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Priority Need For Housing For Survivors Of Domestic Abuse: One Year On



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Summary

Prior to the passage of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, people made homeless as a result of domestic abuse had to prove they were more vulnerable than the ordinary person in order to access homelessness assistance from councils, unless they were pregnant, had children or had another specified vulnerability. The Domestic Abuse Act amended housing law to deem anyone made homeless by domestic abuse automatically in priority need for temporary accommodation, which came into force in July 2021.

We looked at how well the change is working and whether survivors' experiences of making homelessness applications have improved as a result, including a survey of frontline workers from Solace and other domestic abuse and homelessness services.

Key Findings

There are some survivors of male violence who are excluded from the change:

- Migrant women with insecure immigration status and those with no recourse to public funds are not eligible for housing support and can be made destitute by domestic abuse. They are some of the most marginalised and vulnerable survivors as a result.
- Survivors of rape and sexual violence are excluded unless perpetrated by an intimate partner or family member. Sexual violence can cause women's homelessness, but not only are these women excluded from priority need unless they have children or other vulnerabilities, women without children who are under the age of 35 are only eligible for the amount of housing allowance that is meant to cover shared accommodation such as flat shares and hostels. Shared accommodation is inappropriate and potentially physically and /or psychologically unsafe for survivors of sexual violence.

More people are homeless as a result of domestic abuse, and more are deemed as being in priority need for housing:

- Using the latest national data available we compared the nine month period from July 2021 (when the change came into force) to March 2022 to the same period the previous year.
- The number of people made homeless by domestic abuse between these periods increased by 24% in England and 22% in London, which is reflected in the experiences of our service users, 887 of whom were made homeless by domestic abuse in the full year April 2021 to March 2022 compared to 609 the previous year.
- The number of people accepted as priority need also increased between the 9 month period above, by 35% in England from 1,140 to 1,540 people and by 193% in London, from 140 to 410 people.

Housing outcomes are not improving and are set to get worse:

- Many survivors need the secure and affordable tenancies offered in social housing, but social housing is in short supply compared to need (and priority need).
- Despite domestic abuse survivors now being eligible for automatic priority need, the proportion of survivors we work with being supported into temporary and private rented accommodation is increasing year-on-year.
- Women's Aid's survey of survivors found that three quarters of women living with and having financial links with an abuser said that the cost of living crisis had either prevented them from leaving or made it harder for them to leave.¹
- The rising costs in the private rented sector, poor quality of housing at the lower end of the market and the impact of inflation and energy prices on the costs of basics such as food, gas and electricity bills, combined with insufficient income from benefits, risks greater numbers of survivors returning to perpetrators.

Key Findings

Gatekeeping practices remain common:

- The lack of social and affordable housing supply incentivises housing officers to find reasons to turn down homelessness applications. The ways in which they do this are known as 'gatekeeping'.
- 30% of frontline workers said priority need has improved survivors' experiences of making homelessness applications, but half said it has not improved.
- In half of the applications frontline staff had supported, service users had experienced some form of gatekeeping.
- The most common form of gatekeeping was requiring police corroboration, with 71% of frontline staff reporting that this happens in at least some cases, this has increased from last year when 67% said the same. Housing officers should not be requiring police evidence. Only 18% of women experiencing domestic abuse in the previous 12 months are estimated to report it to the police (Crime Survey of England and Wales, 2018) and the first stage of a homelessness application has a low evidence threshold, where housing officers need only believe that an applicant 'may' have been made homeless as a result of domestic abuse.
- Housing officers asking for proof of physical violence has however decreased, showing a marked improvement. Last year 37% of staff said it was requested in most or all applications compared to 13% this year.

Conclusion

The change to priority need has made some improvements to survivors' experiences of making homelessness applications and accessing support, and there is increased awareness of the new definition of domestic abuse since the passage of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. However, the lack of affordable and social housing supply incentivises housing officers to gatekeep or create delays, which is compounded by a lack of understanding or at times empathy for survivors of domestic abuse.

The move to remote services since the pandemic has exacerbated these issues and can leave women who have fled abusive perpetrators with nothing in precarious situations. The law is clear that in the first assessment, housing officers need only be satisfied that applicants 'may' be homeless as a result of domestic abuse. But even when supported by expert advocates and support workers who have risk assessed their service users, housing officers too often find reasons to turn survivors away.



Recommendations

Councils should:

- Ensure every housing officer has been trained in their duties in relation to domestic abuse and homelessness and that this training is readily available to access.
- Commission co-located housing advocates to provide advice and training to housing officers and to provide direct support for homelessness applicants whose first disclosure is to the housing authority.
- Ensure that there is a physical presence in the housing department of every council during normal business hours with female housing officers available and all staff trained in trauma informed practice.
- Ringfence 5% of all new social housing built for survivors of domestic abuse.
- Ensure that private rented accommodation offered to survivors is offered at the Local Housing Allowance Rate.

The Greater London Authority (GLA) should:

- Accelerate its commitment to exploring the roll out of co-located housing domestic abuse advocates in housing authorities, as set out in the Safe Accommodation Strategy.
- Continue to prioritise increasing the supply of social housing in London.
- Work with other tier one authorities to learn from the implementation of the safe accommodation duty and the interaction with housing authorities' homelessness duties.
- Use the Local Partnership Board to create opportunities for councils to share best practice and learnings from implementing the change to priority need.
- Ensure continued funding from the Safe Accommodation Duty is used to fund provision for migrant women with insecure immigration and no recourse to public funds, and the specific funding stream for 'led by and for' organisations remains in place for future rounds.



The Government should:

- Extend eligibility under the Domestic Violence Rule and Destitution Domestic Violence Concession (DDVC) to all migrant survivors with insecure immigration status, and/ or no recourse to public funds who have experienced domestic abuse and extend the time temporary leave and access to public services is given from 3 to at least 6 months, as recommended by Southall Black Sisters.
- Lift the no recourse to public funds condition and implement a firewall between public services and Immigration Enforcement to ensure survivors can report safely and access safe housing.
- Lift the benefit cap and the two-child limit from Universal Credit.
- Increase benefits in line with inflation
- Review the freeze on Local Housing Allowance rates so that they are linked again to the actual market rent levels and availability of housing at those levels.
- Scale up investment in building new social housing to meet demand.
- Put into primary legislation that local connection rules do not apply to survivors of domestic abuse and make clear that councils can neither enforce local connection rules nor turn survivors away when their perpetrator/s live in the same area.
- Run a communications campaign directed at the public and councils on survivors' housing rights when made homeless as a result of domestic abuse.
- Allocate additional administrative burdens funding to support housing officers processing homelessness applications beyond 2024.
- Extend priority need and the shared accommodation exemption for single people under 35 to survivors of rape and sexual violence.





