

Domestic Abuse and Homelessness

House of Commons

12 June 2019



KEY MESSAGES

- Tackling domestic abuse is an issue which councils take very seriously. They already offer a range of support to protect victims and their families from this horrendous crime.
- The Government recently announced that local authorities will be required to publish strategies which set out in detail the range of support services available for domestic abuse survivors and their children. Councils will be supported with this vital work through funding, which will be provided to ensure these services are put on a long-term, sustainable footing.
- The Government's new package of support for domestic abuse survivors also places a legal duty on councils to deliver accommodation-based support. It is important that the final package ensures local authorities are supported in their work going forward. It must provide flexibility to ensure services can be tailored to the needs of different areas.
- A multi-agency approach is needed to tackle this crime, with flexibility in the new package of support to ensure services can be tailored to the needs of different areas.
- Our ambition must be to reduce the number of victims of domestic abuse. We need greater investment in early intervention and prevention schemes that help stop domestic abuse occurring in the first place.
- Everyone deserves a safe, secure and affordable place to call home, and housing is especially critical for the safety of domestic abuse victims. Councils are already housing 200,000 people in temporary accommodation, and homelessness services are facing a funding gap of more than £100 million in 2019/20 and £421 million by 2024/25.
- The Government needs to use its Spending Review to sustainably fund homelessness prevention, to adapt welfare reforms, and to enable councils to address the growing housing shortage.

Briefing

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Domestic abuse is a horrendous crime, which can have a long-term and devastating impact on families, particularly children. It can take the form of psychological, physical, sexual, emotional or economic abuse, and occur in a wide range of domestic settings.

In January 2019, the Government published the draft Domestic Abuse Bill. It has the potential to make important changes to help improve the lives of victims. Our ultimate aim should be preventing this abuse from occurring in the first place.

Successfully addressing domestic abuse requires a multi-agency public health approach. Police and Crime Commissioners have a clear role to play given their statutory responsibilities for victims, as do councils and other public services. Health, housing and education services are vital to tackling domestic abuse.

We need specialist services in local areas to ensure people receive the right support and the right guidance at the right time. In addition, more needs to be done to share best practice to local areas and ensure the lessons learned from Domestic Homicide Reviews are available at a national level, to improve understanding of this issue.

The LGA supports an early intervention and preventative approach. It is vital that we are able to ensure that both victims and perpetrators receive the right support and interventions at the right time. It is also imperative the Government recognises a more co-ordinated, public health style approach is needed to challenge attitudes towards domestic abuse and reduce its prevalence.

Rather than focus on processes and structures, central government and local partners need to focus collectively on strengthening the culture of local collaboration and joint commissioning. Encouraging this shift in culture across the health service is especially important.

Legal duty on councils to deliver accommodation-based support

In May 2019, the Government published a consultation on a new delivery model for accommodation-based support. This includes the introduction of a statutory duty on local authorities to provide support that meets the diverse needs of victims of domestic abuse and their children, ensuring they have access to provision that is right for them.

Tackling domestic abuse is an issue which councils take seriously and already offer a range of support to protect victims and their families from this crime. The LGA has welcomed the additional measures outlined in the Government's consultation, which we hope will assist councils in this vital work. We will be working with the Government and our member councils during the consultation to ensure there is adequate resources and funding in place in the areas that need it.

Links between domestic abuse and homelessness

The All Party Parliamentary Group for Ending Homelessness has recognised that domestic abuse is a housing issue as much as a criminal justice one. Housing security is critical for the health and wellbeing of families, and everyone deserves a safe, secure and affordable place to call home. For domestic abuse victims, housing plays an especially crucial role in protecting survivors from falling victim to domestic abuse in the future, and in preventing them from becoming homeless.

However, the housing system is currently in crisis. Councils are currently housing more than 200,000 homeless people, almost half of them children, in temporary accommodation. Councils spent nearly £1 billion supporting families into temporary accommodation in 2017/18 alone. This is bad for families and unsustainable for councils, which as a result have less funding to invest in preventing homelessness for everyone. Currently, homelessness services face a £421 million funding gap by 2024/25.

These issues are also undermining the success of the Homelessness Reduction Act. Whilst councils welcome the Act, and have used it to drive a more prevention-focused approach, homelessness cannot be prevented or relieved without housing.

The Government urgently needs to use its Spending Review to reform the welfare system. In particular, the Government should invest in LHA rates to bring them back in line with rents and enable people to access at least the cheapest 30% of the housing market, so that housing is affordable and accessible for those who desperately need it. The Government must also free councils to build more social homes, and ensure councils are properly resourced to prevent homelessness.

In order to tackle the national housing shortage in the longer term, councils need to be empowered to build more affordable, good-quality homes at scale, and fast. The lifting of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) borrowing cap was a welcome and necessary first step, which councils and the LGA had long called for.

Councils also need to be able to keep 100 per cent of Right to Buy (RtB) receipts to ensure they can replace any homes sold. Over the past six years the number of RtB sales has quadrupled, councils have been unable to keep up with and replace these properties. This loss of social rented housing risks pushing more families into the private rented sector, driving up housing benefit spending, and exacerbating our homelessness crisis.¹

We need to see a dramatic growth in council housebuilding. It is the only way to boost housing supply, help families struggling to meet housing costs, and tackle the housing waiting lists many councils have.

