

Guidance for social landlords: Domestic Abuse: COVID-19 (April 2020)

Domestic abuse - impact of COVID-19

We all have to stay at home to prevent the spread of COVID-19, but for thousands of women and children in Scotland, home is not a safe place to be. This is a particularly difficult time for women and children experiencing domestic abuse as social distancing and self-isolation will mean that women and children will have reduced contact with supportive friends, families, communities and services.

Some women who live with an abuser will feel increased anxiety around the prospect of self-isolation and social distancing, or even quarantine, in a house with an abuser. Or, for the many victim/survivors who do not live with their abusers, they may feel an increased level of fear at the prospect of their abuser knowing that they are at home, and the possibility for further surveillance that this creates.

[Experts have warned](#) that pandemics have been linked to increased violence against women and girls. That women already face complex decisions and a wide range of barriers preventing their ability to safely escape an abusive partner. During pandemics, when mobility is constrained, social distancing measures are imposed, economic vulnerability increases, and legal and social services are scaled back, challenges in escaping abusive partners are exacerbated.

What can social landlords do?

1. Develop a specific domestic abuse policy based on the [Good Practice Guidance for Social Landlords](#). This guidance applies for responding to anyone experiencing domestic abuse including men, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender people and gender non-binary people (LGBT+).

2. Homelessness

- Prevent victim/survivors homelessness by ensuring women and children can remain in the home.
- Social landlords still have a responsibility to provide accommodation to women and children, even when keeping allocations to a minimum
- NRPF new guidance from COSLA on accommodating and supporting people with no recourse to public funds

3. Housing management - continue to manage voids and allocation process so that

- Perpetrators of domestic abuse can be rehoused
- Women and children experiencing domestic abuse can be housed through a managed process
- Additional security measures are provided to homes to enable women and children to remain safely in the home

4. Engage with local women's aid groups and violence against women partnerships

5. Provide information to ensure victim/survivors know where to access support

1. Develop a specific domestic abuse policy

During the COVID-19 pandemic, having a policy that sets out how you will respond proactively to domestic abuse is more critical than ever. An existing policy should be reviewed to ensure that interventions are informed by the increased risk to women and children, service generated risks are reassessed and collaborative working arrangements with local support services and violence against women partnerships strengthened. Home is not a safe place for many women and children across Scotland. Local authorities and housing associations have a responsibility to prevent and respond to domestic abuse in accordance with [Equally Safe](#) - Scotland's strategy for preventing and addressing violence against women and girls.

The priority should be to ensure women and children can remain safely in their home unless they choose to move. This should include working with specialist support providers to provide women and children with support and arranging additional security measures as required. Landlords should ensure that women are aware of all their housing options in order to make an informed choice, including the option to move out of the home for a temporary period, for example while the perpetrator is rehoused.

Guidance produced by CIH Scotland, Scottish Women's Aid, Shelter Scotland, ALACHO and the SFHA sets out how social landlords should be responding, it includes good practice examples, checklists for best practice in responding to domestic abuse and templates for domestic abuse policies.

The guidance for social landlords to develop a domestic abuse policy is [here](#).

2. Homelessness provision

Responsibility

Local authorities already have a range of statutory obligations on homelessness including providing information and advice and offering

temporary or permanent accommodation if appropriate. These obligations will remain in place throughout the crisis.

However, it is important that local authorities draw upon and use the support that is available in order to meet their duties. This includes working with housing associations and private landlords and letting agents to access appropriate accommodation and national funding to secure temporary accommodation. This can include accessing new sources of temporary accommodation where necessary including hotels and the Air B&B market. Provision of accommodation for victim/survivors of domestic abuse should take into the specific safety and support needs of women and children experiencing domestic abuse. Working in partnership with women's aid and your local violence against women partnership will support better outcomes for women and children.

New guidance on No Recourse to Public Funds

COSLA has issued [guidance](#) for local authorities on supporting people with no recourse to public funds (NRPF). It makes clear that local authorities should provide temporary access to accommodation and financial support to people with NRPF who are in need, and take any other relevant measures required to protect public health.

