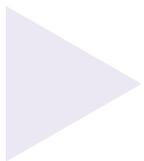




Change, Justice, Fairness:

“Why should we have to move everywhere and everything because of him?”



A research report on homelessness as a result of domestic or sexual abuse.
Co-produced by the Community Research Team: Janice Burns, Tracy Forrester,
Karin Johnstone, Lee-anne MacLeod, Marion McDonald, Catherine Todd and
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Fife Domestic and Sexual Abuse Partnership thanks the community research team for their incredible commitment to this project spanning over two years. Their research has given partners in Fife a greater insight into the experiences of women with experience of domestic and sexual abuse who have been faced with the risk of homelessness as a result. We will take forward learning from this community led project to improve our partnership response.

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Foreword

We became involved in this project because we knew from our own experiences of becoming homeless as a result of domestic abuse how deeply this has affected us, our children and our grandchildren. When we came together as a group of women from different backgrounds and life experiences and began sharing our stories we found strong similarities in how we had been treated. We were determined to prevent other women and children in the future from having to live through what happened to us. We had done nothing wrong but were forced to leave our home, either by the perpetrator or by the housing system that expected us and our children to become homeless. We found that when we went through the homeless system in Fife we did not get the support and assistance we expected and needed, but were treated like second class citizens, stripped of our dignity and as if we had no rights. This is deeply unfair: it leaves women to pick up the pieces, blaming them for what has happened, and gives power to the perpetrator.

By being involved in this project and carrying out this research we hope it will reach the hearts and minds of the powers that be to change the systems that continue to undermine women. We produced this report with the hope that it would lead to changes in housing policies, procedures and attitudes to end the injustice that punishes women and children when they have done nothing wrong. We want these changes to ensure that women and children are able to remain in their homes, if that is what they want to do, and that effective action is taken against the perpetrator. We also want women to be able to make informed decisions about their housing options and receive the support they need to rebuild their lives. We want to see Fife Council pioneering these changes and leading the way for the whole of Scotland.

From the community research team

Background

Domestic abuse and homelessness

Domestic abuse is persistent and controlling behaviour by a partner or ex-partner which causes physical, sexual and/or emotional harm. It is common but often concealed and in most cases it is experienced by women and children and is perpetrated by men. In 2012-13 there were 60,080 incidents of domestic abuse recorded by the police in Scotland. Eighty percent of these involved a female victim and male perpetrator.ⁱ While police statistics provide an indication of the scale of the problem, these figures are an underestimate, as many women do not report domestic abuse to the police.

While a range of policy and legislative measures has led to significant improvements in Scotland to address domestic abuse and has encouraged women to look for support, one of the largest barriers women face when ending a relationship with an abusive partner is where she and in many cases, her children, will live. A Scottish Government review of domestic abuse, housing and homelessness policy and research concluded that:

“The prevention or cessation of domestic abuse in a family context will almost always require the woman to leave that home.”ⁱⁱ

Domestic abuse is a major cause of homelessness in Scotland. In 2013-14 “a dispute within the household: violent or abusive” was the reason given for a homeless application by 4,124 applicants, (11% of all applications). The gendered relationship between domestic abuse and homelessness is illustrated by the fact that 71% of these applications were made by women and women, with children make up 36% of applicants in this category.ⁱⁱⁱ Research has highlighted that these figures are likely to significantly underestimate the scale of the problem, as women may not disclose that they are experiencing domestic abuse when making a homeless application. Many women when forced to leave their home initially rely on friends or relatives for a place to stay and do not make a homeless application until later.^{iv} Domestic abuse is also closely linked with repeat homelessness.^v Research into the effectiveness of exclusion orders found that for most women exclusion orders did not provide an option to remain safely in their home. Reasons for this were; ineligibility, breaches unenforced, lack of awareness, access to legal aid and advice. The research also found that, for a wide range of practitioners, leaving an abuser and leaving the home have become merged and the homeless route provided a faster and more straightforward approach.^{vi}

The impact of domestic abuse on women’s health has been well documented in research and includes physical injury, chronic poor health and a range of psychological and reproductive difficulties. Women who experience domestic abuse are more likely to

suffer severe depression and anxiety.^{vii} Becoming homeless exacerbates pre-existing health problems and contributes to considerable new difficulties that affect women's and children's health and wellbeing.^{viii}

Housing interventions and homelessness policy responses for women need to be seen in the context of larger social, economic and political processes which engender social constructions of homelessness and tend to marginalise the issues affecting women.^{ix} Women's economically disadvantaged position in the labour market, often working in part time low-paid employment to manage child and other care responsibilities means that they are disproportionately dependent on the social housing sector.^x

The commitment made by the Scottish Government to end homelessness by 2012 and the development of a more person centred housing options approach to homelessness prevention provided an opportunity to focus on women's experience of homelessness as a result of domestic or sexual abuse and what can be done to prevent it.

The Research Approach

The WHIR Project is a community-led participatory action research project based in Fife which aims to improve housing options for women who experience domestic or sexual abuse.¹ Community-led participatory action research enlists those who are most affected by an issue, typically in collaboration or partnership with others who have research skills, to carry out research on and analyse that issue with the goal of developing strategies to resolve it.^{xi} This approach was used to ensure that women who experience homelessness as a result of domestic or sexual abuse were directly involved in finding appropriate solutions for preventing homelessness, informing policy and improving responses from service providers in the future.

The research was carried out by a group of women who had experience of homelessness as a result of domestic or sexual abuse and was supported by staff from Scottish Women's Aid. It was rooted in an ethical framework that embraces seven core principles of participatory action research: mutual respect, equality and inclusion, democratic participation, active learning, making a difference, collective action, and personal integrity.^{xii}

The community research team met on a weekly basis from 2013 – 2015. During that time, they shared their knowledge, expertise and understanding about what it is like to be homeless because of domestic or sexual abuse. They cultivated the focus of the research, clarified what they still needed to know about other women's experiences and decided the best ways to get that information – reliably and with integrity. They designed the methodology and tools, gathered and analysed both quantitative and qualitative information. They used their shared understanding of women's experiences to highlight the key findings, conclusions and recommendations and to co-produce this report.

Research Aims

The broad scope of the research project was to understand better the range of difficulties women face when they become homeless as a result of domestic or sexual abuse and to identify ways to improve women's housing options. Three research questions were identified:

- Are service providers knowledgeable or aware of the impact domestic or sexual abuse has on women's health and well-being?
- Do existing systems and structures support women effectively?
- Are existing housing options appropriate for women experiencing domestic or sexual abuse?

¹ Information on the WHIR project can be found on page 65

Methodology

The community research team agreed and developed the following methodology:

Service Provider Survey – an electronic self-complete survey. This survey was promoted to Fife Council customer service, housing and homelessness staff through an email request to complete an online survey. A similar invitation was sent to frontline service providers in Fife Housing Partnership organisations, Fife Women’s Aid, FRASAC and other third sector organisations that provide housing support, information or advice to women experiencing domestic or sexual abuse. The survey focussed on individual service providers’ knowledge and opinions about domestic and sexual abuse, their organisational and individual role in responding to women who are seeking help and their confidence in responding to women who become homeless as a result of domestic or sexual abuse.

Women’s Questionnaire – a self-complete questionnaire targeted at women living in Fife who had been at risk of homelessness due to domestic or sexual abuse. The survey was available in paper and electronic versions. The community research team designed a leaflet describing the research project and multiple ways women could access the questionnaire. This leaflet was distributed throughout Fife in public spaces such as libraries, shops, community centres and Fife Council offices. It was also displayed on Fife Council and Fife College websites and promoted on local radio and in the Fife Free Press. It was also promoted through support services. Apart from a broader question that asked women about the information and assistance they needed when they became homeless or were at risk of homelessness, the questions related to women’s experience of Fife Council housing and homelessness services. It covered a range of issues, including the usefulness of information they received and how they felt they were treated by frontline staff; the challenges they faced moving into temporary and permanent accommodation and the impact this had on their well-being; the impact of remaining in their own homes (for women who did not move into temporary accommodation); any assistance they received from Fife Council to address their needs and the extent to which they had a choice of remaining in their homes or leaving.

Women’s Interview – a semi-structured interview aimed at getting an in-depth understanding of women’s experience of being at risk of homelessness as a result of domestic abuse. Interviews were carried out by a community research team member and a facilitator from SWA. The discussion was focused on the period of time women first thought about their housing situation as a result of their experience of domestic or sexual abuse and covered topics such as the advice they received from Fife Council, how they made decisions regarding their housing needs, whether they felt they had a choice about what to do, whether the outcome was best for them and what could have been done differently.

Policy Context

Since devolution Scotland has been internationally recognised for its progressive approach to tackling domestic abuse. The strategic approach taken in Scotland has recognised domestic abuse as a cause and consequence of gender inequality. The National Strategy to Address Domestic Abuse in Scotland in 2000 defined domestic abuse as:

“Domestic Abuse, as gendered based violence, can be perpetrated by partners or ex partners and can include physical abuse (assault and physical attack involving a range of behaviour), sexual abuse (acts which degrade and humiliate women and are perpetrated against their will, including rape) and mental and emotional abuse (such as threats, verbal abuse, racial abuse, withholding money and other types of controlling behaviour such as isolation from family and friends.)”^{xiii}

Subsequent strategies have recognised the need to adopt a broader definition of violence against women which clearly identifies the gendered nature of violence against women and frames it as a human rights violation. In 2015 the Scottish Government and COSLA published Equally Safe,^{xiv} Scotland’s strategy for preventing and eradicating violence against women and girls which aims to tackle all forms of violence against women and girls: domestic abuse, rape and sexual assault; sexual harassment and intimidation at work and in public; stalking; commercial sexual exploitation such as prostitution, pornography and human trafficking; dowry-related violence; female genital mutilation (FGM); forced marriage; and so-called ‘honour’ based violence.

“The strategy recognises that women and girls are at risk of such abuse precisely because they are female and it aligns with the UN definition of violence against women that includes the girl child, reflecting that this risk is present throughout life. It is gender, rather than age, that predicts an individual’s likelihood of experiencing inequality and the forms of violence described above, with girls, young women and adult women all at risk because they are female.”

Equally Safe underlines the need to ensure that work to address violence against women is interwoven into other Scottish Government strategies, programmes and frameworks. Work to address homelessness is highlighted as a cross cutting policy area that impacts on women and girls at risk of or experiencing violence:

“Of particular note are the 2012 Homelessness Commitment which establishes strong housing rights for those assessed as unintentionally homeless; the development of the Housing Options approach.”

Local authorities and their Community Planning Partners are seen as having a key role to play in the delivery of Equally Safe, which focuses on prevention at a national and local level, outlines a framework for implementation and sets out how work to address violence against women links to the National Performance Framework.

A key priority of Equally Safe is that interventions are early and effective in preventing violence and maximising the safety and wellbeing of women and girls. The policy seeks to ensure that service providers are competently able to identify violence against women and girls, and respond effectively.

“It’s vital that practitioners working across the range of mainstream services that come into daily contact with women and girls are able to identify those at risk and offer an appropriate, safe and consistent response - from police officers, teachers, community workers, social workers and housing officers, to GPs, midwives, dentists, bar reporters, and children and young people’s services. Then and only then can we be sure of offering those affected or at risk a professional, capable and compassionate response from their very first point of contact; an integrated response that’s quick and easy to access, shares information between services and in doing so, spares women the ordeal of having to repeat their experiences over and over. Greater consistency and information sharing between services will also increase our collective ability to keep women safe and hold perpetrators to account, along with encouraging individual organisations to consider the implications that their actions have on other services in the system.”

Homelessness Policy

Scotland’s commitment to tackling homelessness has also attracted international acclaim. In 2003 the Scottish Government introduced the ambitious target to end ‘unintentional’ homelessness by 2012. The Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003 established a framework for achieving this including changes to eligibility criteria which abolished the priority need distinction. This now means that all people who are defined as homeless through no fault of their own, have a right to settled accommodation.

Recognition of domestic abuse as a major cause of homelessness and repeat homelessness is embedded in homelessness policy including the requirement, introduced by the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, for local authorities to produce homeless strategies which could be integrated with their domestic abuse strategies.

