



For women and children.
Against domestic violence.

MORE THAN BRICKS AND MORTAR

A feasibility study into delivery of best practice
in domestic abuse dispersed accommodation

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Introduction

Since 1971, when Refuge opened the world's first women's refuge in Chiswick, West London, the need for safe accommodation for victims of domestic abuse has been recognised; fifty years later, the Domestic Abuse Act (2021) enshrined the need for safe accommodation provision into law; requiring local authorities to carry out needs assessments to identify whether their commissioned provision meets the needs of the population. These needs assessments often highlight common groups who are underserved in terms of access to refuge, or other safe accommodation, such as:

- Disabled survivors, and older survivors with mobility needs
- Those with multiple disadvantage, such as severe mental ill-health and/or problematic substance use and/or serious criminal history
- Large families, or those with older male children
- Survivors with pets
- Transgender survivors

Traditional models of refuge/safe accommodation are not always able to accommodate survivors from these groups – this is evidenced in data from the No Woman Turned Away Project, which helps survivors who are finding it difficult to access safe accommodation – their data for 2021 shows that 42% of those supported had mental health needs; 21% had a disability; 18% had substance use support needs; 10% had 4+ children and 9% had older male children¹.

A model of support that includes dispersed accommodation within the community combined with access to the right specialist help could be of real benefit in helping survivors who have difficulty accessing traditional refuge accommodation to be safe.

This feasibility project utilises findings from research and consultation with Refuge specialist frontline practitioners, managers and survivors to identify what that specialist support should look like and how we can deliver it within a dispersed accommodation setting, with the ultimate aim of developing a best practice model for support within dispersed accommodation.



About Refuge

Refuge is a registered charity and the UK's largest single provider of specialist support services for those who have experienced gender-based violence (domestic abuse, sexual violence, forced marriage, 'honour'-based violence, stalking, trafficking, exploitation, female genital mutilation and modern slavery).

We provide support to thousands of survivors and their children daily, across our national network of services including:

- 45 refuges with a mixture of bedsits and rooms; with shared facilities
- Independent domestic and sexual violence advocacy services
- Community outreach
- Support for children and young people
- Sanctuary schemes
- Culturally-specific services for black and minoritised women, including Eastern European women
- Support for survivors with multiple disadvantage

In addition, our national reach includes a service to support victims of modern slavery and trafficking, our innovative tech-facilitated abuse and economic empowerment service and the Freephone 24-Hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline (including Live Chat).

Our award-winning campaigns, research and advocacy raise awareness to prevent violence against women and girls. Refuge works closely with the Government, bringing the voices of survivors directly to policy makers to shape legislation and improve the national response to VAWG.

We are survivor-led and offer a bespoke package of holistic support delivered by specialist staff; designed to support the survivor to be safer, physically and psychologically, and able to thrive in the future. This work entails enabling an understanding of the dynamics of abuse, so the survivor knows they are not to blame, and that domestic abuse is rooted in a gendered imbalance of power in society that is replicated in individual relationships.



Key findings

The project focused on finding out from survivors and domestic abuse professionals what makes the refuge environment work for survivors of domestic abuse and how we could use this learning to create the same sort of benefits for survivors who are accommodated in dispersed accommodation: properties that are individually sited and intended to accommodate single survivors with or without children.

Refuge buildings are part of the ecosystem that ensures survivor safety and recovery. They offer a secure place to stay, with an environment that is well-maintained. The support that is available within that environment is much valued by residents and includes practical support, such as help to access benefits or legal advice; emotional support helping survivors to come to terms with their experiences of abuse and peer support, which helps to normalise the abuse and supports survivors to realise that their experiences were not their fault.

We know there will always be a need for traditional refuges, but dispersed accommodation could be a valuable addition to the refuge offer and enable services to meet the needs of a wider range of domestic abuse survivors. This feasibility study found that with sufficient funding and carefully thinking about service modelling, it is possible to replicate the kind of support that refuges offer for survivors in dispersed accommodation, although this is predicated on the availability of properties and sufficient funding.

Whilst challenges to replicating these support elements exactly for survivors in dispersed accommodation arose during the project, these were not insurmountable. For example, we thought carefully about how to make properties secure, and how to keep both survivors and visiting staff safe within them. To protect the sanctity of the home environment and give the survivor a space untainted by traumatic discussions, an important element of the model was identifying where support should take place. Two potential models have been proposed: a 'gold star' model, featuring a dedicated community hub, close to a cluster of dispersed properties and a cheaper model featuring an office site in one property, utilising community buildings such as children's centres for group work activity. The staffing model is also very important. The consultation flagged up potential difficulties with spreading staff too thin (based on real experiences of staff in other projects), especially if caseloads were too high, so Refuge has designed a model that includes specialist domestic abuse support, combined with dedicated housing support and support for children, with a robust layer of management to maintain effective oversight.

We are confident that the model devised is one that will enable survivors in dispersed safe accommodation properties to thrive.



Methodology

The project findings have been informed by two key strands of work:

1. Desk based research – primarily looking at the needs of survivors who may be excluded from mainstream refuge provision
2. Consultation, which included several elements:
 - a. 1:1 interviews with survivors who had either been unable to enter a refuge, or had difficulties entering a refuge
 - b. Focus groups with survivors who occupy Refuge's nearest equivalent to dispersed accommodation – several two-bedroom properties occupied by two women each, in an East Midlands city
 - c. Group consultation with Refuge frontline staff – both community-based and refuge based
 - d. Individual interview with one staff member with experience of working in a dispersed accommodation service for another provider
 - e. Group consultation with service managers
 - f. Further consultation sessions with senior Refuge staff to develop service model
 - g. Consultation with a specialist housing lawyer regarding tenure
 - h. Financial modelling with Refuge's finance team and development team

The survivor consultation work was carried out by Refuge's survivor engagement coordinator. All other consultation was carried out by Refuge's head of development, supported by the development team and the heads of services.

To facilitate the consultation with survivors, an interview script was developed with branched question sets covering different sets of experiences (see Appendix One). All survivors were asked to sign a consent form outlining the purpose of the consultation and the survivor's rights in relation to the consultation. All survivors' contributions have been anonymised.

The staff consultation focused on three questions:

1. What needs do survivors of domestic abuse have that refuges can meet?
2. How do refuges meet these needs?
3. How can we meet these needs in dispersed accommodation?

Background

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021

The Domestic Abuse Act (DA Act) passed into law in England and Wales on 29th April 2021. This piece of legislation, several years in the making, contains a range of measures designed to, “provide further protections to the millions of people who experience domestic abuse, as well as strengthen measures to tackle perpetrators” (Home Office, 2021)². These measures include the creation of a statutory definition of domestic abuse; a new criminal offence of non-fatal strangulation; invalidating a defence of consent, or the ‘rough sex defence’ where a victim is harmed or killed; introduction of a new criminal offence of threatening to share intimate images and strengthening the ability of the legal system to support survivors of domestic abuse.

Several elements of the Act strengthen the rights of survivors of domestic abuse to access safe accommodation: all eligible homeless victims of domestic abuse now automatically qualify as priority need when approaching a local authority for assistance, for example. Part IV of the Act puts a new onus onto Tier One local authorities, such as county councils, unitary authorities and the Greater London Authority (GLA), to ensure that domestic abuse survivors can access safe accommodation when they need it. Specifically, the DA Act:

“Places duties on each relevant local authority in England to:

- I. Appoint a multi-agency Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board which it must consult as it performs certain specified functions (below).
- II. Assess, or make arrangements for the assessment of, the need for accommodation-based domestic abuse support in their area for all victims and their children who reside in relevant safe accommodation, including those who come from outside of their area.
- III. Prepare and publish a strategy for the provision of such support to cover their area having regard to the needs assessment.
- IV. Give effect to the strategy (through commissioning / decommissioning decisions).
- V. Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy.
- VI. Report back annually to central government.” (DLUHC, 2021³)

Additional central government funding has been made available for Tier 1 local authorities to meet the duty. This funding was £125 million for 2022/23⁴.

Commissioning response to the DA Act

Refuge monitors commissioning activity across England by horizon scanning for tenders relating to domestic abuse and VAWG daily. Data about this commissioning activity is gathered on a pipeline spreadsheet. With this tool we can identify and analyse commissioning trends in the sector.

Our data for 2021/22 shows that the nature of commissioning is beginning to change, potentially in response to the DA Act. In particular there has been a significant increase in the volume of accommodation-based services being commissioned, or recommissioned, subsequent to the Act as the chart on the opposite page illustrates.



As commissioning activity was curtailed over the period of the pandemic (many of Refuge’s contracts were extended during this period) whilst local authorities concentrated their resources on their Covid-response, it is likely that some of the commissioning in 2021/22 was triggered by deferred local authority contract cycles. However, some of the commissioning is likely to have been a direct response to the statutory duty to commission Safe Accommodation contained within the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (the DA Act). Local authorities were required to spend their allocation of New Burdens funding within the financial year, which clearly triggered some commissioning activity. There is also evidence of a change to the type of accommodation that is being commissioned. Of note is the volume of dispersed accommodation that is featuring within tenders.

What is dispersed accommodation?

