survey included (a) having had to find new accommodation because of VAWG (b) having fled a London address, and (c) having since found somewhere new to live that was not refuge accommodation.

103 women participated, with 84 women completing the survey in full. Just over 40 per cent of respondents described themselves as having a disability or long-term disabling health condition, and 10 per cent had no recourse to public funds at the point where they fled the abuse. 77 per cent fled with their children. The vast majority of respondents (80 per cent) were using Solace services or had done in the past.

Findings

Women have long and arduous journeys

Recent analysis of journey data from respondents fleeing abuse in the last five years shows that journeys to safety are long and arduous. 82 per cent of the respondents were still seeking more permanent or suitable accommodation at the time of the survey. For 50 per cent of these women, the journey to safety had already extended beyond six months, with 15 per cent in transit for over a year.

Women face multiple barriers to leaving

Both practical and emotional barriers block women's flight from abuse. Practical problems run alongside complex emotions, fear of repercussions, emotional ties to the perpetrator and anxiety about relocation. Poor experiences with the local authority also have a detrimental impact on women's ability to flee. For 35 per cent of women, the experience of being turned away by the Local Authority was a barrier to being able to leave the perpetrator.

Fear of homelessness keeps women in dangerous homes

46 per cent of women fleeing secure tenancies said that fear of losing their tenancy had been a barrier to leaving the perpetrator. The phenomenon of fear of homelessness competing with fear of abuse has been noted in the literature around women's recovery from abuse (see Kelly et al., 2014).

Methodology and Limitations

Due to limited resources, this survey was primarily administered online and was publicised via social media as well as being promoted across Solace and other services in London to those with lived experience of homelessness through abuse. While paper copies were made available to some Solace clients, many of the most vulnerable women, including those who are street homeless or destitute, or some of those on the longest and most fraught journeys to safety, will not have had the chance to contribute to its findings.

Over thirty per cent of women seeking shelter from abuse are turned away more than six times

Analysis of journey data shows that 31 per cent of women make six or more approaches to seek safe accommodation, only to be turned away.

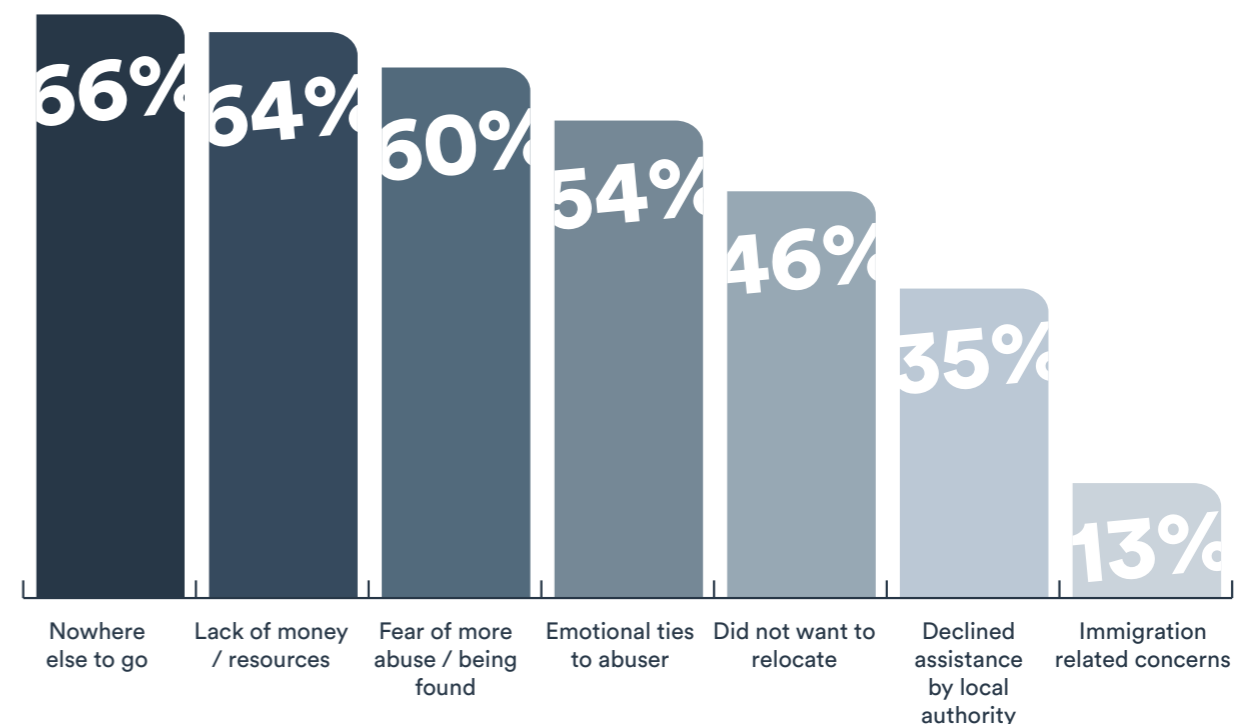
Most women have negative experiences of the local authority

62 per cent of those seeking help from the local authority found the response unhelpful or very unhelpful.

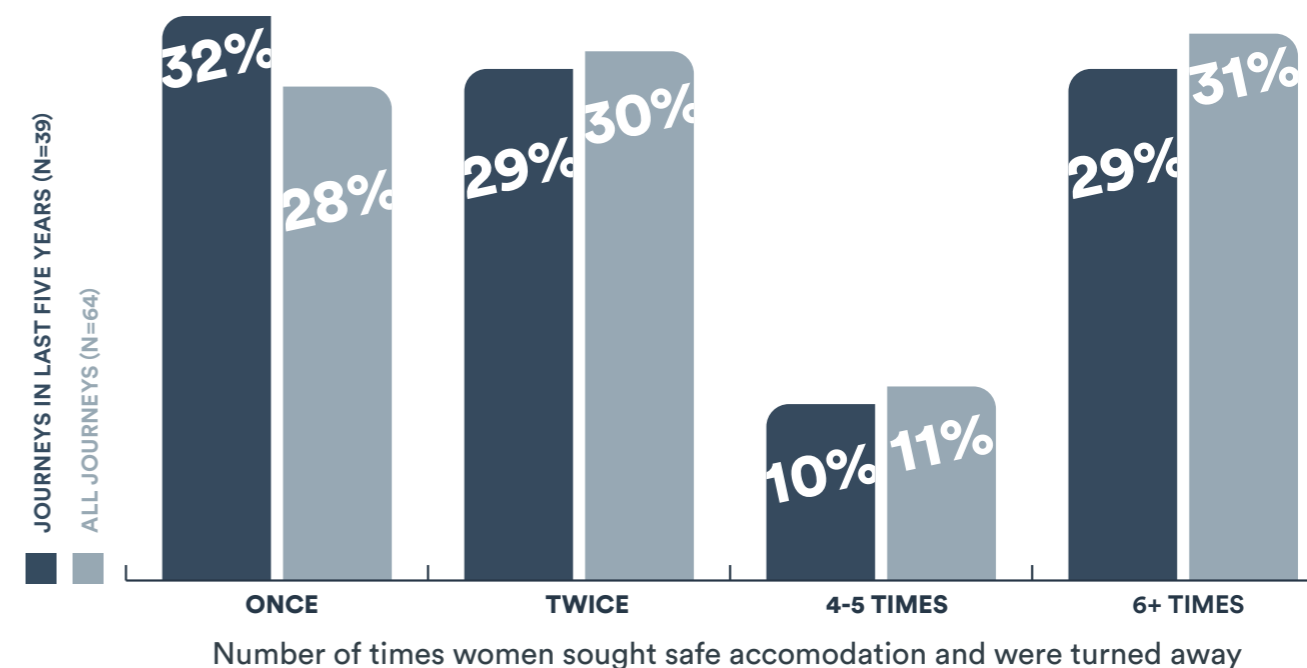
Women reported common experiences of gatekeeping, even in cases of extreme vulnerability, such as being heavily pregnant or undergoing cancer treatment.