Homelessness Prevention Guidance (2009) emphasises the need for multi-agency joint action at a local level to ensure that the needs of those affected by domestic abuse and homelessness are tackled effectively. It outlines action to prevent homelessness resulting from domestic abuse, which includes that social landlords should review allocation and transfer policies to ensure they meet good practice, review rent arrears and repairs procedures to ensure that they are not unfairly penalising women affected by domestic abuse and work closely with other relevant agencies to develop appropriate services.

The guidance also makes a number of specific recommendations. These include liaison with specialist support agencies, such as Women’s Aid, ensuring that women are able to access appropriate legal advice, installation of security features in the current home and provision of mobile phones and other forms of technology to support external security, guidance for staff on interviewing techniques that place an emphasis on sensitivity and

confidentiality. The guidance also states that *‘it is likely also to be helpful in cases of domestic abuse to have a clause in the Allocation Policy for housing the perpetrator of the abuse if they apply for re-housing’*.

Guidance on Meeting the Best Interests of Children Facing Homelessness (2010) recognises that domestic abuse *“can lead to a spiral of repeat homelessness, poverty, disruption to schooling and employment and loss of contact with networks of support. A coordinated, multi-agency approach involving partner agencies such as Women’s Aid is required to ensure that women and children can stay safely in their own home or, where necessary, make the move into alternative accommodation without facing additional economic and social disadvantages.”^{xv}*

In 2010 the Scottish Government and COSLA agreed priorities to support local authorities to meet the 2012 homelessness target. These priorities included promoting and improving joint working and preventing homelessness where possible. A key element of homeless prevention work has been the adoption of a Housing Options approach which is described by the Scottish Government as:

“a process which starts with housing advice when someone approaches a local authority with a housing problem. This means looking at an individual’s options and choices in the widest sense. This approach features early intervention and explores all possible tenure options, including council housing, housing association housing and the private rented sector.

The advice can also cover personal circumstances which may not necessarily be housing related, such as debt advice, mediation and mental health issues. Rather than only accepting a homelessness application local authority homelessness services will work together with other services such as employability, mental health, money advice and family mediation services etc. to assist the individual with issues from an early stage in the hope of avoiding a housing crisis.”^{xvi}

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 introduced a duty for local authorities to provide housing support to homeless households. The Housing Support Duty came into effect in June 2013, and requires local authorities to conduct a housing support assessment for applicants who are unintentionally homeless or threatened with homelessness where they have ‘reason to believe’ there is a need for housing support services. Triggers for a housing support assessment include repeat homelessness, rent arrears, involvement in anti-social behaviour, health difficulties, substance misuse, leaving prison and particular groups identified as at risk of homelessness, such as victims of domestic abuse.^{xvii}

Other housing-related legislation intended to assist women experiencing domestic abuse are the Matrimonial Homes (Family Protection (Scotland) Act 1981 and the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014. This legislation provides exclusion orders suspending the right of a spouse, civil partner or cohabitee, where the cohabitee has

occupancy rights, to occupy the family home. Interdicts restraining their behaviour, which may include powers of arrest, can be attached to the exclusion orders. The Protection from Abuse (Scotland) Act 2001 also provides for a ‘domestic abuse interdict’ that bans specific behaviour and can have powers of arrest attached.

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 (ground 15 Schedule 2) provides grounds for a local authority or housing association to take legal action to transfer a Scottish Secure Tenancy to the tenant’s spouse or partner where there has been an application for such a transfer and where the applicant no longer wishes to live together with their ex-partner/spouse. In cases of domestic abuse, following a request from the victim, a landlord can apply to the court to evict the perpetrator and transfer the tenancy into the woman’s name. The court has to consider that it is reasonable to evict and the landlord has to offer the perpetrator alternative accommodation (ground 15 Schedule 2).

Further policy developments in this area include the Scottish Social Housing Charter established under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010, which sets standards and outcomes that all social landlords should aim to achieve when performing their housing activities. The charter covers equalities; the customer/landlord relationship; housing quality and maintenance; neighbourhood and community; access to housing and support; getting good value from rents and service charges; and other customers. For example the outcome on equality states that:

- *every tenant and other customer has their individual needs recognised, is treated fairly and with respect, and receives fair access to housing and housing services.*

While the outcomes on housing options state that social landlords ensure that:

- *people looking for housing get information that helps them make informed choices and decisions about the range of housing options available to them*
- *tenants and people on housing lists can review their housing options*
- *people at risk of losing their homes get advice on preventing homelessness*

The Equality Act 2010 requires public bodies to address discrimination and promote equality for protected groups: age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, gender, sexual orientation and, in part, marriage and civil partnership. The Public Sector Equality Duty requires that public authorities consider equality in their day to day work in developing policy, delivering services and in their role as an employer.^{xviii}

Policy context in Fife

Fife Council’s homelessness approach forms part of the Local Housing Strategy developed by Fife Housing Partnership, which includes Fife Council, NHS Fife, Fife Housing Association Forum, the Private Landlords Steering Group, and the Fife Tenants’ and Residents’ Federations.^{xix} Prevention of homelessness is a key priority and an

enhanced housing options approach is delivered through the 'Prevention First' initiative. Fife Specific Needs Housing Approach^{xx} outlines a framework to address specific housing needs within Fife Housing Partnership's Local Housing Strategy. It provides a broad definition of specific needs service user groups and 'People escaping domestic violence' is one of the key groups identified.

Fife Council's Social Housing Charter sets out the council's commitments in the provision of all housing services and activities:

"Fife Council ensures all residents can access housing but also good housing advice. Our charter commitments are to make sure that people with housing needs get the widest choice and clearest advice possible, from the support needed to stay in their own home through to easy access to transferring your tenancy and homelessness services, should they be required."^{xxi}

The council's Customer Service Charter further details the high standard of service 'customers' can expect, including doing their best to fully deal with an enquiry at the first point of contact, providing customers with good information, *"you will be given information that is easy to understand, accurate and meets your needs."* The Charter also sets out the professionalism customers can expect *"we will treat you fairly and sensitively and protect your personal privacy"* and that *"translation and interpreting services can be provided if required."*^{xxii}

Fife Council and housing associations based in Fife work in partnership to provide the Fife Housing Register (FHR) as a single common housing list and route of access to all of the partners' homes. The FHR implemented a 'Protocol for dealing with Gender Based Violence (including domestic abuse and harassment)' in June 2014. The Protocol strategically supports the Homelessness Approach and Specific Needs Housing Approach and sets out a policy and operational framework for responding to the needs of 'individuals experiencing abuse or harassment'. It provides arrangements to respond appropriately to the sensitive individual nature of claims of abuse or harassment, clear lines of inter-agency communication through identified contacts and specific procedures, consistent partnership working to provide higher quality information to promote and support informed choice across housing options, a clear process for recording and documenting incidences of abuse and harassment, and systems designed to prevent those affected by abuse and harassment becoming homeless.

The Protocol states that the *"Fife Housing Register partners are committed to addressing this type of behaviour, where possible, action will be taken against the perpetrator although there may be occasions where the victim moving home is the most positive option."*



Research Findings

In this chapter we present the findings framed by the three research questions. The first section outlines service providers' responses to questions about their knowledge and understanding of domestic and sexual abuse. It also includes women's responses to questions about how much Fife Council staff understood their situation and how they were treated by Fife Council staff. The second section outlines the responses received from service providers and from women on questions related to the extent to which current systems and structures support women at risk of homelessness as a result of domestic or sexual abuse. The third section presents findings primarily from women (through questionnaires and interviews) about the extent to which existing housing options are appropriate for women who are made homeless due to domestic or sexual abuse.

Service Providers

96 service providers completed the Service Provider Survey. Most were women (89%), white (99%), and Scottish (60%). They represented a broad range of age groups; more than half were between 35 and 56 years old. Over half were Fife Council (56%) or Housing Association employees (9%). The other organisations represented included Fife Women's Aid, YMCA, Trust in Fife, Fife Keyfund and Frontline Fife. The positions they held included service advisors, homeless officers, homeless support workers, community liaison and development workers as well as team leaders, administrators and service managers.

Women who completed the Women's Questionnaire

45 women completed the Women's Questionnaire. They were primarily white (93%), of Scottish (59%) or British (33%) nationality and between 26 and 45 years old. Half of them were responsible for children under the age of 18. Nearly half (46%) of the women had been made homeless or were at risk of homelessness more than once because of domestic or sexual abuse; at least 16 (39%) more than twice.

Women who completed the interviews

Four women who took part in the interviews had experienced homelessness or been at risk of homelessness as a result of domestic abuse. One woman's experience was 19 years ago; for the other three women the experience was recent. One woman had been permanently rehoused, one was living in temporary accommodation and another was about to move into a new tenancy at the time of the interviews. Three of the women had dependent children. One woman had decided to remain in her tenancy after separating from her partner two years ago, but following his persistent abuse and threatening behaviour she was about to move into a new tenancy. The other 3 women had to move out of their homes into a range of temporary accommodation, staying with friends and relatives, Women's Aid refuge, private rented flat and Fife Council temporary accommodation – including bed and breakfast. These 3 women had all moved multiple times with their children, ranging from 3 to 5 times at the time of the interviews.

Are service providers knowledgeable or aware of the impact of sexual or domestic abuse on women’s health and well-being?

While exploring their own experiences of homelessness and the responses they encountered from housing and homeless services, the community researchers questioned service providers’ understanding of domestic and sexual abuse. They shared what it was like to have to tell their story repeatedly to different people, often publicly in open-plan offices, sometimes feeling that they were not believed or that what was happening to them was either their fault or not that serious. They talked about feeling intimidated and disempowered by the response they received. They wanted to know if the response they received from service providers reflected a lack of knowledge and understanding about domestic and sexual abuse and its impact on women’s health and well-being. They also wanted to know if other women had experienced a similar response.

This section presents service providers’ responses to questions about their work experience, level of training in and knowledge of domestic and sexual abuse issues and their opinions about women who disclose domestic or sexual abuse. It also includes women’s responses to questions about how much Fife Council staff understood what they needed and how they were treated by Fife Council staff.

The length of time staff had been in post ranged from less than a year to more than 10 years; half of the service providers had been in post for more than 5 years. Most (96%) also said that their job requires them to assist service users face-to-face and (80%) said they had assisted a service user who had experienced domestic or sexual abuse at least once.

Table 1. Percentage of service providers who had undertaken previous training in domestic or sexual abuse issues (n=90)

Answer Options	Domestic abuse	Sexual abuse
Attended a conference or other special event	32%	26%
Attended a skills-based training workshop	37%	27%
Attended other in-depth training (more than 4 hours)	29%	27%
Other (talk given at office, on-line training)	3%	3%
None	36%	44%

One third of the service providers said they had not received any previous training in domestic or sexual abuse issues.

Service providers’ knowledge and understanding about domestic and sexual abuse

Service providers were asked about their knowledge and understanding of the underlying causes of domestic abuse and the impact domestic and sexual abuse has on women’s health and well-being. Their responses to these questions are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Service providers’ knowledge about the underlying cause of domestic and sexual abuse (n=93)

Answer Options	Yes	No	Don’t Know
Causes of domestic abuse			
Perpetrators of domestic abuse are violent because they are under a lot of pressure.	1%	82%	16%
Being female is the greatest single risk factor for becoming a victim of domestic abuse.	16%	69%	15%
Alcohol consumption is the greatest single predictor of domestic abuse.	40%	41%	18%
Domestic abuse is more likely to occur in lower-income families.	3%	82%	15%
Sexual abuse is more likely to occur in lower-income families.	0%	86%	14%
Domestic abuse can occur in a same sex relationship.	99%	1%	0%
Sexual abuse can occur in a same sex relationship.	99%	1%	0%
Domestic abuse is more common in ethnic minority communities.	4%	56%	40%

The majority of service providers were clear that domestic abuse was not a private matter between partners. They also understood that perpetrators of domestic abuse were not violent because they are under a lot of pressure and were aware that domestic and sexual abuse can occur in same sex relationships.

Most service providers did not have an understanding of domestic abuse as a consequence of gender inequality with only 16% answering that being female is the greatest single risk factor for becoming a victim. Service providers were much more likely to think that alcohol is the underlying cause of domestic abuse.

