

DOMESTIC ABUSE AND HOMELESSNESS IN ENGLAND DURING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

Survivors of domestic abuse experiencing homelessness are one of the most marginalised groups in society, and the lockdown-related rise in demand for already limited resources exacerbated the barriers they face. Catherine Glew, Louisa Steele and Lisa Raftery explain how a partnership proved vital in providing guidance to those working in the homelessness and women's sectors, and outline why a gendered approach is essential going forward.



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INTRODUCTION

In March of this year, COVID-19 spread fast across the UK. National lockdown measures came into effect on 23 March, and by late April the UK had the third highest recorded death toll in the world.¹ It soon became clear that this was a particularly dangerous time for those suffering domestic abuse and people facing homelessness.

RISING LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

A survivor survey carried out by national federation Women's Aid found that lockdown measures escalated domestic abuse and closed down routes for women to escape to safety. 67.4% of survivors currently experiencing abuse said that it had gotten worse since COVID-19, and 76.1% said that they are having to spend more time with their abuser.²

Women from Black and minoritised communities faced particular risk, being at the sharp end of racialised discrimination and increasing levels of violence against women and girls (VAWG) as well the disproportionate impact of the virus.³

1 WHO, 30 April 2020. COVID-19 Situation report 101 https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200430-sitrep-101-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=2ba4e093_2

2 Women's Aid. (2020) [A Perfect Storm: The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Domestic Abuse Survivors and the Services Supporting Them](#). Bristol: Women's Aid.

3 Imkaan (2020) [The Impact of the Dual Pandemic's: Violence Against Women & Girls and COVID-19 on Black and Minoritised Women & Girls](#).

SURVIVORS CURRENTLY EXPERIENCING ABUSE



Said it had gotten worse since COVID-19



Said they are having to spend more time with their abuser

A lack of housing options can stop survivors from being able to leave, and these options have been even more limited. Women's Aid's found that two women surveyed had been homeless during lockdown, and that another had had to travel 600 miles to a refuge space.⁴

4 Women's Aid (2020)



RESPONDING TO HOMELESSNESS

People experiencing homelessness, particularly those sleeping rough, have also been severely vulnerable. The UK Government responded with the public health initiative 'Everyone In', funding hotel rooms to allow an estimated 14,600 people in England who were sleeping rough, staying in communal shelters or otherwise vulnerable to rough sleeping to safely self-isolate.⁵ The initiative showed what political will could achieve and provided shelter for those with long histories of rough sleeping.

Research and experience have shown that survivors of domestic abuse experiencing homelessness alongside other forms of disadvantage are among the most marginalised in society. Women are disproportionately affected - a 2018 evidence review by the University of York for St Mungo's found that experience of domestic violence and abuse was "near-universal" among women who become homeless.⁶

It is worth bearing in mind that even before the pandemic, survivors experiencing homelessness faced considerable barriers to getting the support that they need. Women and survivors facing challenges with their mental health, substance use and immigration status struggle to access specialist domestic abuse services, which are often poorly

5 Inside Housing, 6 June 2020. MHCLG clarifies rough sleeper claims following stats regulator intervention <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/news/mhclg-clarifies-rough-sleeper-claims-following-stats-regulator-intervention-66667>

6 Bretherton and Pleace (2018) Women and rough sleeping: A critical review <https://www.mungos.org/publication/women-and-rough-sleeping-a-critical-review/>

resourced to work with survivors experiencing multiple disadvantages. Rising demand, limited funding and constraints caused by lockdown measures only exacerbated existing barriers to support for homeless survivors during COVID-19.

A COLLABORATIVE RESPONSE

The pandemic has made a strong partnership response to homelessness and domestic abuse more important than ever. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, Standing Together and St Mungo's were already working collaboratively on the Safety by Experience project, funded by the Ending Women's Homelessness Fund managed by HomelessLink, the national membership charity for homelessness agencies in England.

Safety by Experience aims to find out more about the experiences of women who live in or access homelessness support services. By asking women how they keep safe, and finding out more about their experiences of multiple disadvantages and violence and abuse, the project is creating guidance and resources for staff across the homelessness and women's sectors, ultimately ensuring that women feel safer and better supported in homelessness services.

Partnerships of this kind are key to getting responses right for this most marginalised group of survivors. Sharing skills, knowledge and experience across sectors can empower staff working in homelessness settings to better identify and respond to domestic abuse and other violence against women and girls.





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TOOLS FOR THE HOMELESSNESS SECTOR

By March, with the threat from domestic abuse escalating nationally, the partnership quickly realised that clear and simple tools were needed for colleagues working under intense pressure to make sure that people facing homelessness could safely self-isolate.

