

Q1 How is support guaranteed for victims of domestic abuse whilst they are accommodated away from their home district, and overcoming barriers to returning people to their home authority when it is deemed safe for them to do so?

#### Safe Accommodation

Safer Places are now contracted by ECC to provide safe accommodation to victim/survivors of Domestic abuse and we have 28 safe accommodation spaces in Harlow and 18 safe accommodation spaces in Chelmsford, we also have 61 safe accommodation spaces in Hertfordshire contracted by HCC where we can place men and women. Historically safe accommodation was large, shared spaces but Safer Places have developed a model of flexible use safe accommodation (dispersed refuge) to provide space for men, people from the trans community and larger families for example and these are available in Harlow and Hertfordshire. We have also ensured the quality of the accommodation is of the highest standard in safe areas with the help of Essex Community Foundation whose assistance to us at this difficult time during the pandemic was second to none and enabled us to keep every space available to re-provide for Altham House during COVID and not decrease our spaces as a result. During this time our Harlow and Chelmsford refuge spaces were not funded by Essex County Council and we were using our reserves, income from our training services and searching for funding daily to enable us to sustain the 46 units of refuge provision in Essex which we provided and which was the majority of the provision in the county at that time.

We would not deem it safe for a victim/survivor from Harlow to be placed in a Harlow safe accommodation therefore we ensure that spaces which are acceptable to the victim/survivor are offered elsewhere in our portfolio. This means that Harlow victims will be accommodated either within Hertfordshire where we offer 61 units of accommodation for men, women and families including a specialist refuge run in partnership with Druglink for those who are drug or alcohol dependent and a specialist refuge for Black and minoritized women or in Chelmsford, and following their stay within our safe accommodation they can receive up to a year's resettlement support from our service on relocating to the community. For many clients it will never be safe to return to living in the same town or area as their perpetrator, there are many reasons why this is not safe, but this will include the perpetrator still at large in Harlow, lack of criminal conviction or simply the victim/survivor will never feel safe in Harlow. Sadly, too often these days victim/survivors are not safe because the perpetrators associates or family abuse as well and increasingly today there is involvement with drugs and networks that was much less common in the past. Whilst in safe accommodation victim/survivors and support workers will work together to see what is possible if they wanted to return home to Harlow. This would include putting in place civil orders including occupation orders, non-molestation orders and family court orders such as prohibited steps order or child contact arrangements that are safe. All our refuge staff are qualified IDVAs and are therefore well placed to complete this work. We also have in house legal advice which is invaluable. We will also work closely with MARAC, local policing to ensure multi-agency support for safety including working with Harlow council to obtain a sanctuary scheme. It is important for the victim/survivor to have this choice to return to their Harlow even if it is not necessarily a choice we would make in their circumstances due to risk. All safeguarding referrals will also be made for both adults if they have care needs and for the children where there is concern. This is a fundamental part of our work because in addition to the domestic abuse the children in our refuges very often face additional disadvantage and risk which if not addressed may lead to harm in the short term and may have an impact on them across the rest of their childhood and adult lives. We have a dedicated Safeguarding lead for Essex to ensure that we can identify risks faced by those we support and advocate strongly to ensure these are addressed.

Multiagency working is absolutely critical to achieving the best outcomes for victims and we would like to confirm that our working relationship with Harlow Council and its housing department is one of the best working relationships we have across both counties, and this makes a huge difference to what can be achieved for victims. Thank you.

#### Short case study

*E is a resident of Harlow and has 2 children, E was referred to safe accommodation after her children disclosed to their teacher that they were worried about their mother. Police visited E at home where she felt she could disclose the abuse she had been experiencing for many years. Her alleged perp was arrested. Upon his arrest, E was then subjected to abuse from her alleged perpetrators family and when she went to the school, she told staff she was afraid her alleged perpetrator would be released, and she could not return home. A referral was made by E's IDVA for Safer Places safe accommodation as a matter of urgency as she was in the school office.*

*E stated she has attempted to flee in the past and a few years ago she fled to her sisters and found herself a flat to rent but her alleged perpetrator accessed her emails and found all the details of new address –she stated she had no choice but to return, and then to plan to flee again. E stated another time she fled, the alleged perp was arrested with threats to kill, and his sentence was only 12 days in prison. E reported she was physically and financially abused by her alleged perpetrator.*