Table 3. Service providers' knowledge about the dynamics of domestic and sexual abuse (n=93)

Answer Options	Yes	No	Don't Know
Impact of domestic abuse			
Perpetrators of domestic abuse use fear and intimidation as a way of controlling their partners.	95%	1%	4%
Sexual abuse is not always a physical act.	71%	20%	9%
Domestic abuse can occur without any kind of physical threat or assault.	95%	4%	1%
If a woman leaves an abusive partner, the abuse by that partner is likely to stop.	9%	81%	11%
Victims of domestic abuse are at greater risk of injury when they leave the relationship.	20%	41%	39%
Victims of domestic abuse have good reasons for not leaving an abusive partner.	65%	16%	19%
Victims of sexual abuse have good reasons for not leaving an abuser.	55%	19%	26%

The majority of service providers understood that:

- perpetrators of domestic abuse use fear and intimidation as a way of controlling their partners.
- domestic abuse is unlikely to stop when a woman leaves the perpetrator.

However, the majority of service providers were unaware that victims of domestic abuse are at greater risk of injury when they do leave an abusive partner.^{xxiii}

There was also lack of understanding of the impact of fear and intimidation by an abusive partner on women's ability to end the relationship or to leave. Slightly more than half of the service providers thought women had good reasons for not leaving an abuser. Their opinions about women leaving an abusive partner are explored further in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Service providers’ opinions about women leaving an abusive partner (n=84)

Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree
Women who experience domestic abuse should get out of the relationship immediately.	6%	19%	28%	32%	15%
Victims of domestic abuse could leave the relationship if they wanted to.	11%	43%	24%	17%	6%
It is easy for women who experience domestic abuse to leave their home.	50%	45%	2%	1%	1%
Women who experience domestic abuse should be able to remain in the family home if they want to.	4%	5%	12%	51%	28%
If victims stay in the family home after repeated incidents of violence or abuse, they must accept some responsibility for the domestic abuse.	56%	27%	6%	6%	5%

Note: there were some service providers who either skipped the question entirely or said an individual item did not apply to them. The percentages are based on the number of workers who answered this question.

The vast majority of service providers did not think that it was easy for women to leave their homes (95%) and agreed that women who experience domestic abuse should be able to remain in the family home if they wanted to (79%). They also did not think women should accept responsibility for the domestic abuse if they stayed in the family home after repeated incidents (83%).

While nearly half (47%) agreed that women who experience domestic abuse should get out of the relationship immediately, just over half (54%) did not think victims could leave the relationship if they wanted to.

Although the majority of service providers seemed to understand that ending a relationship with an abusive partner is difficult for women and agreed that women should be able to remain in their family home if they want to, at least 1 out of 10 service providers did not.

- 9% thought the abuse would be likely to stop when a woman leaves the relationship
- 16% and 19% did not think victims of domestic or sexual abuse (respectively) had good reasons for staying with an abusive partner

- 23% thought that women could leave the relationship if they wanted to
- 9% did not think that women should be able to remain in the family home if they want to
- 11% thought that victims should accept some responsibility for the domestic abuse if they did stay after repeated incidents of violence or abuse

Service providers were asked to give their views about women who have experienced domestic abuse. Their responses are provided in Table 5.

Table 5. Service providers’ views of women who have experienced domestic abuse (n=84)

Answer Options	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly agree
uncooperative and difficult to deal with	29%	42%	27%	1%	1%
needing to be taken care of	8%	29%	29%	29%	6%
the same as everyone else	7%	25%	15%	37%	15%
unique individuals with a range of skills, strategies and abilities	4%	8%	26%	33%	29%

In responding to this series of statements most service providers disagreed with the view that women who experience domestic abuse are ‘uncooperative and difficult to deal with.’ They were also more likely to agree that women who experience domestic abuse are ‘unique individuals with a range of skills, strategies and abilities’ and that they were ‘the same as everyone else’. They were just as likely to view women as ‘needing to be taken care of’ as not to.

Almost a third of service providers:

- did **not** disagree that women who experience domestic abuse are uncooperative and difficult to deal with
- did **not** agree that women who experience domestic abuse are the same as everyone else or unique individuals with a range of skills, strategies and abilities
- **did** agree that women who experience domestic abuse need to be taken care of²

²Workers may have seen this as a supportive response to women they viewed as vulnerable but it may be experienced by women as “being treated like they knew what was best for me” or that they were “told” what to do, undermining their ability to think and act for themselves.

Women’s views about the response they received from Fife Council housing and homelessness services

In the Women’s Questionnaire women were asked how much Fife Council housing and homelessness staff understood about domestic abuse and the resulting impact it has on women’s needs and concerns when they seek information and advice. Women were also asked how they felt they were treated by staff when they approached the council for advice.

Table 6. How much Fife Council Housing/Homelessness staff understood what women needed or going through (n=45)

What you needed or were going through	Not at all	Some-what	Very much
Your need for additional safety and security measures?	35%	23%	43%
Your need for emotional safety?	36%	26%	38%
Your need for privacy?	42%	26%	32%
Your need for confidentiality?	21%	32%	47%
Your concerns about getting information from abusive partner?	48%	24%	27%
Your concerns about leaving your support network?	50%	22%	28%
What it was like to tell your story over and over again?	47%	31%	22%
What you were feeling?	42%	32%	26%
The impact the abuse you experienced has had on your health and well-being?	44%	26%	31%
Your need for your dignity to remain intact?	32%	42%	26%

Note: there were some women who either skipped the question entirely or said an individual item did not apply to them. The percentages are based on the number of women for whom the need did apply; for example, how much workers understood their need additional safety and security measures applied to 40 women.

On the whole, women did not think Fife Council housing and homelessness staff “very much” understood what they needed or were going through. While nearly half of women indicated that council staff “very much” understood what they needed in terms of their confidentiality, half of women also said that they did not at all understand their concerns about leaving their support network, getting information from an abusive partner or what it was like to tell their story over and over again. At least a third of women said that

council staff did not at all understand their concerns in relation to most of the issues listed above, including the impact the abuse they experienced had on their health and well-being.

In addition to selecting responses to each of the issues in the above table, several women added comments in the space provided at the end of this question. Several women wrote about council staff needing a better understanding of how domestic abuse works, what it feels like to have to repeat their circumstances over and over again each time worrying that they would get a negative reaction or would not be believed. Some women suggested that while some members of staff were sympathetic, others were unprofessional and lacked the emotional skills and empathy to respond appropriately to domestic abuse. One woman said that the Fife Council staff were very understanding of her needs.

Women noted that although Fife Council housing and homelessness staff seemed to understand what they were saying, they did not act in a way that made them feel safe and supported. They were viewed as just another woman looking for a council house, without any consideration or provision for domestic abuse.

“It was only after 4 years of running away with my children doing it myself that CEDAR and Women’s Aid found me and started helping me.”

“To get advice re - removing ex from property basic info ‘go see a lawyer’”

“Fife Council are very unprofessional and lacking in the emotional skills to deal with abusive cases.”

“It must be hard but I do think more training in sensitivity is needed and how male violence against women works.”

“In particular having to repeat my circumstances over and over again was humiliating and distressing to me. I was also worried about a negative reaction of not being believed every time I had to explain to a new person.”

“Tell the story time and time again gets tiring and upsetting, you come away from abuse and would like a bit of understanding and sometimes people get stressed and anxious so need things explained several times.”

“The officer understood what I said, but he did not act in a way that made me feel safe and supported.”

“Was treated like ‘just another single mother looking for a council house! Didn’t matter that I was going through hell at the time. They were not interested at all in what I had been through.”

How women felt they were treated by Fife Council Housing/ Homelessness staff

Women told us how they felt they were treated by Fife Council housing and homelessness staff by stating the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with 12 different statements. Their responses are presented in Table 7 below. Please note that for simplicity we combined 'strongly agreed' and 'agreed' responses (Agree) and 'strongly disagreed' and 'disagree' responses (Disagree). Also note that with the seven positive statements 'agree' indicates a positive opinion, but with the five negative statements 'disagree' indicates a positive opinion. It is important to note that a third of women neither agreed nor disagreed with each of the statements.

Table 7. How women were treated by Fife Council housing and homeless staff (n = 42)

Answer Options	Agree	Neither disagree or agree	Disagree
Positive Statements			
Treated me with respect	44%	41%	15%
Treated me like they understood how I felt	29%	36%	36%
Respected my privacy	54%	22%	24%
Treated me with compassion	32%	37%	32%
Took me seriously	40%	38%	21%
Listened to me	37%	34%	29%
Treated me like I was a valuable member of society	24%	36%	40%
Negative Statements			
Asked me to tell my story over and over again before they understood what I needed	24%	31%	45%
Treated me like I was lying	10%	36%	55%
Treated me like I was less intelligent than I am	27%	32%	41%
Treated me with indifference	22%	39%	39%
Treated me like they knew what was best for me	48%	29%	24%

Overall women’s responses to the statements reflected a relatively positive view of how they felt they were treated by Fife Council housing and homelessness staff.

There were four notable exceptions to this pattern:

- A third of women disagreed with the statement that staff “treated me with compassion”.
- Most women did not agree that staff treated them like they understood how they felt.
- Most women did not feel they were treated like they were valuable members of society.
- Women were more likely to agree that staff had ‘treated me like they knew what was best for me’.

Several women commented on the way they felt they were treated. While one woman wrote that her housing officer was ‘brilliant’, most of the comments were about being treated with a lack of empathy, compassion and understanding, particularly in relation to how they were feeling at the time.

Women said that they felt like they were being processed through a system that did not treat them as individuals, that was unable to respond to them humanely, or offer any flexibility or support to meet their individual needs. They also said that some staff did not seem to know what to do, what to say or how they should respond to their requests for help.

They also wrote about being made to feel like it was their fault or that staff appeared uninterested in their individual circumstances and there was no understanding of their need to feel safe. For some women the response they got from council staff understated the seriousness of their situation. They felt that they were not believed, that they were somehow at fault or that they were exaggerating their experience.

Other women commented that moving into temporary accommodation resulted in them losing their rights to their privacy, respect and dignity. Some commented that they found the weekly inspections of their accommodation by housing staff intrusive.

“Seems like I was part of a production line. If I could have given them my story first and then treated as an individual it would have made me feel human at least.”

“Again, nobody was outright hostile but I think it’s a function of the way the system works-there’s a rush to shove you somewhere and not much leeway for flexibility so there might not be much incentive to listen.”

“I felt I was treated not as a victim of domestic abuse and vulnerable but as another homeless case.”

“They treat you like it's your fault you're homeless or in the situation you are in. Or they have no understanding of what to do, say or act.”

“They were not interested in my story. I wasted so much time trying to get help from them. I was ill and trying to bring up 3 kids alone.”

“When go into homeless was in there for two and a half years, every week having someone checking the house inside every week, very stressful and heart breaking.”

“I felt I was made to feel like an idiot and treated with no respect. As my officer came to my house at times I asked him not to, I felt violated.”

“Was made to doubt yourself has this happened have you made it up or escalated this situation.”

“Council said that it can't be that bad as have a child/pregnant etc.”

Key Findings

- ▶ Most service providers lacked a gendered understanding of domestic abuse as a cause and consequence of women's inequality. They were much more likely to see alcohol as the greatest single predictor (40% of service providers).
- ▶ The majority of service providers (80%) did not know that women are at greater risk of injury when they end a relationship with an abusive partner.
- ▶ They did seem to understand that perpetrators use fear and intimidation to control partners, but had less understanding of how this dynamic could seriously jeopardise women's options about staying or leaving.
- ▶ Where this is most relevant is how it affects the way they respond to and support women through the process. The majority of service providers (62%) did view women who have experienced domestic abuse as unique individuals with a range of skills and abilities. However a third indicated that some women in this situation are uncooperative and difficult to deal with.
- ▶ Women's experiences reflected the attitudes voiced by service providers; they felt treated as though they were just another single homeless mother needing a house, not as a unique woman with individual circumstances and homeless because of someone else's actions nor given information relevant or specific to their situation.
- ▶ Women commented that the impact of domestic abuse on their health and wellbeing was often not recognised or responded to appropriately by Fife Council staff. That they were not treated with compassion, dignity or respect but made to doubt themselves; that the situation was somehow their fault or that they had made up or exaggerated their experience.

Do the existing structures and systems support women effectively?

