

SUBMISSION FROM SCOTTISH WOMEN'S AID

Scottish Women's Aid welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Equal Opportunities Committee call for evidence on preventing homelessness among young people. Scottish Women's Aid is the lead organisation in Scotland working towards the prevention of domestic abuse. We also play a vital role campaigning and lobbying for effective responses to domestic abuse. An important aspect of our work is ensuring that women, children and young people with experience of domestic abuse get the services they need, both from local Women's Aid groups and from the agencies they are likely to contact.

Our members, 38 women's aid groups working across Scotland provide accommodation and support services to women and to women with children. This support is provided to women living in refuge, in temporary homeless accommodation and in their own tenancies. Support services are also provided to their children through one to one support, group work and therapeutic play. The experiences and views of our members inform this response.

Domestic abuse and youth homelessness

Domestic abuse is a significant cause of youth homelessness; research has found that a violent relationship with a partner was the second most common reason for a homeless application making up 14% of applications from 16 – 24 year olds. While violence in the parental home accounted for the next most common reason, 11% of applications from 16 – 24 year olds. Violent relationship breakdown is particularly significant amongst younger parents with 21% of young parents (16 – 24 year olds) stating this as the reason for a homeless application in Scotland.¹

In a Communities and Local Government Survey conducted in England nearly half (45%) of 16 and 17 year olds said that violence was a feature of the relationship breakdown that led to their homelessness.² The research found that childhood experience of domestic abuse was a significant factor for young homeless people, 40% reported witnessing domestic abuse as a child and 39% said they had been victims of domestic violence in their childhood.

Women's Aid services report an increase in younger women using their services, in a recent survey 1 in 5 women were between 16 and 25 years old³. They also report more cases of repeat homelessness, as young women come back to their service after being unsuitably housed. These figures reflect both the prevalence and long term impact of domestic abuse. The Scottish Government estimates the cost to the public purse of domestic abuse at £2.3 billion, in costs to the civil and criminal justice system, health services, social services and housing.

Strategic measures to prevent domestic abuse and reduce the long term impact of domestic abuse through effective early interventions would significantly reduce demand on a range of services. In particular in preventing homelessness that results from

¹ Quilgars, D., Johnsen, S. Pleace, N., (2008) Youth Homelessness in the UK: A Decade of Progress? Joseph Rowntree Foundation

² Statutory Homelessness in England: The experiences of families and 16-17 year olds Homelessness Research Summary Number 7, 2008

³ http://www.scottishwomensaid.org.uk/assets/files/publications/research_reports/NOEP%20February%202011.pdf

domestic abuse, which is the fourth most common reason for a homeless application and accounts for 11% of repeat homeless applications in Scotland.⁴

Youth homeless strategy, prevention and multi-agency working

Youth homelessness requires a more effective strategic response at national and local level. Research by Shelter⁵ highlighted the need for an improved strategic response to youth homelessness including a youth housing strategy, inter-linked to relevant strategic plans and supported by a much more holistic approach to the problem. Multi-agency working at a strategic level and joint working in delivery would support and resource this approach. At present the local multi-agency violence against women partnerships in Scotland often struggle to have representation from local homeless or housing services. These partnerships could support a more co-ordinated multi-agency response to homeless prevention and early intervention.

Assessment and approach

Homelessness and housing options staff need to be appropriately trained to understand the dynamics of domestic abuse, relevant strategy, legislation and guidance and support options available in order to be able to respond consistently to homeless or housing advice presentations. While responses have improved over recent years and our members report some very good relationships with homeless services – this can often be down to a relationship with an individual member of homeless staff and does not consistently apply across the service or across Scotland as a whole.

Homeless prevention approaches need to ensure that in cases of domestic abuse applicants are not prevented or discouraged from making a homeless application. In recent months we have had increasing requests from our members to support them in challenging homeless assessments or decisions. Referrals to housing options services should not be a condition of application – if it is part of a homeless assessment process it should be offered, where appropriate, once an application has been made and not used to prevent applications where the applicant is at risk of abuse.

The Scottish Government's Prevention of Homelessness Guidance (2009) and guidance on Meeting the Best Interests of Children Facing Homelessness (2011) set out good practice in responding to domestic abuse and homelessness. How far this guidance is currently implemented across local authority areas is unknown.

Mediation services are not appropriate where an application is made as a result of domestic abuse

Temporary accommodation and support provision

While there has been a significant improvement in the quality of temporary homeless accommodation, there is still considerable concern about the suitability of much of the hostel and bed and breakfast accommodation for young vulnerable people. The lack of one bedroom homeless flats in many areas means that this type of accommodation is increasingly used.

