

Local Government and Communities Committee

Homelessness

Submission from Scottish Women's Aid

Housing Options and Homelessness Prevention

How do you feel housing options and homelessness prevention is working in practice? Are there examples of good practice?

In practice current housing options and homelessness prevention policy fails to prevent homelessness for women and children experiencing domestic abuse. Domestic abuse is a major cause of homelessness in Scotland. In 2015–16 of the 34,662 applications a “dispute within household: violent or abusive” was the reason given for a homeless application by 4,135 applicants. This cause of homelessness is gendered 72% of applications were made by women and women with children made up 36% of applicants. Research has highlighted that these figures significantly underestimate the scale of the problem, as women may not disclose that they are experiencing domestic abuse when making a homeless application. Many women when forced to leave their home initially rely on friends or relatives for a place to stay and do not make a homeless application until later.¹ Domestic abuse is also closely linked with repeat homelessness. Research has shown that families that experience domestic abuse are four times more likely to lose their home due to arrears.²

While a range of policy and legislative measures has led to significant improvements in Scotland to address domestic abuse and has encouraged women to look for support, one of the largest barriers women face when ending a relationship with an abusive partner is where she and in many cases, her children, will live. A Scottish Government review of domestic abuse, housing and homelessness policy and research concluded that;

“The prevention or cessation of domestic abuse in a family context will almost always require the woman to leave that home.”

The findings from our [research project on homelessness as a result of domestic abuse](#), which was led by women with direct experience of these issues, highlighted the lack of housing options or homeless prevention measures that are available for women who are at risk of enforced homelessness due to domestic abuse.

¹ Scotland (2010), *Domestic abuse, housing and homelessness in Scotland: An evidence review*, Scottish Government Communities Analytical Services, Scotland (<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/Doc/328505/0106198.pdf>)

² <http://www.cih.org/resources/PDF/Wales%20Policy/Domestic%20abuse%20and%20housing%20in%20Wales%20factsheet.pdf>

The key findings of this research are:

Women experienced responses from housing options and homelessness systems that were not confident or consistent in providing the housing information and support that they needed, with this being especially poor where women wanted information to support them to remain in their own home.

Only a small number of women were able to remain in their own home, but many of them experienced a lack of control over the situation and continued to feel unsafe. Most women felt they had no choice about leaving their home either because it was unsafe to stay, they were not offered any safe alternatives to leaving or because the homelessness system reinforced the perpetrators control and sense of entitlement to the home. Women felt that the focus on them leaving their home and the lack of any challenge of perpetrators questioned the validity of their experiences and compounded the already significant impact of domestic and / or sexual abuse.

This confirms the findings of our previous research, on the use of [exclusion orders](#) in preventing homelessness, which sets out the difficulties and limitations of these orders in enabling a woman to remain safely in her home. Amongst the reasons for this are women's ineligibility, breaches were unenforced, women unable to access legal advice and legal aid and because homelessness services provide a faster and more straightforward approach for practitioners working in social work, health and housing to domestic abuse.

A large proportion of women that took part in the research (almost half) had experienced repeat homelessness due to domestic abuse. Women often had to move multiple times and experienced cumulative losses in terms of their belongings, social networks and finances, as well as significant negative impacts on their physical and mental health. Multiple moves also impacted negatively on their children's health, wellbeing, social networks and education. In many cases the abuse continued despite women moving and many women felt unsafe in their new home, and community, in the long-term. Moving from temporary to permanent accommodation was often a disempowering process with women feeling they had no control or involvement in decision making.

Most service providers lacked a gendered understanding of domestic abuse. They were also not fully informed about the dynamics of domestic abuse and how these can impact on risk / safety and women's options to stay in or leave a relationship. Some service providers held stereotypical and negative views about women, which many women felt were reflected in their experiences of accessing services. Women felt that many service providers did not recognise their experiences of domestic abuse and respond with compassion, dignity and respect; but instead responded in a way that implied the abuse was their fault, exaggerated or made up or that they were to blame. Many service providers were not confident about responding to women experiencing abuse or clear about what is expected of them, especially with regard to support women to remain in their own home and / or taking action against perpetrators and with regard to supporting women with protected characteristics.

Are there examples of good practice?

While the research was carried out in one area of Scotland, Fife, we know from our work with our members working across different local authority areas that the research clearly reflects current housing options and homelessness practice and women's experiences across Scotland.

What needs to happen to improve the delivery of housing options and homelessness prevention services and the outcomes achieved for service users?

As a result of the research in Fife, Fife Housing Partnership (FHP) together with Fife Violence Against Women Partnership (FVAWP) recognised that significant improvements were required in the way in which FHP and FVAWP partners respond to women and children experiencing domestic and / or sexual abuse who are also at risk of homelessness. This led to the establishment of a working group, including members of the community research team, to develop an improvement plan to address the research findings and recommendations. A comprehensive improvement plan has been developed to be implemented over the next 3 to 5-year years.³

This requires commitment to and investment in joint working involving key strategic and service delivery partners and crucially the involvement of women with direct experience of these issues to develop an integrated and gendered response to preventing women's homelessness.