When the community research team explored their experiences of seeking advice, support and assistance in relation to their housing, one of the common themes that emerged was the inconsistent response they received, often dependent on which member of staff they saw. They often encountered members of Fife Council staff who were not sure how to respond or who gave incomplete, inaccurate or misleading information. They discussed their experience of having to navigate a complex homeless process that was not well explained. They were required to complete multiple forms; travel to several other agencies to get additional support, make follow-up phone calls or describe their personal circumstances over and over again. The extent to which all community researchers received inconsistent responses from Fife Council staff indicated that the problem may be deeper than a lack of knowledge or understanding of domestic abuse. Did staff know how to appropriately identify and respond to women at risk of domestic abuse? Know what they were supposed to do if a woman disclosed domestic or sexual abuse? What processes they should follow, what action the council should take and what their responsibilities were to assist, refer or co-ordinate with other services? The community researchers also wanted to know if their experiences were unique or whether other women received a more appropriate response and the information and assistance they needed when they approached the council.

We asked service providers about their knowledge and opinions of women who experience domestic or sexual abuse; whether they would be able to identify women at risk of domestic or sexual abuse and how confident they were assisting women, in relation to their housing options, when they did disclose domestic or sexual abuse. We also asked women to tell us about the information and assistance they received when they became homeless or at risk of homelessness, whether they got what they needed and how useful it was to them.

Most service providers said they had a written policy or protocol about what to do if a service user disclosed domestic abuse or sexual abuse. 52% of staff had read their organisations' policy/protocol on responding to domestic abuse and 60% had read their organisations' sexual abuse policy/protocol. Among Fife Council staff, this ratio was smaller; 75% of staff said they had a policy or protocol for domestic abuse and 56% said they had one for sexual abuse, but only a third of staff who knew about the policies/protocols had read either of them.

The service providers' opinions about women who experience domestic or sexual abuse are presented in Table 8 and Table 9.

Table 8. Service providers' opinions about identifying women who experience domestic and sexual abuse (n = 84)

Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am able to identify domestic abuse without asking the service user about it	11%	27%	22%	32%	9%
I can recognise victims of domestic abuse by the way they behave	28%	33%	27%	11%	0%
I can recognise victims of sexual abuse by the way they behave	21%	40%	30%	7%	1%
Some women claim domestic abuse when they have not experienced it	1%	10%	32%	49%	9%
Some women claim sexual abuse when they have not experienced it	5%	17%	26%	46%	6%
Women tend to exaggerate the psychological effects of sexual abuse	52%	38%	6%	1%	2%
Women tend to exaggerate the physical and psychological effects of domestic abuse	51%	35%	12%	1%	0%
Women who experience domestic abuse are able to make appropriate decisions about how to handle their situation	16%	36%	34%	8%	6%

Note: there were some workers who either skipped the question entirely or said an individual item did not apply to them. The percentages are based on the number of workers who indicated the item applied to them.

Most service providers (61%) could not recognise victims of domestic or sexual abuse by the way they behave, however, 42% agreed that they could identify domestic abuse without asking the service user about it.

More than half of service providers (58%) agreed or strongly agreed that some women claim domestic or sexual abuse when they have not experienced it.

Only 14% of service providers agreed that women who experience domestic abuse are able to make appropriate decisions about how to handle their situation with more than half (52%) of providers disagreeing with this statement.

In addition to asking service providers about their ability to identify women who experience domestic or sexual abuse, we asked them about their organisational

responsibility and their individual role within that to provide housing information and advice to women in this situation. Their responses are presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Service providers' opinions about domestic and sexual abuse (n=84)

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree
Housing organisation responsibility					
I think domestic abuse is an important housing issue	1%	2%	6%	31%	59%
I think sexual abuse is an important housing issue	1%	4%	7%	36%	52%
My workplace encourages me to respond to domestic abuse	5%	9%	18%	40%	29%
My workplace encourages me to respond to sexual abuse	4%	11%	14%	49%	23%
Housing officers have a responsibility to ask all women who complete a homelessness application about domestic abuse	14%	25%	21%	28%	12%
Housing Services should take tenancy action against a perpetrator of domestic abuse	12%	7%	21%	34%	26%
Housing individual role responsibility					
If a woman does not tell me about domestic or sexual abuse, there is very little I can do to help her	7%	43%	11%	32%	7%
If a service user refuses to discuss the abuse, staff can only offer information or advice about general housing options	7%	31%	9%	41%	12%
Housing officers do not have the knowledge to assist victims of domestic abuse	15%	45%	22%	18%	1%
Housing officers do not have the knowledge to assist victims of sexual abuse	5%	32%	33%	22%	8%

Note: there were some workers who either skipped the question entirely or said an individual item did not apply to them. The percentages are based on the number of workers who indicated the item applied to them.

Nearly all service providers (>90%) agreed that domestic and sexual abuse are important housing issues and most also agreed that their workplace encourages them to respond to domestic and sexual abuse. As many service providers agreed as disagreed that Housing Officers have a responsibility to ask all women who complete a homelessness application about domestic abuse. 50% of service providers agreed that housing services should take tenancy action against a perpetrator of domestic abuse.

1 out of 5 service providers did not think that housing officers have the knowledge to assist victims of domestic abuse; this proportion is higher in relation to sexual abuse.

Service providers were also asked whether forcing sex on a partner, hitting a partner or stalking an ex-partner were criminal offences in Scotland. Nearly all service providers were aware that forcing sex on your partner is a crime according to Scottish Law (94%) and most also understood that hitting your partner (89%) and stalking an ex-partner (86%) are criminal offences.

Service providers were also asked about their knowledge of how they were expected to respond to disclosures of domestic or sexual abuse. Their responses are provided in Table 10.

Table 10. Service providers’ opinions about what to do if they suspect DA/SA (n=84)

Statement	Yes	No	Don't Know
Housing applicants are required to provide proof of domestic or sexual abuse in order to be placed on the homeless list.	12%	78%	10%
Being supportive of a service user’s decision to stay in the home is condoning the abuse.	8%	86%	7%
Concerns about domestic abuse cannot be recorded in a service user’s file if she has not disclosed the abuse.	32%	24%	45%
Housing services can take tenancy management action against a perpetrator of domestic abuse.	30%	21%	49%

Most recognised that housing applicants are not required to provide proof of domestic or sexual abuse in order to make a homeless application and that supporting women’s decisions to stay in the home is not condoning the abuse. At least 45% of service providers did not know if concerns about domestic abuse can be recorded in a service user’s file if she has not disclosed the abuse.

Two thirds of service providers did not know if housing services can take action against a perpetrator of domestic abuse.

Service providers' confidence responding to domestic abuse

After asking service providers about their ability to identify domestic or sexual abuse, their knowledge of their organisations' responsibilities and their own role within that, we asked them to tell us how confident they were in being able to respond appropriately. Their responses are presented in Table 11(a) and (b).

Table 11(a). Number of service providers who said these actions were not in their job role (n=80)

Action	Not in my job role DA	Not in my job role SA
Customer care		
Reassuring her know that you believe what she is saying.	11	8
Talking with her about any impact her experience of domestic abuse may have on her housing options.	13	16
Letting her know that she is not to blame.	10	8
Guidance		
Giving information to her about her housing rights and options.	10	12
If children are involved, following child protection guidance.	11	11
Arranging additional home security measures.	30	26
Referring her to other relevant agencies or services.	5	7
Identify domestic abuse as the underlying cause of homelessness.	22	21
Assistance to move out		
Assisting her to move into a Women's Aid refuge if that is what she wants to do.	15	18
Assisting her to move into temporary accommodation other than WA refuge if that is what she wants to do.	19	20
Assisting her to move into different permanent accommodation if that is what she wants to do.	19	23
Assisting to remain		
Assisting her to stay the family home if that is what she wants to do.	23	21
Giving her information about how to exclude an abusive partner if she wants to stay in the family home.	20	na
Taking appropriate action against the perpetrator of domestic abuse.	28	na

25% of service providers indicated that it was not in their job role to provide this information or assistance although 90% of service providers had previously indicated that their job required them to assist service users face-to-face.

Table 11(b). Service providers' confidence responding to domestic abuse (DA) and sexual abuse (SA): percentages of those who indicated the action was in their job role

	Not confident		Somewhat confident		Confident	
	DA	SA	DA	SA	DA	SA
Customer care						
Reassuring her that you believe what she is saying.	9%	7%	25%	35%	67%	58%
Letting her know that she is not to blame.	7%	30%	19%	30%	74%	40%
Talking with her about any impact her experience of domestic abuse may have on her housing options.	30%	11%	25%	24%	45%	65%
Guidance						
Giving information to her about her housing rights and options.	21%	18%	23%	28%	56%	54%
If children are involved, following child protection guidance.	31%	28%	18%	24%	51%	48%
Arranging additional home security measures.	34%	38%	24%	24%	42%	38%
Referring her to other relevant agencies or services.	12%	18%	25%	21%	63%	61%
Identify domestic abuse as the underlying cause of homelessness.	28%	38%	22%	19%	50%	43%
Assisting to move out of family home						
Assisting her to move into a Women's Aid refuge if that is what she wants to do.	23%	21%	22%	20%	55%	59%
Assisting her to move into temporary accommodation other than WA refuge if that is what she wants to do.	25%	25%	18%	15%	57%	59%
Assisting her to move into different permanent accommodation if that is what she wants to do.	20%	22%	26%	27%	54%	51%
Assisting to remain in family home						
Assisting her to stay the family home if that is what she wants to do.	30%	26%	23%	24%	47%	50%
Giving her information about how to exclude an abusive partner if she wants to stay in the family home.	47%	Na	18%	Na	35%	Na
Taking appropriate action against the perpetrator of domestic abuse.	52%	Na	19%	Na	29%	Na

Service providers were more confident in providing reassurance to women who had experienced domestic abuse and letting her know she was not to blame. A third were not confident talking to women about the impact domestic abuse might have on their housing options, identifying domestic abuse as the underlying cause of homelessness, arranging additional home security measures or following child protection measures.

Service providers were more confident in providing assistance to women to move out of their home than they were in providing assistance for her to remain in the home. Almost a third (30%) of staff responded that they were not confident about assisting her to remain in the home if that is what she wants to do. Almost half (47%) of service providers answered that they were not confident about giving information about how to exclude an abusive partner, or what action could be taken against a perpetrator.

Table 12. How confident service providers feel assisting women who have experienced domestic or sexual abuse and who may have additional or different requirements (n=80)

Equality Domains	Not confident	Somewhat confident	Confident
Age	19%	29%	52%
Ethnicity	26%	31%	43%
Disability	22%	29%	49%
Sexual orientation	21%	27%	52%
Religion	24%	29%	47%

Service providers were even less confident in communicating with or assisting women from different protected groups. Almost a quarter of them answered that they were not confident in providing assistance to women with different or additional needs in relation to their age, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation or religion. *At least 5 service providers indicated that it was not within their role to provide assistance to women who have experienced domestic abuse and who may have any additional or different requirements.*

Survey responses from Women

In the women’s questionnaire, women were asked for their views of the information and assistance they needed and received. Their responses are presented in Table 13. It is important to note that these services are often the first point of contact for most women exploring their housing options when ending a relationship with an abusive partner.

Table 13. Proportion of women who needed, but didn't get the information and assistance they needed (n=45)

Answer Options	Number of women who needed this	% women didn't get this
Housing Options		
Information about your housing rights	39	31%
Information about transferring tenancy to your name	16	44%
Information about staying in the family home	24	42%
Information about actions the council could take against the abusive person(s)	31	52%
Information about home safety and security measures	35	26%
Assistance making a decision about which housing option was best for me	38	34%
Housing application process		
Information about how your housing application would be assessed	37	19%
Information about the housing application process	37	19%
Assistance making a housing application	31	16%
Information about the housing allocation policy	34	32%
Information about the points system	36	22%
Support		
Assistance making contact with other services that could help me with finances	34	44%
Information about how to get support with domestic abuse	38	34%
Assistance getting interpreting services	9	22%
Assistance with mobility issues	11	27%
Assistance with any other specific needs	12	8%
Information about any outside agencies that might be able to offer support	38	37%

A significant proportion of women needed, but did not receive, information or assistance with most of the items listed in Table 13. Half of women said they needed information about actions the council could take against their abusive partner but they did not receive this. A third of women said they needed but did not get the following information or assistance:

- Information on transferring a tenancy to her name
- Information about staying in the family home
- Assistance making contact with other services that could help them with finances
- Information about how to get support with domestic abuse
- Information about any outside agencies that might be able to offer support

Almost a quarter of women who needed assistance with interpreting services or with mobility issues did not receive this assistance.