Slow or no response to repeated emails to housing officers, disbelief, misinformation, unsympathetic staff, and the stress of having to repeat their history of abuse over and over make the process unbearable for many women.

Emotional and practical barriers to leaving



The majority of women seeking shelter are turned away multiple times



Women also report being placed in unsuitable accommodation. Sometimes this was a practical issue; for example, women forced to share single beds with older children in studio rooms, or disabled women being given properties with stairs. At other times it was a failure to understand the needs of women fleeing abuse; for example, women being pressured to take up places too far from their support network or dangerously close to their perpetrator. These experiences are consistent with the wider literature around survivor experiences of local authority housing services. They also echo Solace’s frontline staff survey on the impact of the Homelessness Reduction Act. Both perspectives, workers’ and survivors’, point to a system that is, for many, almost impassible in its complexity without the help of a knowledgeable guide.

Women with third party assistance are more than twice as likely to be housed by the local authority

Our research found that 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). The need for outside assistance to get housed was also a strong and consistent theme throughout the research.

“ I felt they didn’t believe me and my situation. They only began to listen when I had help from Solace Women’s Aid.

Women face wide-scale disruption to their lives through relocation

Our research shows that 38 per cent of women are forced to abandon their jobs or training as a result of fleeing abuse; those that stuck with existing commitments from their new location sometimes ended up with long and exhausting commutes. 75 per cent of women needed a new healthcare provider. Women also gave up vital social support networks; 60 per cent changed their friendship groups, and 31 per cent had to find a new faith community.

“ Travel to work; went from 20 minutes by rail +5000 miles per year to driving 14,000 miles per year.

Children’s lives are equally disrupted by fleeing. Amongst women fleeing with children, 50 per cent had to find new schools, and 43 per cent had to find new childcare arrangements.

The majority of women fleeing abuse move addresses at least twice

Frequent relocation is a common occurrence for women fleeing abuse. Analysis of the journey data from respondents who had fled abuse in the last five years showed that the majority of women (59 per cent) moved at least twice after fleeing, with 18 per cent uprooted four or more times.

This finding is consistent with previous longitudinal research showing the post-flight period to be one of repeated upheaval and change (Kelly et al. 2014).

Seeking safety damages most women’s housing prospects

Whether fleeing a secure tenancy; a private rented property or their own home, the majority of women experience a disadvantage in their housing circumstances as a result of seeking safety. 53 per cent of the women starting their journey with a secure tenancy lost their tenancy and ended up in temporary accommodation; staying with family and friends or became homeless. This finding is consistent with previous Solace research which found a 41 per cent drop in the number of women in secure tenancies on departure from refuge accommodation (Solace 2016).

Women fleeing private rented accommodation (in itself not a secure housing option in a city of spiralling rents and insecure tenure) were also found to be twice as likely to be more precariously housed as a result of fleeing. 50 per cent slipped further down the housing ladder to living in temporary accommodation, with family and friends, and in hostels. Just 5 per cent had found secure tenancies. Just one in four survivors who had been homeowners continued to live in their own property after fleeing abuse, with many moving into private rented accommodation.

Holding perpetrators to account

Across all respondents, where women were cohabiting with the perpetrator before fleeing, 45 per cent of perpetrators are known to have remained in the home. These findings echo previous research indicating that it is the victim of abuse who is forced out of the family home (SafeLives 2018; Solace 2016). Amongst homeowners, 63 per cent of perpetrators are known to have remained in the family home. This highlights how perpetrators are often not held to account for their actions, and remain in control of their environment and assets.

Feedback from survivors: ‘Listen to us the first time we ask for help’

Research participants were asked about what would have made it easier for them to find somewhere new to live. The most common response was also the simplest; to be listened to the first time they sought help, and to be believed. Women also want

their disclosure and request for help met with a non-judgmental, supportive and understanding attitude. Access to more and better information was another major theme. Information is seen as essential to unlocking rights and entitlements, and specialist third parties (case workers, solicitors) are perceived as crucial to this process.

“ Agencies that should have been there to help me actually believing me and not siding with my abuser.

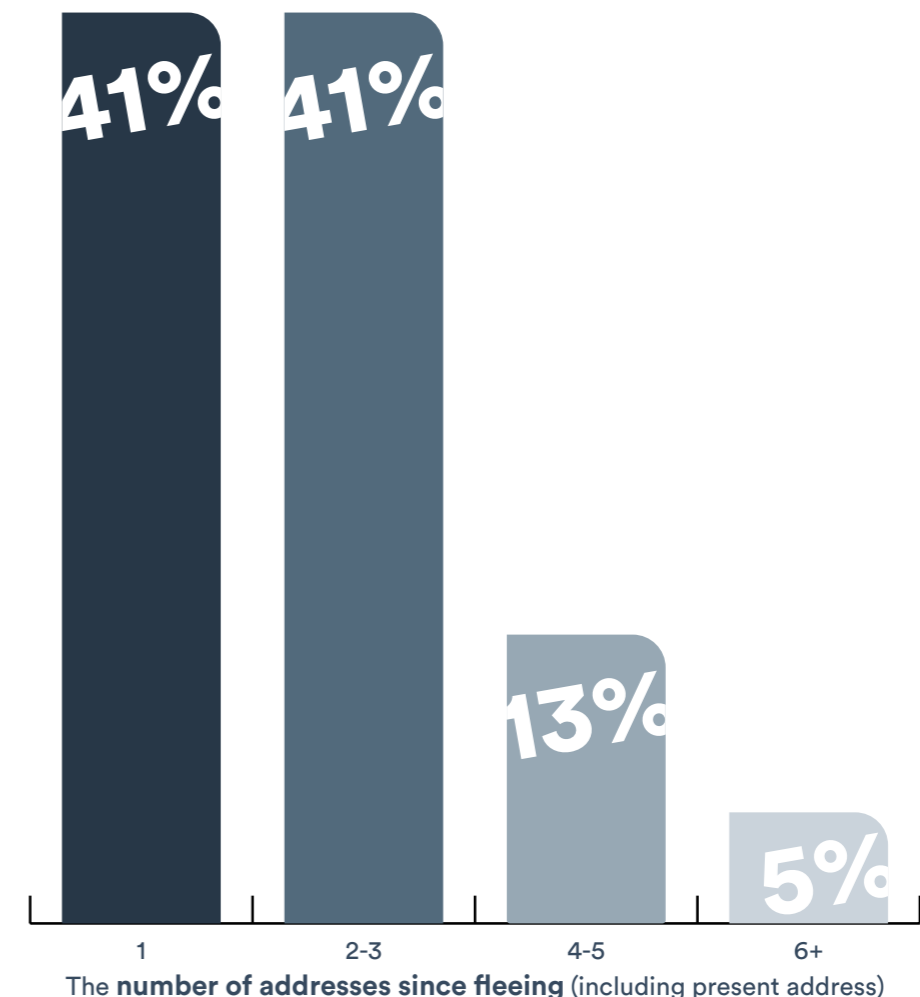
“ Having access to knowledge of my rights. I was so scared the police were going to come and take me away as that’s what my abuser would always tell me.