Introduction

Domestic Abuse is a leading cause of homelessness in the UK. Women living with abuse are regularly faced with either having to stay in an abusive and often escalating situation or lose their home.

Women and children made homeless as a result of domestic abuse can be in complex situations and need urgent help to reach a safe space. On average 'high' risk survivors live with domestic abuse for 2.3 years and 'medium' risk survivors 3 years before getting help, so when survivors do disclose abuse, it is absolutely crucial that they are believed and offered support.²

In October 2019, Solace published [Safe as Houses](#), which detailed the failures of the housing system to protect women and children when they most need it. We assessed the impact of councils' duties to prevent and relieve homelessness under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and found that despite the potential to positively impact the experiences of survivors fleeing abuse, the situation in many parts of London was instead worsening.

In 2021, after a year of the Covid-19 pandemic and as the Domestic Abuse Act was completing its parliamentary stages, Solace published [Violence against women and girls, housing and homelessness: A joined up strategy](#), which looked back at the impact of multiple lockdowns on

survivors of domestic abuse and looked ahead to the potential of some of the changes proposed in the Domestic Abuse Act.

These changes were to:

- (1) bring in a duty on local authorities to provide support in safe accommodation for victims of domestic abuse and their children, and
- (2) change the eligibility criteria for victims of domestic abuse for priority need for temporary accommodation when they approached housing authorities.

We highlighted that while the measures in the Act were welcome, they were never designed to address the impact of the pandemic on Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and the unparalleled number of survivors reaching crisis point and becoming unsafe in their homes during the pandemic period.

Without sufficient safe, suitable and affordable accommodation for survivors of domestic abuse, the additional crisis accommodation provided by the new duty risked creating a logjam of need for housing both from those who initially moved into refuge or other safe accommodation, and for those for who move directly into temporary accommodation having presented as homeless at a local authority.

Why is safe, suitable and affordable accommodation needed?

When survivors of domestic abuse are not supported appropriately it can have devastating consequences on their physical and mental health and their long-term ability to recover and rebuild their lives.

Maya's story*

A service user in one of our community services, Maya, had fled an abusive partner who had been physically and sexually violent towards her. Maya presented as homeless at a London council and because she had stayed with her mother the council did not offer her emergency accommodation. Maya explained that she had experienced child abuse when she lived with her mother and found it traumatising to be there – she had only gone there when she fled her abuser because she had nowhere else to go.

It was nearly two weeks before the council got in touch with Maya, during which time she sofa surfed at night and spent the daytimes walking around the streets. The council asked her to retell her experiences of abuse each time they made contact, which was at least four times and in addition she found it difficult speaking to a male housing officer. Maya is now in a self-contained room in a mixed hostel with a communal and kitchen space and with male residents and people using drugs and alcohol, which is not psychologically safe for her, is potentially physically unsafe, and means her daughter cannot visit her.

Referring to her perpetrator Maya told us, *“He’s got somewhere to sleep, somewhere to have a bath, and I don’t have anything. Technically I’m still homeless because the place I’m in is unsuitable. I am sad and depressed and suicidal right now. I need to be somewhere I know it’s going to be okay”*.



Lesley's story*

Lesley is currently staying at our multiple disadvantage refuge for women who have experienced multiple and intersecting disadvantages and inequalities. Lesley had approached her council as homeless having fled an abuser who had threatened her life. She was told she would get a call back from the out of hours service with an offer of emergency accommodation. Lesley told us she didn't report the abuse to the police because her abuser – who was her partner - has Alzheimer's and she thought they either wouldn't believe her or they would put his violence down to his illness and wouldn't press charges.

When the out of hours service called Lesley they said they couldn't help her unless she had a police report. By that point Lesley had no other options available, so she spent the night on the streets and said she took speed to stay awake to stay safe.

When we asked Lesley what she wanted to say to councils and the Government she said, *“Don't let women sleep on the streets”*.

***To protect our service users, names have been changed.**

What is priority need?

Under existing housing legislation,³ people who present as homeless to local housing authorities (within local councils) are entitled to interim accommodation from the housing authority if they have reason to believe that the applicant may:

- Be homeless
- Be eligible for assistance and
- Have a priority need

At the initial stage, applicants do not need to prove they meet the criteria, but housing officers should reasonably believe that they ‘may’ do.

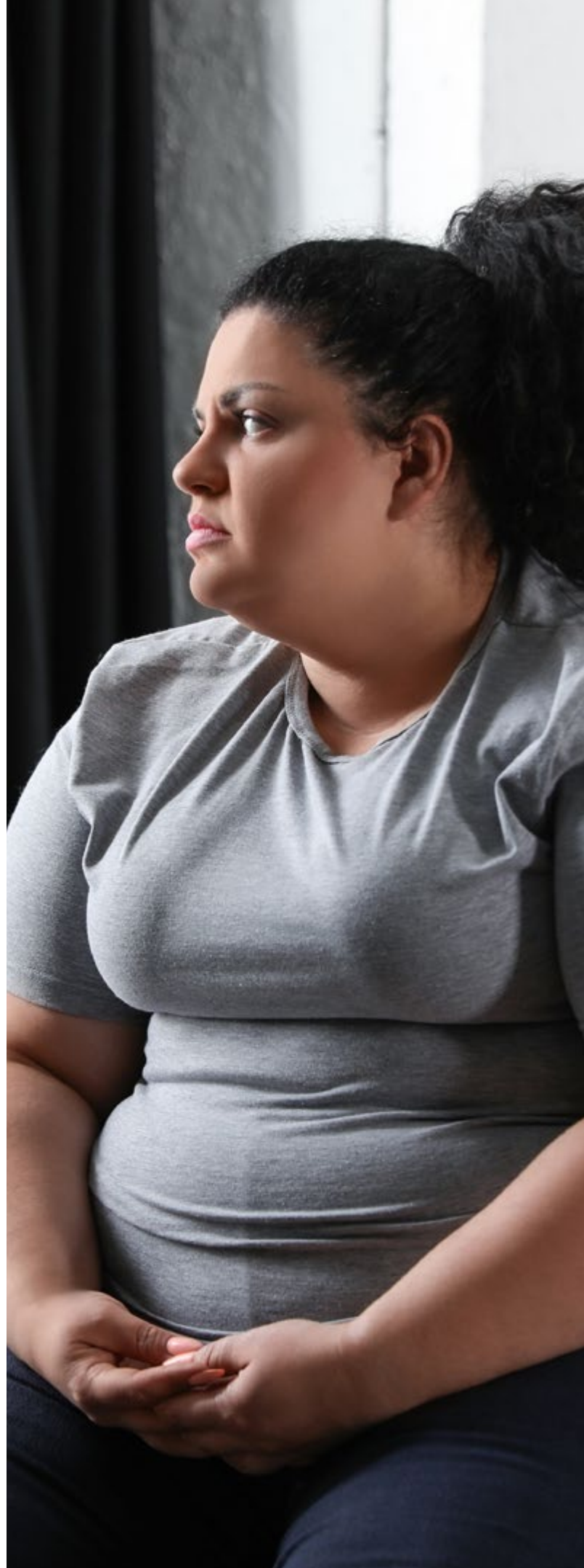
Once accepting someone for interim accommodation, the housing authority then has 56 days to consider whether they have enough evidence that the applicant is:

- Eligible for assistance
- In priority need and
- Not intentionally homeless

If the applicant meets these criteria, the local housing authority owes them a “main” duty to provide suitable temporary accommodation until such time as the duty is ended, either through an offer of settled accommodation or some other circumstances.