Hundreds of people housed under the Everyone In initiative were self-isolating in hotel rooms with strict social distancing and infection control measures in place. Time spent working face-to-face was minimal, and guests were encouraged to remain in their rooms as much as possible. These measures - while vital to control the spread of the virus - made it more difficult for staff to recognise signs of abuse and build trust so women and survivors felt safe to disclose. Meanwhile, the risk was increasing - particularly for survivors self-isolating alongside their perpetrators.

Together with colleagues from SHP and Homeless Link, St Mungo's and Standing Together published brief guidance on recognising and responding to domestic abuse and sexual violence during COVID-19, published in April. The guidance provides a simple framework for asking and responding to disclosures of domestic abuse, as well as addressing specific concerns for staff working in homeless hostels and emergency hotels.

The guidance gives example scripts for welfare checks conducted face to face and on the phone, which was becoming standard practice in many homelessness services. It also suggests ways to navigate social distancing guidance and offer support discretely and safely when women may be overheard by those around them.

Initial feedback from staff working in homelessness services was encouraging - despite dozens of new rules and guidance documents to follow, colleagues found the domestic abuse guidance clear and practical. The partnership will keep the document under review in preparation for future local or national lockdown measures.



LEARNING FROM OTHER PARTNERSHIP PROJECTS

Beyond the Safety by Experience project, Homeless Link was working with grantees of the Ending Women's Homelessness Fund across England as homelessness and women's sector partners adapted their practice. Whilst the vast majority of the 29 partnership projects adapted and continued to provide vital support services to women experiencing homelessness, some organisations were forced to pause.

Across the country the women's sector and homelessness sector partners advocated for women's needs to be recognised in the emergency provision, being vocal on COVID-19 task force meetings and collaborating with other agencies to ensure women's voices were heard. Despite this, very few local areas opened women only emergency accommodation, and vulnerable women were placed in mixed-sex accommodation at great risk to their safety.

Only two areas had opened a women only emergency space within the first three months of the pandemic - Leeds and Manchester. In Leeds, this rapid gendered response was built on existing hard work by frontline services across the women's and homelessness sectors, who before the pandemic advocated for a women-only emergency night shelter to be opened by the council. This proved successful, and

the Safe Space hub was opened in September 2019, based at the St Anne's Centre and supported by Simon on the Streets women's outreach workers funded by Homeless Link.

When the pandemic hit, frontline services and council acted quickly to open a women only emergency hotel, and to move women from the women's Safe Space hub into the women's hotel with a partnership of organisations coordinating support to women accommodated. This is an example of the power of partnership working cross-sector between women's and homelessness sectors, and a proactive local authority who had already embraced the need for a gender specific response to women's homelessness.

Since then, three other areas have opened women-only spaces after strong advocacy and lobbying from the partnership projects. Other areas have greatly improved the situation for women in mixed-sex accommodation, through working with the authorities to create safe zones within the hotels and providing training for hotel staff on violence against women and girls (VAWG).

Homeless Link continues to gather and share the learning from these cross-sector partnerships as the situation evolves, and as women are moved from emergency accommodation into move on housing. The charity will shortly publish a case study review of seven grantees' experiences adapting services to COVID-19, and the impact on women and services.



HOMELESS SURVIVORS OF ABUSE MUST NOT BE FORGOTTEN

As emergency hotels close, focus has switched to finding suitable move on accommodation and support for people accommodated through the Everyone In initiative. Alongside this, homelessness agencies are turning their attention to the increasing flow of people newly sleeping rough as the winter months draw in. In London, 620 women were seen sleeping rough between April and June of this year, a 20% increase compared to the same period in 2019.⁷

In preparation for a likely second spike of the virus in the UK, it is essential that local and national governments go further and embrace a gender sensitive response to women's homelessness, considering the needs of women when planning and funding emergency accommodation and move on options. Without careful consideration, women survivors experiencing homelessness, domestic abuse and VAWG alongside other disadvantages will stay hidden and go unsheltered and unsupported. .

Guidance for staff on how to best support this group is essential. However, the expertise of staff in the homelessness and specialist women's sectors can only go so far if the safeguards that women and survivors require – including women-only accommodation, the provision of ongoing specialist support and additional security measures for safety – are not there.

The Safety by Experience project will continue to work alongside partners from across government, homelessness, and the specialist women's sectors to bring to light the needs of women and survivors of domestic abuse and embed a gendered response to homelessness across England.

⁷ Greater London Authority (2020) Rough sleeping in London (CHAIN reports)
<https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/chain-reports>

