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All-Party Parliamentary Group on  
Domestic Violence and Abuse

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# A safe home for every survivor: Extending priority need to all survivors of domestic abuse

## Campaign briefing

Too often people become homeless as a result of domestic abuse. Official statistics for England show that in 2017, 6,850 people cited the breakdown of a violent relationship as the main reason for their homelessness.<sup>1</sup> This figure does not include people who were not eligible for an offer of settled housing, or who were not able to make a homelessness application.

Research in 2014 found that 61% of women and 16% of men who were homeless had experienced violence or abuse from a partner<sup>2</sup>, whilst one in five women experiencing or having experienced extensive physical and sexual violence reported having been homeless at some point in their lives.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, research from St Mungo's found that half of their female clients have experienced domestic violence and a third of the women said domestic violence had contributed to their homelessness.<sup>4</sup>

For people fleeing domestic abuse, access to safe, secure accommodation is vital. Without this, there is a risk that survivors will be left with no option but to return to a dangerous situation or sleep rough, putting themselves at risk of further abuse and exploitation.

**We are calling on the Government to ensure that the forthcoming Domestic Abuse Bill makes provision to ensure that all survivors of domestic abuse have access to a safe home.**

**This could be achieved by ensuring that everyone fleeing domestic abuse who is homeless is automatically considered in priority need for settled housing, rather than being subject to the vulnerability test to determine whether they qualify.**

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<sup>1</sup> MHCLG, Live tables on homelessness: Table 774

<sup>2</sup> P. Mackie and I. Thomas, Nations Apart? Experiences of single homeless people across Great Britain, London, 2014, Crisis. [https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/20608/crisis\\_nations\\_apart\\_2014.pdf](https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/20608/crisis_nations_apart_2014.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Scott, S. and McManus, S. (DMSS Research for Agenda). (2016) Hidden Hurt, violence, abuse and disadvantage in the lives of women. Published [online](#): Agenda

<sup>4</sup> St Mungo's, Rebuilding Shattered Lives, *The final report: Getting the right help at the right time to women who are homeless or at risk*, London: St Mungo's.

## What are survivors of domestic abuse currently entitled to?

The Homelessness Reduction Act (2017) means that local authorities now have a legal duty to provide meaningful support to everyone who approaches them as homeless. This includes support to help prevent their homelessness from occurring in the first place, and for those people who are already homeless, help to find them a home.

Despite this welcome change, there is no guarantee in place that people fleeing domestic abuse will receive an offer of settled housing if these two options fail.

Currently, unless a person experiencing domestic violence can prove they are “more vulnerable than an ordinary person would be if they became homeless” then they would not be defined as being in priority need and eligible for an offer of settled housing. To be considered ‘in priority need’ a person must either: be pregnant; have dependent children; be aged 16-17, or if a care leaver aged 18-20, or be vulnerable as a result of mental illness, disability, risk of domestic abuse or time spent in care, prison or the armed forces.

Experiences show, however, that domestic abuse in isolation is rarely considered to qualify someone as in priority need; particularly without dependent children. In 2017, only two per cent of people were found to be in priority need and made an offer of settled housing because they were vulnerable as a result of domestic abuse.<sup>5</sup>

**We argue that all persons who experience domestic abuse are, by definition, vulnerable and therefore they should be placed in the automatic priority need category.**

Providing evidence to demonstrate vulnerability can be traumatic and near impossible for people who have experienced domestic abuse. There is evidence of local authorities consistently failing to provide people fleeing from domestic abuse the help they need and of the ‘vulnerability test’ being used as a gatekeeping tool.

*“Housing providers will request proof of violence making clients reluctant to make a homeless application.” Homeless charity worker responding to ELHP survey, 2017*

*“I felt like I was a nuisance, and my concerns for mine and my children’s life weren’t justified. If it wasn’t for having a separate domestic violence support worker I would have been gaslighted into staying in the abusive relationships. I feel they took advantage of how vulnerable I was.” Survivor, 2018*

Proving you are homeless due to domestic abuse can be distressing for survivors and there is a lack of consistency between local authorities when it comes to approach. There are accounts of survivors being told to return home to a dangerous situation to retrieve evidence to prove they are homeless due to domestic abuse. In some cases, survivors are also being asked to provide a criminal reference number. This is inappropriate as many survivors do not want to report abuse to the police. It could also result in survivors staying in a dangerous situation until it escalates and the police become involved.

