

Domestic violence and housing: Cross Party Housing Group briefing

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Introduction

A robust response to the housing needs of survivors of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) is essential for safety, wellbeing and recovery. The intersection between housing and VAWDASV cannot be underestimated. Too often, the biggest barrier for a survivor leaving an abusive situation, having the space to recover from sexual violence, exit sexually exploitative situations or exit the streets or unstable housing is a lack of an appropriate, secure home. Alongside specialist refuge provision, housing and homelessness services are central in the coordinated community response to VAWDASV, a model which places responsibility with all agencies involved with a survivor and her children, to work together to safeguard her and the children and hold the perpetrator to account. Without the availability of a safe, secure home, recovery is limited at best.

This briefing from Welsh Women's Aid and Shelter Cymru highlights three areas where we feel a joined-up response from the housing sector, the specialist VAWDASV sector and Welsh Government is needed to improve outcomes for some of the most vulnerable and under supported survivors of gender-based violence.

Sexual violence and priority need

Currently in Wales domestic abuse is a stand-alone priority need for housing. This is particularly important for single women who may not meet the priority need test in other ways. However, survivors of other forms of VAWDASV in Wales are not receiving the same support when they experience sexual violence separately from domestic abuse.

The Welsh Government Code of Guidance for homelessness states the following; *'when working with victims of sexual or violent offenders, where the victim previously resided with the perpetrator, allocation processes should take account of the risk to the victim in continuing to reside in an address known to both the perpetrator and the family of the perpetrator. Reallocation of accommodation should be considered in all such instances.'*

Our concern in this reference is, 'victim previously resided with' which would exclude a lot of survivors of sexual violence and exploitation from support.

Welsh Women's Aid members have talked about sexual violence victims and those exploited through the sex industry as unfairly excluded from accommodation, and that while survivors may have multiple support needs, if their presenting issue is sexual violence, it is not treated as priority and they are not considered for rehousing.

While the vulnerability test can be applied for women exploited through the sex industry, we are concerned this can be discretionary and inconsistent with decisions impacted by unconscious bias about women 'choosing' to work in the sex industry. Women exploited through the sex industry experience rape and sexual assault consistently. Arguably each encounter is in fact sexual violence because of this exploitation. The dynamics of the relationship between exploited women and their

pimps can display similar traits to domestically abusive relationships; where women are financially controlled by the pimp, who is abusive and controlling (and may well be a 'boyfriend' as well). It is important for agencies working in a housing management capacity to understand the intersection between financial and sexual exploitation; we are aware of cases of women who are rehoused and then evicted due to rent arrears caused by financial exploitation. As with domestic abuse, this cohort of women are not always in charge of their finances.

Welsh Women's Aid members have highlighted examples of women who have experienced sexual violence and a poor response from housing:

- A rape victim whose attacker was a neighbour. After he was released on bail he returned to his house opposite the victim. Safe accommodation could not be accessed as she was not fleeing domestic abuse
- A woman seeking alternative housing as her husband was being investigated for having indecent images of children on his laptop. The woman wanted a safe place to be able to access ISVA support and begin to come to terms with what was happening to her family
- A woman aged 19 who had been sexually assaulted and groomed as a child within her local community was looking for refuge as he had been released back into a small rural community
- A woman who had been raped was evicted from temporary accommodation because of rent arrears. When this was challenged with the help of her support worker, due to the small amount owed, she was told the council no longer had a duty to accommodate because of intentionality and 'priority need issues'.

What is clear from these findings is that survivors of sexual violence are not receiving the same response as survivors of domestic abuse. We therefore call on Welsh Government to widen priority need to all survivors of VAWDASV in its current review of priority need.

Dynamics of gender-based violence in the rough sleeping population

Projects in the UK working with women experiencing gender-based violence, homelessness and multiple disadvantage have found they are often falling through the gaps in services, particularly between homelessness and women's support services. These projects have found that this cohort of women are impacted by trauma and complex PTSD from consistent experiences of violence and abuse from multiple perpetrators across the life course¹.

Historically, homelessness services have been designed for men with mixed hostels and day centres not feeling like 'safe spaces' for women. In addition, women's services often lack capacity and resources to provide the intensive support needed for women with multiple support needs. This leaves women experiencing multiple disadvantages who are homeless with very few women-specific safe options.

While working with women who are sleeping rough Shelter Cymru has seen examples where their transient and 'chaotic' lifestyles can distract and mask the presence of DA and sexual exploitation. These support needs are often difficult to address due to the pressure on victims of trying to manage other pressing issues such as housing, finances and health issues. However, evidence shows that

¹ <https://weareagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Hidden-Hurt-full-report1.pdf>

women sleeping rough are at an increased risk of experiencing violence and abuse. Due to them already being a marginalised group the potential for this abuse to be noticed by professionals and opportunities for women to report it are limited.

Domestic abuse and social housing

In a previous report² Shelter Cymru highlighted a case in which a young person experiencing domestic abuse was denied a tenancy because the providers felt that as there was abuse the risk was too high. Unfortunately, Shelter Cymru casework suggests that this is not a unique example. They frequently find survivors of domestic abuse face multiple difficulties when applying for and trying to maintain a tenancy within social housing. They have examples of people being placed in to lower 'bands' on housing registers meaning they are less likely to be housed rapidly, this is often due to a misunderstanding or underestimation of the level of risk faced by victims. They also see cases in which people are threatened with eviction for rent arrears, even when there is evidence of domestic abuse and particularly financial abuse.

It is vital that housing providers recognise the important role they play in providing much needed stability and safety for people experiencing domestic abuse. As social housing is managed and support is readily available and providers are experienced in working with partners such as the police, it can be a safe place for a survivor to be, even while they are still with the abusive partner. The ability to ensure there is a marker on the property, target harden quickly and obtain an exclusion order means that social landlords can often work in a way which prevents the household from becoming physically homeless. These are things that are difficult or even impossible to implement if someone is living in private rented accommodation or navigating through the homelessness system.

Asks and recommendations

- Priority need to include all forms of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence
- Local authorities should ensure that pathways into women only/ emergency/temporary accommodation exist and are utilised
- Ask and Act training must be available for providers of emergency accommodation
- Social landlords to ensure allocations are open and accessible to survivors of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence

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² <https://sheltercymru.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Trapped-on-the-Streets-Full-Report.pdf>

