



Refuge response to the Law Commission's Renting Homes recommendations – Supported Housing June 2004

Introduction

Refuge opened the world's first refuge in Chiswick in 1971. Refuge is the UK's largest single provider of specialist accommodation and support to women and children escaping domestic violence - a national "lifeline" for up to 80,000 women and children every year. Refuge provides safe, emergency accommodation through a growing network of refuges throughout the UK and runs a 24 hour national domestic violence helpline, in partnership with Women's Aid. Refuge offers an unique children's programme, individual and group counselling for abused women, and community based outreach services for women including specialist services for minority ethnic communities. Refuge runs award winning media and advertising campaigns to raise public awareness, whilst campaigning and lobbying for better provision for women and children experiencing domestic violence.

Overview

Whilst Refuge works on a daily basis to ensure the human rights of women and children are protected and upheld, when it comes to supported housing in a domestic violence context Refuge believes that a unique set of responses is vital.

Refuge – emergency accommodation for women and children experiencing domestic violence

Refuge provides emergency, temporary places of safety for women and children. Currently there are over 500+ refuges around the UK. If the recommendations as they currently stand are put in place refuge groups will face serious operational difficulties which could ultimately result in closures.

Exclusions

Refuge is requesting that domestic violence accommodation be built into the exclusion category for the following reasons:

- In an ideal world refuge accommodation would be short term
- However, although intended to be temporary, length of refuge stay is not normally under a four month period as it is virtually impossible to provide local permanent housing due to the shortfall of spaces. Rehousing cannot happen this quickly. This results in a silting up of refuges
- Refuge is a direct access accommodation landlord and 'is not in a position to make an informed choice about the suitability of a person for anything other than immediate and short-term occupation of the premises'

Therefore, Refuge urges the Law Commission to recognise the unique challenges women's refuges face as a direct access provider to people escaping violent crime. Refuge would request that refuge accommodation be included within the exclusion clause.

Importance of Licences

- Refuge provides immediate and direct accommodation. We do not operate waiting lists or preadmission assessment interviews. We have to assess following admission. This means that licences are essential
- Life in a refuge is communal. Much living space e.g. kitchens, lounges etc is shared. Therefore when women who have mental and/or violent anti-social problems come to live in a refuge or women who have violent partners who track them down and harass them at a refuge, it puts the other residents (women and children) in grave danger
- Currently licences enable refuges to manage difficult situations e.g. where one resident puts other women and/or children in immediate danger
- If licences are abolished this will no longer enable refuges to do this. Instead it will mean that refuges have to apply to courts to remove an individual. This situation will endanger other residents and of particular concern are the children. The majority of our residents are children under the age of 11 – most of whom have been abused too. We have a duty of care to protect them from further experiences of violence and upset

Police exclusion order (16.29-16.38)

Police exclusion orders do not have a relevant role within a domestic violent context. If for example a refuge were to receive a 19-year-old woman who was persuaded by her partner to go back to the refuge¹, thereby threatening the lives other women in the refuge, a 48 hour exclusion order would be a very temporary and inappropriate measure. Instead the woman should be removed and taken to alternative temporary accommodation.

Conclusion

Refuge is urging the Law Commission to ensure that refuge accommodation is included within the 'exclusions' section of the proposed future Renting Homes recommendations and that licences remain in place.

Refuge would welcome the opportunity to speak in more detail about this subject area. Domestic violence requires unique tenure responses and it is vital that these are recognised by the Law Commission and included in future policy documents.

- ENDS -

¹ Women are at increased risk of death or serious injury following separation (Barnard et al, 1982)