Table 14. How women rated the information and assistance they did get

Answer Options	How useful was the information or assistance women did get?			
	Not at all	A little	Some-what	Very
Housing Options				
Information about your housing rights	15%	22%	22%	41%
Information about transferring tenancy to your name	0%	22%	11%	67%
Information about staying in the family home	7%	7%	21%	64%
Information about actions the council could take against the abusive person(s)	27%	13%	13%	47%
Information about home safety and security measures	8%	15%	23%	54%
Assistance making a decision about which housing option was best for me	20%	16%	32%	32%
Housing application process				
Information about how your housing application would be assessed	30%	10%	20%	40%
Information about the housing application process	27%	10%	23%	40%
Assistance making a housing application	15%	8%	8%	69%
Information about the housing allocation policy	30%	22%	13%	35%
Information about the points system	21%	21%	21%	36%
Support				
Assistance making contact with other services that could help me with finances	21%	11%	37%	32%
Information about how to get support with domestic abuse	12%	4%	28%	56%
Assistance getting interpreting services	14%	0%	29%	57%
Assistance with mobility issues	25%	0%	25%	50%
Assistance with any other specific needs	9%	18%	18%	55%
Information about any outside agencies that might be able to offer support	21%	8%	29%	42%

Note: these percentages are based on the number of women who said they received the information and assistance they needed (see Table 13).

Women were less likely to consider the information or assistance useful that they received about:

- the actions the council could take against an abuser
- assistance making a decision about which housing option was best
- the housing application assessment process
- housing allocations policy and points system

Women rated more useful information and assistance they received about:

- transferring a tenancy
- remaining in the family home
- safety and security measures
- making a housing application
- where to get support with domestic abuse
- assistance with interpreting, mobility or other special needs

The four women interviewed talked about their experiences seeking information and support from Fife Council housing and homelessness services as well as other services, friends and family. They spoke about the difficulty they had getting clear information about a range of housing options and accurate information about the housing application and homelessness registration processes; how long it would take to register, whether they were eligible to register as homeless. Each woman's circumstances were different but they all expressed frustration with the lack of useful advice and information they received from Fife Council housing and homelessness services.

A: I just remember at that time being really completely out my depth not knowing where to turn or what have you. I found the whole experience quite intimidating. With that time where I was living down in XXX that I had to go, and I do remember being somewhat relieved when I got there because they were very obviously sympathetic and I think because, when you are in that situation you don't tell anybody, people don't start noticing until you confide in people. So it was a very huge thing to go and talk to strangers about what was happening. I did find it helpful as it was almost a relief to talk about it.

Interviewer: So you approached Fife Council about your housing needs; what advice did you get from them?

A: Just to fill out the form, basically. I didn't get any funding advice, other than to fill out the form and they would process it. Obviously I did that when I was still in the house at that time, so it was a waiting game and then when I became homeless and registered as homeless there wasn't that much advice given then. The only options that were available at that time, I can't remember what they called it but it was a shared place but they were full so the only option they could give me was a bed and breakfast. So that's what they did.

Interviewer: Can you maybe say a bit more about your experience with the homeless officer?

C: By the time we got there I mean I was still reeling I was still vomiting every...you know...venting, just crying. You know battery acid tears it was horrible. By the time we got there, there was somebody spoke to my support worker said 'what's her name?' and I was standing there and I don't even know where they came from and I said 'she can speak for herself' and [he] just laughed at me and he told me 'I didn't even know you would understand English'. I was [sigh] so it wasn't very nice and then the homeless officer told me that 'yeah, yeah well you qualify for a single bedroom flat'. I was told to give a minimum 8, 10 areas of choice and I said, 'right that's it' and we just walked out and I still don't know what happened there. And then I was told I had to wait for my registration. It took weeks and weeks and weeks and meanwhile I was thinking, 'wait my support worker has suggested a couple of areas'. I thought, 'I don't want to go there I really don't'. So I kept phoning the homeless office and could never speak to him and eventually I asked my registration how much longer? 'Oh you know you should get it within the week', I think it took well over 6 weeks, 7 weeks before it came through.

Interviewer: This is before you were registered as homeless?

C: Yeah that was before I was and then I got my registration and I tried to make an appointment to go and see the homeless officer to say, 'look could you please help me? I have some questions', because when someone is with you it's difficult especially when [he] only speaks to her, you know. You're there like a plant, you know, it was impossible but then things got better because I had a letter from a new housing officer. She had taken over and I could go meet with her, my support worker came with me and I was trying to argue my case.

D: Then you have to explain it to one, then explain it to the other and the thing is with [location], they all live there so if they don't know you or your partner, they know family. Trust is a big massive thing as well. You don't want to go to the council and say, 'Oh hi hen' in the office where everybody can hear you or somebody hears office workers discussing your case when they're not meant to either. Not enough private confidentiality things with that.

Interviewer: Did you find that weren't taken into a private room or shown a separate room?

D: No, just standing at the desk, over the desk. A lot of times I whispered and she kind of kept looking at me and I'm thinking to myself, 'you've got on your screen that I'm being moved due to domestic abuse and you just told me that out loud. Why are you advertising it to the whole entire office?' I thought that was really disgusting. I was thinking, 'how does she know who I'm getting abused from? They could be in the queue.'

Women commented that the information and assistance they received that was useful often came from sources other than Fife Council housing and homelessness services.

“It came from CEDAR not the council or any registered body and by that time it was mainly too late”

“I was given safety and security measures through CEDAR project but no one else”

“I was given no information about domestic abuse and the council worker explained NOTHING!!”

Key Findings

- ▶ Service providers seemed to understand that domestic and sexual abuse are crimes and that their workplace encourages them to respond appropriately, but there was a clear lack of consistency in attitudes about how they should respond and a significant lack of confidence about how they provide a service to women.
- ▶ 58% of staff agreed that some women claim domestic abuse when they have not experienced it. This attitude is reflected in some women's responses and concerns about not being believed or 'made to doubt themselves.'
- ▶ Service providers viewed women who have experienced domestic abuse as unable to make appropriate decisions for themselves and that they need to be taken care of.
- ▶ Their lack of confidence was particularly evident for any actions that should be taken against the perpetrator and assisting women to remain in their own homes. Their lack of confidence in these areas was fairly consistent whether applied to women experiencing domestic or sexual abuse.
- ▶ Service providers lack confidence in assisting women with protected characteristics. Almost a quarter were not confident in providing assistance to women with different or additional needs in relation to their age, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation or religion. This corresponds with women's experiences with almost a quarter of women stating that they needed but did not get assistance with interpreting services or in relation to mobility issues.
- ▶ Women's experiences of getting information they needed or getting information that was useful to them reflected a system of support that was neither confident nor consistent. A significant proportion of women were unable to get information or assistance with most of the housing and support information they needed, with a third of women stating that they did not get information they needed that would support them to remain in their home.

Are the existing housing options appropriate for women experiencing domestic or sexual abuse?

In the process of exploring their experiences community researchers identified as a central issue the lack of housing options that they were made aware of when they were thinking of ending their relationship with an abusive partner. In their experience the expectation was that they and their children would have to leave their family home and this felt fundamentally unfair. This sense of injustice was compounded by their experience of trying to access information and support and navigate a homeless system that failed to understand or respond appropriately to their needs. They highlighted that they had to bear the costs, financial, practical and emotional, of losing their home on themselves and their children while their abusive ex-partner was left undisturbed. At the same time they were struggling to cope with the impact of domestic abuse on their mental and physical health. In some instances community researchers had been unable to get the information or advice they needed about remaining in their home and had been referred inappropriately to other agencies that were unable to help them. They, also knew from experience that for some women moving out of the home and to a new area was, in certain circumstances, the safer option for them. But once in that process, often felt they had no control over what happened to them or involvement in decisions that affected them.

They identified issues such as Fife Council's policy of one offer of housing for homeless applicants and of feeling punished by being removed from the homeless list for 6 months after refusing an offer of housing because of the poor condition of the house or because the area was near their ex-partner. Or of incurring rent arrears resulting from being charged rent for both their temporary accommodation and permanent housing, when they were unable to move into their new home because they had no furniture or carpets and were waiting for a community care grant. Community researchers wanted to know about other women's experience of getting information and assistance with their housing options, what choice they had about leaving or remaining in their family home and what their experience was of that process.

We asked women completing the questionnaire to tell us what information they received from Fife Council about a range of different housing options, whether they felt they had a choice about leaving or remaining, where they moved to temporarily and then permanently, the difficulties they faced moving and the impact that process had on their health and well-being. Their responses to these questions are summarised in Tables 15 – 19.

We also talked with the four women we interviewed about their housing situation, what they needed to consider in relation to their housing needs, any advice or support they

were given about housing options – from Fife Council and any other sources including friends and family members - and whether their housing outcome was best for them. On the whole their experiences reflect what is already summarised from the questionnaire responses. Where we felt a deeper understanding of those experiences was useful, we selected statements from the interviews of women’s own words and present them in designated boxes.

What housing options women were told about by Fife Council

Table 15. Housing options women were told about (n=39)

Answer Options	Yes	No
Homeless temporary accommodation	49%	51%
Stay with family or friends	45%	55%
Rehoused in council or housing association tenancy	45%	55%
Bed and breakfast	36%	64%
Women’s Aid Refuge	31%	69%
Private landlord tenancy	24%	76%
Transfer tenancy to another area	13%	87%
Stay in family home and seek legal action to have abusive person removed	11%	89%
Transfer tenancy to own name	8%	92%
Buy own home	3%	97%

More than half of women said they had not been informed about any of the options when they were seeking help with their housing.

Women stated that they were not informed about any other options, but several did comment that they were required to carry out repeated form filling. One woman said that the advice she was given was to “stay at home and call the police.”

Do women have the option of staying in the family home?

Women were asked if they felt they had a choice about remaining in their home or moving out. The majority of women (84%) said they had no choice.

Several women commented that they had to leave as their ex-partner refused to. This sense of his entitlement to the family home was also understood by some women as a legal entitlement; that they had to leave because the house was in her partner’s name or because it was a joint tenancy. One woman commented that she had no choice but

to leave as her name had been removed from the tenancy by her ex-partner without her knowledge.

Women also said that they had to leave because they did not feel safe in their home. Some women left because they were afraid of increasing violence, harassment, stalking and other abusive behaviour. That they had no control over their lives; that staying was too stressful and they were concerned about the possible repercussions for themselves and their children.

Some women also said they were unable to afford the cost of paying a mortgage and other bills on their own.

“If process of having abuser removed was faster and Fife Council knew process - I believe more women would stay in their home.”

“Too scared to stay husband refusing to leave.”

“He would not let me stay there with my kids.”

“I did not have a choice as abuser was a joint tenant.”

“Had no choice but to move because of harassment, stalking and violence from partner.”

“No as you have no control over your life as you're being abused.”

“I felt too ashamed to go to Fife Council to ask for any assistance, but I also felt strongly about having to leave my property.”

The four women who were interviewed talked more in depth about the decision to leave or stay in their homes. As highlighted above, they didn't view the situation as a real choice; two of the women had to find another place to stay because the abusive partner forced them out of their homes with violence or by changing the locks. One woman was advised by Fife Council to give up her tenancy because her abusive ex-partner had accrued substantial debt –in her name. One woman did remain in her own tenancy and although she received repeated threats and intimidation from her ex-partner both at the tenancy and in the community, she stayed because she knew he would find her anyway and continue the abuse wherever she went.

A: If I had known that I could have registered as homeless in that situation, I didn't know that. I had no alternative but to stay there. I had just been through a major operation, and was recovering from that. It was his house, his room, his bed so I had to sleep on the living room floor until the locks got changed and then I had no alternative but to go.

B: Well I actually lost my house and accommodation due to my ex-partner, which I didn't think anything like that, would ever happen. He was really controlling with everything. He'd moved in to my house so me and my daughter already stayed there and what had happened was I was self-employed with my own business and things. He was working so set up a joint bank account as you do when you're with somebody. Set up direct debit for like housing benefit, council tax, all the usual things. Eventually before I lost my house, I found out that he'd cancelled the direct debits so because the house was in my name and he was on the tenancy, it was me at fault for everything. So I was in thousands upon thousands of pounds in debt which I knew nothing about.

