

Policy: briefing

Homelessness prevention and sanctuary schemes

A discussion of the issues around the use of sanctuary schemes as a means of preventing homelessness

Summary

- A sanctuary is a safe room in the home of a victim of domestic violence to enable them to remain in their home safely, thus avoiding the upheaval of rehousing.
- Official figures show domestic violence to be a factor in one out of eight new cases of homelessness.
- The Government emphasises that sanctuaries should only be provided where remaining at home is the clear choice of the victim and it is safe and appropriate for them to do so.
- Shelter believes that sanctuary schemes can provide valuable assistance to people looking for a means to remain safely in their existing accommodation, where the perpetrator does not live within the accommodation concerned.
- People approaching local authorities for assistance who are experiencing domestic violence may be entitled to assistance under homelessness legislation, in addition to access to a sanctuary scheme. Shelter believes that the homelessness legislation has been vital in ensuring that those fleeing violence have access to safe emergency accommodation.
- It is vital that the voluntary nature of sanctuary schemes is not compromised by the strong policy emphasis on reducing the number of homelessness acceptances and people living in temporary accommodation. There is a danger that households which may be entitled to full homelessness assistance could feel under pressure to opt for a sanctuary scheme instead.
- Sanctuary schemes must be offered alongside a homelessness application and temporary accommodation. This ensures the applicant has access to safe accommodation while they consider their options. Shelter is also concerned that opting for a sanctuary could deny an applicant access to the statutory homelessness safety net in the future. Sanctuary schemes must not replace the option of rehousing at a later date.
- Shelter supports the expansion of the refuge network and the provision of Supporting People funding to ensure refuges are properly staffed.
- Shelter believes that local authorities should be responsible for funding sanctuary schemes.

Introduction

The Government has placed renewed emphasis on the prevention of homelessness in recent years. An important strand of this work focuses on those who become homeless because of domestic violence.¹ Official figures show domestic violence to be a factor in one out of eight new cases of homelessness, accounting for around 10,000 homeless households every year.² In an attempt to prevent victims of domestic violence being driven from their homes, and therefore becoming homeless, the Government encourages local authorities to set up 'sanctuaries' for victims in their homes.

This briefing considers the use of sanctuary schemes as a means of preventing homelessness and sets out the principles on which Shelter believes such schemes should be based.³

Sanctuary schemes and homelessness prevention

The Homelessness Act 2002 marked a shift in approach for local authority homelessness services. In addition to their statutory duties to respond to homelessness, local authorities acquired a new obligation to develop strategies to prevent homelessness from occurring in the first place.⁴ In particular, local authorities are now encouraged to provide a wider range of advice and services to people seeking homelessness assistance, and to develop schemes to address the problems that most commonly result in homelessness applications. To assist authorities in implementing this approach, the Government published a good practice guide to homelessness prevention in 2006.⁵

Official statistics reveal that 13 per cent of applicants accepted as homeless by local authorities became homeless because of domestic violence.⁶ In response to this, the Government has promoted the development of sanctuary schemes as part of homelessness prevention services. It is estimated that around one-third of all local authorities are now offering sanctuary schemes.⁷

How sanctuary schemes work

A sanctuary scheme provides a secured room to enable a victim of domestic violence to remain in their own home safely, if they wish to do so, and thereby avoid the upheaval of rehousing. Sanctuary schemes are specifically designed to assist those who have had to move in the past because of domestic violence and do not want to have to do so again. The schemes are available across all types of tenure, but are not appropriate where the perpetrator lives within the accommodation concerned. The safe room is secured with safety measures such as a reinforced door, heavy-duty locks on the windows and doors, alarms and CCTV. The room provides a place to which the victim can retreat if violence occurs, while they call the police and wait for assistance. Sanctuary addresses are recorded on police computer systems to ensure the fastest possible response in the event of an incident. Specialist support is also provided.

When to use sanctuary schemes

Shelter believes that sanctuary schemes can provide valuable assistance to people wanting to remain safely in their existing home. However, the option of a sanctuary should only be considered if the victim's safety can be guaranteed and, importantly, if the victim so chooses. It must also be noted that sanctuaries are a recent development and as such there has not yet been a full evaluation of their use.

