

“Stuck in Limbo”

Experiences of women
in Greater Manchester
on surviving domestic
abuse, homelessness
and a housing system
not working for them

November 2019

Who We Are

Shelter

Shelter helps millions of people every year struggling with bad housing or homelessness through our advice, support and legal services. And we campaign to make sure that, one day, no one will have to turn to us for help. We're here so no one has to fight bad housing or homelessness on their own.

Women's Voices

Women's Voices is about uniting women in Greater Manchester to improve communities and services through running events and campaigns geared towards changing attitudes. Its members have all experienced homelessness, addiction or abuse. The group is committed to making sure women can live the lives they dream of, free from violence, fear and stigma.

Inspiring Change Manchester

Inspiring Change Manchester (2014-2022) is an eight-year National Lottery Community Fund programme that works with people experiencing 'multiple and complex needs'. This includes those facing homelessness, substance addiction, mental health issues and at risk of offending.

www.inspiringchangemanchester.shelter.org.uk

Author: Martha Schofield, Assistant Evaluation and Research Officer

CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Why this research matters	4
Chapter 2: How we did the research	7
Chapter 3: What we discovered	9
Chapter 4: Barriers women faced to accessing the support needed for their housing	14
Chapter 5: Recommendations for how services can be better designed to help women who have experienced domestic abuse and housing issues	20
Chapter 6: Conclusion	26

CHAPTER 1: WHY THIS RESEARCH MATTERS

At Shelter we know that women fleeing domestic abuse can often face homelessness due to many barriers in accessing a place they feel comfortable, safe and free from harm. This can make it more difficult to escape.

Specialist domestic abuse services (e.g. refuges) are continuing to face funding cuts and uncertainty, which often results in reduced provision of services and ultimately sees women and children being turned away.

Looking specifically at accommodation-based support options, which is a focus of this research, the number of refuge spaces in England falls short of the minimum standards recommended by the Council of Europe by 1,715 bed spaces as of May 2018¹.

It's important we provide the right housing response to tackle domestic abuse because it's a major trigger of homelessness. Between January and March 2019, 9% of households found to be homeless or threatened with homelessness in England lost their last settled home due to domestic abuse. This was the third most common reason and accounted for 6,000 households². Domestic abuse is therefore hugely costly to the state; in the year ending March 2017 alone, the Home Office estimates that domestic abuse resulted in £550 million in housing costs to the government, including temporary housing, homelessness services and repairs and maintenance³.

Yet, crucially, the experiences of survivors are rarely sought in wider debates about housing and homelessness, let alone heard or acted upon.

With this in mind, we created a joint research project in which we explored the experiences of women who have survived domestic abuse and then in turn had to survive homelessness and bad housing.

The research purposefully focuses on women's as opposed to men's, experiences of domestic abuse, as women are considerably more likely to

¹ Women's Aid (2019) The Domestic Abuse Report 2019: The Annual Audit. Available online at: <https://1q7dqy2unor827bjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Annual-Audit-2019.pdf> [Accessed 30 July 2019]

² MHCLG, [Live tables on homelessness](#). Initial assessments tables, Table A2 – Jan-March 19.

³ Oliver, R., Alexander, B., Roe, S. & Wlasny M. (2019) Home Office: The economic and social costs of domestic abuse: Research Report 107. Available online at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/772180/horr107.pdf [Accessed 30 July 2019]

experience repeated and severe abuse, as well as sustained physical, psychological or emotional abuse, or violence which results in injury or death⁴.

Shelter's Research team worked collaboratively with the Women's Voices Movement, a group facilitated by Inspiring Change Manchester (ICM) which is an eight-year programme (2014-2022) working with local people with 'multiple and complex needs', many of whom are living chaotic lives and have historically struggled to access or benefit from support services⁵. Women's Voices Movement unites women in Manchester with shared experiences of complex needs to raise awareness of their needs and improve the support they receive.

While not every member of Women's Voices Movement has lived experience of domestic abuse, all of the women contributing to this research had experienced abuse from a partner or ex-partner.

Domestic abuse is the third most common trigger of homelessness in Greater Manchester⁶. Working with local women helped us to understand the very real, lived experiences behind the statistics, drawing ourselves more closely to their lives and the situations they face in a process of collaboration, learning and 'voice building'.

We did this to make sure that our collective understanding never loses sight of the fact that there are real women facing these challenges and our policy and practice solutions are grounded in their experiences.

Working collaboratively, we came together and agreed the main questions that needed asking were:

- 1. What are women's experiences of surviving domestic abuse, homelessness and bad housing?**
- 2. Why can't women access the support they need for their housing, having experienced domestic abuse?**
- 3. How can services be better designed to help women who have experienced the trauma of domestic abuse, homelessness and bad housing?**
- 4. What could national and local government, landlords and others do to improve women's experiences of homelessness and domestic abuse?**

⁴ Women's Aid (no date) Domestic abuse is a gendered crime. Available online at: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/domestic-abuse-is-a-gendered-crime/> [Accessed 12 July 2019]

⁵ Inspiring Change Manchester (2019) Inspiring Change Manchester [homepage]. Available at: <https://inspiringchangemanchester.shelter.org.uk/> [Accessed 01 November 2019]

⁶ This follows family or friends no longer willing or able to accommodate and the ending of a private rented tenancy. MHCLG, [Live tables on homelessness](#), Initial assessments tables, Table A2 – Jan-March 19.

We decided not to look in detail at the abuse itself, but instead focus on how experiences of the housing system, and homelessness, supported (or prevented) women from leaving the perpetrator.

We know that a lack of suitable housing options can discourage women from leaving an abusive relationship; therefore, an understanding of what suitable accommodation looks like for women fleeing domestic abuse is needed in order to develop solutions to support them out of their situation.

