



REDUCING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ...WHAT WORKS? ACCOMMODATION PROVISION

Crime Reduction Research Series
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Introduction

Housing services often have a central role to play in the safety of people experiencing domestic violence. The provision of appropriate services to people in their own home is important because leaving is usually a last resort for most people experiencing domestic violence.

Most women escaping domestic violence and seeking help from statutory bodies have limited financial resources and many therefore turn to the social rented sector to provide them with somewhere else to live (either local authority or registered social landlord (RSL)).

Local housing authorities have specific legal duties towards homeless people and those threatened with homelessness under the 1996 Housing Act. Detailed information on implementing this legislation is contained in a code of guidance produced by the DETR¹. Local authorities are obliged by law to give 'reasonable preference' to certain prescribed categories of people on their housing register, and people fleeing domestic violence may fall into one or more of these. Additional preference may be offered to households with a particular need for settled accommodation on medical or welfare grounds.

Housing policies and procedures for people experiencing domestic violence can contribute to crime reduction and prevention, primarily by providing effective and appropriate advice, support and accommodation. Where this is lacking, people are more likely to remain in a violent situation or – where they have escaped – to return to their violent partner.

There are currently large information gaps in the area of domestic violence and housing. Most written material is about refuge services, even though many people experiencing domestic violence remain in their own

homes, spend periods in other forms of temporary accommodation or are rehoused without ever having stayed in a refuge.

The DETR/DH²/WU³ are currently undertaking a study that will fill some of the information gaps. It will provide information about the current provision of accommodation and support services for households accepted as homeless by local housing authorities. It will:

- produce comprehensive figures on the number of households made homeless through domestic violence that are living in different types of temporary accommodation;
- measure user satisfaction levels for different forms of temporary accommodation;
- explore the costs and benefits of these different accommodation types; and
- highlight good practice in local authorities.

Key findings

Staying at home

Leaving the family home is usually a last resort for people experiencing domestic violence. It is possible that some who do leave would have stayed if improvements to the security of their current home had been made, and measures had been available to improve their personal safety. Some local authorities and other agencies operate such schemes for households experiencing domestic violence. Examples include personal alarms (usually linked to the police),

¹ Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

² Department of Health.

³ Women's Unit.

mobile phones, closed-circuit television, prioritising repairs and providing door chains, extra locks and external security lighting. These types of initiatives are relatively cheap when compared with the costs of providing someone with alternative accommodation or the costs of repeated violent attacks. However, there is a lack of evidence about the effectiveness of such measures.

Good practice

The DETR/DH/WU published 'Relationship Breakdown: A guide for Social Landlords' in 1998. This provides guidance for social landlords to assist with the development of policies to deal with people applying for rehousing, or made homeless, following relationship breakdown. Issues covered include housing management issues, how social landlords and other organisations can work together, legal information, policy options and examples of good practice amongst social landlords.

Many local authorities have produced policy and procedure guidance on domestic violence for housing staff. In addition, some local authorities provide guidance for conducting interviews, and training for housing officers in domestic violence issues. Examples of good practice guidance provided for housing officers in this area include:

- ensuring the safety of the person who is fleeing domestic violence;
- responding sympathetically to the applicant;
- believing the applicant and never asking for proof of violence;
- being non-judgemental; and
- maintaining confidentiality.

Some local authorities give additional priority to households on the housing register experiencing domestic violence (often by awarding extra points). Some local authorities and RSLs have points schemes or operate management transfer arrangements for existing tenants that give priority to people experiencing domestic violence.

Local authority practice and policy are being examined as part of the current DETR/DH/WU study. The study will produce a good practice guide for local authorities on the range of options for addressing the accommodation and support needs of households experiencing domestic violence. It will also examine the effects of the allocations provisions of the 1996 Act, and any local authority policies relating to it, on households experiencing domestic violence.

Service Provision

Prior to 1996, a number of studies found some problems with the way that the homelessness legislation was being applied to people experiencing domestic violence, and also with service delivery. These

studies were undertaken before the substantial revisions to the homelessness legislation and its accompanying code of guidance in 1996.

Although there are numerous examples of good practice within local authorities, a small number of very small-scale and localised studies suggest that some problems may still exist. Two of these studies, both undertaken in one London borough, found that some women experiencing domestic violence felt that the service they had received from front-line staff, when applying as homeless, was poor.

A further revised code of guidance on allocations and homelessness to be issued shortly by the DETR contains several amendments and additions relating to domestic violence and homelessness, and is intended to improve local authority practice in this area still further.

Monitoring

Official figures on households accepted as homeless due to domestic violence come from P1E returns submitted by local authorities to the DETR. In 1998/99, 17 per cent of households (almost 20,000) accepted as homeless in England and Wales gave violent relationship breakdown as the main reason for the loss of their last settled home. This is likely to under-estimate the extent of homelessness arising as a result of domestic violence because it excludes households:

- who applied but were not accepted as being homeless and in priority need;
- whose reason for homelessness was recorded in the official statistics as something other than relationship breakdown e.g. rent arrears; and
- who were rehoused through the housing register or transfer list without having to apply through homelessness legislation.

Local authorities are not required to produce figures showing the number of households experiencing domestic violence that are housed through housing registers or transfer lists, and the literature review found that very little data existed on this.

