

Minutes of the APPG on Domestic Violence Meeting

A joint meeting of the APPG on Ending Homelessness & the APPG on Domestic Violence

Monday 21 May, 2-3:30pm
Boothroyd Room, House of Commons

The joint meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Ending Homelessness and the APPG on Domestic Violence focused on priorities for tackling homelessness and the housing issues facing survivors of domestic abuse, in the context of the Government's consultation on the Domestic Abuse Bill and the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act.

The meeting was an invite-only roundtable discussion, led by the Co-Chairs of the APPG on Domestic Violence (Jess Phillips MP and Maria Miller MP) and the APPG on Ending Homelessness (Will Quince MP and Neil Coyle MP). The meeting covered four main areas:

1. Experiences of homelessness and housing insecurity for survivors & service providers
2. Priority need and assessments of vulnerability
3. The Housing First approach in cases of domestic abuse
4. Implementing the Homelessness Reduction Act with survivors

Speakers at the meeting were:

- Sarah Stonedale, Survivor
- Katie Ghose - Chief Executive, Women's Aid
- Mary Mason - CEO, Solace Women's Aid
- Guddy Burnet- Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance
- Vanessa Dixon - Director of Operations, Shelter
- Alison Inman - President, Chartered Institute of Housing
- Elinor Crouch-Puzey - Housing Development Manager, Standing Together
- Jon Sparkes - Chief Executive, Crisis
- Ian Swift - Housing Services Manager, Southwark Council
- Dominic Williamson – Executive Director of Strategy and Policy, St Mungo's
- Gill Herd, Senior Manager – Partnerships, Solace Women's Aid
- Katharine Sacks-Jones – Director, Agenda

Jess Phillips MP

Jess Phillips MP welcomed attendees to the meeting and outlined the crossover of the two APPGs around the issues of tackling homelessness and the housing issues facing survivors of domestic abuse. She highlighted that we are hopefully about to enter a big period of change due to the upcoming Domestic Abuse Bill. She stated that we therefore must hear evidence on all of the issues survivors face, particularly as currently the main focus of the Bill is the criminal justice system.

Experiences of homelessness and housing insecurity for survivors & service providers

Chaired by Jess Phillips MP

Sarah Stonedale, Survivor

Sarah shared her experiences of domestic abuse and the struggles she experienced accessing support and finding accommodation after leaving. After she first moved to London she struggled to gain accommodation as she wasn't from the area, and when Sarah did secure housing, it was inadequate and unsafe - with other residents taking drugs in the communal areas. After escaping abuse, Sarah was caught in a cycle of insecure housing that failed to provide a safe environment for her and her children - including a mass hostel with no sanitary provisions, and temporary accommodation where the ceiling kept falling in.

Sarah has since set up 'Sister Blue' to help other women to access housing and services, and she highlighted the experiences of some of the women she had helped, including local authorities turning survivors away, asking if they can return to their perpetrator and interrogating women about their abuse. She highlighted that some women are told by housing and social services that if they go into a refuge they won't be able to access social housing or have access to their children, as refuges are deemed 'unsafe'.

Sarah stated that the key issues to consider included repeat homelessness, how long referrals take, the lack of accountability, banning mixed-gender hostels for single women and funding for refuges. She emphasised that there must be support available to survivors at every stage of their housing pathway.

Katie Ghose - Chief Executive, Women's Aid

Katie stated that the housing barriers raised by Sarah were frequently experienced by survivors, and are compounded by welfare reform policies. It was vital that the Government assess welfare reforms for their impact on women's ability to escape abuse. She stressed that these reforms impact the most vulnerable women the most.

Katie set out findings from Women's Aid's 'No Woman Turned Away' project - which delivers additional casework support to women who have called the National Domestic Violence Helpline (run in partnership between Women's Aid and Refuge) who are unable to access refuge. She stated that findings were desperate and shocking. Of the 404 survivors supported by the NwTA project from 2016-17, one in ten (11%) slept rough while searching for refuge; including seven women with children and three who were pregnant. 40% of women sofa surfed - which can be hugely unsafe and risk further abuse or exploitation.

Katie emphasised that survivors are tired of being turned away from services, and that Women's Aid's Annual Survey 2017 found that, for survivors supported by specialist services, housing was the most frequent co-presenting issue alongside domestic abuse.

Mary Mason - CEO, Solace Women's Aid

Mary stated that Sarah had shared experiences that Solace Women's Aid deal with on a daily basis. She highlighted that survivors who aren't a priority are being turned away due

to gatekeeping, despite the fact that women and children fleeing domestic abuse are most in need.