CHAPTER 2: HOW WE DID THE RESEARCH

An ethos and commitment to co-production was central to this research, with women who had lived experience collaborating with Shelter throughout the research project by conducting the interviews and participating in group sessions, as well as shaping the questions asked, designing the sample, analysing the findings and developing recommendations.

Working in such a collaborative way ensures the right questions are being asked and provides added legitimacy to the research and its recommendations.

Research activities undertaken as part of the project comprised:

- Four semi-structured interviews took place in total. Three of these interviews were peer interviews with women with lived experience of domestic abuse. The fourth interview was by a support worker with a woman in HMP Styal.
- Three women from HMP Styal completed a survey with a peer mentor working within the prison, and the peer mentor also provided written insights on their observations at the prison.
- Two group sessions also took place and were attended by peer researchers from Women's Voices and other members of Women's Voices, GROW trainees⁷, HMP Styal support workers, and Shelter staff (from ICM and the Research team). The first group session explored the four focus areas, whilst the second session analysed findings from all of the previous research activities.

Women contributing to the research were staying in various places and had varied tenancy statuses at the time of their interviews, highlighting how each of their experiences differed. Accommodation situations included settled housing, prison, a hostel, a women's refuge and street homelessness.

As the research progressed, many of the women's housing circumstances changed, which allowed them to reflect on different points of their journey in securing suitable accommodation. For those with children, a mixture of circumstances was seen, from children living with them in a refuge or social home, children living with an ex-partner, or the perpetrator still having access to the children.

⁷ GROW Traineeships are paid employment placements at Shelter that support individuals with experience of homelessness to access employment, training, personal development opportunities. <http://icmblog.shelter.org.uk/grow-traineeship-opportunities/>

All of the interviews were conducted qualitatively and semi-structured around the four key areas outlined previously.⁸ A total of 23 women contributed to this research, including both one-off contributions and others who participated in multiple research activities.

Qualitative research is not by its nature designed to be statistically representative. Instead, this research is intended to provide an in-depth understanding of experiences and views of the specific contributors, and as such may be helpful in bringing to life the statistics and illustrating the housing challenges they face.

It is not intended to be reflective of the experiences and views of all women experiencing domestic abuse. Therefore, claims cannot be made about the extent to which the findings may be generalised to the wider population, particularly as most of these experiences are limited to the Greater Manchester area. There will be many other women with different experiences to these and caution should be applied in how this research is represented.

⁸ Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of contributors.

CHAPTER 3: WHAT WE DISCOVERED

Survivors' journeys

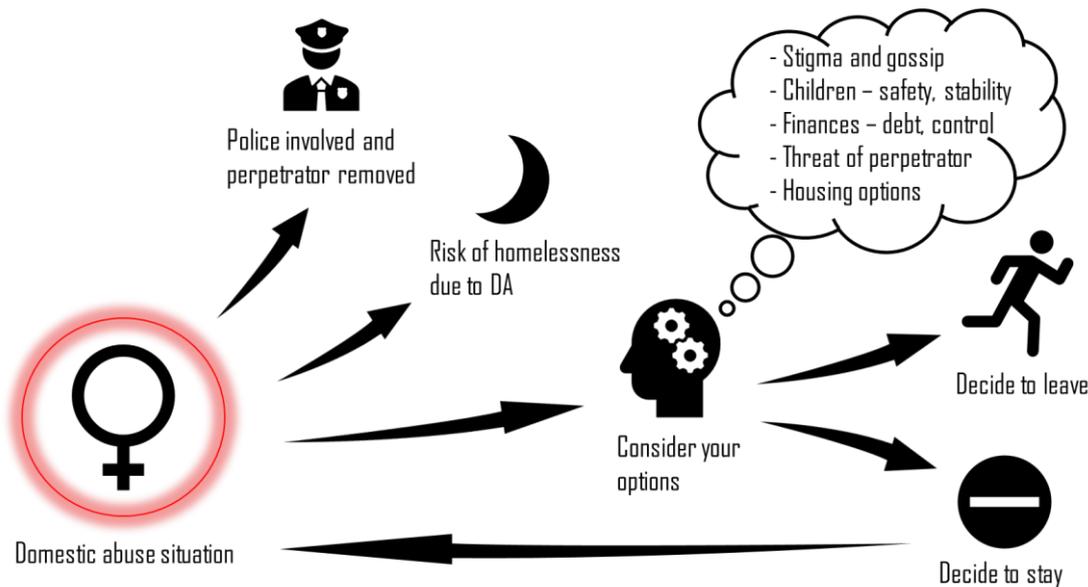
The three diagrams included in this report attempt to depict stages 1, 2 and 3 of the contributor's journeys towards securing safe, stable homes away from the abusive environment.

The three key stages in this journey are broken down as:

- 'Deciding to move away',
- 'Experiences of leaving' and
- 'After effects'

While the diagrams attempt to capture the factors at play in survivors' decision-making, it is important to note that every journey was unique to each individual.

'Deciding to move away'



Stage 1: 'Deciding to move away' – The initial options faced by women when fleeing domestic abuse

While living in an abusive relationship, women are faced with a number of **difficult decisions around moving away** which could impact on their safety, wellbeing and their housing.

For a number of the women involved their first decision was whether to **contact the police to report the abuse**. In some instances, the perpetrator was then removed from the home, and the survivor and any children involved were able to remain in their existing accommodation. However, this was not always the case,

as some women spoke about abuse getting worse after services stepped in (e.g. if the perpetrator remained in the home) and also the dangers involved in the perpetrator still knowing their whereabouts if remaining in the same home.