Prior to the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, people made homeless as a result of domestic abuse met the criteria for priority need only if they either had children, were pregnant, or were considered more vulnerable than an ordinary person, leaving housing officers to make judgements about the likelihood and impact of domestic abuse on victims and survivors.

The Domestic Abuse Act amended homelessness legislation⁴ to provide that “a person who is homeless as a result of that person being a victim of domestic abuse” was added to the list of categories of priority need. This change came into force on the 5 July 2021.





Survivors excluded from priority need

This report details some of the impacts of the change to priority need and the challenges still experienced by eligible survivors. There are some groups however who are excluded from the legislative change creating a two-tier system for survivors.



Migrant victims and survivors

Migrant women with insecure immigration status and women with no recourse to public funds are some of the most vulnerable survivors of domestic abuse because their immigration status can be deliberately exploited by perpetrators and their access to support is limited. Immigration abuse can include withholding key immigration documents so that a survivor is unable to ascertain what rights they have, purposefully mismanaging a survivor's immigration status or deliberately using the immigration system to control and threaten them.

To exacerbate this, migrant survivors' immigration status often means they are not able to access publicly funded services including housing. Half of all referrals that were turned away from the emergency Covid-19 refuge set up and run by Solace in partnership with Southall Black Sisters between May and November 2020 were due to the lack of provision for women with no recourse to public funds. These women fail the eligibility test for local authority housing support and so without support from specialist services they face the choice between sleeping rough and returning to their abuser.

Organisations such as Latin American Women's Rights, Southall Black Sisters and Safety4Sisters, who work directly with migrant women, lobbied Government to accept amendments to the Domestic Abuse Act which would extend provisions for victims and survivors of domestic abuse to migrant

survivors. These amendments were rejected by Government.

Instead, up to now, the Government has opted to maintain policy frameworks that enable migrant victims who report to public authorities including the police, to be reported to immigration enforcement agencies. In 2021-22, the Home Office funded a £1.4m pilot scheme to support women with no recourse to public funds and gather evidence on their needs to inform future policy. In their response to a Work and Pensions Committee report in June 2022, the Government said decisions on the recommendations coming out of the evaluation will be taken "as soon as practicable"⁵. In the meantime they have continued funding another £1.4m for 2022-23.

In addition, in response to a Super Complaint lodged by Southall Black Sisters and Liberty on data sharing between the police and the Home Office in 2018, the Government published a review of data sharing arrangements rejecting the need for a firewall and instead proposed a protocol that would prevent immigration enforcement action against victims whilst criminal investigations and proceedings are ongoing. We support our sector colleagues in rejecting the protocol as it does not go far enough to provide adequate protection.

The Government has now ratified the Istanbul Convention, which is the gold standard for ending male violence against women but will employ exclusions to the convention that protect migrant victims and survivors.



Survivors of rape and sexual violence

The data on sexual violence including rape as a cause of homelessness is limited, but through our work with survivors of sexual violence particularly the rape crisis service we run in north London and our work with women experiencing street homelessness, we know it is both a cause of homelessness and increases for women already homeless, and for vulnerable young women the lack of available support can be particularly traumatising.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS)' analysis of the most recent Crime Survey for England and Wales showed that in the year ending March 2022 there were 194,683 sexual offences recorded by the police, 36% of which were reported rapes. The full survey was not carried out during the pandemic, but data from the year ending March 2020 showed that 37% of rapes and assaults by penetration happen in the victims' home – higher for women than men, and that 38% of victims are aged 16 to 34.

We know through our work that sexual violence can cause women's homelessness. But not only are these women excluded from priority need unless they have children or other vulnerabilities, women without children who are under the age of 35 are only eligible for the amount of housing allowance that is meant to cover shared accommodation. In October, single survivors of domestic abuse who are

under 35 became eligible for housing support to cover self-contained accommodation. While this amount is not enough, it is significantly higher than the shared accommodation rate.

Our caseworkers and advocates have worked with younger women who have been housed in completely unsuitable and unsafe mixed-gender accommodation, including large hostels where there is drug use in the communal areas. We have found that there is a real lack of recognition of the vulnerability of this age group in local housing departments. Young women who have been abused and exploited are told by housing officers to check websites where houses in multiple occupation are advertised, such as Spare Room or Gumtree, expecting them to approach and move in with complete strangers.

For women who have been raped or sexually assaulted, including where the perpetrators were their flat mates or friends of flat mates (12% of sexual assaults are perpetrated by victims' friends), the expectation on them to share accommodation fails to recognise the trauma they have experienced, the ongoing risk to their safety, and the emotional or psychological impact on them.



Has the change in priority need worked for eligible domestic abuse survivors?



With priority need being in force for over a year, we have investigated whether the change within the Domestic Abuse Act has led to a step change in access to safe and affordable housing for domestic abuse victims.

In order to capture and compare data on the change, we looked at national and London level homelessness data from July 2021, when the change came into force to March 2022 (which was the latest available at the time of analysis) and compared this to the same period in 2020-21 before the change.

The number of people made homeless as a result of domestic abuse has increased

The national and London-level data, published by the Department for Leveling Up, Housing and Communities, show that the total number of people made homeless as a result of domestic abuse increased in London and England between July 2020 – March 2021 and July 2021 – March 2022, at a higher rate than the total number of people made homeless or threatened by homeless in the same period (figure 1).

Some of this change could be a result of awareness of the legislative change among local housing authorities and so more accurate recording but this is also likely to be a reflection of greater numbers of survivors presenting as homeless.

This is reflected in our services over the last three years, where the percentage of service users made homeless as a result of domestic abuse has increased from 609 in 2019-20 to 887 in 2021-22 (figure 2).

