



Abuse and Housing Support: A Protective Measure?



Policy Brief

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Key Insights

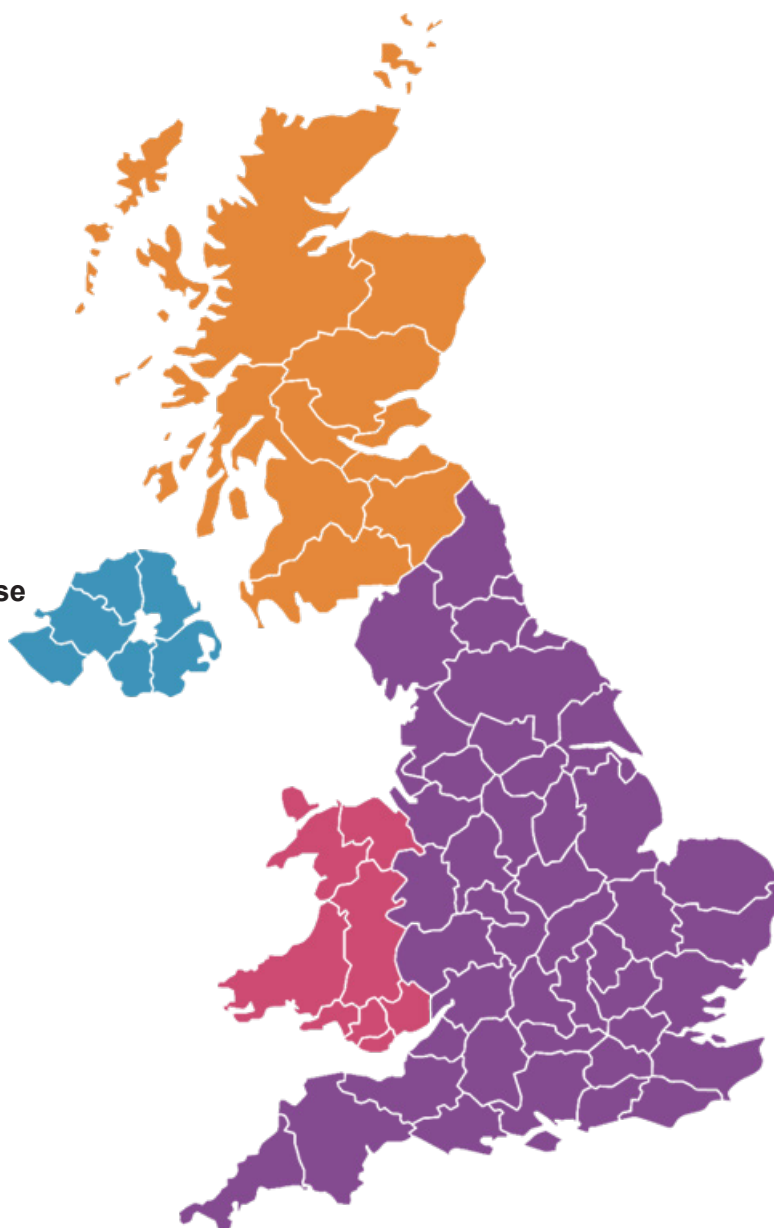
Housing support needs for older victims of abuse are currently not sufficient.

Older people require inclusive and tailored assistance in accessing and using support and housing services.

Older people might be less likely to seek support from commissioned services because of a perception or reality that services are primarily designed with adults ages 16-59 in mind.

While older women victim-survivors may have access to unsuitable housing support and intervention services, older men may not have any options.

Older victim-survivors suffer from structural, cultural, and individual barriers to gaining effective housing support.



Recommendations:

UK local authorities and domestic abuse housing support providers should be encouraged to make sure awareness of older domestic abuse is reflected within housing service design.

For example, make it a contractual requirement that the refuge or housing support provider trains all staff on domestic abuse, including training tailored to the specific needs of older victim-survivors. In tandem with this, ensure that ageist perspectives are identified and worked against.

Local authorities should be encouraged to increase housing support options across the country for older victim-survivors that take into account their unique needs.

For example, in cases of reduced mobility. Refuge and immediate escape options must be available that do not place older people in with younger victim-survivors or those with children if possible. An increased focus on sanctuary schemes that allow older people to stay in their own homes should be promoted. Key options for older male victim-survivors must also be accessible.

Local authorities and Domestic Abuse housing support providers should be encouraged to increase awareness and signposting for services suitable for older victim survivors.

Appropriate messaging and imagery that includes a focus on older victim-survivors and includes people from all communities (including older men and older members of the LGBT and BME communities) on promotional material and branded literature is necessary to help increase awareness of housing provisions for older victims.