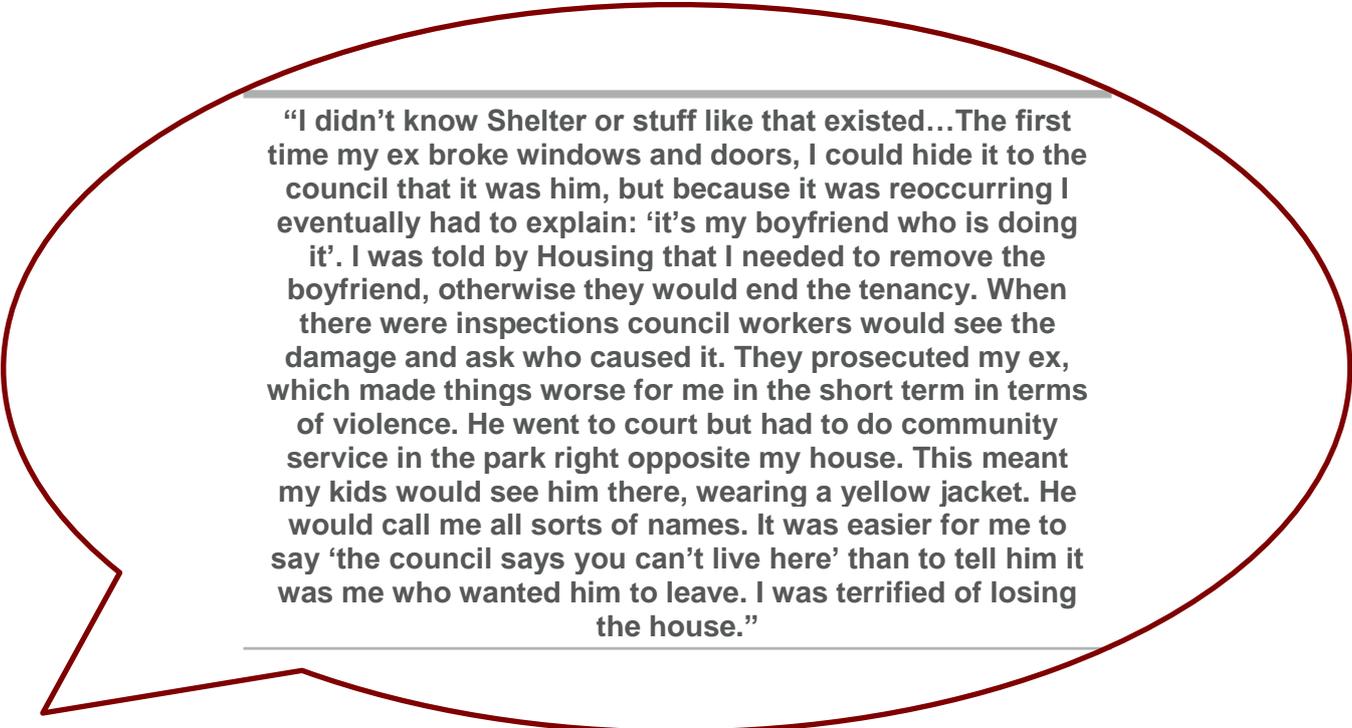
Even without taking the decision to report the perpetrator directly or leaving the home, **domestic abuse can put women at risk of homelessness**. This was apparent according to Melanie's experiences:

"He [ex-partner] kept beating me up and the neighbours kept phoning the police so the housing gave me [an] ASBO [Anti-Social Behaviour Order] so I had to be evicted after 15 years there and then they said I had to go private because of the ASBO".

In this instance, the way that the situation was handled by the police resulted in an eviction from Melanie's council property and having to move into a private rental, losing the social housing that had been her home for many years.

Another woman spoke of her abuser convincing her to leave her council property for a private rental, which later meant she experienced difficulties getting rehoused by the council as she was found to be 'intentionally homeless'. Domestic abuse can therefore have an immediate impact on housing security as well as future housing options.

Tina's story below highlights the range of pressures impacting upon housing that were encountered by the women:



"I didn't know Shelter or stuff like that existed... The first time my ex broke windows and doors, I could hide it to the council that it was him, but because it was reoccurring I eventually had to explain: 'it's my boyfriend who is doing it'. I was told by Housing that I needed to remove the boyfriend, otherwise they would end the tenancy. When there were inspections council workers would see the damage and ask who caused it. They prosecuted my ex, which made things worse for me in the short term in terms of violence. He went to court but had to do community service in the park right opposite my house. This meant my kids would see him there, wearing a yellow jacket. He would call me all sorts of names. It was easier for me to say 'the council says you can't live here' than to tell him it was me who wanted him to leave. I was terrified of losing the house."

Survivors also spoke about the difficult process of **considering their options to leave**. As the stage 1 diagram shows, there are many factors influencing

decisions to move away from the perpetrator. For instance, pressures rising from your own local community were noted several times:

“Every woman on the estate was in a similar situation to me, actually mine was not too bad compared to theirs. That’s what I was doing, comparing with the other women, it was the only thing I knew.”

Stigma and gossip within the community can circulate, particularly according to one woman who felt everyone on her estate knew each other’s business, such as whose children were taken into care or judging who’s coping ‘best’ by “whose curtains are the cleanest”.

Considering the **best option for their children** was a key part of the decision-making for many women who voiced concerns around the disruption caused by both living in an abusive environment but also moving away.