Figure 1

Number of homelessness applicants owed a prevention or relief duty, overall total and total as a result of domestic abuse, July 2020 to March 2021 compared with July 2021 to March 2022, London and the rest of England

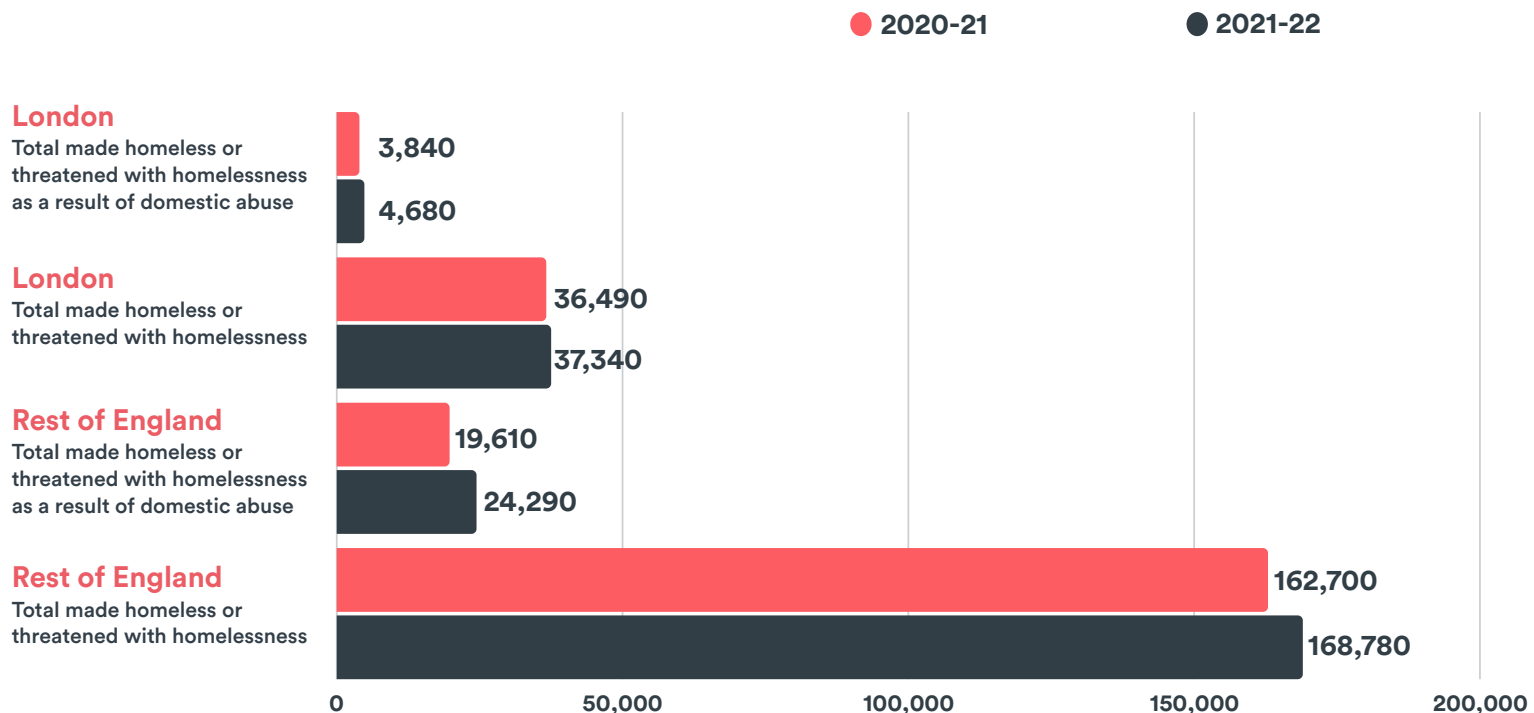
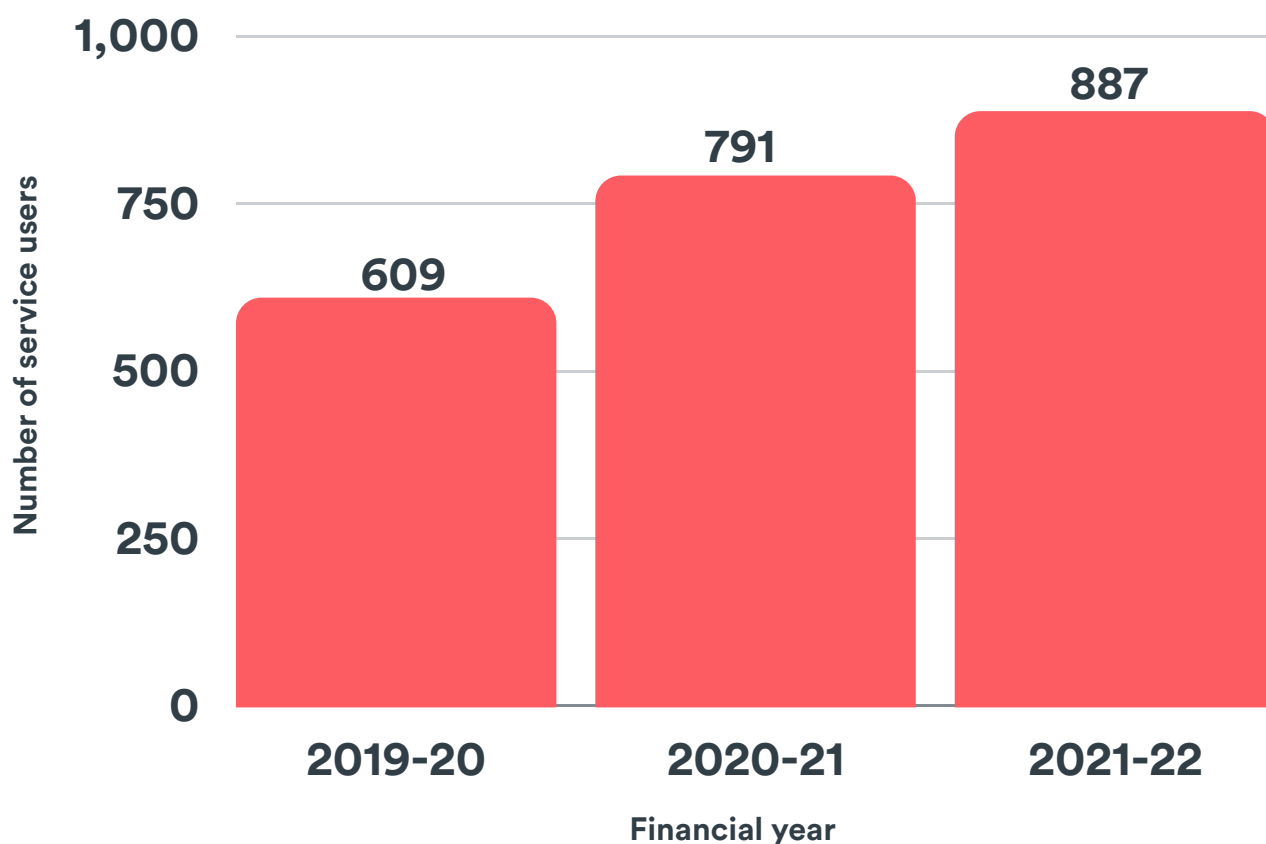