I eventually went and spoke to them and tried to get it sorted out and things, but there was no way I was ever going to be able to pay it off. So they said the only solution they can think of is that I give my house up because obviously more and more debt was getting added on. So that's how I eventually lost my house.

I don't know why they didn't do something round about the fact that I was accommodated already. I was going through, basically it was, a debt management programme so everything was getting sorted out. So why did I still have to leave?

D: Because I was just stubborn. I just thought, 'no, why should we have to move everywhere and everything because of him' and I knew back then that he'd find us. He would just never stop, he would never stop. So I was like, 'no, if he doesn't like it and can't cope with the fact that I am no longer willing to be abused and the kids are no wanting it, then he could move'.

The council always give you the whole, even now, they're like 'auch just go into a homeless unit' because I'm private let and I'm not with them and you're asking them to house you. They're like, 'well go down homeless' and its like, 'with two children and dog and my disability?' I was like, 'you really want me to up root everything?' I was like, 'are you for real?' We didn't ask for any of this and they just don't prioritise you at all.

They wanted me to physically move out of there or their exact words were, 'phone Women's Aid they can help you'.

Where did women go when they had to leave their family homes because of domestic or sexual abuse?

Women were asked to select, from a list of housing options, where they had moved to when they left their family homes.

Table 16. Where women went when they had to leave their family home because of domestic or sexual abuse (n=33)

Housing options	Number	%
Homeless temporary accommodation	10	30%
Bed and breakfast	7	21%
Women's Aid Refuge	13	39%
Stayed with family or friends	14	42%
Rehoused in council or housing association tenancy	5	15%
Private landlord tenancy	5	15%
Transferred my tenancy to another area	0	0%
Bought new home	1	3%

Special note: several women moved to more than one type of temporary accommodation – for example, stayed with friends/family then moved into homeless temporary accommodation.

35 (78%) of the women who completed the Women's Questionnaire had to move out of their homes, at least once, because of domestic or sexual abuse. A substantial number of women (44%) had to move multiple times from one temporary residence to another after leaving their family homes. They stayed mostly with family or friends or moved into Women's Aid Refuge. None of the women had transferred their tenancy to a new area.

Did women have a choice about where they went when they had to leave their family home?

Women were asked if they felt they had a choice about where they moved to when they had to leave their home; half said 'YES' and half said 'NO'.

Of those women who said they did not have a choice, some wrote about not knowing what assistance was available; of relying on family and friends for advice and a place to stay. Others said that nothing else was available for them; the only refuge space they could get was in a different area or they had to move in with friends because they could not get into a refuge. They also mentioned having limited choice over the area in which

they would be housed; raising particular concerns about being able to maintain their children at the same school to avoid causing them further disruption and distress. The most often cited comment was that they were ‘just told’ where they were going to be moved to and when; they did not feel they had any option or any say in the decision.

Several of the women who said they did have a choice also indicated that it was not a simple yes or no answer and that they did not have any real options. For example, they mentioned that they moved into a refuge, but did not choose where; that they had to leave the area because the abuser lived there or that they could have stayed but it was easier to move and get away from an ex-partner.

“I was told because I was homeless I had to be moved where I was put.”

“Just told I was moving again and again. No discussions beforehand.”

“Told I had no choice and would have to take what was given.”

“With homeless you go where they put you and then you could be there for up to 2 years then have to move to your chosen area and start all over again.”

“Stay in an abusive relationship or go to my mums. Council never gave me an alternative.”

“Was brought to a meeting with officer to be told council had nothing for me. Could take up to a year. Refuge is nice but it is still refuge. Desperate to have my house.”

“Felt I was put in a very bad area with lots of issues. A less strong person may not have coped.”

“Having a child at school which ended up being a bit away but not wanting to place more distress on the child.”

“My understanding of Fife Council/Homelessness workers after domestic abuse is that they only give information on housing. You get 1 offer and then taken off the list and how many bedrooms you need etc. No additional support. I was in a private let and if I got help to get another one then I would have been grateful. I’m still at parents living with 3 kids.”

The additional difficulties experienced by women when moving into temporary accommodation

In addition to dealing with the distress of domestic or sexual abuse and then having to cope with being made homeless, women experienced a whole range of other difficulties when they moved into temporary accommodation. These are outlined in Table 17.

Table 17. Range of difficulties women experience when they moved out of their homes (n=32)

Issues	Number	Percent
Rent or mortgage arrears	12	38%
Repairs needing done	8	25%
Furnishing the home	13	41%
Concerns about your safety or security	17	53%
Moving costs	16	50%
Needing specific adaptations to your home	1	3%
Feeling isolated	20	63%
Other	5	16%
Move my GP, HV and CPN		
Had to use my money while I waited on pension		
No space		
Support worker told me to live on money I had so I did not need to apply for benefits. Had I known then I would have used that money to get a deposit and a private let.		
Missed ex as part of family life		

Special Note: Most women (81%) dealt with more than one issue.

Most women dealt with more than one of the issues listed above and half said they experienced at least 3 different difficulties. The three most common issues women had to deal with were feeling isolated, concerns about safety or security, and the financial costs of moving.

“It changed my whole life, I found it very difficult to pack up everything I had for so long, move it all and start afresh, this was very hard emotionally mostly due to the fact that I was already stressed due to abuse but that I had to start again decorating a new place and buying furniture with very little money.”

The impact of having to move out of the family home and into temporary accommodation

Having to move out of their homes and into temporary accommodation had a significant impact on women's lives. A few women had a positive experience; one woman commented that she felt much safer and more settled. The majority of women told us about the range of problems they faced.

Many women wrote about multiple and interrelated losses that they struggled to cope with. These losses related to the physical and emotional loss of the family home, furnishings and belongings; to the loss of friends and family and the sense of belonging to an area or community that felt familiar. Women talked about the loss their children experienced as a result of moving school and leaving friends. This sense of loss was reinforced by feelings of social isolation and loneliness that women talked about after being moved into a 'strange' area where they had no support. Some women were conscious that the move was temporary and that they would have to move again, so felt they were unable to settle or make friends. Women also mentioned loss of employment and the financial loss they experienced of refurnishing and decorating with little money. All of this had a detrimental effect on women's mental health; several wrote about how hard this was emotionally, that they felt sad, depressed and stressed.

"Felt I was just moved anywhere and they did not care about my support networks."

"Very big I had to leave all my possessions and friends I feel as if I have lost everything and am struggling with the isolation of living in a strange area, away from all my supports."

"Had to give up employment and enrol children in different schools. Socially isolated as I relocated to a different region to get away from former partner."

"Felt sad, depressed, low and a 'special case'."

Although women talked about having to leave their home for their own safety, for some women this did not result in them feeling safer or more secure. They mentioned being scared of being on their own and unable to go out. The risk to the safety of family or friends was also a concern for some women where they had gone to stay with a relative or friend on a temporary basis.

"Relief initially but stayed with parents and realised quickly that I was putting their safety at risk. Started looking for a private let as it would be quicker and wanted the children to have as normality as soon as possible."

In some cases the quality of temporary accommodation also caused women and their children difficulties. This was due to a number of reasons; inadequate facilities in bed and breakfast accommodation, being placed in accommodation where there were people with drug and alcohol issues or where they witnessed domestic abuse. Or where the 'rules' around occupying the accommodation were felt to be disproportionate.

“Very detrimental. Unable to see grandchildren as much, wouldn't have them stay over as very poor scatter flats. Drug/alcohol issues within flats. Seemed hard to let areas. Waited year for council house.”

“Also, in bed and breakfast, there were abusive men shouting at their partners in adjoining rooms and this was awful.”

“Left everything behind went from ex-partner's rules and abuse to another set of rules and no sign of any end to it.”

Many women talked about having to move, or be moved, several times and the cumulative impact this had on them and their children. These multiple moves were stressful, disruptive and unsettling for women and their children who had to change or miss school with each move.

“To lose things that are important to myself, having to rebuild. You can't attach to a new place in case you have to move again and making new friends can be difficult.”

“Hard - way into a new town - my own furnishings had to be given away as private let fully furnished - daughter did not want to move - new town/school.”

“I had a child that moved with me and we were moved on many occasions. Very stressful and daughter would not settle because of being moved constantly. Had a bad effect on my mental health because of the stress.”

“I had the children with me so having to move 5 times in 9 months was hard especially as my oldest child had to miss or change schools a lot and for 4 of those months we were in the middle of nowhere with a 6 mile walk to nearest shop and we were all in one small room.”

“The moves were disruptive. I wish the council would have done more to ensure taxis for my children to their school as this was the most distressing thing.”

Women also talked about not knowing where they could turn to for support with different issues such as housing or for financial or emotional support to help them deal

with all of the issues they were experiencing. Although they were going through the homeless process they had not been made aware of other agencies that could provide support.

“Financially, emotional. I had two very small children (5months and 1yr old) didn't get any help from Fife council or homeless. Wasn't told of anyone that I could contact for any kind of support.”

For some women the uncertainty of not knowing how long they would have to live in their temporary situation was stressful, as they wanted to regain some stability for themselves and their children.

“I'm still there. I gave up all my belongings and if I was given help to transfer to another private let I would still have my belongings.”

“I was homeless 10 months, the council promised me time and time again that they would house me quickly as I needed the stability to piece my life back together and I never got that.”

“After left our home, I and my 16 months daughter stayed in friends of friend's house. We kept moving to different houses for 1 and a half months. At the time life was very hard. We couldn't get food properly. My daughter is a hungry baby. She couldn't get food properly. So I used to give my food to her and drunk water instead of food. Sometime they directly tell us to leave their house which is hard to hear. They will make any comments sometime, we cannot do anything. Because we don't have any place to go. If I was alone I would definitely I would kill myself in that situation. But I wanted to live for my daughter.”

Women's experience of moving from temporary accommodation into a permanent home

Of the 35 women who had to move out of their homes because of domestic or sexual abuse, 21 (60%) had moved into what they considered permanent accommodation. It is important to note that all of these women will have had to move at least twice.

Length of time women were living in temporary accommodation

The length of time it took for women to be rehoused from temporary accommodation ranged from 3 months to 5 years. Of the 12 women who responded to this question; 7 women waited a year or more and 2 were in temporary accommodation for 5 years.

Table 18. Where women moved to from temporary accommodation (n=20)

Answer Options	Number	Percent
Rehoused in council or housing association tenancy	15	75%
Family home and sought legal action to have abusive person removed	0	0%
Private landlord tenancy	4	20%
Transferred tenancy to another area	0	0%
Transferred tenancy to own name	0	0%
Bought new home	1	5%

The majority of women were rehoused into council or housing association tenancies. None of the women moved back into their family home and sought legal action to have abusive partner removed, transferred their tenancy to another area or transferred the tenancy into their own names.

Did women have a choice about where they went when they moved into permanent accommodation?

Women were asked if they felt they had a choice about where they moved to when moving on from temporary accommodation and into a permanent home; 9 women said 'YES', 10 said 'NO'.

When asked why they felt they did not have a choice some women commented that as they would only receive one offer from the Council they had no option but to take it. Others mentioned that they were told they had to take what they were given. Some women felt that uncertainty about the length of time they would have to wait for another house if they refused an offer, concerns about the area or condition of the property undermined any sense of choice. Women also raised concerns about being offered housing close to where their abuser lived.

“I was just told I was to take first house as they needed my homeless flat.”

“Given house very close to my abuser.”

“I find it unfair that I have to take the 1st offer of housing even if it is unsuitable i.e. area, type of housing (flat) unsuitable neighbours. Limited choice of streets/type due to being homeless.”

“I needed to get away from where I was and I didn't know how long I'd have to wait for another house or what area/condition it would be in and I was advised that the 1st offer I got was in one of the better areas.”

“If I’d ‘chosen’ areas which have less availability of council housing, I’d have been in temporary accommodation for much longer. I think more council housing needs to be built. I was sad to have to move the children from their school.”

Moving into permanent housing

Moving out of temporary accommodation into a permanent tenancy raised another range of additional difficulties for women.