Essentially dispersed units are properties that can be used to accommodate survivors who might not be able to access traditional refuge accommodation, which is usually formed of either large, shared houses, or blocks of self-contained units, with or without communal facilities.

The statutory guidance accompanying Part IV of the DA Act further defines dispersed accommodation as:

“

- i. “Safe (secure and dedicated to supporting victims of domestic abuse), self-contained accommodation with a similar level of specialist domestic abuse support as provided within a refuge but which may be more suitable for victims who are unable to stay in a refuge with communal spaces, and/or where peer support from other residents may not be appropriate, due to complex support needs, or where older teenage sons cannot be accommodated in a women only refuge, for example. Where two or more units share any part of the accommodation, including shared hallways or access routes, provision should be single gender or single sex.
- ii. Safe (secure and dedicated to supporting victims of domestic abuse), self-contained ‘semi-independent’ accommodation which is not within a refuge but with support for victims who may not require the intensive support offered through refuge, but are still at risk of abuse from their perpetrator/s” (ibid).

Such properties would often consist of individual houses, or flats, housing single survivors, with or without children.

Increased commissioning of dispersed accommodation

In 2021/22 Refuge’s Development team reviewed 28 opportunities* that included a requirement for dispersed accommodation units (55% of accommodation-based services commissioned that year). In 2020/21 only 4 opportunities included a requirement for dispersed units (22%). This was a 600% increase in the volume of dispersed accommodation opportunities in one year.

This increase is likely to be rooted in the safe accommodation needs assessments that Tier One local authorities are now required to conduct annually to understand the needs of survivors and their children within their area, and those who come into their area. Where these assessments show that existing safe accommodation provision is not meeting the needs of survivors such as disabled, LGBT or male survivors more generally, this is beginning to translate into the commissioning of dispersed accommodation.

As an example: the needs assessment carried out for Sheffield City Council in 2021 included recommendations to, “Ensure future commissioning of safe accommodation includes appropriate spaces to meet the needs of the LGBT+ community” (Sheffield DACT, 2021⁵) and to, “Provide appropriate accommodation that can be accessed by people with disabilities, such as appropriate facilities for a person with a mobility or visual disability.” (ibid).

The needs assessment also flagged the need to, “Increase the number of safe accommodation spaces available to reduce the need for those affected by domestic abuse to be placed in temporary accommodation.” (ibid). The report states that 148 females and 32 males were placed in Sheffield temporary accommodation on the grounds of experiences of domestic abuse in 2020. It does not analyse the needs of these survivors other than to say that 45% of the women accommodated had children, but none of the men did. As routes into both refuges and temporary accommodation are through Sheffield City Council Housing Services, this would suggest that these survivors either could not access a place in a mainstream refuge (if the refuge was full, for example), or that available places did not meet their needs.

The outcome of the needs assessment is reflected in the commissioning that Sheffield City Council carried out for safe accommodation provision in the city in 2022. The tender, published at the end of March 2022, requires a provider to deliver 41 units of accommodation that can be, “a mix of, safe dispersed accommodation, or smaller blocks of accommodation”, which meets the need of “female and male victims, LGBT+ and women with multiple and complex needs”⁶.

In 2022/23 there were slightly fewer opportunities including a requirement for dispersed accommodation (22 opportunities – 28% of all accommodation-based services commissioned that year). It is not surprising that there has been a slight dip in commissioning of this type of accommodation, given the volume of commissioning in 2021/22 that was almost certainly in response to the DA Act. However, this is still a significant amount of commissioning activity in relation to this model of safe accommodation provision.

Why is dispersed accommodation needed?

As referenced above, traditional refuge accommodation, of the type that has been used to accommodate women fleeing domestic abuse since Refuge open the first women’s refuge in 1971, generally consists of either large, shared properties, or self-contained units within a single building. This type of shared refuge provision offers security to survivors and a space to not only gain specialist domestic abuse support from keyworkers, but also peer support from other women who understand the experiences the survivor has been through.

The Routes to Support database, run by the UK Women’s Aid Federations, which lists refuge services in the United Kingdom showed that there were 269 refuge services in England listed on 1st July 2022⁷. Of these, 75.8% (204) had shared house accommodation, 41.6% (112) had self-contained units and 23.4% (63) had dispersed accommodation (some services offer more than one accommodation type)⁸. Therefore, most domestic abuse safe accommodation has shared facilities – this means that whilst survivors would have their own bedroom (usually shared with their children), they would usually share other facilities, such as kitchens, bathrooms and laundry room, with other residents.

By their nature, shared refuges engender restrictions on the groups of survivors that they can support. For example, many refuges are not suitable for older male children, who might need to share a bedroom with their mother, and bathrooms and/or other communal spaces with vulnerable women. Many refuges stipulate a maximum age for male children within their acceptance criteria.

The fabric of the refuge building will also limit who can access a property. For example, women with multiple children often have difficulty finding refuge spaces. The number of children that a refuge can accommodate will be limited by room size primarily, but also by other factors such as HMO (House of Multiple Occupancy) regulations in the area. HMO regulations often stipulate how many bathrooms and kitchens a property must have per X number of residents – and children are generally included in



* Only English opportunities were considered

this number. For example, the Southwark Council HMO regulations state that the maximum number of occupants per bathroom is five.

Many refuges will also not accommodate families with pets (of the 269 refuge spaces in England listed on Routes to Support, only 16 were able to accept pets), primarily to avoid difficulties posed by pets in communal spaces, but also due to restrictions placed by landlords (refuge buildings are usually leased from or managed for housing associations and local authorities).

Intersectional barriers to access

Barriers to accessing refuges can be compounded for survivors with additional needs such as problematic substance use, mental health needs, or physical disability.

Survivors with disabilities

Disabled women experience domestic abuse at more than double the rate of the population generally: according to data from the 2020 Crime Survey of England and Wales, 17.5% of disabled women had experienced domestic abuse in the previous year (2019-20) compared to 6.7% of non-disabled women. 9.2% of disabled men had experienced domestic abuse in the same period, compared with 3.6% of non-disabled men⁹. Public Health England report that disabled people also experience domestic abuse for longer periods of time, and with more severity and frequency than non-disabled people¹⁰.

Whilst disabled people can and do experience the whole range of psychological, physical, sexual and economic abuse that domestic abuse encompasses; their abuse may also feature elements specific to their circumstances e.g. being denied money for prescriptions or for personal needs relating to their impairment; control of movement by restricting access to mobility aids; shaming the individual over their disability¹¹. People with disabilities may also experience forms of abuse specific to their circumstances, such as abuse from a carer, or institutional abuse within a facility; Stay Safe East, the specialist by-and-for organisation that provides domestic abuse support for disabled people, classifies these as forms of domestic abuse¹².

Disabled people also face particular barriers in escaping or ending the abuse, including:

- Lack of information specifically for disabled survivors and information in accessible formats
- Help from professionals tending to focus on health-related needs, rather than abuse
- There may be multiple perpetrators, including professional caregivers
- Social isolation can reduce options for escape still further
- They may perceive that there is nowhere to go¹³

Sadly, for survivors with a disability, the latter perception may be a reality. General needs refuges are often not physically accessible for survivors with disabilities; Stay Safe East note that very few have good access, or spare rooms for personal assistants, or 24-hour support; none are able to reserve accessible rooms and many have a lack of space and/or shared facilities that are particularly difficult for disabled women¹⁴. Fully wheelchair accessible refuge spaces are particularly hard to source: on 1st July 2022, there were 140 vacancies in refuge services in England listed on Routes to Support¹⁵. None of these spaces could accommodate a woman requiring a wheelchair accessible space.

These access barriers were vividly illustrated by ZO, a survivor who describes herself as having 'multiple' disabilities, who participated in Refuge's consultation for this feasibility study. She explained her experiences of trying to get into a refuge with the support of friends:

“

When my friends made contact and then I subsequently made contact with [a local domestic abuse organisation] they tried to look up refuge space, and I made them very aware from the get go that I had disabilities and challenges. And I already knew from the conversation that they were very reluctant to take me on, and because it was covid and they did say to me – they did say to me we will try and look for a refuge space for you, but unfortunately it would appear that [for] someone like you with your disabilities especially your physical disabilities... our accommodation may not be suitable...the ones she has on her books aren't suitable at all because of covid, and because of my medical conditions. She said I would also be at higher risk of contracting covid as well if I was placed in certain types of accommodation.

That was really difficult; I felt that the door was shut. Even though they were trying even again that would have been incredibly difficult, I could have easily not disclosed that information but I wanted to be very honest and open that I am not safe where I am.... Where I was, I wasn't safe or stable to stay in. My mental health and the fear of repercussions and the fear of violence reoccurring again was quite high for me. I knew I couldn't stay where I was, I really wanted to go into a refuge space where I felt safe and I wasn't finding that. I mean they were phoning 15/20 refuge spaces and all of them were declining me or they were saying it wasn't suitable and they weren't willing to take the risk.