Money was another theme – women feel the lack of it, and this makes their journey to safety harder.

“ Money. Since leaving, my finances are constantly an edge away from disaster.

Participants highlighted a number of practical suggestions for improving the support offered by local authority housing departments to survivors of VAWG. These include: employing VAWG specialists or creating a VAWG department within the housing team; faster referral to specialist services by housing; more support for women to remain safely at home (including evicting the perpetrator); immediate access to move-on properties for women leaving refuge, and making sure that all women fleeing abuse are automatically found to be priority need.

The majority of women fleeing abuse move addresses at least twice



Frontline Perspectives

What benefits should we expect from the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017?

Entering into force in April 2018, the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) offered the potential to positively impact the experience of survivors fleeing abuse, including:

- Survivors seeking advice around homelessness should be offered up-to-date, exhaustive advice on their options in an accessible format
- All people found to be homeless/ at risk of homelessness regardless of priority need (e.g. including single women) or intentionality should receive tailored support
- The system should be faster and more proactive, with a greater focus on preventing homelessness
- Housing officers should have the necessary training and skills to understand and support survivors' specific vulnerabilities when constructing personal housing plans
- The same training should make the system less punitive in deciding whether women have 'deliberately and unreasonably' refused to cooperate with the actions outlined in their plan, leading to the local authority ending their duty.

The impact of the Act was met with tentative optimism from some quarters – for example, the London Assembly Housing Committee, which has highlighted pockets of promising practice in some boroughs (LAHC 2019). Other sector voices lamented the ongoing requirement on vulnerable homeless people to prove their priority need status, the variable quality of individualised plans, and the way these plans are fatally compromised by a lack of affordable housing (Centrepoin 2019). This more cautious perspective aligns with the findings uncovered by Solace's research via frontline VAWG workers.

Perspectives on change

In June 2019, Solace surveyed 27 frontline workers to gather their impressions of how the new Act was being embedded. Respondents covered both refuge and community-based services and were in regular contact with housing departments across a number of London boroughs.

The homeless process is slipping backwards

Our research shows that while it is still early into the life of the Act, the hoped-for benefits to survivors are not yet being widely felt. The overall impression remains one of stasis and even regression following the Act's implementation.

Despite some isolated pockets of good practice, staff note broad variation between (and indeed, within) boroughs in the way gatekeeping is applied and support offered: single women are being turned away in some areas, but offered improved support in others; areas with co-located VAWG specialists offer more crisis accommodation than before, whereas other areas continue to turn women away or offer private rented, unsuitable properties or properties far from schools and health services.

Some respondents also highlight that the new prevention duty is being used for gatekeeping:

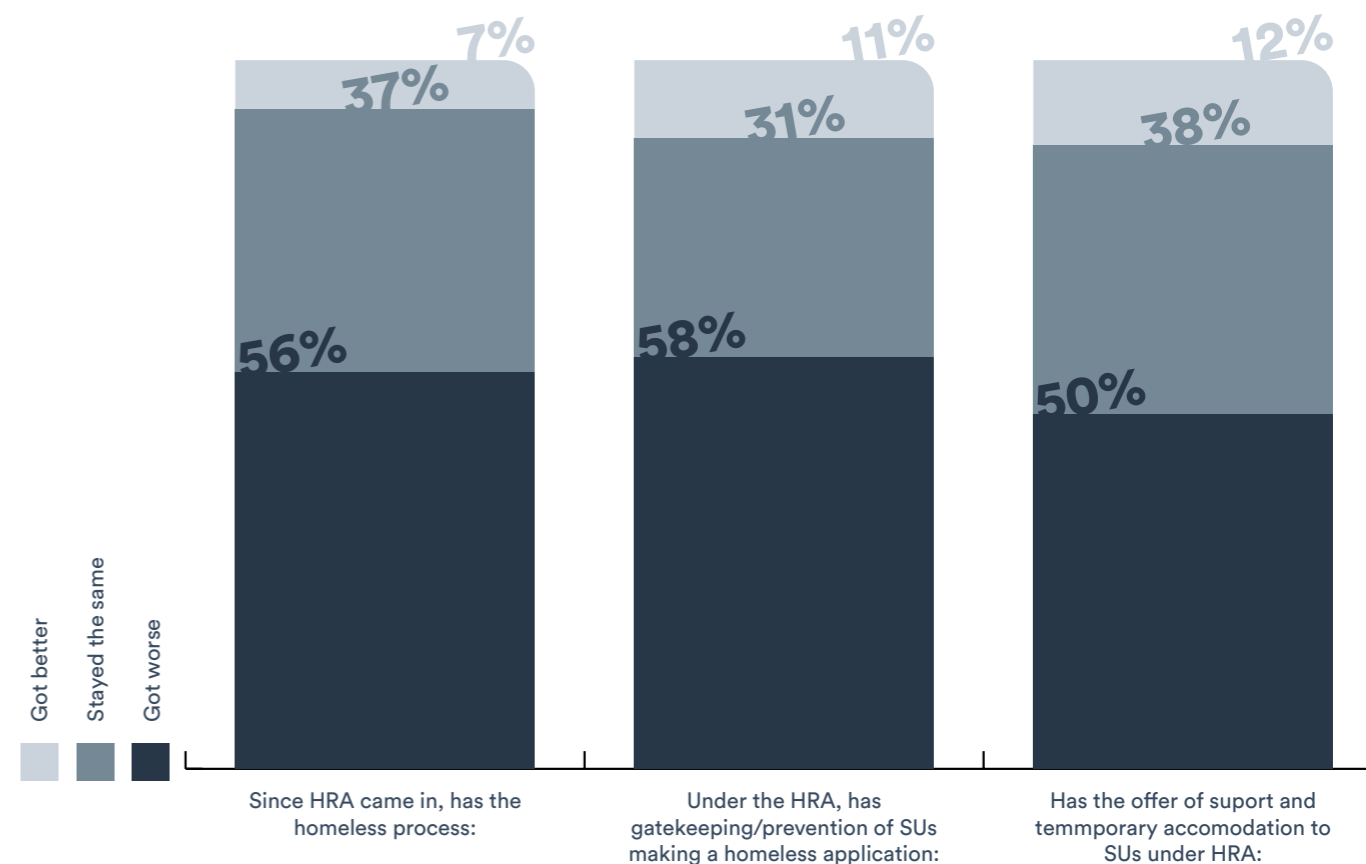
“If any woman approaches to make a homeless application, even if they are entitled, they will be signposted back to the early help officer. Therefore gatekeeping at its worst.”