The improvement plan is gendered, takes a pro-active approach to responding to and preventing women and children's homelessness and sets out joint actions that will be taken against a perpetrator of domestic abuse.

How effective is the relationship between all the relevant agencies, including the health sector, and charities working on homelessness prevention?

Where better responses exist these are largely dependent on relationships with individuals within local authorities or housing associations rather than embedded in policy and practice. Unfortunately these often breakdown when a staff member moves on from their role.

Homelessness continues to be defined primarily as a housing issue which means that all other matters relating to homelessness, such as gender, domestic abuse, social security, health and support needs are seen as secondary to this. This narrow policy focus needs to develop gender sensitive approaches that take account of the diverse and complex situations of women.

What needs to happen to improve the delivery of housing options and homelessness prevention services and the outcomes achieved for service users?

The research report makes 15 detailed recommendations (3 to the Scottish Government and 12 to Fife Council and their public and voluntary sector partners). These are directed towards improving the strategic and operational delivery of services to

³ http://publications.fifedirect.org.uk/c64_PDF-EFCS-100117.pdf (from page 39)

prevent homelessness for women and children experiencing domestic. The recommendations focus both on homelessness prevention and on improving the homelessness response to domestic abuse. (A full list of recommendations is included in appendix 1). Main recommendations include:

- Develop a specific housing options approach for women experiencing domestic or sexual abuse that prevents homelessness and enables women and children to remain in the home;
- Introduce legislation to provide protection for women by placing conditions on perpetrators, including removing perpetrators from households for a period of time, to prevent further harassment or abuse and provide the space and appropriate support for women to consider their options. (As required by the Council of Europe [Convention](#) on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.);
- Develop a proactive housing policy to address domestic and sexual abuse that promotes a zero-tolerance approach to violence against women and strengthens women's rights to remain in the home. This proactive approach should be, included within the tenancy agreement, tenant's handbook, promoted in information leaflets and online. Sets out what actions will be taken against a perpetrator, (in conjunction with other strategic partners where required). Makes effective use of management transfers to support women to make planned moves and avoid homelessness and supports women to transfer the tenancy to her name;
- Review homelessness policy to reduce the impact of homelessness on women and children who are homeless as a result of domestic abuse. This includes;
- Amending the one offer of housing rule to ensure women are housed safely and appropriately for their needs;
- Ensuring women are not allocated housing that continues to put them at risk e.g. in the same area as the perpetrator;
- Providing removal and storage facilities to enable women and children to retain their possessions. Provide assistance to enable children to be able to remain at the same school (travel pass);
- Providing financial advice and assistance to ensure women are not further indebted by the homelessness process;
- Removing the rental charge on two homes when women are moving from temporary to permanent accommodation;
- Ensuring that women are not charged for the damage caused to the property by the perpetrator

What role should private sector housing providers play in preventing and responding to homelessness?

Our members report that women come under pressure from homeless services to accept offers of housing in the private sector. Women's Aid services are also pressurised to support women to take these offers and are seen to be 'unrealistic' and 'obstructive' when supporting women to make their own choices and decisions. The private sector is often too expensive for women, especially those with larger families or unable to meet rent deposit/advance payments. It is seen as insecure and insuffi-

ciently regulated this is particularly important for women and children who have experienced domestic abuse and need time and stability to recover and rebuild their lives.

Temporary Accommodation

What evidence is there of pressure on temporary accommodation in your area? Has this increased in recent years?

Refuges provide an important specialist supported accommodation resource for women and children who are forced into homelessness. There are currently 477 refuge spaces in Scotland, failing to meet the Istanbul Convention recommended ratio of one refuge bed per 10,000 inhabitants.⁴ Our annual Census Day survey found that 46% of women and their children needing refuge were unable to be accommodated due to lack of safe or suitable space.⁵ The need for refuges will continue to remain high as long as women and children are expected to become homeless in order to end a relationship with an abusive partner.

How can homeless people's experiences of temporary accommodation be improved? For example, how can the use of unsuitable accommodation be reduced or the length of time spent in temporary accommodation reduced?

For women who have experienced domestic abuse or other forms of violence against women there needs to be specific provision of safe, specialist supported accommodation. We are aware from what women have told us and our members that temporary accommodation provided by local authorities or in hotels and bed and breakfasts often do not feel safe. Women experience sexual harassment and intimidation when housed in mixed sex temporary accommodation. Women reported feeling re-traumatised by hearing and witnessing domestic abuse. Women also felt 'violated' about male housing staff inspecting their temporary accommodation at times they had no control over.