It is not just refuges that are often inaccessible for disabled survivors; other forms of temporary accommodation are too, with survivors being placed in properties with stairs that are inaccessible, or placed too far from survivors' support networks¹⁶. OE's account to Refuge shows how these barriers have contributed to her being unable to leave her husband, should she need to in future:

“ I think very few people know the extent of my disability and if I were on my own with my daughter I would need a significant amount of care and support. So my husband is currently classed as my carer and he does most of the kind of day to day, household tasks. In the short term I could probably get by with minimal help, but no more than a few days. I need help with things like preparing food, getting shopping in. Depending on where I was, getting my daughter to nursery or to school, anything like that. I would need help sort of supporting her with bath time and – the physical activities. I would need a lot of help with that. And the amount of help that I need with her has changed over the years. She's growing older so there are things that she can do now which makes it easier for me, and then there are things that they get harder for me. I would need help with day-to-day tasks like food and transport and physical activities around the house and things like that.”

When asked if she would need an adapted property:

“ Yes, so in fact that is still a problem in our house. I can't get my wheelchair in and out of our house. I need my husband to get the wheelchair in and out. So without a doubt I'd need somewhere that is fully wheelchair accessible. And I think other things would help, but it being wheelchair accessible would be an absolute must. [I] would [also] be needing things like, so either a wet room or a bathroom. So we've got a bathroom - so we've got a bath with steps and a bath chair that you can go up and down...I would just have to take stairs out of the equation, they make life a challenge. I can manage at the moment but if I were in that situation I would need it to be ground floor, wheelchair accessible...”

Survivors with multiple disadvantage

For survivors who experience issues with problematic substance use and/or severe mental health needs, refuge accommodation can be the lifeline they need to start re-building their lives after experiences of abuse.

This was the experience of one woman interviewed as part of AVA and Agenda's Hand in Hand report discussing survivors' experiences of abuse and multiple disadvantage¹⁷:

“ I probably went to women's refuges 30 times all over the country, but I just ended up going back (to the relationship) as I felt they were my belongings, that was the stuff I need, and they are mine and at least I've got soap and a clean bath and my kid's stuff. I thought he will change, he will be okay, he's promised he will change but he never ever did. I just had to get stronger, it was people in women's refuges, workers that often said things that gave me hope. It made me think about things in a different way.

Sadly though, this is a group that also encounters difficulties in accessing safe accommodation. This is illustrated by data from Women's Aid's No Woman Turned Away (NWTa) project that offers support to domestic abuse survivors who encounter barriers to accessing refuge. The biggest group supported by NWTa in 2021 (the period covered by the 2022 report)¹⁸ was women with mental health difficulties (77 women, or 42% of those supported); women who had drug and/or alcohol support needs made up 18% of those supported (33 women).

A previous NWTa report¹⁹ highlights some of the barriers that make accessing mainstream refuge difficult for survivors with substance use or serious mental health needs. Particularly highlighted was the inavailability of specialist staff to effectively support survivors (only 10% of refuges had a specialist drug worker, for example). 15 out of 23 women supported by NWTa on the basis of substance use needs, in 2016, were refused an available space because of their needs.

Where survivors can access other forms of temporary accommodation, this is not always ideal. The Fulfilling Lives South East (FLSE) report project, which supported women with multiple complex needs (93% of whom had experienced domestic abuse) found that the strict house rules of temporary accommodation can be trigger memories of an abuser's control. The mixed client group in most temporary accommodation can also make survivors feel unsafe. One FLSE service user commented that, "I would love to see the end of large hostels as they ruin lives not support them, as people end up stuck for years giving up hope of a better life."²⁰

Even where the accommodation is designed to provide specialist support relating to multiple disadvantage, this may not be suitable, as a contributor to the Hand in Hand report notes:

“I was placed in a complex needs hostel. It was a mixed hostel, 24 hour staff – but I didn’t engage with them. But everyone was using other drugs or drinking in the hostel. I was in my own bubble and my mental health deteriorated really bad, I wasn’t eating, I stopped drinking water, I was very dehydrated, I was attacked several times outside the hostel because I used to wait outside at night time to get my drugs. I’d get my money out the cash point at midnight, I was attacked several times.”

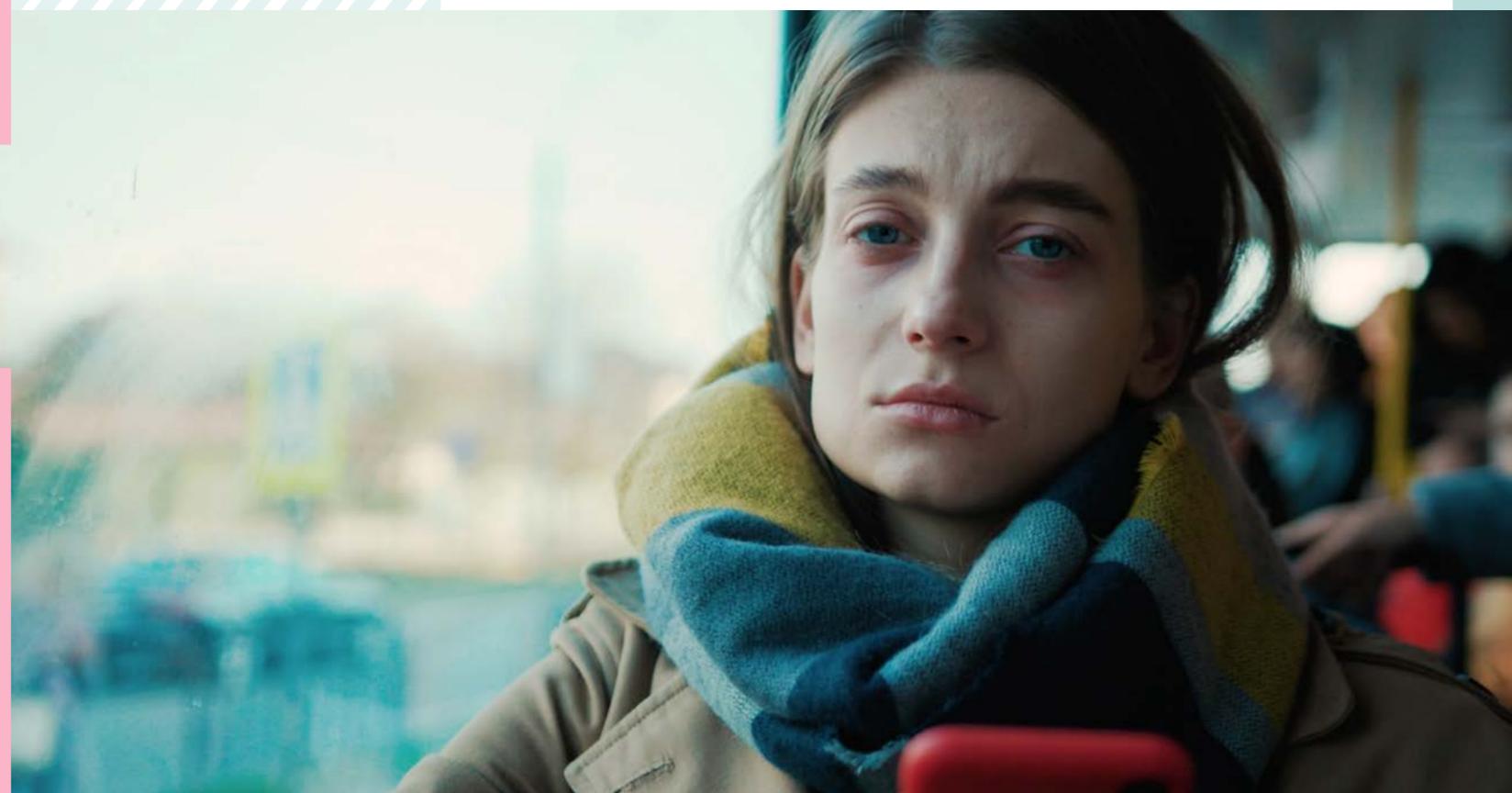
That dispersed accommodation might be a better environment for some survivors with experiences of multiple disadvantage is illustrated by this Refuge service user, who identifies as having a mental health related disability herself,

“For those types of people who are autistic for example or have certain types of mental health they may find it very challenging to live with other people. They may have a need to live independently or with support built around them.

Say they might benefit better from having specialist domestic support that’s provided in house but independently. As in they have their own independent accommodation put with someone to support them there rather than a communal, shared accommodation setting. What I see is that they might benefit from that a great deal because they feel that it’s independent and it’s safer and more comfortable. And that helps them to feel that for their side of things, confidentiality and that they may feel that they benefit from that better to be able to open up about domestic abuse and what they need to discuss with their support worker one on one.”

A FLSE client also notes the difficulties of sharing refuge accommodation with other women and their children:

“I can’t stay at Refuge, not being around all the Mums with their kids, that’d do me right in, I couldn’t handle it. Besides, if I stayed locally, he’d just follow me there and he’s not supposed to know where the Refuges are. I can’t go out of area as I don’t know anyone, all my support is here.”



Benefits of support in dispersed accommodation

During this consultation, frontline staff and managers consulted saw the benefit of dispersed accommodation provision. They recognised that this model could suit survivors who wouldn't generally be able to access a mainstream refuge, as described above, and noted particular benefits for some groups:

Survivors with disabilities: whilst staff can often put adaptations in place to meet the needs of some disabled women, this can take time. If adapted dispersed units were available, this would reduce barriers to access.