Tailored support for all, not yet realised in practice

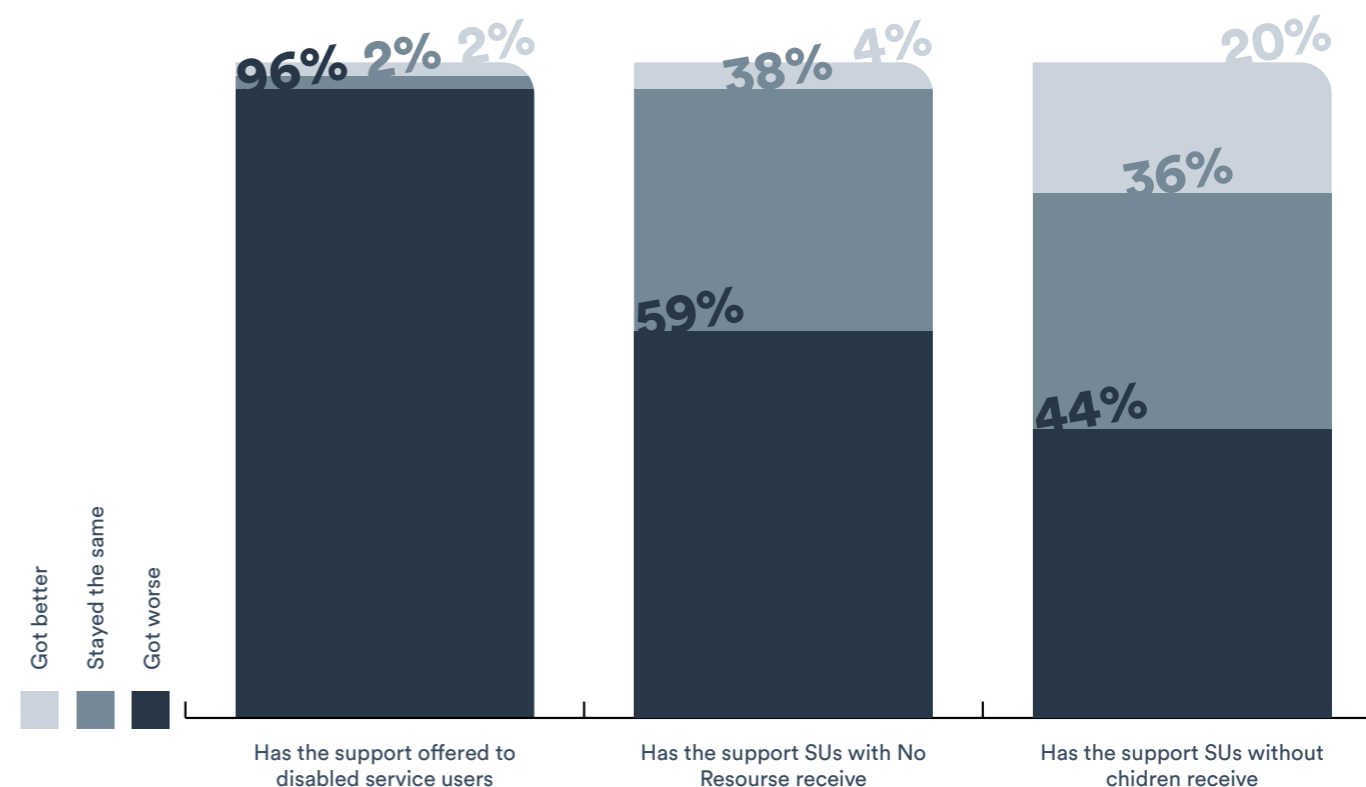
The goal of tailored support for all women seems far from being achieved. 36 per cent of respondents say single women receive a worse service from local authorities since the Act was introduced, despite pockets of good practice in Islington and Southwark (both Trailblazer authorities under the HRA, and so granted additional funding to implement the Act). 37 per cent feel that circumstances are worse for women with no recourse to public funds, with examples provided of poor practice, including not providing women with interpreters or turning them away without advice. For disabled women, the picture is one of incredibly poor service, with long and rigid assessment forms, and a refusal to recognise their priority need:

“I have to remind councils that disabled users are under priority need and that offering private property is not best option.”

Frontline impressions of HRA - stasis and regression



A long way from 'tailored support' (n=27)



Use of unaffordable private rental on the rise

64 per cent of respondents feel that the use of private rented accommodation as a final offer of accommodation has increased following the Act's implementation (with the remaining respondents saying it has remained the same). Many report that Housing Officers in some boroughs are using the change in legislation (incorrectly) to explain why they are offering private rented accommodation instead of a full homelessness assessment, a practice which prevents women from accessing their full housing entitlement.

A slower system

There is no evidence to suggest that the system as a whole is becoming faster or more responsive to survivors' needs. In fact, findings show the opposite with 60 per cent stating that the time taken to make a decision on the main housing duty had gone up, leaving many women and children in limbo.

An unrealistic understanding of domestic abuse

Only 11 per cent of respondents think that the content of their service users' Personalised Housing Plans (PHPs) are 'realistic and appropriate'. 41 per cent report that service users had been threatened with ending of duty by the Local Authority due to 'refusal to cooperate' with the contents of their plan. Many mention that PHPs push for survivors to take on a daily search of private rented properties, an onerous task for many women traumatised by abuse, or who lack the necessary resources or language skills:

“Some SUs [service users] are told that they should only look for accommodation themselves (and those SUs have limited English, have mental health issues which prevent them from making calls, have no knowledge of computers, have no access to internet, have no smartphones etc).”



Introduction

The landscape for women fleeing abuse in London is bleak. Under the strain of long-term underfunding and short-term, localised commissioning, the specialist VAWG sector is disintegrating, and places of safety are shrinking. A deepening housing crisis, and a lack of affordable housing, traps women in unsafe or unsuitable accommodation or forces them to choose between a roof over their heads or their safety. Extensive cuts to public spending under successive governments including a focus on temporary accommodation alongside decreasing social housing stock have condemned many women struggling to regain financial independence to destitution and insecurity. In this context, Solace's specialist work around homelessness due to VAWG fills a critical and ever-widening gap. Holistic support, which understands the full breadth of women's experiences and puts their needs and choices front and centre, is in diminishing supply in the capital. Access to safe, suitable accommodation is even rarer. By providing the two together, each model illustrated in the following five case studies provides women with the physical and emotional space to begin rebuilding their lives.

Solace works in partnership with a range of specialist organisations, across London, to provide trauma-informed services that are flexible, reliable and responsive; that build on strengths and restore choice to survivors. It is this approach which enables engagement and supports sustainable recovery, enabling women and children to move towards independence, breaking the cycle of abuse and exploitation, and delivering important savings in terms of both human suffering and public spending.



Second-stage accommodation for women who have been sexually exploited through trafficking or prostitution

About the Project

Amari is a pan-London, second-stage housing project that supports women who have been sexually exploited through trafficking or prostitution to gain independent lives, free from exploitation, hardship and vulnerability. The project is a collaboration between Commonweal Housing and Solace Women's Aid, with support from London Councils. Women are eligible for the Project after having successfully maintained a first stage tenancy (for example, in emergency accommodation or refuge) with higher levels of support.

At Amari, tailored support is provided alongside 12-18 months of good-quality accommodation in self-contained, dispersed flats. This supports women to transition into independent living, building the skills they need to maintain a tenancy and helping to break the cycle of homelessness and sexual exploitation that can re-occur once women leave emergency accommodation. Resettlement support is also provided for the first three months of independent living.

About the outcomes

“Before I would tell myself everything is going to be fine but it was just something that I told myself to get through things, whereas now I tell myself that and I know it, I really know it.

Client, Evaluation of the Amari Project (2019)

Recent evaluation of Amari shows that the combination of stable, good-quality and self-contained housing plus holistic support is crucial to women making positive changes in their lives. Many women had negative experiences of their first-stage accommodation, especially when sharing with other women who also had high support needs. **Amari provides the space they needed to work on their recovery.**

Practical support focusing on independence means that the majority of tenants, and all those who had moved on from Amari, had increased the skills needed to successfully manage their own tenancies and finances. These skills are crucial to women being able to maintain stability in their lives and to continue to sustain their recovery from trauma. The project has enabled seven women to successfully resettle into independent accommodation, and to maintain their housing situation.