Do you have concerns about the funding of temporary accommodation? If yes, how should temporary accommodation be funded?

Our [research](#) on the impact of the Local Housing Allowance cap on refuges in Scotland found that Women's Aid groups face cuts of £3.7 million annually in housing benefit that will result in the widespread closure of the refuges that accommodate hundreds of women and children each year. A new model of funding short term supported accommodation is yet to be announced by the DWP. As part of the [consultation](#) process we, together with Women's Aid England and Wales have called for a specific funding model for refuges.

Permanent Accommodation

The shortage of social housing means that women are waiting longer to be permanently rehoused. Our research found women waiting between 3 months to 5 years.

⁴ <http://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/210>

⁵ Scottish Women's Aid Census Day Survey (2016)

They also felt they had very little choice about where they moved to. Some women commented that, as they would only receive one offer from the Council they had no option but to take it. Others mentioned that they were told they had to take what they were given. Women also raised concerns about being offered housing close to where their abuser lived.

The research highlights that moving into a permanent home raised multiple challenges for women, these included being able to furnish the home, isolation and concerns about their safety and security. Given the shortages of social housing it is vital that allocation and management of this scarce resource is managed to sensitively and appropriately respond to women and children's specific needs. This would reduce repeat homelessness and the impact on the health and wellbeing of women and children.

Multiple and Complex Needs

Many of the complex support needs of women who are homeless: mental health issues, drug use and trauma, for example, stem from their experience of violence. Women experiencing domestic abuse are more likely to suffer from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder and are also more likely to self-harm or attempt suicide. PTSD is one of the most commonly diagnosed mental health issues for women who have experienced domestic abuse.⁶

For women and children to recover they need to get the right kind of support at the right time, while some homelessness services may provide women who are homeless with supportive services, they often do not have the tools or resources to deal directly with recent or past trauma, or to support children. In fact, some temporary accommodation conditions create environments that can in themselves be traumatic experiences. Our research, for instance, found that homeless services replicated the power and control women had experienced from their abusive partner. It is therefore very important for homelessness services to embed a gendered policy and practice response and be able to recognize the different experiences of trauma survivors and be equipped or work with specialist agencies to address their specific needs.

Rough Sleeping

Women's homelessness remains largely invisible. Women chose places to sleep where they will not be seen and to conceal their homelessness. When women who are victims of domestic abuse or other forms of violence against women end up on the street, they run a bigger risk of becoming a victim of sexual violence because of their vulnerable position.⁷ A focus on rough sleeping and night shelters are contexts where women are unlikely to be present and therefore not counted.

For example, we recently provided [evidence](#) to the recent Equality and Human Rights Committee into Destitution, Asylum and Insecure Immigration Status in Scotland. Our submission highlighted the destitution of women and their children with no

⁶ Scottish Women's Aid (2010) Information Paper 5: Impact of domestic abuse on women's mental health

⁷ Moss, K. (2015). Homelessness and Victims of Domestic Abuse. Bristol: Policy Press.

recourse to public funds or whose immigration status restricted access to social security including housing benefit. The Committee's report [Hidden Lives](#) highlights that "destitution is largely hidden in plain sight" and that further work is required to identify the scale and nature of destitution in Scotland. Women with insecure immigration status experience specific patterns of abuse such as domestic servitude, restrictions from learning English, or working outside the home that restrict women's agency and often render them invisible. The report highlights that destitution is harmful to those experiencing it. It places individuals in unsafe, dangerous and exploitative situations, including domestic servitude, prostitution, exploitation by organised criminal gangs and abusive relationships.

Other

Housing interventions and homelessness policy responses to women need to be seen in the context of larger social, economic and political processes which engender social constructions of homelessness and which tend to marginalise the issues affecting women.⁸ Women's economically disadvantaged position in the labour market, often working in part time low-paid employment to manage child and other care responsibilities means they are disproportionately dependent on the social housing sector.⁹

Cuts to social security have had a grotesquely disproportionate impact on women, from 2010 to 2020, 86% of net 'savings' raised through cuts to social security and tax credits will come from women's incomes.¹⁰ Increased risk of poverty is a key structural factor which undermines the capacity of women to establish and maintain independent homes and directly contributes to an increased vulnerability to homelessness.

This review of current policy on homelessness prevention in Scotland provides an opportunity to understand and effectively address women's experiences of homelessness and avoid replicating ungendered policies which will continue to fail to prevent women and children's homelessness.

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⁸ <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/Doc/328505/0106198.pdf>

⁹ Scottish Household Survey 2010

¹⁰ Women's Budget Group (2016) The impact on women of the 2016 Budget: Women paying for the Chancellor's tax cuts

Scottish Women's Aid is the lead organisation in Scotland working towards the prevention of domestic abuse and plays a vital role in campaigning and lobbying for effective responses to domestic abuse.