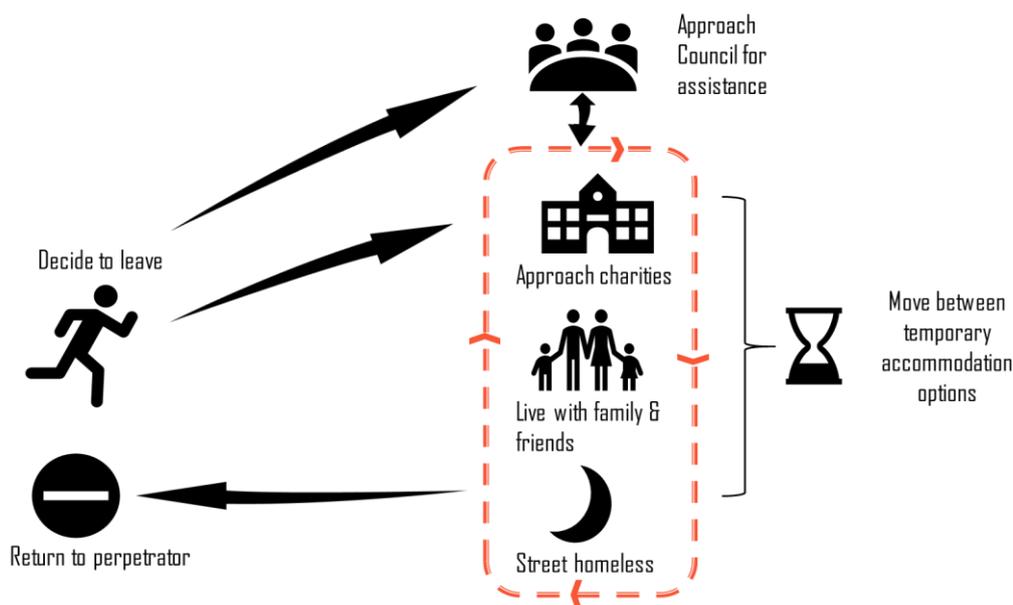
Financial resources are another major factor, with several women saying that the perpetrator stealing or controlling money hinders options to leave. Rent arrears were another housing issue experienced by women because they may lead to an eviction.

Moreover, the **persistent threat of the perpetrator** influences women’s decisions to leave as their presence instils fear, dictates safety, limits options and distorts capacity to make the ‘best’ judgement for you and your family.

As a result of these competing and conflicting concerns and priorities, women may **decide to remain with the perpetrator**. This can be driven by pressures from the local community or even their families, as was mentioned by a Muslim interviewee who “because of [her] culture rarely opens up”. This leads women to become a “prisoner in your own home”, unwilling or unable to leave the house, never-mind seek support services or consider alternative housing options.

Abusive circumstances mean experiences of ‘home’ deviate from ideas of home as a safe “sanctuary” that offers a “sense of purpose”, as identified during discussions on ‘what home means to you’. However, as one woman highlighted, after considering limited alternative housing options, which often involve being accommodated far away from family and friends, some women feel “what you know is better than what you don’t know” – even if this means continuing to live in an abusive environment.

'Experiences of leaving'



Stage 2: 'Experiences of leaving' – After leaving the abusive environment, women rely on a number of stakeholders to offer housing assistance

The decision to leave the perpetrator is extremely difficult, placing women in great danger and at risk of homelessness. Experiences after leaving their homes were far from easy, and often involved moving between various temporary housing options throughout their journey.

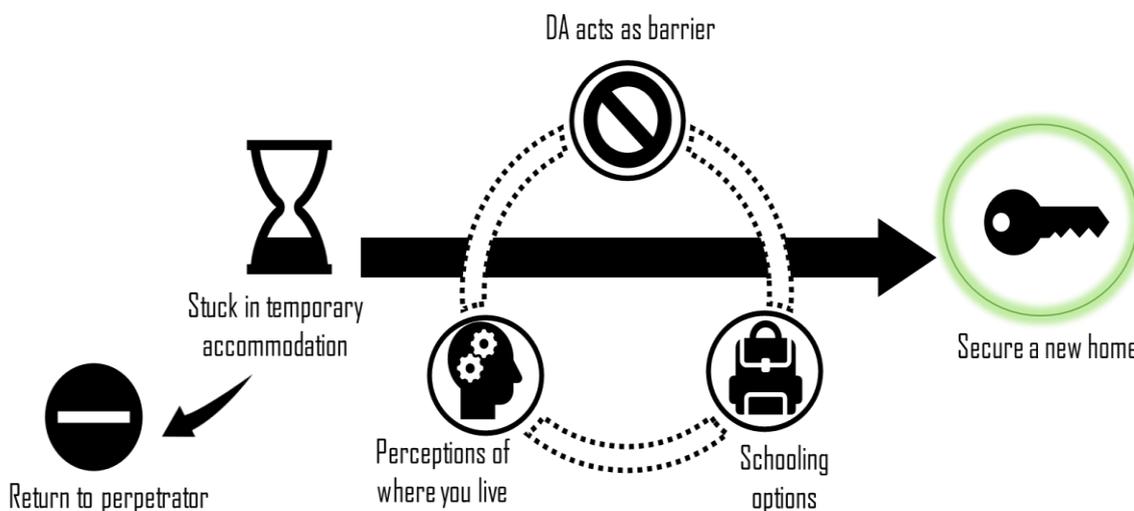
Approaching the **statutory homelessness service (often referred to as housing options team at the local council) for assistance** was an important step towards securing a new home; however, this process could prove to be difficult and lengthy (as explored further in the barriers section below), so women were often forced to rely on shorter-term accommodation options, such as direct access hostels, B&B's or refuges.

Alternatively, some women **approached charities for assistance** as a first step after leaving. This included to gain access to the aforementioned short-term accommodation options, as well as reaching out to charities like Shelter for advice and signposting.

Women also recalled **relying on family or friends**, as either an immediate solution to avoid homelessness, or, as one woman noted, as a longer-term solution after her local authority refused to help, instead suggesting she would "find [her] own solution" and ultimately disappear into the system.

A couple of contributors were **street homeless** at the time of the research, reflecting both the lengths that women go to in order to leave the abusive environment and also the barriers faced in securing settled accommodation. Unfortunately, immense dissatisfaction with the temporary housing options realised at this stage can incentivise returning to the perpetrator.