⁴ Domestic abuse, Housing and Homelessness in Scotland: An Evidence Review, Scottish Government (2010)

⁵ More Priority Needed: The impact of legislative change on young homeless people's access to housing and support Shelter (2005)

Women's Aid groups report that when refuge accommodation is full - our statistics⁶ show that 1 in 3 women and their children seeking refuge were turned away due to lack of space last year - young women are housed in bed and breakfast accommodation for lengthy periods of time. This is isolating and costly with the added expense of eating out due to the lack of cooking facilities. Hostel accommodation may be mixed sex, can increase exposure drugs, alcohol, violence and predatory behaviour – that these young women left home to avoid. For young women fleeing forced marriage these issues have even more significance and the use of this type of accommodation can place them at increased risk.

More specialist temporary or emergency accommodation for young people should be provided - young people should not be accommodated in mainstream homeless hostels, B & Bs or with older homeless people.

Effective interventions to youth homelessness have to go beyond physical housing. High quality support services are critical for those most at risk. For young women who have experienced domestic abuse specialist support services are essential in reducing the long impact of the abuse on them and on their children and in preventing further abuse from taking place.

However, despite the continuation of dedicated Scottish Government funding through the Violence Against Women Fund and Children's Services Fund, specialist domestic abuse services are being cut across Scotland. 84% of our members reported operating with either a reduced or standstill budget with 1 in 5 Women's Aid groups having to cut services as a result.

Domestic abuse services are not the only support services that are facing funding cuts that have a direct impact on tackling youth homelessness. Cuts to these services are likely to result in increased youth homelessness and repeat homelessness.

The Scottish Government is currently consulting on the regulations to be included under section 32B of The Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 (inserted by The Housing (Scotland) Act 2010). Local authorities will have a statutory duty to assess the housing support needs of homeless applicants who are unintentionally homeless or threatened with homelessness and are in priority need – they must also ensure housing support services are provided to those in need.

This provides an opportunity for the Government, nationally and locally, to ensure improved practice in the assessment of housing support needs and in the provision of this support for young people across Scotland.

Particular issues in rural areas

There is a lack of services available for young homeless people living in rural areas. Women's Aid groups report the difficulties young women have in accessing a range of services from rural areas – due to lack of services provided locally or as a result of the increasing centralisation of services, lack of transport and transport costs. This includes

⁶ SWA Census Statistics

<http://www.scottishwomensaid.org.uk/assets/files/publications/general/SWA%20Census%20Leaflet%20ARTWORK.pdf>

support services, health services, child contact centres, appointments with homeless services etc

Permanent Housing

There is a well documented lack of social housing across many areas of Scotland and of one bedroom properties for young people. While the private sector can often provide good quality housing in more sought after areas there are concerns that this does not offer long term security. Women's Aid groups have also reported concerns about the suitability of landlords, the poor quality of some private sector accommodation and lack of appropriate support. Concerns have also been raised about the use of rent deposit schemes without the provision of adequate support- as this has meant young women being housed but given insufficient support to enable them to manage practically and emotionally. This often results in them re-presenting as homeless in a short period of time.

Impact of welfare reform

We support the concerns raised in previous submissions to the Committee about the impact of changes brought about by the Welfare Reform Bill on young people. The proposed changes to housing benefit, community care grants and the social fund will impact adversely on housing allocations, restrict move through from temporary accommodation and the ability to buy the basic furnishings to move into a flat.

Changes to housing benefit for supported housing

The proposed changes to housing benefit for supported accommodation set out by the DWP in their consultation at the end of last year also raise serious concerns about the future funding of this type of accommodation. The proposal is to end the "exempt accommodation rule" which currently applies to a wide range of supported accommodation and bring supported housing within the Universal Credit system – and the UC cap. At present the Exempt Accommodation Rule links the additional amount of Housing Benefit to the actual cost of providing, maintaining and managing accommodation for a vulnerable person.

The proposals in the consultation lacked significant detail but as outlined present a real gap between what the DWP proposed to fund and the real costs of providing this type of accommodation. If this proposal goes ahead it will mean that more vulnerable young people will be unable to access supported accommodation – as there is no capacity within the sector to provide existing services with reduced funding. It is unlikely that local authorities facing their own budget cuts and competing priorities will be in a position to meet the shortfall.

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