The guidance applies to:

- **EU national students, workers and people with spousal visas** who have lawful leave to remain subject to NRPF conditions;
- **Non-EU nationals who have overstayed their visas, and appeal rights exhausted (ARE) asylum seekers**, who no longer have leave to remain but are unable to return home and require assistance from the local authority; and
- **EU nationals who are not jobseeking, working or self-employed or who only hold pre-settled status, or have not yet applied for settled status.**

Groups identified as at particular risk are:

- **Single adults who are not currently in receipt of support from the local authority** are at highest risk of rough sleeping and are likely to struggle to comply with current public health advice on self-isolation or social distancing.
- **Specific risks for women** who may be vulnerable to exploitation, violence and domestic abuse because of their insecure immigration status and lack of access to public funds.
- **Children within families who have NRPF** and are currently receiving support from the local authority may have a package of support in place that is no longer sufficient to meet their basic needs and alleviate poverty. They may also struggle to access wider services (for example, as a result of school closures).

3. Housing management - allocating/transferring tenancies

Landlords will be prioritising allocations to support reducing homelessness and to ensure that a victim/survivor can move home or a perpetrator be rehoused. It is vital that social landlords are still able to ensure safe management transfer during this period of crisis. As many refuges are full or have had to change to single occupancy, social landlords have an even more important role in housing women and children who are able to move on from refuge and into their own home. This ensures refuge is available to women and children in crisis. New guidance on housing allocations can be found here.

In line with the good practice guidance, it is important that victim/survivors are not prevented from being rehoused because of rent arrears or rechargeable repairs. Where there are delays in women being able to move into a tenancy because of issues related to COVID-19 e.g. time to furnish a property, health and safety checks or arranging removals, rent should not be charged for that period.

Health and safety - managing risk during allocations

There are health and safety challenges for both the prospective tenant and staff member. When showing someone around a house, witnessing a tenancy agreement etc. However, as this work is essential for the safety and security of victims of domestic abuse, it should continue to take place. [PPE Guidance](#) must be followed at all times.

Nonetheless, it is vital that all staff adhere to good [health and safety practices](#) and landlords should develop a no contact sign up process. Processes could include:

- Additional photos and videos to minimise the time and desire for visits to properties ahead of a tenancy agreement being signed.
- Where tenants do access the property, they are in contact with the landlord by mobile phone who is outside the building. Applicant and landlord should not be in the same building at the same time.
- Use of e-signature software to agree a tenancy.
- Waiting at least 72 hours to touch paper work if it is to be handled by the landlord and tenant.

Safe contact with victims/survivors

Social landlords may already be aware of victim/survivors of domestic abuse currently living in their tenancies or may be contacted by women for the first time looking for information and support. The good practice guidance and the resource list within it provides useful information on how you should respond and how to address risk. We strongly advise that only staff trained in domestic abuse take the lead on planning and providing a response in order to reduce any further risk of harm to women and children.

It is important to remember that unless your tenant or someone else in the household is in danger you should:

- not take any action that has not been agreed with the tenant
- always check with women if it is safe to contact them and how they want to be contacted
- be clear about what you can offer before making contact

When contacting a victim/survivor ALWAYS

Take your lead from the victim/survivors, as they are experts in relation to managing their situation and keeping themselves and their family safe.

Speak to the victim/survivor on her own. If it is not safe to do this, use a pretext that relates to the tenancy or to support around COVID-19 for getting in touch.

If you have serious concerns about a tenant, your first response should be to contact the Police. You should advise tenants who have concerns about a neighbour to call the police at the time. Domestic abuse is a crime and the safety of women and children is paramount.