Our Women's Aid network of 36 members, working across Scotland from Shetland to the Borders, provide 487 refuge spaces for women and children experiencing domestic abuse.¹ Our response is informed by the views of our members.

Appendix 1

Change, Justice, Fairness: Recommendations

Scottish Government should:

1. Develop a specific housing options approach for women experiencing domestic or sexual abuse that prevents homelessness and enables women and children to remain in the home; that includes the recommendations detailed below in this report.
2. Introduce legislation to provide protection for women by placing conditions on perpetrators, including removing perpetrators from households for a period of time, to prevent further harassment or abuse and provide the space and appropriate support for women to consider their options. (E.g. Domestic Violence Protection Orders in England and Eviction and Barring notices in other European countries).
3. Ensure women are able to easily access free legal services to support their ability to remain in their home and to obtain relevant protective orders.

Fife Council with their public and voluntary sector partners should:

4. Review Fife Housing Register Gender Based Violence Protocol to develop a gendered framework for preventing homelessness and addressing the housing needs of women and their children experiencing domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women. The protocol should be based on a clear understanding of and response to violence against women as an equalities and human rights issue, linked to relevant policy and legislation. (Equally Safe, Public Sector Equality Duty etc.). It should set out the actions FHR partners will take to support a woman to remain in her home or move to another tenancy, including the provision of additional security measures, specialist support and detail what actions will be taken against a perpetrator.
5. Develop a proactive housing policy to address domestic and sexual abuse that promotes a zero-tolerance approach to violence against women and strengthens women's rights to remain in the home. This proactive approach should be:
 - included within the tenancy agreement, tenant's handbook, promoted in information leaflets and online

- set out what actions will be taken against a perpetrator, (in conjunction with other strategic partners where required).
 - make effective use of management transfers to support women to make planned moves and avoid homelessness
 - support women to transfer the tenancy to her name
6. Review homelessness policy to reduce the impact of homelessness on women and children who are homeless as a result of domestic abuse by:
 - amending the one offer of housing rule to ensure women are housed safely and appropriately for their needs
 - develop specific allocations guidance to ensure women are not allocated housing that continues to put them at risk e.g. in the same area as the perpetrator
 - providing removal and storage facilities to enable women and children to retain their possessions
 - providing assistance to enable children to be able to remain at the same school (travel pass)
 - providing financial advice and assistance to ensure women are not further indebted by the homelessness process
 - removing the rental charge on two homes when women are moving from temporary to permanent accommodation
 - ensuring that women are not charged for the damage caused to the property by the perpetrator
 7. Provide an appropriate and sensitive service to women to ensure their privacy and confidentiality and reduce the risk of further harm by; developing customer service systems that do not require women to disclose or discuss the reason for their visit in public areas, promotes the availability of private interview rooms to women and the option to request to meet with a female member of staff.
 8. Ensure women receive appropriate support and advice by providing wrap-around support and advice throughout the process and beyond, with easy access to re-engage with support services as circumstances change.
 9. Develop specific guidance and clear pathways that enable staff to implement policy and practice consistently and with confidence. Provide staff with a clear structure of what action to take; that prompts them to ask appropriate questions and follow agreed assessment and referral processes.
 10. Develop specialist domestic abuse housing officers within local area offices with responsibility for the delivery of policy, provision of advice and support for staff and authority to make decisions in relation to transfers, allocations and tenancy support.
 11. Implement mandatory training on domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women delivered by experienced trainers in this field, this should include specific training:

- on domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women, to ensure frontline, customer service, housing and homelessness staff have a good understanding of domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women, are able to identify women at risk and to respond confidently and appropriately;
 - on domestic and sexual abuse and the diverse and overlapping needs of women in relation to disability, religion, race, and age, sexual orientation to ensure frontline staff understand the particular barriers different women face when accessing services;
 - for managers on domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women, that outlines their responsibility for the delivery of an appropriate service response and how to support their staff team with any impact this work may have on them;
 - for elected members and senior management on domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women, that outlines their responsibility for the delivery of strategy and services for women and children, linked to Equally Safe strategy and the Public Service Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010).
12. Develop collaborative working arrangements with a range of organisations to provide advice and support that meets the needs of women and children, this should include;
- clear systems for referring women to relevant agencies that go beyond signposting and support women's engagement with that service;
 - training for frontline staff on services provided by relevant agencies, contact arrangements and how to supportively engage women with these services.
13. Develop specific information for women who are experiencing domestic or sexual abuse in leaflet and online formats that details their housing options, relevant sources of support, the provision of interpreting services, private interview rooms etc.
14. Provide accessible interpretation and translation services in accordance with national standards and good practice guidelines.
15. Develop an action plan and evaluation system to implement these recommendations within clear timescales; that ensures the active involvement of women with direct experience of these services within this process.