Survivors who wish to be accommodated locally: most refuges will not accept referrals for survivors from the local area, since there is likely to be an increased risk of a woman with connections locally being found by her abuser. Refuges need to safeguard not just the survivor, but other women and children in the refuge. However, some women really need to remain locally, perhaps because they are working, or because they need to access family support to care for a disabled child. Dispersed accommodation could be an option, subject to a thorough risk assessment, as the risk sits only with the survivor; other refuge residents would not be impacted.

Survivors from minoritized communities: Refuge's Eastern European advocacy team noted that Eastern European women might be concerned about being isolated in a communal refuge if there were no other Eastern European women there. They might also fear experiencing racism or negative treatment by other residents.



Dispersed accommodation as an effective solution for survivors of domestic abuse

For survivors in the groups illustrated above, dispersed accommodation could be an option – provided the fabric of the building can meet the needs of the survivor and their family i.e. offering the right number of bedrooms, or appropriate accessibility features.

But, the experience of being in a domestic abuse refuge is so much more than bricks and mortar. Refuges have been developed to offer safety, physical and emotional security, psychological recovery, empowerment and to allow survivors to develop the confidence to step out on their own and flourish. Refuge's concern when contemplating delivery of dispersed accommodation is to make sure that a survivor in a dispersed refuge property can access the same type and level of support that they could access in one of our shared refuges. There is a danger that survivors might be ineffectively supported, or even put at risk, if the model is not properly considered and developed.

An example of poor practice in relation to dispersed accommodation emerged in consultation with Refuge's staff for this project: a staff member, Stacey*, had previously worked for another provider, whose refuge provision included several units of dispersed accommodation. Stacey was required to provide housing management and support to survivors in the dispersed units, and to hold a caseload of around 30 community outreach cases. The only way Stacey could support survivors in her caseload at all effectively was by working extremely long hours.

Another staff member, who had also previously worked in a project with dispersed accommodation, commented about high prevalence of anti-social behaviour, because staff were not present at the properties; the properties were not kept clean, and residents commonly ran out of credit on gas and electric pre-payment meters. Problems with this provision were compounded by large geographical distances between properties. Management of the properties by a worker from the main refuge also created problems, because the refuge worker didn't have time to manage the dispersed properties effectively, meaning that maintenance and health and safety issues were overlooked.

As one of Refuge's strategic priorities for the next three years is to, "Deliver high quality services and set quality standards for domestic abuse services"²¹ it stands to reason that we want to ensure that if we are responsible for dispersed accommodation, then we deliver this in the best way possible.

* Not her real name

Best practice model for delivery of dispersed accommodation as a safe accommodation for survivors of domestic abuse

What support does refuge offer?

If we are aiming to replicate the kind of support that survivors can access within traditional refuge accommodation within dispersed properties, the first thing that is essential to understand is what this support looks like. The project team consulted with Refuge staff, managers and service users to understand what support is offered within the refuge environment.

Bricks and mortar

Some aspects of refuge service delivery are tied up in the fabric of the building and the physical aspects of service delivery. Clearly one key element of a refuge's physicality is the requirement for security. The importance of this was confirmed by a survivor who occupies a small refuge property shared with just one other woman,

“ I think the most important [thing] is our safety. We are feeling more safe here, compare[d] to where [we were] before and got some personal space as well. Like you can feel better mentally, that's most important.”

Specialist refuges are anonymous buildings that are essentially 'hidden in plain sight': they have high standards of security, but do not look out of place in a residential neighbourhood, so are not remarkable within the community. Addresses are protected and access to the building is generally restricted to residents, staff and pre-approved and vetted contractors. To ensure the health and safety of survivors, their children and staff is safeguarded, refuge workers carry out regular health and safety checks and ensure that maintenance tasks are carried out as promptly as possible, including regular upkeep tasks such as window cleaning and gardening.

Support

Whilst all groups of consultees from Refuge's staff teams raised the importance of security and health and safety in service delivery, survivors were much more concerned with how their needs and those of

their children were supported within the refuge environment. For example, one survivor, who had not been able to access refuge because she was working, felt that refuge would have offered her emotional support and support to understand the justice system:

“ So my understanding because I've never been in one is that definitely I would get that mental support. They would maybe give me the ideas of support me in the way that maybe they explain - what I was going through a court case at the time.”

Survivors who had been in refuge all commented about the value of dedicated support from their refuge keyworker – some survivors who had been in larger refuges previously noted that their former keyworkers had held very large caseloads, and this had negatively impacted the kind of support they were able to access:

“ Definitely if I need something to help I ring my keyworker. I need help to fill that form in or whatever, that office lady won't have time because we are a lot – 20 [referencing previous refuge]. Imagine there might be 2 or 3 in the office for such a people or clients, it's not easy. It won't be quicker like now, just like present when I'm here. Everything is just done quickly. If I were there with 20-10 I have to share with her, I don't think I would be here...Or also having time with my keyworker to chat like I do here.”

Another client fed back about the support she receives from her keyworker:

“ My keyworkers put things into a different perspective so you don't have to put up with that. There is help out there...My keyworker she'll sit there all night if you want her to, that's how good my keyworker is. I haven't got no bad word against them.”

The women gave detailed feedback about what sort of help they felt benefitted them:

- Help to link in with other professions e.g. GP, solicitor, counsellor, carers, immigration advisor
- Help to make applications and fill in forms
- Knowledge about the local area
- Support with civil and criminal justice processes
- Someone to talk things through
- Advocacy
- Practical help e.g. accessing benefits
- Planning for the future – especially finding somewhere new to live
- Emotional support
- Peer support from others who have had similar experiences

Consultation with staff and managers from frontline services very much reflected these as areas of importance, but also flagged up the importance of specialist, trauma-informed, support that could be tailored to meet the intersectional needs of survivors. For example, ensuring that professional interpreting was available for survivors who needed it and that mothers could access help with parenting and support for their children. The importance of the relational aspect of support was also flagged:

“ Having that daily contact with residents allow[s] us to build a trusting relationship which would then allow us to gauge when it is time to action those need[s]; addressing isolation.”

This was flagged as being particularly important where women are in crisis, as the relationship with their keyworker gives them confidence to ask for help.

Benefits of the communal environment

The benefits of a communal refuge for survivors were flagged by both survivors and staff. For example, OE felt that one of the key things she wanted from a refuge was access to a support network:

“ Having not been to a refuge I don't know what it's like, but I'd imagine if you've got people coming there from similar situations there is a natural sort of support network of people who are helping each other. Even if it's just letting your kids play together, something like that.”



Where women had experienced the communal refuge environment, they were very positive about the support they had received from other residents:

“ You can actually get other women in refuge you trust; you do tend to sit and talk. The other female can relate to what that other woman is saying so I do think it is actually a good point to be fair. They could actually give you advice.”

Survivors who had also experience group work in refuges, highlighted the benefit of this in helping them to understand their experiences of domestic abuse:

“ To be honest it is actually a good point. I did do [a group work programme], but I didn't finish it. It was actually quite interesting. It was pointing out the start of domestic violence. Mental abuse, showing you the awareness signs. I didn't finish the course, but it was quite interesting, yeah [group work] would be a good thing because some people, obviously if they have only been in refuge for the first time it is good for them so they can see the signs of how it starts off with mental abuse and controlling behaviour.”

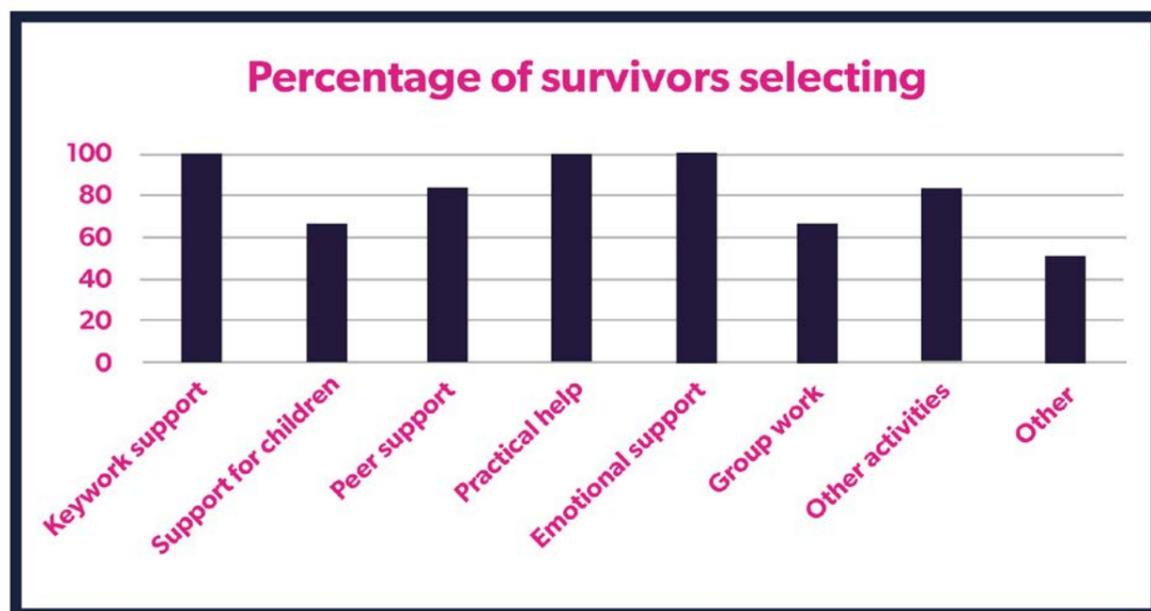
Staff flagged the way that women in refuges offer support to one another, whether this is by offering emotional support to another resident, helping another mother to source school uniform, or helping women to settle in. They also saw real value in celebrating religious or cultural festivals together as a group and referenced the empowerment that peer support offers in helping survivors recognise that they are not alone in their experiences of abuse.