Provision of additional security measures

Many women are experiencing increased stalking of the family home, incessant texting and phone calls from their ex-partner as social isolation provides opportunities for greater surveillance. This causes increased fear and anxiety for women and children who are unable to feel safe in their home. Social landlords can help alleviate some of that anxiety by providing additional home security measures such as lock changes, reinforced doors and doorframes, fire letterbox covers, window alarms, external lighting, CCTV and video entry. While also ensuring they do not come into physical contact with any tenants.

4. Engage with local women's aid groups and violence against women partnerships

During this time of crisis, collaborative working to prevent and respond to domestic abuse is more important than ever. Social landlords should have good working arrangements with a range of agencies including specialist support providers and strategic partners.

Domestic abuse support services for women and children

Women's Aid are redesigning their services to continue to provide support safely to women and children. For some, this means reconfiguring their shared refuge accommodation to single occupancy. Social landlords also have a critical role in supporting women and children by offering accommodation as well as other forms of support such as funding, providing cleaning services, food delivery etc. You can find contact details of your local women's aid group at <https://womensaid.scot/find-nearest-wa-group/>

The Scottish Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline is also a source of information and advice for professionals <https://sdafmh.org.uk/>.

Your local Women's Aid group or Scottish Women's Aid can also provide you with support to ensure that as you develop new procedures, these are properly risk assessed by a specialist domestic abuse service.

Local Multi-Agency Violence Against Women Partnerships

[Equally Safe](#) highlights the need for agencies across every area of Scottish life to work together to tackle domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls. At a local level, Violence Against Women Partnerships (VAWPs) are recognised as the key driver for this multi-agency work.

These Partnerships are responsible for bringing together all the key public sector and third sector organisations working to prevent and eradicate domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls within each local authority area.

Importantly, VAWPs offer a single point of contact for the breadth of work being taken to tackle domestic abuse and other forms of gender based violence at a local level and avoid duplication of effort and resource.

For more information about VAW Partnerships (including the contact details for the Coordinator/ Lead Officer in your local authority area), please contact vaw@improvementservice.org.uk or visit the [Improvement Service's website](#).

Multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs)

MARACs are confidential, regular, local partnership meetings of where information about domestic abuse victims at most risk of serious harm is shared, and a coordinated plan of action to safeguard the victim and her children is developed. Contact details for your local MARAC can be found at <https://safelives.org.uk/practice-support/resources-marac-meetings/find-marac> any queries on MARACs should be sent to Scotland@Safelives.org.uk.

5. Provide information to ensure victim/survivors know where to access support

It is important that women experiencing domestic abuse know that help and support continues to be available nationally through the domestic abuse helpline and locally through Women's Aid services. Some women may assume or have been told these services have been closed. Social landlords have a role to play in including information on domestic abuse support services within all their communication to tenants and ongoing COVID-19 updates.

Local Women's Aid services have moved to new ways of working to support women and children - find out from the Women's Aid group in your area what services they are providing and how women can contact them.

Scotland's National Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline <https://sdafmh.org.uk/> continues to provide support 24/7 through phone, webchat and email. The helpline also provides information and support to friends, family members and professionals looking for advice. Information promoting the helpline should be provided in all your communications and through your social media.

6. Resources

Scotland's Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline is available 24/7 via phone on 0800 027 1234, email helpline@sdafmh.org.uk or live web chat may be a safer way for women to make contact during this time www.sdafmh.org.uk

Scottish Women's Aid has a range of information and resources and videos <https://womensaid.scot/>

Scottish Women's Rights Centre <https://www.scottishwomensrightscentre.org.uk/> provides free legal information, advice and representation to women affected by violence and abuse.

Rape Crisis Scotland www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/ provides advice, information and support to anyone who is a victim of sexual violence.

Guidance developed by CIH Scotland, Scottish Women's Aid, ALACHO, Shelter Scotland and the SFHA for social landlords <https://womensaid.scot/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Domestic-abuse-guidance-for-social-landlords-FINAL.pdf>

Guidance from COSLA on accommodating and supporting people with no recourse to public funds <http://www.migrationscotland.org.uk/resources>

7. Contacts

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