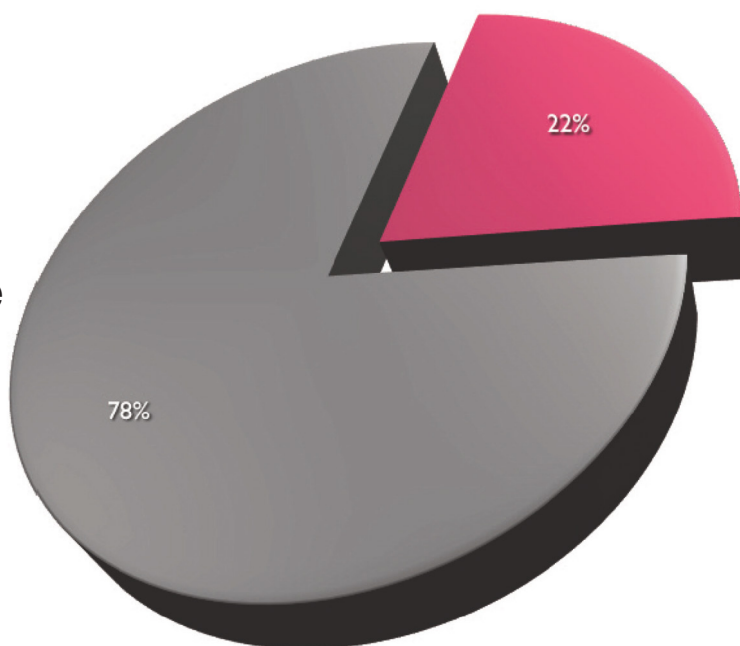
Policy Problem:

The idea of safe houses and housing support to assist those experiencing domestic abuse in the UK was first developed in the 1970s. At the time, domestic abuse was still a hidden form of harm dealt with behind closed doors, marital rape was legal, and support services were almost non-existent. In 1971 the organisation Refuge opened the first refuge for women and children experiencing domestic abuse at 2 Belmont Terrace in Chiswick West London. Since then, the number of refuges and housing support service in the UK has skyrocketed. However, many of these options do not consider or cater for certain victim groups, especially older people. Older victim-survivors of abuse may not have any suitable refuge or housing support option in their area. If there is one, they may not know about it, or they may be afraid to use it. Abuse among older people is still a highly hidden form of harm.

Violence against older people is widespread. In February 2020 Hourglass conducted a survey looking at experiences of and attitudes and perceptions towards the abuse of older people, 'Growing Old in the UK 2020'. We found that at least 2.7 million people across the UK over the age of 65 have experienced abuse – this is nearly one in 5 people over 65.¹ This is a much higher prevalence than the UK national prevalence study estimated in 2007,² or than has been estimated by the World Health Organisation's global study from 2017.³ By any measure, this prevalence is not reflected in use of third sector services, support services, or housing or refuge support.

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Data suggests that older people might be less likely to seek support from commissioned services because of a perception or reality that services are primarily designed with adults ages 16-59 in mind. Women's Aid service use, broken down by age, is revealing of the exclusion older women face from community and refuge services. From 2010 to 2017, just 2.7% of service users were over 61 (2% using community-based service and 0.7% using refuges).⁴ In 2019-2020 this has risen fractionally, 3.8% of service users were over 61 (2% using community-based service and 1.8% in refuges).⁵

Funding cuts and a propensity to focus on those statistically most likely to become victims, have led to a “one size fits all” approach to service delivery, which results in a lack of specialist knowledge and understanding.⁶ The particular experiences of domestic abuse or wider abuse types in older age means all-age refuges are often not appropriate, as older victims, men, and women, are more likely to have caring duties or their own care and support needs. Imagery of refuges and support services that feature predominantly younger women and children can also mean that older men and women perceive these services as being inappropriate for them.⁷ Staff and support workers at domestic violence and family support services may not necessarily be aware of the unique dynamics of the abuse of older and the parent-child abusive relationship, and as such may not be able to provide effective and appropriate support for older women/men experiencing elder abuse.⁸

Invisibility of services and support needs comes up again and again in literature, and signposting needs to make clear the availability of suitable refuges and housing support structures for older victim-survivors.⁹ The Womens Aid Domestic Abuse Directory which lists support organisations including refuges, does not allow users to filter for those supporting or catering to older victim-survivors. Lack of effective intervention facilities are also a problem for older male victims of abuse, much as they are for older female victims. However, while older female victims have options to go to safe female spaces (even if not suitable), these spaces either are closed to older male victims or do not exist.¹⁰

In order to help remove them or give them the opportunity to escape from an abusive environment, older people require inclusive and tailored assistance in accessing and using support and housing services.