Table 19. Difficulties women experience when moving into their permanent homes (n=20)

Issues	Number	Percent
Furnishing the home	13	65%
Concerns about your safety or security	11	55%
Moving costs	9	45%
Rent or mortgage arrears	8	40%
Feeling isolated	8	40%
Repairs needing done	6	30%
Needing specific adaptations to your home	2	10%
Other (money from council was late, got hell from landlord)	1	5%

Special Note: Most women dealt with more than one issue.

Most women (80%) said they had experienced multiple challenges; nearly half dealt with at least 3 different issues and 3 women said they experienced 6 out of the 7 listed. The two most common difficulties identified were furnishing the home and concerns about safety or security.

The impact of moving from temporary accommodation into a permanent home

The experience of having to move multiple times and then start all over again, even if this is expected to be a move into a permanent home, had both a positive and negative impact on women.

In moving into a permanent home many women again experienced the same feelings of isolation that they had when they first had to leave their home. Women also talked

about the difficulties they had in decorating and furnishing a home with very little money or support to help them to do this. They talked about wanting to make the home safe and comfortable for their children and how depressing and stressful the reality of their situation was particularly if the house was not in a good condition or in an area that they felt was unsafe. For many women the pressure of having to move quickly, into a property with no furnishings or carpeting, or be liable for rent arrears if they waited for a grant added further to their stress.

For some women moving into a new permanent home was a very positive experience. They described it as a new start, that they were able to put down roots, make friends and see their children settled in school. Women also highlighted feeling free, independent and having personal choice.

Other women found that the initial feelings of relief and sense of freedom were short lived. This was due to being moved to an area they did not feel safe in, where they could let their children play or feeling frightened that their ex-partner would find out where they were living.

“Socially isolated, broken relationships with extended family as unable to continue caring for elderly relative.”

“I had to start everything new, furniture, carpets & decorating with very little money. The decor that was already there was horrible of just stripped walls, it was very depressing. I was moved into a flats which had an alcoholic & drug users, it was hard to relax & feel comfortable.”

“I do not know for how much longer I can stay here, 6 months on still unpacked, had to move twice in 5 months. Also have a daughter who was bullied at school and cannot get her back into schooling.”

“Glad to get it but very stressful having no furniture, carpets etc. Waiting to hear from Welfare Fund. Not much time to move and resettle.”

“I love it now. Its’ brilliant. Next chapter, new start.”

“It feels more permanent like we can put down roots. The children are established in their schools now. I've made friends.”

“It was good at first it was freedom but I soon realised how bad an area it was and now I feel trapped again as I can’t let kids out etc.”

“Massive as it was finally my home but scared as it was somewhere new and terrified that my ex-partner would be able to find me.”

It is not surprising to find that moving multiple times before being able to resettle into a permanent home comes at a cost. Starting over was not with a clean slate for many women. The issues or difficulties they experienced while living in temporary

accommodation recurred and for some women were made worse when they moved to a permanent tenancy.

The four women who were interviewed also spoke about the complex challenges they faced either finding suitable temporary and then permanent accommodation or remaining safe within their own home. They also talked about the impact of being homeless on their children and in terms of their children's schooling.

A: I didn't get an option of where that would be either, and my son was in primary school so it was a significant impact on me because we were put in a bed and breakfast in XXX. Fortunately I did have a car, but various things happened and that just made it extra hard. And I wasn't given any advice at the time like registering with another school or who else in the council could help me. There was no support. I would have found it really helpful to have had some support to know where to turn. I didn't know. I'd never been on benefits or anything like that before, but obviously when this all happened I had to give up my job after a time because it was costing me more in child care than I was earning. So I had to give that up but there was no sort of emotional support offered at that time.

B: I think if I had known that back then, I wouldn't have moved because my daughter was settled. She was in her school, she had a house, she had all her friends and then I had to move away from the area I was brought up in as well. So it was a big change for me and for the kids and then as I said, she had to start all over again. She went to a new school when we were in Women's Aid and then when we got put into homeless it was getting taken back and forward to school, which they only did that for so long. And then she had to miss out on school and then when we were moving to where we are now it was a different school again. So it's not just women it affects. It's the children as well. Nobody ever thinks about that, 'oh, it's a child, they'll adapt. They'll get on with life.' And I was like, 'No, it does affect them.' Children don't let it show as much as adults do. Adults don't know how to hide their emotions as well as children. They just adapt and get on with things but still they do struggle.

C: Whatever you do, wherever you go, because you are in refuge you do know people with stigma. People do look down upon you. And especially when you're older, which is my case. Do you know they expected me to know better at that age? It appears more acceptable if you are in your twenties, your thirties maybe your early forties, but anything over and beyond that people really deem you to be so stupid that you got yourself to that stage.

You're destroyed. I mean yeah, you eat, you drink, you sleep, you talk but you're dead inside and you can feel it. You feel so down, so low, you wish the floorboards would open up and swallow you. It's so embarrassing. Yeah, you just think oh gosh, I should have let him kill me because that would have ended it. It's just agony, agony, agony.

Experience of women who remained in their homes

Of the women that took part in the survey 9 had remained in their own homes, 4 sought legal action to have the abusive partner removed, 1 woman had the tenancy transferred into her name, 2 women already had the tenancy in their own names. One woman said that she had come under pressure from her landlord to change her sole tenancy to a joint one: "my housing officer kept asking me to add him to the tenancy – lucky I refused". One of these women had asked her ex-partner to leave; the other woman's partner had his own tenancy and would come and go as he wanted.

When describing the difficulties remaining in their homes caused and the impact of this on their health and well-being, women wrote about feeling like they had no control over whether or not the abuser would come back and their fear of further abuse. But they also talked about the importance of getting support from other agencies that provided security. One woman said that staying in her home allowed her to have some normality to her life.

"I felt like he was going to keep coming back whenever he wished as he still saw it classed as his own home that his kids were in so he could be there as and when he saw fit."

"My abusive ex knows where I stay. It makes me very frightened."

"Fear of being burned alive as he has threatened that, but glad I could count on protective measures police, PPU, (Public Protection Unit) and WA (Women's Aid)."

“Allowed me to have some normality to my life.”

“After abuser was warned then remanded – it was easier. But I still look for him or friends/family and OCD about security at night. Police on special dial helps with address tagged.”

All of the women we interviewed have had to move out of their homes because of an abusive partner or ex-partner. Only one woman managed to remain in her own home at some point and sought legal action to keep him out.

D: It was quite hard, I think because he did the whole I'm not going, I'm not going to go and the children are there still witnessing it and then having to put up with more, the dog as well because he sensed that it wasn't good. The fact that he could come at any given moment in time, he seen it as his home, and it's like well it's not, it's my kids home it's where they need to be they need to be happy, to me it wasn't about us, what either of us wanted, it was about what the children needed and I was like they don't need a mum and dad that are like this. I'm not having my girls coming home with a man like you and thinking that's normal and he even agreed that he wouldn't like some guy treating his two wee girls the way he treated me so I was like well there you go, but he was still protesting that he wouldn't leave and I'm no doing this and I'm not doing that. And I had my dad, I asked him quite a bit and he was like you have to stick to the legal route because they make you scared of the police, to go to them.

You should just get one person but you get every Tom, Dick and Harry. You get Tom then you tell Tom, then you tell Dick and then you tell Harry and then you will get somebody else because they are not available or they're not on shift. Really? And then it's draining so draining and then you get annoyed and fed up and you don't want to do it anymore, just forget it.

Key Findings

- ▶ Nearly half (46%) of the women who took part in the survey had previously been made homeless (or had been at risk of homelessness) more than once because of domestic or sexual abuse; at least 16 (39%) women had been homeless more than twice.
- ▶ When women left their family home they then had to move house multiple times and with each move bearing the burden of feeling isolated, the impact of cumulative losses, feelings of displacement from friends and neighbours and belongings, moving into an unfamiliar area and of having to cope with the resulting financial debt.
- ▶ The impact of multiple moves was considerable for women both emotionally and physically; women talked about how the stress of moving each time added to the harmful impact of the abuse that in many cases they were continuing to experience, despite their attempts to move away from the abuser.
- ▶ These challenges are additional to the impact of experiencing domestic or sexual abuse. Most women did not feel they had a choice about moving out. They felt they had to leave their homes because it was unsafe for them to stay or because they felt his control over the situation and sense of entitlement to the home was supported and reinforced by the response they received from the homeless system.
- ▶ The response women received from the council required that they and often their children move out of their home. It questioned the validity of their experience, did not challenge their partner's entitlement to remain in the family home despite his abusive behaviour, or offer any safe alternatives to moving out (e.g. tenancy transfer or additional home security measures).
- ▶ Women did not necessarily feel any safer once they had moved out of the family home – not in the long term. Their ex-partner would know or find out the new address particularly where he had access arrangements with the children. Domestic abuse also does not only happen inside the home, so when women moved out they were still concerned about their safety on the street, at the shops, taking their children to school.

- ▶ Moving on from temporary accommodation into what they considered their permanent accommodation may have allowed women a chance to start afresh, but it came at a substantial cost to their livelihood and well-being. Women experienced a lack of control over the process, lack of involvement in decision making and a system that disempowered them.
- ▶ Women were concerned about the impact on their children of having to leave their home, often moving multiple times. The difficulties experienced in moving school and the impact on their children's emotional wellbeing and health, missing education, bullying, loss of friends and support particularly at a time when they really needed it.
- ▶ Women also commented on their sense of unfairness, that on the one hand they are told it's not their fault and on the other that they are treated as if they were the ones to blame and experienced losing their home as an additional judgement on them.
- ▶ Only a small number of women were able to remain in their home. They also experienced a lack of control over their situation and fear of further abuse from their ex-partner. Support from a range of agencies was highlighted as essential in allowing them to remain in their home.

Conclusions

Overall this research highlights one of the key challenges women face when ending a relationship with an abusive partner. For many women (and their children) doing so will result in homelessness and all the additional emotional and financial impact this brings.

For many women, housing providers and particularly the local council are the first point of contact to get help or information about their housing options. It may also be the first time they disclose their experience of domestic or sexual abuse. It is important that staff members who come into daily contact with women are able to confidently identify those at risk and offer an appropriate, safe and consistent response that keeps women safe. The findings from this research demonstrate inconsistency in service providers' knowledge of domestic or sexual abuse and a lack of confidence in how to identify those at risk and respond appropriately and safely to their needs. Service providers also lacked confidence in assisting women experiencing multiple forms of discrimination in relation to their race, age, religion or disability.

Fife Housing Register's (FHR) Protocol for dealing with Gender Based Violence (including domestic abuse and harassment) demonstrates the commitment of local housing partners to address the housing needs of women experiencing domestic or sexual abuse. It aims to provide a comprehensive operational framework to respond appropriately and sensitively to individual needs, prevent homelessness as a result of abuse or harassment and sets out a commitment to addressing this behaviour – 'where possible taking action against the perpetrator.' However this research found that service providers appeared to lack knowledge of the FHR's protocol on Gender Based Violence and what procedures they should follow, what information to give, what referral processes to use, or what action could be taken against the perpetrator that would 'promote and support informed choice across housing options.'

For women who took part in this research, it meant that they were often unable to get information or advice that would support them to make an informed choice about their options. As a result, most of the women (84%) said they did not have a choice about moving out or remaining in their homes. More than half of women that took part in the research said they had not been told about any housing options. When women were given options, these were limited to different types of homeless accommodation. Several women said they had to leave their homes because their ex-partner refused to leave or forced them to go. This sense of entitlement to the family home, understood by some women as a legal entitlement, did not appear to be challenged by the council or in the advice or information women received.

Women's experience of homelessness was of having little control or autonomy in the process; they commented that they were often disbelieved and the impact of the abuse

they had experienced belittled. For some women this experience reinforced the messages women receive from a perpetrator; that they won't be believed and that they are incapable of making decisions over their lives.

The Housing Options approach is a key element of homeless prevention policy. It outlines a process that aims to enable anyone who approaches a local authority with a housing problem to get support with a range of housing options and choices based on their individual circumstances. The findings from this research project raise serious concerns about the housing options that are available for women who are at risk of homelessness due to domestic and sexual abuse. Furthermore, it questions the extent to which Scottish Government policy and guidance to prevent homelessness and Fife Council's implementation of these are appropriate for women who experience domestic or sexual abuse. The primary housing option available to women who took part in this research was to go through the homelessness route; often moving multiple times through temporary homeless accommodations and with little choice as to permanent tenancy - the size, location or condition of the property. Becoming homeless as a result of domestic or sexual abuse comes at an enormous cost to women and their children, as well as to the public purse. Significantly, removing women from their homes did not result in women feeling safer or free from further abuse and harassment.