Government guidance to local authorities confirms that a sanctuary should only be provided where it is the clear choice of the victim.⁸ The guidance also advises that sanctuary schemes should be just one of a range of options available to those who are experiencing violence. This advice is welcome, and it is vital that adequate mechanisms are in place to ensure that local authorities are adhering to it.

The main criterion for eligibility to a sanctuary scheme is that the victim would be likely to become homeless without the installation of the sanctuary. The Government's guidance makes clear that a sanctuary room should only be installed where it is safe and appropriate for the victim to remain in their home. There may be cases where the nature of the building

1 The Government defines domestic violence as 'any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality'; Crown Prosecution Service, *Domestic violence: policy for prosecuting cases of domestic violence*, February 2005, para 2.2.

2 Actual figure: 9,770; Communities and Local Government (CLG), *Statutory homelessness: 1st quarter 2007, England*, CLG statistical release 2007/0109, June 2007.

3 This briefing should be read in conjunction with the related Shelter policy briefings: *Homelessness prevention*; *Homelessness prevention and mediation*; *Homelessness prevention and the private rented sector*, August 2007.

4 ss.1–4 Homelessness Act 2002

5 Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), *Homelessness prevention: a guide to good practice*, June 2006.

6 CLG, *Statutory homelessness: 1st quarter 2007, England*, CLG statistical release 2007/0109, June 2007.

7 CLG, News release, 19 December 2006.

8 CLG, *Options for setting up a sanctuary scheme*, December 2006.

renders the creation of a sanctuary inappropriate. Authorities are also advised to consider factors such as police response times in rural areas and the nature of the perpetrator in each case. Some perpetrators may be too dangerous for a sanctuary to be suitable.

Sanctuary schemes and the statutory safety net

People who experience violence and approach a local authority as homeless may be entitled to assistance under homelessness legislation, in addition to access to a sanctuary scheme. Local authorities have a statutory duty to assist people who are unable to occupy their homes because of violence or threats of violence.⁹ They have a duty to provide temporary accommodation and carry out a full assessment of the applicant's circumstances. If the applicant is then accepted as homeless, the authority will owe them a full rehousing duty. These statutory duties are intended to ensure that homelessness is addressed in the long term as well as providing access to immediate assistance where necessary.

People approaching local authorities as homeless are increasingly being offered housing options interviews in which they are encouraged to consider alternatives to a homelessness application, such as sanctuary schemes. Since the introduction of the interviews, the number of households accepted as homeless by authorities has dropped substantially, as has the number living in temporary accommodation.¹⁰

The Government's good practice guide to homelessness prevention states that a housing options interview should never replace or delay a homelessness assessment where an applicant is eligible.¹¹ However, the same guide also refers to homelessness assessments operating as part of a 'two-stage process', of which the interview forms the first stage. Shelter is concerned that this ambiguity, combined with the pressure on authorities to reduce the number of people living in temporary accommodation, may lead to some domestic violence victims feeling under pressure to opt for a sanctuary instead of statutory homelessness assistance.

Another source of concern in this context is Best Value Performance Indicator 225¹², which links the use of sanctuary schemes with reductions in homelessness acceptances resulting from domestic violence. While providing a sanctuary as an alternative

to a homelessness application may help reduce the number of cases in which statutory assistance is needed, it will not always be the best option for someone who has become homeless because of domestic violence.

Shelter also has concerns that those who do opt for sanctuary schemes may be denied access to the statutory safety net in the future. Government guidance recommends that, if the victim's circumstances change or they no longer feel safe in their home, the sanctuary should be reviewed and alternative options considered. We would welcome confirmation that, where security measures have been installed in a home, local authorities should not decide that it is reasonable for the individual to continue to live there and that they therefore no longer qualify as homeless.

Emergency accommodation

It is vital that safe emergency accommodation is available for victims of domestic violence if they decide to leave their home. While sanctuaries may be a valuable option for some victims, they do not remove this need for emergency accommodation. Homelessness legislation offers an essential safety net for people experiencing violence because it obliges local authorities to provide temporary accommodation in an emergency. This duty is triggered at a deliberately low threshold to ensure that victims of domestic violence can access safety in a crisis.

