

Headline Report from

Domestic Abuse and Social Housing: How can social landlords better support families dealing with domestic abuse?

26th and 27th September 2022, Trafford Hall

On the 26th and 27th September the Housing Plus Academy organised a think tank, attended by 30 participants from housing associations, charities, and support organisations to explore how they can work more effectively together to support victims of abuse.

A. Who does domestic abuse affect?

People from all walks of life can experience domestic abuse, it is a problem which is often hidden, and people feel ashamed to come forward for help, as it is often difficult to talk about it, so it can be overlooked. Educating both staff and victims can help identify abuse and encourage people to come forward for help. The COVID pandemic and subsequent cost of living crisis have increased rates of domestic abuse.

Children are victims in their own right and it is important they receive direct support; this is recognised in the new Domestic Abuse Bill. People often try and hide abuse from their children and aren't aware of how much they are impacted. Children can keep the impact hidden for years. It can affect girls and boys differently, so support should be adapted accordingly.

Centre 56¹ run a specialist children's support service, which has a nursery and after school care. They aim to create a fun environment, which feels like any other children's group. They find that working with children can help engage families who might otherwise be resistant to seeking support.

B. How does domestic abuse affect the victims and how should they be supported?

Abuse can take many forms. While focus is often on physical abuse, mental abuse can be just as damaging, and harder to escape from. There are often cultural differences which are important to understand in helping to identify abuse in how abuse happens.

Coming forward to ask for support can be terrifying for victims. They need to feel reassured that whoever they disclose the information to, will help them access the right support and not make the situation worse. Sometimes people are threatened with having their children taken away. This can stop people asking for support and may not address the root cause of the problem.

Support for domestic abuse needs to go further than simply removing the victim from a dangerous environment. Help needs to be long term and address the mental impact of suffering abuse. Living in a high stress environment for a long period of time can have long term impacts physically and mentally. Flexible support needs to be available when people feel ready and at a pace that matches the needs of the victim.

¹ Centre 56- Domestic Abuse Charity based in Liverpool, providing support for children and their families. It is part of the Regenda Housing Group- <https://centre56.org.uk/>

Many support schemes offer a set number of sessions which doesn't allow victims enough time to work through their problems. Different life events such as having children can trigger abuse and it is important that support is available when this happens.

Victims of domestic abuse are often moved away from their local area, losing their local connections and support networks. This was made worse over COVID when it became harder to go out and meet new people. Fear of being forced to move can prevent people from coming forward to ask for help.

Bolton at Home find that the majority of victims want to stay in their homes and they work to ensure this can happen, they also have two specialist "perpetrator officers" who help re-house the perpetrators away from victims, thus avoiding having to re-house victims.

For services to be effective it is essential they are trauma informed and person-led. This means that the service offered must be victim-focused and gently supportive.

Bolton at Home have a "Victims Voice Facilitator" who talks to past and present victims and survivors about how they could be best supported and presents these findings to the board. Jane's House, a refuge owned by Safenet² set up in memory of a women who was killed by her partner, spoke to Jane's family and victims of domestic abuse about how they thought the refuge should look to ensure people are as comfortable as possible.

Clarion run "Life Swap" sessions where victims of domestic abuse will come and talk to staff. They find it can be more effective than more formal training in helping staff understand the needs of victims.

C. How can social landlords and support organisations help

Social Landlords have an important role to play in both identifying and supporting victims, through their own services and working with other organisations.

Housing Associations have many roles to play in helping victims of domestic abuse, firstly in helping to identify victims. Both Bolton at Home and Calico have trained all their in house staff to spot the signs of domestic abuse. Bolton at Home's "Eyes Wide Open Campaign" trained staff at all levels to spot the signs which created a big increase in referrals.

The responsibility for identifying victims spreads beyond housing associations, it needs to be everyone's problem if we are going to solve it. Trafford Domestic Abuse Service ran a programme to train up hairdressers to spot the signs and refer people on for support. Hairdressers have close contact with customers and people can sometimes disclose information during a hairdressers session.

Housing Associations also need to make it easy for victims to come forward and ask for support by providing a clear reporting process. Bolton at Home have domestic abuse advisers located in their Ucan centres-local neighbourhood centres where residents can come for support across a range of issues, as well as offering activities and training. They find this works well as other people won't know why they are coming for advice.

² Safenet- Domestic Abuse support charity based in the North West of England, providing a range of services including refugees and specialists children services. It is part of Calico Housing Association- <https://safenet.org.uk/our-services/>

Staff from housing associations and support organisations need to be given authority to support victims in the best way they can. To do this they need to be in a stable mental state; secondary trauma, in other words trauma resulting from dealing with disturbing cases of abuse, can have a big impact on people, so staff need to feel supported and have a space where they can talk over what they have heard about from clients and receive additional support themselves if necessary.

The Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance's (DAHA) aims to improve the housing sectors response to domestic abuse through the adoption of a certain set of standards and an accreditation process. The DAHA accreditation process looks at all areas of the organisation, and all the departments involved are evaluated considered in the accreditation process. Once a housing association receives accreditation, it has to prove it is maintaining the standard to continue being accredited.

As part of the process of becoming accredited, Bolton at Home ran a training day for all staff, during this day they identified members of their own staff who were experiencing domestic abuse. Staff can themselves be victims of abuse and it is crucial to ensure they are properly supported. Bolton at Home now has a specialist officer to support staff who are suffering abuse.

D. How can partnership working help improve services

Partnership working is crucial to delivering effective services across a local area. It helps create a joined-up approach so that people get the right support. Partnership working helps to ensure organisations are working together rather than disconnected and in competition with each other. It also helps victims as it means that they don't have to repeat their story to multiple different organisations.

