

## Rural Services Network

### Analysis of survey on Domestic Abuse and Homelessness in rural areas during lockdown

The Rural Services Network carried out a survey on the potential impact of domestic abuse during Covid-19 and lockdown. Responses were received from 92 organisations, predominantly comprising Local Authorities, but also from Housing Associations, charitable organisations, and police forces.

Responses were gathered during April and May 2020 and have been summarised below:

1) Are members aware of a rise in reports of Domestic Violence in rural communities in relation to COVID-19?

Yes 40%

No 60%

The following points are important to highlight:

5 responses highlighted that they were aware of an increase in calls to helpline services despite not seeing an increase in official reports

11 responses highlighted that they were anticipating a rise in reporting as lockdown eases.

Comments included:

- Complexity of cases that include mental ill health, is increasing
- Although we have seen a slight rise in reported Domestic Abuse incidents across the county, we have yet to see an increase in people seeking support from our specialist support services despite considerable messaging. This would indicate that people are finding it difficult to access support safely if they are self-isolating with the perpetrator.
- There has been a rise in domestic abuse generally and that includes rural communities from men calling our helpline. This is because male victims of domestic abuse are isolated anyway, and the lockdown has made them even more so. Due to the lack of refuges and safe houses for male victims of domestic abuse which tend to be in major towns and cities, there is a lack of places for male victims to escape to, so some will have to sleep rough or become homeless to escape.
- Actual homeless duty regarding Domestic Violence has resulted in two placements. Calls regarding this have been lower than usual. In rural areas this has not been an issue. The Safer New XX Partnership has Domestic Abuse as a main priority and all agencies work closely together sharing information and support.

- There is expectation that risk is increased and wide-ranging work by multiple agencies is underway to identify victims and provide new routes to seeking support. No specific intelligence suggests higher risk in rural communities.
- The number of calls to the Domestic Abuse Support Line has decreased, this is likely to be due to the partners being at home and thus restricting opportunity to make a call.
- We have seen a reduction in calls however we are not surprised as people will find less opportunity to make contact with support services where 'locked in' with their abuser
- Not specifically in the rural areas.

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2) Are members aware of a rise in reports of homelessness/rough sleeping in rural areas in relation to COVID-19?

Yes 53%

No 47%

The following points are important to highlight:

8 responses were received stating that there was a rise in reports of people presenting as homeless due to being unable to stay with family/friends/sofa surfing

17 responses were received stating that the council had worked hard as per the Government directive to provide accommodation for everyone in lockdown who may have been homeless regardless of priority

The following comments should also be noted:

- The cessation of S21 notices slowed this right down, however we are starting to see demand increasing from household breakdown, prison and probation discharge and hospital discharge, but generally numbers are down due to the lack of movement from private sector landlords.
- Significant increase in family/relationship breakdown resulting in rough sleeping.
- Homelessness has reduced due to suspension of evictions.
- A significant rise has been seen in urban areas but not rural areas.
- Our Housing Advice Team have experienced a 20% increase in homelessness applications – and while it is too early to spot any patterns, it appears that family break-ups seem to be increasing.
- Whilst figures cannot be calculated, we have reports that this is on the increase. There are a number of rough sleepers within easy walking distance of town and small markets towns moving out into villages for the night. In certain circumstances they are remaining in the villages, especially those with a shop. Apparently, these people are very afraid of Covid-19 and wish to move out of the bigger conurbations to rural areas where they feel safer.

- Yes, we have seen a significant increase in reports and presentations for homelessness and rough sleeping during the COVID 19 crisis across our district which includes a large amount of rural areas. We are currently getting 3 times the amount of calls out of hours for reports of homelessness and rough sleepers.
- No specific rise in rural areas

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3) What mitigations would members suggest in relation to these challenges in rural communities?