Refuges provide accommodation and specialist support specifically for women fleeing violence. In 2002, 43 per cent of local authorities reported a lack of refuge accommodation in their area¹³, but since then the number of places in refuges has increased by 26 per cent.¹⁴ Shelter welcomes this increase and calls on the Government to provide financial support for further expansion of the refuge network, including both extra capital investment and more funding through Supporting People to provide support for victims.

Local authorities may be able to meet their duty to provide temporary accommodation to homeless households fleeing violence by securing a place for them in a refuge, where appropriate. However, the duty to provide safe temporary accommodation is not dependent on the availability of refuge places; if there are none available, accommodation must be provided elsewhere. Shelter believes that temporary

9 s.177(1) Housing Act 1996.

10 Between 2003–04 and 2006–07, the number of homelessness acceptances decreased by 46 per cent, from 135,430 to 73,360. Between 2004 and 2007, the number of households in temporary accommodation decreased by 11 per cent, from 97,680 to 87,120. CLG, Statutory homelessness, 1st quarter 2007, England, CLG statistical release 2007/0109, June 2007.

11 DCLG, *Homelessness prevention: a guide to good practice*, June 2006, para 2.11.

12 ODPM, *Best Value Performance Indicators: 2005/06*, February 2005, page 239.

13 ODPM, *The provision of accommodation and support for households experiencing domestic violence in England*, 2002, page 56.

14 Women's Aid Federation (WAF), *WAF of England 2005 survey of domestic violence services findings*, March 2006, page 5.

accommodation should be offered to all those entitled to it, even where a sanctuary scheme is also available. This is vital to enable those fleeing violence to access safe accommodation while they consider their options.

Funding sanctuary schemes

Sanctuary schemes are promoted as a cost-effective way of addressing the housing needs of victims of violence. Installation of the security measures associated with a sanctuary costs between £750 and £1,000¹⁵, which is less than the cost of providing temporary accommodation. As yet, however, there is no clear funding mechanism for sanctuary schemes. Government guidance suggests funding the schemes through homelessness prevention funds; savings made by reducing temporary accommodation; or registered social landlords paying for the works.¹⁶

There needs to be more clarity about where the responsibility lies for providing and funding sanctuaries, to avoid victims being passed between agencies. Shelter believes that the responsibility for providing temporary accommodation and the funding for a sanctuary should lie with the local authority. The Government must provide sufficient funding for local authorities to implement sanctuary schemes and provide the necessary support to victims.

Furthermore, the cost of installing security measures represents only part of the overall cost of providing a sanctuary. Response from emergency services and support from specialist agencies are key factors in the effectiveness of a sanctuary: funding must be secured to ensure that this support is available.

Conclusion

Shelter supports the provision of sanctuaries as one of a range of options offered to victims of domestic violence, where the perpetrator does not live in the property. However, we have some concerns over the possible consequences of the context in which sanctuary schemes are being introduced, namely with the Government emphasising the need to reduce the number of homeless households relying on statutory assistance, in particular temporary accommodation.

Shelter supports work that achieves genuine homelessness prevention and enables people experiencing violence to remain safely in their homes if they choose to. However, it is vital that the voluntary nature of sanctuary schemes is not compromised, and that victims of domestic violence feel able to access statutory homelessness assistance at any time if they believe that this is the best option for them.

Recommendations

- Sanctuary schemes must be optional, with no presumption either for or against their use. The decision must remain with the household experiencing violence.
- Sanctuary schemes should be offered as part of a package of services, including those of specialist domestic violence agencies and the police.
- It is essential that a full assessment is undertaken of the level of risk to the victim in each case. A sanctuary should only be offered where it is safe for the victim to remain in their home.
- Sanctuary schemes should be offered alongside homelessness applications and temporary accommodation, to allow the applicant immediate access to safe accommodation while they consider their options.
- People who opt for a sanctuary but later find that they need to flee their home should be able to pursue a homelessness application without the existence of a sanctuary being used as a reason to refuse the application.
- The Government must provide sufficient financial resources to enable local authorities to fund sanctuary schemes and provide the necessary ongoing support to victims of domestic violence.

¹⁵ CLG, *Options for setting up a sanctuary scheme*, December 2006, page 24.

¹⁶ Ibid, page 24.

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Registered charity number 263710

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