For partnerships to be successful, partner organisations must have a shared ethos and aims. Organisations have different strengths. Housing Associations are often the bigger organisations in a partnership, and they should be careful to not take over from smaller organisations nor assume they can provide the best support or the right answers.

Talk Listen Change³ lead the Stockport Domestic Abuse Service, a partnership between different local organisations including Age UK and Stockport Homes that provide services to support victims.

Solace Women's Aid⁴ have found co-location of services to be very helpful. Having domestic abuse specialists within housing teams can be a very effective way of identifying and supporting victims.

Trafford Domestic Abuse Service funds experts to sit within the homeless service, where they will help support victims in re-housing, and once they have been housed.

E. Funding domestic abuse support services

Funding for stand-alone projects is often insufficient and short term, preventing completion and evaluation of projects. Longer term more stable funding keeps staff working long term which helps build relationships with victims.

³ Talk Listen Change- Is a Manchester based relationship support organisation helping people form safe, healthy and happy relationships. They offer a range of services including specialist perpetrator programmes- <https://talklistenchange.org.uk/>

⁴ Solace Women's Aid- Is a London based women's support charity they offer counselling services and secure accommodation for women escaping abuse- <https://www.solacewomensaid.org/>

Some domestic abuse organisations such as Safenet and Centre 56 have opted to become part of housing associations, which can help provide security. Safenet is now part of Calico and Centre 56 is part of Regenda. Housing Associations can talk to their local housing benefits team to apply for an “Intensive Housing Management Charge” to be added to victims housing benefit which can help fund support services. This helps specialist services to survive.

F. How best to prevent domestic abuse

To stop domestic abuse, we need to address the root causes of the problem. People need to feel able to challenge negative behaviour and language before it escalates. The relationship charity, Talk Listen Change, runs a “perpetrator programme” which helps abusers understand and challenge their own behaviour, so that they don’t go on and abuse another victim. It is important that perpetrators are helped to recognise responsibility for their actions while at the same time addressing why they abuse and giving them an opportunity to reform their behaviour. This support for perpetrators needs to be long term as it takes a long time to change someone’s behaviour.

The language around abuse is crucial to how we think about it. There is an argument that the word “domestic”, weakens the solutions as it suggests abuse only takes place in the home, which is often not true. Referring to a couple having a “domestic” can minimise the problem it can sound “cosy” and “homely”.

When people talk about domestic abuse, blame is sometimes placed on the victim, raising the question “Why they don’t just leave” or placing judgement on people who turn to drink or alcohol to help them cope. Education is needed to help challenge these views, which can often stop people coming forward for help.

G. The shortage of safer and more suitable housing

Safe, good quality housing is central to helping victims rebuild their lives. 70% of the women Solace support are in housing need. Too often victims are offered poor quality accommodation which doesn’t suit their and needs that they feel pressured into accepting. Fear of being homeless or being placed in unsuitable quality accommodation can prevent victims coming forward for support. Increasingly organisations have to rely on the private rented sector to house victims. The available accommodation is often in a category know as “exempt accommodation”, which does not always meet normal standards.

Housing associations need to work closely with support organisations to help ensure that victims are suitably housed. Secure refuges are often initially used to house victims, and can be useful as they help to provide peer-to-peer support. Trafford Domestic Abuse Service⁵ are currently setting up a refuge specifically for men who have suffered domestic abuse after receiving feedback that they would benefit from peer-to-peer support.

However, secure refuges do not meet the needs of all victims, and it is important that other housing options are available. It is also important for there to be appropriate, well supported move on accommodation. Solace Women’s Aid run a move-on accommodation project in partnership with 4

⁵ Trafford Domestic Abuse Service (TDAS)- Is a Manchester based domestic abuse support organisation they offer a range of services including accommodation and community outreach services- <https://www.tdas.org.uk/>

housing associations across London, the housing associations provide the accommodation while Solace provides the additional support. Victims are housed for 2 years and are then supported to find other accommodation in the local area. Solace finds that by providing stable high-quality accommodation it allows victims the head space to address other pressing needs such as work and training. So far, the project had a 100% tenancy sustainment rate.

When providing housing for victims it is essential that it feels like a “home”, victims must feel safe and be given the opportunity to put their own touch on the accommodation, for example picking paint colours and putting up their own decorations.

Conclusion

Tackling domestic abuse is not the responsibility of one team or specialist service. All organisations concerned with this problem need to work together to educate people to understand and identify abusive behaviour. Victims need to receive access to safe and secure housing, and long-term trauma informed support. Work is also needed with perpetrators to address the root causes of the problem. It is only through working in partnership that we will address the problems of domestic abuse in a rounded way, and ensure victims are properly supported.

Messages to Government and key actors

At the end of the Think Tank we asked participants to propose the key changes government and leading organisations could make to support victims of domestic abuse. The key messages are below:

- Secure funding for domestic abuse services should be in place to allow the long term development and provision of services. Services should not just address an immediate crisis, but also offer long-term support that people can access when they need it.
- There needs to be more investment in gender specific high-quality accommodation for people suffering abuse.
- Supporting early intervention work with couples can stop the situation escalating into domestic abuse.
- Supporting work with the perpetrators as well as the victims will help to stop people re-offending.
- Equality and diversity needs to be imbedded in service planning and delivery, and services need to be adapted so they are accessible to everyone.
- Education in schools about what a healthy relationship looks like would help to protect young people. Too many children do not have a good example at home and this can lead them in to entering an abusive relationship later in life.