Figure 2

Number of Solace service users made homeless as a result of domestic abuse



In London, the number of people deemed to be priority need as a result of domestic abuse increased significantly compared to the rest of England

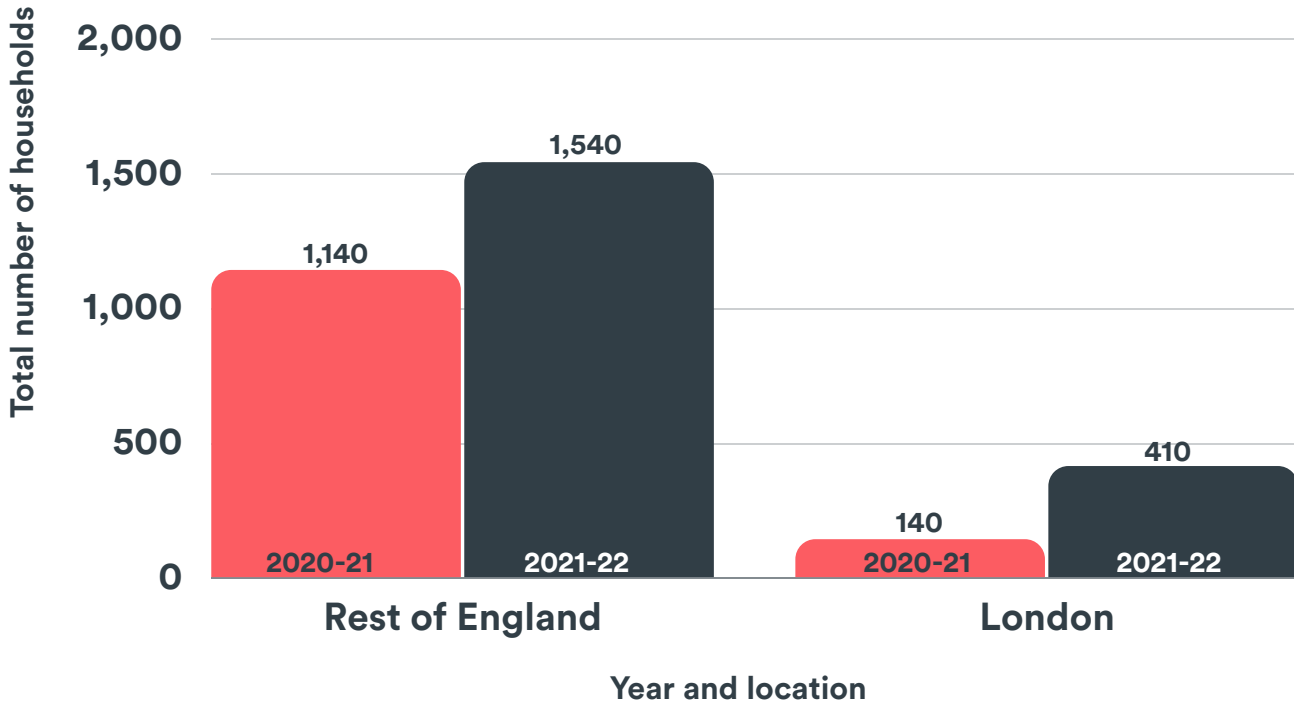
The total number of people accepted as homeless (owed a main duty) by local housing authorities increased by 19% from July 2020 – March 2021 to July 2021 – March 2022 in England (excluding London) ,from 20,100 to 24,010, and decreased by 5% in London from 7,640 to 7,280.

However, the number of people deemed to be in priority need as a result of domestic abuse increased by 193% in London from 140 to 410 households in July 2020-March 2021 compared to July 2021-March 2022. For the same reporting period, there was a 35% increase across the rest of England, with an increase of 1,140 to 1,540 households (figure 3).

While it is positive to see London councils accept more people as priority as a result of domestic abuse, the overall number of homelessness applications accepted have not increased inferring that the increase could be as a result of a change in reporting.

Figure 3

Households accepted as priority need as a result of domestic abuse before and after change, London and the rest of England



We have not seen improvements in housing outcomes for our service users who have been made homeless as a result of domestic abuse

We looked at data on housing outcomes for service users made homeless as a result of domestic abuse across three years from 2019-20 to 2021-22 (by the date they entered the services).

The type of housing outcome did not change significantly over this period, as shown in Figure 4, which shows all the different housing outcomes for all service users made homeless as a result of domestic abuse, by the year they came into a Solace service.

The category 'survivor resettled through support' includes those supported into private rented accommodation, which has increased during the three years as it is increasingly the only option offered to women we work with, and is concerning because of the higher costs and often poor quality of accommodation in the private rental market, which has seen an increase in rent costs in the first quarter of 2022 and is predicted to continue to rise through 2022.⁶