Support workers at Amari encourage women to engage beyond the project with other services, extending their professional support network and becoming practiced at making and keeping appointments, taking up new opportunities etc. **All service users are successfully linked to different forms of support and activity**, such as education, work, health, financial, and legal advice.

Secure housing – even if time-limited – gives women a base from which to be safe, secure and to consider

their future. Rates of relapse within the project have been extremely low, and the majority of tenants who moved on reported feeling very removed from their previous involvement in prostitution. **Women have taken strides towards future projects** - two tenants have gained paid work, two entered education, one entered an apprenticeship and one applied for a Masters while at Amari.

New skills extend beyond managing money, paying bills, making and keeping appointments and managing their household – for example, all service users interviewed after having left the project stated that they were **better able to look after themselves**. The transitional support offered when women move into independent living is seen as essential to ensuring that women continue their journey around recovery and moving towards independence.

As women develop their practical skills, **their self-esteem is also nourished**, leaving them more confident to take on responsibility – a virtuous circle of self-development. **Women also report feeling more motivated and resilient** compared to before entering the project – even in the face of setbacks.

Moving into the self-contained accommodation provided through Amari can be a lonely time for women, either due to moving across London, severing unhealthy connections, or simply taking time out to heal. However, women value the positive experience of relating to their neighbours and Support Worker, and **re-investing in their social networks**, getting on better with family and starting new, healthy intimate relationships and friendships.

“Sometimes I sit there and I am in awe of it, I can't believe how different things are from how they were before.”

Client, Evaluation of the Amari Project (2019)

Housing First Islington

*Everything has changed now.
Before it was just like day to day,
minute by minute but now I can kind of
look forward for the first time.*

Client, Housing First Islington

About the Project

Housing First (HF) Islington is a pilot project delivered in collaboration between Single Homeless Project (SHP), Solace and Fulfilling Lives Islington & Camden (FLIC). Under HF, stable housing is offered without preconditions as a solid platform from which individuals experiencing multiple disadvantage can begin their recovery – a radical departure from more traditional ‘staircase’ models of provision where people have to meet fixed criteria (for example, addressing their drug use) in order to be housed.

The project consists of one HF worker providing intensive, wrap-around support to a small case load of five women, all of whom are experiencing multiple disadvantage including homelessness, and none of whom were engaging previously in support. As well as tackling their housing needs, the pilot provides intensive support with a range of issues, including domestic abuse, substance misuse, and health and wellbeing.

About the outcomes

Sometimes all they do is just talk especially at first the first few months just talk to you. She went out of her way to come and see me where I was and all that. I knew I had somebody there that could help me.

Client, Housing First Islington

Outcomes from the first ten months show that **80 per cent of the women engaged consistently with the project**. Building a trusting, consistent, non-judgemental relationship with the HF worker was a huge step forward for women who had deeply negative prior experiences of using services. This positive relationship, coupled with the flexible engagement with women, secured engagement from women who were unwilling or unable to engage with any other services or even mainstream provision within Solace. This included accompanying them to appointments, working at their pace, and meeting them on their own terms – in one case, arranging parallel meetings with the perpetrator’s worker to allow the woman to be seen alone.

All the women had a long history of homelessness. **60 per cent of clients were housed** – two in independent housing, and a third client in supported accommodation, whilst other independent accommodation is being sourced. Intensive support from offer to moving in and beyond, plus a budget for moving-in essentials and assistance with anything that goes wrong with the new property, were crucial to keeping women engaged with their tenancy. Simply being able to shut the door on their own space was hugely important to women who had experienced both violence and homelessness.

For the majority of the women, abuse had been a significant part of their lives since childhood, and for the all women, domestic abuse was the original cause of their homelessness. The trusting relationship with the HF worker and incremental work around self-esteem, confidence and resilience allowed them to begin reporting incidents, safety planning and **engaging for the first time with the Police and legal remedies, and specialist VAWG services**. MARAC referrals were reduced by 20 per cent and one client left an abusive relationship.

The links between abuse, multiple disadvantage and poor health outcomes are well-evidenced. **Women were supported to take control of their health** after years of neglect - for example, support around hepatitis treatment and scripting. All the women had a mental health diagnosis and 60 per cent were referred to psychiatric services. 100% of clients were referred to substance misuse services.

Women were also helped to take steps towards financial independence – opening bank accounts separate to the perpetrator, and **100 per cent of clients were assisted to access benefits**. Many of the women were able to access a personal budget through the scheme for emergencies that otherwise would have been disastrous – for example, to replace lost keys or after one woman had all her clothing destroyed by the perpetrator.

Slowly, women began considering the future. **80 per cent of clients were assisted with links to family or community** – for example, making contact with children through a Letterbox scheme, or re-opening contact with family members. Women also began considering work – with **two women expressing an interest in training and one woman attending a job interview**.

About the Project

The Mia Project is a specialist crisis and longer-term one-to-one support service that works with survivors of domestic abuse who are:

- 16 +
- often have multiple needs
- may be excluded from mainstream services and/or
- find it hard to engage with support.

The Project operates by making sustained efforts to secure initial engagement, delivering focused and consistent attention through small caseloads, and providing one-to-one bespoke, dedicated support to meet jointly developed goals. With this flexible and

trauma-informed approach, women are helped to stay safe, access work and training opportunities, become financially independent, build self-esteem and engage with Mia and other support services.

The Mia Project works across two London boroughs and has different referral criteria in each area. In Southwark, the scheme is open to women experiencing high risk domestic abuse with a child on a Child Protection Plan. In Enfield, the scheme is open to women experiencing high risk domestic abuse whose cases have been heard at a Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) a minimum of twice in one 12 month period.

About the outcomes

“they [the children] are in peace now, they’re not scared like they used to be.

Client, NEF Consulting Evaluation of Project Mia, Year One Findings (2019)

55 women were supported by the Mia Project in the first nine months of operation. Interviews conducted with Mia staff and clients by NEF consulting for a one-year evaluation found that **securing engagement** is a pivotal process that can take several months to achieve. The Mia Project secures women’s trust by demonstrating a different approach to other services – genuinely women-centred, consistent and trustworthy, responsive, and flexible (for example, allowing women to opt for a combination of group work and/ or one-to-one sessions, and being available to accompany women to appointments). The feeling of having someone ‘on side’ makes women feel more in control, which in turn improves their engagement in the support offered.

Through the medium of this trusting relationship, the Mia Project is able to **increase women’s space for action** via a combination of practical and emotional support, information and courses. Practical help with finances, bills and accommodation means women are able to **improve their material circumstances**. **Liaison with other services**, for example social services, is also valued highly by women who may have had negative experiences of these services in the past.

By offering women advice around services for children, the Project is able to **improve their connections to useful support**. The provision of a specialist children’s therapist means that mothers can understand more about how to **mend relationships with children** that may have been damaged by the constant stress of living under domestic abuse.

The combination of a trusting, consistent relationship with their Solace worker plus access to courses such as the Arise course (an 8-week domestic abuse awareness course designed to increase knowledge and confidence around domestic abuse and empower women to keep themselves safe) gives women a **better understanding of healthy relationships** and the signs of domestic abuse as well as **improved confidence and self-esteem**. Peer support on the course and sharing messages through the WhatsApp group also **reduces feelings of isolation**.