A number of responses were received to this question with several citing partnership working across agencies as the best way forward. Other comments received included:

- Visible policing in rural areas – reports of harassment of farmers by walkers.
- Improved broadband for those affected by Domestic Abuse to access virtual support and services.
- Transport to refuges.
- Reassure households they can take in family/friends who would otherwise be homeless.
- Housing Associations cannot let void properties in usual way, use these as temporary accommodation during crisis?
- Concern that rural victims of Domestic Abuse need different access to methods of support.
- Information on how to contact services when required.
- “Funding will be needed to support the work for Domestic Abuse charities that continues throughout this time and also the knock-on effects after the end of lock down. We work for a project which supports victims of Domestic Abuse in rural areas based on the information in the Captive and Controlled document from the NRCN. Alongside our own expertise we deliver a specialised service for these victims who face very different challenges to those from urban areas. There is going to be even more added pressure on the farming community which will have an impact on stress levels and therefore exacerbate those who are already in Domestic Abuse situations. Support is needed throughout lockdown but also the development of specialist services for when lockdown is relaxed, and people feel freer to report Domestic Abuse. An increase in referrals is anticipated.”
- “COVID-19, social distancing and the lockdown have severely impacted the way we are able to support the most vulnerable members of our communities. Whereas our local drop ins were supporting 40-50 per hub each week, now it’s down to 4-5 phone referrals a week. The need hasn’t gone down, but the ability to support it has. This is a problem that will ultimately be felt downstream. We are a preventative service, and we feel that by our

communities not being able to offer preventative up stream work, will result in an increase in evictions, crime and homelessness.”

- “The local domestic abuse service (UAVA) have suggested it would be useful to raise awareness of the domestic violence issue, e.g. getting family, friends and/or neighbours to look out for any signs and promoting apps that may help, e.g. Hollie Guard and/or Bright Sky apps”
- Virtual case conferencing through multidisciplinary teams designed to support rough sleepers and homelessness with complex needs
- “We are so far managing to house all rough sleepers, but we are getting to the end of our resources. It is a matter of finding properties rather than one of finance at the current time.”

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4) Finally, respondents were asked to highlight any other thoughts or comments.

- Limited transport and the impact this has on people fleeing Domestic Abuse and their ability to get to temporary accommodation that has been provided.
- There may be hidden domestic abuse which may become more apparent when the lock down measures are lifted when victims are more able and confident to access services
- Now most hotels and B+B’s have closed down, there is a lack of accommodation available for those who need to flee their home in an emergency, it is difficult getting transport to access accommodation in rural areas at the best of times let alone during COVID when public transport services are running skeleton services and taxi firms are only taking one passenger at a time and charging premium rates. There is also concern that some prisoners are being released from prison early which could potentially increase the risks to survivors. Support services are also running reduced services and therefore face to face support and contact is minimal meaning most survivors have to seek help either digitally or over the phone which carries its own problems if phones and other forms of communication are not available or being withheld.
- With regard to housing and homelessness we haven't seen any increase in domestic abuse approaches as a result of Covid 19. Equally, we are not aware of increases in domestic abuse from victims in rural areas.
- Availability of properties from housing providers is an issue as they have furloughed staff and are not repairing properties. This means we have limited move on options and more and more people are staying in unsuitable properties because we have no move on options. We are non-stock holding and so are reliant on housing providers
- Limited support available - restrictions on how this support can be delivered. We have had several approaches from customers who previously had low level Mental Health issues - but due to the restrictions - their Mental Health

has deteriorated - they may not be under the CMHT - so we are completing more referrals to these services.