*Referral and entry to safe accommodation was completed within the same day. E and her children were admitted to our Chelmsford safe accommodation, made to feel safe and comfortable and provided with the support they needed to recover from the abuse they had experienced. E would like to return to Harlow but at present it is not safe for her to do so but she hopes in the future once her perpetrator is convicted for the abuse he has committed. E remains in Safe accommodation presently.*

*Safer Places support in safe accommodation includes the following:*

*Practical, emotional , therapeutic and specialist support developed on the basis of a comprehensive assessment and a plan which is developed between the key worker and the individual reflecting the individuals priorities , goals and wishes.*

*Managing risk through agreeing safety plans which could include: DASH risk assessment and safety planning, preparing to leave safely for refuge, ensuring safety online and tech, safe child contact and implementing of civil orders. Where a client can return to their home if made safe safety support is provided as needed including personal safety and alarms, target hardening, civil orders. Access to free legal advice and guidance with onward referral to legal aid or pro-bono services.*

*Housing matters including housing rights, moving, approaching the council and bidding – Housing drop in centre to provide specialist advice and challenge.*

*Money issues such as support with accessing benefits, managing debt and budgeting, signposting and supported meeting with CAB with clients to enable higher levels of debt management (Level 3, debt counselling, Debt relief orders and bankruptcy)*

*Employability support in areas such as sustaining existing employment, preparing for work and getting a job (we have an excellent partnership with Essex Job Centre Plus with clear pathways for victims).*

*Mental and Physical Health support including initial assessment, referral to appropriate agencies, liaison and support to access other health services for the victim and their children.*

*Emotional Wellbeing support, including access to Safer Places programs, counselling (delivered in English and the main community languages ) and emotional support including BIT (Brief*

*Interventions Therapy) from Practitioners and a range of one to one and group therapeutic support for adults, for children and for families together delivered by qualified registered therapists e.g. Art Therapy*

*Support with children and parenting including engagement with children's social services, children's centres, schools and other services.*

*Referral into a wide range of additional services provided either by Safer Places or by partner agencies,*

*Access to Safer Places 24 hour helpline is a standard provision for all clients.*

*Access to legal support surgeries is available either face to face or by phone, our legal advisor holds fixed "surgeries" and we have partnerships with legal teams to access legally aided or pro bono or reduced cost services. The pace at which we can have legal matters dealt with is swift.*

*Access to our programmes includes our core programme, Triple R. DA recovery programme and Made of Money course.*

## Housing IDVA

Safer Places are contracted by Harlow Council and ECC to deliver a Housing HIDVA (independent Domestic Violence Advocate), this allows Harlow Council Homelessness team to refer directly into Safer Places services for any victim/survivor who presents as homeless due to Domestic Abuse. The service ensures that the victim/survivor are contacted quickly to be assessed for risk and safety by a qualified IDVA and stalking specialist. This will include reducing homelessness by making their home safe if it is safe to do so, for example support with reporting to police and/or gaining civil interventions and also where possible adding a sanctuary scheme to their home. If a victim/survivor is able to stay in their own home the HIDVA will then refer them with their consent to Changing Pathways for continued community support as we currently do not hold the community support service. The victim/survivor can also use the Rosie Centre for continued practical support 5 days a week.

Where it is not safe for the victim/survivor to stay in their own home the HIDVA will seek safe accommodation, this will be mostly through Safer Places safe accommodation and we will place in the most suitable accommodation we have available to match the clients wishes, needs and risk management requirements for example, if they are actively using substances our specialist provision at Townsend in Hertfordshire. If however the client wants to live elsewhere, for example to be close to family living in the Midlands , then the HIDVA will assist in securing a refuge space and arranging for the client to transfer to that area. The HIDVA will ensure risk assessing and safety plans are in place and will complete referrals and advocate on behalf of the victim/survivor to gain safe accommodation in a timely way and that at every stage of the process safety is maximised.

