Housing system failing survivors of domestic abuse

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50 years on from Cathy Come Home, women and children are still being failed by the housing system as survivors are punished for fleeing abuse, often plunging them into poverty and insecurity, and hampering their chances of recovery.

A new report published today by Solace Women's Aid shows that survivors are being dramatically failed by major flaws in the housing system. Refuges provide a temporary safe haven, but the unequal and unfair system can leave women and children vulnerable and often feeling they have little choice but to risk their own safety and return home to their abuser.

Mary Mason, CEO at Solace says, 'time and time again women fleeing abuse are being utterly let down, re-victimised and traumatised by this unfair treatment'.

The unjust and inconsistent approach to housing means numerous women are losing out as a result of fleeing violence which places them at greater risk of poverty and destitution. Our report shows that over 60% of women entering Solace Women's Aid refuges from a secure tenancy lose this on leaving the refuge. Housing officers regularly question the credibility of women's stories often sending them back home despite the risk. Women and children are forced to join the back of the housing queue, to move multiple times between unsuitable and unsafe temporary accommodation like hostels and B&BS, while perpetrators often go unpunished and remain within family-sized homes. These travesties of justice are preventing vulnerable women and children from recovering from abuse, re-integrating into society and moving towards safe, independent lives.

The public purse is bearing the brunt of the cost. A recent study commissioned by London Councils found the cost of temporary accommodation across London in 2014/15 was close to £663million – a portion of which could be saved if the housing situation for women and children affected by abuse was more effectively managed.

In order to end these injustices, Solace Women's Aid calls for a secure and consistent approach to the housing response to domestic abuse survivors across London and a 'zero tolerance' approach from landlords to perpetrators who remain in the family home.

Shena's* Story

After suffering a long history of domestic abuse at the hands of her father and then her ex-husband, Shena, who is currently living in a Solace refuge, escaped to safety. While living in secure housing, the perpetrator found her through family contacts and continued to harass her and broke into her property. He bombarded her with phone calls and distressing texts including threats to pay someone to have her killed. She was finally given a Restraining Order under the Protection from Harassment Act with no end date. However, he breached this order on a number of occasions and was imprisoned three times as a result, with the final conviction resulting in a six months custodial sentence. So fearful about his release Shena fled her home to live in a refuge again so he couldn't find her when his sentence ended and carry out his threats. In the past 18 Months Shena who has a secure Tenancy with a Housing Association has endured a fruitless battle in pleading with the Housing Association to move her to a safe permanent address unknown to the perpetrator, she is still waiting. Even with the evidence of criminal convictions and supporting letters from the police, who consider her at significant risk, the Housing Association doesn't consider this level of threat significant enough to move her to another, safe home. When exploring alternative housing options she also met with local authority housing officers who were equally unhelpful and dismissive. The Key Worker at a Solace refuge who is supporting Shena and advocating for housing on her behalf says, "It's absolutely soul destroying for Shena that the people meant to help her are completely failing to do so. It is so debilitating for women to come up against these injustices without an end in sight." Like so many others, Shena continues to fight for a safe home to live in but tragically the battle is far from over.

This name has been used to protect the survivor's identity.

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