Barriers faced by older victim-survivors in relation to support and housing are:

- **Structural**
- **Cultural**
- **Individual**

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

include a lack of representation as to the experiences of older people in the service design, evaluation, and monitoring of Domestic Abuse housing support, as well as a lack of local data on prevalence of abuse among older people as a group and their housing support needs and wants. One size fits all domestic abuse support accommodation may not provide accessible infrastructure if the older victim-survivor is disabled or has accessibility needs. Local authorities may also default to considering safeguarding and push older victim-survivors towards care homes which may not be suitable for them. Other structural barriers also include the lack of imagery surrounding older victim-survivors in using housing support services. Older victim-survivors suffer from a systematic invisibility in a domestic abuse support context, in particular in imagery, communications, and messaging. The majority of services and support housing provisions are targeted at and use images of younger people (especially women) and their children. This helps to reinforce a misconception that older people are not affected by domestic violence, and that current provisions of support and housing are not suitable for older people.

CULTURAL BARRIERS

include those where there is a lack of awareness among housing or refuge staff or professionals about the specific and unique needs of older victim-survivors. While frontline domestic abuse workers may understand the power dynamics and specificities of the abuse of older people, older victim survivors may not always get an emphatic or understanding response from housing support personnel and may be left questioning their

decision to leave the abuse situation or relationship. Elizabeth Bates notes that there are accounts of men who discuss their further victimisation by services after being laughed at, blamed for their victimisation, or not believed because of their physicality.¹¹

INDIVIDUAL BARRIERS

include older victim-survivors' concerns about ageism at housing support facilities, or fear they will not be taken seriously. A key individual barrier for older victim-survivors includes the fear of being taken from, or losing their owned family home and placed in sheltered accommodation or having to use a refuge. These fears involve a number of facets, including anxiety on loss of independence, the potential financial loss through losing their homes, as well as the state and condition of any sheltered accommodation available.¹² It has been argued by a number of scholars that the meanings or feelings toward one's own home may be magnified in later life, thus this fear may be much less likely if the victim-survivor is able to reclaim control of their own home as the tenant, and ensure that the abuser or perpetrator is evicted from the living space.¹³ Integral social and networking needs may also be unmet with current housing provisions or support options, especially if older and younger victim-survivors are housed together.

Recommendations:

UK local authorities and domestic abuse housing support providers should be encouraged to make sure awareness of older domestic abuse is reflected within housing service design.

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Consulted or recommended resources

Coping with Abuse Inside the Family and Out: LGBT And/or Male Victims of Elder Abuse – L Cook Daniels (2017)

Elder abuse prevalence in community settings: a systematic review and meta-analysis – Y Yon et al (2017)

Hourglass Data (2020)

No One Would Ever Believe Me": An Exploration of the Impact of Intimate Partner Violence Victimization on Men – E R Bates (2020)

Practitioner perspectives of domestic abuse and women over 45 – N.L Carthy and R, Taylor (2017)

Survival and Beyond: The Domestic Abuse Report 2017 – Women's Aid (2018)

The Domestic Abuse Report 2021: The Annual Audit – Women's Aid (2020)

The U.K. national study of abuse and neglect among older people – J Manthorpe et al (2007)

Violence Against Older Women: Intergenerational Family Violence – M Joosten (2019).

1 Hourglass (2020)

2 Manthorpe J, Biggs S, McCreadie C, Tinker A, Hills A, O'Keefe M, Doyle M, Constantine R, Scholes S, Erens B (2007) The U.K. national study of abuse and neglect among older people.

3 Yon Y, Mikton CR, Gassoumis ZD, Wilber KH (2017). Elder abuse prevalence in community settings: a systematic review and meta-analysis.

4 Women's Aid: Survival and Beyond: The Domestic Abuse Report 2017 (Published 2018).

5 Women's Aid: The Domestic Abuse Report 2021: The Annual Audit (2021).

6 Carthy, N. L., & Taylor, R. (2017). Practitioner perspectives of domestic abuse and women over 45. *European Journal of Criminology*.

7 Joosten M et al 'Violence Against Older Women: Intergenerational Family Violence' in Bowes, H (Ed.) (2019) *Violence Against Older Women*, Volume 1.

8 Ibid (2019)

9 <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/domestic-abuse-directory/>

10 Bates E A, "No One Would Ever Believe Me": An Exploration of the Impact of Intimate Partner Violence Victimization on Men., *Psychology of Men & Masculinities* 21, no. 4 (2020): [PAGE], doi:10.1037/men000206)

11 Cook Daniels - L, "Coping with Abuse Inside the Family and Out: LGBT And/or Male Victims of Elder Abuse," *Elder Abuse*, (2017), [PAGE], doi:10.1007/978-3-319-47504-2_25)

12 Bowen E, and Rosalind S 'They Come with a Package of Issues: Challenges of Supporting Older Victims of Domestic Violence and Abuse' in Bowes, H (Ed.) (2019) *Violence Against Older Women*, Volume 2

13 Carthy, N. L., & Taylor, R. (2017). Practitioner perspectives of domestic abuse and women over 45. *European Journal of Criminology*.



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