'After effects'



Stage 3: 'After effects' – related to securing settled housing

The final stage in the journey highlights the **after effects related to securing settled housing** for survivors fleeing domestic abuse. For women who the statutory homelessness service has accepted a duty to rehouse, the wait for settled accommodation means being **“stuck in limbo” in temporary accommodation**. This often negatively impacts self-esteem, and, particularly as the effects of trauma can cloud judgements, some women may **return back to the home where they were facing abuse**.

Domestic abuse can act as a barrier to finding settled accommodation as highlighted in Melanie’s personal accounts showing the impact of anti-social behaviour. Rent arrears are another problem which can follow the woman through her journey, even if they have been resolved previously, and act as an obstacle to securing a new home because they can result in being found ‘intentionally homeless’ or refused social housing.

There are many factors which influence **perceptions of where you live**, in relation to both temporary and more permanent accommodation. As Tina’s story illustrates, proximity to the perpetrator is a crucial factor determining how safe survivors feel when deciding where they will live. The need to be far from the perpetrator can conflict somewhat with the desire to be close to family and friends, who embody important support systems during the difficult journey. On top of this, **schooling options for any children** involved are hugely influential, with women speaking of the disruption to her children’s education caused by moving around.

Considered together, the three diagrams reflect the difficult housing decisions that are forced upon women escaping an abusive situation. In the wider context they show that the transition to a safe home is far from smooth and encounters a wide range of barriers.

CHAPTER 4: BARRIERS WOMEN FACED TO ACCESSING THE SUPPORT NEEDED FOR THEIR HOUSING

Wider systemic issues

For the women contributing to this research, a series of systemic issues acted as significant barriers to fleeing domestic abuse and accessing appropriate support and accommodation. Crucially, the **unaffordability** of the housing market alongside a severe **lack of social housing** restricts feasible move-on options. If women were living in a council home while suffering the abuse, then the fear that they may lose their existing home in some cases deterred them from leaving the perpetrator.

Poverty and **debt** were identified as significant barriers to women being able to remove themselves from the abusive environment. Previous research carried out by Shelter shows that recent **housing benefit reforms**, such as the benefit cap and the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) freeze, are disproportionately impacting upon women and children⁹ and causing deprivation, debt and homelessness¹⁰.

Housing policy such as the **'bedroom tax'**¹¹ was highlighted as also driving financial hardship. Domestic abuse compounds these issues further; in one instance, the removal of children from the abusive home meant the woman was forced to downsize due to the bedroom tax, which in turn meant she did not have enough space for her children to stay when they came to visit.

Debt in the form of **rent arrears** when leaving a property is also an issue which follows women seeking to flee and could prevent them from accessing a new tenancy, particularly in social housing.

Austerity measures have made matters worse for victims of domestic abuse as they have led to considerable cuts to support services. This has left women with fewer places to turn to as support services shut down or increasingly restrict who they can support.

⁹ Kleynhans, S. (2019) Shelter blog: International Women's Day: we must see an end to women in housing poverty. Available online at: <https://blog.shelter.org.uk/2019/03/international-womens-day-we-must-see-an-end-to-women-in-housing-poverty/> [Accessed 29 July 2019]

¹⁰ Halpin, Z. (2014) Shelter blog: The Bedroom tax by numbers. Available online at: <https://blog.shelter.org.uk/2014/07/the-bedroom-tax-by-numbers/> [Accessed 29 July 2019]

¹¹ The 'spare room subsidy' is government policy introduced under the Welfare Reform Act 2012 which can see Housing Benefit reduced if the tenant lives in council or social housing and has a spare bedroom. Gov.uk (no date) Housing Benefit. Available online at: <https://www.gov.uk/housing-benefit/what-youll-get> [Accessed 29 July 2019]

Multiple barriers encountered by an individual

A number of the women in our research were having to deal with other issues or aspects of their identity which posed additional barriers or exacerbated problems further when experiencing domestic abuse and seeking safer accommodation.

Some were battling with **substance misuse**, which they reported was detrimental to their finances and clouded their judgement when making decisions for their families, their own safety or tenure security.

Poor mental health – either existing prior to the abuse or as a result of it – disadvantaged some women further. One woman spoke of the difficulty making any life-changing decisions, such as those around your housing, when “you can barely open the curtains”.

“I came to the UK with my partner on his student visa. His behaviour was sexually violent and abusive. I found it difficult to access services because I had insecure immigration status and I feared that I would get deported. I was effectively locked in with an abusive partner.”

As the quote above shows, personal characteristics, such as **immigration status**, but also being **BAME** or **LGBTQ**, can also disadvantage women further and give rise to specific issues. For example, one woman reported that the fear of leaving a perpetrator can be heightened if your immigration status is dependent upon your relationship with them. Lucy spoke of her personal experiences as a trans woman, highlighting the added difficulties caused by this gender identity:

“A huge barrier for trans women accessing services is the perception that we are not welcome to do so, or that we may cause discomfort to other survivors by our presence”

This can lead to many trans women returning to perpetrators, “sofa surfing”, engaging in survival sex, entering further abusive relationships or being street homeless (and resultantly often reverting to a male gendered presentation to avoid being identified as trans which can elicit violence or sexual assault).

Another woman who was serving a custodial sentence at HMP Styal at the time of contributing to this research voiced her concerns about coming into custody and not knowing if her tenancy would still be available upon release from prison. This issue is not exclusively experienced by domestic abuse survivors, rather it is a tenancy issue encountered by many women in the **criminal justice system**¹².

¹²Prison Reform Trust (2018) Home truths: housing for women in the criminal justice system. Available online at: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/portals/0/documents/home%20truths%20june%202018.pdf> [Accessed 01 November 2019]

Both of these personal stories uncover further significant issues for some survivors; however, exploring these experiences in the depth they require falls beyond the scope of this research.