Temporary accommodation

Many households escaping domestic violence spend a period of time in emergency or temporary accommodation, prior to finding a more permanent solution to their housing problem. For those accepted as homeless by the local housing authorities, much of this accommodation is 'mainstream' and caters for all homeless applicants, although some accommodation – refuges, special hostels and reception centres – is specifically for households experiencing domestic violence.

Bed and breakfast hotels

- The code of guidance accompanying the 1996 Housing Act states that bed and breakfast hotels

should only be used as a last resort and are generally not suitable for families with children. DETR's 'Relationship Breakdown' guide for social landlords recognises the inappropriateness of this type of accommodation for households experiencing domestic violence primarily because of its lack of security and support. Other inadequacies can include poor living conditions, a lack of basic amenities, playing space and privacy, and overcrowding.

Refuges

- Staying in refuges can provide some women fleeing violence with a degree of safety and support that would probably not be available to them in any other form of temporary accommodation, and users express high levels of satisfaction with refuge services. The levels of safety and support, and satisfaction levels of refuges compared with other temporary accommodation types, will be investigated in the DETR/DH/WU study.
- Local authorities expressed concerns about the shortage of refuge provision – nationally and in particular areas – in replies to a recent letter from the minister for Women. A study in the London borough of Hackney found that the number of women seeking rehousing because of domestic violence exceeded the bed-spaces in refuges by a factor of eight.
- Under-funding is another concern. A study of three London boroughs, the county of Essex and the former metropolitan district of West Yorkshire, found inadequate funding in all the refuge projects contacted.
- There are problems securing refuge accommodation for some women. This arises because refuges may lack the resources to accommodate women with mental health or substance abuse problems, may not allow male children over a certain age, and may be unable to accommodate women with large numbers of children.
- Refuge services are reliant on Housing Benefit (HB) as a means of funding. Hence many are unable to accommodate women who cannot meet the full cost of charges either through HB or earnings e.g. asylum seekers or women on low incomes.
- The under-use of refuge services by women from some ethnic minority groups is of particular concern.
- In some areas, women are remaining in refuges (and indeed other forms of temporary accommodation) for longer than they need to, because of the lack of move-on accommodation, thus reducing the number of places available to

women in a crisis situation. Women's Aid have argued that while some women are able to cope with the move from a refuge into permanent general needs housing, others would benefit from transitional or 'second-stage' accommodation where they continue to have access to support and advice services. Currently, the amount of such accommodation is extremely limited and refuge groups have identified a need for more to be developed.

Support

The provision of a full range of support services for people experiencing domestic violence (either in their existing home, in temporary accommodation or once they have secured long-term accommodation) is likely to be a cost-effective intervention. This provision can be seen as a preventative measure in housing terms, for example, by reducing the likelihood of tenancy failure (the cost of which has been estimated by the Audit Commission at £2,100 per tenancy).

Outreach work has proved effective, especially with women from ethnic minorities, but because it is labour intensive and hence costly, many refuges have only been able to offer limited services or none at all.

Women's Aid have expressed concerns about the difficulties for refuges in accessing 'floating support' funding through the Housing Corporation; although more than 100 schemes are currently running, none are earmarked for people experiencing domestic violence.

A government inter-departmental review has considered the future funding of all forms of housing and support services. It recognised the problems inherent in the current funding arrangements where funding can come from a wide range of different sources but is complex and uncertain, and support is linked to certain types of accommodation or tenure. The review produced the 'Supporting People' initiative in order to address funding concerns. From 2003 there will be an integrated policy and funding framework where a single specific grant will be paid by central government to local authorities to fund support services.

Conclusions and recommendations

Monitoring of domestic violence could be improved by encouraging local authorities to provide figures for the number of households experiencing domestic violence that apply for housing but are rejected, and also households experiencing domestic violence that are rehoused through the housing register or the transfer list.

Although some local authorities may not have a choice, they should only use bed and breakfast accommodation for people experiencing domestic violence as a last

resort. When rehousing domestic violence survivors, they should also ensure that they receive adequate support, and do not spend prolonged periods in other forms of temporary accommodation.

Social landlords should be encouraged to develop, review, monitor and evaluate specific policies and procedures for dealing with people experiencing domestic violence. These should encompass housing advice, homelessness, allocations and transfers, and housing management.

There is considerable scope for the development of both aftercare and resettlement services, and schemes that assist people experiencing domestic violence to be safe and secure in their own homes.

Further research is needed to understand the following areas:

- the comparative costs and benefits of various housing options for people experiencing domestic violence – different temporary accommodation types, the use of injunctions, and improved house safety and security – and the potential costs of failing to provide an appropriate housing response;
- the housing paths followed over a period of time by people experiencing domestic violence;
- the accommodation and support needs of people

experiencing domestic violence in the short, medium and long term; and

- the impact, in crime reduction terms, of various accommodation strategies for violent partners.

Further reading

Department of the Environment and Department of Health (1996) *Code of guidance on parts VI and VII of the Housing Act 1996: allocation of housing accommodation and homelessness*.

London Research Centre (1998) *Tackling Violence against women*. DETR.

London Research Centre (1999) *Relationship Breakdown: A guide for social Landlords*. DETR.

Stanko, E., Crisp, D., Hale C. and Lucraft H. (1998) *Counting the costs: estimating the impact of domestic violence in the London Borough of Hackney*. Crime Concern.

Department of Social Security (1998) *Supporting People: A new policy and funding framework for support services*.