What survivors want from dispersed accommodation

It is clear from this consultation that refuge accommodation is much more than a roof over the survivor's head. Instead, a stay in a refuge is an opportunity to access intensive multi-faceted specialist support to aid recovery. All survivors should be able to access support that is on a par with this, whether they are accommodated in a communal refuge, a self-contained flat in a block, or a dispersed refuge unit.

This was expressed by survivors themselves: our consultation asked survivors what help they would want to get in dispersed accommodation, with the option to choose from eight possible categories of support. The findings of this are illustrated below:

Every survivor consulted wished to be able to access keyworker support; practical help, such as



applying for benefits, finding somewhere to leave and access legal help, and emotional support. One survivor, LU, who had been unable to access refuge commented that she would value support from a key worker:

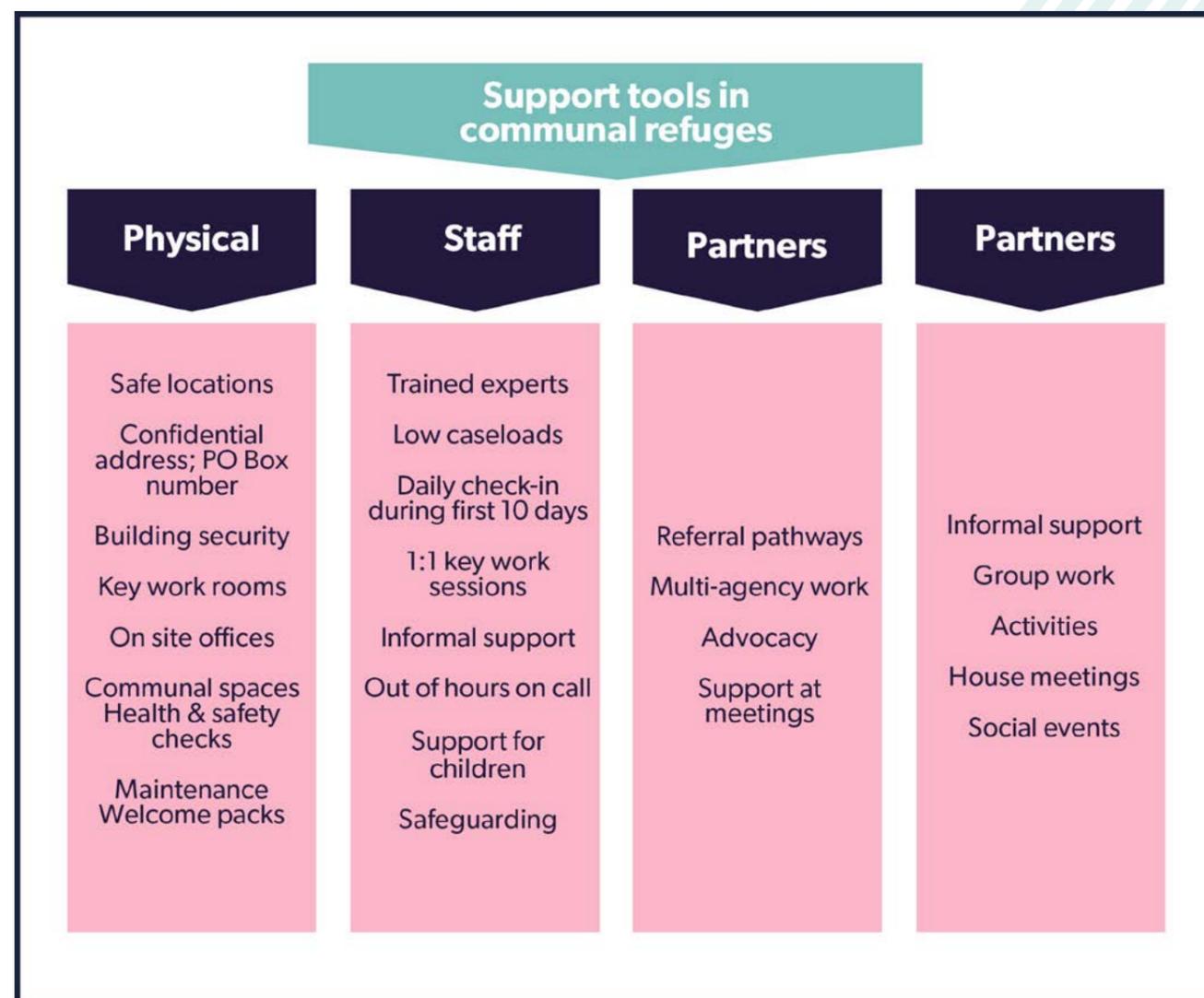
“That would be really helpful in that stage where you're fleeing domestic violence. Feeling that there is someone out there and I feel like all these women need that because you just facing this trauma, it's nice to know that you're not lonely.”

She also noted that she would really have benefitted from practical support:

“100% so that was the main thing that was making me [have] sleepless nights myself. So [name of town] benefits they screwed it up three time in my case. They [were] threatening me with debt and I just [...] should cover what they threatening me to pay, because they said I'm not allowed because I'm earning too much. Then Universal Credit said no they should pay that. I had to make lots of complaints with the housing benefits to get somewhere because I knew their decision was not right. So there was lots of days and hours that I spent writing this complaints and fighting for my case, when I could spend that time with my son and not taking days off etc. But there are not many women out there who will understand that, so I 100% agree. They need that help massively because it's good to have someone on their side, as you see the government council they are not always 100% sure and right with us.”

Ensuring access to key elements of refuge support in a dispersed accommodation environment

Our consultation with Refuge’s frontline staff and different levels of managers, identified systems and practices that are in place in place in refuges to facilitate delivery of support to survivors. These systems are illustrated in the diagram below.



An important element of this feasibility study is developing a model that ensures that survivors can access these different layers of support in a dispersed accommodation environment. However, during consultation some specific concerns about the nuances of a dispersed accommodation model for survivors arose.

Barriers to support in dispersed accommodation

Whilst the refuge model has been established for fifty years, dispersed refuges are relatively new in the sector. As with any new model, there are particular concerns that must be negotiated and solutions identified to ensure that dispersed accommodation can demonstrate best practice. Some of the barriers to achieving best practice that emerged during consultation are described below.

How to support the survivor in their own home: refuges generally offer key work rooms, or office spaces to meet with survivors. Although the refuge is the survivor’s home, albeit temporarily, there is a delineation between support spaces and the survivor’s private space. Trauma-informed practice indicates that support sessions do not take place in the survivor’s own room. In fact, within Refuge, policy states that keyworkers do not access survivors’ rooms without prior notice. Given that in dispersed accommodation, the whole property is the survivor’s private space, how can we reconcile this with the need for a location to provide support?

Providing support across multiple sites: concerns were raised as to how support could be effectively delivered if one member of staff was responsible for multiple properties, given that the usual refuge model entails all residents receiving support in one location.

Confidentiality and security of units: some staff were concerned that having properties out in the community increased the risk of properties being identified as safe accommodation. Aligned with this is also the need to keep properties safe. Refuges use tools such as CCTV, secure fencing / boundaries to provide security and privacy for residents. The postal addresses are not publicised: PO Box numbers are used to receive mail. How can we ensure that risks are minimised without being overly intrusive for residents, without the added security of a communal environment?

Tenure type: most refuges issue residents with licence agreements, as opposed to assured shorthold tenancies. This reflects the fact that refuges are a form of temporary accommodation. This enables a survivor to make a homeless application to the local authority that they choose to settle in, which would usually give the survivor a priority banding when bidding for social housing.

The licence also gives the refuge provider a tool for dealing with serious breaches of the conditions of occupancy, such as male breaches (where a survivor allows the refuge address to be known by a man, or admits a man into the building), violent offences against other residents, or possession of drugs on the premises. In these situations, the decision may be made to evict the survivor from the refuge, but they can still be supported to approach a local authority for crisis accommodation, as they cannot, through case law, be deemed to be intentionally homeless if they were accommodated in temporary accommodation²².

