



Spotlight #5: Episode 3

Podcast Transcript

Title: The missing piece of the puzzle: the vital role of housing providers in tackling domestic abuse

Key:

I: Interviewer

R: Responder

Introduction: Spotlights is a series of online events and publications focusing on a particular group of victims and survivors who are often hidden from services. As a part of our Spotlight on homelessness and domestic abuse, my colleague Deidre has met with Aisha Sharif from Standing Together Against Domestic Violence. In her interview, Aisha talks about the pivotal role social housing providers play in identifying and responding to domestic abuse, and how the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance ensures that all housing providers can support victims and survivors of domestic abuse.

I: So Hi Aisha. Thank you for joining me today to talk about homelessness and domestic abuse.

R: Thank you. We're thrilled to be speaking to SafeLives about the work that we do. So thank you.

I: You're welcome. Today we're talking about the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance called DAHA.

R: Yes.

I: Yep. Can you start off by telling me what it is?

R: So DAHA is a partnership between three organisations: Standing Together Against Domestic Violence, Gentoo who are a large housing provider in the north of England and Peabody who are one of the oldest Housing Associations in the UK. Their goal was to come together to look at housing sectors responses to domestic abuse because we knew historically there had been a lot of gaps there. Basically ensure that anyone experiencing domestic abuse within a social housing setting received a constant and reliable and effective response. DAHA do this through raising awareness through workshops, through training, through lobbying central and local government and through research and disseminating that across the sector.

I: So it sounds like you're doing a lot?

R: Yeah *[laughing]*.

I: **Just a little bit.**

R: Quite busy.

I: **So why would you say that it's important for housing providers in particular to have an effective response to domestic abuse?**

R: I mean for us I think if we look at the current picture in the UK, we know that domestic abuse is one of the leading reasons around women's homelessness particular around hidden homelessness.

I: **Yep.**

R: Shelter released a report recently which highlighted a huge number of women who are sofa surfing, so not just street homeless. Nearly half of those women who they spoke to cited domestic abuse as a direct reason. We also know through other research recently released that for many women in social housing, many of them are being either forced or are not aware of their rights. They are losing those secure social housing tenancies which in terms of stability are a high issue. So the link for us between housing and domestic abuse is so clear.

Also in terms of leaving the relationship in the first place, for most victims or survivors, housing and where they gonna live, that's their number one, that's the first issue. So for us it's like a no brainer and also for us and particularly for me I think I've always felt that the housing sector is so uniquely and ideally placed to not only identify domestic abuse but also identify early on so before it reaches crisis point. I think if you look at other agencies, statutory or either likewise in this country, there's no other agency such police, social services, even specialist support agencies that have that kind of access into people's homes.

You know, often the police or health services get involved with people when things have reached crisis point or a point where a victim or survivor has been really badly harmed whether that is emotionally or physically. I think with housing the proximity, the close proximity that most housing providers have with their residents means that they're in such a brilliant position to offer support and identify a lot earlier on.

I: **Yeah. I can hear a housing provider say, "I'm not an expert in domestic abuse, how would I respond?" How do you help them around that issue?**

R: I mean that's one of the key factors. I think many housing providers are unaware of their role. Many people are only aware of statutory duties, like your local authorities in terms of rehousing victims. But actually what we do is provide really practical common sense ways of supporting survivors. So it might be something really simple, like training all your frontline offices on the signs of domestic abuse within a property. It might even be making sure that you establish like routine enquiry in your service because it's so common. Also just really simple things like making sure that they know the National Domestic Violence Helpline number so that they can give that to people who may come forward or linking them up with local Idva services. There's so much for housing to do. I think that a lot of the time we talk about making safer communities and making our communities kind of happy and thriving and I think housing is the cornerstone of any community. So it's about encouraging the housing providers to look around their communities and see what resources exist for some of their more vulnerable residents.

I: **So it's about early intervention.**

R: Definitely.

I: It's about identification and then having a good response and then linking up to those in the community who can provide an expert response.

R: Absolutely.

I: That sounds good.

R: *[Laughs.]* Good.

I: So one of the ways that I notice that you do that is through helping housing providers get a certain accreditation.

R: Yeah.

I: That's called the National Domestic Abuse Service Standards?