11 children accessed specialist therapy in the Southwark branch of the Mia Project in the first nine months of operation. Their mothers reported that children accessing therapy seemed **less frightened and anxious**. In some cases, therapy had also allowed children to return to school and/ or had improved their behaviour in school. It had also improved family relationships in general.

“[My caseworker] is amazing, she’s changed my life.”

Client, NEF consulting Evaluation of Project Mia, Year One Findings (2019)

The Rhea Project

Self-contained, good-quality temporary housing plus tailored support for women with children

About the Project

The Rhea Project provides good quality, temporary housing and tailored support for survivors with children. Commonweal Housing leases eight properties across London to Solace, who in turn provide specialist Key Work support for Rhea residents. Working in partnership with Southwark Council, an established move-on pathway makes it easier and quicker for women to find long-term, secure accommodation to move in to, and the support from the Solace Key Worker prepares women for independent living. The Rhea Project meets a gap in local provision for women with children, including older male children, who may find refuge accommodation harder to access or less suitable to their needs. It also fills a gap for women who need low- to medium-level support: less

intensive support than refuge accommodation, but more intensive than an advocacy service. The service works by offering the combination of specialist support at home from a Solace worker, good quality temporary housing, and the expectation of secure, longer-term accommodation. This expectation is realised for those women accepted by Southwark by the awarding of a minimum Band 2 priority, which enables women to bid for properties and have a realistic chance of securing long-term social housing within a reasonable amount of time. This gives survivors and their families the practical and emotional space to begin thinking about their recovery, boosting their courage to continue their journey to independence.

About the outcomes

The combination of safe, good quality housing and specialist key work has had benefits for both women and children. An interim evaluation looking at outcomes for the Rhea project during 2018 found that **mums reported improved emotional wellbeing in their children**. This was seen as both a direct benefit of being somewhere safe, and an indirect benefit of improvements to their mother's mental health and the **positive parenting strategies** passed on by the keyworker. These improvements translated in many cases to **better attendance and/ or behaviour at school**.

50 per cent of survivors reported **less anxiety or fewer trauma symptoms** on exiting the project, and three quarters of women were assessed as having significantly improved safety. Women had **improved practical circumstances** as well, with three quarters reporting better financial circumstances in terms of

either managing debt or dealing with their finances day to day.

Survivors highlighted that the combination of a place of safety and support from their keyworker had helped to build their **confidence and sense of empowerment**. This included feeling more confident to engage with and challenge other services. All survivors felt they had a **greater awareness of domestic abuse** after being supported at Rhea, including an improved ability to spot the signs of abusive and controlling behaviour in future relationships.

Critically, Rhea offers survivors physical and emotional **space to dream and consider the future**. At the end of their stay, women were looking forwards and considering their personal and professional development goals, and thinking about what they wanted for their family lives and for their children.



The WiSER Project

A VAWG service for women experiencing severe and multiple disadvantage

About the Project

The Women's Safe Engagement and Recovery (WiSER) Project works with women aged 16+ affected by VAWG who are facing severe and multiple disadvantage, are frequently excluded from mainstream services, and/or who find it hard to engage with support. In the first year of the service:

- 86 per cent of service users had at least one mental health diagnosis, and 41 per cent were exhibiting symptoms of undiagnosed PTSD
- 68 per cent had problematic substance or alcohol use
- 50 per cent entered the service homeless (rough sleeping, in unstable or temporary accommodation, or sofa surfing), and
- 14 per cent had no recourse to public funds.

The Project works across Camden, Enfield, Islington, Hackney, Haringey, Islington and Waltham Forest, and is delivered in partnership between Solace Women's Aid, Fulfilling Lives Islington and Camden, NIA, Hopscotch and IMECE. Women at the Well provides expertise regarding prostitution and AVA leads on training and evaluation.

Using small caseloads and a trauma-informed approach, the service provides assertive outreach and flexible support to enable women to access safe housing, engage with support, increase their self-esteem, reduce their risk and make safe choices. Alongside Specialist Advocates in each borough, WiSER employs BME specialist advocate navigators, and a clinical psychologist.

About the outcomes

“You're not kind of restricted by particular outcomes, like, the woman just decides her journey... We are actually giving women the power to decide what to do, where to do it, how to do it.

Advocate, WiSER, AVA Year One Evaluation (2019)

AVA's evaluation of the WiSER project's first year found that **65% of women were successfully engaged** with the project for an average of 7.6 months. For many of the women, this represented their first ever trusting relationship with a service and is a positive result delivered through gentle persistence, flexibility and consistent trustworthiness.

Re-establishing trust in professionals, as well as accompanying women to appointments, chasing up outcomes from meetings, and funding women's means of transport all encouraged better engagement with other services as well. This had a knock-on effect on women's health and self-care, with **62 per cent of women supported to register with a GP**, **69 per cent supported to seek help for substance misuse**, and **54 per cent supported to connect with mental health services**.

Strong trusting relationships also enabled women to begin talking about abuse. **100 per cent of women surveyed felt safe to discuss experiences of abuse and violence at WiSER**, and over half were directly

supported around VAWG. The number of women in contact with the perpetrator of abuse halved as women began to consider what healthy relationships might mean to them.

Women were also supported to take practical strides towards independence. **69 per cent of women were supported to access safe housing**. For some women, this allowed them to break with the perpetrator. The same proportion of women were supported to **stabilise their finances through accessing benefits, budgeting, and debt advice**, and, in some cases, dealing with the aftermath of financial abuse.

By having their basic needs better met by the project, women were encouraged to look forwards, with the **proportion of women making plans to actualise their aspirations rising from 30 to 90 per cent**. This included thinking about both starting and finishing training, with one woman completing her university degree.

The impact of the project extended to local services. Training was delivered to 150 professionals from a range of sectors and organisations, resulting in an **increase in the confidence and understanding of professionals when dealing with issues including substance use and mental health**. Three months after training, participants were able to retain new knowledge about substance use issues, alcohol issues, mental health conditions, trauma and multiple disadvantage.

“I don't see any big challenge now, it's just keeping up how it is. My biggest challenge is maintaining what I am doing now. That's my biggest challenge. I'm not scared of anything at the minute.”

WiSER Client, AVA Year One Evaluation (2019)

Mapping women's journeys to safety



Introduction

Women's journeys to safety can be long, arduous, dangerous and far from linear. All too often, they can involve navigating opaque and inflexible systems, dealing with gatekeeping and disbelief, and managing protracted periods of uncertainty and confusion.

Having someone by your side – on your side – at any and all of the stages of the journey to safety can have huge implications in terms of the eventual human and financial costs.

Methodology

Solace held two workshops with seven survivors and four caseworkers to create three indicative 'journey maps'. The journeys are woven from the seven narratives shared at the workshops and illustrate the complexity of women's journeys as well as the value of specialist support at different points – crisis, prevention, and in the longer-term.

Mapping women's journeys to safety

Specialist and flexible support for women with multiple disadvantages prevents avoidable homelessness and saves money.

SUPPORTING ISHTAR WILL SAVE £184,409



Total Cost
Route A total
£16,502

Cost
Solace housing/immigration legal assistance **£530**
Specialist advocacy **£413.25**
Specialist counselling **£600**
Children's psychological support **£1,450**

Route A
A What actually happened

Route B
B What could have happened

The Solace team connect Ishtar with a solicitor to challenge Children's Social Care, who reverse their decision, finally housing mother and son together. Ishtar is able to access Solace's in-house immigration solicitor and benefits advice. She is also able to access specialist counselling from Solace's sister organisation and her mental health slowly improves. Her son has access to a children's worker and child psychologist and begins talking again.