During consultation there was a concern raised that survivors in dispersed accommodation would automatically qualify for assured shorthold tenancies because they were sole occupants of a property and this would cause problems by:

- Making it harder for the survivor to move on into their own home
- Taking away an avenue of redress if the survivor breached their conditions of occupancy – meaning that Refuge would have to go through lengthy court proceedings in the circumstances that eviction became necessary

Safeguarding staff: some of the staff consulted raised concerns about the safety of staff if they were supporting survivors in a dispersed unit. In a refuge, there are generally at least two staff on site. There are also well-established procedures to safeguard staff if lone working does become necessary. There

is clearly a need to adapt these processes to keep staff safe when their main role is supporting survivors in several individual dispersed units.

Safeguarding survivors and their children: within a refuge the presence of staff on site offers a layer of safeguarding oversight to survivors and their children. The refuge conditions of occupancy and house rules also exist to ensure a safe environment. For example, they set out the way children should be treated in the refuge; outline what will happen if a survivor goes missing from the refuge and explain the boundaries of confidentiality in safeguarding scenarios.

Refuge workers have a constant overview of the wellbeing of refuge residents: they can conduct welfare checks on survivors if they haven't been seen for a while, set up regular check-ins with a survivor who is known to be suicidal, or help survivors to keep to the terms of a child protection plan. This reassurance can sometimes make the difference between a child remaining with the mother or being removed into local authority care, as children's services may agree with a survivor that she can keep custody of her child provided she enters a women's refuge. The question is, how can a similar level of safeguarding assurance be provided to survivors within dispersed accommodation?

Support for children: refuges offer a range of support aimed at children, ranging from provision of children's play equipment, activity sessions and days out, to support from a children's support worker (CSW), who can help children to settle in, organise play sessions, provide child care during key work sessions and support mothers with issues relating to parenting. Whilst this type of support is not currently consistently provided across all refuges (primarily due to lack of funding), clearly the ideal would be that children in any form of safe accommodation could access play facilities and specialist CSW support – in line with the DA Act, which states that children are victims of domestic abuse in their own right.

Health and safety: health and safety checks in refuges consist of daily, weekly and monthly checks, as well as other periodic checks, such as gas boiler servicing. These checks are important for ensuring the wellbeing of vulnerable survivors and their children. Questions about how these checks could be conducted in dispersed properties arose during consultation.

Cleaning: in refuges cleaning of survivors' own rooms is generally the responsibility of the resident; cleaning of communal areas may be the responsibility of all residents on a rota basis, or the refuge may employ a cleaner. However, in a dispersed property cleaning would be the responsibility of the occupant. Concerns were raised about preparing a property for occupancy once a survivor had moved on. Clearly new residents should be able to access a clean property, but cleaning a house or flat from top to bottom is a big job. There were concerns about how staff would manage this.



Utility bills: within refuges utility bills are generally managed by the provider, although there are some exceptions within self-contained refuges. For example, at one of Refuge's sites, where residents have their own flats, the utilities are on pre-payment meters: residents are given a key / card when they move in, which has some credit on it. They then manage the payments themselves, although the accounts remain in Refuge's name. The meters are logged as belonging to vulnerable clients, so there are protective measures attached to them e.g., if the emergency credit runs out after working hours the gas / electricity will remain on until the next working day.

There was a lot of discussion about how to manage utilities for residents of dispersed properties during the consultation: some staff felt it was better to empower clients by supporting them to manage their own bills, otherwise when the survivor moves to their own home, they struggle the reality of managing bills. Others felt it was more practical for the bills to come centrally to Refuge.

Furnishing: the cost of setting up multiple properties with furniture and white goods is likely to be high. How can this cost be managed? Additionally, we want survivors to be housed in high quality environments with access to the same facilities as women in refuges. Access to IT provision was much discussed. It was generally agreed that internet access should be provided, to facilitate access to the Universal Credit portal.



The model

The model described below has been developed by Refuge and is designed to ensure that the elements of support in refuges detailed above can be replicated for survivors in dispersed accommodation. It also incorporates solutions for the concerns raised in relation to provision of dispersed accommodation.

Physical

To enable delivery of best practice support the dispersed accommodation should be part of a wider safe accommodation service, including refuges, to meet the needs of all survivors.

Location of properties

In response to practical concerns about staff having to travel substantial distances between properties, creating issues for support delivery, Refuge will utilise a **cluster model** consisting of several properties dispersed within a discrete geographical location, within easily travelling distance from each other. Properties also need to be within **walking distance** of facilities of shops, schools, GP surgery etc.

To negate concerns about delivering support in the survivor’s home, the service will ideally offer a **central support hub** where survivors can access one-to-one keywork support, group work, support for children and activities. This would consist of an office with access to a meeting room, which is within walking distance of all dispersed accommodation properties. If this is not feasible (i.e., due to cost), **an office within one dispersed property** could be utilised as a base for staff and for offering keywork. Men within the dispersed accommodation will be supported alongside a specialist provider such as Equation. We will develop pathways for men to access enhanced support such as group work.

The latter model could benefit survivors who might need additional support e.g., those with multiple disadvantage, as the presence of staff on site would add a layer of safeguarding protection. However, to protect the confidentiality of residents, the office would need to be separate from accommodation.

Safe locations

Confidential address; PO Box number

Building security

Key work rooms

On site offices

Communal spaces
Health & safety checks

Maintenance
Welcome packs

Type of property

The scheme should offer a **variety of unit sizes** to meet the needs of different groups. Ranging from 3–4-bedroom houses, to 1-bedroom flats/houses. The cluster of properties should include at least one property suitable for survivors with disabilities. Some properties in each cluster should be able to accommodate pets.

To provide flexibility and minimise voids, Refuge will promote a flexible access policy in terms of referrals. For example, a male victim could be accommodated in any property that fits his needs; survivors that may feel isolated in a property on their own, could share a larger property if not occupied by a family.

Tenure

As part of the feasibility study, Refuge sought advice on appropriate tenure for dispersed accommodation from a housing solicitor, Donna McCarthy, a partner in Devonshires. In her advice note she summarised the position as follows,



“The provision of dispersed accommodation may, on the face of it, meet all of the features of a tenancy, however by its definition it is intended to be temporary and not designed for anything more than short term, transitory accommodation. Taking into account recent cases in relation to the provision of interim accommodation under Part VII of the Housing Act 1996 I am of the view that, on balance, it is arguable that the grant of dispersed accommodation would not meet the definition of a dwelling and should, therefore, be an excluded licence.”

Although it was noted that the application of an excluded license agreement to a dispersed accommodation tenure has not been tested in court, the solicitor did advise that, “for there to be a tenancy there are four essential qualities that should exist - identifiable parties; identifiable premises; a period of tenancy and exclusive possession and if one or more is missing then it will usually be a licence.”

Refuge feels satisfied that it is legitimate for tenure in dispersed properties to be governed by **excluded licence agreements** because:

1. Survivors occupying the dispersed properties must allow entry to Refuge staff for the purposes of housing management (including health and safety checks, and cleaning) and support
2. There is an automatic right of entry to Refuge staff at any time if urgent issues arise within the property, or there is a concern about a survivor’s wellbeing and a welfare check is necessary, or for security e.g., there are concerns that an abuser has gained access
3. The property is a form of temporary accommodation, of the same nature of a refuge and

is not a dwelling, as established by case law (e.g. R (N) v Lewisham Borough Council [2015], Dacorum Borough Council v Bucknall [2017] and Abudah Ali Ibrahim v Haringey LBC [2021]). Survivors will be required to engage with support to secure move on to permanent accommodation as a condition of their licence.

Confidentiality and security

Properties will be selected to ensure that they are 'hidden in plain sight'. They will be typical of the neighbourhood and not stand out as being different, or institutional in nature. Whilst properties will be close, they will not be so close as to draw attention by visits from project staff.

Properties will be fitted with **CCTV**, but this will be sited as discreetly as possible, for example, utilising 'Ring' type doorbells for screening visitors. Access to any rear entry points will be restricted with secure fencing. Properties will be fitted with arson proof letterboxes and the properties will utilise a central PO Box number for mail (the project staff will collect mail from the Post Office sorting office and distribute it). Doors and windows will have secure locks and windows will have restrictors so they cannot be opened more than a few centimetres.

Properties will be flagged with local police to ensure a quick response in case of any incident. Survivors will have access to a panic button to summon police.

Health and safety, maintenance, and cleaning

To ensure properties are maintained to a good standard, Refuge will employ **housing support workers**, whose sole job is to oversee the housing management of the dispersed units. Their job will entail:

- Weekly and monthly health and safety checks to the whole property – residents will be supported to report any day-to-day issues that arise within the properties
- Organising periodic safety checks, such as PAT testing, servicing of boilers
- Oversight of maintenance; dealing with maintenance issues
- Organising professional deep cleaning when residents move out
- Preparing properties for new residents e.g., making up beds; stocking cupboards with starter pack of food; supplying toiletries and cleaning materials; providing emergency clothing and toys as needed

Furnishing

All properties will be **fully furnished** with mid-range quality furniture. The cost of furniture will be built into the housing benefit budget.

Utilities

Utility bills will be paid by the survivor through a pre-payment meter. Meters will be pre-loaded with credit to cover the initial period of a survivors' stay.