R: That's right. So those are eight standards and they range from things like policy and procedures to how inclusive or accessible your service is. So it's quite broad but it's kind of like a minimum of eight areas that we felt were really important for any housing provider to achieve. I mean what's great now is we've developed an online resource tool which is free for housing providers to access where they can actually look at their own progress and their response and they can have access to these policies. There's lots of best practice on the website and they can see how close they are to achieving those eight standards. If they feel that they are really close, we can come in and have a look and check that they've done the work properly and they can achieve accreditation really simply. If they feel that actually there is some work to do and for a lot of providers, particularly the larger ones, there will be work to do. It might take them a bit longer. We can provide support with that including workshops which are currently funded by London Council so free for housing providers to attend. You know all the way through to like designing sort of bespoke training and policies and procedures for them. It's an in-depth process but one that I think is really, really simple and easy to engage with.

I: How do you make it attractive to housing providers? I mean some of them, hopefully a lot of them, want to have a good domestic abuse response but how do you attract others?

R: For housing providers I think it's really important, one for us and that's the benefit of us having come from the housing sectors that we understand the concerns. One of the issues obviously for us is two women a week are still killed as a result of domestic abuse so that in and of itself is something that we definitely speak to housing providers about. Aside from that, in terms of like putting forward the business case, at the moment Gentoo and SafeLives are developing a report which looks at the financial cost to housing associations or housing providers. The results are quite shocking actually, just kind of like some of the preliminary findings are the void costs. So a property that was inhabited by someone experiencing domestic abuse will almost be six times more expensive to re-let to another resident. So in terms of the business case, we know that the people who experience domestic abuse is seven times more likely to be in significant arrears which means they're not paying their rent which means the housing provider is not getting that income. Even the business side of looking at why housing providers should have a robust response to domestic abuse are there. So we definitely speak about those kinds of issues as well.

I: Great. So a housing provider gets this accreditation.

R: Yes.

I: What kind of improvements have you seen in practice?

R: Yeah, I mean I think the improvements are immense really, like I said, even around in terms of tenancy sustainment. When I worked for a housing provider and I know that it's the same with Gentoo and Peabody, we've seen a huge increase in residents being able to sustain their tenancy. So that means less transient communities because people aren't being forced to flee their properties, they've been supported to stay in them. A lot more support around understanding people's needs if they need to be moved and making sure that people are supported around that. When I was working for a housing provider, we actually established a fund for survivors when they needed to leave or if they needed to have a managed move and that was about paying for the cost of their removals. The benefit to them being that they could move really quickly and it was pretty much stress-free, and then the benefit to the business meant that they could recoup that empty property and re-let it again. For survivors the benefits are having things like emergency systems in place in case their property is broken into or damaged. We saw an improvement of I think something around two weeks to four hours. So that was where a perpetrator had damaged someone's door, i.e. forced entry. It's common practice to ask for like police crime reference numbers before housing providers make those repairs. Obviously once you start raising awareness around domestic abuse and the barriers to survivors, approaching police and getting those reports, the housing providers start to understand. Then they can put in place their own procedures around that and make sure that survivors are being made safe a lot earlier and a lot better.

I: So it begins with believing them.

R: Absolutely. I think that's a strand that runs through everything we do which is key principles that we want to see housing providers adhere to. One of those definitely is believing them and having a non-judgemental approach, making sure your services is inclusive and accessible. Whether that's linking with other partners to make sure that people from different communities feel that they can access and use your services. Also making sure that staff are really aware of the reality around domestic abuse and they're not buying into those Daily Mail articles that are everywhere. It's a reality and a lot of people do believe which is that a lot of people make up domestic abuse maybe to move or to get a property. So it's just about making sure that we are raising awareness to challenge those myths and those misconceptions around domestic abuse. I think that's where you see the most change. Once the attitudes change towards domestic abuse, the behaviour almost follows. For survivors that's priceless. Again a lot of survivors may never go to the police. They may feel uncomfortable to tell maybe their workplace or even going to the doctors. But, if they're in social housing property then there's lots of touch points that they will have with either their housing officer or gas engineers or people that are in and out of their lives every other day. It's about making sure that housing providers use those opportunities or understand why they should use those opportunities to support vulnerable residents.

I: I guess if you work with an organisation that you feel has quite a negative attitude toward domestic abuse of blaming or not believing, it would be hard for you to disclose.

R: Absolutely.

I: Have you had any increases in disclosure amongst staff?

R: Yeah. One of the highlights for me when I was working at the housing provider was initially when I started there the service was solely for residents. As a result of that, of

staff seeing how well we supported survivors, how much we believed them, staff began to come forward and disclose. In one year we actually had seven staff disclosures and I know Gentoo and Peabody in particular have definitely had significant numbers of staff coming forward and making disclosures.