She commented that Solace Women's Aid advocates spent half of their time on housing when they're meant to be focusing on other issues, including helping women get their children into education and rebuilding their confidence. The current housing crisis meant that 87% of survivors are moving from Solace's refuges into temporary accommodation – when this many used to move into settled housing. Mary said that the situation for women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) was even worse; survivors with NRPF could spend up to two years in a refuge, unable to rebuild their life and continually re-traumatised.

Mary stated that a whole housing system approach is needed, which has a clear pathway for women escaping abuse into secure accommodation.

Guddy Burnet - Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance

Guddy stated that at local level housing providers needed to be upskilled on domestic abuse and agreed that a whole housing approach - underpinned by refuges as essential crisis support - was needed. It would also be vital to improve the private rented sector response to domestic abuse.

She agreed that mixed-gender hostels were inadequate for women, and specifications for these services lacked specialist domestic abuse knowledge. She also stated that housing and domestic abuse were both cross-authority issues, so a collective duty was required to prevent people from being 'ping-ponged' from one place to another.

Dominic Williamson – Executive Director of Strategy and Policy, St Mungo's

Dominic stated that St Mungo's had started looking more at women's experiences, resulting in a shift in their service provision.

He emphasised that aside from the upcoming Domestic Abuse Bill, the proposed short-term supported housing reforms are a key policy issue for organisations and MPs to focus on - particularly in terms of adequate supply to meet demand in the future. The Government were set to launch a rough sleeping strategy, which St Mungo's will recommend must include a focus on women's experiences.

He commented that the Homelessness Reduction Act should be improving the response survivors receive, but acknowledged that it is still early days and there are some big gaps in the law.

Priority need and assessments of vulnerability

Chaired by Maria Miller MP

Maria highlighted that domestic abuse accounts for around one in ten homelessness applications, and Crisis found that 61% of homeless females had experienced violence and or abuse from a partner. Even if women were able to access refuge, women and children fleeing abuse can face years moving between forms of temporary accommodation, waiting for social housing, or in homelessness.

Maria stated that her own local authority had policies in place to prevent women and children from having homelessness applications rejected. In introducing this section, she

asked why inconsistency existed between local authorities, and what processes were in place to protect vulnerable people if they weren't priority need.

Katharine Sacks-Jones – Director, Agenda

Katharine stated that inconsistency exists as survivors are not deemed a priority, despite that fact that families are meant to be protected by legislation from sleeping rough. The problem was acute for single women escaping domestic abuse, as duties were less clear. The vulnerability test, and the threshold to meet this, is too high - and Katharine argued that survivors should be deemed vulnerable without testing.

Ian Swift - Housing Services Manager, Southwark Council

Ian indicated that Southwark Council have policies in place to prevent survivors and that they fund Solace Women's Aid to deliver independent advocacy and support services, co-located in the local authority. He argued that local authorities must use the Homelessness Reduction Act as a basis for preventing homelessness and providing support, but must take external steps such as working with external specialist support services (like Southwark Council and Solace Women's Aid) to ensure they are doing all they can to protect women and survivors. Southwark was a 'trailblazer' for the HRA, and as a result of new policies, training and procedures had achieved a 93% customer satisfaction rate within their housing services.

Vanessa Dixon - Director of Operations, Shelter

Vanessa acknowledged that there were differences between bigger and smaller local authorities, but that across the board significant levels of gate-keeping were taking place. She argued that assessment should be based on fact, not on judgement and that authorities needed to acknowledge that some women can coherently discuss their experiences and their stories.

Vanessa stated that housing officers should be trained in domestic abuse and the impact on victims, and have a clear understanding of trauma informed support. She did not believe housing officers took the approach they often do due to malice, but because of a lack of understanding and the current pressures they are under.

Alison Inman - President, Chartered Institute of Housing

Alison commented that the solutions being offered are not new; we're reinventing approaches and pathways that used to exist. She argued that the main problem is the supply of housing. She stated that we never used to house survivors in temporary accommodation, and that if we solved the housing supply many of the issues survivors face would also be tackled.

The Housing First approach in cases of domestic abuse

Chaired by Will Quince MP

Will said that Housing First provided people with stable and permanent housing without any pre-emptive work, followed by wrap-around support to help maintain a tenancy. He highlighted that in Holland, Housing First had almost eradicated homelessness and tackled 80% of homeless cases with complex needs.

