



The provision of accommodation and support for households experiencing domestic violence in England

Introduction

This research was commissioned by DETR¹ in 1998, with the Women's Unit² and the Department of Health. It aimed to explore how local housing authorities catered for the accommodation and support needs of women and their children who had been accepted as homeless due to domestic violence, and the role of local refuge groups in meeting these needs.

Local housing authorities have a duty under the Housing Act 1996, to secure suitable accommodation for households experiencing domestic violence who are unable to remain in the family home and who are assessed as being unintentionally homeless and in priority need.

The Housing Act 1996 defines domestic violence as '*violence from a person with whom he is associated, or threats of violence from such a person which are likely to be carried out.*' Domestic violence as defined by the Act includes a range of different types of relationship, but this research focused on domestic violence and its consequences when they occur between women and their current or former male partners.

Local housing authorities also have the power to assist existing local authority tenants, and applicants, into alternative accommodation through the housing register, as discussed in the Housing and Relationship Guidance issued by DETR in 1999³.

¹ Now the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

² Now the Women and Equality Unit

³ DETR (1999) *Relationship Breakdown: A guide for Social Landlords*

Key findings

- Women sought help from a wide variety of sources including the police, local authorities, refuge groups, voluntary organisations and friends and relatives.
- At the end of March 1999, nine out of ten local authorities were using a range of temporary accommodation for homeless households who needed to leave their home because of domestic violence. Women's refuges accommodated around 15% of households who had been accepted as homeless by local housing authorities.
- In 1998 there were 409 refuge properties in England, with approximately 7,269 bed-spaces. Refuges were located in 60% of local housing authority areas. Over a one-year period, refuges accommodated an estimated 19,910 women and 28,524 children.
- Housing departments reported that many different types of support were available to households experiencing domestic violence in temporary accommodation, although these are more often available to women and children in refuges than those in other types of temporary accommodation.
- The vast majority of local housing authorities had specific policies for housing register or transfer applicants who were experiencing domestic violence. More than a third of authorities reported problems in meeting the permanent accommodation needs of households experiencing domestic violence.
- Although either outreach or resettlement support was available in three quarters of local authorities, many authorities reported problems with addressing the specific support needs of households experiencing domestic violence.
- More than four fifths of refuge groups provided outreach services available to all women experiencing domestic violence (not just ex-residents of the refuge). 95% of refuge groups provided resettlement services.
- Most women who had remained in their own homes felt they had made the right decision, but experienced specific problems such as their ex-partners' rent arrears, and the ineffectiveness of injunctions. Few housing departments had attempted to use domestic violence as a ground for evicting the violent partner, and even less had sought possession from perpetrators as a breach of the tenancy.

THE ACCOMMODATION AND SUPPORT NEEDS OF HOUSEHOLDS EXPERIENCING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The accommodation and support needs of individual women experiencing domestic violence vary according to factors including the risk of further violence – which determines whether or not it is safe to remain in the current home. Other factors are the presence of children and child protection issues, the woman's wishes, and any additional support needs she may have. Although women may often need temporary accommodation as either a respite from the violence, or a step towards a permanent move away from the violent relationship, women's first contact with support services is often whilst they are still in the violent relationship.

The range of support needed by households experiencing domestic violence includes advice, information, advocacy and emotional support, which may be provided by help-lines, local drop-in centres, staff on-site in temporary accommodation, or staff who visit households in temporary accommodation – 'outreach' services. Women may also need support to live independently having left the family home permanently, and support staff may visit to provide resettlement services.

SEEKING HELP

Housing and social services are the local authority departments from whom households experiencing domestic violence seek most help. In all of the case study authorities, households requiring emergency accommodation could contact services 24 hours a day. In some cases, call centres were linked directly to the authority's temporary accommodation, or were provided by social services emergency duty teams.

The initial advice that respondents receive, at the point of leaving a violent partner, is often a crucial determinant of how tolerable the period following leaving a violent situation is. Women and refuge staff interviewed reported a range of responses from local authorities, although most were fairly satisfied with the housing department staff that they dealt with.

The advice about accommodation that women experiencing domestic violence were given varied from one local authority to another. In some areas women were encouraged to remain in the family home while in others it was the expectation that they would leave.

Some authorities took practical steps to make it possible for women placed in temporary accommodation to return home at some point if they wished, including helping to secure the original property, removing the perpetrator, and paying Housing Benefit both on the original property and on temporary accommodation. However, the payment of Housing Benefit on both properties was not always presented as an option, and as a result, some women had given up their existing tenancy before being able to consider their options.

Nearly all of the refuge groups in the national survey had a public telephone number, and most were available on a 24-hour basis. Of calls received during 1997/98, refuge groups were able to receive 30% of the women referred to them for accommodation, whilst around half of all requests for accommodation were referred elsewhere because there was no room in the refuges.

Refuge groups run a number of telephone help-lines, including 2 national help-lines. During 1997/98, refuge groups received 78,000 telephone calls from or on behalf of women experiencing domestic violence. Two fifths of calls requested refuge accommodation, whilst the rest sought advice and information.

HOMELESSNESS AND TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION FOR HOUSEHOLDS EXPERIENCING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Acceptances by London boroughs account for nearly half of households accepted as homeless due to domestic violence, and the South East a further fifth. Just under a third of households homeless due to domestic violence and who were being accommodated in temporary housing were living in local authority or housing association accommodation or accommodation leased by them, and a further quarter were staying with friends or relatives. Refuges accommodated 15% of homeless households, while a further 13% were in hostels, and 6% were in Bed and Breakfast accommodation.