There was a somewhat mixed response to whether **being a woman** acts as a barrier to receiving support. On the one hand, one woman expressed the opinion that being a woman used to mean you were guaranteed a council house. In contrast though a number of the women felt they experienced additional barriers due to their gender identity. This was because of the financial hardships of being alone alongside government policy like the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) freeze which disproportionately affects women¹³, but also largely due to their additional responsibilities as a mother, meaning they have to consider both their own wellbeing and that of their children. This led to discussions around the cycle of abuse:

“All these issues stem from [the] trauma of having witnessed domestic violence as a child. Now that I am going to therapy, I understand that this is the root cause.”

Many survivors felt they had struggled to identify they were in an abusive relationship because of what they experienced as a child in an abusive environment or living in care. **An abusive environment can disrupt children’s education**, which can in turn reduce their life opportunities and entrenches poverty.

Support service provision and interactions with professionals

Women interacted with a number of statutory services in their journey to a safe home. Over the course of this research the statutory services identified by women included the police, local authority housing teams and children’s services. **The important role these services consistently play throughout women’s journeys** away from the abuse was emphasised during this research and was also reflected in the passionate way many women reflected on their interactions with these services.

Women primarily referred to times when they felt the **support offered to them by statutory services was either insufficient or not appropriate to their wants or needs**, such as Melanie’s experience of being given an Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO) after the police were contacted following noise complaints. Another woman added that she felt she was essentially operating in a system that punished her for the actions of the perpetrator.

¹³ Kleynhans, S. (2019) Shelter blog: International Women’s Day: we must see an end to women in housing poverty. Available online at: <https://blog.shelter.org.uk/2019/03/international-womens-day-we-must-see-an-end-to-women-in-housing-poverty/> [Accessed 29 July 2019]

A number of stories recounted by the women focussed on times they felt their local council had **refused to offer them the help they required** to find safe, alternative accommodation. A couple of women spoke about the difficulties involved in being passed between different local authorities, which one woman felt was an attempt to avoid offering assistance. Several contributors noted, though, that this perceived reluctance stems from severely diminished resources within local authorities.

“It’s going to be years and years... people and organisations need to have compassion”

Another barrier to receiving support to leave the abuse was the service some women said they received from local authority housing teams. Sometimes, when sharing their story with a professional, women felt it was met with **scepticism or a lack of compassion** – perhaps, according to one woman, due to staff hearing similar stories of abuse so regularly.

“If you are told ‘no’ enough times, you stop asking”

Disruptions to the support, such as when a professional is off sick or on leave, were viewed as another barrier, showing the value placed by some of the women on building trust with a professional through repeat interactions. One woman stated she was close to giving up when she could not get hold of the professional she had been working with previously.

With regards to understanding the specific needs of domestic abuse survivors, several contributors noted a lack of understanding among professionals that domestic abuse is both physical *and mental*. Also, women felt alienated at times when professionals used the ‘wrong’ language, described by one woman as language which reveals a limited understanding of what the survivor is going through, or formal language that might be difficult to understand.

An **in-depth understanding of the experiences, rights and entitlements** of women fleeing domestic abuse is essential to ensuring that a safe home away from the abuse can be obtained. However, **a lack of knowledge** in these areas was often cited by the women contributing to this research.

The laws around rights and remedies for people fleeing domestic abuse are complex and spread across various areas of the law which made it **difficult for survivors to navigate**, particularly at a time of trauma. In the context of these complexities, women recounted times when they encountered bad practice or were provided with incorrect information.

It was also felt a **lack of understanding of the specific needs and experiences of domestic abuse survivors** was shown by local authorities requiring “proof of everything” to make a homelessness application, even though many women and support workers said gathering this evidence was often not possible or safe for the survivor. For instance, gathering evidence of a local

connection, proof of tenancy, or for general paperwork – as were mentioned in this research – might involve returning to the previous home inhabited by the perpetrator, which could place women in great danger. If the woman has not yet left the abusive home, attempts to gather evidence risk alerting the perpetrator to the woman's plans to leave.

The **involvement of children** adds further complications during the journey to securing a safer home. A strong point of focus for the women was the **scaremongering and fear of children's services** as a significant barrier to survivors accessing support. The removal of their children was unanimously identified as the ultimate fear, leading to many women not coming forward, or mentioning substance abuse if relevant to their situation. A strongly gendered notion of 'home' was voiced frequently across the research, with home being associated with children, who are seen as the responsibility of the woman. If the children are then removed, so is the sense of 'home', which then becomes a past memory.

When children are removed from the abusive environment by children's services this can have a negative impact on the housing situation of the affected mother. For example, the contributor who highlighted that her children's removal led to her losing a home with enough rooms for her children to stay in due to the bedroom tax. Another woman spoke about needing a two-bedroom home in order to get her children back, but housing benefit failed to cover the cost.

Alternatively, when children embark on the journey to settled accommodation alongside their mother, they experience marked **disruption to their routines and security**. This is caused by moving between accommodation or when the whole family have to share one room in a refuge, which one survivor said led to her child's sleep being severely disturbed. Where children are homeless as a result of domestic abuse, assessment of whether accommodation is suitable must specifically consider interference in children's routines.

Women were also afraid of the **perpetrator being given custody of the children**, which was identified as being highly damaging. Women reported the risk of perpetrators deceiving support services by acting as an innocent party, which could then lead to them being rehoused or retaining the tenancy. One woman had lived experience of this issue after her abuser told support services she was causing the harm to their children due to her alcohol issues. This issue goes beyond the scope of this research but is another example of how the effects of domestic abuse can be reinforced by services working with survivors.