The police officer gives Ishtar the number for Solace.

Cost
1 years prescription to anti-depressants **£7,819**
Speech & Language Therapy **£1,980**
Children's counselling in school **£1,092**

Over the following years of abuse, Ishtar's mental health deteriorates. She makes repeated visits to the GP – accompanied each time by her husband – and is given antidepressants. Ishtar's son stops speaking and begins wetting the bed.

Cost
Processed by Housing Options Team, refused Assistance **£558**

Ishtar arrives at the Local Authority Housing department. She is told they cannot house her as she has no recourse to public funds. The housing officer gives her the number of the National Domestic Violence Helpline and encourages her to return to the perpetrator.

Ishtar contacts Children's Social Care. They offer to house her son, but not her, and turn her away. In desperation she begs a friend to take her in. Her friend's husband insists they can only stay one night – after that she must return to the perpetrator.

Ishtar and her husband are married in Iran. At first he is a tender and loving spouse.

Cost
Police 999 Call out **£2,060**

Ishtar's husband tracks her down at her friend's house and assaults her. Neighbours call the police.

Ishtar's husband brings her to the UK. He quickly becomes controlling and physically and sexually violent. After their baby is born, Ishtar's husband controls all the finances. He takes her passport and tells her the police will deport her if she reports his violence.

Fearful for the safety of her son, Ishtar prepares in secret to flee. She has no money.

Ishtar calls the Helpline. The only space for a woman with no recourse is 120 miles away. She has no money to get there. They advise her to contact Children's Social Care.

Total Cost
Route B total
£200,911

Cost
School exclusion **£73,543**
Emergency foster care **£15,504**

Ishtar's son begins lashing out at school and is excluded. He is eventually taken into emergency foster care after a teacher at his primary notices signs of physical abuse, but returned to his father after Children's Services find him to be a 'good enough' dad.

Cost
6 month inpatient psychiatric stay **£98,355**

Ishtar's mental health continues to deteriorate. The following year she is hospitalised after attempting suicide, leaving the perpetrator to care for her son.

Ishtar sees no alternative but to return to her husband. The abuse intensifies.

Mapping women's journeys to safety

Specialist and flexible support for women with multiple disadvantages prevents avoidable homelessness and saves money.

SUPPORTING LEANNE WILL SAVE £66,605



Route A Route B Route C Route D

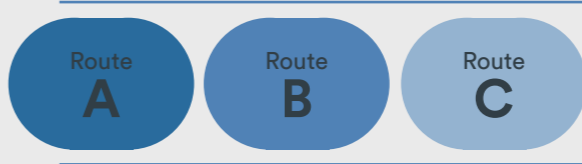
Leanne lives with her parents and extended family in a deeply religious household. One night she is raped by her boyfriend and his friends at a party, leaving her with frightening flashbacks and physical injuries. After she finally confides in her mother, her parents blame her for the rape and throw her out of the family home.

Cost
Processed by Housing Options Team, refused Assistance
£558

Desperate, she visits the Local Authority Housing Department. The Housing Officer does not believe her and calls her parents to corroborate Leanne's story. When Leanne refuses to return home, she is given a list of out-of-date private rental options, none of which she can afford.

Total Cost
Route D total
£28,178

Leanne begins sleeping rough, experiencing further abuse from strangers.



What actually happened

Route D What could have happened

Cost
5 A&E visits
£166 per visit
3 inpatient stays
£3,056 per visit

Leanne begins selling sex to survive and is quickly trapped into a cycle of drug misuse, sexual exploitation and violence. She is in and out of hospital for exposure and injuries sustained through assault. In the A&E toilets, she finds a number for Solace.

Cost
Bedspace for 1 year
£13,350
Amari Support Worker for 1 year
£4,384

Leanne's Solace keyworker is able to help her to transition to a one bedroom flat at Amari.

Cost
Eviction arrears written off and re-letting property
£5,806

No spaces are available at Amari. After a year in temporary accommodation, Leanne is given a studio flat in Kent. She has never lived independently and is unable to manage her bills or rent. In arrears and separated from her support network, her mental health deteriorates and she loses her tenancy. Leanne returns to sleeping rough.

After a year, with no end to temporary accommodation in sight, she leaves her flat and starts to sleep rough again.

Cost
1 year in prison
£68,705

Leanne continues to sleep rough and sell sex. Eventually she is sent to prison for a drugs offence. On release, she is left destitute.

Cost
12 months in temporary accommodation
£9,828

In temporary accommodation, the poor conditions, noise, and drug-taking by her neighbours reactivate Leanne's trauma from sexual exploitation and living there is extremely stressful.

Solace support Leanne to present to the local Housing Options team. Although she is rejected again, they successfully challenge the decision and Leanne is placed in temporary accommodation.

Total Cost
Routes A-C total
£94,783
per cycle

Mapping women's journeys to safety

Specialist and flexible support for women with multiple disadvantages prevents avoidable homelessness and saves money.

SUPPORTING LUANA WILL SAVE £44,638



Route A
Route B

Luana meets her partner when she is 21. At first loving and attentive, he quickly becomes controlling and abusive. After a few months, he moves into her housing association flat, stopping her from seeing her friends and family.

The police are called out regularly to the flat. Luana decides not to press charges as she believes this relationship is the best she can get. She is not given any encouragement to leave – both Luana and her perpetrator are known to the police, and they are often both drunk when officers arrive.

Total Cost
Route A total
£50,702

Route A
What actually happened

Route B
What could have happened

Cost
20
police
call outs
£41,200

Initially reluctant to engage, Luana builds a good relationship with her WiSER worker after her partner goes to prison for a drugs offence.

Cost
WiSER key worker, **£7,425**
sanctuary scheme, **£240**
and injunction **£177**

Her support worker is able to work flexibly with Luana's drug use and mental health problems to keep her engaged. Liaising with the housing association on her behalf, they stop the eviction and support Luana to obtain an injunction to keep her partner away from the flat when he is released from prison. The local sanctuary scheme fit a new fireproof door and CCTV camera.

A nurse refers Luana's case to adult safeguarding. The safeguarding team give her the number of the local domestic violence service, but do not take the case further. Luana doesn't call.

Cost
10
A&E
attendances
£1660

Luana's drinking and drug use escalates and her mental health begins to deteriorate. She presents at A & E several times after self-harming.

After repeated complaints from neighbours, Luana is threatened with eviction for anti-social behaviour. That evening, her partner throws her down the stairs and she is taken to A&E. In hospital, a psychiatric nurse refers Luana to WiSER.

Total Cost
Route B total
£95,340

Luana leaves the night shelter after being sexually assaulted by another resident, and starts sleeping rough. Her drug use escalates. Luana finds out through the rough sleeping community that the perpetrator has been released and returns to him.

Luana begins drinking heavily to block out his physical and sexual violence.

Cost
90 day
inpatient stay.
£46,187
DoL Assesment
£1,457

Luana has a breakdown and is sectioned after presenting at A&E. On release from hospital, she presents at the local authority housing department. They insist that she is still intentionally homeless and refer her to a mixed gender night shelter run by the local church.

Cost
Night shelter
£142

Cost
Refuge
£230

Luana spends four days in a refuge, but is asked to leave after they are unable to support her drug use and increasingly erratic behaviour.

