



Response from Sonas Housing Association on the Draft HSE Policy on Domestic Violence

Introduction

Sonas Housing Organisation welcomes the policy on domestic violence, intimate partner violence and sexual violence for the HSE. As an organisation which provides housing for women and children who are homeless due to gender-based violence against women, we feel this is a necessary and important step to a more co-ordinated approach to the issue of domestic violence. Part of Sonas' remit is to influence policy and decision making as it relates to women and their children out of home due to Domestic Violence. Please find below our responses, comments and queries to the draft HSE policy.

Specific responses on the draft domestic violence policy

Page 6:

Correction – the Regional Planning Committees (RACs) are still not in existence. The ERPC was disbanded in 2008 to fit in with the Cosc timeframe to establish the Regional Advisory Committees. However the RACs have not yet been established.

Page 10: Re the embedding of continuous monitoring and evaluation

Sonas is currently researching and implementing a performance management/outcome monitoring system for its domestic violence housing support service. We are looking for a best practice option that will have an outcome focus and which will measure effectiveness. We could work with the HSE in rolling out a best practice solution.

Page 14:

Regarding No 3: To provide best practice in all service provision to victims of domestic violence

While ensuring women are able to stay in their own home safely after experiencing domestic violence is an ideal situation, it requires a lot of cross-sectoral work to ensure this happens. There are many instances in which it is simply not possible for a woman to stay in her own home and this needs to be acknowledged and clarified.

Sonas welcomes any initiative that allows women immediate access to temporary refuge accommodation on a 24/7 basis. However this is not stipulated in the draft policy, it is stated as 'emergency accommodation'. A great deal of emergency accommodation in this country is inadequate for women coming from a domestic violence situation. B&Bs and mixed hostels are still the most common form of temporary accommodation and neither offer the supports required for women in this position.

Many countries and EU directives explicitly state the need for at one refuge per 10,000 of the population (Kelly, L. 2008, Minimum Standards for Support Services). However time and resources is needed to ensure the adequate provision of refuges. We welcome more refuges throughout the country and a consistent approach to governance of these refuges.

Regarding the evidence that points to the negative impact on families of moving on and transitional housing

Could you clarify what research this stems from? There is a great deal of research completed that explains how transitional housing is a very beneficial service for women coming from a domestic violence situation (Allen, Bybee and Sullivan, 2004; Melvin, Sullivan and Cain, 2003; Mullins, 1994; Perry & Zorza, 1999).

As well as the external research, the benefit of transitional housing was highlighted in your own commissioned NUIG study:

The critical value of the [transitional housing] service was highlighted by many women who spoke of having few alternatives to the TSH programs, believing they would have either returned to their assailants against their own wishes or been homeless had the programme not been available to them. It was explained that for some women, the TSH programs may literally mean the difference between life and death. (NUIG, 2007 page 50)

There is an inherent danger in moving from transitional to floating models of support. While it does achieve a 'housing first' approach, many child safety, childcare and child protection services are withdrawn. The impact of this model on children has not been sufficiently researched either here or abroad. With this in mind, your points re transitional housing need to be clarified and explained.

Consistency needed

The reconfigured Homeless Agency¹ approach of housing first or housing with support needs to be referenced and reflected in the HSE policy. In line with these policy changes in the homeless sector, it is likely that transitional housing will be reconfigured to:

- 'Housing with support' for women with low support needs
- Floating support into all tenures – this will be a specialist programme response which incorporates 'safety planning', court accompaniment and specialist DV support and advocacy services
- Low threshold services for women (made homeless due to domestic violence) with high needs including addictions, mental health and in need of childcare supports on site
 - This reflects the identified health impacts of DV including addictions and mental illnesses
 - The statistics gathered by Sonas in relation to enquiries in 2008 show 23% of women with mental illnesses, and 36% with addictions
 - In 2007 a working group of the Homeless Agency showed a considerable overlap between domestic violence, drug abuse and mental illnesses. While the size of the group was small and not statistically valid, this overlap is important to consider.

Bringing domestic violence into the 'homeless' policy arena more strongly and tying together the HSE's domestic violence and homeless policy responses will ensure greater consistency. It will also mean that the Care and Case Management Approach and the identification of needs through the Holistic Needs Assessment can be applied to specialist DV accommodation and support services. This will mean better information on the profile of service users and better agency (including public services) responses to meet their needs.

¹ Which is a partnership between the HSE, local authorities and NGOs in the Dublin area

The National Homeless Strategy's reference to domestic violence should be referred to in the HSE policy. There is a great need for some consistency in this policy among agencies and a whole of government approach should apply.

Page 14: No 5 To ensure data collection as a basis for driving high quality and more relevant service development

Sonas welcomes consistent data collection and sharing of statistics and quantitative information, however, data management and sharing must be mindful of the sensitive nature of domestic violence issues. Only statistics and data which do not identify the women or children should be shared.

Also Sonas is currently working on setting up a best practice form of collection and managing data in relation to its domestic violence support service. This is something it could work with the HSE to roll out.

Page 22:

There is reference to standardisation and the development of standards. It is important that the standards developed for specialist emergency and move-on housing (whether floating, low threshold or housing with supports) reflect / incorporate the homeless standards in Putting People First. Again a whole-of-government approach should ideally be incorporated into the HSE policy.