

# Evaluation of the Rhea Project: Final Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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solace



# Executive Summary

## About the project

The Rhea Project was established as a partnership between Solace Women's Aid (Solace) and Commonweal Housing (Commonweal) to pilot good quality, temporary housing with tailored support for survivors of domestic abuse and, in some cases, other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG). London Borough of Southwark Housing Department (Southwark Housing Solutions) are a third partner, necessary for the pilot to achieve sustainable systems change. With overlapping aims, these partners have come together to enable the Rhea Project to be piloted and evaluated.

Solace exists to end the harm done through Violence Against Women and Girls. Through the Rhea Project, it aims to provide services to meet the needs of survivors of domestic abuse through a holistic, empowering approach. Commonweal supports piloting of innovative 'action learning' projects that address an identified social injustice, where a housing element is a key part of the system needed to meet the identified need. Solace work closely with Southwark Housing Solutions to promote and embed systems change and effective practice to meet the needs of women escaping domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG.



The project is highly innovative for several reasons. It fills a gap in provision for survivors who need low to medium support. This can be defined as a lower level of support than a refuge, but a higher level of support than an advocacy project. It combines bespoke, home based support with good quality, temporary, furnished self-contained accommodation for survivors of domestic abuse who have children and for whom other accommodation may not be appropriate or available. It promotes timely and appropriate move on to long term, secure and appropriate accommodation. This is often lacking for survivors and can be a factor in survivors returning to previous or new domestic abuse situations.

## **How does the project work?**

Survivors are identified and referred via Southwark Housing Solutions. Following placement, Southwark Housing Solutions process the bidding for move on housing. In the meantime, Rhea staff provide the housing management and holistic, home based, key work support.

The underlying ethos of Rhea is one of empowerment to increase confidence and self-determination in independent living. Direct support for children is not part of the aims of the project, but positive outcomes for children are nevertheless integral. There is evidence in the academic literature to support this approach of holistic provision.<sup>1</sup> The fact that Southwark Housing Solutions agrees that all families accepted into this project will receive a minimum Band 2 status for their housing ensures the throughput of the project. Otherwise the spaces would clog up and undermine the purpose of the project.

## **Finances – costs and benefits**

In 2018 the average annual cost of rent plus support per property was £15,634. For the pilot, this was more than offset by the average annual income per property of £17,035. This indicates that the model enabled a balance of income and cost, within a small margin. In 2019, the average cost per property was £18,338 and the average income per property was £17,884. Therefore, the average deficit per property was £452.75. This can be compared with a Home Office estimated annual cost on the public purse of £34,015 per person (2019) experiencing domestic abuse, representing excellent value for money and cost saving.

## **Impact of the project**

Rhea has shown positive impacts for practice in Southwark Housing Solutions. It has stimulated joint working and improved staff capabilities, leading to improved referral pathways, appropriate referrals, smoother transition, and better outcomes. Leadership commitment in Southwark Housing Solutions and the siting of the Rhea Key Worker within the department has been a major contribution to this. Training of Housing Staff may also have contributed to its effectiveness.





Rhea has delivered positive outcomes for survivors against all aspects of the Theory of Change. In interviews, the majority of interviewees self-reported improvements in emotional and psychological wellbeing. Seven out of nine reported significantly increased confidence and a greater sense of empowerment. Five out of nine reported greater capacity for self-advocacy. All nine interviewees reported that the project had given them space to 'hope and dream' and set future goals. In Solace exit data, four out of nine survivors reported they had fewer symptoms of trauma and anxiety and four reported that they had developed improved coping strategies.

Notably, all the survivors remained unreconciled to the perpetrator on move on from Rhea. Eight out of nine survivors reported their understanding of the issues and triggers underpinning domestic abuse had fundamentally changed and it they were more aware of the risks of involvement in a domestic abuse situation in the future. Improved ability to manage finances is an essential part of autonomy and was reported by seven out of nine survivors. For three survivors, existing employment was sustained during the time in Rhea and five other survivors began further education courses or had plans to do so in the near future. There were also indications that Rhea key work had facilitated greater capacity of survivors to develop constructive liaison with key agencies such as schools and Children's Services.

Whilst direct support for children is not an objective of Rhea in the Theory of Change, the findings indicate significant benefit. In interviews, seven out of nine mothers reported that both their understanding of parenting and their relationships with their children, and the children's emotional welfare had improved as an indirect result of key work support. Other positive outcomes reported included improved school attendance and engagement, better behaviour at school and home and survivors feeling more confident about their children's future outcomes.

## Lessons for replication

Addressing domestic abuse is a systems issue. Effective and timely assessment, good quality furnished self-contained housing, which is ready to move into, holistic personal support and working pathways to appropriate move on are necessary to facilitate ongoing progression into independence and recovery. This means that a whole systems perspective is key to effective replication. It is important that the purpose of the Project is embedded in policy within the Housing Department. This requires a good understanding of the nature, dynamics and impact of domestic abuse, managing accommodation services and strong leadership in the Local Authority Housing Department. Within Rhea, the relationship between Southwark Housing Solutions and Solace has been fundamental to the ongoing success of the Project. Southwark has developed a Whole Housing Systems Approach for women experiencing domestic abuse, which means that Rhea sits within a broader policy and practice framework. Within this, supportive and pro-active management of the Key Worker role is important to ensure an effective balance of workload between face to face contact and office-based work. The geographical dispersal of accommodation was key for security of the survivors. This was facilitated by Commonweal's availability of high-quality properties across boroughs but could be replicated in cross-borough agreements elsewhere. The role of Commonweal in the pilot is unique and is linked to their specific purpose and model. However, this should not be a barrier to replication in other areas.

Our evaluation has found that the pilot has been effective in achieving immediate and longer-term positive outcomes and high levels of cost-effectiveness. Subject to the replication issues above being considered and addressed, we feel that this important and innovative pilot would provide great social value and cost benefit, if replicated in other areas.





## Images

p. 1 - Pexels  
p. 3 - Unsplash  
p. 4 - Adobe Stock

The Solace logo consists of a solid red square with the word "solace" written in white, lowercase, sans-serif font in the center.

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