Elinor Crouch-Puzey - Housing Development Manager, Standing Together

Elinor highlighted the Housing First pilot being run by Standing Together in partnership with St Mungo's and Advance, a local Independent Domestic Violence Advisory service who also provided support services to the project. This made the project unique as most Housing First support services are provided by a homelessness service rather than a specialist domestic abuse service. The pilot focused on supporting women with multiple disadvantages, including experience of domestic abuse, into accommodation before supporting them address their additional needs. There were 4 local housing providers signed up to the pilot and the charity hoped to roll the pilot out further if additional funding was provided.

Katharine Sacks-Jones - Director, Agenda

Katharine argued that Housing First is really important to women, due to their vulnerability and complex needs. If a woman has had a bad experience of hostels or refuges, they are unlikely to return and instead enter into long-term rough sleeping - increasing vulnerability significantly. Katharine stated that safe and secure housing is a crucial first step, but the support they receive afterwards must be trauma-informed. She noted that Housing First is only one option that can work for women, which should be explored alongside others.

Jon Sparkes - Chief Executive, Crisis

Jon stated that the evidence was clear on Housing First but, similarly to Katherine, recognised that it won't be for everyone. He commented that the Housing First pilots were important, but more development funding would be vital. He also highlighted that there was currently a 4.5 million backlog of available housing - and it therefore does not matter how good the approach was if no housing is available. Housing First included a range of interventions - one of which (tailoring support to a person's specific needs) will be particularly important for survivors.

Jon also commented that the HRA could make the right changes if it followed the guidance of the law but also used some imagination.

Alison Inman - President, Chartered Institute of Housing

Alison said that Housing First was an exciting opportunity, which needed to be watched as it transformed. She agreed with previous speakers that housing providers needed training and internal policies on domestic abuse, but stated that expectations on this needed to be managed.

Implementing the Homelessness Reduction Act with survivors

Chaired by Neil Coyle MP

Neil noted the time constraints of the meeting and highlighted that in London alone councils have estimated that they would need £17 million annually to effectively implement the HRA.

Ian Swift - Housing Services Manager, Southwark Council

Ian stated that Southwark Council introduced the HRA in 2016, and whilst the council are supportive of the Act they are concerned by the inadequate funding provided from central Government to deliver it. The lack of adequate funding is giving councils an excuse not to deliver services to the spirit of the Act, and that the 'duty to refer' people in need of support in the Act is not strong enough. Ian said that all bodies and agencies who are coming in to contact with survivors should be playing a better role.

Despite this, Southwark Council have eliminated bed and breakfast use for families, homeless preventions have gone up by 50%, and personal and bespoke housing plans are designed for survivors by Solace Women's Aid.

Gill Herd - Senior Manager for Partnerships, Solace Women's Aid

Gill stated that the HRA has already made a real difference to single women and advocated for the current Southwark model to be rolled out across the country.

Recommendations for the Domestic Abuse Bill

Chaired by Jess Phillips MP

Jess highlighted that we had heard some good and bad examples of policy and practice, and turned the discussion to possible recommendations previously considered by the APPGs:

1. National Government should extend priority need status to all survivors of domestic violence.
2. Local authorities should accept all survivors of domestic violence under the local connection criteria of the homelessness legislation.
3. A sustainable and secure funding model for specialist domestic violence and BME-led services ideally agreed on across party basis to ensure consistency and continuity of service provision.
4. Expand the Destitute Domestic Violence Concession (DDVC) so it is accessible to all migrant women and extend the timeframe beyond three months.
5. Provide additional financial support to refuges and domestic abuse services to support women with insecure immigration status and No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF).
6. Placing guidance to social services to provide financial and housing support to women and children who meet the S17 criteria (Children Act 1989) on a statutory footing.
7. MHCLG should implement an England wide housing reciprocal initiative for survivors of domestic violence.
8. Priority Management Transfers for survivors of domestic abuse.
9. MHCLG and the Home Office should provide joint funding for new Housing First models for survivors of domestic abuse.
10. Local authorities should work with local domestic violence support services to obtain alternative solutions to identification and official documents so people fleeing domestic violence can proceed with their homelessness application.

There was consensus amongst attendees on the recommendations, so Jess stated that the four chairs of the APPGs would arrange a meeting with the Minister to discuss these in relation to the Domestic Abuse Bill.

Jess thanked everyone for attending and contributing to a useful discussion.