- There are insufficient funds awarded by central government to sustain the placements made. Further funds are needed to support the LA's to try to forge pathways for these clients into longer term accommodation and sustain their temporary accommodation placements. Without further funding agreed soon, these placements will have to be ended which is counterproductive to both the efforts under COVID19 and 'zero rough sleepers' targets.
- In our area we have a lot of holiday parks and caravan /mooring sites which all closed down straight after the instruction from government. The message should have been clearer from the start that they could remain open if it were to prevent homelessness.
- Managing this very challenging cohort (former rough sleepers) in non-supported settings is very challenging for the residents, accommodation providers, local communities and enforcing social distancing / isolation guidance can be challenging for some.
- Raising awareness is of course to be supported, but when awareness is raised there needs to be a properly funded offer for adult and child survivors that is long term and sustainable. Some current interventions focus on the awareness and lack the expertise required to provide much needed trauma informed advocacy and therapy. This leads to people arriving at the right service to find a huge waiting list - specialist provision needs proper resource.
- Guidance from MHCLG feels somewhat urban-centric and assumes greater /direct control over sites of accommodation than actually exists in the local economy.
- 24- hour access supported accommodation required in all areas. Other pressures on Housing teams including the early prison releases, hospital discharge and the closure of B&B and hostels means emergency accommodation is in high demand. Specialist, ring-fenced accommodation is required for victims of Domestic Abuse as there is a risk that vulnerable victims may return home to the perpetrator if suitable housing is not available for their family. There is a need to pool resources and to have more timely communication with other partners around accommodation. An example would be notified earlier of prison releases so potentially more permanent accommodation can be arranged rather than relying on emergency accommodation. Unfurnished accommodation – Currently a lack of furnished accommodation, there is limited support through YMCA, but not likely to be enough for assisting larger families.
- Somewhere for the abused person/family to go to quickly. Priority response can often be slow due to policing levels in rural areas. The development of key words/phrases for the abused person to attract help in a "safe" way. More domestic abuse awareness training within rural communities. No safe houses. Neighbours live a distance away. Feelings of stigma, shame, guilt, lack of hope.
- We feel that we will get a surge once the lockdown restrictions are semi lifted. We also suspect a rise in Safeguarding for children and unwanted or wanted

pregnancies. We have specific farming groups who are now becoming involved in Domestic Abuse work through their Young Farmers Clubs where they have talks etc along with Women's Institutes. Our local Domestic Abuse group are to put details in village newsletters etc. We struggle with local transport. Farming families in particular are historically private, and families run deep and so it would be almost impossible for a victim to leave the environment as they know little else. Often the children work on the farms too, so this poses the possibility of there being more than one perpetrator.

- We are also keen to provide support to people who are or feel they are at risk of perpetrating violence and abuse - we are keen to try to provide counselling, respite advice and support
- There needs to be recognition that putting together a response to COVID and in general a response for rough sleepers is exceptionally challenging in a geographically vast and rural area with limited resources - when I say resources I mean staff. We have only a handful of staff and very limited availability of willing landlords. The concerns we now face are those post-covid, we would want to make a plan to ensure clients do not have to return to rough sleeping however, we do not own stock and many clients have either a history which are unlikely to lead to offers of accommodation or have significant current issues which again would probably not lead to offers of accommodation. these issues cannot be resolved overnight. whilst we will do all we can to work with clients during this period to help them resolve or work towards resolving these issues we are limited in our ability to ensure landlords take them as future tenants.
- In light of the Covid 19 crisis I have witnessed partnership working on a different level, it's been fantastic.
- Stop Domestic Abuse have introduced measures to facilitate self-referrals from victims in isolation living with the perpetrator (increased the hours the advice line is open to victims and perpetrators and introduced a virtual drop-in service accessed via Facebook Messenger for victims). Since extending the opening hours of the telephone lines and introducing the virtual drop-in we have had a 50% increase of the number of survivors contacting us. The virtual drop-in it is being used by victims unable to make a telephone call and we have examples of victims using it to find out about accessing refuge or using it to arrange a suitable time to speak to a worker when it is safe for them etc. When the Government reduces or ends the lockdown measures, it is anticipated that there will be an increase in victims seeking support. This is expected to be via a combination of police referrals triggered by an increase in the reporting of incidents, self-referrals, and other agency referrals. The long-term trauma on children and young people living with domestic abuse during the current restrictions will be significant. Children and young people are currently not able to seek any respite at school or receive support/safeguarding from a safe adult at school or their peers. Domestic abuse services (alongside other agencies) will be dealing with the long-term impact for years to come. We are likely to see an increase in unhealthy

behaviours, adolescent to parent violence and a decline in children's mental health.