Staff

Staffing model

As highlighted above, housing management will largely be the responsibility of housing support workers. Support will be delivered by specialist **floating support workers** (FSWs). Within the proposed model FSWs can carry a higher caseload than refuge workers (maximum 6-7 clients per FSW, compared to 4-5 clients per refuge worker), since they are not responsible for most housing management. The ideal model will include resilience in staffing numbers in the form of additional workers who can hold cases during leave periods.

The FSWs will be based at the hub / office where survivors will come to access support, where feasible. Support can be provided in the property if the survivor cannot travel for any reason – if they have a disability, or several small children, for example.

The FSWs and housing support workers will have dedicated line management.

Out of hours support

As in our refuges, all staff will participate in an on-call rota to provide out-of-hours support for survivors in the dispersed properties. The on-call worker can be reached via one consistent phone number. She will always be supported by an on-call manager, who can assist with complex issues.

Support for children

Children will be supported by **peripatetic children's workers** who will work across clusters depending on need. Ideally, they will work from the central support hubs; otherwise they will work from children's centres in the locality. These children's workers will replicate the role of the refuge CSWs, offering play work, activities, guidance and support for the parent.

Training

Staff will undertake Refuge's full training programme consisting of 20 specialist training courses focusing on the law, GDPR, housing management, safeguarding, casework and aspects of support. Additionally, dispersed accommodation staff will undertake



training to further equip them for their role, such as conflict resolution, de-escalation and establishing boundaries.

Support delivery

The support offered by the FSWs will include:

- Specialist support and safety planning, to reduce risks and harm for survivors and their children
- Ongoing casework support, including referrals to specialist advice and practical support, such as legal advice around civil and criminal remedies
- Emotional support
- Empowering survivors with information on their rights and options, demystifying complex statutory systems and dispelling myths perpetuated by perpetrators and wider society
- Support to cope and thrive in the dispersed accommodation
- Move on support to secure permanent accommodation
- Financial empowerment work to maximise income, including support with debt

As highlighted above, most support delivery will take place outside of the survivor's home. This is in keeping with a trauma informed support model. However, there may be some activities that could take place in the home. For example, cooking together, budgeting, completion of benefits applications, children's activities: activities that are dedicated to empowering the survivor, or helping them to live more independently.

As in our refuges, support will be **tailored** to the needs of survivors and can be more or less intensive according to where the survivor is in their journey. For example, when the survivor first accesses the accommodation, support can be daily.

Refuge will partner with other specialist organisations to ensure survivor's intersectional needs can be met effectively. This may entail co-working, or another agency may lead on support delivery for some groups, such as male survivors. The budget for the dispersed accommodation service will include an allocation to buy in specialist support of this nature.

Refuge will ensure that our hubs / service offices are women-only spaces, since we know that the majority of survivors who need to flee abuse are women²³. However, to ensure best practice support for men, or LGBT survivors who may feel uncomfortable in a women-only space, we will establish pathways to peer support with local support organisations, such as men's groups.

Safeguarding

Refuge's usual child and adult safeguarding procedures will apply to work with survivors in dispersed accommodation. All staff will undertake Refuge internal safeguarding training and training in local safeguarding procedures.

This model is designed to promote the well-being of vulnerable survivors and their children by ensuring that there is regular contact with the specialist key worker. In situations where an adult or child is considered at risk, the FSW can attend the property without notice. The usual locally agreed process of making safeguarding referrals will be followed.

If a child is subject to a child protection plan, the FSW can provide support around this, such

as supporting the survivor during social workers' visits to the home and offering advocacy at statutory meetings.

Where there is a risk to a vulnerable adult, the FSWs can agree a schedule of contact to ensure the survivors' wellbeing.

Where a survivor is identified as being at high risk (either through risk score, or professional judgement), the service will make a referral to the MARAC (multi-agency risk assessment conference).

Staff welfare

To understand any risks posed by survivors to staff, the referral process will include an assessment of any factors that might create risk, such as use of drugs by a resident, or a history of violence. Depending on the outcome of this assessment, protective strategies can be put into place, such as dual working with another member of staff.

The following strategies will be used in all cases to safeguard staff:

- Use of an electronic security alert that will alert a call centre if activated; the call centre will then alert police
- Logging of visits with a buddy, including check in at the end of the visit
- Dual working at all initial visits enabling increased safety until a full picture of risk is gained. Dual working may continue for some clients.



Partners

Referrals

Referrals will be received through the usual routes: through the local domestic abuse service; via the National Domestic Abuse Helpline, from area housing teams, or other professionals and through other specific groups, including Respect's Men's Advice Line and Galop (supporting LGBT victims).

The referral process will be like that in refuges, in that it will ascertain whether it is safe for the survivor to be in the area; it will seek to understand the needs of survivors and their children and the risks that they face. For a dispersed accommodation referral, it will be important to understand whether this type of accommodation is right for the survivor. For example, if they are feeling very isolated and low, accommodating them in a property on their own may not be appropriate.

Partners

Information from partners will often be vital in informing the referral process. With survivor's permission we may speak to other professionals to gauge their views on how well the survivor will fare in a dispersed property.

Partnership working will continue throughout the survivor's stay in the property, supporting Refuge to **meet the survivor's needs holistically**. The use of the hub / office model will allow space for partners to meet with survivors away from their home. Refuge will always advocate for survivors to ensure their needs in relation to domestic abuse are understood.

We will also build partnerships with individuals who can offer **enhanced activities** for survivors. This might include first aid classes, CV workshops, or craft activities. All of which will provide opportunities for developing skills and for accessing peer support.

Peer support

Peer support

The key to ensuring that survivors in dispersed accommodation can benefit from the value of peer support is by creating spaces and opportunities for them to interact with other survivors who can understand and normalise their experiences of abuse.

As highlighted above the dispersed model will include physical spaces where survivors can meet within a group: to take part in formal group work programmes, activities and informal drop-ins.

Where a survivor is unable to physically access external spaces, Refuge will create new opportunities to access peer support. For example, Refuge can run our group work programme online (a model that was successfully tested during the pandemic).

Informal support

Group work

Activities

House meetings

Social events

Testing the model

Pilot

Refuge has an opportunity to test this dispersed accommodation model in Warwickshire, where we already run a county-wide domestic violence and abuse support service consisting of community-based provision and refuge accommodation. The local authority commissioning team have used data from the Warwickshire needs assessment to understand the requirement for additional safe accommodation in the county and are commissioning Refuge to deliver a pilot project consisting of 36 units of dispersed accommodation, spread across each of Warwickshire's the five districts and boroughs.

Refuge has worked very closely with Commissioners to design a model for delivery of support in Warwickshire, which has been based on the findings of this feasibility study.

The project is currently at mobilisation stage. We expect that the first properties will be on-boarded in early summer 2023.

Refuge will work alongside Commonweal Housing to evaluate the findings of this pilot and disseminate learnings.

Staffing model

As an example, a cluster of six properties will be staffed by:

- 1 service manager (time pro-rated across wider pilot)
- 1 floating support worker
- 1 housing support worker
- 0.5 children's support worker (time pro-rated across wider pilot)
- Support from senior service manager to implement (time pro-rated across wider pilot)

Support model

With the Warwickshire pilot both support models will be trialled:

1. The 'gold star' model – featuring an external support hub, close to dispersed properties, where survivors can go to access one-to-one support, peer support, group work and activities.
2. On site support – staff have an office base in one residential property (the residence is separate from the office); this is a space to offer one-to-one keywork. Group work and activities will take place in venues such as children's centres.

Financial feasibility

Warwickshire County Council initially provided a support budget of £10,000 per property for this pilot, however following development of the model, the County Council subsequently bolstered this offer considerably, e.g. adding funding to cover costs of enhanced support for children (as victim's within their own right) through children's support workers. This income will be supplemented by Housing Benefit.

The above support structure is feasible within budget if housing management costs are costed to Housing Benefit. However, to remain within the budget, the on-site support delivery model was chosen, whereby an office is sited within one property and community rooms are utilised for group work.

In Warwickshire, the Commissioners developed a specification alongside Refuge's development of the best practice model. The "on site support" model - whereby an office is sited within one property and community rooms are utilised for group work - was outlined within the specification prior to Refuge developing the "gold standard" approach. Both models are being trialled within Warwickshire to evaluate their effectiveness.

Refuge aimed to stick as close to the original budget proposed by Warwickshire during market engagement (excluding the enhancements). The budget provided from Warwickshire County Council covers the following:

- Staffing costs (support element)
- Set up costs, including implementation support
- Head office support costs
- Project costs e.g., travel, insurance, stationary, IT and phones
- Recruitment
- Budget for renting community meeting rooms
- Resident welfare

- Translation
- Budget for spot purchasing specialist support

The Housing Benefit budget covers:

- Staffing costs (housing management element)
- Rent
- Maintenance and cleaning
- Utilities
- Set up costs (furnishing)
- Council tax
- Voids allowance

Evaluation of pilot

Refuge will conduct an internal evaluation of the Warwickshire pilot at the end of the first full year of delivery. The evaluation will include:

- Consultation with staff, commissioners and residents
- Evaluation of outcomes for and experiences of survivors accessing support through the two different support models
- Evaluation of project data: referral levels, client groups supported, void levels, outcomes achieved
- Evaluation of the financial model

The findings of this evaluation will be used to adjust the model and will feed into a final set of good practice guidance for the sector and commissioners.