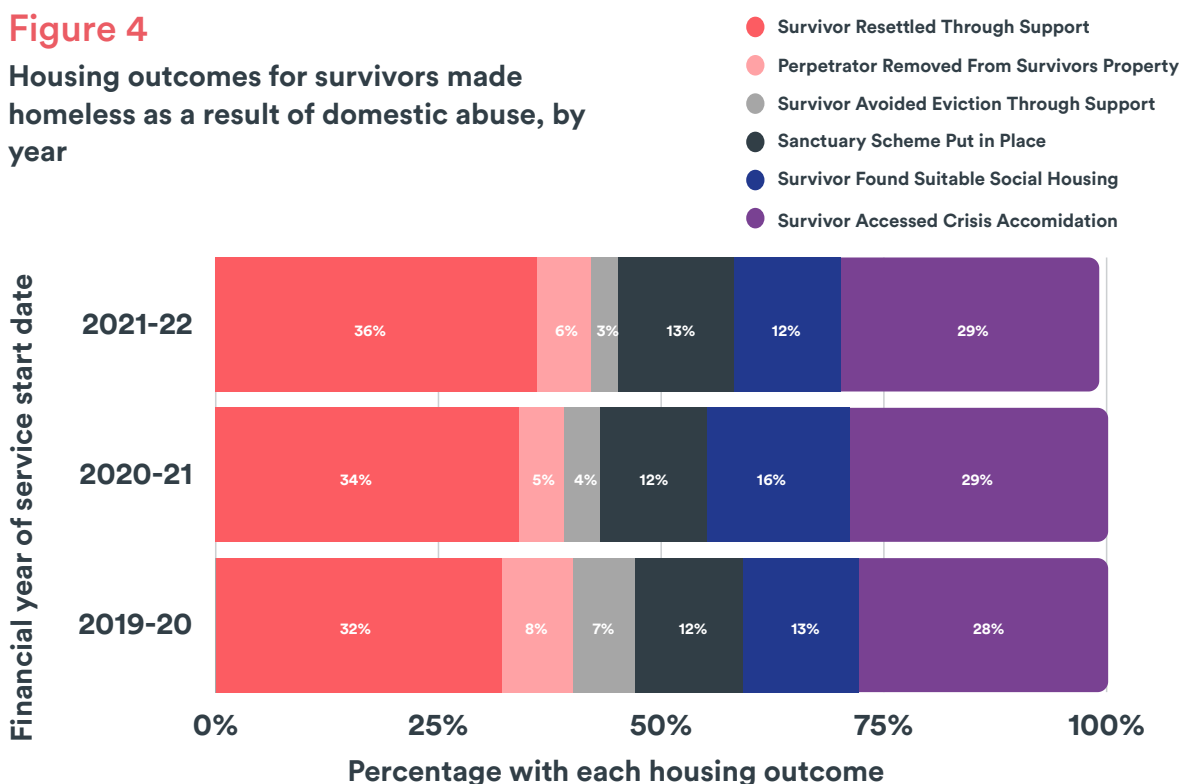
It also includes those who move into temporary accommodation while they wait for 'suitable' long-term accommodation. We find that temporary accommodation is often very far away from the boroughs women report to and increasingly out of London altogether. Women, particularly with children, find it very difficult to even travel to

the accommodation, and we and other specialist organisations assist with travel costs, basic food, and essentials such as duvets and utensils as well as supporting with additional utilities costs where needed.

Outcomes including the avoidance of eviction through support and the removal of perpetrators from survivors' homes are both likely to have been impacted by the pandemic, with fewer evictions as well as fewer removals of perpetrators over the last two years compared to 2019-20.

Given the pressures on social housing, it tends to only be survivors who already have a social housing tenancy who are able to settle into new social housing through support unless they have very high needs. Even with support from housing authorities to access temporary and rented accommodation, it is often unsuitable and / or unaffordable with voluntary sector organisations picking up the costs of the ongoing needs of survivors and their children. With the current and worsening cost of living crisis we are concerned that we will see an increase in repeat referrals and domestic homicides as women return to perpetrators when their housing costs become unviable.

Figure 4
Housing outcomes for survivors made homeless as a result of domestic abuse, by year

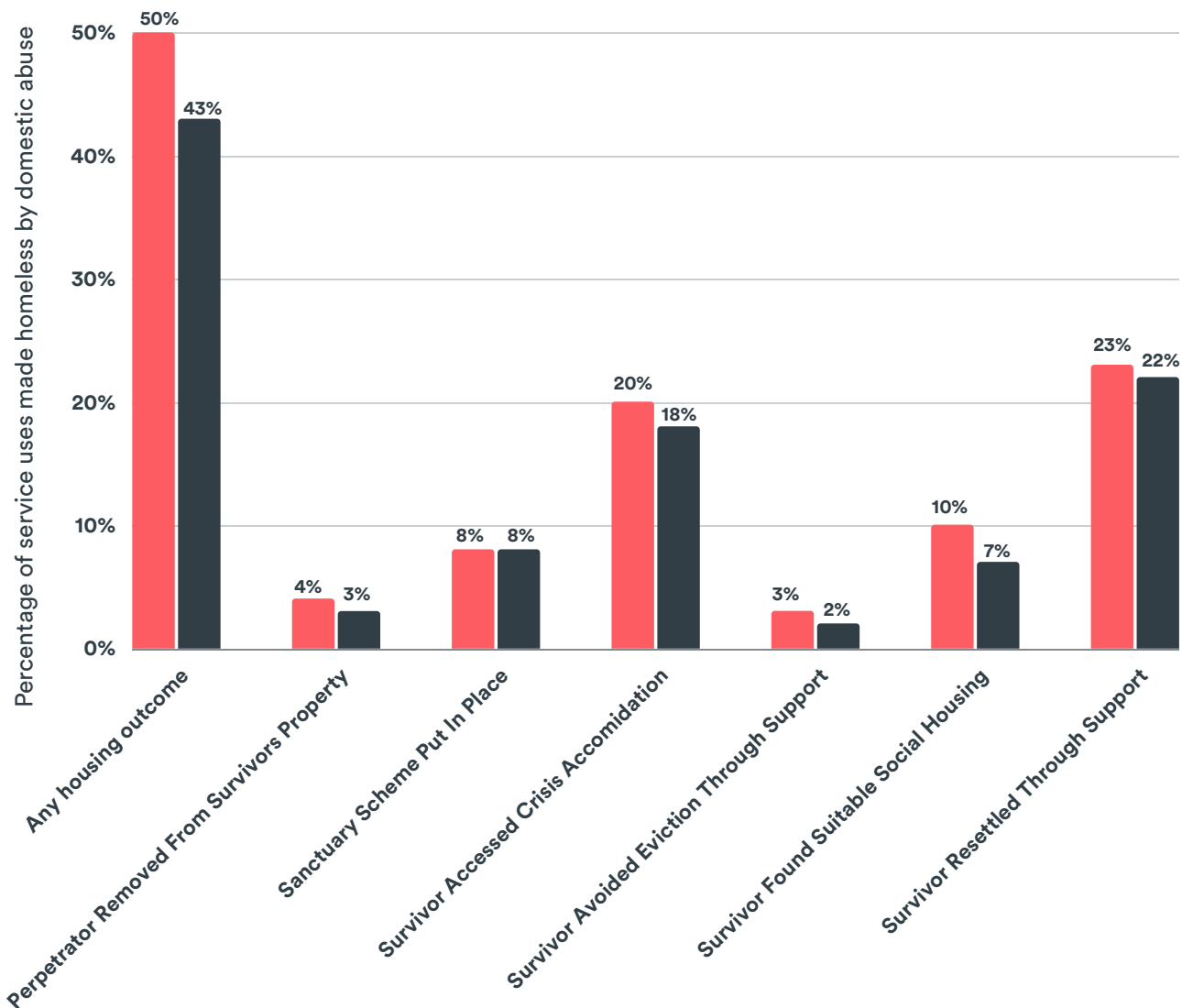


We also looked at outcomes for service users coming into our services before and after the legislative change (April 2019 to June 2021 and July 2021 to March 2022), with a slight decrease in the percentage with a housing outcome since the legislative change. The percentage with any housing outcomes is less than 50%, but this reflects the short-term nature of the work that advocates do with survivors to get them to a point of safety and often refer them on to other services to support their ongoing and unresolved needs:

Figure 5

Housing outcomes for service users before and after priority need came into force

● After policy change
● Before Policy Change



Overall, outcomes have worsened across all the categories, which is the opposite of the policy aims of the change to priority need and reflects the crisis in supply of suitable and affordable housing. We might have anticipated that more service users would have found suitable social housing in this time however that number has actually decreased, and the number resettled through support has only slightly improved. There may be a lag effect because of the relief duty period of 56 days, which would exclude some service users who have gone on to settled accommodation and in time we will have more data to see if and how the situation is improving but it is concerning to see the minimal changes to date.