Prevention

A key element going forward in any multi-agency response should be a shift towards disrupting the life of the perpetrator, rather than the victim. In order to achieve this, we need to develop accessible, effective interventions that are designed to reduce the number of perpetrators now and in the future. Where possible, victims of domestic abuse should be supported to remain in their own home, but only if it is safe to do so. There needs to be clarity on the powers that are available to councils when looking at housing, support and treatment options for alleged perpetrators.

Separately, there needs to be more accessible and effective interventions that are designed to reduce the number of perpetrators now and in the future. There is a role for the Domestic Abuse Commissioner to ensure further investment is made into perpetrator programmes so they can be fully evaluated and best practice can be shared nationally. The Drive perpetrator pilot scheme, led by Respect, SafeLives and Social Finance, is a good example of this.

Specialist services often primarily focus on the victim, both in terms of keeping the victim safe and sometimes looking to the victim to manage the abusive situation. Councils have found that perpetrator programmes which aim to change offenders' behaviour and stop reoffending have often lacked funding or are only commissioned as part of temporary pilot schemes. There needs to be a long-term investment in changing the offenders behaviour, as this will help to build a comprehensive evidence base to help councils identify which effective programmes to invest in.

Reducing domestic abuse over the longer term also means looking at what younger people are taught about relationships. This must include what children and young people are watching online and the impact this is having on their views about appropriate behaviour in a relationship. The LGA's supports compulsory Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in all secondary schools. Effective Relationship Education (RE) is also essential for children because it gives them a foundation to build upon as they transition from childhood to adolescence and young adulthood.

Funding

The LGA welcomes the steps taken by Government so far to tackle this, such as the Homelessness Reduction Act, the Draft Domestic Abuse Bill, as well as the recent announcement that victims will be supported with housing. However, any legislative changes need to be matched with adequate resources and funding. These measures come at a time when local government, the LGA's research shows that there will be an overall funding gap of £8 billion by 2025. This means councils are increasingly being forced to prioritise spending for those at immediate risk of harm, rather than on earlier support services that can help families address harmful behaviours, including in areas such as domestic abuse.

The impact of domestic abuse on children is also putting additional pressure on councils with children's services currently facing unprecedented demand. Domestic abuse is highlighted as a key factor in a large number of these child protection plans. To help support children and young people our Bright Futures campaign is calling on the Government to plug the growing £3.1 billion funding gap for children's services by 2020 and reverse the cuts to early intervention funding to local councils. Without this funding, councils will find it increasingly difficult to invest in early help services, such as children's centres and family support, that can prevent children entering the social care system, and help to manage needs within families to avoid them escalating.ⁱⁱ

Ensuring that there is long term sustainable funding to tackle domestic abuse also makes economic sense. The impact of it is estimated to have cost over £66 billion in England and Wales. The biggest component of that is the physical and emotional harms incurred by victims (£47 billion), particularly the emotional harms which account for the overwhelming majority of the overall costs. But the cost to the economy is also considerable, with an estimated £14 billion arising from lost output due to time off work and reduced productivity as a consequence.

The impact of domestic abuse on children and child safeguarding

Domestic abuse is the most commonly cited factor when children are assessed by children's social care services to determine whether they need support. It is crucial that we focus on the needs and experiences of children and young people, especially those who have experienced, or been affected by, domestic abuse.

Following the [LGA's call](#) for an urgent injection of funding into early intervention initiatives that provide support for children experiencing domestic violence it is encouraging that the Government allocated £8 million towards support for children who witness domestic abuse.

We know that children may experience high levels of anxiety and depression in response to living with domestic abuse, and this could have a harmful impact on educational outcomes and put them at higher risk of offending.ⁱⁱⁱ According to the NSPCC, children exposed to domestic violence are also more likely to experience behavioural and emotional problems.^{iv} In addition to the harm caused by witnessing the abuse of others, 62 per cent of children living with domestic abuse are directly harmed by the perpetrator of the abuse.^v With approximately one in five children having been exposed to domestic abuse, this is an issue which requires urgent attention from the Government.

Adverse childhood experiences such as being exposed to domestic abuse or substance misuse in the home, have been found to have an impact on long term health and behavioural outcomes. Children who have had four or more adverse childhood experiences is more likely to experience a range of negative outcomes in adulthood.^{vi} They are 16 times more likely to perpetrate violence and 20 times more likely to be incarcerated at some point in their lifetime.^{vii} Investment in protecting children is both important in addressing an immediate safeguarding risk as well as reducing domestic abuse in the longer term.

ⁱ LGA media release, March 2018 (<https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/lga-responds-new-planning-laws-councils>)

ⁱⁱ LGA media release, March 2018 (<https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/barn-conversion-developments-heap-more-pressure-rural-schools-roads-and-affordability>)

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- ⁱⁱ LGA Bright Futures Campaign, Children's Services: <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/bright-futures/bright-futures-childrens-services>
- ⁱⁱⁱ JTAI :The multi-agency response to children living with domestic abuse
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/680672/JTAI_domestic_abuse_18_Sept_2017.doc
- ^{iv} <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/domestic-abuse/>
- ^v <http://www.safelives.org.uk/policy-evidence/about-domestic-abuse>
- ^{vi} http://www.safelives.org.uk/practice_blog/living-domestic-abuse-ace-adverse-childhood-experience
- ^{vii} http://www.safelives.org.uk/practice_blog/living-domestic-abuse-ace-adverse-childhood-experience