A note for commissioners

Good practice

The Warwickshire safe accommodation pilot is an example of good practice in the way it has been developed. Although the County has aspired to offer further units of safe accommodation to meet the needs of survivors that are not normally housed in refuges since the advent of the DA Act, Commissioners have taken the time to consult with DA sector specialists and housing providers about the most effective model for support. This is in contrast to other commissioning activity seen by Refuge in the year since April 2021, when the DA Act came into law.

Concern – property sourcing

A key concern relating to new commissioning opportunities for dispersed safe accommodation is the requirement for bidders/providers to source properties as a requirement of the safe accommodation provision – often at short notice. Examples of commissioning activity since the introduction of the DA Act include a new safe accommodation offer in southern England requiring provision of five properties, and a similar provision in northern England, requiring six properties. Another, central England-based

local authority commissioned a service consisting of over 60 units; all of which needed to be sourced by an incoming provider.

Commissioners of traditional women's refuge services usually (but not always) include the buildings as part of the commissioned opportunity, whether these were provided by the local authority, or another landlord: usually a housing association. Occasionally an incoming provider would be required to source property, but this was not the norm.

With commissioning of new safe accommodation provision, subsequent to the DA Act, providers are being expected to source multiple properties within a very short time frame.

Refuge recommends that commissioners follow Warwickshire County Council's example and work alongside providers to develop pathways for sourcing accommodation; consult on the support model and give time for implementation, particularly when properties do need to be sourced.

Conclusion

The process of developing this model for delivery of best practice support in dispersed accommodation highlighted the value that survivors place on the refuge support model, whereby they can access specialist help for a whole range of needs, a safe space to stay whilst recovering from domestic abuse and access to peer support to aid recovery. This underlined the need to make sure that support for survivors in dispersed units would equate to that offered in refuges.

This model has been carefully thought out, with support from many of Refuge's expert frontline practitioners, who collectively have decades of experience in supporting survivors of domestic abuse. Whilst they raised concerns about potential pitfalls in delivery of dispersed accommodation, they also thought practically and creatively to come up with solutions. The resulting model is robust and resilient and we are confident that it will effectively translate into a pilot project.

Whilst it is possible to replicate these facets of support for survivors in dispersed accommodation, to facilitate best practice commissioners must ensure that there is sufficient funding to allow for housing support, specialist casework support, support for children and sufficient service management to oversee the provision effectively. This is not a model that could be effectively delivered if there was insufficient budget available, as we believe this would put survivors at risk.

Appendix One – Interview Script

Survivor engagement Dispersed accommodation consultation questions

(Describe the difference between mainstream refuges and dispersed accommodation i.e. dispersed accommodation is individual properties that are out in the community, are separate from a regular refuge building, but still offer casework support; still temporary (not permanent homes). Mainstream refuges offer blocks of safe accommodation in discreet locations that accommodate several families in either communal settings, or self-contained flats within a larger block)

Demographic questions:

What gender do you identify with?

How old are you? 16-24; 25-29; 30-34; 35-39; 40-44; 45-49; 50-54; 55-59; 60-64; 65-69; 70-79; 80+

How would you describe your ethnicity?

Do you need an interpreter to communicate fluently in English?

How would you describe your sexuality?

Would you describe yourself as having a disability?

If so, is the disability related to mental health; mobility issue; chronic illness; sensory need; learning disability; other?

Do you have children that live with you?

If so, what are their genders and ages?

Your accommodation:

What accommodation do you currently occupy?

Do you consider this accommodation to be safe?

If it is not safe where would you rather be living?

(If not currently in refuge) Have you ever tried to access refuge accommodation?

If yes, were you successful in finding a place?

If no, what was the barrier to you getting a refuge place? E.g. no room; family size too big; not able to support your needs

Please get more detail e.g. about needs – whether the needs relate to substance use, disability etc.

If no, would you have ever wanted to be accommodated in a refuge?

If yes, what stopped you from trying to get a place?

Support

For survivors who have experience of living in refuge accommodation, or are living in refuge accommodation now (not dispersed properties)

What support does the refuge offer you?

Are there any gaps in the support that you are offered? What?

Aside from support, what other benefits are there from living in refuge accommodation?

Do you (did you) get help from anyone else whilst you are (were) living in the refuge?

If so, who?

Can you see any benefits to living in a dispersed accommodation unit? If so, what?

For survivors who have never lived in a refuge:

What support do you think a refuge would offer you? What needs would it help you to meet?

Who supports you at the moment? E.g. friend, domestic abuse worker, other professional?

Do you get all of the support that you need?

If no, what other support would you need?

Dispersed accommodation

Could a dispersed refuge unit work (have worked) for you as safe accommodation?

If not, why?

If yes, why?

Would you have any concerns about living in this type of accommodation? If so, what? E.g. safety, security, unable to access support

What facilities would you expect in a dispersed refuge property?

What help would you want/have wanted in a dispersed refuge?

- Regular support from a key worker
- Support for my children e.g. play activities, support with parenting
- Peer support i.e. support from others who have had experiences of abuse
- Practical help e.g. getting benefits sorted, finding somewhere permanent to live, access to legal remedies
- Emotional support

- Group work
- Other activities e.g. workshops, crafting, cooking
- Other

Is there anything about living in a dispersed unit that would be better than a regular refuge? E.g. less rules, staff not on site, not having to live with other women (share facilities)

If you lived in a dispersed refuge would you want to be supported at home, or off-site e.g. at a community facility?

How often would you want to meet with a key-worker?

Appendix two - references

Endnotes

- 1 [NWT A-2022-Final-A.pdf \(womensaid.org.uk\)](#)
- 2 [Domestic Abuse Act: Factsheet - Home Office in the media \(blog.gov.uk\)](#)
- 3 [Delivery of support to victims of domestic abuse in domestic abuse safe accommodation services - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)
- 4 [Local Authority Domestic Abuse Duty: 2022 to 2023 funding allocations - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)
- 5 [Sheffield-Safe-Accommodation-Needs-Assessment-2021-FINAL.pdf \(sheffielddact.org.uk\)](#)
- 6 [Domestic Abuse Procurement Final 07.03.2022.pdf \(sheffield.gov.uk\)](#)
- 7 Unpublished data from 'Routes to Support' (Women's Aid, 2022)
- 8 Unpublished data from Routes to Support (Women's Aid, 2022)
- 9 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/outcomesfordisabledpeopleintheuk/2020F>
- 10 Public Health England, 2019, 'Disability and domestic abuse' Public Health England
- 11 Hague, Thiara, Magowan and Mullender, 2008, 'Making the Links Disabled Women and Domestic Violence, Women's Aid Federation, England
- 12 Stay Safe East, 2021, 'Stay Safe East Response to the Women's Health Strategy Call for Evidence'
- 13 Meakin, B. (2019), 'Shaping our Lives: A Refuge for All Project and Findings Report' Shaping our Lives and DCMS
- 14 Bashall, R. and Irving, A. (2019) 'Housing Rights of Disabled Women Survivors' Safe as Houses Conference Presentation
- 15 Unpublished data from 'Routes to Support' (Women's Aid, 2022)
- 16 Solace, 2019. 'Safe as Houses'. Solace Women's Aid
- 17 Hailes et al, 2018. 'Hand in Hand. Survivors of Multiple Disadvantage Discuss Service and Support'. AVA, Agenda and Lloyds Bank Foundation
- 18 Nicholson-Pallet, P., 2022. Nowhere to Turn 2022. The Women's Aid Federation of England.
- 19 Women's Aid, 2017. Nowhere to Turn. The Women's Aid Federation of England.
- 20 ['Where do you go? There's nowhere': Developing safe accommodation options for domestic abuse survivors | Homeless Link](#)
- 21 Refuge, 2022. '2022-25 Our Strategy.' Refuge
- 22 In *Moran v Manchester City Council*, 2009, the court found that a woman evicted from a refuge for victims of domestic violence by reason of her conduct could not be regarded as intentionally homeless because it would not have been reasonable for her to occupy the refuge indefinitely. See, for example: [Case Comment: Moran v Manchester City Council \[2009\] UKHL 36 – UKSCBlog](#)
- 23 E.g., the Crown Prosecution Service website says, "Women are more likely to be subjected to prolonged, repeated and more severe forms of abuse or sexual violence that becomes increasingly frequent and more serious the longer it continues. Women are more likely to be killed as a result of domestic abuse." (CPS, 2022)

About Refuge

Refuge is the largest specialist provider of gender-based violence services in the country, supporting over 7,000 women and children on any given day. Refuge opened the world's first refuge in 1971 in Chiswick and, 50 years later, provides: a national network of 48 refuges, community outreach programmes, child support services, and independent advocacy services for those experiencing domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence. We also run specialist services for survivors of tech abuse, modern slavery, 'honour'-based violence, and female genital mutilation. Refuge runs the 24hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline which receives hundreds more calls and contacts from women experiencing domestic abuse every day and can be reached on

0808 2000 247.
www.refuge.org.uk
www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk
www.refugetechsafety.org