Refuges accommodate not only households accepted as homeless by local authorities, but also households awaiting a decision on their homelessness, and those who have not applied.

Of the estimated 2,256 women resident in refuges at the end of February 2000, almost three-quarters had children or were pregnant. Almost half of children resident were under five years old. Although refuges were located in 60% of local authority areas, metropolitan authorities, London boroughs and unitary

authorities were more likely than district councils to have refuge places in their area.

Specialist temporary accommodation for households experiencing domestic violence – such as for women from particular ethnic groups and women with special support needs – was available in some local authorities, and was provided mainly by refuge groups.

Accommodation for women from particular ethnic groups was concentrated in a few regions. Many local authorities reported a lack of accommodation to meet the needs of specific groups of households experiencing domestic violence, in particular for women with mental health problems, with physical disabilities, and with learning disabilities.

Nearly two thirds of women accommodated in refuges during 1997/98 were from local or neighbouring areas. More than a fifth of the women who left refuges during 1997/98 were re-housed by a local authority or registered social landlord (RSL), and at least a fifth were known to have returned home to their partner. The length of stay for women in London and the South East tended to be longer than for those living elsewhere, reflecting greater pressures on housing stock.

SUPPORT FOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

Support varied according to the type of temporary accommodation used. Virtually all refuge groups provided a core set of support services to their residents, including one to one support, advocacy, counselling, as well as benefits and housing advice. Although available, support in hostels or Bed and Breakfast accommodation tended to be limited more to benefits and basic legal advice, and was not always easy to access. Only a small number of respondents to the survey of users had received support while living in Bed and Breakfast accommodation. Two fifths of housing departments recognised that they experienced problems in addressing the support needs of households in temporary accommodation other than refuges, and more than 40% of authorities identified problems addressing the support needs of people from specific ethnic groups, people with physical disabilities, mental health problems and learning disabilities. These problems were reported consistently across most regions.

Children who have lived in violent households are often distressed by their experiences of domestic violence, and need specialist support. Many children in refuges were receiving counselling or emotional support, and refuges were far more likely to have

children's services than other forms of temporary accommodation. Respondents in other types of temporary accommodation reported difficulties accessing support services for their children.

RE-HOUSING

Re-housing is a major concern for households who have to leave their homes due to domestic violence. Over four fifths of local authorities had specific policies for re-housing households experiencing domestic violence who were on the Housing Register, or for existing tenants who had applied for a transfer. A fifth of housing departments treated new applicants that had experienced domestic violence as a priority group, and a further 15% awarded additional points on grounds of domestic violence. While many authorities experienced problems in meeting the permanent accommodation needs of households experiencing domestic violence, this varied regionally, but was highest in London, with 82% of authorities reporting such problems.

Respondents who had been re-housed were asked their views about their new home. The main issues were related to the size of the accommodation and proximity to local amenities. However, for several respondents, safety and security were emphasised, either because there was particularly good provision, or because there had been problems. Women were also critical about the length of time they had had to wait for re-housing.

OUTREACH AND RESETTLEMENT SERVICES

Although three quarters of local authorities reported that outreach services for households experiencing domestic violence were available in their area, 37% of local authorities stated that there was a problem addressing the outreach needs of households experiencing domestic violence. Most refuge groups provided outreach services. A quarter of the 68 outreach projects run by refuge groups in England were projects for specific groups of women, including African Caribbean women, and black and Asian women. Respondents in the users' survey highly valued the outreach services that were available.

Professionals interviewed in the case study areas stressed the difficulties faced by many women when they move on to independent accommodation having spent time in temporary accommodation, or having moved directly away from their former home. Resettlement services were both important and highly valued by households who had experienced domestic violence, and were available in over six out of ten authorities for households who have been re-housed as a result of domestic violence. However, there was

variation in the extent to which resettlement support was available in local areas, and a substantial number of authorities reported difficulties addressing resettlement needs. Most of the respondents to the users' survey indicated that they had received only limited resettlement support, although women leaving refuges were more likely to receive this help.

WOMEN WHO CHOOSE TO REMAIN IN THEIR OWN HOMES

For some households experiencing domestic violence, remaining in their own homes may be preferable, provided they are not at risk of further violence, and appropriate support is available. There was variation in the extent to which security measures such as alarms were made available to women wishing to remain in their current homes. For many women who had used injunctions, these had not proved effective in keeping ex-partners away from their homes.

Although almost half of housing departments said they informed tenants of the risk of eviction for perpetrators of domestic violence, only 5% of authorities had sought possession on the grounds of domestic violence using section 145 of the Housing Act 1996. Even fewer had sought possession from perpetrators by using evidence of domestic violence as a breach of their tenancy agreement.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The research study collected information about the accommodation and support services provided by refuge groups affiliated to the Women's Aid Federation as well as accommodation and support secured by local housing authorities for households they had accepted as being statutorily homeless due to domestic violence. The research also considered how well these services met the needs of households experiencing domestic violence, and the objectives of statutory agencies with responsibilities to these households.

As well as national surveys of local authority departments, case studies were carried out in ten areas, involving interviews with officers in local authority housing and social services departments, staff of women's refuges, domestic violence coordinators, health workers dealing with domestic violence, and the police. In addition, 60 in-depth interviews were held with households who had experienced domestic violence and had used accommodation or support services. Four national surveys of refuge groups were also conducted. The research took place between 1998-2000.

Further Information

Further information is available in the full housing research report *The provision of accommodation and support for households experiencing domestic violence in England* by Debra Levison and Doreen Kenny, ISBN 1-85112-607-4, available from:

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www.housing@odpm.gov.uk/information/domestic
together with additional information on the research methodology

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