Lack of suitable alternative accommodation

The accommodation options available to women fleeing domestic abuse were repeatedly criticised by contributors with lived experience for being inadequate and unsuitable. Accommodation which survivors are offered, such as temporary

accommodation in hostels, B&Bs or refuges, as well as some social housing, may be of **poor quality**.

In some instances, it was considered unsafe, primarily due to the presence of men in a hostel, which can be traumatic for women escaping domestic abuse. In some instances, refuges and hostels were **understaffed** and became frightening spaces, such as when sharing amenities with people with substance misuse when the survivor may be in recovery or never been exposed to this previously. For instance, one woman felt: “Cuz I’m clean I don’t want to [be in] a hostel full of drugs”. These experiences indicate a severe local shortage of **women-only provision**, and addressing this would be hugely beneficial.

CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HOW SERVICES CAN BE BETTER DESIGNED TO HELP WOMEN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED DOMESTIC ABUSE AND HOUSING ISSUES

Shelter came together with the Women's Voices Movement in Greater Manchester to create a series of **recommendations** for how services could be better designed to help women affected by domestic abuse with their housing issues. These recommendations outline values and principles of service delivery which can be drawn upon by all professionals involved in women's journeys to a secure home.

The phrase 'relevant support services' is used subsequently to refer to both statutory and non-statutory services involved in supporting survivors; from local government, to statutory and voluntary children's services, the police, charities, schools and accommodation-based services like refuges. Recommendations specifically targeting the national government then follow subsequently.

Recommendations on values and principles of service delivery

"[They should] have women who have been there themselves, have someone that 'gets you' instead of someone who is terrified of you. Or at least, have a professional working with someone who has lived experience and is more approachable for the women."

Recommendation 1: People with lived experience of domestic abuse should be working across the sector to design and deliver relevant support services.

The involvement of experts by experience avoided women feeling judged (especially with substance misuse) and encouraged them to open up, thereby initiating their journey of moving away from the perpetrator. Experts with a strong local knowledge were praised for using the 'right' language and for having a deeper understanding of the issues at hand. This builds trust and avoids situations, such as one woman's experience during a home visit in which she had difficulty in dealing with an inexperienced social worker "fresh out of university" and without lived experience or knowledge of her community.

Recommendation 2: Improved training of professionals on domestic abuse and trauma.

Professionals (often used by contributors to refer to experts who they perceived did not have lived experience) likely to be supporting survivors must receive **targeted training on domestic abuse and the associated trauma**, as this would address a lack of understanding of the complexities of domestic abuse and be more likely to foster compassion amongst professionals when addressing survivors' housing issues.

This applies to both developing understanding of the emotional trauma, but also **increased knowledge of the rights of people fleeing domestic abuse**, particularly as entitlements are complex, crossing various areas of the law (including immigration, housing, criminal law, family and welfare benefits). Better legal training around domestic abuse for refuge workers and housing officers, such as in the form of easily accessible guides, would improve the service offered to survivors.

Recommendation 3: Support offered by relevant support services must be consistent and be designed to minimise disruptions to survivors accessing support.

Support services need to be aware particularly when using professionals who may not have lived experience that it takes time to **build trust**. Survivors have a need to **see the same person consistently** to avoid disruptions when progressing on their journey to a safe home.

They also often need support, such as therapy, to be offered on a **long-term basis** as it involves undoing years of trauma.

Professionals should have a 'how can we help' ethos, to avoid survivors feeling that professionals are making it more difficult to leave by creating barriers to receiving support, such as documentation that is in the abuser's home.

Recommendation 4: Relevant support services must be better tailored to domestic abuse survivors' specific needs, particularly addressing the lack of gendered support.

The women gave some examples of how services could be more tailored to their needs:

- **Specialist domestic abuse advocates** operating within local authority homelessness teams.

-
- An “alternative housing route” for people with a social housing tenancy who are at risk of violence or abuse¹⁴. Such a scheme is coordinated by Safer London; the Pan-London Housing Reciprocal¹⁵ is a voluntary collaboration between local authorities and registered housing providers who work together to enable their tenants to move to a social tenancy in another borough. It was recommended that Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) instigate a similar project.

Services must be as inclusive as possible of all survivors from all backgrounds or social groups, such as by clearly advertising themselves as inclusive of trans women. Alternatively, separate service provisions should be provided for those who don't feel comfortable accessing mainstream services with other women.

There were strong calls for **gendered support** in various forms, including increased use of female police officers and women-only accommodation provision, with the latter addressing the shortage outlined previously and the problem of women feeling uncomfortable in mixed hostels.

More generally in relation to gendered support for the survivor, more could be done to recognise “individuality as a woman”, which means acknowledging the affected woman in her own right, beyond being a ‘mum’ or someone’s ‘partner’.

Recommendation 5: Relevant support services must be required to consider additional needs survivors may have when being offered homelessness assistance.

Important additional requirements for domestic abuse survivors must be considered when choosing where to re-locate them and their families. The women we spoke to felt that they **must not be housed near the perpetrator** for their safety, but simultaneously they desire **not being placed too far away from family and friends** and risking becoming isolated. While this can pose difficulties when finding suitable locations, the following recommendations should ensure best efforts are taken to secure appropriate housing:

- Support services must **ensure women feel safe and listened to** if voicing their temporary accommodation needs, such as concerns around co-habiting with people with substance misuse issues. For example, there could be a formalised space for women to air grievances or review policies in relation to this. Women must not feel they have to “put up and shut up”, as one woman felt when refuge staff ignored her concerns about men loitering outside the refuge.