Frontline workers report a slight improvement in some areas but not all

This mixed picture is reflected in findings from our survey of frontline staff, which went to Solace staff and was also shared with our networks in May this year. In total, 38 people responded to the survey from Solace and six other domestic abuse or housing providers.

Half of those who had been in post since before the change said that the policy change had not improved survivors' experiences of making homelessness applications, while 30% said it had improved and three said it had deteriorated.

Frontline workers said

“Housing advisors/officers are often discouraging women by giving worst case scenario re: waiting times and women are often signposted to other local authorities and placed out of area in [temporary accommodation] TA, leaving them more vulnerable.”

“We have found that for clients fleeing [domestic violence] DV this process is not always followed. Clients are still given conflicting information. Local Authorities will still uphold intentionally homeless decisions.”

One person said that the process was...

“Only better as we do not need to gather as much evidence to determine vulnerability due to mental or physical ill health. However other issues are still present, and many worsened.”



Gatekeeping remains prevalent

The average number of homelessness applications staff estimated they had supported survivors to make in the three months prior to taking the survey was nine times, with a total of an estimated 359 homelessness applications between them. Service users experienced some form of gatekeeping in half of the applications staff had supported.

The most common form of gatekeeping was requiring police corroboration, with 71% of frontline staff reporting that this happens in at least some cases, which is slightly higher than last year when 67% said the same.

Housing officers asking for proof of physical violence has decreased, showing a marked improvement from 37% of staff saying it was requested in most or all applications last year to 13% this year, which demonstrates an increased awareness of the new definition of domestic abuse since the passage of the Domestic Abuse Act. The Domestic Abuse Act defined domestic abuse in primary legislation and includes economic abuse and coercive control.

Last year, one fifth of frontline staff said perpetrators had been contacted to corroborate applicants' experiences of domestic abuse in at least some cases, which is more likely to happen in cases of family abuse including so-called 'honour' based abuse and puts survivors at greater risk of retaliation and abuse from their perpetrator/s. This year the percentage has fallen to 11% of staff, which is an improvement but still concerning (figure 7).

Other common gatekeeping tactics include the imposition of local connection rules, where homelessness applicants are usually expected to prove they have a connection to the area for the local housing authority to accept them. This rule does not apply to domestic abuse survivors, who may have to move for their safety. However, we also find that authorities will impose this unilaterally, telling survivors they cannot stay in the area for their own safety. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities recently consulted on introducing regulations to prevent local authorities from applying local connection in social housing allocations but has not yet published a response.⁷ If implemented, this change would not impact the homelessness legislation and assistance criteria, but would be a step in the right direction.

Since the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, local housing authorities and in London the GLA have a duty to assess the needs for and commission

accommodation based support services. While much needed and welcome, we highlighted in our last report that without improvements to the housing landscape this risked women being pushed into unsuitable and unwanted accommodation and the survey data shows that this is the case. Refuges are not always suitable for a variety of reasons such as family size, women having teenage sons with them and not least that survivors don't necessarily want to move into a refuge. For the safety of all residents it is important that women do not have visitors, which is difficult for women with children or other relatives who are not living with them.



Figure 6

Estimated frequency of gatekeeping experienced by service users and / or their advocates and support workers over the last three months

- Every application
- Most applications (75%-90%)
- Between half and three quarters of all applications (50%-70%)
- Around half of all applications (50%)
- Between a quarter and a half of all applications (25%-50%)
- Some applications (up to 25%)
- No applications