## *HIDVA case study*

*Client had been placed in temporary accommodation by Harlow council and a referral to HIDVA made. The client aged 85 went to her local church for lunch as she did each week, where she had broken down and spoken to the Pastor about the emotional abuse she had been suffering from her*

*son and daughter in law (APs), who were both registered as her carers. The paster contacted Harlow council for support. A social care referral was completed, a social worker had contacted the client and her supporting family to complete a statement, the SW said the AP's had also made a referral and stated she was not safe. This was being investigated, the AP's has also reported the client as missing, and the police had made contact and were reassured the client was safe.*

*The client had another son, who was contacted and was unaware of the abuse. When the HIDVA contacted the client she always completed contact with the support of this son as she was very hard of hearing and would at times get confused. The client disclosed that the AP's had been taking her money, and said her son had bought her house, which she had no knowledge of selling to him.*

*The HIDVA suggested to the client that with the help of her supporting son, she go to the bank to change her pin number to her account and also to check statements over the last eight years, if possible. The HIDVA suggested they inform the bank of what has been going on so that she would be recognised as a victim of financial abuse and get the full support she needed. The bank changed the account pin and made the account secure. By looking at the statements, the client had apparently sold her house to the AP ten years ago for £20,000. The client stated she had not agreed to this. It was also discovered that the AP's had been paying for holidays, vets bill, gym memberships and had bought cars over the years and this added up to over £35,000 being spent without the client knowing. The client also disclosed the lack of care she had received from the AP's and verbal abuse she had suffered.*

*The HIDVA encouraged the client to report to the police which she did with the help of her supporting family. The client didn't want to press charges as she stated he was her son.*

*The HIDVA advised the supporting family to contact the GP as they believed the AP's have Power of attorney and she booked the family an appointment to speak to the Safer Places legal adviser, who gave them the information to get a replacement POA completed revoking the previous POA and the AP's were removed from all medical notes as the next of kin.*

*As the client did not want to come into safe accommodation, the HIDVA completed an application for supported housing with the client and helped with gathering the info needed with the application. The client remained in the temp accommodation for a couple of weeks and was offered a flat at a supporting housing unit in Harlow.*

*The HIDVA recently had a call from the family thanking her for the support she had given and stated the client is so happy in the accommodation she is in, has made friends and is joining clubs. They also informed her client had changed her mind and was going ahead with completing a statement to the police for the AP's to be charged.*

As before, Safer Places are not funded for community services in Harlow and changing pathways deliver this service, however we provide the Rosie Centre in Harlow for all Harlow women from our own funding and donations. The Rosie Centre is named after Esytina Blunnie's unborn child Rosie and it provides a centre where women can obtain support and advice from Safer Places but also from other agencies including MIND, CAB, Rainbow services and access to legal support. The centre has events 5 days a week including counselling, art therapy and singing therapy and women can attend everyday if needed.

Between April 23 – June 23 we received 20 referrals for safe accommodation from women who are resident in Harlow and 1 male resident seeking safe accommodation.

A further 19 women were referred and attended the Rosie Centre.

Q 2 the speed in which emergency accommodation is being provided for victims of domestic abuse in Harlow is sufficient?

We operate a 24/7 emergency helpline, provide webchat and email referrals so there are options for victim/survivors and professionals to choose. We admit victim/survivors 24/7 including males and male children up to the age of 18. Safer Places strives to place any referral in a timely manner and within 24 hours from first contact (please see case study in Q1) however at times referrals can take longer due to complexities around Tech abuse, mental health and substance misuse where we need to complete extra assessments to ensure that the client is safe in the space/coming into the space or the support offered will be appropriate. One of the greatest barriers we face however is increasingly referring agencies are not open about the needs and circumstances of the people they are referring. Increasingly we are being asked to admit people who may be vulnerable and homeless but who do not need safe accommodation because of domestic abuse or who may have experienced domestic abuse but in fact need a crisis provision or supported provision as a result of other needs for which there is no suitable provision or no suitable provision that can be accessed as quickly as refuge .For example we have had people referred who we have found have needed help to get to the bathroom or to cut up food and cook meals This is a serious matter because there is a risk very vulnerable people are being dumped out of their local area and their familiar services and support networks into places unable to meet their needs . It is not an everyday occurrence but it is becoming regular that referrals are made to us which we want to accept on trust from professionals but are subsequently disappointed to find that they have been extremely economical with the truth as it is known to them at the time of the referral .On a number of occasions in the last year we have admitted people to refuge who turned out to be very unwell and who posed a risk to themselves , other residents and their children and our staff.