¹⁴ Safer London (no date) Pan-London Housing Reciprocal. Available online at: <https://saferlondon.org.uk/pan-london-housing-reciprocal/> [Accessed 12 July 2019]

¹⁵ Safer London (no date) Pan-London Housing Reciprocal. Available online at: <https://saferlondon.org.uk/pan-london-housing-reciprocal/> [Accessed 12 July 2019]

-
- **Developing a better range of temporary and permanent housing options** to provide survivors with more choice and autonomy. Some initial work is being undertaken in this area by the Women's Homelessness Influence Group, which is part of Manchester's Homelessness Partnership. The group is made up of service providers, women with lived experience and commissioners from Manchester City Council and one of their recommendations is for these services to carry out a data gathering exercise to begin evidencing need.
 - Enhanced communication and **joined up working** across support services will improve the process of re-locating survivors and avoid risky outcomes such as Tina's (Chapter 3) in which the perpetrator was given community service right next to her home.

Recommendation 6: Survivors and their children need spaces they can talk openly about experiencing domestic abuse to encourage early intervention.

While the findings in this report uncover a number of issues related to survivors' perceptions and interactions with children's services, recommendations in this area are beyond the scope of this research, which has a narrower focus on housing issues specifically.

It is important to acknowledge, though, the need to identify domestic abuse and intervene as early as possible to avoid services becoming involved at crisis points, such as when children are removed.

Of great importance to ensuring early intervention is possible is the presence of **safe spaces where women and their children feel able to talk openly about experiencing abuse**, such as:

- Community services such as Mums & Tots. These must be accessible both **within and outside of the immediate community**, with the latter reducing concerns over fuelling gossip or information getting back to the perpetrator.
- Schools are a key space for children and survivors as they can monitor signs of disruption at home and provide **lessons on healthy relationships** to break the cycle of abuse.
- **Family support workers based in schools** to offer support to affected mothers. It should be noted though that one woman said that no-one confided in the support worker in her child's school as they had a children's services background, which meant parents feared their children being taken into care if abuse was identified.

High-level recommendations

The women contributing to this research also supported Shelter's higher-level recommendations which target national government, believing the following recommendations are a way to strategically address the wider systemic issues identified in the 'Barriers' section of this report.

Recommendation 7: The government needs to build 3 million genuinely affordable social homes over 20 years to ensure people have suitable housing options.

Lack of social housing and suitable accommodation which is affordable, decent quality and in locations that meet the needs of survivors is a major underlying issue on a national scale that must be addressed by national government.

As reflected in survivors' journey experiences, shortages of social housing in Greater Manchester had a knock-on effect, such as lengthening the time women and children spend in temporary accommodation, which can often be an expensive last resort for local authorities.

The women involved in this research support Shelter's recommendation to **increase the national supply of social housing**.

Moreover, a couple of contributors highlighted frustrations around poor **use of existing buildings**, drawing attention in the group discussion to the many empty buildings around Manchester.

Recommendation 8: Housing benefit policy which disadvantages survivors wanting to escape abuse must be addressed.

The women we spoke to supported desperately-needed improvements to housing benefit policy:

- The **bedroom tax** received the most criticism from women contributing to this because it caused financial hardship or posing a barrier to children living with their mother. Government should specifically consider the impact of the bedroom tax on survivors and their families and seek to mitigate disproportionate effects.
- Entrenched poverty posed a significant challenge to some of the survivors seeking to rebuild their lives. The four-year freeze to local housing allowance (LHA) rates has made finding an affordable private rental even more difficult

for those who need it most¹⁶. The women we spoke to therefore support Shelter's recommendation to **unfreeze Local Housing Allowance and lift rates back up to cover at least the bottom third of local rents.**

- There must be more accessible and clearer **advice and process around rent liability for survivors who have to leave tenancies.** This would reduce concerns survivors expressed around being liable for rent after fleeing the abusive environment, which can leave women financially disadvantaged, negatively impacting their tenancy records and credit ratings and, in turn, their access to housing in future.

Recommendation 9: Increase funding of community and relevant support services supporting survivors.

- **Increased funding** of relevant statutory and non-statutory services for survivors of domestic abuse is desperately required, with austerity measures and resultant cuts identified as the major cause of support service limitations.

¹⁶ Shelter (2019) From the frontline Universal Credit and the broken housing safety net. Available online at: https://england.shelter.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1827021/From_the_frontline_Universal_Credit_and_the_broken_housing_safety_net.pdf [Accessed 04 November 2019]

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This research has evidenced that domestic abuse and housing issues and homelessness are strongly inter-linked.

Importantly, our findings are based on the contributions of women with lived experience from Women's Voices Movement in Manchester and HMP Styal. We value the perspectives of experts by experience as a vehicle to more accurately identify the barriers women and children encounter to securing suitable housing, and to devise solutions for women affected by domestic abuse.

The three-stage journey diagrams away from an abusive environment to settled accommodation show the complex and, at times, conflicting decisions that survivors must make during the process. Ultimately, they can be deterred from leaving the perpetrator when access to suitable housing becomes too difficult, and this can lead to women returning to the domestic abuse situation even after making the brave step to leave.

Barriers met along the journey range from over-arching systemic issues, such as the lack of affordable housing, through to the multiple barriers an individual may face, such as additional barriers due to being LGBTQ.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations, most of which centre on the values and principles that all relevant support services should develop. Of central importance to the contributors of this research was the integration of people with lived experience in the design and delivery of services. This is advantageous as it encourages women to disclose their abuse and increases the likelihood that they feel understood and supported by all parties involved in their journey to a safe, settled home and a life where they can thrive.

Shelter helps millions of people every year struggling with bad housing or homelessness through our advice, support and legal services. And we campaign to make sure that, one day, no one will have to turn to us for help.

We're here so no one has to fight bad housing or homelessness on their own.

Please support us at shelter.org.uk

RH7439. Registered charity in England and Wales (263710) and in Scotland (SC002327)

Shelter
88 Old Street
London EC1V 9HU
0300 330 1234

shelter.org.uk

Shelter