Cost
Eviction,
re-letting of property.
£3906
Processed by Housing Options Team, refused assistance
£558

Luana is evicted. The Local Authority Housing Department tell her she is intentionally homeless and turn her away.



In 2014, I moved from Thailand to the UK with my British husband. My husband started abusing me emotionally, financially and sexually when I first became pregnant with our first child, and it only got worse from there.

I was so stressed when letters from the Home Office started arriving at the house threatening to deport me. I had to report monthly to the police, I was not allowed to travel, to work or entitled to any benefits.

My husband said I was causing him stress because of my migration issues and refused to get involved. He didn't like me talking to his family or having any contact outside of him. He would leave me and the children for long periods without any money or food.

The last straw was when he hit my daughter. I knew I needed to leave to keep them safe. That was the most difficult time. I knew I was going to become homeless with two children, no income or job – how was I going to survive?

First we went to the local authority at Lewisham. We waited for hours. They told me to return to my husband, and that they could accommodate the children, but not me. Next we tried Lambeth, but they said the same. My children were crying, I was desperate - it was one of the worst experiences of my life.

When I needed help, there was nobody there but Solace. No refuges would take us because we had no recourse to public funds. Solace put us in contact with Southall Black Sisters who funded a hotel in the short term. Solace also provided legal support to take the Council to court, and we won. They were obliged to put us in temporary accommodation. With the help of Solace I also achieved leave to remain and recourse to public funds.

I don't know what I would have done without having the support to navigate this system. We need to empower women with knowledge, there is so little information available. It's almost as if they don't want you to know your rights. The Council said that that I had no right to housing. Telling that to me, is like telling me that I have no right to breathe, or to drink water.

If it was not for Solace I would probably be back home, with my husband. Now I am free and I am looking forward to a future where I can have a career and achieve the best for my children. I think of them and I know I have to keep going. I want to speak out so that no other migrant women have to go through what I went through, or worse.



I've had lots of keyworkers in my life, but things never seemed to change. I went into care when I was little, because my Dad was abusing my Mum. Eventually, he killed her, so I know how bad these things can get.

I got married young and ended up in prison because of his control and drug use. We went on to have three children together, but Social Services were always involved. One night a rival gang member set the flat on fire, and I lost my daughter and husband in the fire. I nearly died. I ended up in a psychiatric hospital. Once I got out I went from violent relationship to violent relationship. It was around this time that I met my most recent perpetrator. He controlled everything I did and a cycle of abuse began resulting in me losing everything including contact with my family.

The council put me in a mixed hostel where men were coming and going and I knew most of them, and I was scared. I ended up being raped there. The Police referred me to North London Rape Crisis run by Solace. Solace contacted me and also referred me to a housing specialist at Solace. We went to the Council together for a homeless assessment and I it was very stressful but my worker supported me every step of the way. We had several knock-backs resulting in them saying they were closing my case as I wasn't in 'Priority Need'. My worker advised that this was unlawful and I shouldn't be treated like this.

Solace referred me to a solicitor who I met and she told me the council's decision was disgraceful and she would fight against it.

The solicitor fought with the council for three months. One Friday afternoon my worker called me and said the solicitor had told her that she had informed the Council if they didn't reply by the end of the week, then she would take them to court on Monday. They had replied and offered me temporary accommodation. This was seven months after I first went in. I spent those months living with verbal, financial, sexual and physical abuse from my perpetrator. He could have killed me in that time.

I was given temporary accommodation straight away. It was self-contained and my Solace worker went with me and helped me to set up my bidding number for a council flat. I went to my perpetrator's flat when he was out at work, took all my clothes, and left my keys on the kitchen table. I have not spoken to him since.

I was given high priority status and so received a council flat within two months. It was close to my sister's house and she's been supporting me. My family are really happy to be back in touch and I've reconnected with my daughter and grandchildren. I haven't had a drink since I left and I'm on the waiting list for counselling. A home is so important. When I lived with my perpetrator, I couldn't do anything for myself but now that I have my own place, I can rebuild my life.

Key Asks

The message from survivors and frontline workers is clear:

London's housing and homelessness systems are failing women and children made homeless through VAWG.

This picture of deepening crisis is consistent with both previous research conducted at Solace, and wider research on women made homeless through VAWG.

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

To this end, Solace has three key asks.

1

An increase in allocation of homes to women made homeless through VAWG by the allocation of:

A

A minimum of five per cent of all local authority social housing lettings.

Around 1,000 women leave refuge each year in London, with many more presenting as homeless to London's local authority housing departments. A shortage of social housing causes problems at every stage of women's journeys to safety. Some journeys are deferred as women weigh up fear of abuse with fear of homelessness – almost half of the women in our survey fleeing a secure tenancy said fear of losing their tenancy was a barrier to leaving the perpetrator. Some journeys are stalled as women end up stuck in refuge or temporary accommodation with nowhere to move on to – which in turn impacts on access for other women in crisis. Other onward journeys become protracted and uncertain. Our research shows that the majority of women move twice or more after fleeing, and that most experience a downturn in their

B

A minimum of five per cent of all permanent new social homes built in London

housing circumstances, with many losing their secure tenancies, moving into temporary accommodation, or ending up on friends' sofas and in hostels. Without a settled base, women and children are unable to do the recovery work they need to rebuild their lives after abuse.

The allocation of additional permanent social homes each year in London would give a number of women and children a safe platform from which to begin rebuilding their lives, supporting sustainable recovery from abuse. Increasing the supply of suitable and safe move-on accommodation would also help to relieve pressure on an overloaded refuge system by ensuring women are able to move on when they are ready, freeing up spaces for more women in crisis.

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.

Currently, women are subject to a vulnerability assessment on presenting to the local authority to determine whether they are significantly more 'vulnerable' than any other person would be if made homeless in order to secure the main homelessness duty of settled housing. Proving this level of vulnerability can be both difficult and re-traumatising for survivors of abuse.

We join the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Ending Homelessness in calling for a consistent approach that sees all women fleeing VAWG and who are presenting as homeless placed in an automatic priority need category. This would enable many more vulnerable women in London to be housed in a timely manner, thereby reducing risk, disruption, and the longer-term impact of abuse.

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

Priority banding, or in some boroughs, points, determine your place on the waiting list for social housing.

Our research highlights that the majority of women will be forced to relocate multiple times. Allowing women to keep their band or points status between boroughs means that they do not have to begin afresh with their housing application each time they cross a local authority line in the quest for a safe home. For women who are already displaced and disrupted, this can feel like an insurmountable challenge on top of consecutive relocations. Smoothing the path to safety by removing this hurdle ensures that they are not further disadvantaged.

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.

A comprehensive local strategy for all women – including a safety net for women with no recourse to public funds – provides an opportunity to map, clarify and expand options for women seeking safety from abuse. This includes looking at options for women wanting to remain safely in their own home, as well as women who need to relocate,

ensuring access to safe, suitable crisis accommodation and ensuring women retain their housing rights and tenancy status throughout their journey. This requires a focused, cross-departmental approach joining up VAWG, housing, homelessness and social care strategies to ensure a coordinated approach to women's safety, security and wellbeing.

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Journey Maps

Costing references are available online at solacewomensaid.org and on request info@solacewomensaid.org

Glossary

BME/BAME	Black and Minority Ethnic
HF	Housing First
HRA	Homelessness Reduction Act (2017)
MARAC	Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference
PHP	Personal Housing Plan
PRS	Private Rental Sector
VAWG	Violence Against Women and Girls

To protect our service users, names and photos of women and children have been changed.

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