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<sup>5</sup> MHCLG, Live tables on homelessness: Table 773

## The scale of the problem

Fifty-three per cent of survivors (52 out of 97) supported by the Women's Aid's No Woman Turned Away project, which provides additional support to women struggling to access refuge places, were prevented from making a valid homelessness application by their local authority.<sup>6</sup> **Nearly one quarter (23.1%) of these women were prevented from making a homeless application because they were told that they would not be in priority need.** Whilst all of the women who approached their local housing team should have been considered vulnerable, the majority of women (92.3%, 48 out of 52) who were refused assistance also met one of the other priority need categories. This included 31 women fleeing with children, 10 of whom had mental health support needs and three having a physical disability.

Crisis' No One Turned Away research also found that many local authorities were failing to adequately assist people presenting as homeless due to domestic abuse and that there was often a lack of sensitivity when dealing with survivors, with accounts of survivors being asked to recount their experience in public or told to return to the perpetrator.<sup>7</sup>

## How would this change to the law work?

We strongly welcome the new emphasis that the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017) places on prevention and would expect that as far as possible local authorities would be working with people fleeing domestic abuse to prevent their homelessness occurring in the first place.

However, for people who are fleeing domestic abuse, and whose homelessness cannot be prevented, given that they are by definition vulnerable, extending automatic priority need status would ensure that everyone fleeing domestic abuse would be given a safe and secure home. Crucially, it would prevent them from returning to a dangerous perpetrator or sleeping rough and putting themselves at risk of further abuse and exploitation.

Local authorities should not require a person to prove that they have been a victim of domestic abuse to provide them with a safe space to go. It is extremely unlikely that anyone would falsely present to a local authority as homeless due to domestic abuse, however references can be sought from domestic abuse services, such as the National Domestic Violence Helpline run in partnership by Women's Aid and Refuge, to confirm domestic abuse when finding survivors permanent accommodation.

Survivors of domestic abuse in Wales are already considered priority need. In Wales 11% (237) of households in priority need were in this status because of domestic abuse.<sup>8</sup> Seven per cent (147) were single person households. Although 12% (6,850) of households in England cited domestic abuse as the cause of their homelessness, only two per cent (1,330) were accepted as in priority because they were vulnerable due to domestic abuse. This means the remainder were considered a priority for other reasons i.e. having dependent children or pregnancy.<sup>9</sup> An analysis of the impact of the Housing Act (Wales) 2014 also shows a slight increase in the number of single person households

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<sup>6</sup> Miles, C & Smith, K (2018), *Nowhere to turn, 2018, findings from the second year of the No Women Turned Away project*. Bristol: Women's Aid. The analysis in this report is based on case work data from 264 women.

<sup>7</sup> Dobie, S., Sanders, B. & Teixeira, L. (2014) *Turned Away: The treatment of single homeless people by local authority homelessness services in England*. London: Crisis.

<sup>8</sup> A. Ahmed, M. Wilding, A. Gibbons, K. Jones, M. Rogers, I. Madoc-Jones Sustainable Housing & Urban Studies Unit (SHUSU) The University of Salford

<sup>9</sup> MHCLG, [Live Tables 773 and 774](#)

in priority need due to domestic abuse from 123 households in 2015-16 to 147 households in 2016-17.

From the Welsh data, we can conclude that automatic priority need status for survivors in England would result in more individuals who have experienced abuse being owed the main homelessness duty. The change would result in an additional demand for services requiring additional resource, however, the evidence does not imply a huge additional burden on local authorities.

## What you can do

The Domestic Abuse Bill presents a vital opportunity to legislate for automatic priority need for survivors of domestic abuse. To help us achieve this goal you can:

1. Sign-up to support our amendment to extend priority need to all survivors
2. Submit an oral or written parliamentary question
3. Hold a Westminster Hall or Adjournment debate on the issue
4. Submit a 10 Minute Rule Bill

For further information about the campaign and how to support it, please contact [APPG@Crisis.org.uk](mailto:APPG@Crisis.org.uk) or 020 7426 8591