I: So it is a part of their accreditation to have an internal domestic abuse policy as well?

R: Yes, yes. For us that's vital. I read today actually that domestic abuse cost the UK economy something like 1.6 billion in like lost employee hours and things like that. Even looking at it from a cold point of view it's that. I think internally for most; HR would be unaware maybe of how much of an impact domestic abuse would have on their staff.

I remember one case where we had a woman in a really prominent and quite high powered position within the organisation who disclosed domestic abuse to me. That was so telling because she knew...well she felt that because of the stigma associated with domestic abuse that it would be really hard for her to say it openly. However, because we had an internal policy and procedure at that point, it was able to be dealt with really quickly and really sensitively which is vital in terms of one for the survivor and their mental health and also being able to maintain financial independence. Then also for the business, they don't lose good members of staff and then also actually if they have perpetrated, it's about how they tackle them as well. Because unfortunately, as much as we all have survivors that we're working alongside, in most organisations you will have perpetrators as well.

I: Yeah, definitely.

I: Yeah, no, I think that's one of the realisations that we had when I was working in hospitals as an IDVA, the number of staff members we supported as well.

R: It is, it is and I think it is definitely those are the sectors that people don't like to think about it but it is there. Yeah, it's about having a really good response for everyone and if it's everyone...

I: We might have practitioners listening, housing providers who might not be at a decision level where they can say, let's make this step but they want to improve their individual practice. What's your advice to them about how they can better respond to a survivor?

R: I would say just definitely if somebody discloses believe them. If you have concerns, believe yourself. It's always better to share that information safely, of course, rather than hold on to it. Domestic abuse is so common. I think definitely just building it into routine enquiry can never hurt. I think when we did that we realised that. We did a pilot for about a week and we realised when we build it into just asking everyone that we came into contact with over 70% of people that we spoke to were experiencing domestic abuse. Those were people who were in significant rent arrears, so a thousand pounds or more.

I: Mmm.

R: So I mean that's definitely something that they can do. Also realising domestic abuse is not just physical.

I: Yeah.

R: I think when you know that someone is being verbally abused or financially abused or coerced and controlled, not dismissing the fact that all that's going on just because the person might not be physically violent. Making sure that the message is out there. Raising knowledge and awareness of domestic abuse and why it's so important. And also familiarise yourself with local support. There are so many specialist support services out there. It's just about making sure you know and understand and then being able to give that information really quickly to someone who may only have told you.

I: **Yep and it sounds like making connections in their head between domestic abuse and other issues is really important, like you talk a lot about significant rent arrears and not just jumping to judgement but to think 'why is that happening?'**

R: Absolutely, that is probably the best question to always ask yourself as a frontline housing provider which is just why. Why are there smashed doors? Why does this person always want a new lock every other month? Why are there holes in the walls? Why are they in rent arrears? You absolutely ask those questions and where you can share that safely and also making links and making sure you know what the Marac is. Making links to them because sometimes...and a lot of the time actually with housing providers, we are the missing piece of that puzzle. There may be concerns from neighbours around noise and it may be described as anti-social behaviour. Actually all it takes is for us to kind of scratch the surface and we realise that isn't anti-social behaviour or troubled families or whatever that tag is, it's actually domestic abuse. So it is so vital.

I: **So not looking at things in isolation.**

R: Absolutely, yeah, absolutely and also having a robust response to domestic abuse means that we're able to look at perpetrators as well and not just constantly re-victimise women who may actually be victims of domestic abuse themselves, but actually shifting the blame to the perpetrators who might be coming to the property and causing damage, causing noise. We know that in properties where there's domestic abuse, they're almost I think like four times more likely to also experience anti-social behaviour. So it just shows again the links between a lot of associated issues and domestic abuse. So having that robust service and response to domestic abuse actually can help in other areas as well.

I: **Great, thank you very much that's all really interesting. It sounds like you're doing really good work.**

R: Hopefully, we try.

I: **Yeah, great, thank you.**

R: Thank you.

Conclusion: Thank you for listening. If you'd like to find out more about Safelives Spotlight on domestic abuse and homelessness, go to our website [SafeLives.org.uk](https://www.SafeLives.org.uk) where we will be uploading content every week from different experts from the 7th August through the 15th Sept. And we want to hear from you-we need your views, experiences and practice tips, so join the conversation on Twitter with the hashtag #SafeAtHome and get involved on the SafeLives Community.