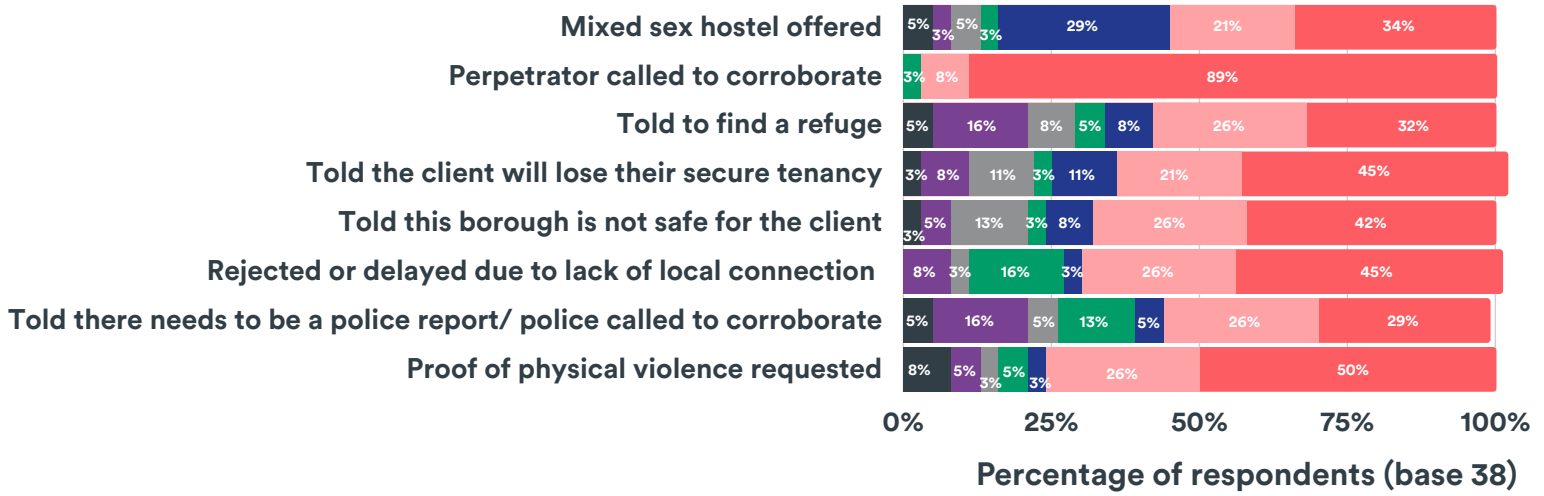
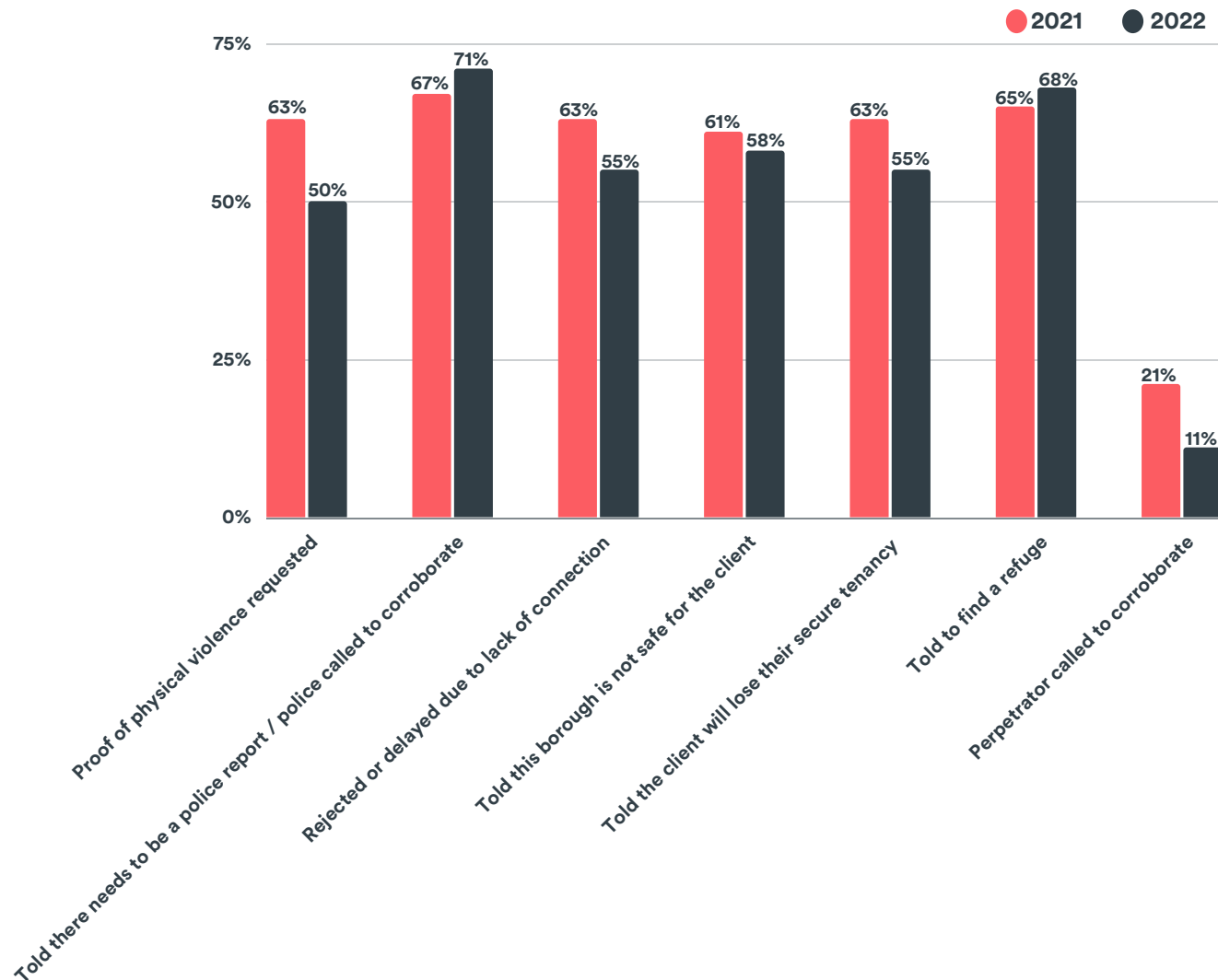


Figure 7

Percentage of respondents who reported gatekeeping type in at least some applications



Housing officers use delaying tactics made worse by remote services

One change that frontline workers have seen since the change in the priority need criteria is an increase in delays by housing departments. For example –

“Few women have received a non-priority need decision letter. The alternative tactic is to delay the ending of relief duty, to not provide main housing duty, so that the priority need decision never has to be made. Significant delays from the moment the applicant requests homelessness assistance, to awarding main housing duty, is the biggest problem.”

“There are issues around the timely provision of emergency and temporary accommodation. All too often, survivors are being left in a property with the perpetrator for weeks without any communication.”

“They have a duty to provide [temporary accommodation] TA while they make their enquiries but again, they often try to claim that they need all of the documents at the point of application.”

A lot of housing authorities have changed their operations since the pandemic and where there used to be face to face appointments and people presenting as homeless could physically wait to be seen, many have moved to online and phone appointments only or on a hybrid basis.

“Having telephone appointments for Housing in my area (not face to face) is making it difficult for my clients who often do not have a phone to attend appointments. We are also frequently not given a named officer to liaise with which makes it harder to progress.”

While our teams welcome the opportunity to deal with housing applications online and on the phone in many cases some physical presence is often needed.

Staff also find that when service users approach housing authorities without an advocate they are more likely to be recorded by housing staff as having made housing enquiries rather than treated as making a homelessness application, and more likely to be turned away. When we write formal letters and state women's rights, the response can change dramatically.





Holly's story*

Holly is being supported by the WiSER partnership, a specialist assertive outreach service working with women experiencing multiple disadvantages. Holly is a highly vulnerable woman due to complex and enduring mental health issues, substance misuse, being targeted by multiple perpetrators of abuse, involvement in the sex industry, homelessness and offending behaviour. She was recently evicted from her private rented tenancy due to domestic abuse as neighbours made complaints to the landlord.

When Holly made a homelessness application with support from her advocate, they accepted her as priority need and the staff member was helpful. However, when the homeless application was made Holly did not receive confirmation of when she would be offered temporary accommodation, and the housing office was closed due to COVID-19.

Holly and her advocate were relying on telephone and email contact with the council. Holly had to check out of the hotel WiSER had funded with her personal belongings in the morning and wait in offices and coffee shops until the end of the day. If she had not heard from the council, her advocate would have to check her into another hotel again funded by WiSER. This went on for around a week. Communication from the council took long periods, offering no time frame of when she would be offered accommodation. She is now in a self-contained studio, but it is in a communal block with male residents and drug and alcohol consumption, leaving Holly very vulnerable.

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The Solace logo consists of the word "solace" in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font, centered within a solid red square.

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*To protect our service users,
names & photos of service users
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