The lack of a national or local³ gendered policy and practice response to homelessness, as a result of domestic or sexual abuse, means that the existing inequalities experienced by women are repeated and reinforced. This further marginalises their experience and the cumulative impact that both domestic abuse and homelessness have on their health and well-being.

³For example FHR 'Protocol for dealing with Gender Based Violence (including domestic abuse and harassment) adopts a non-gendered approach.

Recommendations

A number of key recommendations emerged from the research findings and conclusions. These are relevant both to the Scottish Government in relation to national strategy on homelessness and violence against women, and to Fife Council and their partners in the strategic and operational delivery of services aimed at preventing homelessness for women and children, experiencing domestic or sexual abuse at the earliest opportunity.

Scottish Government should:

- ▶ Develop a specific housing options approach for women experiencing domestic or sexual abuse that prevents homelessness and enables women and children to remain in the home; that includes the recommendations detailed below in this report.
- ▶ Introduce legislation to provide protection for women by placing conditions on perpetrators, including removing perpetrators from households for a period of time to prevent further harassment or abuse and provide the space and appropriate support for women to consider their options (e.g. Domestic Violence Protection Orders in England and Eviction and Barring notices in other European countries).
- ▶ Ensure women are able to easily access free legal services to support their ability to remain in their home and to obtain relevant protective orders.

Fife Council with their public and voluntary sector partners should:

- ▶ Review Fife Housing Register Gender Based Violence Protocol to develop a gendered framework for preventing homelessness and addressing the housing needs of women and their children experiencing domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women. The protocol should be based on a clear understanding of and response to violence against women as an equalities and human rights issue, linked to relevant policy and legislation. (Equally Safe, Public Sector Equality Duty etc.). It should set out the actions FHR partners will take to support a woman to remain in her home or move to another tenancy, including the provision of additional security measures, specialist support and details of what actions will be taken against a perpetrator.

- ▶ Develop a proactive housing policy to address domestic and sexual abuse that promote a zero-tolerance approach to violence against women and strengthens women's rights to remain in the home. This proactive approach should:
 - ▶ be included within the tenancy agreement and tenants' handbook, and promoted in information leaflets and online
 - ▶ set out what actions will be taken against a perpetrator, (in conjunction with other strategic partners where required).
 - ▶ make effective use of management transfers to support women to make planned moves and avoid homelessness
 - ▶ support women to transfer the tenancy to her name

- ▶ Review homelessness policy to reduce the impact of homelessness on women and children who are homeless as a result of domestic abuse by:
 - ▶ amending the one offer of housing rule to ensure women are housed safely and appropriately for their needs
 - ▶ developing specific allocations guidance to ensure women are not allocated housing that continues to put them at risk e.g. in the same area as the perpetrator
 - ▶ providing removal and storage facilities to enable women and children to retain their possessions
 - ▶ providing assistance to enable children to be able to remain at the same school (travel pass)
 - ▶ providing financial advice and assistance to ensure women are not further indebted by the homelessness process
 - ▶ removing the rental charge on two homes when women are moving from temporary to permanent accommodation
 - ▶ ensuring that women are not charged for the damage caused to the property by the perpetrator

- ▶ Provide an appropriate and sensitive service to women to ensure their privacy and confidentiality and reduce the risk of further harm by; developing customer service systems that do not require women to disclose or discuss the reason for their visit in public areas and, promote the availability of private interview rooms to women and the option to request to meet with a female member of staff.
- ▶ Ensure women receive appropriate support and advice by providing wrap-around support and advice throughout the process and beyond, with easy access to re-engage with support services as circumstances change.
- ▶ Develop specific guidance and clear pathways that enable staff to implement policy and practice consistently and with confidence. Provide staff with a clear structure of what action to take that prompts them to ask appropriate questions and follow agreed assessment and referral processes.
- ▶ Develop specialist domestic abuse housing officers within local area offices with responsibility for the delivery of policy, provision of advice and support for staff, and authority to make decisions in relation to transfers, allocations and tenancy support.
- ▶ Implement mandatory training on domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women delivered by experienced trainers in this field; this should include specific training:
 - ▶ on domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women, to ensure frontline, customer service, housing and homelessness staff have a good understanding of domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women, and are able to identify women at risk and to respond confidently and appropriately.
 - ▶ on domestic and sexual abuse and the diverse and overlapping needs of women in relation to disability, religion, race, and age, and sexual orientation to ensure frontline staff understand the particular barriers different women face when accessing services.
 - ▶ for managers on domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women, that outlines both their responsibility for the delivery of an appropriate service response and how to support their staff team with any impact this work may have on them.

- ▶ for elected members and senior management on domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women, that outlines their responsibility for the delivery of strategy and services for women and children, linked to Equally Safe strategy and the Public Service Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010).
- ▶ Develop collaborative working arrangements with a range of organisations to provide advice and support that meets the needs of women and children; this should include:
 - ▶ clear systems for referring women to relevant agencies that go beyond signposting and support women's engagement with that service.
 - ▶ training for frontline staff on services provided by relevant agencies, contact arrangements, and how to supportively engage women with these services.
- ▶ Develop specific print and online resources for women experiencing domestic or sexual abuse which details their housing options, relevant sources of support, the provision of interpreting services, private interview rooms etc.
- ▶ Provide accessible interpretation and translation services in accordance with national standards and good practice guidelines.
- ▶ Develop an action plan and evaluation system to implement these recommendations within clear timescales and ensure the active involvement of women with direct experience of these services within this process.

About the Women's Health Improvement Research Project

The Women's Health Improvement Research (WHIR) Project is a community-led project based in Fife. The project's aim is to use a participatory action research approach to better understand the impact of homelessness as a result of domestic or sexual abuse on women's health and wellbeing and identify solutions to prevent women and children becoming homeless and reduce the impact on their health. The project was developed as a partnership between Fife Domestic and Sexual Abuse Partnership (FDASAP) and Scottish Women's Aid.

Carrying out the research – the Community Research Team

Women with experience of homelessness as a result of domestic or sexual abuse were invited to become involved in the project through support agencies and organisations they were in touch with. An information event facilitated by Scottish Women's Aid was held to recruit women to become community researchers; 19 women attended and 15 women expressed an interest in volunteering in the project. A larger group of women was involved in the earlier stage of the research but were unable to continue due to work, family, study and other commitments. A group of six women has been involved throughout the length of the project. These women developed the research questions, designed the research methods, analysed the findings and co-produced the research report.

Facilitating the project - Scottish Women's Aid

Cheryl Stewart, Researcher, and Jo Ozga, Policy Worker, from Scottish Women's Aid provided training and support and facilitated the community research team in designing, developing and carrying out the research and in co-producing the research report.

Additional support - Fife Women's Aid

During the initial stages of the project a support worker from Fife Women's Aid was available to provide support to women taking part in the project.

Supporting the delivery of the project – WHIR Steering Group

A steering group made up of representatives from FDASAP, Fife Women's Aid, Fife Council Housing and Community Safety Services, Fife NHS, Fife Health and Wellbeing Alliance and Scottish Women's Aid was established to support the delivery of the project. The remit of the group included oversight of the budget, ensuring the project adhered to participatory action research ethical guidance, provision of knowledge and expertise, facilitation of access to research participants, promotion of the project to relevant stakeholders and dissemination of the project's findings to facilitate change in policy and practice.

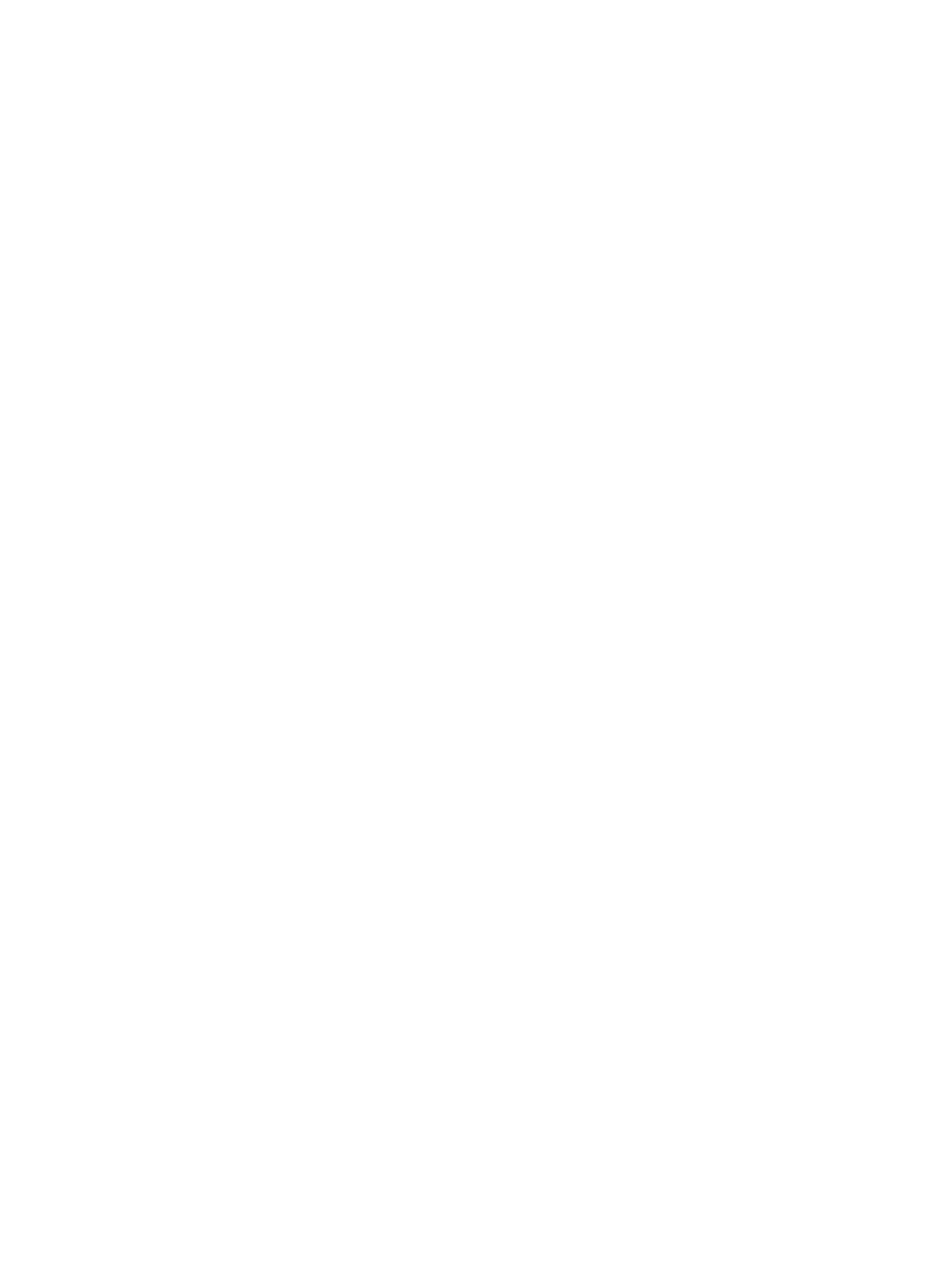
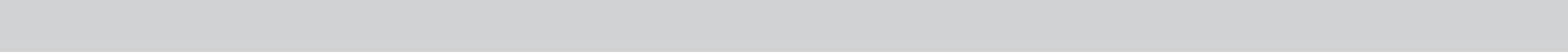
Funding for the project - Fife Health and Wellbeing Alliance www.healthyfife.net

Funding for the project was provided by Fife Health and Wellbeing Alliance (FHWA), a partnership between Fife Council, NHS Fife, and the voluntary sector in Fife. It provides the strategic lead for improving health and wellbeing and reducing health inequalities in Fife. A joint application for funding was made by Fife Domestic and Sexual Abuse Partnership (FDASAP) and Scottish Women's Aid. Funding provided by the Scottish Government also supported Scottish Women's Aid's involvement in the project.

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